

Children's Network Orientations

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The present study was designed to determine the suitability of an existing network orientation measure for use with children and to investigate the implications of positive or negative network orientations for children. The Network Orientation Scale (Vaux, Burda, & Stewart, 1986) was adapted for use with children and used in a longitudinal study of 52 school-aged children and their mothers. Test-retest reliability of the scale was found to be acceptable, and internal consistency was found to be acceptable for children age 10 and older. Children's network orientations were not related to those of their mothers, although children in higher income families reported more positive network orientations than children in lower income families. Children's network orientations were also related both to the extensiveness of support received by the child and to the child's satisfaction with that support. Positive network orientations were associated with more internal locus of control and with greater self-esteem, but were not associated with mother-rated behavioral problems. Longitudinal analyses suggest that children's satisfaction with their networks may actually have a stronger effect on network orientation assessed some years later, rather than at the same point in time.

Social support from members of the social network has been shown to promote adaptation in children undergoing stressful experiences or simply the everyday vicissitudes that come with growth and development (Bryant, 1985; Rutter, 1979; Sandler, Miller, Short, & Wolchik, 1989). Yet, as Hobfoll and Freedy (1990) have noted recently, "Despite the wealth of studies on social support's contribution to stress resistance and well-being, there is precious little research concerning the factors that determine social support's availability or its effective use" (p. 91). Virtually no research examines these issues for children.

Tolsdorf (1976) coined the phrase "network orientation" to describe the individual's beliefs, attitudes, and expectations concerning the potential usefulness of network members in helping one cope with a life problem. He argued that even with potentially supportive network members available, individuals who had negative network orientations would fail to mobilize their networks and thus would forgo the supportive resources network members might have provided.

The authors are grateful to the William T. Grant Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health for research support, to the parents and children of the study for responding so thoughtfully to our questions over the course of the research, and to two anonymous reviewers for important suggestions. Reprint requests should be addressed to Deborah Belle, Department of Psychology, Boston University, 64 Cummington Street, Boston, MA 02215.

Eckenrode (1983) found in a study of urban mothers that positive beliefs in the usefulness of help-seeking were endorsed more often by younger women, by English-speaking versus Spanish-speaking women, and by those with higher incomes and more education. Women with more positive help-seeking beliefs tended to report a larger number of potential supporters and to mobilize more supporters in response to a life crisis. Colletta (1987) discovered that among adolescent mothers, positive network orientations were more common among those whose families of origin had positive attitudes toward seeking help from others, those with a personal history of success in gaining assistance, and those whose network members were not themselves highly stressed. Colletta found, however, that network orientation bore no relation to the frequency with which adolescent mothers reported actually seeking help in problem areas. Vaux et al. (1986) found that among student and adult community samples, network orientation was associated with the availability of specific supportive behaviors, as well as with perceived support, support mobilization, and trust. Research has also shown that positive network orientations are associated with internal locus of control and with high self-esteem (Colletta, 1987; Eckenrode, 1983).

More recently Hobfoll and Freedy (1990) have argued that individuals differ in the level of discomfort they experience in seeking support, a variable conceptually related to network orientation. These authors report that among women with seriously ill children, those who were more uncomfortable seeking support actually received less support and were more distressed about the child's illness than women who were more comfortable seeking aid.

Although research to date suggests that network orientation and related concepts such as Hobfoll and Freedy's "discomfort seeking support" are helpful in elucidating the support mobilization process, very few studies have examined these issues for children. Children differ from adults and among themselves, of course, in their access to potentially supportive figures within and outside the family. Children may also differ among themselves in their willingness to seek out and utilize supportive resources which are, in fact, available. Belle, Burr, and Cooney (1987) interviewed children using a hypothetical situation format, asking whether children in such situations would or would not confide their experiences in others and probing for children's reasons either for or against confiding. Their results suggest that children do differ in their predictions about potential costs and benefits from network involvement.

No previous research has studied network orientation longitudinally, although some researchers (Colletta, 1987; Tolsdorf, 1976) have analyzed retrospective data from respondents. Does network orientation predict a person's future network characteristics and adjustment, or is network orientation itself the product of earlier network characteristics and adjustment experiences? Could both longitudinal trajectories hold true?

The present study was designed to explore the concept of network orientation in children and to determine the suitability of an existing network orientation measure for use with children. Vaux et al.'s (1986) network orientation scale was adapted for use with school-aged children. Its internal consistency and short-term and long-term stability were assessed.

