WIDOWHOOD: FEMININE IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIPS
IN AN AUSTRALIAN COUNTRY TOWN.

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By
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This thesis is my own work and all sources used have been properly acknowledged.

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"Parting with him! Why, that is the whole Scheme and Intention of all Marriage Articles. The comfortable Estate of Widowhood, is the only Hope that keeps up a Wife's Spirits. Where is the Woman who would scruple to be a Wife, if she had it in her Power to be a Widow whenever she pleas'd? If you have any Views of this sort, Polly, I shall think the Match not so very unreasonable."

(John Gay, The Beggar's Opera, Act 1, Scene 10, pg. 64)

"If there were no authority on earth Except experience, mine, for what it's worth, And that's enough for me, all goes to show. That marriage is a misery and a woe; For let me say, if I may make so bold, My lords, since when I was but twelve years old, Thanks be to God Eternal evermore, Five husbands have I had at the church door; Yes, it's a fact that I have had so many, All worthy in their way, as good as any."

(Chaucer "The Wife of Bath's Tale", The Canterbury Tales, Pg 37)
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Preamble

This ethnography is about widowhood and identity - what it is like to be a widow in an Australian country town. However, these are my interpretations of other women's words and experiences; interpretations shaped by the fieldwork situation in which I found myself as well as by more general theoretical and methodological concerns. This introductory chapter is an accounting of these factors, which are inextricably part of the ethnography to follow.

First of all, a brief overview of the anthropology of old age is presented (see Clark 1968, Fry 1980 and Keith 1980 for more detailed discussions). Then, there is an outline and critique of the literature of widowhood, which is followed by my theoretical introduction to the subject of widowhood and feminine identity. The remainder of the chapter concentrates on the fieldwork situation; on living in Goulburn from the point of view of my informants, on my approach to fieldwork and definition of problem, and introducing my informants.

Anthropology of Old Age.

The anthropology of old age - like other relatively new sub-fields such as legal and medical anthropology - has a strong applied and urban orientation. For, anthropological interest in old age has been largely stimulated by challenges posed by recent demographic changes in Western countries, and by the future impact of an aging world population. Their most obvious implications are new morbidity and mortality profiles
in human populations (Dubos 1965): just as important are the many social, cultural and personal ramifications of retirement and a new, large group of "unproductive" adults. The rights of old people, the costs of intervention and non-intervention, discrimination against the aged ("age-ism") - these are all issues which merit attention. With its holistic and cross-cultural perspectives, anthropology can help solve these pressing modern problems, as well as improve our knowledge about old age, aging and age and society (Keith 1980).

"The old carry only the tainted death mask ... We (in Western society) reject and seclude them because they remind us of death and undermine our fantasies of perpetual youth." (Lifton 1979:90)

The image and reality of old age, as synonymous with illness and death, seem mutually confirming; they share a "natural" relationship (see Russel 1981:16-17) This assumption pervades folk and scientific thinking and practice about the aged and "their" problems - as if mortality and morbidity were the special preserve of the old rather than human problems. It is not surprising, then, that the anthropology of old age and aging is sometimes subsumed by the anthropology of health and illness (e.g. Bauwens 1978, Clark 1973). Accurate or not, the equation between age and illness and the question of the (social, moral, physical, psychological) "health" of old people provide a fascinating crucible for the study of culture.

Simmons (1945) undertook the first anthropological study of old age, in which he compared the status and treatment of the aged in 71 non-western societies. This work stimulated a later debate over the impact of modernization on the aged (Cowgill and Holmes 1972, Palmore 1975). There has been a general tendency in anthropology to idealize the traditional, and this has sometimes obscured empirical answers to this
difficult question (see Keith 1981:340-342). However, it does seem that modernization is associated with a decline in status of the aged (Fry 1980). Because we still know so little about the underlying processes, and because of our increasing need to understand and perhaps mitigate the consequences of an aging world population, such research continues to be of practical and theoretical import.

Ethnographies have also been stimulated by Cumming and Henry's disengagement theory (1961) which posits that it is natural and desirable, socially and psychologically, for old people to withdraw into themselves. Clark and Anderson (1967), Hochschild (1973, 1976), Jacobs (1974), Myerhoff (1978), Myerhoff and Simic (1978), Stephens (1976) and others have challenged this theory ethnographically, and have suggested (explicitly and implicitly) that the disengagement model's main function is to legitimate socially convenient neglect of the aged.

Very little ethnographic research has been done in Australia on old age, aside from Swain's (1980) study of old age and stigma in Sydney. Further and innovative research into old age, aging and age are important objectives for an anthropological theory of human development, and to define and resolve perceived and real social problems. It is also important for a discipline whose own practitioners are aging. Turner (in Myerhoff 1978) suggests that Myerhoff is "thrice born" through her ethnography of Jewish old people in California - having returned from other cultures to her own Jewish heritage - and that her work is enriched by such "reflexivity". The anthropology of old age provides anthropologists with the opportunity for a very personal "re-birth", to understand their
own aging and the relativity of all careers.

**Widowhood**

Very little research has been done on widowhood generally.¹ Caine's (1974) autobiographical account, Hochschild's (1973) ethnography about widows in a "senior citizen" housing project, major studies on social roles and relationships in widowhood by Lopata (1968, 1973, 1979, 1980), and a recent Melbourne study (Penman, Rosenman and Shulman 1981) are some exceptions. Blau's (1973) influential study about "role exit" and rolelessness in old age, in which widowhood is defined as a kind of "role exit" from marriage, and role of wife; and Myerhoff's (1978) ethnography, which documents the greater vitality and resilience of old women, are two other studies which are not primarily concerned with widowhood but have contributed to our understandings about old women and widowhood. Contrary to the generally negative picture of widowhood (Lopata 1980), all of these studies point out how well women cope with widowhood.

Given that widows are the single largest social group, 65 years and over, in modern society (e.g. Pollard and Pollard 1981), such neglect is remarkable and reflects a general masculine bias shared by many researchers (Oakley 1981). Related to their substantive neglect is the image of widows - as grieving, hapless and helpless burdens - which is reinforced by popular stereotypes about old women (Giesen and Datan 1980), self-help literature on grief and bereavement, and also by research into the old age "problem" which

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¹ There are even fewer studies about widowers (Lopata 1980); however, my discussion is restricted to literature and issues relating to (old) widows.
seems to so often define widows as "special problems" (e.g. Pollard and Pollard (1981:22) and Bengtson, Kasschau and Ragan (1977:333) who conclude that "the woman's life in old age may be qualitatively less desirable than that of the old man"). This image persists despite research evidence to the contrary, which points out the greater vulnerability of widowers than widows. (Bernard 1972, Blau 1973, Myerhoff 1973, Townsend 1963) and the significant proportion of widows who say they are "fuller and freer people than before the death of their husbands (Lopata 1973:413, similarly Penman et al 1981).

Their substantive and theoretical neglect, and the associated loss imagery reflect an ideology which advantages men and marriage (which clearly advantages men, see Bernard 1972) and assumes that women are defined only in relation to men and marriage. Gubrium (1973) challenges the "myth of the golden years", which defines old single people as disadvantaged and abnormal. Not only is it not normal for old people to be married (29% of men, 65% of women, 65 years and over are not married in Australia, Pollard et al 1981), marriage may not be even a desirable arrangement for many old people; in old, unhappy marriages, when a partner is senile or requires a great deal of care and the "healthy" partner is responsible for their care.

Even less research has been done on widowhood in non-western societies. This silence can be explained - superficially - by their different population structure; the proportion of old people is approximately half that of industrial societies, and more men than women survive to old age, because of poor health care and birth control (see Simmons 1945). However, this is,
in itself, an unsatisfactory explanation - considering that feminine perspectives have only recently been explored by anthropologists (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). At the same time, widows are essentially a modern - and "invisible" - phenomenon (Markson and Hesse 1980).

"A glass of beer with the boys, freedom to let out a four letter word, or let go in a public dance are the privileges of old age for many women in the world." (Keith 1980:351)

This picture, of increasing freedom with age, challenges the masculine view of widowhood: it hints at aspects of feminine experience which are outside of male control and may be a reason why widows have been so largely ignored by men. Widowhood may, in fact, be part of the general "loosening up of constraints" which women enjoy in old age. Women's renewed involvement with other women, after the constraints and responsibilities of being wives and mothers - may be an important part of their new-found freedom and identity. Clearly, this represents an ideological and theoretical departure from traditional images of loss and emptiness, which deny women's voices and understandings of widowhood.

Theoretical Introduction

Widowhood as a personal experience and social category is a central theme of this ethnography about old women in an Australian city. Most of the women described are widows; the remainder can expect to become widows, for widowhood is the statistically "normal" (Blau 1973) and probably culturally normal (Oakley 1981) outcome of marriage in modern society. Widowhood is conceptualized popularly and in the literature as a significant identity crisis for women, which entails reconciling the past as wife with the present and future as a single
woman. While my approach is influenced by this crisis model, I am also interested in the continuities in women's lives, which survive widowhood—in particular, their relationships with other women. For, the women in this ethnography seem to live in what I call "a world of women"; of daughters, friends, neighbours where men remain comparative strangers. They seem to have spent their lives involved in such relationships, and in exclusively feminine activities. It is, I suggest, within this "world" that they understand their own identities as individuals and women.¹

In general terms, this is a study of "identity", in which I have borrowed ideas from a number of different but complementary theories about identity and social life. They are "the social construction of reality" paradigm from Berger and Luckmann (1966), "presentation of self" and "impression management" in face-to-face situations (Goffman 1959, 1963), and Erikson's psycho-social theory of the development of identity (1959, 1963). These approaches are all derived, to some extent, from "symbolic interactionism" (Mead 1934); all assume that people actively seek "consistency" in their environments (Robbins 1973: 1205). "Consistency" is taken here to signify definition, meaning or identity, so that "inner" (subjective) and "outer" (social) realities are inter-connected, and behaviour can be interpreted as meaningful.

However, these three approaches differ in their emphases. The social construction of reality perspective stresses the

¹ Interestingly, the "world" I describe is very similar to the "world of female support, intimacy and ritual" documented by Smith-Rosenburg (1975) in her analysis of women's letters to their friends in nineteenth century America.
connection between individual consciousness and macro-social structures. This has been enunciated in terms of the "problem" of modernity (Berger 1977), or the lack of connection ("mediating structures") between personal reality and large institutions. Unlike traditional society with coherent religious and ritual systems, the "individual seek(s) power, intelligibility and literally a name" (my emphasis, Berger and Kellner 1977:9-10) in the "private sphere", which becomes a kind of refuge in a bureaucratic and impersonal world. Following this argument, widows are theoretically more "nameless" or alienated than other people who are (relatively) secure in the "private spheres" of the work place or family. They are, as a category, generally devalued (Lopata 1980), due partly to their age and sex (de Beauvoir 1972) but also to their displaced status in modern society.

However, other displaced groups such as trans-sexuals (Garfinkel 1967), black street corner men (Liebow 1967), tramps (Spradley 1970), mental patients (Goffman 1961), Aboriginal fringe dwellers (Sansom 1980) and so on, have been shown to share coherent identities and worlds, which are connected to some degree with the structures and values of modern society. For women/widows, the "world of women" may constitute a significant "private sphere" which is quite different from the marriage relationship (Berger and Kellner 1977). The "world of women" precedes marriage in the mother-daughter relationship (Chodorow 1974, 1978) which may also serve as the prototype for later relationships. It is structurally different; women's relationships being symmetrical rather than asymmetrical and communicating similarity and relatedness (see Oakley 1981:265-280) rather than difference and distance. The "world of women" may well, for some women, overshadow marriage (as des-
scribed by Smith-Rosenburg 1975), better meeting their emotional needs and allowing them to express themselves more freely than in more constraining male-female relationships. This pattern is consistent with cross-cultural research on women (e.g. Rosaldo 1974), but it flies in the face of our own popular notions about romantic love and marriage, and the general ideological position that "wifehood and motherhood are women's essential identities" (Oakley 1981:265).

Goffman, on the other hand, is concerned generally with "the organisation of experience ... not the organisation of society" (1974:13). In his detailed analysis of face-to-face situations, Goffman shows how people exploit the complexities and ambiguities of social life for their own purposes; to realise their definitions of self and situation. By implication, identity is both members' and observers' construct and a process. Influenced by Bateson's work (1958, 1972) on learning and systems, Goffman (1974:7) defines situations as behavioural and ideational systems ("frames"), and meaning and identity as situationally embedded.

Goffman's work is stimulating in its richness and insight; it provides an idiom for the description of the ongoing, negotiated and dramatic character of everyday life. But, it is limited theoretically by Goffman's emphasis on the actor's perspective, and on circumscribed events. Bateson's analysis of "ethos" and progressive change in systems, "schismogenesis", suggests that ideas are "immanent" in situations, not just in minds, and that situational analysis can reveal structure. Similarly, Geertz argues that the aim of ethnography should be "to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts" (1973:28). My ethnography and approach to ethnography
have been affected by Bateson and Geertz's theoretical positions; seeing culture as a communicative system and the anthropologist's task to "interpret" meaning from a "mass of most diverse and disconnected material" (Bateson 1958:259).

Erikson's approach to identity is more developmental than cultural; he posits an epigenetic series of identity crises which are resolved, or not, in the social environment. Old age is characterised by a crisis of "integrity", or meaning:

"It is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be." (Erikson 1964:260)

This "crisis" is part of the individual's life-long search for meaning but it is brought about by the impact of increasing environmental change (and eventually death) on the aging person. The "life review" (Butler 1968:487) is a well known application of Erikson's "integrity" crisis:

"a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterised by the progressive return to consciousness of past experience ... normally these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated."

While it offers interesting insights into how people verbally construct life stories, the "life review" is, by definition in the "theatrical mode" (Goffman 1974:504); stressing the unitary and fixed character of identity. Interpretation from within an ethnographic framework can help in understanding how particular women resolve their crisis of meaning, as participants in ongoing social situations. I am interested in the various ways widows interpret their lives - in their talk and reminiscences culturally, in their "symbols of continuity" (Myerhoff 1978:206), and also socially, in their relationships with other women where they construct shared pasts and identities through "identification" (Erikson 1964) with each other.
Little research has been done on feminine development and identity (Levinson 1980, Rossi 1980), although Erikson argues (1964) that identity issues are quite different for women than for men - being about relatedness and loss rather than achievement and independence. Sociological and cross-cultural research seem to support this distinction, e.g. Blau (1973), Chodorow (1974), Keith (1980), Levine (1979), Myerhoff (1980), Oakley (1981), Scarf (1980). I would suggest that women's "integrity" crisis could be a crisis about nurturance - about the loss of the nurturant role in old age. No longer being needed as a woman may, in Erikson's terms, cause women to question the "integrity" of lives spent nurturing other people, and to seek other ways of expressing nurturance in their "world" of old women and widows.

Old People in Goulburn

Goulburn is generally known as a cold and windy town, consisting of a long succession of take-away cafes, petrol stations and of small, unremarkable houses. This travelers' view of Goulburn, as a non-descript place to hurry through, is shaped by the highway which crookedly bisects the town and serves also as its main street. As a result, the 2,000 or so heavy trucks, which daily thunder through on their way to Sydney or Melbourne (and generally heavy traffic) make shopping a noisy, inconvenient and dangerous business—especially for the elderly. Turning off the main track, to the east or west, one discovers a more pleasant Goulburn; a place of quiet, tree-lined streets, old churches and Cathedrals, cared for gardens and prosperous suburbs merging with the surrounding country-side. For some people, Goulburn is not mid-way to somewhere better but a destination. This seems
especially so for old people - many of whom have chosen to remain in Goulburn rather than move to the coast or to Sydney, and others who have moved into Goulburn from outlying districts.

Historically, Goulburn has been a transportation, religious, educational and Government centre for the south eastern region of N.S.W., which extends north from Eden and east from Young. With the growth of Canberra and an improved highway to Sydney, Goulburn's importance as a regional centre has declined. Its population has remained virtually static since 1961, at about 20,000 (see Gray 1981, based on ABS Census). Canberra has become the major regional centre: for example, the Diocese of Goulburn is now the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, and people go to Canberra to shop where once they came from Canberra to Goulburn. As elsewhere in Australia, the fastest growing age group in Goulburn over the past ten years is people 70 years and over (Gray 1981). At the same time, approximately 40% of the workforce are in government employment which is almost twice the N.S.W. average (1980 Goulburn survey). This highly mobile group would presumably not contribute to Goulburn's aged population— which is consistent with my own observation, that a high proportion of old people move into Goulburn from smaller rural districts.¹

While Goulburn may no longer be an important regional centre, it seems to be generally agreed that Goulburn is a good place to be old in (see Gray 1981); in 1982, with approximately 28 doctors, a general hospital, long care

¹ Unfortunately there are no detailed statistics on rural migration to support this claim although preliminary census figures for 1981 do show that Goulburn has a much higher concentration of old people than neighbouring Gunning and Mulwaree Shires.
(mainly geriatric) private hospital, a regional psychiatric hospital with several psycho-geriatric wards, two day care centres, nursing homes and aged hostels. Roughly 13% (386) of the aged population live in long term institutional accommodation; about a half are psycho-geriatric patients. Another 6% (142) live in subsidized independent living units such as the Smith Family Homes, Housing Commission and Legacy Lodge; leaving about 80% of the aged population who live mainly on their own. Also, there is a home care and handyman service, a meals on wheels service, a senior citizens' club and centre, bowling clubs and Church and service groups which care for the aged. Furthermore, a great deal of community work in Goulburn is done by older women, many of whom are widows, through church auxiliaries and small groups. (Women tell me this is so and Poiner (1979) confirms this in her study on community participation in nearby Marulan).

Services for the aged affect only a minority of people at any one time, and in any case they cannot ensure a good old age. What seems more important is the fact that most old people are "locals" rather than "newcomers" to Goulburn (see Martin 1965:27-28 for discussion of this distinction). In my experience there are very few old people who have come recently to Goulburn as strangers. About one quarter (13 of 49) moved into Goulburn from outlying farms, and several others were teachers in the district. When they were younger they came to Goulburn because it was a regional centre - to shop, have babies, for medical care, (in some instances) for their children's education, and to visit friends and relations. They all say now that they "know" Goulburn, whereas Sydney and Canberra were always too far away to visit regularly. Their eventual move is "natural", part
of an orientation towards Goulburn. As one woman put it:

"Then of course, when we started to get old and had to worry about living way out there, we all drifted in here, without knowing it (that) we settled in (the same) place."

"Newcomers" by comparison are in a difficult position. Goulburn would have little to offer them because so much of what "happens" (formally and informally) is based upon long established relationships, and a detailed knowledge of those relationships. Of the only two "newcomers" I interviewed, one has since moved away and the other plans to leave Goulburn.

For the majority, being a "local", a person embedded in a complex network of lifelong kin and voluntary relationships, is highly satisfying. The women I work with are quick to, and enjoy, placing other people socially, thus revealing their own identities and expertise. Sometimes this involves re-discovering and re-constructing shared (often rural) pasts; social connections lost perhaps on marriage, when women moved away and were busy with their husbands and children. Now they have the time (and interest) to spend with other women, who may be old school mates, neighbours, distant cousins etc. "Newcomers" cannot be thus placed; they are social nonentities with no one to listen, recreate and understand their pasts. Similarly, "newcomers" are not as interesting to "locals": as "outsiders" move in old neighbourhoods are considered to change for the worse, in that they become more affluent and less friendly - less socially dense. On the other hand, when someone important returns, this is exciting news, "a local boy/girl who has made good".
I suspect that my being a newcomer/"nobody" has helped my research, freeing up people in what they tell me. As an outsider, I could not, supposedly, understand the full import of what I am told nor do I have the social connections or power to use that knowledge.

I have defined my research population as old people living on their own in Goulburn. This discussion is a reminder that "living in Goulburn" is a subjective as well as geographical statement. "Attachment to place" (Rowles 1981) is an aspect of people's realities and identities, whether they still live in that place or not. For example, a group of women who now live in Goulburn, spent much of their lives in a rural district and still identify themselves with that "home" (see chapter 2, for discussion of the Country Ladies). Other women have lived all their lives in particular neighbourhoods of Goulburn, and claim that they cannot find their way around the rest of the city. They have never had much reason to go there, they say.

The aged population, with its local rural orientation, is not representative of the general Goulburn population. Indeed, there seem to be two quite distinct groups: "locals" (the aged and their relatives, comprising extended families) and "newcomers" (individuals and nuclear families) who identify only temporarily with Goulburn. Goulburn, for these people is a stopping-off point, just as it is for the passing highway traffic. Certainly, there is some slippage: "newcomers" who marry "in" and "locals" (particularly young people) who leave, looking for work mainly, not to return. With time, Goulburn will probably become a "newcomers'" town, part of the increasing urban sprawl along the highway.
If the rural population continues to decline, so presumably will Goulburn's aged population (unlike Australia overall, Pollard and Pollard 1981:28). As distances shrink and local affiliations weaken, larger centres perceived as better serviced (just as Goulburn has been) may attract old people and will be, in turn, "natural" places to which to retire.

