

Personal networks in community-dwelling older adults 2018-2019 (ancillary study)

Author: Lea Ellwardt, University of Cologne, Germany

Background

In the LASA main interview, a module for network delineation was employed to capture the participants' personal relationships, i.e., their [personal network](#). This ancillary study collected additional information on the relationships with network members, together with perceptual data on the relationships between the network members. It follows up on a maximum of five generated network members (i.e., alters) that a participant (i.e., ego) named in the main interview. The resulting variables on alter-alter ties resemble ego's cognitive social structures (Krackhardt 1987). The ancillary study ended with a number of scales on how respondents perceive social aspects of their neighborhood. This ancillary study was approved by the medical ethics committee of the Amsterdam UMC, location Vumc, as part of the broader LASA assessment by the committee.

Study design

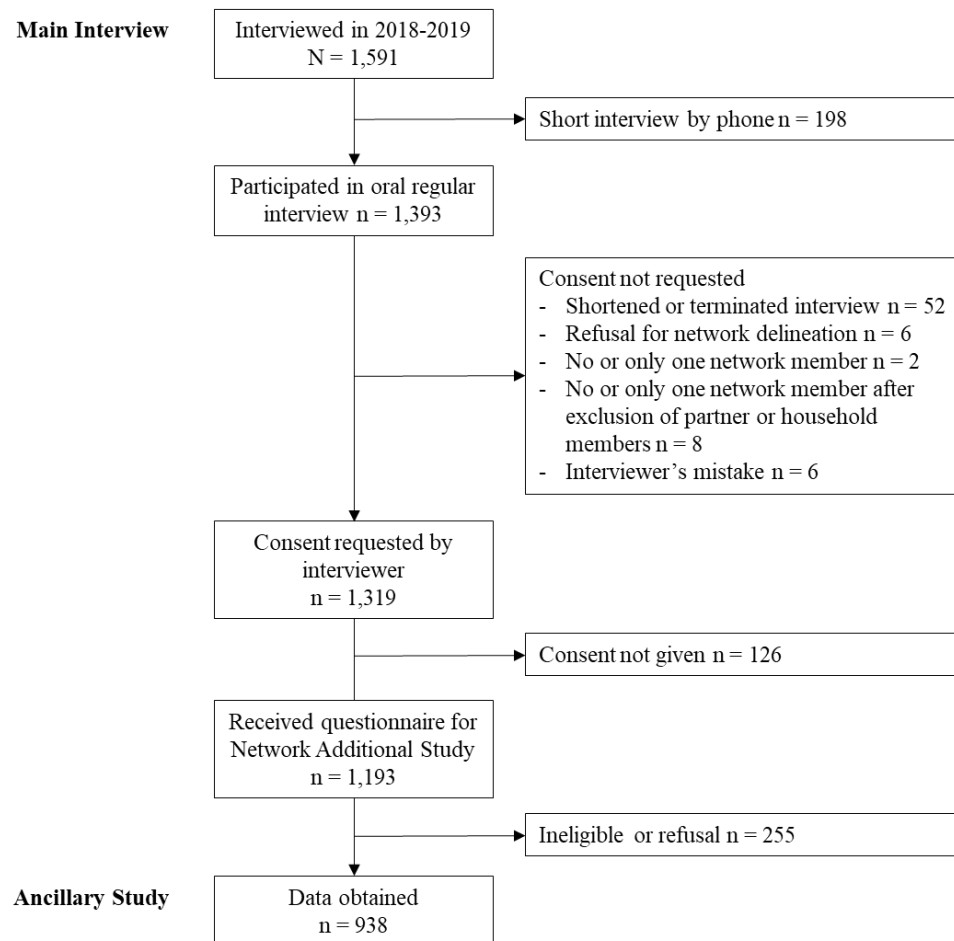
At the end of the LASA main interview (years 2018-2019), study participants were asked whether they would be interested in receiving an invitation to any of the upcoming additional studies. This ancillary was announced with this statement: "We would like to send you a questionnaire in a month or two. The questions will be about a few people (maximum five) you mentioned in the questions about the people with whom you have important and frequent contact. We are especially interested in whether people in your network know each other and how you perceive the quality of their contact with each other."

Eligibility to an invitation was granted to participants who had completed the network module in the main interview and generated at least two names (otherwise, assessing relationships between alters was not feasible) other than the partner and household members. Approximately one month after the completion of the main interview, participants were mailed a personalized paper-and-pencil questionnaire that listed their generated names. A maximum of five names was handled, as done previously in the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP Network Roster A on core confidants; Cornwell et al. 2014). This was to reduce the response burden, limit early termination of answering the postal questionnaire, and fit all answers to a network question onto one page in large font size. Names were selected based on the highest contact frequency, excluding partners and household members (5% in total) for whom daily contact was assumed. In cases where contact frequency was equally high for more than five contacts, names were selected randomly.

