

## **Social Support Interventions and the Third Law of Ecology**

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*Most of what we know about the effectiveness of social support is based on field studies of naturalistic relationships and transactions. Social support interventions, particularly those that attempt to create new support providers, stretch the limits of our knowledge base. The article by Heller et al. (1991) highlights gaps in our knowledge, suggests the importance of intimacy in support exchanges, and identifies possible limitations in trying to compensate for deficiencies in family support with new friendships.*

After a decade of intense research on social support concepts, some investigators turned to the question of how social support might be manipulated in interventions that are designed to improve the human condition or prevent distress. The study by Heller, Thompson, Trueba, Hogg, & Vlachos-Weber (1991) was an evaluation of just such an intervention that paired elderly women with telephone partners in an attempt to alleviate poor morale, loneliness, and depression. Despite numerous sensitivities to the substance of the intervention, the needs of elderly women, and the methodological rigor of evaluation, the intervention did not demonstrate effectiveness in boosting perceived support from friendships or improving participants' well-being.

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In their community psychology text, Heller and Monahan (1977) illustrated ecological principles with references to Barry Commoner's (1968) four Laws of Ecology. Commoner's Third Law was "Nature knows best." Heller and Monahan explained that "the assertion that nature knows best leads one to exercise caution whenever a 'planned intervention' is attempted" (p. 165). The caution of interfering with Nature stems from two dangers: (a) interventions can sometimes disrupt the natural order to cause unforeseen and undesirable consequences, and (b) interventions that attempt to mimic naturally occurring processes can miss elements that are essential for their effectiveness. My comments center on this second aspect of the Third Law of Ecology and its potential relevance for understanding the social support intervention effects described by Heller et al. (1991).

In the crudest of typologies, social support interventions could be divided into two categories: (a) those that modify or mobilize the existing social support network, and (b) those that create new support providers (see Gottlieb, 1988; and Vaux, 1989, for more refined analyses). Heller et al.'s intervention was an example of the latter category. Their study resensitized me to the fact that much of our current knowledge on the effectiveness of social support is not relevant for interventions that add a novel person to one's social network. It also was apparent that Heller et al. were well aware of this observation. They opened their article by noting the promise of results from field-based research on naturalistic social support and then contrasted it with the failures and limited successes of intervention trials that attempted to manipulate social support. In doing so they drew attention to the gap between a knowledge base that is grounded in the natural social environment and interventions that seek to create new social resources to compensate for the inadequacies of the natural ecology. The specific issue that emerges from their research—how might we understand the failure of a social support intervention—is timely in that such interventions are being developed and evaluated in significant numbers (Gottlieb, 1988; Vaux, 1989). The issue is timeless in that it is part of the large and omnipresent problem of translating "basic" (nonintervention) research into intervention activities.

## **TWO CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS**

The authors should be credited with drawing attention to two critical features of their results. The first observation was that the intervention was not successful in improving perceived friend support. They noted, for example, that the intervention did not increase perceived friend support and that partners who participated in the telephone contacts were not likely to be identified as close friends during follow-up assessments. In their critical

self-evaluation they surmised that the intervention might have been too weak to influence the outcome measures, perhaps because these new supportive relationships had been developed through telephone contacts.

For the most part, research that invokes the social support construct is a poor source of information on how a stranger (i.e., a new telephone partner) becomes recognized as a legitimate part of the natural social support network. Most of the social support research is directed at understanding the impact of naturalistic, intimate social ties on psychological well-being and health rather than on the formation and mobilization of social support (Barrera, 1986).<sup>2</sup> What are the important considerations in transforming “artificial” supporters to bona fide friends and intimates? There might be a well-developed literature that could inform intervention procedures, but I (perhaps like other social support researchers) have not mastered it. Research on perceived similarity and friendship formation, a literature that Heller et al. consulted, is an example of an area that is likely to be a more appropriate source of data and ideas than extant research on social support.

Do relationships built exclusively on telephone contacts provide a sufficient context for effective support provision? There are not extensive data on this specific point, but I was reminded of some research by the sociologist and social network analyst Barry Wellman (Wellman et al., 1973). In his study of over 800 adult residents of East York (Toronto) he found that the “intimacy” of a social tie predicted whether or not that social tie was considered a support provider. Furthermore, the frequency of contact with an intimate was positively related to his or her identification as a support provider. Wellman et al. (1973) noted that “although some intimate supporters maintained contact only by telephone or letter, for the most part the provision of support usually requires some face-to-face contact between an individual and his intimates” (p. 162). Heller et al. were attracted to an intervention that used telephone contacts because the accessibility of phones would allow participation even by those women with physical disabilities or transportation problems. It might still be possible to structure a social support intervention around contacts that are not face-to-face, but it appears that other procedures are necessary for establishing greater intimacy between dyad members before supportive exchanges could be expected to have much of an effect. Reis’ (1990) compelling review of support and intimacy suggests that support interventions are more likely to be effective if they provide for the development of intimacy between support providers.

