Stability and Change in the Structure and Function of Older Women's Social Networks

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

The current study investigated the stability of older women's self-reported social network structure and function over a three year period, and whether stability differed with age. The sample was comprised of 238 women who were categorized into two age groups: young-old women (YO: N = 141; mean = 68.79 years; SD = 3.50; range 60 -74 years) and old-old women (OO: N = 97; mean = 79.16; SD = 3.54; range 75 - 93 years). Using Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) social support diagram, women identified social network members in three circles. The only significant difference was that young-old women identified more network members in the second circle (YO: mean = 7.14; OO: mean 4.34) at time one. There was considerable stability in circle 1 regarding the relationship of the first and second network members to the participant (e.g., spouse). Overall, stability of person one was 85% (YO: 88%; OO: 81%). Women identified a spouse (20%) and a child (45%) as the first person in circle one at both time points. The overall stability of the second person in circle one was also high (80%), although there was more variation between the two age groups (YO: 87%; OO: 70%). The majority of women listed a child (55%) as the second person in circle one at both time points. Change in the four dimensions of functional social support (i.e., emotional, resource, reciprocal, negative) did not reveal age differences except with regard to negative social support; old-old women reported significantly less negative support ($p < .02$) at time two. For the majority of women (61-68%) perception of functional support did not reliably change (i.e., +/- 1 SEM) over the three years. Discussion will focus on prediction of stability and change in structural and functional support.

Introduction

Method

- As part of a larger protocol, women completed measures assessing their social support

- The structural and functional components of women's social networks were assessed during a baseline session as well as three years later

Social Support Measures

- Structural Support
  - Social network density and member relationships were assessed by the Social Support Diagram (Kahn & Antonucci,1980)

- Functional Support
  - Using 7-point Likert-items, women were asked to rate the total amount of emotional, resource, reciprocal, and negative support provided by primary and secondary network members

Structural Support

- Women could identify up to three network members in Circle 1, that is people that they could not live without
- The number of network members in Circles 2 and 3 were unlimited, and women listed other key people in their lives
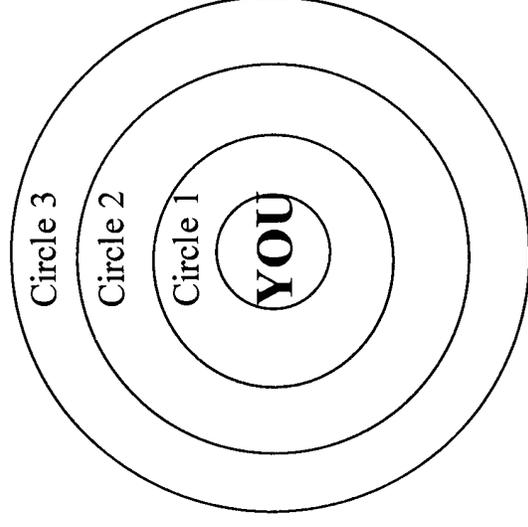
Functional Support

	Exemplars: *How likely is it that this person would…*
Emotional	…make you feel accepted? For example, let you know that he/she enjoys your company or invite you to do something with him/her?
Resource	…do something for you which you'd otherwise have to do for yourself, such as run an errand for you, pick up something at the store, or get your mail?
Negative	…criticize you?
Reciprocal	How likely is it that you would make sure that this person were cared for if they were sick?

Participant Characteristics
Time 1

	Young-Old N = 141	Old-Old N = 97
Age	M = 68.78 years SD = 3.57	M = 79.38 years SD = 6.28
Education	M = 11.40 years SD =	M = 11.39 years SD =
Marital Status	32% Married 63% Single/Widowed	13% Married 84% Single/Widowed
Income		
Self-reported Health	M = 1.99 SD = .80	M = 1.88 SD = .70
Life Satisfaction		

Research Questions

Within this short-term longitudinal sample of young-old and old-old women:

- How can the structural components of women's social networks be characterized?

- What are women's perceptions of the total amount of social support provided by the closest two network members?