The questionnaire started with a listing of all names (first name and first letter of the last name) together with the relationship type to eliminate confusion about name duplicates, e.g., Jan B (cousin) and Jan B (neighbor). Relationships between alters were assessed by listing all possible pairwise combinations (e.g., Person A and Person B, Person A and Person C, ..., Person D and Person E). The minimum was one pair for two names, and the maximum was ten pairs for five names.

Participants

The vast majority of eligible participants (N=1,193; 86%) agreed to receive an invitation to this ancillary study, out of which n=938 participants (79%) returned a completed questionnaire. Nearly all participants received a questionnaire with five selected alters (M=4.9, SD=0.4) and were invited to rate the maximum of ten relationships between alters.



Data Collected

Contact with specific network members

Contact mode: Respondents rated their mode of contact with the network members extracted from the main interview: "How do you mainly maintain contact: do you meet each other, or do you have contact via telephone or internet (e.g. email, WhatsApp)?" Possible answers on a five-point Likert scale included almost always meeting, mostly meeting, a balanced mix of both, mostly via telephone or internet, almost always via telephone or internet.

Relationship quality: Respondents rated their overall relationship quality with these network members. The question reads, “Please indicate whether you think you have a good or a difficult relationship with these persons,” followed by answers on a five-point Likert scale from very difficult, difficult, both difficult and good, good, to very good.

Relationship aspects: Respondents further rated five aspects of their relationship with these network members. All items were adapted and modified from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS; Fisher and Ryan 2018) that originally asks questions about the contact with the study participants’ relationship with their partner or spouse. The introduction reads, “In most relationships there are nice things, but sometimes there is also criticism. For each of the following statements, would you please indicate to what extent you agree with the statement?” Five statements could be rated: “I do fun things with this person. I can count on this person when I have a problem. This person sometimes criticizes me. I can confide in this person if I want to talk about my concerns. This person is (sometimes) too demanding with me. I mainly meet with this person alone, without other people present.” Answer categories on a five-point Likert scale included strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

Contact between friends and family

Two items assessed the participant’s general perception of connectivity within their network. These items did not list names from networks members from the main interview but asked about the contacts among the social circles of friends and family in general.

Contact among friends only: The first question reads, “We will start with some general questions. To what extent do your friends know each other personally?” Answers included hardly anyone knows each other, some friends know each other, around half know each other, most friends know each other, almost everyone knows each other, not applicable.

Contact among friends and family: The second question reads, “To what extent do your family members and friends know each other personally?” Answers included hardly anyone knows each other, some know each other, around half know each other, most friends know each other, almost everyone knows each other, not applicable.

Contact between specific network members

Contact frequency: Respondents rated the contact frequency between network members extracted from the main interview. The question reads, “Please indicate whether these persons know each other. If so, how often do you think these people have contact with each other? This contact can be a meeting, or by telephone, or via the internet (e.g. via email, WhatsApp).” Answer categories were identical to the question on the respondents’ own contact with their network members (choice of answers in main interview: never, once a year or less, few times a year, once a month, once a fortnight, once a week, few times a week, each day) and included the additional options “they don’t know each other” and “I don’t know”.

Relationship quality: Respondents rated the relationship valence between network members extracted from the main interview: “Please indicate whether you think these people have a good or difficult relationship with each other. This is your estimate. If two people don’t know each other, move on to the next pair.” Answer categories were identical to the question on the respondents’ own contact with their network members (see above: very difficult, difficult, both difficult and good, good, to very good) and included the additional option “I don’t know”.

Neighborhood social context scales

Several scales on perceptions regarding the social context of the respondent's neighborhood were adapted from the second wave of the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP; York Cornwell and Cagney 2014). The introduction reads, "Finally, we are interested in your opinion about your living environment. By this we mean your local area – meaning anything within a 15-minute walk or one kilometer of your home." This introduction was modified from one mile to one kilometer and from 20 to 15 minutes, because walkable distances in Dutch neighborhoods are typically shorter than in U.S. neighborhoods.

Neighborhood social ties: This scale asked three questions (item response categories: never, rarely, sometimes, often): "How often do you and people in this area visit in each other's homes or when you meet on the street? How often do you and other people in this area do favors for each other? How often do you and other people in this area ask each other for advice about personal things?"

Neighborhood social cohesion: This scale included a rating of the following five statements (item response categories: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree): "This is a close-knit area. People around here are willing to help their neighbors. People in this area generally don't get along with each other. People in this area don't share the same values. People in this area can be trusted."

Perceived neighborhood danger: This scale included a rating of the following three statements (item response categories: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree): "Many people in this area are afraid to go out at night. There are places in this area where everyone knows 'trouble' is expected. You're taking a big chance if you walk in this area alone after dark."

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