<sup>2</sup>This gap in the literature is being closed by researchers who are investigating the development of social support and its mobilization. A forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, edited by Stevan Hobfoll, is devoted completely to this topic.

Because much of what we know about social support is based on naturally occurring transactions between intimates, other literatures must serve as the foundation for those social support interventions that involve the creation of new supportive relationships. Questions of how intimacy develops in new relationships and whether intimacy is necessary for the effective provision of nonprofessional social support are among the questions that might be addressed by future research.

Heller et al.'s second valuable observation was that even if the intervention had improved friend support, it might not have had the desired influence on loneliness, depression, and morale. Prior to the intervention, family support was significantly related to all outcome variables, but perceived friend support was unrelated to loneliness and morale and only weakly related to depression. This prompted the authors to question if they had selected the wrong intervention because they had sought to change friend rather than family support.

The lack of effects for friend support led me to recall Weiss' (1973) discussion of social support functions and the specific provisions of certain relationship types. According to his analysis, disruptions in certain relationships (e.g., divorce) create voids that cannot be filled by the addition of dissimilar relationships. In his chapter entitled "Materials for a Theory of Social Relationships," Weiss commented on the role of friends and support group members in adults' adjustment to divorce:

The interesting question was whether these friendships . . . would compensate for the absence of marriage, at least in relation to loneliness. On this point our findings were unequivocal: they did not. Members remained lonely; friends and activities, perhaps particularly discussion groups, helped in that they made the loneliness easier to manage, but they did not end it, or even appreciably diminish it. (p. 106)

Weiss' conclusions have some discouraging implications. They suggest that there might be constraints on the ability of certain supporters to fulfill the social needs that are created by the loss or dysfunction of specific relationships. Is it impossible for close friends to provide support that will compensate for elderly women's loss of adult children through geographic relocation, marriage, or family upheaval? If this is the case, social support interventions that involve adding a new supporter will have a very narrow role in prevalent transition events such as divorce, bereavement, and other family separations.

Alternatively, the different pattern of correlations for friend and family support might have been a reflection of quantitative differences in degrees of intimacy rather than qualitative differences between family and friend support. It is still possible that outcome variables were correlated with family support primarily because of the greater intimacy of these ties compared to elderly women's friendships. Heller et al.'s study did not in-

clude data on the intimacy of family and friend relationships to evaluate the plausibility of this explanation.

### POSITIVE FEATURES

It is important not to lose sight of the valuable aspects of the intervention that are worth emulating in future intervention trials. First, the authors identified a group that was lacking social support rather than attempting to increase the support of those who were already receiving sufficient amounts. Second, they measured mediating variables (perceived family and friend support) that were useful for interpreting the mechanism for change or the failure of the intervention. Third, the intervention was selected because it could be sustained without extensive professional involvement. Fourth, the researchers did not disappear after the intervention phase because they were sensitive to potential adverse consequences of abruptly terminating interventions. Finally, they recognized the reciprocal nature of social support and the possibility that participants would benefit through the act of providing support as well as receiving it. Intuitively, the give-and-take of social support that is captured by the helper-therapy principle (Reissman, 1976) would be a concrete method for building intimacy and, therefore, a potentially valuable component to other social support treatments.

### CONCLUSIONS

Heller et al.'s research should signal caution, but should not discourage the development of other social support interventions. For interventions that create new supportive relationships, greater attention should be devoted to the creation of intimacy prior to evaluating the effects of supportive exchanges. The design of such interventions will gain direction from the literature on friendship formation and other research that is directly concerned with the cultivation of confidantes from acquaintances. There are other support interventions that rely on mobilizing existing supportive ties, decreasing conflict, or increasing the quality of support between intimate ties. The basis for these interventions is more firmly rooted in the field research that has contributed most heavily to the perception that social support makes effective contributions to health and well-being. There is value in laying the groundwork for interventions by conducting field research that identifies social support correlates of the desired outcomes for the specific populations that will be the focus of the intervention. These are steps that reflect a deep respect for the principle that "Nature knows best."

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