Chapter 19

The Comparability of Event–Related and General Social Support

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ABSTRACT

Some studies (e.g., Kogovšek & Hlebec, 2008, 2009) have shown that the name generator and the role relation approaches to measuring social networks are to some extent comparable, but less so the name generator and the event-related approaches (Hlebec, Mrzel, & Kogovšek, 2009). In this chapter, the composition of the social support network assessed by both the general social support approach and the event-related approach (support during 15 major life events) is analyzed and compared. In both cases, the role relation approach is used. In addition, in both approaches a more elaborate (16 possible categories ranging from partner, mother, father, friend to no one) and a more simple (6 possible categories ranging from family member, friend, neighbor to no one) response format is applied and compared. The aim of the chapter is to establish, in a controlled quasi-experiment setting, whether the different approaches (i.e. the general social support and the event-related approach) produce similar social networks regardless of the response format (long vs. short).

INTRODUCTION

Social support networks can be measured in many different ways. Each approach has specific advantages and disadvantages and each may be useful and appropriate for specific research pur-

poses. It could be argued that the name generator approach produces the most complete, broad ranging and substantively rich data about one's social network. It asks a respondent to directly name actual persons in his/her network. Usually a broad range of other information is also collected about the obtained network members (e.g., type

of relationship, strength of tie, network members' personal characteristics and so on). Therefore, relatively accurate estimates and interpretively rich information about network characteristics such as network composition, structure etc. are made possible. Yet such network data collection may be quite burdensome for the respondents, especially in the case of relatively large networks. In contrast the role relation approach, whereby network members are represented only as role relationships and typically only the first two important persons are obtained and with the help of a showcard the possible role relations are listed, is cheaper, simpler to administer and less burdensome for respondents. However, owing to the specific response format less precise information on network members is obtained and therefore the estimation of the different network characteristics is limited. Third, many studies in the field of social support (e.g., Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Hobfoll, 1985; Keinan, 1997; Thoits, 1985) show that the effectiveness of a certain type of support provided and the mechanisms through which the support works are often highly dependent on the specific situation requiring support. For instance, emotional support may be provided in a situation (e.g., an accident) where the affected person needs or expects help of a more practical kind. If an unsuitable type of support is provided this may thus cause additional stress, dissatisfaction, feelings of being misunderstood, controlled or alienated. Therefore, the context of a specific situation influences how effective a certain type of support can be. Since all of these approaches are often used in large cross-national substantive studies (e.g., International Social Survey Programme, General Social Survey, Generations and Gender Programme, European Quality of Life Survey), this raises a number of questions about the comparability of results, biases, limitations and so on among such studies. In addition, there are differences among the approaches in terms of the costs and benefits, respondent burden, measurement instrument characteristics and complexity

of implementation which are, again, important issues in large cross-national studies.

Various conceptualizations of social support frequently stress the difference between actually received (enacted) social support and the subjective appraisal of social support or perceived[1] support (Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, & Sarason, 1994; Knipscheer & Antonucci, 1990; Laireiter & Baumann, 1992; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990; Vaux, 1988, 1992). In most models social support resources or social support network are part of the definition.

Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce (1990a, 1990b, 1994a; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990) define *received (enacted) social* support as help people receive from others in specific stressful situations. Received support depends on the availability of support (whether or not respondents have a social network), the individual's coping skills and the degree of severity of the stress perceived by others (potential providers of support). *Perceived support* refers to a person's belief that social support is available if needed, but without it necessarily being actually taken up. One can further distinguish between (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990) the availability of support and the adequacy of the available support, as well as global and specific measures of perceived support. The third dimension of social support is a social support network. Events that stimulate the provision of social support are divided along several dimensions such as minor-major, simple-complex, and stressful-nonstressful (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994a, pp. 93-95).

Two main hypotheses regarding the role of social support can be distinguished with regard to the distinction between stressful and non-stressful events. The hypothesis about the *buffering effects* of social support states that social support is only effective during stressful events (e.g., death of a close family member, divorce, retirement, moving to another place etc.). The *main effect* hypothesis holds that social support is related to well-being in non-stressful situations. We can say that these two

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