The Role of Social Networks in Helping Adults Cope with the Loss of a Sibling

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Abstract

The current study uses a personal network approach to examine the social ties of 20 adults who have experienced the death of a sibling over the past one and five years. The network approach provides detailed information about the perceived structure of adults' networks (quantity and role of network ties) and the functional aspects of network ties (types of support and conflict related to sibling's death) that may be related to adults' reports of coping and psychological adjustment to the loss. Implications for future research and interventions are discussed.

Background

Adult Sibling Relationships and Bereavement
- Adult sibling relationships are generally characterized as affectionate and supportive.
- Adult sibling relationships tend to remain stable through life course transitions.
- Grief over the death of a sibling is difficult and the social systems surrounding siblings often do not respond to the loss.

Social Support
- Community psychologists have had a long standing interest in the role of the social network ties in helping individuals cope with difficult life circumstances.
- Social support refers to "a social network's provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual's ability to cope with stress."
- Supportive relationships with others play a significant role in limiting distress related to the death of a family member.

Network Analyses
- Most studies assessed social support using dichotomous questions or questions on a Likert scale.
- A network approach allows researchers to analyze the various types of social support an individual receives from the different members of their social network.

Methods

Network analyses will be conducted on 20 adults between the ages of 18 and 25 who have experienced the death of a sibling in the previous 1-5 years. Participants are recruited from a Midwestern university through various calls to participate, including emails, the daily campus update, and Facebook. Participants are invited to complete a semi-structured interview that lasts approximately 1 hour.

Network components assessed:
1. Identification of network ties
    - Significant members of the participants' social network
2. Identification of social role of each network tie (family, friend, etc.)
3. Assess type of social support provided by each network tie
4. Assess reciprocal provision of support, negative interactions, interpersonal closeness, and frequency of contact for each network tie

Methods

Network analyses produce three types of variables:
- Structural
    - the total number of significant ties, as well as the number of ties for an ascribed role (family, friend, etc.)
- Content
    - the characteristics of the dyadic relationship, such as proximity, emotional closeness, and frequency of contact.
- Functional
    - social exchange and the functional role of the network

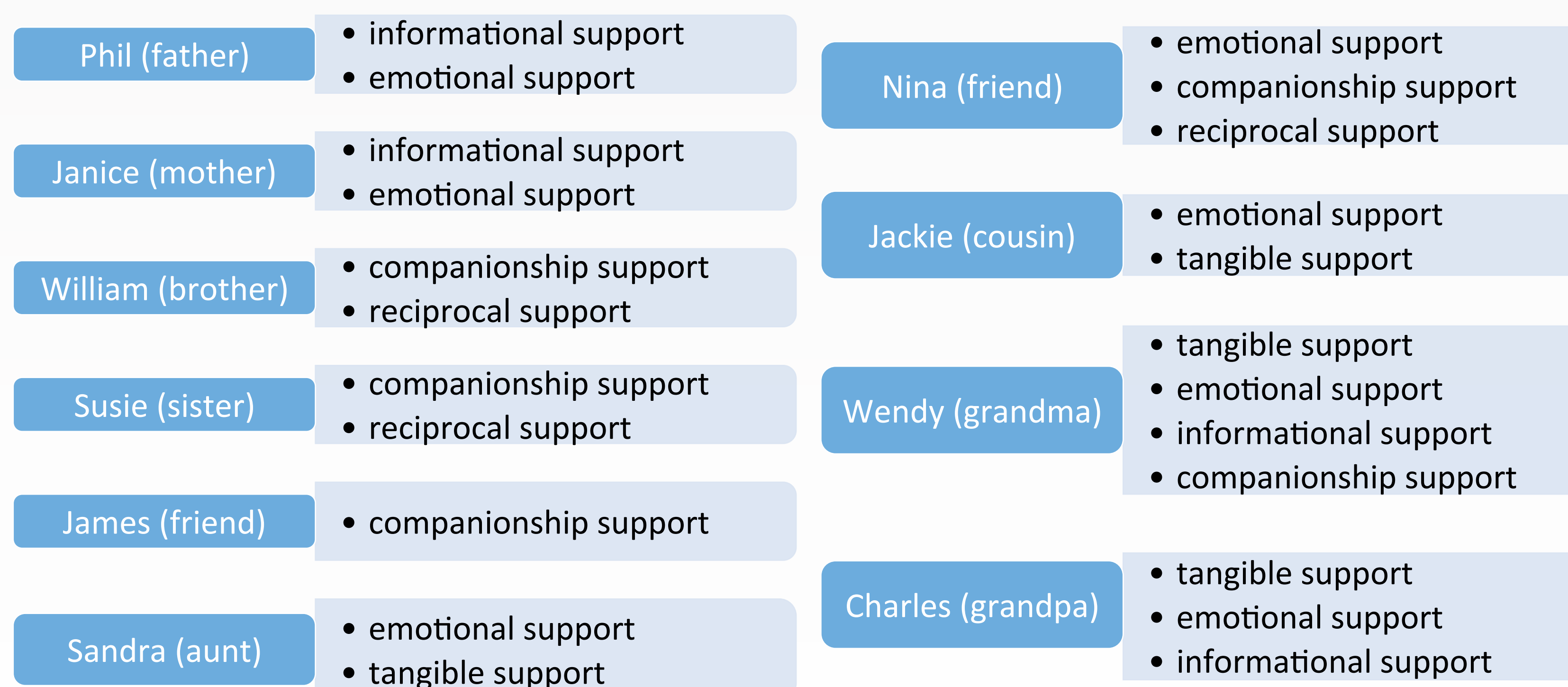Participants will also complete four self-report measures:
- Center of Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale-Revised (CESD-R)
    - Measures depression symptoms defined by the DSM-V for a depressive episode
- Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG)
    - Measures maladaptive symptoms of loss
- Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI)
    - Measures positive outcomes reported by persons who have experienced a trauma
- World Health Organization Quality of Life assessment- Brief (WHOQOL-BREF)
    - Measures an individual's perceptions of his or her own quality of life

