Het meten van sociale steun
Sonderen, Frideric Lodewijk Petrus van
MEASURING SOCIAL SUPPORT

SUMMARY

This thesis reports the results of a study on the conceptualizing and operationalizing of the construct 'social support'.

Chapter 1 presents the central issue, which can be divided in the following three questions:
(1) What is understood by the construct 'social support' at a conceptual level, and how are the aspects covered by this construct related?
(2) How reliable and valid are the instruments used to measure the various aspects of social support?
(3) Are there any relationships between characteristics of the social network and other aspects of social support?

Chapter 2 deals with social support as a concept. First, an overview of definitions ascribed in literature to social support is given. The literature uses a great many conceptualizing terms, some of which are partly operationalizing. As a consequence, it is difficult to compare the results of different studies.

We decided to regard social support as an 'umbrella-concept', covering several related aspects. The following aspects are distinguished:
(1) the social network;
(2) supportive interactions;
(3) discrepancies in supportive interactions, and
(4) perceived supportiveness.
Each of these aspects is then elaborated. For the social network a description is given of the requirements someone has to meet in order to be regarded as a part of the social network. For interactions, discrepancies and perceived supportiveness, the emphasis is put on distinguishing dimensions of these aspects of social support.

The chapter concludes with a section in which the several aspects of social support are put into a feedback-model.

Chapter 3 describes the way in which the aspects of social support are operationalized. The three methods used in this study to delineate (parts of) the social network are discussed in detail. The methods are:
(1) the exchange-method, based on exchanges between the respondent and members of the social network;
(2) the role-relation-method, enquiring about the presence of certain types of relationships, such as with parents, brothers or neighbors, and
(3) the affective approach, which identifies those members of the social
network who are (very) important to the respondent. The exchange-method is the 'primary method', which means that it is used to identify as completely as possible 'the part of the network that is most relevant for support'.

More information is gathered about some of the network members identified by the three methods described above. This information concerns both the member of the network and the relationship between the respondent and that member. The supportiveness of specific relationships is also investigated.

Next we described how other aspects of social support are measured, namely interactions, discrepancies and perceived supportiveness. Each aspect is measured using an 'item-list' consisting of short questions and four response categories. Interactions and perceived supportiveness are also measured by means of 'vignette-lists'. These vignettes are very short descriptions of fictitious persons, who receive, or do not receive, support. The respondent is asked to compare her/his own situation with the one described by the vignette.

In chapter 4 the second and third research questions are elaborated. The reliability of the questionnaires used to delineate the social network is assessed by computing the overlap between network members mentioned in the first measurement round and network members mentioned at a retest, four weeks after the first measurement.

The reliability of the instruments used to measure other aspects of social support is assessed by two indicators: coefficient Rho, comparable to Cronbach's alpha, and the test-retest correlation.

The validity that is central in this study is construct-validity. The construct-validity of the various instruments is assessed by the following techniques:
- coherence between the items, and the degree in which the types of support are distinguishable, for all respondents as well as for specific groups of respondents;
- divergent and convergent validity;
- the similarity between the respondent's answer and the answer given by specific network members;
- the relation between the scores on the self-report questionnaires and an index for social support based on interview data;
- the relation between the scores on the self-report questionnaires and some questions asking specifically about support received or experienced;
- the relation between the scores on the self-report questionnaires and the score on a loneliness scale;
- the degree in which changes in social support can be predicted by life-events and changes in long-term difficulties, and finally
- (by means of a 'process-analysis') how the respondent reached decision for each support question.

In order to answer the third research question, concerning the relationship between characteristics of the social network and other aspects of social support, a selection is made of network member characteristics as well as characteristics of the relationship between this network member and the respondent. This selection was based on those characteristics indicated by the literature as relevant.

Chapter 5 explains the process of data gathering. First, the choice of certain types of respondents is discussed. Then the actual selection of respondents, and the non-response of this selection is described. After mentioning briefly how information was gathered, this chapter concludes with a description of some sample characteristics.

