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## **Narratives of meaningful endurance.**

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## ENGLISH SUMMARY

Women of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese descent living in the Netherlands have a higher incidence of health problems and are overrepresented among the unemployed. Health problems can form a major obstacle to employment. Yet, health problems are often overlooked when explaining cross-group differences in employment. In this dissertation, I set out to answer; 'How can the Sense of Coherence explain why some ethnic minority women remain employed despite their health problems whilst others do not?' By using the theory of the Sense of Coherence (SOC) I aimed to shift the dominant focus on risk factors and deficiencies, to a focus on success factors, opportunities and enabling factors.

What is actually the Sense of Coherence? The Sense of Coherence, or SOC, is a general orientation to life which covers three main components. *Comprehensibility* is the belief that things happen in an orderly and predictable way and a sense that you can understand events in your life. *Manageability* is the belief that you have the resources to take care of things and that you can deal with arising situations. Lastly, *meaningfulness* is the belief that things in life are worthwhile and you care about what happens.

### Health & Employment of Ethnic Minority Women

This dissertation provides important insights about the health and employment of ethnic minority women. First, the findings indicate that health problems are an often overlooked obstacle to employment of ethnic minority women. Ethnic minority women seem to be in a double vulnerable position, with both a disproportionately high incidence of health problems and an overrepresentation among the unemployed. Yet, the findings of this dissertation also provide reasons for a more positive perspective.

First, I found that close social ties can reduce the negative effect of health problems on employment. Social ties can reduce the negative impact of health problems on employment by providing social support and providing the comfort of feeling embedded in a close social circle. However, I found that this protective effect depends on a combination of the aspect of social ties which is considered and the ethnic background of the individual. Quantity of contact has a protective effect for native Dutch individuals, number of social ties and proportion of co-ethnics has a protective effect for Moroccan individuals, but for Turkish individuals I did not find any protective effect of close social ties. I argue that these cross-ethnic differences in the protective effect of social ties may be due to cross-cultural differences in social norms.

Moreover, I found that (workfare) volunteering may contribute to employability and empowerment of ethnic minority women. Workfare volunteering is used as a policy tool in the Netherlands to promote empowerment and employability. However, for two

mutually reinforcing reasons it eventually disempowers. Firstly, volunteering hardly ever results in paid employment because employers do not recognize volunteering as real work experience. Secondly, the focus on paid employment as ultimate form of integration misrecognizes migrant women as active citizens, which often results in disempowerment. The findings show that the double policy goals of workfare volunteering require different conditions, which often results in failing to achieve the set goals.

Lastly, I found that women can escape the vicious cycle between health problems and unemployment through the meaningful reconstruction of difficult experiences. Women can put a halt on the on-going negative chain reaction through focusing on the meaning and purpose of adversity. I call this type of narrative *narratives of meaningful endurance*, which are characterized by structure, authorship and meaningful reconstruction, in opposition to its counterpart, *narratives of non-directional distress*. In addition, I found that a strong SOC enables individuals to construct a narrative of meaningful endurance and to escape the vicious cycle between health problems and unemployment.

### The Theory of the Sense of Coherence

This dissertation provides novel insights about the theory and application of the Sense of Coherence. Despite the popularity of the theory, we know surprisingly little about how a strong SOC actually develops. I found that experiencing consistency and load balance are associated with developing a strong SOC and that in addition to decision making power, helping others, religion and self-transcendence contribute to developing a strong SOC. Migration and integration may pose additional threats to developing a strong SOC. However, different resources, such as religion, collective narratives and social capital, may protect the development of a strong SOC. Unexpectedly, we found that second generation migrants had a significantly lower SOC than their first generation counterparts especially due to issues with belonging, dealing with different cultural norms and stereotypes.

SOC is supposed to be applicable across various cultural groups. However, despite previous research indicating potential problems, the cross-cultural applicability of the standardized SOC survey has not been properly tested so far. If this assumption is not met, differences between SOC across groups or the effects of SOC may be over- or underestimated. I found that SOC can be used across native Dutch, Western and non-Western individuals, yet, that researchers should be particularly careful when using SOC in non-Western groups.

Many studies have found that SOC has a positive effect on different health related outcomes. Yet, *how* SOC works and through which mechanisms has not been looked at so far. I found that narrative construction, and particularly *narratives of meaningful*

*endurance*, are one of the mechanisms through which SOC operates. Moreover, SOC, a general orientation to life, has so far only been used to explain health-related outcomes. However, as a general orientation to life I hypothesized SOC would also be applicable to explain other outcomes besides health. The findings of this dissertation show that SOC may also be influential in explaining outcomes in employment. These findings open up new ways to consider new applications of SOC theory.

In conclusion, the high incidence of health problems among ethnic minority women does not necessarily block the path to paid employment. A strong Sense of Coherence (which enables the escape from a vicious cycle between health problems and unemployment), social ties and (workfare) volunteering may enable ethnic minority women to find paid employment despite their health problems. However, migration and integration may threaten the development of a strong SOC. Incorporating techniques to strengthen migrant women's SOC in existing interventions may therefore not only contribute to a stronger SOC and better health, but also to better labor market integration and opportunities to escape the vicious cycle between health problems and unemployment.