Data collection for the current study is underway. Steps for data analysis include:
1. Scores on each network variable (structure, content, function) for each of the 20 participants are calculated;
2. Scores on network variables are aggregated across the sample;
3. Scores on measures of bereavement (depression and complicated grief) and growth (PTG and quality of life) are calculated for the sample;
4. Relationships between network structure and content (quantity and size of the network ties) and network function (social exchange between network ties) are statistically examined to describe factors related to participants' reports of bereavement and personal growth.

Network Example

Jon (pseudonym) is a 19-year-old man who lost his brother when Jon was 13. Jon's brother died from cancer after battling the illness for four years. Jon described his network and supportive ties as follows:

Phil (father)	• informational support • emotional support
Janice (mother)	• informational support • emotional support
William (brother)	• companionship support • reciprocal support
Susie (sister)	• companionship support • reciprocal support
James (friend)	• companionship support
Sandra (aunt)	• emotional support • tangible support

Nina (friend)	• emotional support • companionship support • reciprocal support
Jackie (cousin)	• emotional support • tangible support
Wendy (grandma)	• tangible support • emotional support • informational support • companionship support
Charles (grandpa)	• tangible support • emotional support • informational support

Network Example

Summary of Jon's Perceived Network:
- Structural (quantity and role of the network ties)
    - Total network size: 10
    - Family network size: 8
    - Friend network size: 2
- Functional (social exchange between network ties)
    - Emotional support network size (function): 7
    - Tangible support network: 4
    - Informational support network: 4
    - Companionship support network: 5
    - Negative interaction network: 0
    - Reciprocal support network: 3
- Grief and Growth Measure Scores:
    - Depression (CESD-R): 10 out of 80
    - Complicated Grief (ICG): 24 out of 95
    - Posttraumatic Growth (PTGI): 60 out of 105
    - Quality of Life (WHOQOL-BREF): 115 out of 130

Jon's network includes an average total number of network members (10) who comprise a majority of supportive ties. He perceives emotional support (7) and companionship support (5) from more network members than tangible support (4) and informational support (4). A total of 80% of Jon's network consists of supportive family members, who were also grieving the loss of Jon's sibling. Jon also reported providing support to three other network members and dealing with no negative interactions from network members. Both Jon's depression and complicated grief scores are in the nonclinical range. His score on posttraumatic growth and quality of life indicate that Jon reported a relatively large number of positive changes from the loss and currently reports functioning at a high level.

Implications

- Network studies can provide a nuanced description of network ties perceived as supportive and non-supportive in coping with the loss of a sibling.

- Network research can help to identify various configurations of network ties that are differentially related to individual coping with the loss of a sibling.

- Researchers would do well to assess aspects of both grief and positive meaning making in understanding coping with the death of a sibling.

- Findings may provide insights for intervention strategies that focus on perceived network supports rather than individual level strategies for coping with the death of a family member.