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For everything a season? A month-by-month analysis of social network resources in later life[☆]

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ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that informal social ties provide older persons with many resources that serve to protect and improve their levels of health and well-being. Most studies on this topic, however, ignore the month or season of the year during which data was accumulated. This study proposes two hypotheses to explain seniors' social network resources over the calendar year: the "fluctuation hypothesis", which proposes that seasonal variation, in the form of weather fluctuations, institutional calendars, and holidays, might influence the social lives and resources of older persons, and the "network stability" perspective, which, informed by tenets of convoy theory and socioemotional selectivity theory, emphasizes the increasing importance of close network ties as individuals age and the stability of these ties. Using two waves (2005–2006 and 2010–2011) of the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), a nationally representative sample of community-dwelling older adults aged 57–85 in the United States, we examine a diverse set of nine social connectedness outcomes. Results, overall, support the network stability perspective, as the only social connectedness outcome found to significantly vary by month of year was average closeness with network members. We conclude by suggesting some methodological considerations for survey research and by noting how these findings complement the growing literature on inter-year fluctuation in social networks and social support. Changes in older adults' networks, while frequently observable over the course of years, do not seem to be seasonally patterned.

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1. Introduction

Social networks convey many of the resources that protect and enhance older adults' health and well-being (van Tilburg and Thomese, 2010) and function as a key resource over the life course to influence the exchange of supports (Ajrouch et al.,

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2005). A large body of research has illustrated that older adults embedded in strong social networks are less likely than their isolated peers to experience cognitive decline (Barnes et al., 2004), and more likely to report better physical and mental health (Cornwell and Waite, 2009). The ability to maintain social connections that could provide valuable social support is also viewed as a key marker of “successful aging” (Rowe and Kahn, 1998).

From prior work, scholars are well-attuned to the fact that personal relationships are not static entities and that the composition and function of people's social networks often change (Degenne and Lebeaux, 2005; McPherson et al., 2006; Wellman et al., 1997). There has been great variation in the methodologies used to examine these shifts. Some studies have assessed historical change in core network size over several decades with repeated cross-sectional data (McPherson et al., 2006), while others have examined within-person change over shorter periods of time (Mollenhorst et al., 2014; Degenne and Lebeaux, 2005). The majority of research examining within-person network change in later life addresses how social networks are shaped by key life course transitions and changes, including those of widowhood (Cornwell et al., 2008; Hatch and Bulcroft, 1992), retirement (Cornwell and Laumann, 2011), and geographic mobility (Stacey-Konnert and Pynoos, 1992; Walters and Bartlett, 2009). Finally, some research on older adults has examined highly granular fluctuation in social network interaction, using time usage data to examine how social contact differs throughout the week (Cornwell, 2011; Marcum, 2012) or during different times of the day (Baltes et al., 1990). While this body of literature has effectively drawn attention to the importance of considering social time and network change in scales spanning hours to decades, little attention has been given to the more middle-range dynamics of *month-to-month* or *seasonal variation*.

Our focus on seasonal variation in social network resources grounds our analysis in a classic sociological insight, namely that “[t]he rhythm of social life seems to reproduce the calendar's divisions” (Durkheim, 1897/1951:119). Following Lewis and Weigert (1981:439), we consider seasonality as “a sequence of whole blocks of time which contain partially predictable and broadly recurring sets of meaningful events.” Significant changes that accompany seasonal flow could have key implications for social network resources. For instance, warmer weather conditions facilitate seasonally-based social activity, such as summertime block parties or community get-togethers, time spent socializing with others in public places (Garvin et al., 2012), and longer evenings spent with family (Crouter and McHale, 1993). Each season is also characterized by holidays that could also facilitate time spent with network members, re-ignite family and friendship relations, and promote social support provision.

The flip side of this coming together is the seasonal patterning of social isolation and risk. Extreme temperatures (hot or cold) can be direct sources of stress for elderly individuals, contribute to health declines (Worfolk, 2000), and increase the risk of mortality (Klinenberg, 2002). During warm spells of the summer, urban seniors may seek refuge in their homes and avoid venturing out into the heat (Klinenberg, 2002). Icy winter conditions also pose a barrier to daily activity and social engagement (Clarke et al., 2015). What is more, seasonally-patterned risk may be disproportionately experienced by vulnerable populations. Klinenberg (2003), for instance, documents that the Chicago heat wave had the most devastating effects for older adults living alone. The most vulnerable seniors in greater need of assistance from network members during times of weather-related stress may be those whose networks do not convey readily accessible help, thus widening the disparities they face.

Finally, exploring potential seasonal variation in network resources can provide insights into current practices in social survey methodology. Most ego-centric network protocols—including some of the instruments used in the present study—specifically ask respondents about their “typical” scenario, inferring that there is some seasonally-invariant baseline to which their responses should be aligned. Pronounced seasonal fluctuation in these selected measures would raise the possibility that modifiable contextual cues have an outsized influence on social connectedness, perhaps distorting the picture of people's “usual” social lives. Researchers using ego-centric network modules, in particular, recognize how survey design features can shape subjects' responses to network roster questions (Marin, 2004; Marin and Hampton, 2007). A factor such as time of year could introduce another form of “noise” to network-related measures; people may be primed to take a short-term view rather than considering the full month-by-month picture and aggregating across the peaks and valleys of their yearly experience when providing network-related data. A scenario of seasonal variability could indicate *either* substantive dynamism in people's pool of network resources *or* methodological biases depending on when (i.e., which month) during the year respondents were surveyed. Finding seasonal stability, on the other hand, could imply that certain aspects of people's networks do not waver from month to month, or that respondents tend to gloss over the more short-term variations across months of the year and report what is typical within their social lives. In our discussion, we reflect on our findings' implications for social survey methodology.

In summary, the purpose of this study is to determine whether the social network resources of older adults appear to be stable year round, or whether they vary according to a seasonal pattern. We do so through an examination of multiple aspects of an individual's network using two waves of data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP).

2. Fluctuation or stability in network resources?

Existing theory and research offers contrasting expectations about whether older adults' network resources are likely to shift through the course of a year. By ‘network resources,’ we refer to (1) structural aspects of people's core discussion networks; (2) qualities of those core networks; (3) social support received from within and/or beyond the core discussion network; and (4) bases of social connection that form the broader context of people's social networks. We first provide justification for expecting seasonal fluctuation in this range of network resources. In general, the fluctuation hypothesis

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