- Are individual differences such as IADL functional ability and health status predictive of the stability of structural and functional network components?
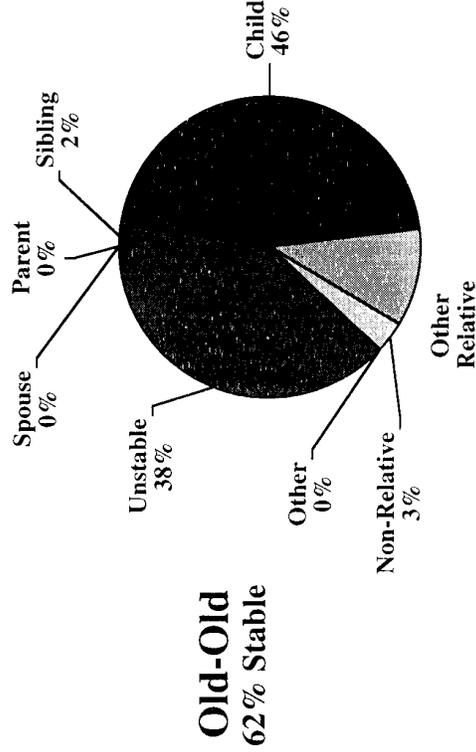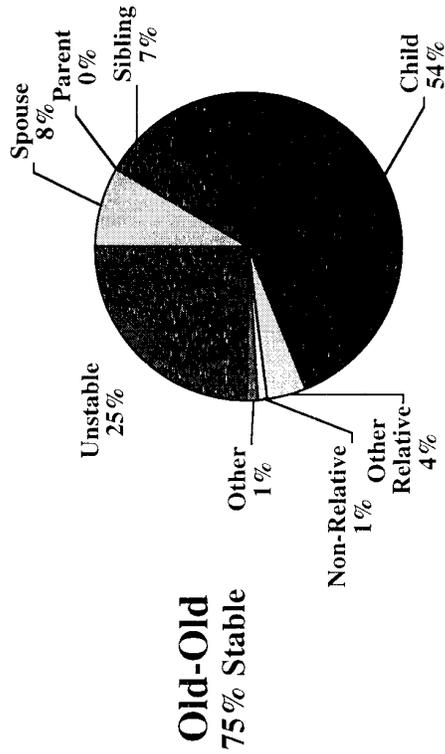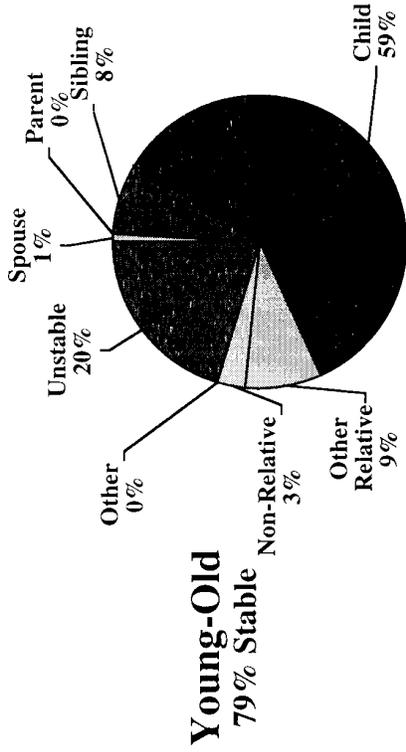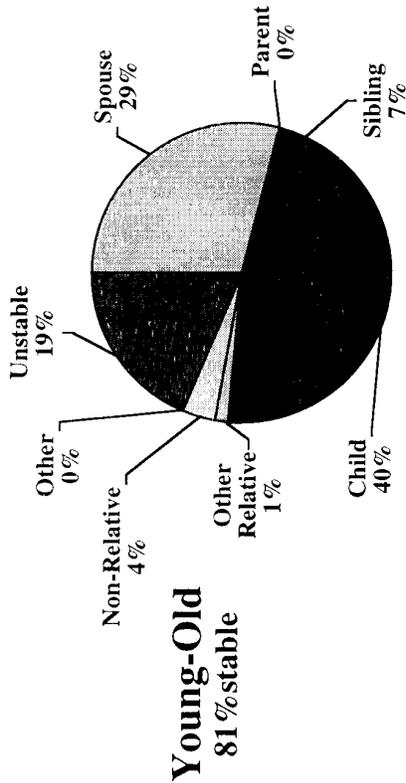
Structural Support

Network Size

	Young-Old Time 1	Old-Old Time 1	Young-Old Time 2	Old-Old Time 2
Circle 1	3.00	2.97	3.00	2.96
Circle 2	5.14	4.34	5.82	5.34
Circle 3	4.36	3.77	4.26	4.27
Total	12.50	11.10	13.09	12.57

- Young-old women reported significantly more total network members than older women at Time 1.

- For both young-old and old-old women, network density did not significantly change over the three-year period.

Network Member Relationships

Primary Network Members

Young-Old
81% stable

Spouse 29%
Parent 0%
Sibling 7%
Child 40%
Other Relative 1%
Other 0%
Non-Relative 4%
Unstable 19%

Old-Old
75% Stable

Spouse 8%
Parent 0%
Sibling 7%
Child 54%
Other Relative 4%
Other 1%
Non-Relative 1%
Unstable 25%

Secondary Network Members

Young-Old
79% Stable

Parent 0%
Sibling 8%
Spouse 1%
Child 59%
Other Relative 9%
Non-Relative 3%
Other 0%
Unstable 20%

Old-Old
62% Stable

Sibling 2%
Child 46%
Parent 0%
Other Relative
Spouse 0%
Non-Relative 3%
Other 0%
Unstable 38%

Primary and secondary network membership remained relatively stable.
Children were a main source of support for most women.