The people presented in this ethnography are part of a historical "cohort" (Schaie 1970); less mobile, more rural than their own middled-aged children, who have often moved out of the region. They are women who raised their children during a depression and world war, and who have, mostly, never worked outside the home (see Hochschild 1973:7-12, on the relationship between cohort and women's identity). Their identity as "locals" is an important resource which buttresses them from the potentially disorganized impact of modernity. They share a well defined "place" identity and sense of personal continuity and significance, which contribute to personal "integrity" (Erikson 1959).

Fieldwork Strategies and Problems

Fieldwork commenced in May 1981, with visits to the local senior citizens' clubs, a Church community centre, the meals-on-wheels service and Smith Family - to interview organizers and introduce myself. These agencies were chosen because they cater for old people living on their own, not in a hospital or a "home", and because old people participate in a variety of ways in them. They are active as members, leaders, clients and volunteers; some of whom I eventually interviewed. I also assumed that these agencies as public organizations would be more co-operative than private groups and individuals who might refuse me entrance. The normal
refusal rate for gerontological research, employing standard survey and interview methods, is 30 to 35 per cent (Rosow 1967:45). This must, in itself, raise questions about the supposed representativeness of such research. My own refusal rate of 6 per cent (3 women, all over the telephone) is well below this rate and seems largely due to differences in method, which will be detailed here.

The organizations initially contacted all proved co-operative and I was rapidly and at least partially, absorbed into them - as a senior citizens' club member, and later as assistant secretary; a clothes and rags sorter at a Church centre; meals on wheels worker, supervisor and committee member; and as a social worker-cum-interviewer at the Smith Family homes. This multiplicity of roles is not unique; indeed it is characteristic of fieldwork and social life generally. However, these overlapping and sometimes conflicting notions of who I was affected what people told me and my own expectations and interpretations. For these reasons, they need further explication.

For example, the Smith Family is a benevolent agency which provides low cost accommodation for pensioners. Although residents live in their own small units and are expected to care for themselves, the Smith Family homes resemble a "total institution" (Goffman 1961); being geographically isolated, with decisions made on behalf of residents by staff members and there being an obvious residents-staff distinction.

In such a situation, personal privacy and loss of control can emerge as important issues in the day-to-day life of residents, and this can affect the course of fieldwork. The manager introduced me to many of the residents, explaining that he liked to know who was visiting them (he had, indeed,
screened out unsuitable people - salesmen, "do-gooders" etc.)
These official introductions certainly facilitated initial
contact and co-operation. Everyone approached this way agreed
to be interviewed (I suspect because they felt they had no
choice in the matter). These formal introductions also en­
sured that intimacy and trust, crucial to the anthropologist­
informant relationship, would be unlikely. All eight inform­
ants contacted this way (seven widows and one single man) were
friendly but were also very guarded in what they told me
about themselves and complained (more than other informants)
about neighbours' gossiping and back-biting: everyone "here"
knows your "business". Several claimed that they had "nothing"
to do with their neighbours (just a few feet away)- a few telling
me stories about neighbours even uprooting their flower gardens.
These complaints seem to contradict research (Rosow 1967, 1970)
which indicates that old people prefer age-segregated accommo­
dation. They suggest, at least, that old people do not like
low cost aged housing.

The fact that I was an officially approved interviewer,
talking to various other residents, must have put people on
their guard. None of the eight have been very forthcoming,
and I have not taped, or asked to tape, any of them. (Taped
interviews have been conducted with seventeen informants.)
In this situation it seems reasonable that I should be seen
as a social worker/meddler and even as a spy. (See Curtin
1976 for an account of the sometimes invidious position of
social workers vis a vis the aged.)

The specifics have varied in other situations but such
issues continued to be an integral part of fieldwork and of
my enculturation: shaping what information came and did not
come my way. Other factors such as my age, sex, nationality
and social class also affected relationships and the ethno-
graphy as a whole. I will not discuss them at length here
but shall relate them to other ethnographic issues.

My general strategy has been cautious, proceeding from
public and safe to private and dangerous topics gradually.
I have approached most informants through "go betweens" such
as home helpers, mutual friends, neighbours and relatives,
or after an initial acquaintanceship in more natural situa-
tions. This approach creates its own problems; fitting the
researcher into social networks and alliances, but these
are unavoidably part of social life-what more "objective"
methods mask. My concern was to be as non-threatening as
possible: such "domestication" of my role was not only nec-
essary but proved also to be highly fruitful ethnographically.

I have been circumspect about note-taking and tape-
recording; seeking permission and watchful for signs of un-
ease or reticence. Because of their inherent intrusiveness
and my desire to "fit in" as much as possible, I decided not
to note-take or tape-record in group situations such as card
games, club meetings, bus trips etc. Also, much of the
information I am interested in is conveyed in gossip, jokes,
facial expressions and innuendo: it is public but "off the
record" and such obvious recording would be inappropriate.
(See Hannerz 1969:201-210 for a discussion of these issues,
and of his similar decision.)

These situations would have been interesting taped or,
better yet, video-taped. Instead, I have had to rely on my
field notes which, like all "accounts" (Garfinkel 1967) are
"selected, truncated versions of what happened" (Leiter
1980:162). I present detailed descriptions, or vignettes, of
actual situations, and use members' own words literally (in quotation marks) to convey the nuances and richness of small situations, and to develop my own interpretations.

This cautious strategy has not always worked; for example, in my unsuccessful efforts to do fieldwork with old men at a bowling club. Although I was sponsored by a prominent member and accompanied by another woman, I remained an anomaly; unescorted by respectable women just do not initiate and "control" conversations with unrelated men. The club was essentially male dominated and sexually segregated. The few women in the club (pub) were with their husbands, in dispersed couples, or were with other women. Certainly, they were not "chatting up" men. Also it was a public "joking" situation, and my personal questions and efforts to engage in serious conversations were inappropriate (as one man later agreed with me—and his wife—in their home).

My visits to the club, and my presence, were treated by the men as a mixture of joke and question-and-answer interview: men lined up for "interviews" so that there was little chance for me to sit back and observe from "backstage" (Goffman 1959), while other men watched the "show". This was evident in an interview with Norm P, who repeatedly asked, "next question!" (cutting short any potential conversation between us). Then, Norm wrote down, unasked, a mysterious list, which he revealed was his schedule of sexual activity. Our "audience" laughed uproariously at his wit and my discomfiture (and the way he had burlesqued the informant role, and by implication, the interview). My sponsor died suddenly several weeks later: this fact and my difficulties convinced me to not expend any more effort in the club. (A very similar situation developed in the only other men's club I visited.)
Where Are All The Old Men?

My original intention was to study old people in Goulburn and to interview and observe a representative number of old men to women. (Goulburn has, like the rest of Australia, about 2 men to 3 women 65 years and over, ABS 1981 Census.) However, it soon became evident that this would be difficult to accomplish; I could not find "enough" old men. There were 25 per cent or less old men in apparently "mixed" situations such as the Senior Citizens' Club, Smith Family homes, and Meals-on-Wheels service (similar to Russel's Sydney statistics, 1981:101). It seems that old men in Goulburn are either at home or in clubs with other men. I eventually concluded that it would be difficult for me to conduct useful research with old men, mainly because of the high level of sexual segregation of old men and women in Goulburn.

My relative youth and sex would be the immediate causes of this problem. Generally, these men are accustomed to interacting with their own wives and other men but not with unrelated young women. In such situations they might risk being called "dirty old men". Illustrative of this is the fact that of thirteen men interviewed, only two talked to me alone in their homes. The majority were with their wives, or accompanied by other men. There seemed to be no acceptable way around the problem. On the other hand, I was able to interview all old women alone at home. For the women, this was a non-threatening situation; many seemed to see me as a young friend or fictive daughter - a "junior" woman with much to learn. And I was comfortable with this relationship too. The 2 men I interviewed alone - both described themselves as "different" from other men. Both explained that they have
women friends (not girl friends) and like women - unlike most men.

"Mixed" situations such as the day care centre, home help services and various social clubs seem to be largely dominated by women, of various ages. They are, in effect, "feminine" situations, where men are marginal and excluded from decision-making by the women who seem to consider men's (relative or absolute) non-participation as "normal". It is men who participate too much who are considered "problems". And, I became aware that my obvious interest in men in these situations was seen as abnormal. On one occasion, when I sat beside an old man I knew, women considered this quite a joke; they suggested he might be my boyfriend (after all men prefer younger women, they said.) On another occasion it was made very obvious to me that as long as I persisted in this aberrant behaviour, women would exclude me (and him) from their activities. (I discuss the problem of couples in Chapter 5). I soon gave up my efforts and sat with the women from then on.

Where are all the old men in Goulburn? This question continued to interest me even after my research focus shifted to old women and widowhood. It is worth exploring further here, I think, because it is a way of re-tracing the history of this ethnography, and because it ties in with themes which are central to my analysis of widowhood and feminine identity.

"Older women generally seem to evidence greater engagement than old men in community level organizations and activities...".
(Bengtson, Kasschau and Ragan 1977:335)

This certainly seems to be the case in Goulburn. Church and community voluntary work is largely the preserve of old women. Approximately forty retired men do belong to a club
which meets once a month for a business meeting and to hear a guest speaker. Although it is modelled on service clubs in organization and style, members stress its present, leisure "retirement" orientation and do no actual "service". Several hundred men belong to local bowling and social clubs; a small minority participate almost daily. But for the majority of old men in Goulburn, there seems remarkably little to do—aside from gardening and "watching the world go by" (on television, or from park benches).

Retirement marks the onset of old age for men (Blau 1973), and seems also to signal a move into the domestic sphere for men. Having relied on their wives almost exclusively for emotional intimacy (Blau 1973:72), and now exiled from their primary source of identity, work, old men are left stanced, dependent and diminished:

"This was why so many men talked of retirement as a tragedy. They were forced to recognize that it was not their working life which was over, it was their life." (Townsend 1963:169).

Townsend suggests that adjustment may be more difficult for working than middle class men, who supposedly have more interests and social contacts. I suggest that it is a general problem for men. Of six men I categorize as middle class, three (two who are still married) complain of loneliness, and boredom. One has dropped out of all the clubs he once belonged to (he says), because of his invalid wife. Another attends a men's club once a month and wanders over to a neighbourhood shop for company and admits that he is a "lonely man". The third man, recently widowed, has let his house and garden go and has lost interest in all his former activities. Social class has not protected these men from the impact of ill health and, more importantly, social isolation. In fact,
middle class men could be said to lose more (status and involvement) with retirement, although little research has been done on class and aging (Bengtson et al 1977:335-336).

This tends to support Gutmann's (1977:321) analysis that "the city is a young man's terrain and old men ... lose prestige because they lose access to urban power". Furthermore, this situation favours old women, or "matriarchy" because of women's greater "capacity for intimacy" a conclusion which this study supports. Myerhoff (1978:261-262) eloquently describes the plight of old men in a Jewish community in California; a description which seems to fit the situation of many old men:

"(They) are expected to spend their time socializing, taking care of themselves, passing the days pleasantly ... This costs the retired man not only his ability to earn money but his sense of worth."

Old women seem to see the problem of "old men" similarly. Here is how Mrs. H. expresses it:

"If a man's in good health - I really think that when a man gets old (that) if its bad, its better 'cause (sic) you know what to do with him!" (speaker's emphasis)

Old men, at home with nothing to do, are seen by old women as "problems" for wives, who must cope with having them around the house, bored and underfoot. In fact, most old men are still married in Australia (see Pollard and Pollard 181:23): there are, in Goulburn, nearly four times as many widows as widowers (947:243, ABS 1976 Census). This may be one reason why there are so few old men in "old age"groups, because they are relying (more and more) on their wives for companionship. (Townsend 1963:169 advances a similar argument.) Their adjustment to retirement can be seen as a retreat from public life, into their homes and domestic relationships. However, old men are not really "at home" there either. Many old (and
younger) women assure me that wives do not want husbands "cluttering up" the house; gardening is often a happy solution for both, a solitary and productive activity on the domestic margins.

Old men's greater social impoverishment is borne out in statistics on suicide. In England (Sainsbury 1955), in the U.S. (Pfeiffer 1977:655) and in Australia (ABS 1982), men are increasingly more likely than women to kill themselves, as they get older. This is despite the fact that old men are far more likely to be married (and are supposedly thus advantaged), whereas most old women are or will be widows. Similarly, widowers are much more likely to kill themselves than widows (Bernard 1972).

I would conclude that old men, and especially widowers, are significantly "at risk" as a group rather than widows. Bearing in mind that this is a study of widows, men's apparent social isolation seems to be the result of masculine "instrumental" (from Parsons and Bales 1955) ways of relating and defining themselves; ways which are no longer socially appropriate in old age. Their social isolation is a characteristic response for men, who have generally been more emotionally isolated than women. It is a way of avoiding potentially demeaning situations (such as clubs run by women) which perpetuates their dilemma. Nor does it help reconcile the discontinuities between the "young men" they were and the "old men" they are now (see Chapter 5)—except in a negative way, dispatching them, perhaps, to a premature social death.

1 in Townsend 1963, p. 203.
Social Class

The majority of informants described in this ethnography are working class. Taking husband's occupation as a primary indicator (as well as information about education level, family background, housing and life style), thirty of my forty-nine informants (seven men and twenty-three women) I categorized as working class. Over a third of men (or husbands) worked for the Railway as drivers, fettlers, switchers etc. The remainder were small farmers (3), tradesmen (2), a gardener milkman, clerk, tailor, storekeeper and gaoler. Of the nineteen informants described as middle class (thirteen women, six men) about half were prosperous farmers judging from their present circumstances (most of their children have received some higher education). There also are three retired teachers, two senior railway employees, a builder, a maternity hospital matron and a stock-and-station agent.

About one half of the working class and all but one of the middle class informants live in their own homes. These proportions are similar to general Australian statistics (see Russel 1981:39). Home ownership is important economically and symbolically. The aged pension is about one quarter of average weekly earnings, which brings the pension below the poverty line (Howe 1981). Home ownership means inexpensive housing and can ameliorate much of the economic impact of such a low income. "A home of one's own" is also a symbol of independence and of personal identity (see Kendig 1981).

"A home of one's own" is certainly a cultural ideal for my informants. However, a house can also be a burden and a reminder of increasing age and vulnerability. House maintenance is a problem for most of my informants. While most
receive help from children, neighbours and sometimes from domestic services, they generally agree that their homes are less tidy since they have grown older. Some live in only one or two rooms, which are warm and easy to maintain; the remainder of the house may be no longer lived in.

Related to this is the question of subjective poverty in old age. Generally, old people say (in my experience) that their children and people nowadays are materially better off than they were in the past. Perhaps the old people themselves are better off, in terms of disposable income, than they used to be. However, they do not see themselves as prosperous as their children are.

This sense of shared, relative poverty serves as an identity marker. Hochschild describes the democratizing effect of such statements as "we are all elder people here" (1973:57): I would substitute the phrase "we are all battlers here". This applies to such groups as Senior Citizens Club, and others, where a working class ethos is expressed. (Rosow 1967 and Russel 1981:107 support this). Members often talk about not having any money, shopping carefully and getting rich (by buying weekly lottery tickets). They also criticize members reputed to have lots of money for being "tight" and say that they should not receive the pension.

Hochschild quotes Cummings and Henry (1961:233 in 1973:3) explanation about why so little work has been done on lower class, old people: "Lower class people are difficult to communicate with and require special interviewing techniques". That is, they are "difficult" for middle class researchers, who are unaccustomed to talking with working class people.
Hochschild goes on to describe the problem of being seen to "pry" or, as my informants would say, to "sticky beak". These "problems" are an intrinsic part of fieldwork which social class differences between interviewer and informant aggravate. Many working class people have learned to be suspicious of, and resist, what they see as bureaucratic interference. Informants under 70 years can lose health benefits and a portion of the aged pension if their weekly income exceeds $54 and $30 dollars, respectively (for a single person as of Jan. 1983). Except for basic questions about past employment, I have not asked for detailed information about personal financial matters. However, on occasions, individuals may volunteer such details and a great deal, of course, is communicated in passing.

Oakley (1981) argues that there are serious theoretical and ethical problems with standard interviewing techniques which exploit people's vulnerability and sociability to elicit information. My approach has been to answer questions about myself and my research. This may indeed be (as Oakley suggests) a function of my doing research with women but it also reflects my own orientation to fieldwork. Also I have tried to repay some of my indebtedness to informants; for their trust and assistance by respecting their privacy and using pseudonyms and altering identifying biographical details. Interviews, averaging 3 hours in duration have included quite a lot of chat, cups of tea etc. This sociability may be particularly important, if Erikson is correct, in constructing a sense of "integrity" and personal identity in old age. Certainly, almost all my informants seem to have enjoyed our conversations and have invited me to return. This I interpret as symptomatic of old people's continuing need for self-affirma-
tion and desire to learn about the "world outside", which I may represent. (Of course, this resembles my own curiosity about the "world outside" of old women).

Informants

My ethnographic perspective can be described as "women without men" either temporarily, as in women's groups and activities, or permanently as widows. I am interested very generally in the personal and social implication of such a supposedly "un-natural" situation. This group is actually typical of old people; the "average" old person would be a widow.

The majority of my informants are women (36 out of 49) and, of these, 25 are widows. They are mainly working class (see preceding section). In terms of religious affiliation, my informants are roughly representative of the general Goulburn population (ABS, 1976 Census). Just under half (19, 11 women and 8 men) belong to the Anglican Church, 12 (11 women and 1 man) to the Roman Catholic Church 10 (7 women and 3 men) to other Protestant denominations and 8 (7 women and 1 man) are not accounted for. Such representativeness reflects the fact that my informants have been drawn from a variety of social networks and groups, and should strengthen my analysis.

The term "informant" refers to people interviewed mainly in their own homes except for 5 men who were interviewed in a bowling club. Information on important life events, family history, employment, daily activities and social relationships was gathered informally, through a combination of questions and answers and free-ranging conversation. Interviews usually
took 2 to 3 hours, and about two thirds were interviewed more than once. Two widows and a widower were interviewed 7 or more times: they were all very articulate and interested in talking to me about themselves. Of the 15 who were interviewed just once, 2 died after the first interview, 4 seemed too confused to carry on in-depth interviews, and 2 were subsequently institutionalized. Although they had initially agreed to be interviewed, some turned out to be not talkative or, perhaps, not interested in self-disclosure. As well, my intention was to observe informants in a variety of situations. This consideration influenced whom I followed-up for later interviews. Just under half of my informants met this criterion (although few men did, see "Where are all the old men" for further discussion), by participating in situations to which I had access - a day care centre, various women's groups, social clubs and so forth.

Accordingly, my sample and the situations I observed are skewed towards more extroverted, socially active people and semi-public situations. However, this is not entirely the case as 18 informants (13 women and 5 men) were contacted through a domestic help service. My visits often coincided with those of helpers; several of whom were willing to "share" their clients with me and, in turn, be observed by me.

As well as my 49 informants there are some 250 to 300 old people, with whom I have had some social involvement - at the Senior Citizens' Club, meals service, a rehabilitation group, retired men's clubs and various smaller women's groups. Old men are by far a minority in these situations and widows constitute the largest social group. These groups tend to have overlapping memberships, for example, a church workers'
group that regularly meets to play cards with other women (in a church), meals-on-wheels workers and recipients who attend a social club (as "workers" and "oldies" respectively) and so on. Many of these people belong to other unidentified groups and clubs - a local "workers' club", clubs for old people, various women's groups, bowling clubs, etc. Thirteen informants are members of groups in which I also participate.

Special events such as afternoon teas, dinners, bus trips, and meetings bring together individuals (and groups) who might not meet otherwise. Often they are important sign posts in the annual social calendar for old people in Goulburn and are afterwards, popular conversation topics. Such "post-mortems", and the events themselves, have provided me with interesting and often new, information about inter-group relationships and the annual cycle of activities which inform day-to-day happenings.

There are also younger people, mainly women (domestic help and meals workers, children, nurses, social workers etc.) whom I have observed and who have acted as guides and interpreters for me. These people are, in various ways, part of the subjective and social worlds of my old women. The voices of some men and husbands are also heard.

People construct and reveal their social worlds in their talk (Berger and Kellner 1977). In this study talk has been used as an ethnographic resource; in order to understand and convey meanings old women ascribe to their situations. Similarly individual case histories have been presented. They have been constructed by me; using the subject's own words, details of their social biographies, my observations of them in other situations and so on, to try and get at "who" these women are. These case histories are also used to elucidate
cultural themes relating to feminine identity and widowhood. While all the people are "real", names and some biographical details have been altered to protect individuals' privacy. These case histories include Nola H., Mrs. B., Mrs. R., Mrs. N. and Mrs. G. in chapter 3 on images of womanhood, and Harry O., Mrs. G., Mrs. H. and Mrs. D. in chapter 4 on personal meanings of widowhood.

