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SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND LONELINESS: SUGGESTIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT
OF SUPPORT NETWORKS AS GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY

THEO VAN TILBURG

Previous research has documented particular situations where primary relationship networks fail to provide the support required. Both the quantity and the quality of relationships are important for individual well-being. More specifically, the network of relationships should enclose at least one person who can be considered a confidant, with whom daily experiences can be shared, and who can provide help in the event of problems.

The absence of a confidant, such as a spouse or a friend, has been shown to increase the likelihood of (mental and physical) health problems and to influence well-being negatively (Berkman and Syme, 1979; Gove, 1972; House, Robbins and Metzner, 1982; De Jong-Gierveld, 1984a; Knipscheer, 1980; Kobrin and Hendershot, 1977; Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Ormel, 1980; Reiche, 1982; Weeda, 1982; Van de Willige and Ormel, 1979; Woltringh and Knapen, 1980). In addition to an examination of the contribution of the composition of the network to well-being, it is important to consider the role of the support provided by social relationships. Relationships are defined as "supportive" if they are characterized by the individual as relationships that provide intimacy, caring and reflection (emotional support). Furthermore, supportive relationships are relationships that provide the individual with practical help (instrumental support) and with information about problem solving (informational support) (1). Supportive relationships in particular have been shown to contribute to the individual's abilities to cope with problems, and to contribute to general health and well-being (Blazer, 1982; Cassel, 1976; Gore, 1978; House, 1981; Lin, Ensel, Simeone and Kuo, 1979; Turner, 1981; A.W. Williams, Ware and Donald, 1981; Winnubst, Marcelissen and Kleber, 1982).

We shall illustrate these observations with results from Dutch loneliness research (De Jong-Gierveld, 1984b) (2). In this project, respondents were asked to mention their most important relationship. Respondents rated the degree of support provided by a particular relationship on the basis of a list of relational aspects (3). The following categories of respondents were distinguished: respondents whose most important relationship was: a) a spouse who provided much support, b) a spouse who provided moderate support, c) a relationship other than a spouse who provided much support, d) a relationship other than a spouse who provided moderate support, and e) respondents who did not mention any relationship. Next, we determined the number of lonely people within each category. A self-rating scale, which assesses whether respondents label themselves as one of the (extremely) lonely people in society (4), was used as the loneliness measure. Table 1 shows the results of the analysis. Respondents whose most important relationship was a spouse were less likely to rate themselves as lonely than respondents whose most important relationship

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was other than a spouse. The greatest number of lonely people were found in the category of respondents who did not mention any relationship.

Table 1. Relative frequency of labelling oneself as lonely by respondents with different kinds of relationships

Most important relationship	N		Lonely	
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Spouse	233		10.3	
Giving much support	191			7.3
Giving less support	42			23.8
Other type	301		47.8	
Giving much support	136			41.9
Giving less support	165			52.7
None	19	19	63.2	63.2
Total	553	553	32.5	32.5

- (a) Three cases have missing values
 (b) Chi-square = 92.7 with two degrees of freedom; significance = .0000
 (c) Chi-square = 100.9 with four degrees of freedom; significance = .0000

Furthermore, the data revealed that respondents who received much support were less likely to rate themselves as lonely than individuals receiving less support. This result was obtained for the respondents with a spouse as well as for the individuals with an important relationship other than a spouse. Thus the evidence shows that both the composition of the network (the type of the most important relationship) as well as the support provided by the most important relationship are important determinants of loneliness.

Given the importance of social support for experienced well-being, and given the finding that individuals are not always able to obtain the social support required, it appears meaningful to examine the manner in which individuals initiate new (supportive) relationships or improve existing ones. Specifically, the following questions should be addressed: a) Which types of relationships provide support? b) Which factors interfere in the process of initiating new (supportive) relationships, and which categories of individuals are particularly handicapped by these factors? We recently started a new research project which focusses on these issues. In the present paper we wish to deal with the questions in more depth (5).

WHICH TYPES OF RELATIONSHIP PROVIDE SUPPORT?

Two general common-sense notions, which are partially incorrect, appear to influence the research, policy development, and social services in this area.

The first notion is that support is provided by family members in particular (i.e. spouse and children). This statement requires further specification.