The results of the analyses are described in chapter 6 to 9. Chapter 6 deals with the delineation of the social network. The differences between the networks evoked by the three delineation methods can be explained by the differences in relational aspects focussed on by each method. The role-relation method emerged as the most reliable of the three methods. Because no comparative figures are available, it is not possible to make definitive statements on the reliability of these instruments.

Chapter 7 describes the development of instruments used to measure interactions, discrepancies and perceived supportiveness from the social network as a whole. Although items from the interaction-list and perception-list are related, we still developed separate instruments for each of these aspects. The dimensions of support, presumed a-priori from the instruments measuring interactions and perceived supportiveness, were not encountered empirically. Principal component analysis is used to distinguish 'subdimensions' of support for interactions, discrepancies and perceived supportiveness. The term 'subdimensions' is used because of the interrelationships of the items. An exception is made for negative interactions because these items measure a different dimension.

For each aspect of social support, and for each subdimension, the scalability of the items is assessed by means of a Mokken Scale analysis for Polychotomous items. Because the items measuring discrepancies are the same as the ones measuring interactions (except for the answer-categories), we were looking for interaction and discrepancy-scales consisting of the same items.
Three general scales are constructed to measure interactions, discrepancies and perceived supportiveness. Six subscales for interactions and discrepancies were made, and four subscales for perceived supportiveness. Negative interactions are a separate instrument. Scale construction for vignettes is difficult because half of the vignettes are sent to the respondent before the interview, while the other half were left behind after the interview. This influences the scalability. The positive or negative formulation of the vignettes also influences the scalability. No subdimensions were distinguished (for the vignettes), but those measuring interactions were distinguished from those measuring perception. Finally, positive vignettes were distinguished from negative ones.

The reliability of the scales, expressed by Rho, varies from sufficient to good. This holds also for the test-retest correlation except for the item-scales measuring negative interactions or perception.

The analyses assessing validity point to the following:
- the quality of some interaction-scales, especially the scales measuring instrumental support and social companionship, seems to be poorer for older respondents;
- the correlation between vignette-scales and item-scales shows that all vignette-scales measure perceived supportiveness rather than interactions;
- the coherence between answers from respondents and from specific network members was as expected;
- the correlation between scale-scores and specific questions on experienced support is in accordance with the expectations. This holds also for differences, between interactions, discrepancies and perception, in size of the correlations with the specific questions;
- the correlation between the scale-scores and loneliness is high and, in accordance with expectations, for discrepancy and perception-scales higher than for interaction-scales;
- when disturbance factors are taken into account, it can be concluded that it is possible in many cases to predict changes in aspects of social support, based upon the life-events or changes in long-term difficulties;
- the process-analysis reveals that, for most of the questions examined, one or more aspects are not completely understood by the respondent. In most of these cases however, the respondent's misinterpretation does not lead to a different answer. It is not possible to compare the process-analysis of the support items with an analysis of items from other instruments.

Chapter 8 deals with the instruments which measure aspects of social support for members of the social network separately. This chapter has the same structure as chapter 7. Two scales are developed, one interaction-scale
and one perception-scale. Both are reliable. The validity of these two instruments is only assessed where they measure support from separate network members and as such contribute extra information. The interaction-scale and perception-scale are related to scores based on an interview with the respondent in which the supportiveness of the three most important network members is discussed. Next, differences in scale-scores on a short five-item list between the first and second measurement round are related to questions concerning the appraisal of the network member by the respondent.

In chapter 9 the third research question is discussed concerning the relation between characteristics of the social network and other aspects of social support. Only indicators based on the size of (a part of) the social network appear to be correlated to positive interactions, discrepancies and perceived supportiveness. Results show that not only the network size but also the diversity of exchanges within the relationship are related to the amount of positive interactions and extent of perceived supportiveness. Finally the relationship between each of the questions of the exchange-instrument and the other aspects of social support is investigated.

In chapter 10 we look back to decisions and problems characteristic of this study. Furthermore, attention is paid to the utility of the instruments, and to topics for future research.
Chapter 3 deals with the instruments which measure aspects of social support for members of the social network separately. This chapter has the same structure as chapter 2. Two scales are developed, one interaction-scale...