1. This could mean losing some ethnographic accuracy; certainly, I have sacrificed some good "stories". However, protecting individual privacy outweighs these costs. I have not added to the truth but have tried to retain the sense of a particular situation while deleting idiosyncratic, identifying details.
CHAPTER 2

FOOD AND IDENTITY

Storing groceries in ovens, attending free Christmas dinners, receiving meals-on-wheels, and eating alone: these images of need and incompetence correspond with our dominant social welfare orientation to old age (Russel 1981), and with stereotypes about old women in particular. This chapter challenges these myths by demonstrating how old women in Goulburn control and use food to their own advantage.

These women still spend a great deal of time in food related activities - shopping, cooking, eating and talking about food - alone and with others. They have spent much of their lives in this fashion, nurturing or "feeding" people. Even though their children are grown-up with families of their own, these women still feed them - with special meals, treats for grandchildren and "old-fashioned" foods such as baking, jams and chutneys (see Hochschild 1973:73-75 on "old fashionedness" and identity). This food-giving sustains and re-enacts well-worn relationships, and is a reminder of domestic intimacy and a mother's special knowledge and expertise. It can be a political statement; challenging another woman's competence for example. Old fashioned foods are, after all, "best". Even very frail old women continue to cook for their families in this way, when they do not cook regularly for themselves. Some examples are a woman who receives meals-on-wheels but enjoys cooking for her son each weekend and another woman, quite frail and often confused, who occupies much of each day, preparing the evening meal for herself and her brother.
The food domain, intertwined as it is with caring for others and oneself, is perceived by these women as an essential part of being a woman. "Any" woman can cook (well enough to survive). There are always exceptions: women who cannot because they are too "badly off" - confused, frail, blind - and who are forgiven for not preparing food for others or themselves. Their circumstances are to blame - still they do what they can - they can serve cups of tea, at least, and apologize for not doing more. There are also women who refuse to cook; Mrs. M. who refuses to do "anything" for her self. Other women criticize her for this; she is "too lazy to (even) get out of her chair" and she deserves her children's neglect (a very strong condemnation of Mrs. M. as a woman). Such women are described as almost repulsive, for they are anti-social and un-natural women.

Men, on the other hand, are believed not to be able to cook or take care of themselves generally. They are seen as helpless quasi-parasitic creatures who depend on their wives' care and after them on other women (daughters, girlfriends, nurses). Some men are particularly lazy and malinger, receiving meals-on-wheels, for example, unnecessarily. Most men are considered to be incompetent and rather pathetic without women, but there are a few remarkable ones who are domestically competent.

In my theoretical introduction I suggest that women's "integrity" crisis is about no longer being needed as mothers and especially as wives. "Not being needed" can signify "emptiness" ("the female form of perdition", Erikson 1964:596) when hitherto relationships have been largely asymmetrical and based on need. But "not being needed" can also mean
freedom; to feed or not to feed other people and to indulge or "feed" oneself, which is consistent with more positive approaches to widowhood (see Introduction). This chapter examines some non-domestic food situations and how women use food as a social idiom for identity and relationships. The groups to be discussed here are the Country Ladies, the Town Club and the "Has Beens".

The Country Ladies

A group of women I call "the Country Ladies" meets once a month to talk and share afternoon tea. They are all "close": old friends who have known each other over 50 years - married, had their children, moved to Goulburn and (most) have become widows "together".

"Most of us grew up around the Crookwell area and by degrees as we got older, for some reason, we all came to Goulburn. It started off as a very little group and more would come in, you know, and they'd say, 'Oh you better come along and have afternoon tea with us.' and it makes us a group of 12 of us. Since, we've stopped it at 12. There are other people who've come since but they weren't as close to us ... as this group. It's a nice size to have in your home ..."

(A member, speaker's emphasis)

Most of the group retired to Goulburn with their husbands about 15 years ago. Although their country district has a recently built and well equipped "lodge" for old people, the nearest doctor and medical facilities are in Goulburn. This is the main reason given to me for leaving the country. Four of the women are sisters-in-law, several are cousins by marriage and a few were "next door" neighbours with adjoining properties. However, what they all seem to
share in common is that they, and their husbands, were active in the community as church-goers, fund-raisers, and were generally "upstanding citizens". While none are wealthy, they are all comfortably off. They have remained "good" women:

"They're all nice women - they're not silly, none of them swear or none of them smoke." (a member)

"We just talk - and we don't gossip. You know, some of the men used to say I suppose, we'd get there and we'd gossip but I don't know why but we don't do it! We just talk about general things, you know, no tearing people to pieces or anything like that ..." (a member)

Unlike other groups of women which meet under various pretexts; to play cards or housie, and are known for gossiping, the Country Ladies meet, explicitly, to talk. They claim they do not gossip. What constitutes "gossip" and "just talk" is difficult to say. The distinction seems based largely on intent - which is a question of meaning and members' interpretations. However, part of their identity as a group of ladies is that they do not gossip. In choosing to not gossip, they protect the notion of their shared, meritorious pasts, and criticize other groups who do gossip.

Their afternoons are appropriately decorous. Each woman takes a turn as "hostess" which involves organizing and serving the afternoon tea. It is her "guests'" responsibility to attend her "day" (even if, as on one occasion, the hostess was in hospital). Everyone brings a "plate": "We don't make a big do of it, we don't take a lot of food (just sufficient for ourselves)." My interpretation of what Mrs. A. is saying here is that women do not compete explicitly with each other; they are to bring what they can, without fear of criticism. This is so; some no longer bake and bring "store bought" food - that is considered acceptable although not as good as the "sponges" and so forth, which they once made. However, they
all bring a surplus of food (which each takes home afterwards).
It is an impressive display, in terms of abundance and quality;
several large decorated cakes, scones with fresh cream and
jam, various "slices" (low iced cakes served sliced) and
home made sandwiches.

"Presentation" is an important aspect of the Country
Ladies' afternoon teas. Cakes are served intact rather than
cut up, often on special plates provided by their owners.
Sandwiches and "slices" are served cut into delicate portions
and carefully organized on large plates. Everyone has her
own small plate and paper serviette and helps herself to the
"plates" in front of her. She is also supposed to "help"
others around her to food, and to encourage people to try
particular items. They enjoy but do not "gobble" the food.
They do not rush at the food - they talk for about an hour
before the hostess moves in a leisurely fashion to the
kitchen. This is a signal for several women to get up and
"help" her, that is to serve cups of tea and carry in prepared
"plates". Conversation continues over food, and they linger
for another 45 minutes or so.

Each hostess decides whether to have her "day" at home
or at a local club. "Home" is the ideal - it is private, more
comfortable and signifies greater independence. They can sit
in a circle rather than along a table, for example. But the
Club is centrally located and convenient: it means that those
women who feel they cannot do all the work involved in home
entertaining - and to a high enough standard - can still do so,
and guests who have transportation problems (being widows and
unable to drive themselves, for example) - they can also still
participate. Even at the Club, these are private occasions.
Invited guests come and other women "pop in" to say 'hello' to particular friends but the door is kept closed. They have been called "snobs" because of their exclusiveness.

Many of the women claim that they find cooking more difficult than they used to, and say that they are not as good at it any more. They explain this change as getting "lazy". Over afternoon tea Mrs. A. recounts to the other women (and myself) that she now has to freeze food ahead of special events; she cannot cope with cooking food all at once, she gets too confused. Mrs. H. comments how "now" (she is recently widowed) she sometimes "feels" like having just a piece of bread (which is only a minor component of a "meal", Douglas 1975) at night. The other women admonish Mrs. H., telling her she must take better care of herself and eat a "proper" meal. (One of these same women tells me, later, that she is worried about Mrs. H.; she is lonely and does not know how to "mix", without her husband, who was more outgoing. Not feeding herself properly seems to be part of Mrs. H.'s social problems, which are due partly to lack of confidence.)

Pointing to another, rather confused (forgetful, "scatter-brained") woman, the Country Ladies tell me how Mrs. M. used to make beautiful "sponges" (light sponge cakes are a sign of a good cook): she was an excellent cook but now brings a bakery cake to their afternoons.

Another sign of "getting older" is meeting at the Club instead of at home. This concession to age is a controversial one; some women prefer to hold their afternoons at home, at all costs. Moves like this, away from private and home-made to public and commercial, can be seen as part of a general "cooling-out" (Goffman 1962 in Russel 1981:114-116) of these women in anticipation of possible, future institutionalization.
They certainly presage the end of the group:

"We've all had really good friendship over the years ... I wouldn't like to be away from some of them. I might have to because my hearing is not so good now and I am lame now, and my friends are cracking up."

(a member)

Husbands and Widows

Only four of the twelve women are still married; the majority have become widows since the group started about ten years ago. Those men left bring their wives to the afternoon but do not come in. They sit in their cars waiting and talking to each other. Some husbands used to pick up the widows as well, but the men are finding driving more difficult now and are less confident (like the women are about their cooking), and no longer do so. Also there are many more widows and fewer husbands. I asked one member why husbands do not come in and she replied that "they would be driven mad" (by all the talking). "Talking" and "afternoon teas" seem to be women's activities. I would suggest that their absence is also a kind of avoidance. (Avoidance as a feature of male-female relations is developed in Chapter 5)

The "Country Ladies" is essentially a group of widows. Husbands are not only out of place in this context but could also glimpse what the future will be like without them - at a tea party which will probably out-live them.

While men are physically excluded from this group of "we women" (how one woman referred to a group photograph), they are included indirectly. The women all know them and enjoy talking about men and their "ways"; for example, George's fussiness - his wife refers joking/complaining to recent household incidents. Like other couples I interviewed,
they now share the housework: this often becomes a cause of friction - here, because George is a "perfectionist" and has taken over many of the chores. The women are sympathetic to Ada's plight and laugh knowingly at her comments. Men are also structurally present. Most kin relationships in the group are traced through husbands, for example sisters and cousins-in-law.

Some of the husbands belong to a small club for retired business and professional men and farmers, which meets once a month. It is markedly different from the Country Ladies: meeting regularly at a local bowling club with a tightly scheduled agenda comprising a business meeting, formal presentation and morning tea (which the bowling club caters for). There is little time in their crowded mornings for small talk, and the 40 or so members wear name tags and club insignia to identify themselves. Wives are sometimes invited to the meetings. Those "Country Ladies" who have attended say they find the hectic "business" of the morning amusing. The men's club is different again in its orientation; members repeatedly stress its up-to-dateness, that it is not a club about the past. (The Country Ladies say that they do not live in the past but acknowledge that they do enjoy talking about it sometimes.)

Sharing Food and "Identification".

"Perception of another as an extension of oneself" (Hochschild 1973:148) or "identification" is a crucial feature of identity formation which is supposedly motivated by "status envy" (see Robbins 1973:1208). Hochschild argues that such non-reciprocal identification occurs on the part of old women living in a "senior citizens' apartment house with daughters and granddaughters"
Hochschild calls this "altruistic surrender", which may be psychologically enriching, but is also a form of "latent social control" of those who are socially deprived. Furthermore, Hochschild concludes that "among the 'sisters' (old women) there is seldom the stable patterned relationship of identifier and identified-with".

"The Country Ladies" are quite different in this respect. Their shared biographies, reciprocal and ceremonial gatherings, and sense of group honour and identity suggest that there is reciprocal identification among these women. It could well be a kind of "status envy"; in the sense that all the other women in the group are so good and each woman aspires to - and envies - that goodness.

Here is a member's account of the death of another member:

"Dear, it was - it was very distressing, truly it was. It was - you know - the first of the lot of us...."

Significantly, she does not (dare not?) pronounce the word "death", so threatening is this first, fateful death. In a similar way, she describes how she could not talk to another member about her seriously ill daughter "because we both would cry", as if they share the same grief.

As the group "ages", husbands die, and women give up baking and home entertaining; so ages each woman vicariously and actually. Changes, losses and adjustments are thus mirrored and anticipated. Such "identification" cannot be described as simply a kind of fantasy or antidote to the pains of old age. Symbolized by their food sharing, it provides a meaningful way for these women to resolve their crisis of "integrity", through their shared group identity as "Country Ladies".
The Town Club

The Town Club, established in 1976 by a citizens' committee to "help the aged and disabled" in Goulburn, has a membership of about 200, with an average attendance of 60 (50 women, 10 men). Its main activities, like most other local recreational groups for the aged, are housie, cards and an afternoon tea with occasional bus trips and special events (Christmas dinner, Melbourne Cup day etc.). There is considerable overlap, as well, in terms of membership between it and other groups.

Club membership can be divided into 3 discrete groups according to activity - card players, housie players and those who do all the Club's work (running the games, catering the afternoon teas, selling door and raffle tickets, organizing bus trips and special events etc.) Each group has its own afternoon tea - in the card room, housie room or kitchen. However, the "workers" serve everyone their tea from the kitchen and clean up afterwards.

Afternoon Teas, Big Cakes and Greed

Afternoon tea normally consists of 2 plain, store-bought biscuits placed by the "workers" on the saucer of each cup of tea. This is a very basic afternoon tea; iced biscuits, bakery biscuits, home-made biscuits are progressively more elaborate and valued versions of the "tea and biscuits" combination. Each tea is served "complete" (weak, black or white) except for sugar which is placed on the tables. Even the sugar basins are cleaned afterwards, and sometimes "workers" complain about the sugar that members put in their tea. Afternoon tea is served as soon as the games are over and, within fifteen minutes, everyone but
the "workers" have left. Normal teas are clearly minimal events, characterized by frugality, and obviously rationed out by "workers".

A monthly, special tea consisting of homemade scones, cakes and sandwiches is served on medium-sized plates. These are more complicated events to organize. "Workers" and other members, recognized as good cooks, generally contribute food. The problem is to control who brings food. Sometimes women bring their own baking unsolicited, but this may not be considered of sufficiently high quality. For example, one woman always puts blue icing on "everything". "Workers" agree that this looks "awful" and resist serving it; such food reflects badly on them (their judgement?). The problem is that the contributor might realize that they have rejected her offering and ask why: What could they say? (One solution for unwanted food is to "forget" it - in the fridge or, better yet, the freezer.)

The problem of control over food can prove quite disruptive - as on a special occasion when twenty-five high quality "slices" were needed. Extra care was taken in selecting contributors; nevertheless, some "slices" were judged not good enough to serve (too crumbly, hard to cut, messy) and were set aside. Such a decision is obviously political in its implications. It is most effective when done as if one is unaware of who the cook is but it is crucial to know "who" she is, to weigh up the political costs of an adverse decision. Feelings ran high as women watched their "slices" not being served. However, no one commented directly on the decision-making or its consequences. Women would push other "slices" than their own to the back and complained about
other more trivial matters but they did not ask why their cake had been set aside. As a worker later explained: everyone wants their's to be used first, taking home left-overs is an insult. This interpretation is very different from the Country Ladies who seem to be quite comfortable about taking home left-overs.

"Workers" claim that attendance rises on the special tea afternoons. What they are suggesting is that "some" people come just to eat, they are that greedy! This is seen as a particular problem on these occasions because food is served on larger, shared plates and some people keep them to themselves. "Workers" often return to the kitchen with empty plates, complaining about someone's greediness. They try to deal with this by serving a variety of cakes on medium-sized plates. That way, no one can eat too much. They also delay putting food on tables, for the explicit purpose of slowing down the greedy ones, who might otherwise commence eating ahead of their more polite neighbours.

At Christmas time and on other special occasions, a large decorated fruit cake is served. Baked by a "worker" the cake is formally presented to the club members and ceremonially "cut" by a specially-chosen member. Then the cake is taken to the kitchen where it is cut into small squares, counted onto plates and served— all by "workers". In these circumstances, no one even has a chance to be greedy.
"Oldies" and "Workers"

Club members are often referred to by "workers" as "oldies" - even though there may be no chronological difference between the two. "Oldie" is a social category, a category of person for whom things are done. "Oldies" tend to be greedy and lazy; wanting more and more food, trips and treats, which the workers must provide. Because they are so child-like, "workers" must also make decisions for "oldies"; which they do as club office holders and committee.

"It is better to keep your mouth closed
And let people think you are a fool
Than to open it and prove you are one!"

"Saying of the week" (posted by "workers")

What I am describing is a power relationship, whereby "workers" have power and "oldies", none. This relationship is legitimated by the belief that "Workers work for the "oldies"; the "workers" become better people than the "oldies", because of all their work (and giving). By implication, "oldies" should be grateful to the workers - even though they pay a minimal entrance fee. As long as "oldies" are duly grateful and passive, they need not confront their own powerlessness and vulnerability; exemplified by their compliance to "workers"' decisions on club matters and also by comments passed in the kitchen about "oldies".

This situation resembles a "total institution" (Goffman 1961), which Russel also discusses in her analysis of a Sydney Senior Citizens' Centre (1981:114-116). However, there are important discrepancies between the Town Club and a "total institution". There are no paid staff, the Town Club is
centrally located, and the "worker" - "oldie" distinction is not strictly age-based. The Club is not closed; it overlaps various friendship networks and interest groups. Potentially membership is status-conferring—members can become "workers". There are a series of status levels within the category "oldie", from those who are delivered by ambulance and spend the afternoons chatting and drowsing in their chairs, the majority who just play and "look away" when food contributions are requested, those who bring food unsolicited (and cause problems), and to women who are regularly asked and bring baking because they are considered competent and reliable. These last women are friends or at least friendly with "workers": they are often nominated by "workers" to the club committee and become full time "workers". So almost everybody has someone to feel superior to, similar to Hochschild's (1973) "poor dear" hierarchy. Finally, unlike Russel's Sydney study (1981:117), 10 per cent, compared to 2 per cent, of the aged population belong to the Town Club.

The Town Club is an interesting example of a voluntary association, which mimics a "total institution". In fact, it is more democratic than another local club for old people, which is run or rather almost owned by its leader. Also, there are charitable Christmas dinners for "oldies" which are attended annually by almost 400 people, some of whom fall asleep in their chairs or jostle for food. Why do people choose to participate in such apparently demeaning situations? Obviously there are people who do not. One is an old man who tells his wife that he is not "old enough" to come to the Town Club. Another is a woman who has been so embarrassed by
what she considers the "spectacle" of the free Christmas dinners that she refuses to attend again. These are just a few of the majority of old people in Goulburn who for a variety of reasons do not participate in such situations.

There is no easy answer to the question of why people participate. To start with, not everyone would share the "workers'" point of view, that it is "better to give than to receive". Surely, some come to the Town Club afternoons or the free Christmas dinners, feeling that they have paid their way, in money and in years, unaware or unconcerned about political hierarchies. Listening to women talk about all the (free) Christmas dinners they have to fit in their social calendars, this seems the case. Then, there are those "poor dears" who aggressively exploit the benefits of patronization. For example, two women who live in units for the aged phone up organizers of a fete, demanding their "free" ride. A bus for "oldies" has been proposed and subsequently was cancelled: the organizers owe them this!

Such collusion, on the part of the powerless with the powerful, can be found throughout our society. People learn to be selectively powerless as children in families, students in schools, partners in marriage, employees in the workplace and so on.

"Cooling out the elderly", which Russel argues (1981:115) is a function of senior citizens centres is, then, easily done. Old people are ready to "cool" themselves out. Even "workers" who are more assertive than "oldies" leave decision-making to a very few in committee meetings. Members, who are mainly women and working class, do not need a "saying of the month" to tell them they are "fools" and to keep their mouths "closed".
Men, the Consumers

So far, men have not been mentioned. This is partly because so few men belong to the Town Club. As one informant explained to me, this is because "most of them are dead." This is literally incorrect but it provides an interesting insight into how old men are perceived in the Town Club and perhaps in Goulburn generally. (This topic is also discussed in the Introduction.) In the Club, the only role available to men is that of consumer or "oldie", they only eat food. There are predictably no men among the "workers". A few have lunch in the kitchen with other members, but none stay in the kitchen with "workers" during the afternoon. It is in the kitchen where much of the Club's "business", formal and otherwise, is accomplished, rivalries enacted, information shared and alliances forged. Men are to be found mainly playing cards in the card-room.

Men can have no significant influence in the Club. Men who have challenged this dictum, by speaking up and supposedly trying to "take over" (for example, running the card room) have been unwelcome in the Club and are no longer members. Men are so insignificant that it sometimes seems as if they are invisible or are there by mistake: this is really a women's club. Mixed groups are often addressed as "ladies"; a "cut and perm" at a local (ladies') salon is a frequent door prize. On one occasion a man won the hair-do: this was seen as incongruous but no substitute or apology was offered and he gave it to a friend. Other prizes include table cloths and crocheted items (made by women members), tinned foods and small kitchen utensils (bought by women)—all items which are stereotypically feminine.
One man, who is an active member, literally hovers on the periphery of the kitchen. He is sometimes "jokingly" scolded for not helping more in the kitchen, but when he does offer is accused of choosing an easy job or told that "it is about time." Once I was sent to supervise him on a particular job because he was supposedly doing it incorrectly, when he was just doing it differently: "his" way. He realised why I had come to "help" him and was not pleased about the implied criticism.