The supportive function of different types of relationships has not been investigated carefully. Some findings suggest that non-family relationships have an important and specific function, which complement the supportive function of family relationships. Stable and durable ties are important for the ability to cope with life events (Hirsch, 1981; Thoits, 1982). The existence of relationships outside the family is especially important with the loss of the spouse or when problems develop in the relationship with the spouse. Weak ties are useful to obtain information from outside the close-knit network (Granovetter, 1973). This information can help the individual to deal with problems (Walker, MacBride and Vachon, 1977), for example, by increasing the individual's independence from the close-knit network (McKinlay, 1973). Research conducted by K.B. Williams and K.D. Williams (1983) showed that people were more willing to approach others with whom they had weak ties than individuals with whom they had close ties. A possible explanation is that, assuming that asking for help implies failure, failure is less difficult to admit to superficial contacts.

The restriction of social support to emotional support, thereby neglecting instrumental and informational support, appears to account for the over-emphasis of the supportive function of family relationships. We suggest that a multi-dimensional approach to support can provide a broader understanding of the importance of family relationships and other types of relationships. For the moment we can conclude that family relationships are important for the individual. However, an over-emphasis of their supportive function can have serious implications. Individuals living in families may fail to develop relationships outside the household, and individuals living on their own may remain focussed exclusively upon a possible relationship with a spouse, thereby neglecting other (potentially supportive) relationships. A nuanced approach to the supportive role of different types of relationships is necessary.

The second notion is that support has only positive aspects. This notion also requires further specification.

Support can be a source of problems (6), for example when provided aid or information fail to match the needs of the individual. In addition, support may lead to negative consequences. Accepting help can produce feelings of personal unworthiness, for example because concessions have to be made to the provider of help (Caplan, 1976; Gourash, 1978) or because personal control and autonomy are lost (Hansson, Jones and Carpenter, in press; Hattinga Verschure, 1984; Schreiber and Glidewell, 1978) (7). Lewis (1973) demonstrated that the constant pressure of the

approval or disapproval of significant others (who are almost always supporters as well) restricts the individual's ability to develop and maintain relationships. People with specific problems appear to withdraw themselves from their social networks out of fear of negative reactions and stigmatization (Hansson et al., in press).

By not paying attention to the negative aspects of support, one may fail to understand why existing, potentially supportive relationships are not used by people conceivably in need of support.

In sum, on the basis of the available research findings and the existing insights, we conclude that in order to improve supportive networks it is necessary to direct one's attention to a) a broad range of relationships, b) several dimensions of support, and c) the negative aspects of support as well.

WHICH FACTORS OBSTRUCT THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW (SUPPORTIVE) RELATIONSHIPS?

Several problems may arise in the process of developing new relationships. Rook and Peplau (1982) distinguished a number of social opportunities and personal problems that influence this process. Limiting social opportunities are, for instance, a shortness of time and money, and geographical or cultural isolation (see De Jong-Gierveld, 1984a). Limiting personal problems are, for instance, poor social skills, social anxiety and self-defeating perceptions (see Hansson et al., in press; Jones, 1982).

Our earlier research on coping with loneliness (Van Tilburg, 1982) showed that social opportunities as well as personal problems are important factors in the initiation of relationships. We noted an additional limiting factor. A number of lonely individuals appear to develop negative values concerning social relationships. They seem to downplay the importance of support, tending not to subscribe to values expressing the intention to have confidential relationships with others, to receive support when in trouble, or a shoulder to cry on.

This mechanism has not received much attention. Some studies (8), however, provide indications for the restrictive influence of personal values on the development of supportive networks. Research of Tolsdorf (1976) based on a sample of psychiatric and non-psychiatric patients, revealed that psychiatric patients in particular have negative values about relationships ("negative network orientation"). In general, they have also a smaller network of close relationships. McAdams and Losoff (1984) observed that children with more positive values (higher "friendship motivation") report more relationships, have more stable relationships, and are judged as happier by the teacher.

Personal values concerning relationships should not be examined in isolation from social values about relationships. This century has brought rapid and far-reaching changes in the social values about relationships, a development which is often referred to as "individualism" (Hofstee, 1980; Lukes, 1973; Romein, 1946/1971; Slater,

1970; Straver, Van der Heiden and Robert, 1980; Weeda, 1982). Individualization is seen as the process whereby people become more independent and, as a result, more willing to assume personal responsibility, to make personal choices, and to work toward self-actualisation. Although it should be emphasized that this process does not necessarily lead to the loss of relationships, isolation and loneliness (Kooy, 1977; Weeda, 1983), a number of authors, among them Romein (1946/1971) and Hofstee (1980), indicate that individualism may result in a decreased responsibility for the well-being of others and a loss of solidarity. The latter view conceives individualism as one of the sources of loneliness. Debates in The Netherlands on the scope and meaning of the modern welfare state tend to associate individualism with an egocentric and irresponsible concept of human nature (Kuiper, 1980), a lack of social morals (Zijderveld, 1979), and consumerism (Sectoroverlegorgaan Sociaal-Economisch Beleid van het Wetenschappelijk Instituut voor het CDA, 1984). The authors share the view that loyalty and individual responsibility are no longer valued in society: individuals tend to rely on the welfare state for help and care instead of providing for themselves (Schnabel, 1983; De Swaan, 1976/1982).