Functional Support
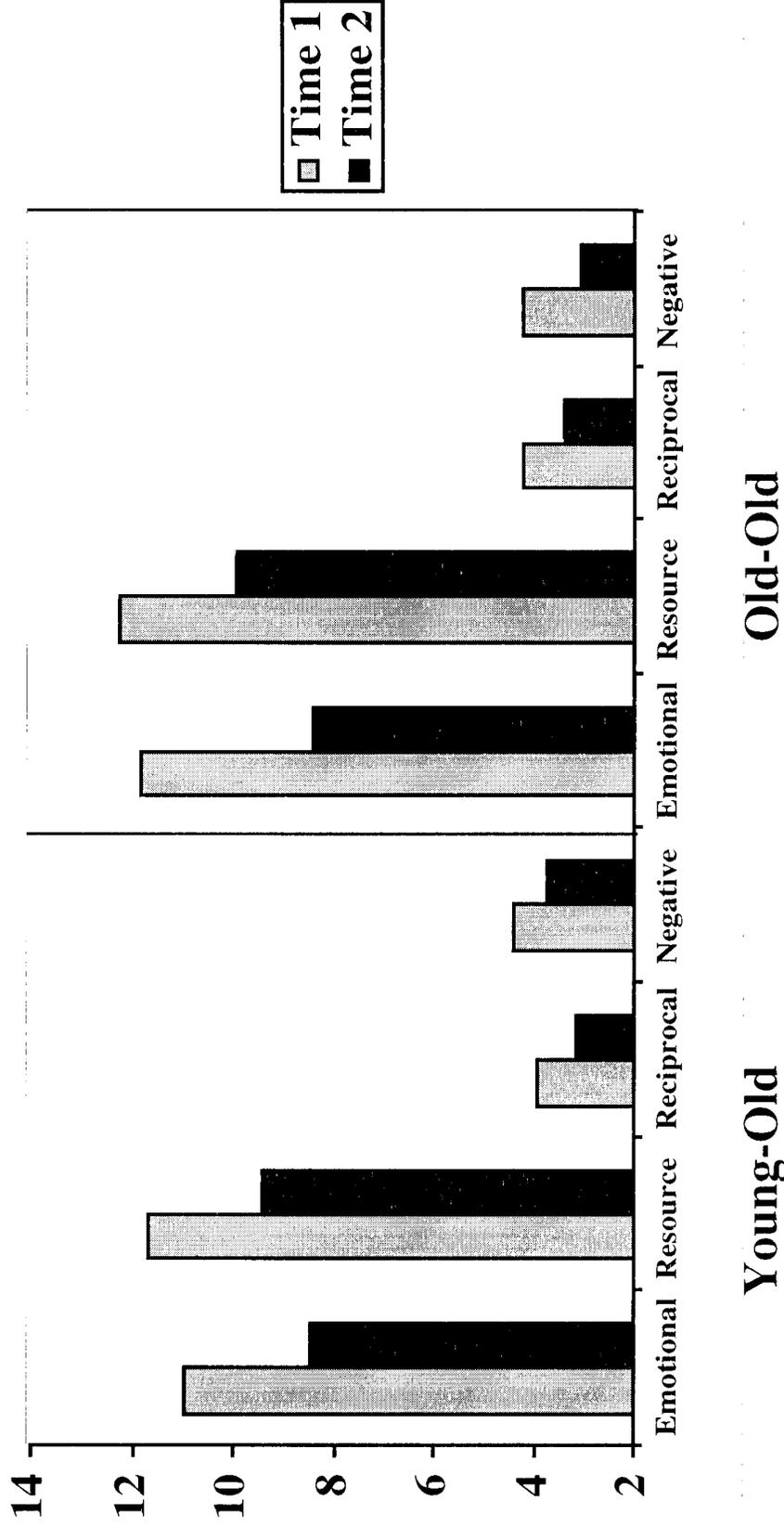
Perceived levels of social support generally did not differ between the young-old and old-old women, however, older women reported significantly less negative social support than young-old women at Time 2. Self-reported social support generally remained stable over the three-year period.

Predictors of Change in Structural Support

Discussion

- Children and other family members were largely identified as the women's primary and secondary social network members

- The relationships of primary and secondary network members were relatively stable over a three-year period

- Levels of perceived support were also stable and generally did not differ between young-old and old-old women, although older women reported less negative support at the second time point

- XX and XX were predictive of change in the structural and functional network components

Conclusions