The message for him, and men generally, is not to get over involved in club affairs, if they want to remain members. He does not—his manner is one of bland agreement, he avoids controversy. However, he is in a "no win" situation being one of the few "eligible" (single, presentable, gentlemanly) men in the club, his every move is controversial. Whoever he sits beside or talks to (usually a woman) can be commented on: for it is newsworthy. At the same time he is criticized for being un-manly, because he is so agreeable and inoffensive. He plays along with the women's jokes; sadly, they are often at his expense.

Women joke about most of the men who come to the club, especially those who come alone. It is as if they are somehow "flawed" - the underlying question seems to be why would a normal man want to come here? Men who belong to a "visible" couple, who accompany wives or girlfriends, seem to be exempt from their barbs. There are various possible explanations: their behaviour is "normal", they come because their women come; they do not pose the same threat to women's relationships (solidarity?) because they are not eligible; criticism of them could be seen as an attack on their female partners. (These are topics which are developed in Chapter 5.)
Men's identity problems - their invisibility, flaws and marginality - derive from their role as consumers in the Club. "Women feeding men" is considered by these women to be a "natural" inevitable relationship. This belief is borne out by their domestic experiences as wives and mothers, cooking for men, in exchange for love and economic support. Women feed men in the club but these men are neither husbands nor sons; they have nothing to give in return. These old men remain indebted. Men accompanied by women are less indebted. Having women to care for them, they are less needy. But, perhaps more importantly, these same women pay their social debts, by bringing food and prizes and by their social involvement in women's business (see also Chapter 5).

The "Has Beens"

The "has beens" is an informal club of women who used to do charitable work together. They now meet to "keep in touch" once a week for a social afternoon in a local sporting club. Their membership has "dwindled" over the years; at least 3 members have dropped out in the last year due to illness. Most are widows. Approximately 20 women attend these afternoons, to play an hour's housie and have an afternoon tea. Two women are the club's permanent, unelected officers (secretary, treasurer, president). Members take turns, in pairs, catering for the afternoon tea. They all pay several pennies for each housie game and card, which goes into a bank account to pay the annual rent on the room. In the past, they raised much larger amounts of money, not for their own entertainment, but through catering for charities.
These afternoons are not particularly special; they are a pleasant diversion, quite similar to other groups' afternoons of housie and tea. Tea consists of several sandwiches and pieces of slice or cake, served on individual plates (a miniature "meal", Douglas 1975). In contrast to the Country Ladies, there are no serviettes, large plates to pass around or showy cakes to admire. There is a mixture home-made and bought food items. Consonant with the informal, unassuming character of the afternoons, women offer each other their left-overs, "waste not, want not", but there is none of the ceremonial sharing evident in the Country Ladies. Such sharing does not necessarily promote intimacy but may well be a sign of intimacy.

The group appears to enjoy "letting down", in their retirement from good works. Women indulge in relatively unrestrained laughing and joking, especially a small group of women which includes the club officers. Seated at the same table they talk and "carry on" loudly, while women seated at the other table watch and comment on their antics, not necessarily approvingly. Women also gossip about other members, for example, about how "loud" and "rude" one of the "officers" is. She apparently checks up on other women's tidying up after the afternoons. The other women consider this very rude but they seem afraid of her and do not challenge her rudeness. Also in the food idiom is a story told about another member, said to be poorly dressed and needing "a good bath"; so dirty is she that other women do not like to drink the cups of tea she makes when she and her friend cater. This certainly puts her beyond the social "pale", not only is she incompetent but her food is contaminated. Her food is not food. Such a story questions her worth and identity as a woman. In these women's terms,
food and feminine identity are closely related.

Such criticisms reveal social and emotional distance among the "has beens" which is very different from the Country Ladies' intimacy and strong sense of group identity. The afternoons are a pleasant diversion for participants but are not especially meaningful. Members belong to other similar groups and talk about and compare themselves to these other groups, suggesting that members are divided by competing loyalties. From an individual perspective, this group is just one of a repertory of social activities in which these women engage.

Summary

This chapter has examined some of the ways in which old women use food in non-domestic situations to express personal and group identity. The Country Ladies, Town Club and "Has Beens" have been analyzed in terms of women's identity and food.

The Country Ladies are a private, personal and exclusive group - they are, perhaps, an example of "inalienable group friendship" (Cohen 1961); communicating intimacy, shared identity and status in the food domain. Reciprocal exchanges of prestigious, home-made, elaborate and rich foods, and the ceremonial treatment of afternoon teas are here striking features. "Entertaining at home" is the afternoon's prototype, again emphasizing intimacy, privacy and hospitality. Each woman takes a turn in playing hostess to her guests whether or not she holds the afternoon in her own home. The hostess seems to represent group identity and honour. Members are indebted to her; to bring food which enhances the group's reputation as good cooks (and women) and to attend and enjoy themselves decorously as ladies should.
The "Has Beens" original focus as an instrumental work group is still reflected in its afternoons, even though members now come to enjoy themselves. Like many other groups in Goulburn, they meet to play cards which, as Crespi argues (1968) seems to be a substitute for conversation. Of course, a great deal of talking goes on around the games but this is seen by the women as a distraction from the primary purpose of the afternoon - to play an hour of cards. Pairs of women take turns "catering" for the group (as they did once, for charity) serving an unadorned afternoon tea. This reflects and expresses a group identity which stresses ordinariness; an ordinary group of ordinary women, of so called "has beens". Similarly, membership is loosely defined, friends of original members have joined, and weekly attendance is not mandatory. Relationships within and outside the group seem to be more important than a larger, embracing group identity; thereby confirming the group's "ordinariness". However, this "ordinariness" is remarkable, revealing as it does these women's ideas about what ordinary women are - competent, nurturing and unassuming.

By way of contrast, the Town Club is organized hierarchically into two main groups; "workers" and "oldies". For all their work in the Club, "workers" control food (and other things). "Oldies" allow "workers" to make decisions for them, in exchange for food and entertainment. Power in the Club can be conceptualized as following along the gradient of food giving and receiving: there is a progression from most powerful "workers" who control the kitchen and movement of food in the Club, to intermediate women who are invited to bring food for special occasions, to the most greedy and powerless of the "oldies". This asymmetrical relationship involves an exchange downwards of food and work and upwards of power.
and status. In this system, "workers" compete to do more, thereby, enhancing their own status and "oldies" compete to get more food and fun from the club ("workers"). For a sizeable proportion of club members, membership is potentially "status generating" (see Russel 1981: 108-109), if only by being better off than some "poor dear" (Hochschild 1973). However, not everybody can compete for status and power in the club, bringing food for example. There would be literally too much food to eat, there would be no one to work for. This is why control of food is such an important issue in the Club. Control over who contributes and serves food concentrates power in the club, inflates the social value of the food domain and is in itself, "status-generating". Validating this inequality are ideas about the laziness, greediness and incompetence of "oldies", the exceptions proving the rule.

For all these groups food giving is "one up" (Myerhoff 1978:261) to food receiving. However, patterns of food-giving and receiving are different in these various situations. The Country Ladies are simultaneously giving and receiving, the "Has Beens" practice a delayed reciprocity and at the Town Club the "workers" are always giving while "oldies" always receive. Full reciprocity seems to heighten the equality and status of the Country Ladies, in comparison to the "Has Beens" who are (with some noted exceptions) roughly equal but ordinary. In the Town Club the repeated non-reciprocity between "workers" and "oldies" may cumulatively increase status difference. Here, men are always consumers never food-givers, if they are participants at all. Thus, the men are always "one down" to the women. These women see their dependence as natural; men are supposedly incapable of caring for themselves. Generally they need women for this.
While access to and control of food seem to be a lifelong feminine (cultural) trait, there is a shift away, in emphasis from obligatory, domestic foods and meals to non-essential entertainment foods such as snacks, desserts and morning and afternoon teas. This change has several implications; eating together becomes a social, "fun" activity. "Letting go" (what Keith 1980 calls "loosening up of constraints" for old women) and eating with gusto are features of these afternoon teas. Women urge each other to eat "more" and joke about having to let their belts out. They often comment when someone is "holding back". Social eating and getting fatter seem to be among the benefits of being an old woman. Having spent a lifetime cooking and feeding other people, they have (unlike old men) earned this privilege. And now they are old, these women are no longer attractive to men (I am told) and, perhaps more importantly, do not need to attract men, being financially (and generally) independent. Being a young woman, I must still "watch" what I eat (and my body), they say. They can please themselves at home now too, for they are free of the burden of feeding their families. (Of course, that also means they are no longer needed at home.)

These social foods are served mainly to other women. Preparing and serving these (potentially) prestigious foods can enhance women's reputations and identities, or conversely as in the Town Club harm them. "Women feeding women" is different from feeding families, being essentially a symmetrical rather than asymmetrical relationship. Women are by definition knowledgeable about food and capable of feeding themselves. "Women feeding women" is a voluntary relationship, which can have various meanings; competition, or fighting with food as between "workers" in the Town Club, status difference such as those marking off "oldies" from "workers" and the
distinction drawn by the Country Ladies between their group and other women, and shared identity among the Country Ladies. Their "identification" is communicated structurally (from Bateson 1958:35) by reciprocal food exchange and is also psychologically real, as their talk reveals.

A partial explanation for this shift from a domestic to non-domestic mode is that the domestic sphere has shrunk, freeing women for lives in other realms. My interpretation is a developmental one. I believe this is warranted by the emphasis women place on food and their feminine identity, notions which shape women's responses to their changing circumstances in old age. As Myerhoff argues (1978:263) "roles based on "nurturant functions are durable and expandable. They can last as long as life and enlarge as needed, for there is always someone who needs taking care of. The nurturant role has added advantages: putting the care-taker 'one-up' ... and arousing obligations and sentiments in the cared for."

For these women, food continues to be an idiom for expressing relationships and their identities as competent and nurturant women. The food domain provides them with ways to literally and symbolically, directly and indirectly nurture themselves. As a consequence feminine identity seems to be especially resilient and meaningful.
CHAPTER 3

WOMEN'S GOODNESS AND POWER

"The reality of the world is sustained through conversation with significant others."
(Berger and Kellner 1977:7-8).

Such a statement seems to me especially pertinent in an ethnography about old women, who are known for all their talking - talk which others as well as the women themselves label as trivial gossip. This study takes a broadly communicative view of social life and meaning and of "the analysis of social discourse" (Geertz 1973:26). In the preceding chapter, food behaviours and food offerings were analyzed as part of an ongoing conversation about feminine identity and world view or reality. This chapter looks at how women "tell the code" (Wieder 1974) for being a woman. Using women's talk as an ethnographic resource, I identify two opposed categories of womanhood which convey "embedded instructions" for organizing experience and self.

Detailed case histories of 2 individuals - Nola H. and Mrs. N. - are presented, and compared with other,"lesser"women. These particular women are remarkable in the extent to which their lives and identities correspond to cultural categories. They are not caricatures but portraits - approaching self-portraits - based on their own, and other women's talk. The first woman, Nola H. is a "powerful woman" whose influence and competence are recognized by other women, and are expressed in the food domain. The second is of Mrs. N., who is a "good woman" and presents herself as such. Some consequences of these categories for feminine identity in old age are then explored,
with particular emphasis on issues of competence, nurturance, survival and power.

**Nola H.**

Nola H., a widow, is an active and prominent member of several groups of women. She has a wide circle of influential friends but none is as outspoken or as controversial as she. Her social life is so hectic and demanding that she is hardly ever home, a fact of which she is proud. Like other old women, Nola H. appears to have resolved the crisis of "not being needed" by immersing herself in women's affairs. In her case, she has been particularly successful. This case history examines some of the ways in which her power is made evident with special emphasis on food as a social idiom.

Aspects of the food domain reveal Nola's quite obvious dominance over other women. Nola has her own "spot" in the kitchen of a club to which she belongs - at the sink, where she can control the movement of dishes and women, who step around her and follow the pace she sets. Only when she is away does another dominant woman "dare" to take her place. On another occasion, Nola decided to cut and place sandwiches on plates for a special tea. Again she set the pace of work in the kitchen; women either making sandwiches for Nola to "finish" or waiting for her finished "plates". As Nola slowly and meticulously cut sandwiches (with her own sharp knife), it must have been obvious to all the women there that no one else could present the food as nicely as she. (In fact, Nola did criticize other women's attempts to do so.) Tempers frayed and women criticized other women's work but Nola remained untouched, in her pre-eminent position. A rival seemed to have been bested by the situation and left the kitchen to get some "fresh
air. There were too many "loud voices" in the kitchen, she said to me and several other friends, especially Nola's!

By all accounts Nola is an excellent cook. She enjoys telling the story about how she was travelling on the bus one day and a woman was on board talking about Nola's delicious scones. Nola happened to have some scones in her bag and gave the women two, because she liked them so much. Nola bakes regularly for various groups and, although she lives on her own, (she claims) her oven is on all the time to meet her social commitments. She also contributes game prizes, usually inexpensive food items. While Nola often complains about all the work (time, skill, effort) involved in providing for these events, she apparently enjoys demonstrating her competence and generosity to other women.

A heavy woman, Nola likes to eat. She is critical of other (lesser?) women who talk about dieting; she disdains what she calls "rabbit food". Nola recognises that she is over-weight - her doctor has been after her for years to lose weight and look at her! She is still getting around. As well as enjoying her food, Nola is discerning and knowledgeable about food. For example, one afternoon, she sampled jams, chutneys and slices made by other women; estimating their ingredients, and congratulating successful cooks.

These types of food, which are served on social occasions, can be varied almost endlessly. As a result, they are excellent fodder for conversations about the comparative merits of different recipes, optional (or not) ingredients, and alterations made to recipes (innovations). Through their food and talk about food, women can become known for a particular item and "own" it, as has Nola with "her"scones. This is how women achieve the status of an expert cook, which is, I suggest,
analagous to feminine competence and identity.

Nola demonstrates her competence with considerable flair. On this same afternoon, after she had tasted the plates at her end of the table, Nola asked to "see" those at the other end. Then she moved to other tables, returning with slices she wanted, for herself and her friends, to eat. Those watching were amused: Nola is such a "character"! they said. No one else would be allowed to get away with such behaviour. Because she is Nola, Nola can flout rules of etiquette which other, less powerful women would break at risk of being called crazy or greedy. Such acts further enhance her reputation as a powerful woman.

Nola's identity as a powerful woman derives also from what other women agree has been a hard but typically feminine life and the way in which she has survived it. Born into a large, rural family, she was chosen to stay at home and help her mother, something which has happened to a number of women in my study. Similarly, Nola has never been in paid work, moving from her parents' to her own home. Then, when her children were still young, her husband died; suddenly, while Nola was out playing cards (which, in terms of my arguments about widowhood, is an interesting coincidence). Despite this tragedy, Nola "battled on" and fed and raised her children. Now, she is burdened with an impractical divorced daughter and four "mongrel" (unde‌disciplined, rowdy) grandchildren who all descend on her, to be fed and cared for. Also she is burdened by poor health; arthritis, a bad back and bladder problems. Nola's story and her problems are typical — they are experiences which other women share and understand. They are all features of what I call a "woman's code" about hardship, self-sacrifice and "battling on". Nola is distinguished by the sheer volume of
difficulties she has confronted and conquered, and by her own toughness and competence. For Nola is a remarkable survivor. Her philosophy might well be (as she has exhorted other "weaker" women): "if you want to die, then die!"

As a survivor, Nola has earned the right to please herself now, and Nola does so. She is often away travelling with her friends; an activity which is apparently highly valued by many widows (and certainly marketed in magazines for senior citizens, and by the tourist industry). The idea that travel is an appropriate and desirable activity for old people, or widows, is logically consistent with the idea that widowhood is an irresponsible stage of life. Like many women I have talked to, Nola says that money is to be spent not saved for the future and for children. After all, these women, have spent a lifetime scrimping and saving at home. Now they do not need to live that way. Travelling is a good way to spend money: it is relatively expensive, conspicuous, frivolous and very sociable, as most other travellers are also widows and it is away from home. (However, women do say that they set aside money to pay for their own funerals; that is their responsibility, not their children's.)

Nola is an expert traveller and her opinions are sought when other women are planning a trip. Like other women, she leaves well prepared, carrying a basket full of morning and afternoon teas, which she shares with nearby friends on the bus. Nola is popular with many of her fellow travellers; her sense of humour and flamboyance ensure that she is "where it is at". Nola claims that, on some trips, women have "queued up" to share her room and company.

1 For these women - who generally cannot drive and are working class - bus and train trips are the most popular kind of travel
Nola is a powerful woman, because of the force and dynamism of her personality, the innumerable afternoons and teas she makes and shares, and her successful "career" as a wife, mother and widow. Nola is exceptional in the consistency and success of her identity as a powerful woman. Other women are certainly less successful than she; for example, a woman who seems to repeatedly fail in this dimension, who other women say has "a big mouth and loud voice". They laugh at her obvious attempts to "big note" herself by rushing around as if she were needed and important. She is a failure in her private life too, divorced and neglected by her children. Her health is poor, like Nola's: instead of being admired for the way she carries on she is criticised for not taking better care of herself.

Mrs. R. is another very powerful old woman who runs her own social club in Goulburn. She chooses club members and activities and even decides who is to go on bus trips. Mrs. R. has no deputy or likely successor. Recently she was hospitalized for major surgery and left written instructions for members to follow in her absence - as if Mrs. R. were still there.

Another woman, Mrs. B. is a once powerful woman whose future has caught up with her. Since she became crippled, Mrs. B. claims she goes "nowhere" because she is embarrassed at being seen on "two sticks" where she was once so dominant. She says she will go out again as soon as she can get around on one stick. Two sticks are too obvious and leave Mrs. B. with no hands "free"; free that is to work and direct other women. Mrs. B. enjoys talking about the past, when she was busy, and all the people she has known. Reading the local paper is her way now of keeping abreast with happenings and she relishes
interpreting events in light of her expert knowledge.

Mrs. B.'s "crisis", as I see it, is to reconcile her past as a "powerful" woman with being, literally and symbolically, "on sticks". She seems prepared to tolerate some loss of power and independence, "one stick". Mrs. B. has apparently "quietened down a lot". Her willingness to compromise, her insistence on some independence, and her adjustment to earlier tragedies – all this suggests that Mrs. B. will reconcile her past and present.

Mrs. N.

Mrs. N. is a vigorous and hard-working widow, who belongs to several groups of women which regularly meet to play cards, housie or do charity work. In fact, she is so busy that Sunday is her one free day – when Mrs. N. catches up on her own gardening and baking.

Mrs. N. shares her home with her daughter, an out-of-work and unemployable de facto son-in-law, a foster son and a boarder. (Mrs. N. has had many boarders over the years, and claims that she treated them all like her own children. Quite a few have come back and told her so.) As well as gardening she shops and cooks for her household. Mrs. N. does all this on foot, which involves her walking several miles each way. For women who know her, the details of Mrs. N.'s daily life are evidence of her goodness. An unmarried couple, an unemployable man, a foster son who is epileptic – these are part of her special burden. That Mrs. N. has to do so much work in a household with another younger woman angers her friends, and further demonstrates what a good woman she is.
Working together, sorting old clothes and rags, Mrs. N. has told me about her life. (This seems the only way to interview her, when she is working. Mrs. N. does not have the time or inclination to just sit and talk, which is how she would see an interview, I suspect.) The only daughter in a family of sons, her mother became an invalid when Mrs. N. was still young. "Naturally" she took over the domestic responsibilities and nursed her mother — even until the birth of her first child.

"It seems ... that people nowadays don't both looking after their aged, do they? They just — when they become infirm or whatever — they look for a 'home' for them ... we were very fortunate, perhaps, that we were able to care for our aged parents."

For these women, staying at home to care for family and old parents is quite a normal experience. They also seem to see it as part of the "good old days". These same women, now old, have no one to care for them. They say that they do not want to be a "burden" on their children.

Mrs. N. describes how she married and raised a large family during the 1930's depression. They were very poor, and moved to the country where they could live more cheaply. Mrs. N. struggled to feed and clothe her children and she enjoys recounting some of the ingenious ways she stretched a small pay-cheque. Handling other people's cast off's as we talk, Mrs. N. often expresses amazement and disapproval at how wasteful people (women) are nowadays. The present generation of women, whose responsibility is is to manage a household, are much lazier than she was and do not even know how to really economize. This criticism applies to Mrs. N.'s own children. Another younger woman has suggested to me that Mrs. N. over-economizes, when old habits are no longer necessary or even appropriate (such as scrupulously turning off
fluorescent lights when it is cheaper to leave them on.)