It is unclear to what extent the social process of individualization influences the development of specific negative or positive personal values concerning supportive relationships. This topic has not yet been empirically investigated. Personal values are not only a product of social values but also of personal experiences (Kluckhohn, 1967; Scheibe, 1970). Thus we expect to find a relation between personal values concerning relationships, personal evaluations of the attitudes of others in relationships, and specific life events.

Our hypothesis is that the values to which individuals subscribe are important determinants of whether or not they ask for support, for the manner in which they develop and maintain relationships, and finally, for their personal well-being.

In subscribing to values which downplay the importance of relationships, individuals can make an existing loneliness-situation acceptable and bearable (Greenwald, 1972). This process can have positive aspects. On the other hand, considering the importance of support for individual well-being, the positive aspects are likely to be outweighed by negative effects. Chances are that the individual will withdraw from most social contact, ending up in relative isolation. The vicious circle is complete (Jones, Freemon and Goswick, 1981). The "pessimistic and cynical attitudes toward other people appear to be stable features of incompetence and might result in the failure to perceive or believe that support is available" (Hansson et al., 1984, p.275). The loneliness-situation is perceived as hopeless; few attempts are made to change the situation because of low expectations for the success and for available support. There are a number of studies that confirm this process. Research by Eckenrode showed that "(b)eliefs regarding the efficacy of help-seeking/receiving ... had a direct effect on the mobilization of supports, and were related as well to the number of potential supporters" (1983, p.523). Solano, Batten and Parish argued that this "lack of faith in the good will of others may be an important motive in failure to

self-disclose" (1982, p.530). The results of a large longitudinal study conducted in the U.S.A. (Brown, 1978) revealed that people conceivably in need of assistance were often not looking for it.

The disruption of the vicious circle of negative experiences and negative expectations of social relationships is of great importance for individuals to be able to develop new relationships. In order to influence this process effectively, further insight is required into a) the manner in which individuals develop perceptions of their circumstances, b) the manner in which expectations and values concerning personal relationships are developed, and c) the manner in which personal capacities to change the situation are estimated. In addition, it is necessary to identify those groups of individuals who are more likely than others to adhere to negative personal values concerning personal relationships.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Research findings have revealed the positive influence of personal (supportive) relationships on individual well-being. The networks of many people provide inadequate support. Therefore, the improvement of supportive networks can be of great importance for well-being. Policy-makers and social service employees should realize, more than they have so far, that it is not easy to develop new relationships or to change existing ones (cf. Allan, 1983). The different types of support provided by the various relationships and the different values concerning relationships should also be taken into account. Research, policy development and social aid which follow the general outline described in this paper should contribute to the improvement of supportive networks.

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NOTES

1. Our definition follows the definition of House (1981), and Unger and Powell (1980), and contains aspects of the definitions of Cobb (1976, 1979), Kahn and Antonucci (1981), Caplan (1976), Toltsdorf (1976), Wilcox (1981), Gottlieb (1978), Hirsch (1980), Klein Beernink (1983) and Thoits (1982). Support is conceptualized as a subjective attribution which

entails objective aspects as well as subjective perceptions about the functions of relationships (cf. Gottlieb, in press; O'Conner and Brown, 1984).

2. The research design is described in De Jong-Gierveld (1984a).

3. In the analysis we distinguished between not lonely and (slightly, seriously and extremely) lonely people.

4. Twenty aspects were rated. With the Mokken Scale Analysis a scale was developed which takes 16 aspects into account. All these aspects concern emotional support. The homogeneity coefficient of Loevinger (H-coefficient) of the scale is .48. The scale is dichotomized around the mean, which is 11.5 (theoretical range 0 - 16).

5. Van der Vliert and De Boer (1984) have previously directed attention toward the first question, without elaborating on the topic.

6. We will disregard the fact that the family is an institution where love and violence often go hand in hand (Straus, 1980).

7. Research of Fischer and Nadler (1976) showed that especially low cost aid (aid from a high resource donor) tends to be a relatively self-threatening experience for the recipient, while high cost aid is a relatively self-supporting experience.

8. The studies of McAdams and Losoff (1984), Van Tilburg (1982) and Tolsdorf (1976) employed qualitative methods with small, non-representive samples.

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