Mrs. N. also re-uses worn-out bed sheets (cutting them in half and stitching up the sides), unravels old garments to re-knit the wool and wears second hand men's trousers under her night gown for warmth. Her thriftiness can extend to petty larceny; on one occasion she was overhead telling another old woman about the merits of wearing trousers to bed, and how to smuggle a pair of trousers out of the building. Of course, Mrs. N. is only taking quite value-less items, which are useful to her in return for many hours and years of unpaid work.

This difference between Mrs. N. and the younger women is largely due to generational or "cohort" effects (Schaie 1970); between women who became adults and mothers in different socio-economic eras. However, I would suggest that frugality remains today a culturally valued feminine trait, and that Mrs. N.'s old habits are tolerated and even admired. It is worth noting that Mrs. N. is not stingy with her children; she is if anything overly generous (for example, in all the work she does for her household). Again, this is a natural fault of a "good" woman and mother.

Mrs. N. has told me repeatedly what a good husband she had - he worked hard for his family and did not drink. She always adds, emphatically, that she was a good wife to him and told him so. Like other widows, Mrs. N. says she is glad he died first because even good husbands cannot take care of themselves. For example, when she would be away from home, he would never cook anything for himself, just eat something insubstantial like a piece of cake. (See Chapter 2 for discussion of food imagery and men's relationship to food.)
Mrs. N. also says that she has been a good mother, mother-in-law and daughter – describing herself as hard-working, tolerant, and sensitive, which are all traditional "expressive" (from Parsons and Bales 1955) feminine traits. What distinguishes Mrs. N. as a "good woman" is that she nurtures people to whom she has no obligations and does so into old age. She does it, she says, because "they have nobody"; she would help "anybody" like that. For example, Mrs. N. cooked, shopped, cleaned and sewed for two old women until both were hospitalized. She even helped them move out. One woman had rooms which were literally full to the ceiling with old bits and pieces. It was an enormous job for anyone, let alone one old woman. After it was over, Mrs. N. then "marched" to the estate agent to complain about the terrible state of the rooms. Both of these women were unattractive – sloppy, selfish, demanding and ungrateful. It is hard to imagine what Mrs. N. got in return for all her work. Mrs. N.'s attitude toward the women has been very matter-of-fact: she has not criticized them nor has she implied that what she did was out of the ordinary. Other women watched her efforts with some amusement and concern for her health; some helped out, out of friendship for Mrs. N. They criticize the pair for exploiting Mrs. N.'s goodness but not Mrs. N., suggesting that Mrs. N. could not help herself, she is so good she is almost a "saint". However, Mrs. N. does have her limits and actively resisted one of these women's efforts to move into her household!

Mrs. N. does not draw attention to herself or her good deeds. At morning tea, when other women are competing for talking time and telling stories about themselves, Mrs. N.
drinks her cups of tea. ("Get your share," she tells me and returns to work.) Similarly, at a social afternoon which she helps organise to raise money for charity, Mrs. N. is pleasant but unobtrusive, refraining from the gossip and loud jokes. She contributes her "work" - excellent baking, garden produce and handicrafts, but does not sit on any committees or wield much political power. Thank goodness Mrs. N. is not a total paragon - she laughs at vulgar jokes, plays the "pokies" and is an inscrutable poker player. Which, as one woman said, "isn't bad (my emphasis) - all things considered."

Mrs. N.'s story and character are organized around themes of self-sacrifice, nurturance, competence, modesty and survival (see also Giesen and Datan 1980 for a similar analysis of the life histories of old women). These themes all have to do with the problem of "feeding" people, literally and metaphorically. The story told by Mrs. N. and other women could be called "a woman's lot": to endure and enjoy a hard life. It is an instructive story on how women "survive" against odds. For Mrs. N., the story is about the "good old (hard) days" when she and women generally had fewer choices and more obligations. In the telling, Mrs. N. remains the woman she had always been, despite old age and changed times. Because these themes are so vividly and successfully illustrated, Mrs. N.'s story is a "good" one to tell.

There are other old women who are "good" despite more serious handicaps than age which prevent them from doing as much as Mrs. N. For example, Mrs. G. has been crippled by polio much of her life. She is largely house-bound and can do none of the good works done by Mrs. N. and, in fact, must
rely on outside (paid and unpaid) help in order to live at home. However, Mrs. G. is very generous with her family. She and her husband were unable to have children but her nieces and nephews are devoted to her, and she to them. Her door is always open to her many friends (Mrs. G. is proud of this) and she bakes special treats for their visits. Like Mrs. N. she is active in her Church.

Within her constraints and perhaps partly on account of them, Mrs. G. manages to be a "good woman"; that is to say, she is good at being the kind of woman that is a cultural ideal. That includes being morally virtuous (chaste, faithful, innocent, charitable) or good, but also giving, caring, competent and so on. (Mrs. G. is further discussed in Chapter 5.)

Mrs. G.'s goodness is socially and psychologically functional; calling for help and love from other women especially, so that she can continue to live on her own. However, such motives (self-interest) are not ascribed culturally to "good women". They do good and are good for its own sake, for example, Mrs. N. who would help "anybody" and expect nothing in return. This lack of self-interest applies to their life stories generally; having little control over events and doing what one had to do, be it raise a large family or care for old parents.

The a-political, passive, "good" woman is woman the nurturer par excellence. Of course, it is in reality more complex than this would suggest. Such giving, intentionally or not, leaves the recipient indebted, even more so if the giver is a "saint". How does one repay such generosity? For, as happens in families, women can feed people so that they can grow and to enchain them. This issue, which is a question
of meaning, will be discussed now.

Women - Good and Powerful?

The image of the "good woman" is very different from that of the "powerful woman" which emerged in my analysis of status and hierarchy among women in Chapter 2 and in the case of Nola H., earlier in this chapter. Those women scheme, compete, and are ambitious; they are full of motives and gossip. However, "good" and "powerful" women as categories are similar in that they are both competent, hard-working, food-givers and survivors. They just use these "feminine" attributes differently. The "good woman" nurtures others, expressing and receiving love. The "powerful woman" gives in order to control people, and to emphasize her individuality and difference from other women; she is feared rather than loved.

This relational difference is illustrated in a comparison of the Country Ladies and the Town Club women. Among themselves, the Country Ladies stress similarity, intimacy and mutuality - their is an ethos of "goodness". The Town Club women organize themselves hierarchically, with a very few powerful women at the top. Here, women use food and their work to communicate difference and relative status and power in the Club.

The "careers" (from Myerhoff and Simic 1978) of "powerful" and "good" women are also different. As has happened with Mrs. G., the "good woman" can be remembered for all her good deeds and kindnesses; accumulated credit on which she now draws. Being cared for and loved is congruent with her identity and mode of relating. This assumes that there is someone to care for her, and that there is morality in the way lives work out. Of course, this is not so, for example, a number of women
interviewed cared for their own parents and now in old age are alone. They may not have borne children, particularly daughters, or they may have moved away. However, I would argue that it is still easier to evoke and receive nurturance from friends, neighbours or fictive children, if one has been a "good woman" rather than a "powerful woman".

For "powerful" women such as Mrs. R. and Mrs. B., the transition to greater dependence in old age seems more difficult. Their way of relating to other women has been through status difference and distance. Other women owe them nothing because "powerful" women have already taken from them. If the "powerful" woman continues in this way, she may well be repaid in kind, by being demeaned. Her position is analogous to that of the retired man; both have lost status and power, and must construct new identities and ways of understanding their lives. Indeed, their responses may be quite similar, both may become more passive with age (see Gutmann 1977 on increasing male passivity). This transition is probably easier for women than men; women are supposed to be nurturant and passive. The "powerful woman" is in a sense simply returning to the fold. However, these are "unmasculine" characteristics which can be seen by men and women as a personal diminution of old men.

There is a less happy outcome for "powerful" women, who refuse to become more dependent, and are seen to become increasingly cranky and autocratic. In my experience, such women are actively disliked and feared by other women. They risk being labelled as "mad" or "bad"; several such women have received Meals-on-Wheels and their frequent complaints and demands are generally considered to be in-valid. If they become too much of a nuisance they may eventually be institution-
This happened to one woman who had once been moderately well-off and had owned a small business which she ran. Mrs. S. lived on her own until she was very old, frail and alone; becoming more eccentric and demanding with the years, and just as independent (according to her). This continued until the women who cared for her gave up because she was so unmanageable (and fearsome), on account of her unpredictable temper. Since then she has been permanently hospitalized "for her own good", something she always resisted and she is apparently still enraged about that fact. Her "fate" is part of the "woman's code", a warning for women who aspire to power. Good women, who do not seek power are accordingly rewarded by being loved and nurtured.

These opposed fates and versions of womanhood, are part of an interpretive and organizing framework for women's identity. One function of this "code" is, I suggest, to reconcile and contain our cultural ambivalence about women's nurturant power; power revealed in their survival as widows, and which is denied by the cultural opposition of goodness and power.
CHAPTER 4
WIDOWHOOD AND "LIVING ON"

"He'll probably go first and then I can have a dog"1

Widowhood is primarily conceptualized in the literature (see Introduction) as a problem of loss: loss of identity, meaning and loss of emotional intimacy from women's lives because of the death of their husbands. This is perhaps most theoretically explicit in Blau (1973), in which widowhood and retirement are analyzed as primary examples of "role exit" in old age. This approach has been challenged on ideological and theoretical grounds (see Lopata 1980): the empirical evidence - based on survey methods - is suggestive but does not get at the personal and cultural realities with which this ethnography is concerned.

This chapter presents case histories of three widows. Approaching widowhood as a question of meaning, I ask how these women understand that experience and how their understandings might fit into other patterns and meanings in their lives. First of all, the case of the widower - as understood by these women - is discussed. It points out how "different", how culturally abnormal is the widower in comparison to the widow. As a deviant kind of man, the widower serves as a basis for revealing conversations among these women about the nature of men and of male-female relations.

1 While walking my dogs in a park I met a women who was waiting for her husband, outside the men's toilets. He did not like dogs.
Widowers

These women generally consider widowers to be a pathetic lot. They are rather like children who need care and attention. Several have received meals-on-wheels because they are widowers; One man supposedly has a "chip on his shoulder" because his wife died first - although he does his own shopping, he still feels he deserves them. (He has since found a girlfriend who takes care of him, and he has decided to resign from the meals service.) Another man who receives "meals" for the same reason is said to toss his dirty laundry, uninvited, over his fence for a woman neighbour to wash! While such behaviour infuriates the women telling these stories, they say that it is to be expected from men.

Similarly, women describe how badly off their own fathers and brothers were as widowers (sometimes for the rest of their lives). If they are widows they say how glad they are that their husbands died "first", because they would not be able to look after, "feed" themselves. Widows are expected by women to "get on with it" after a suitable period of mourning, about a year. Women tell me that they have joined social groups in this way, often at the urging of a friend. Following from Blau (1973), this could serve as an example of "role exit" and role entry, from role of wife to that of widow or more accurately re-entry into the "world of women". Widows often claim that since their husbands' deaths, they are busier than ever and hardly ever "stop at home". (An interesting expression: some even say that a sure way to get sick is to stay at home and, conversely, they get better by going out.)

1 In that widowhood is a return to feminine relationships and loyalties which characterize childhood and adolescence.
A conversation about one very pathetic widower illustrates this "difference" between widows and widowers. This man, a "local," was found dead having committed suicide. (Such conversations about "who" has died - of what, who their family is, details of the funeral - are regular occurrences in these groups of women.) The women in this case tried to make sense of his death; the relevant "facts" were his impending forced retirement and his wife's death five years earlier. He had "nothing to live for," they all agreed. While his decision to die violently shocked them, they said that most men cannot cope with retirement or bereavement; men let themselves go after their wives die. They do not eat properly, drink too much, neglect their houses and gardens; and eventually have to move in with a daughter, re-marry or move into an "old folks' home" - where women care for them again. His suicide was consistent with this pattern; it was seen as an extreme form of "letting go".

Later, one of the women explained their conversation further. Men only work for a living. Because their wives do everything for them, they never learn to cope on their own. Because of this situation, a married woman is never "free" (until she is a widow). And that is why widowers want wives and why widows do not want to remarry and sacrifice their freedom. As another widow expressed it, who wants to be made "a convenience of, by some old man?" A consequence of widowers' incompetence seems to be the suspicion, on the part of widows, that widowers are looking for wives to take care of them. From this perspective, widowers are pathetic, unattractive and threatening - because of their need. (This issue and its consequences are further explored in Chapter 5.)
"Because - when somebody dies ... that's the end - of your part - of that part of your life? (mm hmm) I mean you've got to go on! There's not much sense in holding the torch for your dead husband. You've got to live on, you've got to make a life. You might just as well be happy as live in memory. That's just what I think it is. People live in memories, I mean people who - well, hold their husbands up and live ... in the past."

What Harry is talking about is his problem of making friends with women. One of the only eligible men in a "mixed" club (an issue discussed in Chapter 2) Harry evidently enjoys women's company - listening to their conversations, chatting and flirting mildly, politely opening doors and helping women from their seats. Harry considers himself different from most men in this way:

"What I've seen of men, they'd much rather get away on their own, go to the pub ... Well, I've always been different. I was most fortunate with my wife, if we went anywhere, she didn't go away with the women and me go over - we spent our day together, we enjoyed each other's company ... (You would still prefer to be that way?) That's right." (his emphasis)

Harry says that he is also a different sort of man, being very shy, unselfconfident and interested in people - all supposedly feminine traits. Women seem to recognize that he is a different sort of man than they are used to and say that while he is a "nice" man, he is "boring" and "too agreeable" ("like having a foal" follow you around). Their joking, sometimes insulting, manner towards Harry suggests that these old women may not respect him - for being such an a-typical man.

Harry is also "different" by virtue of being a widower, a man who has survived a wife, in a world of widows. Women have sometimes speculated about his past and whether he had more than one wife. Women with whom he is friendly are "warned" that he is looking for "another", which, in my exper-
ience, is a very successful way of discouraging women from associating with him. As some sort of Bluebeard figure, women may fear sharing his wife's fate. However, Harry does not fit their image of the pathetic widower, being active and clearly competent to take care of himself. He has not "let himself go" or fallen apart because of his wife's death although he says that it was unexpected. They had both assumed—and planned accordingly—that Harry would die "first". His very competence may affront these women—he does not need women.

Harry's explanation that women are unfriendly to him because they venerate their husbands is typically masculine. (That is, they idealize their dead husbands and wish to remain faithful to them by avoiding other men.) This idea is certainly consistent with the loss imagery associated with widowhood and is supposedly a common phenomenon among widows (e.g. Lopata 1979). Among themselves, my widows talk very little about their husbands: when they do so, they tend to talk more about their new found freedom than about perfect husbands. In interviews they talk more about their dead husbands but they seem quite realistic, talking about husbands' faults and good qualities.

Women do not seem to encourage each other in such talk. As one woman explained this: "When someone dies, it is best to send a card but not talk about it." It only gets people upset. This rule was borne out after the death of a husband. The woman involved belonged to a social group—the other women talked about the details of his death (in her absence). When she returned, they never mentioned it to her (as far as I know). This same woman has talked to me alone about how much she misses him but does not talk about her feelings in
the group. These women seem to distinguish between "remembering and mourning" at home and "forgetting and enjoying oneself" outside with other women. Home seems to signify sickness and death, as I have earlier suggested.

However, husband veneration is an excellent and unassailable excuse for not being friendly with, encouraging or marrying other men. It masks their rejection of men. Harry probably knows this, on some level; women rebuff because he is a man. Harry's explanation is far more palatable, especially to men. It is pleasant social fiction which allows him to interact with the women and tolerate their rejection of him; just as he tiptoes around the group, never arguing, not taking offence, and always smiling.

While Harry's explanation may be incorrect, his description of the problem of "living on" is, I think, insightful. Using his own words - how do widows "live on" after their husbands' deaths? What sense do they make of their own widowhood and their lives generally? This section now addresses these questions through the experiences of three widows: Mrs. G. (who is also discussed in Chapter 2), Mrs. H. and Mrs. D. with particular emphasis on the meaning of widowhood, and men's place in the scheme of things.

Mrs. G.

Mrs. G. is in her mid 70's and has been a widow for several years. Both she and her husband were ill during much of their marriage; he was hospitalized on many occasions over the last ten or so years. They had hoped to have children and bought a large "family" house but sadly, "never filled more than one bedroom". Mrs. G. is very close to her nieces and nephews; they are her family now. She describes her husband
as a "good" man, who "never spoke a harsh word". Following this further, I then asked her:

"Did you consider him a close friend?"

Mrs. G. "(pause) Not so much so because - actually he deprived me of a lot of things I am now experiencing - that's whilst he was here, I was sort of restricted. For instance, a very simple thing, where we had so much money in the bank for housekeeping and everything I spent I had to record. And that was very restricting to me..." (her emphasis)

Interviewer: "What sort of restrictions have relaxed in your life?"

Mrs. G. "Well, for instance, I probably have spent more money and yet I wouldn't have been in the position I am in now if he hadn't have (sic) been restraining in his money will go through my hands (gesturing) just like water ... That has given me a lift to be able to do my thing in that regard. To give to where I wanted to give and not only that but to go to the family more that I was able to do before the - . then that was his health, I wouldn't be away from him. Any more than the fact that we married and slept in a double bed and, for the life of me, I wouldn't have dreamed of getting out of that double bed ... although I felt I would have had a much greater rest." (her emphasis)

Mrs. G. is very close to tears at this point. Obviously her feelings are still unresolved about this relationship, especially what she considers to have been her own "failings": "I felt that I was inadequate as a woman and a wife to my husband because of that (not "communicating") and I regret it very much." She was, she says, never "up to his standard". He was much more knowledgeable and could converse with, even her own friends, better than she could.

Later on, she talks about her parents' marriage. Her father was an artist and had "a beautiful character" and her mother "wore the pants" in the family. She identifies herself with him ("Lots of people say I've got a bit of that in me"). Her mother was very "hard" but a good manager whose "ways" helped the family survive the depression; similar to Mrs. G.'s husband and his "restricting" ways. She says she never got
on with her mother and seems to have especially resented the way she treated her father. She tells the following story:

"I remember feeling very upset at the fact that ... Dad was put out (of the double bed) into a back room with - (her brother) - and I can always remember feeling that very much ... it sort of hurt me, it got under my skin - you know - such a gentle, soft thing that you'd put out."

It is not surprising that she would not ("for the life of me") get out of her husband's bed; to her it was such a hurtful act. She realizes that her marriage was similar in some ways to her parents'- she and her father "sunk" their individuality to their partners' "strength". Now Mrs. G. regrets her choice and partly blames her mother for not showing her how to "talk". She sent Mrs. G. and her brother outside when there was adult company and, in my terms, frightened her away from intimacy: "I just felt that it (emotional intimacy) would overwhelm me, just had to force it back."

Her life now seems simpler and less guilt-ridden. During her husband's frequent hospitalizations and since his death, Mrs. G. has had their house extensively renovated. Whereas it had been dark and cramped, today it is full of sunshine and plants. The door is always "on the latch" for friends who frequently pop in to visit and help her out with some chore. She is away often to see her nieces and nephews, and on bus trips. Mrs. G. is finally learning to be more communicative and to overcome her reserve (she is "breaking down more as time goes on"). Our interviews seem to be a part of this for her: "I'm telling you my life history there, things I've probably never told anybody."
Widowhood for Mrs. G. seems to represent a second chance for her to be the open, generous, confident woman "she was meant to be" (Scarf 1980). There is a strong sense of urgency in this; Mrs. G. says she knows that "(her) life is coming to an end." She has lived with a heart condition most of her life but lately there have been signs that "things taking place in (her) body are a little more exceptional ... and weakening generally". It is essential to get "everything settled now." Her house is finally "in order" so that her nieces won't have to deal with it after her death.

What Mrs. G. is doing, in part, in our conversations is a "life review" (see Introduction); she is reinterpreting past events and making sense of her life in preparation for death. It represents a kind of philosophical "house cleaning". In the process, Mrs. G. is also becoming the person she would like to be. The courage, risk-taking and pain this costs her are worth it. For Mrs. G., there is little to lose and much to gain.

The details of Mrs. G.'s life are, of course, unique but her reaction to her husband's death seems typical of many widows:

"The overwhelming majority of widows who recognize or admit change in their personalities or identities (54% in this Chicago Study) consider themselves fuller and freer people than before the death of their husbands. They have rounded out their personalities, previously restrained or limited as a result of marriage." (Lopata 1973:413)

Lopata adds that this does not necessarily mean that they were unhappy in their marriages or that the adjustment has been easy. However, she does not attempt to interpret their meanings further, concluding that (reported) change in self identity is related to class; "marriage and widowhood
are less disorganizing to the identities of lower class women than for those with higher training and life style" (Lopata 1973:417). Almost all the widows interviewed (18 of 21) in this study are working class (see Introduction): certainly, it would be inappropriate to challenge her conclusions, with such a small non-random sample but social class does not seem to be a significant factor in how my widows organize their experiences. There are obvious theoretical and methodological differences between Lopata's work and mine; the most important being my emphasis on meaning and the problem of interpretation. While it is interesting that a significant proportion of widows in both studies say that they have changed for the better (being "fuller", "freer", more "rounded out"), the question remains: how does one interpret such statements? As demonstrated in my case history on Mrs. G., detailed and qualitative information about the person, her way of life and other contextual factors is necessary before such interpretation can be attempted.

Mrs. H.

Mrs. H. is an active 80 year old who has been a widow for about 15 years. Her husband was hard-working, conscientious and a non-drinker: a "good" man but less sociable than she. They moved to Goulburn from their farm because he was ill; shortly afterwards Mr. H. died. They had six children; none live in Goulburn although Mrs. H.'s only daughter lives in Canberra.

Describing how she coped with his death, Mrs. H. has said (repeatedly) that she "had never stayed a night on (her) own" but she knew she had to "do it". Mrs. H. describes herself as an optimist who enjoys a good joke: she cannot
bear whingers and she is certainly not "like that". She prefers not to dwell on morbid topics, does not want people's pity and rarely talks (to me) about losing her husband or her loneliness.

There are "compensations" for living alone: she has her own routine which she enjoys. Although Mrs. H. likes going away to her children's homes and their visits, she is happy to return to her normal "peace and quiet". She has many visitors, does a lot of visiting back and forth with neighbours, and belongs to several women's groups. Another "compensation" for her, of being a widow, is not having to live with an old man. Men do not adjust well to retirement, she says. So many old men are "anti-social"; not interested in going anywhere and their wives have to suffer for it. At least if they are sick, "you know what to do with them", otherwise they just hang around, she says. In these terms then Mrs. H. has been lucky. If her husband had lived longer, would she be enjoying herself so much now?

While widowhood was certainly initially a traumatic experience for Mrs. H., it now seems to be normal. In fact, most of her way of life in Goulburn was established since her husband's death. He only lived in Goulburn as a dying man. However, much of her life has also remained the same as before her widowhood. She has had the same best friend all her adult life and she regularly meets a group of old friends.

Mrs. H.'s sense of who she is extends back 3 and 4 generations of her family: she has a detailed knowledge of literally hundreds of people related to her, living and dead, and is still seeking out information about more remote
ancestors and distant cousins. In fact, we first got to know each other recording her family genealogy. Her knowledge of her husband's family is much more limited; those people are not her family. This may be related to the fact that Mrs. H. and her husband lived on a property adjoining that of her parents and her father's family. They both worked for the family which her parents and her mother's people also had worked for. Her husband's best friends were, she says, her patrilateral cousins. All this suggests that Mr. H. was absorbed socially into her extended family.

This seems to have happened with her own children, that is, sons have been absorbed into their wife's families. Mrs. H. is closer to her daughter than her sons — they talk over the phone almost daily and help each other out in emergencies and normally — she says that "daughters are always daughters while sons are sons only until they marry." Interestingly, Stacey (in Oakley 1981:271) found in her Oxfordshire study, not only the same matri-local residence pattern but also an almost identical version of Mrs. H.'s saying about sons and daughters. (Mother-daughter and mother-son relationships are compared in greater detail in the following chapter.) Mrs. H. has remained her parents' daughter for much of her life — they both died at a great age and she cared for them. It appears very likely that this pattern will be repeated in her life, with her daughter.

Listening to Mrs. H. talk about her happy school days as class secretary and watching her now as she organizes her groups' social activities, it is evident that Mrs. H. has always been a gregarious and efficient organizer, a "secretary". Obviously, she is comfortable with who she is and the pattern
of her life. For Mrs. H., widowhood is not a "second chance" to undo the past (as it seems to be for Mrs. G.) but part of life which is (happily, she would say) characterized by continuity and social connectedness - especially with other women.

Mrs. D.

Mrs. D. is a widow in her 70's who came to Goulburn from the country shortly after her husband's death. They had six children, one of whom died in a sporting accident. None of her children live in Goulburn but most live in the district. Mrs. D. has two sons and two daughters and, like Mrs. H., claims that she is closest to a daughter.

Mrs. D. compares her reaction to her husband's death to that of her brother. Both times, she says, she was a "coward"; afraid to confront their actual dying. Throughout her life, Mrs. D. has been "sensitive" to loss - leaving home for boarding school really "hit" her (she gestures to her stomach). The break-up of her parents' home was another loss. Significantly, "home" for her now is her place in Goulburn, rather than the family property where she and her husband lived.

Mrs. D. describes herself as impetuous and emotional, and says that her husband balanced these qualities with his practicality and generally steadying influence. She still misses him after several years, and sometimes turns to tell him something - as if he were still alive. She misses also men's company generally, saying that now she sees only other women who are mainly, like herself, widows. Yet, Mrs. D. does not dwell on the losses in her life; emphasizing, even insisting, on how positive and meaningful her life and widowhood are.
"My independence, that means more to me than anything" (her emphasis).

After her husband's death, Mrs. D. decided she could not remain on the property dependent on her son to take her place. (Like most of the women in this ethnography, Mrs. D. does not drive a car although she admires her daughters for doing so.) There is nothing she hates more she tells me, than to have people stop and offer a ride when she is walking! So, although Mrs. D. insists that her children are more important to her than any friendship, she moved to Goulburn where she has many dear and old friends (some from school days) but where none of her children are.

Now she is free to walk everywhere. The move to Goulburn which is bound up with her widowhood is one of the best things she has ever done: it has given her "a new lease on life." All sorts of "special" things have happened to her (which attest to the rightness of her decision). Every day is full of "good works" and seeing friends: Mrs. D. feels "stronger" — in the physical and spiritual sense, I suggest — for all her activity. Much of her adult life she was busy raising a family (these were the "best times", compared to now) but she also felt "hemmed in" by her husband's family. Mrs. D.'s life now represents a compromise; she is free of family obligations and is, she admits, sometimes lonely, but she is also more independent and has time for other activities which were once luxuries.

Mrs. D. compares herself to her husband's spinster sisters who still live in the family home, to which she came as a "city slicker". Mrs. D. imagines that leaving that house would "kill" them; their lives and identities are so bound up in it.
By implication, they will only leave it dead. They have chosen their life but Mrs. D. still pities them. However, Mrs. D. herself "cannot bear" to be pitied (her emphasis). On one occasion, she overheard friends (a husband and wife) say that "she (Mrs. D.) is lonely", this is "why" she was visiting them. Mrs. D. strikes her breast, emphasizing how much this "hurt" her. While she acknowledges that it is a good thing to talk with friends about being lonely, she chooses not to. Above all, Mrs. D. does not want to be pitied. For, she asserts, "I am a happy person!" which, indeed, Mrs. D. seems to be.

Our conversations and our relationship generally involve probing her experiences as a widow, and they have been obviously affected by her strong religious faith. While Mrs. D. answers my questions readily and explores her own feelings (as much as she can), her answers are always framed by her religious convictions. Mrs. D. recognizes our difference in perspective. For example:

Mrs. D. "This might seem funny to you but I find it easy adjusting to God's will - I never say 'why did this happen to me?'"

Self: "Even when you have had terrible losses?"

Mrs. D. "No, I've never thought it. It wouldn't occur to me to think that ... even when - possibly the worst thing that ever happened, I still never even had the thought when ... the other little twin was Mongoloid (pause) - well, she died when she was a year and ten months but I never had that feeling."

This tragedy was worse, even, that the deaths of her husband and a son as a young man; yet, she never even thought that it was unfair, nor felt any anger. Mrs. D. is correct when she says that I cannot "understand", in her terms, her acceptance of God's will. However, it is, in an analytic sense, very understandable; as an expression of her own strong
will, pride and her religious beliefs.

"I've had a good life, I've got no regrets about it ... I live each day as it comes, more than I ever did."

For Mrs. D., widowhood and personal identity are defined mainly in religious terms. Both are made meaningful by her beliefs and are also externalized. That is, her identity, life and widowhood are seen by Mrs. D. as outside her control; they are subject to God's will rather than hers. Of course, Mrs. D. is more complex than this analysis might suggest - her personal regrets, her valued independence, her pride and active intelligence preclude a total and simple acceptance. However, these are, for her, asides; trivial in comparison to the larger religious reality. Acceptance and rebellion are underlying themes of her identity, which form a dialectic that testifies to her faith. For, while Mrs. D. rebels in the details of her life, her rebellion is resolved by acceptance.

Discussion

One might presume to explain these women in psychological, reductionist terms and discuss defence mechanisms, unconscious needs, rationalizations etc. I feel that this would damage the "integrity" of their stories, which are a cultural construction and rob them of their complexity. And, it is the dialectic between subjective reality and cultural definition which identity is about.

What we have here are three widows who all say that they had "good" husbands and marriages, yet who also say that they are somehow "better" for being widows. When one explores each woman's frame of reference and what widowhood represents for her, the meanings of their statements are all quite different. For Mrs. G. widowhood is a last chance to be the kind
of person she would like to be, but was not in her marriage. Mrs. H. is the woman she has always been just less encumbered. For Mrs. D., widowhood is infused with a sacred meaning: her new-found vitality is evidence of this.

Mrs. D., Mrs. H. and Mrs. G. are not alone in their responses to the problem of "living on". All of the women in this ethnography see some positive aspects of widowhood - not having to cook so much, no longer worrying about a sick husband, being free to go out more, now their lives are in "God's hands" and so on. They also say that they prefer living on their own, to living with children (some, like Mrs. D., have moved away from children to be more independent) and also that they like to live near friends.¹

Their answers support Gubrium's contention (1973) that marriage does not meet all the individual/woman's needs in old age. They also suggest that widowhood may be a positive alternative to marriage for old women. Bernard (1972) comes to similar conclusions - that marriage is better for husband than wives and that single women are better off than married women. Marriage as an institution seems to offer little to

¹ These findings raise questions about the validity of a corollary of the "golden years" ideology: the idea that care of the aged should be the responsibility of the family, i.e. women, not of government. It is currently in vogue in Australia (Gibson and Kendig 1980: 45) and is motivated, I suggest, more by cost considerations than by concern for the welfare of the aged or of women.
old women. Their children are grown up and women are now economically independent because of the aged pension (which is larger on a per capita basis for single than married people). Unless they are incapacitated, women are able to run their homes by themselves: it is more likely that, if they are still married, they will be nursing their husbands. In any case and as is discussed in the following chapter, emotional intimacy is generally not an important aspect of the marriage relationship; many women rely on women friends as confidants and, in fact, married women complain of loneliness more than widows (see Blau 1973) because, I argue, married women have to stay at home and take care of husbands while widows have more free time to spend with friends. Yet, despite this, it is still generally believed that women need marriage more than men, and that old women/widows are more vulnerable than old men who are likely to be married, even though Blau (1973) concluded that women cope better with widowhood than men do with retirement let alone bereavement.

While old women in this study do not describe their marriages explicitly in these terms, their comments about other marriages and the compensations of widowhood suggest that they are aware of these inequalities. For example, Mrs. M. whose husband is an invalid often talks about how she wears herself out, caring for and worrying about him. Other women talk about this and say she might as well accept that he will die and make the best of it. They hint that she will be better off without him. More telling is their almost unanimous refusal to re-marry (which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5).

For most of these women widowhood marks the end of their emotional involvement with men. As Mrs. D. put it, in widow-
hood "there are women everywhere", and I have heard women talk of whole streets of widows in Goulburn. The social worlds of widows seems composed almost entirely of other (mainly old) women. They interact with men, sons, shopkeepers, doctors, neighbours - generally at a distance (discussed in Chapter 5). At the same time, their social worlds have been composed mainly of women all their lives. I would argue that husbands have represented for many wives all men, and that husbands have been only a temporary intruder into the feminine domestic sphere. This may explain why retirement is seen by these women as a wife's problem. The retired husband is "in the way", like a visitor who overstays:

"When my husband retired I was expecting to experience a very happy and peaceful period, instead I found it turning into a fiasco .... I resented him getting to the mail box first, sometimes even opening the letters I had enjoyed receiving for years. I hadn't minded during holidays but this was going on for ever... Even having to lower the toilet seat each time was an annoyance. (my emphasis, V. Dellar in "Australian Pensioner", March 1982.)

The last complaint I interpret as about masculine intrusion or contamination of the feminine sphere. Interestingly, it is also one which Town Club workers make about an old man who comes to the Club, about having to clean up after him as he heads towards the men's toilet. Male incontinence in old age is a real problem but it is also part of the "dirty old man" motif; men being dribbling and disgusting old creatures who can no longer control themselves. This represents an attack on masculinity by women: incontinent old women are not so funny.

There are exceptions - widows who re-marry, have boyfriends or who enjoy men's company. A woman announced this
to a group of women (that she liked men): it was greeted by a thunderous silence. It is generally agreed that this woman is quite a "character", always joking and being outrageous. This statement was just part of her general outrageousness - maybe, she does not really mean it. Another exception is a widow who re-married and subsequently separated from her second husband. The general consensus among women who knew her and talked about the separation among themselves was, it was all a mistake, best forgotten. She has resumed her old married name and is "better out of it".

Some widows have boyfriends but there is again a public silence on these relationships. That is, they are all "secret" - other women know and watch but pretend that they do not know. I interviewed three such women, with "secret" boyfriends, who told me about them only when it was evident that I already "knew" - had been told by someone else or had seen them together. Even then, their demeanour remained circumspect - especially about what seems to intrigue other women most - the sexual aspects of the relationship.

For example, Mrs. M. has 1 to 3 boyfriends (depending on whom you believe). In interview situations, she presents herself as a pious and serious woman, who put her "life in God's hands" since her husband's death. She casually mentions a man who just happens to be a friend - "he is a friend to everyone" - and who is good and gentlemanly. Then, over morning tea with a young friend, who is "like a daughter" to her, Mrs. M. jokes about how to seduce this too naive man! However, in subsequent interviews, she reverts to her original demeanour even though I have been the audience for their farces. (It is not clear, if Mrs. M. ever does seduce her boyfriend.)
Mrs. A. spends almost all her time with her boyfriend, cooking his meals and tidying up - just as if they were married. They live in the same housing development and their friends and neighbours are well aware of their arrangement. Yet, it remains an open "secret". Mrs. A. has been cautious about letting me in on their secret, or at least acknowledging it. She insists I telephone before visiting: one day I broke this rule and called unexpectedly at her place. Mrs. A. was not in so I tried finding her at her friend's. There was no immediate answer and a neighbour called across, "Oh yes! she's in there - just walk in!" (which I did not do). Finally, Mrs. A did answer the door and reluctantly invited me in. Her friend was in the bathroom (from where she had evidently come). Although we both could hear him through the thin wall, neither of us initially acknowledged his presence and just talked generally. After a while she did call him in, explaining several times that she only "just" arrived ("nothing was going on"). Soon afterwards, we left together and Mrs. A. reminded me that it would be a good idea to call first and then I would be sure to catch her at home. Clearly Mrs. A. was embarrassed at my "catching" her in a compromising situation, with her friend in his bathroom. Together we were creating a social fiction that "nothing" happened there.

In summary, "role exit" (Blau 1973) is only a partial definition of widowhood. There are personal and cultural continuities in these women's lives which cross-cut - and may well out-weigh - the transition from wife to widow. From Mrs. G., Mrs. H. and Mrs. D. and other women in this ethnography, widowhood does not seem to have been a fundamentally disorganizing
event. It has signalled the end of their involvement with men; the person closest to them now is another woman - a daughter (or fictive daughter) - followed by women friends. However, as I have argued, these relationships, particularly mother-daughter, have always been more intimate than those with men, husbands. Indeed widowhood seems to have been a meaningful - even positive - part of their lives with its own compensations: what I call their re-entry into the "world of women" is such a compensation. It is part of the freedom old women have - to eat what they like, go on bus trips, play housie, to please themselves and be themselves with other women; freedoms which are outside and before marriage. This raises further questions about the meaning and centrality of marriage for women, how sexual separation prepares women for widowhood, and more generally about feminine development and identity: issues which are further explored through women's talk about men in Chapter 5.
"It was a common sight to see Olga ... enter the hall, marching across it accompanied by a male companion, bearing herself proudly, almost with disdain, asserting publicly her superiority in being 'attached', then leaving her escort on the benches as she entered the fray, unwilling to be encumbered. On leaving, she would stop for him, and depart as she entered ... donning the man as she might her gloves."

(Myerhoff 1978:248)

This vignette could stand as a metaphor for how these old women relate to men; it well illustrates the peripheral role of men in social dramas where women are the primary audience and actor. This "world of women" - of old women and widows - defines men as strangers. Men are different in nature from women. They are less practical, caring, sociable, adaptable and cunning than women, who feed, nurture and survive men. Men are not the "survivors" that women are; survival being a theme of feminine identity (see Chapter 3). Men's difference from women means that men and women presumably cannot truly know or understand each other. This chapter looks at how these women construct this "difference" in their talk about men - husbands, boyfriends, doctors, and sons - and some of the consequences of their social and emotional distance from men for feminine identity and widowhood. First I shall discuss some general features of women's talk about men.

Hostility and ambivalence towards men characterize much of their talk about men. This antagonism is often expressed in a joking fashion, for example, in half-serious complaints
about husbands and in derogatory jokes about men (discussed in Chapter 2). The following incident illustrates this: a widow regales her friends with the story of a "proposal" she just received in a club bar. Although she acknowledges that her suitor must have been a little drunk, initially she seems to be using the incident to show the other women that she is still attractive to men. Then the story changes, for one of her audience has actually seen her so-called suitor. Not only was he very drunk, but he was also unattractive - with "a mouth like the Great Australian Bight - no teeth!" The story gets even funnier when another woman says she received the same proposal from the same fellow. Not only is he ugly and drunk, he is indiscriminating. The fact that her collaborators are influential women - with whom she wishes to identify herself - is more important than the denigration of her story, suitor and supposed attractiveness. By sharing in the same funny story - against a man - she is one of these women. The new story was a decided improvement. It now affirmed group identity - the courtship was a joke, they all remained single women and it confirmed their suspicions about ("dirty") old men.

There are exceptions, of course, such as the women (in Chapter 4) who like men or have boyfriends. Liking men seems to imply not liking women; as the woman who announced to her friends that she liked men, later also commented "Aren't old women a catty bunch?" Understandably, this was interpreted by the other women as a kind of social lapse and, I suggest, as a betrayal of the code of feminine solidarity. In liking and seeking out men, such women are excluded by other women
(as happened to me in my efforts to interact with men in "mixed" situations, see Introduction.)

At the same time, innocuous flirtations - a man putting his arm around a woman to pull a "pokie" lever, or bringing a woman some home-grown tomatoes, something that was said over cards, or just a glance; these reportages can become ribald and eventful with other women. Women, who are individually demure and virtuous in their demeanour, can become knowing and vulgar in such playful situations. To such an extent, they may even shout out suggestive comments and jokes to men. The following exchange between a group of women and a man about a woman losing her "pills". The young man "warned" her loudly, so that the other women could hear, that she better find them or she would not have a "good time" tonight! The women all laughed at his comments (which struck me as rather ironic, considering that many of these women would be taking some prescribed pills, but not the birth control pill. They probably never have taken that pill. The question of over-medication is discussed in the section on women and their doctors.) Various other rude comments were called out, including would he give them (each) a "good time"? Yes, he replied, it might take him all night but he would try. There were 30 or more years' difference in age between this (married) man and the 25 or so old women, who were mainly widows. There were several old men present but they did not participate in the farce, for farce it was. No one meant what they were saying: except for the fact that other women were present, none would have dreamed of talking to a man in
This sort of joking seems to characterize their talk about unrelated men— and sometimes husbands— where women play with the romantic and sexual possibilities of male-female relationships. They can sound in their talk rather like teenagers. Lopata (1968:124) makes the same comparison and suggests that it may be because:

"Both women are expected to be concerned mostly with themselves and society assigns neither a focal role ... The society excuses each if she neglects some aspect of a role and even expects negligence if such behaviour provides the active, often horrid adult with a motivation to 'keep his shoulder to the wheel'."

(Lopata 1968:124)

Both young and old women are moving out of the nuclear family; they are structurally peripheral in a society which empowers a young, masculine minority, and labels them— even more than other "productive" women— as superfluous. Having no place in the family that "refuge from modernity, both construct another "private sphere" — in the intense friendships and rivalries of adolescence and old age. However, old and young women are also quite different from each other in their consciousness and in the psycho-social issues they confront. The teenager can be said to be rehearsing for her future— for the kind of woman she will be and for relations with men. The old woman knows her past and is engaged in understanding it. This difference is illustrated by a comment made to me.

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1 While these women behaved outrageously with this young man, he always controlled the situation— initiating and ending the exchange, and being even more outrageous than the women. Later, a younger woman challenged his control, by making jokes at his expense to the women. He was obviously offended at her behaviour, and later told the old women that she was "stupid", a diagnosis they accepted.
A group of women had been talking about "men", joking about recent incidents and making suggestive comments. Then, one woman turned to me and exclaimed jokingly that they would be "ruining" me; that is, with their old women's knowledge of men which I, as a young woman, had not yet acquired.

In their joking playful talk, old women permit themselves to voice culturally unacceptable ideas and feelings about men. These include sex and sexual attraction but are also women's manipulation, rejection and criticism of men. Their antagonism derives, I think, from the asymmetrical nature - as they see it - of male-female relations. These women believe that women ought to and do give (see the "good woman" image, in Chapter 3), more than men do or even can. Male-female relationships entail, according to the "woman's code", work and loss of individuality for women. This is most explicit in women's accounts about their widowhood (in Chapter 4) and in their talk and avoidance of old men, which I discuss in this chapter. It seems, also that there is an essential status inequality in all their relationships with men.

Through such talk, men are held at a distance as stereotypes and concomitantly a feminine identity, reality or "code" is affirmed. Relationships with men are defined by a feminine framework for a feminine audience. This may be why there is so little "serious" talk about men and why intimate relationships with boyfriends and husbands are treated as secrets, for neither conform to the "woman's code" of difference and distance from men. This way, they are kept safe from other women's tongues - and competition - and also cannot threaten feminine solidarity, in a "world" where there are many women and too few men to go around.
The Problem of Couples.

These dyadic relationships seem to represent a special threat to the "world of women": couples are, for women, an exception to the norm of widowhood in old age. Women reduce this threat in various ways. The relationship or potential relationship can be re-defined as a joke, as not serious (as happen in the story of the toothless suitor, in the preceding section). The relationship becomes public property, a new talking point which strengthens feminine identity. The history of an unsuccessful courtship illustrates what I mean.

Jack S. wooed a widow in full view of other women—sitting beside her, walking her home and so on. For a while, she seemed interested in him and other women watched the progress of their courtship avidly; warning each other to keep away from her suitor or she might be angry, and generally leaving them alone. Then she appeared to "cool" and publicly rebuffed him. She told her friends how "boring" and persistent he was. The word quickly spread among the other women: anybody who was anybody was soon "in the know" that they were no longer a couple. Instead of being a romantic figure, Jack S. was seen as a joke, and the woman involved started sitting again with other women.

Permanent couples—married or not—tend to be exclusive in public situations such as the Town Club. Partners sit together, play cards, housie and have afternoon tea as a pair. They tend to socialize with other couples; wives sitting together and husbands together (here again, separation of the sexes). Various widows have told me how they no longer are friends with couples since their husbands died (a process which Blau 1973 documents). Some say it is because wives
think that they will chase their husbands; an accusation they ridicule.

My impression is that married women are not as involved as other, single women in women's Club business. Not one is a worker, or sits regularly in the kitchen (see Chapter 2), for they are "distracted" by their relationships with men. In terms of involvement in the Club, being in a "visible" couple - or, in a couple, at all for that matter - is a disadvantage. This is a reversal of the "double standard" of aging (see Introduction), where old single women are said to be, and in some ways certainly are, socially disadvantaged. However, widows are the largest and dominant social group in the Town Club (and other groups). They have the time and freedom to organize these groups and to go away on day-long and over-night outings. Married women must be at home to cook and care for their men.

The minority of women who are still married do not talk about their absent husbands. Like widows, they are not encouraged to. For example, a woman in one of these groups talks at length to me about her husband, his illnesses and her worries about him. Other women - mainly widows - talk around us while we talk about him. Once the topic changes to something more "interesting", we all start talking together. One outspoken woman seemed to sum up the general attitude towards husbands - "Oh him", she exclaimed.

Occasions when "absent" husbands are present are illustrative. A husband appeared unexpectedly in the Town Club kitchen looking for his wife. She appeared taken aback at his arrival and remained beside her friends while he talked to her from the doorway. The only other man in the kitchen addressed the husband, explaining that he was "safe" - he was with his
wife. This explanation seemed to fit the mood of the situation - which was a mixture of hilarity and unease. Her husband of over 30 years could have been the "romantic stranger", the awkward way they were behaving. After he had gone, she pulled a face for the benefit of the other women: thank goodness he has finally cleared out! she seemed to say.

Another situation involving a husband was more difficult for the women to manage. He had come to help out on a special Club event. Instead of doing as he was told by a "worker", he organized the work himself. The "worker" involved was highly annoyed and complained to other women about "men!" and their (impractical and domineering) "ways". This "worker" organized his wife's work but kept clear of him.

This exemplifies the disruptive potential of couples (men, really) in a women's group which has its own well developed feminine hierarchy. Men are here an anomaly, for even though these women criticize men, they also believe that wives should defer to husbands. Women may complain together about how a husband treats his wife but they do not question the marital power relationship, for example, by forcing the wife to side with other women against her husband. Wives commiserate with each other about husbands and tell the "code" (that men are spoiled, difficult to live with) jokingly. But they still defer - by not going away on trips because they have husbands' meals to cook, for example. It is a paradox which one widow expressed thus: it is a "funny thing" how men are "number one" in the world but women are stronger and do all the work.
Avoidance seems to be a general solution to the problem posed by men and by couples. Husbands as a rule do not accompany their wives to the Club. This seems to me different than the fact that single men and widowers also do not participate: it has to do with the challenge posed by couples in a woman's domain such as the Club - as well as with sexual separation. Those few husbands who do accompany their wives participate in only a limited way and follow their wives' lead. That is, if *she* is friendly with "workers" then *he* will sit in the kitchen. For example, the reason given for not nominating a particular man to a position in the Club Executive was because his wife was not interested.

Husbands-like other men-enter the kitchen only as visitors, just as they do at home. (Interestingly, several women have said to me that the worst thing about a retired husband is having him "hang around" the kitchen.) An incident occurred which clearly illustrated this rule. A man came into the kitchen to tell the "workers" that the card players were ready for their afternoon tea. Normally women from the kitchen poke their heads into the cards room to see when they are done playing. A man coming into the kitchen on his own initiative and telling "workers" their business constituted a serious breach. As other women watched, one of the most senior "workers" stepped back (as if she were recoiling) laughed and said (with measured emphasis) "That's O.K., John." It was definitely not "O.K." and John knew it - he smiled and assured her that he was just trying to help. He was deferring to her: John was not "intending" to challenge the status quo. But this was not enough. From the point of view of the leadership, people must not only defer but defer so obviously that even the dimmest or most rebellious observer can *see* the
social order. This particular incident only resolved itself when the man left the kitchen, not when he explained himself, which could have been interpreted as a challenge.

Most men never come into the kitchen and there are predictably none among the "workers", thus, avoiding the sorts of complications discussed above which also arise in some other groups where men are on the executive of what are women's groups, but do no real work. Those few men who sit in the kitchen are not allowed to do any important work (cooking, shopping, serving food) which is the only way of amassing power in the Town Club. (See Chapter 2.) If they speak at all, it is generally uncontroversial; this is Harry O's strategy. At the same time, women criticize him for being so agreeable (and thus un-manly) but if he were to speak his mind (as he has done with me, see Chapter 4) Harry O. would not last long in the kitchen. His"stupidity" is part of an avoidance strategy; the price he pays for enjoying women's company.

Women and Their Doctors

As well as husbands, boyfriends and potential or pretend suitors, these women talk about their doctors. (There is only one woman doctor out of about 30 doctors in Goulburn. She is a recent arrival and does not seem well-known.) Some visit their doctor once a month. The Senior Citizens Centre is just a block away from the Medical Clinic - the Centre serves as a convenient stopping off point, before or after appointments, where women talk about what has or might transpire. Many of these women have gone to the same doctor for years and he is often not much younger than his patient. (I would say that old people in Goulburn tend to go to older doctors.) For many a doctor is like a member of the family: he has cared
for their children and husbands, as well as their own worries and illnesses. This relationship may well have survived those other relationships. As one doctor suggested to me—a woman's doctor may be the only man she has ever talked to intimately. This may be especially so for women of this generation and background. Some women have out-lived their old family doctors and now go to new young doctors who have known them only as old women. For all these reasons, a doctor's death is a significant event, a reminder of one's own death. Above all, doctors are supposed to cure not die of illness.

There is a mixture of reverence and complaint in the way these women talk about their doctors. Their diagnoses and decrees—most often, to lose weight—are accepted but not necessarily obeyed. Diets are frequently abandoned; obesity is seen as a fact of life—even as one of the "compensations" for old age (see Chapter 2). Eating out—as opposed to eating in—is a characteristic of the social life of many old women in Goulburn. After all, one cannot partake with gusto of morning and afternoon teas and lose weight. Women are well aware of this fact, but when the choice to be made is between sociability and pleasing a doctor, the choice is clear. This is especially so, when no one else notices what an old woman looks like. Other old women (such as Nola H. in Chapter 3) do not encourage dieting and warn women about getting sick, and wrinkled and gaunt from weight loss.

Women also ignore other instructions or do not believe a doctor's diagnosis; they can all cite times when a doctor was wrong and someone apparently died or nearly died as a result. There are many such stories—a husband who may have died because of negligence, a woman who claims that her doctor made her "a cripple", someone who turned out to have a
cancer despite an earlier optimistic diagnosis and so on. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, death and illness are popular topics of conversation among these women. Such talk is often highly speculative and can engender controversy — about real (as opposed to apparent) causes, how the person involved looked just before the illness, and the various social consequences for their family and so on. Obviously it helps if one is a "local", in such specialist conversations (see Introduction on "locals" and "newcomers" in Goulburn).

McCluskey and Altenhof (1978:140) argue that "the health of the elderly is of less value to society than the health of other people". This is often expressed by "negativism, defeatism and professional antipathy" on the part of doctors towards old (female) patients. While none of the women I have talked to have actually complained about the treatment they receive (except for one who claimed that her doctor had made her "a cripple"), some of their comments are enlightening. Mrs. H.'s doctor told her that she was "holding together well for her age" — she supposed that was "good news". Another woman who was given a similar verdict said that she told him that she wanted to be in "good shape, period!". Mrs. D. is another example. She loves to walk but has problems with bunions on her feet. Her doctor will not operate (she suspects) because it would not be "worth it" on someone her age — worth it for whom?

These women are loath to complain to their doctors, probably for various reasons: because of the emotional significance of that particular relationship and their fear of rejection, especially in an emergency, like many patients, they do not know that they have that right, and "good" (loved) women do not complain. However, at least some of these women
enjoy being bad patients and telling stories about their doctor's threats and imprecations; lose weight or drop dead of a stroke! There is always the pleasurable prospect of proving a man wrong (again). Instead of complaining to doctors, they complain to other women, which is not the same thing at all.

"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease."

(World Health Organization definition)

One could well argue that "health", for old people/women, is not even "absence of disease" but absence of symptoms. Their health problems are generally chronic and are not responsive to medical treatment. Indeed Comfort (1978:79) states that 75 per cent of the health problems of old age are "sociogenic": that is, they are caused by social factors especially "age-ism" (Butler 1980). The most common physical ailments are rheumatism, arthritis, sight and hearing loss, heart disease and cancer (see Brearley 1978). They represent problems of living and adjustment in old age; their overall symptom is "pain" - emotional and physical - which doctors are predisposed to treat medically and to over-medicate. Doctors may be made uncomfortable by - and may even "fear" (Lifton 1979, see Introduction) - their old patients who do not improve, and who remind them of their own professional limitations and their own mortality. By prescribing drugs, they are doing something. Patients, themselves, often expect or demand prescriptions, "treatment", for their own aches and pains.

Almost all the women in this study take some sort of medication - tranquillizers, sleeping tablets, for blood pressure and arthritis. Remember, none of these people
are institutionalized; they are a "healthy" group. One woman told me how "surprised" her doctor was that she took no pills. This doctor has a large "geriatric" case load and likes working with old people. He told her that she was the only person her age (mid 70's) he knew who did not take tranquilizers. Another time, I took a woman "shopping". She was just out of hospital, where the policy is to throw away patients' previous medications. Now we were replenishing her supply and we returned home with, literally, a grocery bag full of drugs. Such over-medication is symptomatic of "age-ism": it is also an inappropriate response to chronic, qualitative health problems. Perhaps most worrying, over-medication is "iatrogenic" (Illich 1976:22) leaving old people more confused, less competent and in danger of poisoning themselves - which becomes a new administrative "health" problem for families, community nurses and welfare personnel.

The doctor-patient relationship here described fits the general male-female pattern of structural asymmetry and social distance. The doctor is obviously of higher status: he tells women what to do and, in return, they listen to and pay for his expertise. The complaining/joking yet accepting way women talk about their doctors is also familiar, for this relationship is another resource used in the "woman's code" of survival, competence and power.

Mothers and Sons

These women talk little about their sons; they talk more about daughters and daughters-in-law. When I ask, they assert that their children are all very important to them; yet, among themselves, these same women "complain" about being "lumbered" (burdened) with grandchildren and talk about how children
should not impose on mothers. They say they would not live with their children, even if they were invited although many have cared for their own parents and say they are happy they did so (in "the good old days"). Some, such as Mrs. D. (in Chapter 4) have moved away from their children in order to be independent while still insisting that children are more important than anyone else.

This partly reflects a values conflict between the ideals of motherly devotion, the "good woman", and of personal independence. I see this as essentially a problem of interpretation and "presentation of self" (Goffman 1958), whereby individuals present certain versions of themselves in different situations for specific purposes. "On the record", in public situations and with younger people, these women tend to stress their own motherliness. "Off the record", privately and with other women their own age, they are less restrained and stress their shared identity as women free from outside responsibilities. (Just as with women, they are more daring and openly aggressive in respect to men than they would be in other situations).

These women also relate differently to sons than to daughters. When their husbands die, they are ill or move house, and even after their own deaths (for the care of her grave, in one instance) all my informants turn to daughters, rather than to sons. This can certainly be interpreted as a sign of greater intimacy with daughters. Mrs. S., who is

1 This values conflict is somewhat analogous to what Clark and Anderson (1967) see as a dilemma of reconciling "survival" (through increased dependence) with "independence". 
estranged from most of her sons and all her daughters, has found another "daughter" in a niece. Although she seems to enjoy living with an unmarried son, still Mrs. S. threatens to "leave everyone behind" and go live near or with (she is unclear about this) her "daughter", and cut everyone else out of her will. It is doubtful that she would ever carry out her threat to disinherit her children for Mrs. S. is very fond of her house and gardens, and has a number of good friends and a sister whom she sees in Goulburn. What Mrs. S. is saying is that she would prefer to be close to a daughter than to sons.

The special tie between mothers and daughters is borne out in Townsend's study of old people and their families in East London (1963:99-100) as well as other studies (see Oakley 1981:271-273). Chodorow (1974, Thurman 1982) contends that the mother-daughter relationship, at least in modern societies, is fundamentally different from that of mother and son - women identifying with their female children and differentiating themselves from their male children. This has consequences for the development of the mother-child relationship (see Friday 1977 on some of the negative consequences of mother-daughter symbiosis), and for subsequent relationships with men and women. In this sense, the mother-son relationship is a model for female-male relationships, containing within it themes of separation, difference, emotional ambivalence and so on.

Their relationships with sons seem to be largely defined now by how well - or not - they get on with their daughters-in-law. These women see themselves as dependent on daughters-in-law for access to their sons, which can be disastrous for women who only have sons and unfriendly daughters-in-law.
Indeed, several women have claimed that their daughters-in-law have "stolen" their sons away from them. Others complain - less bitterly - about the way daughters-in-law raise (their son's) children or keep their homes.¹

This female relationship is a more difficult relationship to negotiate than the son-in-law relationship for these women, partly because it is so pivotal. Also it seems to symbolize what is considered the "darker" (competitive, devious) side of feminine nature - as does the "powerful woman", for daughters-in-law are rivals for women's sons. As it was earlier in women's lives, when they sought to control fathers and sexual partners - in opposition to mothers and other young women - what is at issue is control of men (de Beauvoir 1963, Friday 1977, Oakley 1981).

Interestingly, a "good" daughter-in-law is "like a daughter" to these women; she encourages her husband to be a son to his mother. (The "good" daughter-in-law is a "good" woman - nurturing, a-political and self-sacrificing - see Chapter 3.) Nurturing family ties is seen to rest with and empower women - mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law. Men - whether sons, fathers or husbands - are primarily outsiders whose responsibility is outside in the world. Women, in their talk about sons, recognize this distinction. When they talk about sons, they emphasize their accomplishments (jobs, careers, possessions). These accomplishments are even seen

¹ These same complaints are sometimes made about daughters; however, their meaning is different, for they are really self-criticisms. Who but their own mothers taught daughters such bad habits? By implication, it is not only a criticism of oneself but also of the "integrity" of one's life as a mother.
to compensate for - and explain - a son's neglect, as in several cases, for 20 years or more. (They also usually add that their daughter-in-law does not wish to live near, for her own "family" reasons.) Men have better, more important things to do. Sons who care for their mothers and are successful in the world, they are special.

Probably there is, in their talk about successful sons, some competition and exaggeration. Their exaggeration is facilitated by women's real and professed ignorance of what it is their sons do: no one else can challenge their stories because no one really knows either. Like husbands, sons are socially divisive - conferring status on women from outside the "world of women" and evoking envy, pity and rivalry from other women. These may be reasons why women seem to talk so little with other women about sons; such topics being outside conversational "rules of relevancy . . . what is permissible and/or desirable in the relationship" (Paine 1969:510).

The pattern which emerges here is a familiar one - deference towards sons as achievers, yet condescension towards them as people who are nurtured and controlled by women - first themselves and then their wives. While deference and condescension are oppositions in terms of affect both communicate social distance and difference from sons. These old women expect to lose their sons to the world and other women and, conversely, to find allies and rivals in daughters and daughters-in-law.

**Summary**

Joking, play and social avoidance are "frames" (Goffman 1974:11) which characterize women's talk about men - be they husbands, acquaintances, sons or doctors. These features, the
content of their talk - which simultaneously uphold and subvert the male world - and the obvious social separation of old men and women; all combine to define men as different and distant from women. Within this, there seems to be a contradiction in that men are seen to need women for nurturance, at the same time as women defer to men's status and power in the world. This engenders not only feelings of difference and distance but also ambivalence and antagonism on women's part towards men, which is often voiced in jokes, playful complaints and derogatory comments about men to women. This contradiction seems to underlie all male-female relations - as experienced by these women. It is only resolved in old age, by widowhood, which represents a final separation from men and is the culmination of a life-long trend towards cultural, social and psychological separation.

This widening spiral I describe seems to be an example of complementary "schismogenesis ... a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction" (Bateson 1958:175). Two of its probable outcomes are "a hostility in which each party resents the other as the cause of its own distortion" (the way these women blame men for being cared for, and also men's comments about "Black widows" who live off dead husbands' earnings) and "an increasing inability to understand the emotional reactions of the other" (p.188), exemplified by the "woman's code", which defines men as "different" from women. Thus, we have the seeming paradox, whereby widowhood and the "world of women" are the logical outcomes of marriage for women - particularly the longer they are married.
There are situations which - at first glance - seem to contradict this argument: old women caring for their surviving husbands, widows who re-marry or have boyfriends, and women who seek out men's company. One explanation could be that women differentiate between men in general - and their ideas about them - and their own special men whom they love: love masking the contradiction of caring for and deferring to men. (Bernard 1972 discusses the wife's denial of marriage's inequalities, and the price she pays for this.)

There is still some status associated with "having" a man, even if he is an old man. As one woman explained, to "walk down the street (with a man), like other women" (my emphasis) gives a woman status relative to other women - especially when most old women are widows. They pay a price for this status - in all the work involved in caring for and feeding men, and also in their social isolation - for they are deviants. In old age, in a "world of women", there are not enough men to go around and men can pose a threat to female relationships. Not surprisingly, many of these women keep their boyfriends "secret" and their husbands outside the "world of women".

Domestic relationships with old men - husbands, boyfriends or brothers - can be especially difficult in terms of managing the contradiction between men's power and need. For example, these women continue cooking a baked lunch every day because

1 This can present problems if he is a boyfriend, not a husband. In the case of one woman who has several boyfriends, her "problem" (as she sees it) is to keep other women away from them. However, widows claim that wives accuse them of trying to "steal" their husbands too.
that is what their husbands expect, even though they no longer have a work schedule or pay packet and are at home - often - with little to do. It also means that wives must be home every day during the middle of the day. If they become ill, women not only have their normal domestic duties but their husband's "outside" chores such as lawn-mowing and gardening to do and must also nurse them (which these women consider a wifely responsibility). Such women are more and more over-worked, exhausted and needed (by their husbands). Continuing to treat men as if they were senior partners in such an asymmetrical situation is - I suggest - a difficult juggling for women (and men). This interpretation is supported by widows' own accounts of "helpless" husbands who could not have survived without them; their relief that their husbands went "first" (and the ordeal is now over); and their refusal to re-marry, that is, to live again with an "old man" (and all that entails). There is also Mrs. N.'s laughing description of her boyfriend's unsuccessful gardening. While they live apart, she does most of his housework and cooks for him; "his hands are as soft as a woman's" from sitting in his wheel-chair all day and he cannot do any work anymore. Perhaps most telling is Mrs. H.'s comment that as men/husbands get older, "they forget (that) they were once young". 

1 The situation - and problems which arise - when an old husband cares for a wife seem to me different. For this constitutes a role reversal reminiscent of asymmetrical shifts described by Bateson. (See 1958:194 for his discussion of shifts in marital roles.) Such a role reversal could well promote greater emotional intimacy, sharing and androgyny. That is not to say that women find it easy to relinquish their house-wifely skills to their husbands. For several couples I have interviewed this reversal seems to have enhanced masculine dominance while effectively disenfranchising the wife. (She can fight this by criticising his housework.)
The wife's own dilemma is normally resolved by her husband's eventual (and, I would say, expected) death, and by her own widowhood. She no longer has to care for and defer to an "old man." This may happen symbolically, when her husband is taken away from her care because he has become so ill that he needs professional care (and perhaps because she is becoming too exhausted). Two women I interviewed were in this position; their husbands had been permanently hospitalized and were so senile that they no longer knew them. This was, understandably, very upsetting for both women; they spoke of having already "lost" their husbands. They could not decide - and sometimes did not even know - in which hospital their husbands were. All they could do now - more like mothers than wives - was wash their soiled bed clothes. I argue that many women experience a similar anticipatory loss as their husbands become "old men".

The contradiction between men's need for women and their power over women is also resolved logically - by splitting it, and equating "old men" as a category with need and "young men" with status and power. Criticisms of old men for being needy, parasitic and "dirty" (which are all, according to the "woman's code", masculine traits), the invidious position of old men in the Town Club and in other "feminine" situations, and their general rejection of old men are illustrative of how needy and powerless are old men. Young men, by contrast, are men of the world - sons, doctors, experts - with status and power, who do not need women (these old women) in any important way. In this way, women's suppressed anger, about the inequalities of male - female relations, is channelled away from most men i.e. "young men" and men they love towards those relatively few, distant and vulnerable "old men". Even
so, it is still mainly expressed in the company of other women and not to their victims, whom they avoid.

The development of the mother-son relationship can be compared to the marriage relationship. As their sons have grown towards adulthood, these women care for and (increasingly) defer to their sons (to the men they are becoming). This ends on their sons' marriages; their wives now care for and defer to them, they "own" these men now. For mothers, the proprietary relationship is over for their sons are "young men" to them, who no longer need them. "Sons are only sons until they marry." The original relationship seems to continue with unmarried sons - mother caring for her grown-up son, who earns a living (like a "young" husband) - until the son must care for the mother.

The dichotomy between young and old men is well defined in non-domestic relationships; men are "young" until they retire. Then they need women - wives, daughters, women neighbours, nurses and so on - and are "old". The transformation in the domestic sphere - in emotionally loaded, more intimate relationships - is more complicated. In old age, sons and husbands move away from their mothers and wives, becoming "young men" and "old men", respectively. Ultimately, neither will need old women. Perhaps most painful of all is the alienation these women must experience from the men their husbands and sons once were. Each comes to resemble the opposing, incomplete typifications of man; typifications which emphasize their difference from old women and the relative imbalance of need and status.
Such change must affect women's identity. With the dissolution of the family of procreation - but not of the mother-daughter tie - the differentiation from men is most complete since adolescence and identification with other women is again significant. We are reminded again of Myerhoff's analogy of old women "donning the man as she might her gloves". For in all their talk about the world outside, the world of men, these women are constructing and discovering a world "inside". These women, now widows, have always been separate from men: they tell a "woman's code" which pre-dates and survives men.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Women begin their lives as mothers' daughters, and finish as mothers of daughters and as widows. This abbreviated history of the "world of women" is also a parable about widowhood and feminine identity - in that widowhood is a culmination of feminine development for the old women of this ethnography. I argue that widowhood is a culturally normal experience which reinforces previous patterns of sexual difference and distance, at the same time as it reveals cultural contradictions about feminine modes of power. This concluding chapter develops these arguments by focusing on the issue of feminine survival in old age, its origins and consequences for old women. First I shall discuss survival as a symbol of feminine identity.

The old women I write about are vigorous, engaging, sometimes frightening people whose personal power and vitality resonates throughout this ethnography. This is how I see them and how they see themselves: women are tough, practical and able to take care of themselves, they say. These women are by definition survivors - by virtue of their age they have outlived old ways of life, relationships and people. They were daughters, sisters, wives and so on. Still they manage to survive intact, as competent and nurturant women. In this sense, their survival refers to the positive resolution of their "integrity" crisis. (Erikson 1959, 1963) - what I suggested in the Introduction is a crisis about the meaning of nurturance. They have done so by altering and expanding their nurturant role; nurturing them-
selves and other women. Their survival also describes a transcendence of the modern problem of "anomie" or namelessness (Berger and Kellner 1977), which they do by constructing a meaningful cultural reality and identity in their relationships with other women. This "world of women" constitutes a significant "private sphere" for widows.

Yet these same women are generally referred to as old girls, grannies, or "old dears". Such epithets are part of the "double standard" of age: an "external" reality which defines old women/widows as a special social problem (discussed in the Introduction) and also makes them the butt of jokes. In this concluding chapter I put forward the argument that these contrasting realities - of women's survival and devaluation - are inter-related, and explore the consequences of this relationship for identity and widowhood.

"Female solidarity is one of the best-kept secrets of patriarchy. It is to the advantage of patriarchy to deny that emotional support, understanding of our lives and needs, skills, and knowledge, and love can be had for women."


Old women live - not in the family or marriage relationship which have generally declined in significance - but with other women; sisters, daughters and friends who are or probably will be widows. I argue that this "world of women", in which men are strangers, has served as a backdrop for these women's lives and identities. In fact, they survive as old women/widows because of "feminine solidarity". Men do not seem to share this sense of personal continuity: they are "young men" of the world for much of their lives (until retirement), suddenly they are "old men" at home cut off from old relationships and networks. Their fate seems to be the social isolation and "anomie", which is supposedly (accord-
ing to the "double standard") the widow's. It is not surprising that men should find the "world of women", from which they are excluded and which is premised on men's transience, — opaque and threatening — nor is it surprising that they should deny its reality. ¹

Women's survival is tied to nurturance, for their crisis of "integrity" is about — and resolved by — nurturance. The nurturant role is "durable and expandable" as Myerhoff argues (1978"263), and a variety of relationships and meanings can be expressed through nurturance. This is most evident in Chapter 2 in the way old women use food as a resource and idiom for identity. I argue from this that old women resolve the crisis of nurturance — of having no one at home to feed or care for — by moving "outside" literally and symbolically. Their emphasis shifts away from domestic meals and relationships, which have become vestiges of what they once were, to an expanded range of voluntary and social activities in the "world of women". Old women are nurturing other women instead of families — especially — instead of men.

Food is socially as well as physically sustaining; it provides women with an extensive vocabulary for communicating a variety of relationships — competition, love, antagonism, intimacy, status difference, mutuality, trust, honour — depending on what food is eaten, how it is presented and served, who gives and receives and so on. Whatever else is communicated in such situations, the food giver — the woman

¹ Stephens (1976) ethnography about old people living in a slum hotel provides fascinating contrast which also supports my arguments. She finds that women and men are mutually antagonistic but that in this situation, men are at the advantage, having lived this way much of their lives. Women are cut off from their domestic, nurturant identities. They are the group who are vulnerable and dependent, who are seen as "burdens" and "there is even less solidarity among these aged women" (pg.258) than among the men.
whose food is eaten, is honoured. In the language of food, she is "filled". Men, who always eat women's food, are "one down" to women; they are "hungry" whereas women are "full".

"Men eating women's food" is a metaphor for male-female asymmetry, however, its meaning changes with age. While all men are seen as incompetent, needy and helpless in domestic matters, relative to women, "young men" are fed so that they can go out and do greater things. "Old men" are fed just to survive. They have little to offer in return - their wives are economically independent and are "finished" biologically and socially, with child bearing. As I argue in Chapter 5, these women do not expect - or experience - emotional intimacy, friendship equality - that is reciprocity in their dealings with men. According to their "code", men and women are too "different" to understand each other; an expectation, borne out by their experiences as husbands' wives and sons' mothers. On one level, this distance is quite functional; male-female relationships - unless socially contained by women (through jokes, avoidance, sexual separation) can be incompatible with female solidarity. (What I termed the "problem of couples" in Chapter 5).

These women are not - and do not identify themselves as - feminists or social critics. They are essentially conservative. In telling a "woman's code" of difference and inequality, they construct a social order which protects the "world of women" from masculine intrusion. By way of example, widows are able to participate more fully in this "world" than married women because they are finished with men. If they were all to decide to re-marry (for example)
rather than not to re-marry the resultant competition for a
dwindling number of old men would make sociability in the
"world of women" unlikely. Such a code also anticipates
loss, preparing women in this way for widowhood.

Oakley's question "what are husbands for?" (1981:236)
is pertinent to this discussion. From a feminist perspec-
tive she, like Bernard (1972), contends that men get more
out of marriage than do women, while being structurally and
psychologically peripheral. Husbands are thus rendered
inessential and dependent relative to wives. Joseph (1961
in Oakley 1981:237) found that women seem to recognise this
imbalance:

"large numbers of girls (predicted) the deaths
of their husbands when (they) had performed
the limited function of providing them with
children."

These young "husband killers" are - subjectively and stat-
istically - prospective widows. They seem to have been
socialized for marriages predicated on sexual separation
and widowhood: their expectations are borne out by my old
women whose husbands died (often by degrees) when they were
"old" and superfluous.

The situation of "old men" vis à vis women is a contin-
uation and reversal of the previous configuration of differ-
ence and inequality. Women are nurturing "feeding" men
as they always have - as mother, wives, sisters, daughters,
nurses, and social workers. But now, men are even more
indebted to women because they have so little to give in
return. As their need increases, they become ill, lonely,
their wives die - nurturance becomes more necessary and
precious and - for men without women - hard to find.
"old men" alone are seen by women as burdens, as a bundle of needs; instead of the assets they were as "young men". In terms of relative power between men and women, this is a reversal; exemplified by the overall feminization of the world of the old - at home, in social clubs run by women, in health services staffed by nurses and other women - and by women's personal experience of caring for and surviving "helpless" husbands. Men's dependence on women is fully revealed in old age by women's dominance, giving the lie to masculine dogma and power: "old men" are a social embarrass-ment which widowhood resolves.

This scenario - of increasing masculine dependency and feminine dominance - corresponds with Gutmann's theory of sex differences in aging (1976, 1977), a pattern exacerbated by urbanization:

"Urbanization within cultures seems to replicate the psychological effects of aging across cultures. On the one hand, it appears to sponsor masculine passivity and early mortality; on the other hand, it increases the freedom of older women and the young." (Gutmann 1977:321)

Gutmann readily acknowledges that these are inferences, drawn from indirect evidence about social status, power and age, and the need for an "inside" view of aging (e.g. 1977:316) - such as this ethnography offers. These women perceive old men as if they were "hungry" - passive, dependent and receptive - and men seem to respond accordingly. Through their interaction and talk a cultural reality of feminine dominance and masculine passivity is enacted and realized. As Gutmann (1976:57) argues men's "hunger has less to do with actual behaviours than....
with modes of perceiving reality and relating to it. It is a feminine and feminized reality - in which old men hunger for nurturance and are (like) children to women. Like children, ideally, they will leave home eventually, however not by growing up (as sons do) but by dying "first".

Single men and widowers - men without women - are always "hungry", that is, looking for mothers to feed them.

Because women feed men, who die, widows are symbolically accused of killing, "poisoning" their husbands/men. Such an accusation - voiced by several men about widows "living off" (cannibalizing) and enjoying themselves on husbands' money - reflects a cultural antagonism and fear of widows. It is an obvious attempt to reassert masculine control over too independent women. The "husband sanctification" of which Harry O. complains in Chapter 3 is a similar sort of attempt - to explain widows' behaviour in terms of their bereavement; their relationship to men. Widows can also use "husband sanctification" as a way of protecting themselves from such accusations, also from self-accusation. However, I have seen little evidence of "husband sanctification" (see Chapters 4 and 5). For various reasons these women talk remarkably little about - living or dead - husbands. Among themselves they talk more

1. Having interviewed so few men in depth, I cannot say if this is a "masculine" reality. There does seem to be a cultural correspondence between the two realities, an "organization of diversity" (Wallace 1961).

2. Linton (1979) calls this "survival" guilt, which he also defines as a question of meaning.
about the freedoms of widowhood; no one there is threatened by their survival. In interviews their accounts are complex; women talk about husbands' positive and negative qualities. Even Mrs. G. (in Chapter 4), who says that her husband was a much better person than she, qualifies her praise in the course of our lengthy conversation and reveals that her feelings towards him are far more complicated and ambivalent than initial appearances suggested. "Husband sanctification" may well be an unforseen consequence of formal interviews; part of a defensive, public stance taken by women in what they perceive as intrusive situations.

The discussion so far underlines the political nature of nurturance; women's power to give and withhold "food", and free and control people through nurturance. Women can do this quite obviously, as happens in the Town Club and also in the Country Ladies. Such manoeuvres can be - easily and incorrectly - dismissed as trivial; women being "bitchy" with other women. They are no more or less trivial, and are as much a part of social life as men's business affairs or political campaigns. More difficult to dismiss, and more threatening to patriarchal ideas about marriage and the family, is the possibility that women use nurturance for their own purposes as wives and mothers. As I have already argued, families are often mother-centred and fathers, psychologically marginal. This happens, at least in part, because mothers nurture the children and because fathers are - consciously or unconsciously - excluded from that role. Fathers are, I suggest, both pulled by external responsibilities and pushed outside.
The consequences of men's exclusion may only be fully apparent in old age, when men no longer have an "outside" identity and are more completely dependent on their wives and on the domestic sphere. In his East London Study Townsend found that (1963:97):

"Both sons and daughters expressed a greater affection for their mothers than their fathers. It was chiefly Mum they visited and Mum they supported, materially and emotionally. The men indeed often accepted this."

This may be one reason why widowers seem to do so less well than widows. With the deaths of their wives, their primary relationship is gone - whereas widows are in still intact families. As I argue in Chapter 5, the essential family bond for my old women is (ideally) mother-daughter with all the ambivalence, identification and intensity that implies. A structural implication of this primary bond is that families - and male-female relationships - are framed by a network of female alliances and rivalries - with mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, daughters and friends - which canalize, define and outlive those other relationships. Another implication of the mother-daughter bond is that women are predisposed to expect greater emotional intimacy and significance in their relations with women than with men.

The contrasted images of woman's goodness and power mask the political implications of nurturance and also the connections between the "world of women" and the family. These images are developed in Chapter 3 through case histories of two women - Mrs. N. and Nola H. - who are known for their

1. By way of comparison, women without daughters can be almost as badly off as childless women - according to these women - depending on how good a "daughter" their daughter-in-law is.
goodness and power (respectively). I argue that they are cultural prescriptions for ways of being women, versions of womanhood. However, each is incomplete without the other.

The "good woman" embodies love and nurturance. She is the ideal mother; having no motives, nurturing because she must - not out of self-interest. This is difficult— for a woman must present herself and be seen as transparently good, her meaning clear. She is caught in the paradox of striving to be a nurturant and loving mother - when her family no longer needs her and there are few in the "world of women" to mother¹ - and at the same time denying knowledge of her own power and motives. Women as mothers are victims of what Chodorow (in Thurman 1982) calls "the fantasy of the perfect mother", for being too powerful and not "good" enough.

The "powerful (bad) woman" is a caricature of the "good woman": she is malicious and devious, using her "food" or nurturance for her own purposes. Her food is like poison masquerading as food. Anger is her chief emotion; like the witch, the "powerful woman" expresses anger and evokes anger. Her energy has been stolen away from its rightful focus, the family, and is used for selfish purposes. Her "fate" - when she is old and weak - is to be turned on and brought down by other women. Unlike men who face a similar punishment for being men, the "powerful woman" can choose to mend her ways, stay at home and eschew power. This is, I suspect (and cases cited in Chapter 3 support my interpretation) - a

¹ Unlike most widows, Mrs. N. has a house-full to mother.
common strategy of women as they get older. Such a "career" choice (Myerhoff and Simić 1978) serves to invoke nurturance from other women: "poor dears" (Hochschild 1973) who are such good women now, sweet and inoffensive. Which they are indeed—what I am suggesting is that both are versions of self, "accounts" which people use as social resources for different purposes.

Even Mrs. N. whom I cited in Chapter 3 as an exemplary "good woman" — devoted to her family, unassuming and unambitious — can act politically. She did this over a decision made by her church, a decision Mrs. N. considered "sacrilegious". For years a church stalwart, Mrs. N. decided (along with several other women) to stay away and withhold her church donations — food, handicrafts and money — until the decision was rescinded. Little did the churchmen realize what anger and opposition their decision would arouse in "good" old Mrs. N.! Her uncharacteristic, political act — of combining with other women to exert her will against masculine authority — she construes as a good thing to have done. Mrs. N. was not just meddling, for the men were at fault: she had no real choice but to oppose what she felt was evil. What this incident shows is how powerful "good women" — especially 'good women" — can be. (Mrs. N. finally won her battle.)

Similarly, Nola H. is not simply a "powerful (bad) woman". She certainly is wilful, aggressive and outspoken: women do fear her and her tongue. Nola H. obviously enjoys the company of woman, the "world of women", preferring the drama and challenge of that world to domesticity. Her house is quite bare, serving as a kind of ante-room until Nola H. is called back on stage to her real life — of housie, teas and bus trips. But she also is a prolific and excellent
cook who feeds many other women and her grandchildren (albeit unwillingly. This is the version she tells other old women). Nola H. was a good mother who raised her children largely on her own. As well she has a lively and bracing intelligence and wit; as well as being intimidating, she can be very entertaining. Certainly Nola H. has more fun than restrained Mrs. N. For all her fun in the "world of women" she is labelled a "powerful (dominating, opinionated, bad) woman" but that is quite a small price to pay: Nola H. can always "mellow" when she is older and needs nurturance.

These images of womanhood prescribe and define relationships sometimes so completely that they resemble a group "ethos" (Bateson 1958). The Country Ladies and Town Club women are examples of this. The Country Ladies are "all good women" who love and nurture each other in their elaborate afternoon teas (and in other ways). The Town Club women are interested in status and power; they organize themselves hierarchically and gossip about one another. Women use food, non-reciprocal food exchanges, to control other members. Yet neither is the full story – the ambiguous nurturance – power connection remains, even in these two stereotypic situations. The Country Ladies are not only saying that they are good, they are showing that they are better than other women's groups. Similarly, Town Club "workers" legitimate their power (achieved through giving) over "oldies" by being good women who "know best", like mothers of geriatric children.

"The long closeted anger of old women generally repressed during their child-bearing years, may revive in others, archaic fears of the 'bad mother' as expressed in the persona of the witch." (Gutmann 1977:312).
So far, I have discussed anger directed at widows because they are survivors, but these women also express anger; anger which may help them survive (Gutmann 1977). In some instances, they have done so very vividly - by pulling out neighbours' flower gardens "by the roots" or giving wrapped garbage to other women as anonymous gifts. In chapter 5, I argue that these women are antagonistic towards men because of what they see as the contradiction between men's worldly status and their domestic need of women, and all the work and self-sacri­fice men demand of women and the little they give in return. Such anger is a dangerous emotion which can threaten the "integrity" of lives supposedly lived for love - according to the dictates of the "good woman" image. These women offset this danger by expressing their antagonism indirectly - in jokes and stories at men's expense, through social avoidance of men and in their almost unanimous stated refusal to re­marr and "be made a convenience of, by some old man" - with other women. Through such talk, they reinforce their sense of difference, distance and shared antagonism in regards to men, and also their feminine identity and solidarity. Their targets are not men whom they personally know such as husbands, sons or doctors; men who may well have disappointed them in this way, but whom they still love, defer to and need. It is in these attenuated relationships where women's crisis of nurturance is made explicit - in old husbands who have become like children in their need and sons "lost" to other women (who are made responsible for this). Their targets are"old men"; men they do not know, whose need and low status is so visible to them. "Old men" - with all their needs and
aggressive dependence on women - recapitulate male-female relations for these women.

The "powerful women"/witch, evoking and expressing anger, is the dominant persona of widows, who have retired/abdicated from domestic cares, leaving home to "please themselves". For this they are branded symbolically as bad mothers, "black widows", "husband killers"; names which recognize old women's real power and the fear this arouses. However, inside the "world of women" there is nurturance and power, and feminine identity is less constrained. Anger seems a more mundane - even theatrical - emotion, part of continuing feuds, friendships and gossip which combine in an engrossing drama about nurturing villains, powerful heroines and men who need women.
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