Associations between children's network orientations and characteristics of their support networks were assessed, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. It was also hypothesized that children who viewed others as potentially supportive in times of difficulty would feel more in control of their own lives, would feel better about themselves, would exhibit fewer behavior problems, and would experience less loneliness than children who viewed others around them as ineffectual or even counterproductive helpers.

Therefore, associations between network orientation and locus of control, self-esteem, loneliness, and behavior problems were examined. Longitudinal analyses were conducted to test whether network orientation at the start of the study predicted these adjustment variables at the end of the study, and whether the adjustment variables at the start of the study predicted network orientation at the end of the study.

Because previous research suggested that network orientation among adults varied with demographic characteristics such as income and education level (Eckenrode, 1983), such associations were assessed for the children in the present study. Also, because previous research found intergenerational continuity in network orientation, based on retrospective data (Colletta, 1987), associations between the network orientations of children and their mothers were also assessed.

Methods

Sample

All analyses except the test-retest reliability analysis were conducted on a study group of families followed over 4 years.

Longitudinal study group. Families from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds were recruited to participate in a longitudinal study of social support processes among children with employed parents. Research families were recruited from an urban community using a variety of methods, including the distribution of leaflets through the public schools, in-person recruitment at parents' meetings, and solicited referrals from community workers. At the start of the study, all parents were employed full-time. In two-parent families both parents were employed full-time, and in single-parent families the custodial parent was employed full-time.

Fifty-two elementary school children (30 girls and 22 boys) and their mothers participated in the study. At the start of the study the children ranged in age from 7 to 12 ($M = 9.673$, $SD = 1.517$), and 33 of the children came from single-parent households. Fifteen of the families were African American, 1 was Hispanic, 1 was Asian, and 35 families were non-Hispanic White. Six percent of families had annual incomes at the start of the study under \$10,000 per year, 60% had incomes in the \$10,000–30,000 range, 17% had incomes in the \$30,000–50,000 range, and 17% had family incomes over \$50,000. Mother's educational level ranged from some high school to completion of graduate degrees, with 62% of the mothers having completed college degrees at the start of the study.

Test-retest study group. A fourth-grade class from a predominantly White, lower-middle class suburban public school was recruited to assess test-retest reliability of a measure of network orientation. Sixteen children participated in this phase of the study.

Procedure

Longitudinal study group. Mothers and children were interviewed separately and privately at yearly intervals over a 4-year period. Families chose the location of interviews, most choosing to be interviewed in their homes. Informed consent was obtained from parents and children before interviews were begun each year, and families were paid \$50.00 each year for their research participation. Interviews generally lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Mothers read and responded to standardized measures on their own during the interview period. Standardized measures were generally read aloud to children and their answers recorded. However, older children who expressed an interest in reading and responding to questionnaires on their own were encouraged to do so.

Test-retest study group. The classroom teacher administered the network orientation measure during classroom time on two occasions separated by 5 days.

Measures

Network orientation was assessed using the Network Orientation Scale (NOS) (Vaux et al., 1986), a 20-item self-report questionnaire designed to operationalize Tolsdorf's network orientation concept. Items indicating negative network orientation include, "You can never trust people to keep a secret" and "Even if I need something, I would hesitate to borrow it from someone." Items indicating a positive network orientation include "Friends often have good advice to give" and "It's okay to ask favors of people." Items were responded to in a 4-point (1-4) agree-disagree format. The total NOS score is the sum of item scores, with a possible range of 20-80. Higher NOS scores indicate more *negative* network orientation.

Vaux et al. (1986) found the measure showed adequate to excellent internal consistency across five different samples of students and community adults. Test-retest reliability among non-college adults after 1 week was excellent. (Surprisingly, low test-retest reliability was obtained for a college sample, however.) Negative network orientations were associated with negative network characteristics (smaller, less complex, less reciprocal, less availability of specific types of support) and with perceived lack of support, thus establishing adequate criterion and construct validity.

Pilot testing with children led to minor word changes in three of Vaux's original 20 items to make them fully intelligible to the children who were interviewed.¹

Network characteristics were assessed using the Children's Inventory of Social Support (CISS) (Wolchik, Beals, & Sandler, 1989). In response to specific questions, children list all family and nonfamily members who provide each of five support functions: recreation/play, advice/information, goods/services, emotional support, and positive feedback. Children rate their satisfaction with each kind of support received from family and nonfamily members, and children rate their feelings about the quality of the time spent with each network member named. Children also list individuals who sometimes make them feel "angry, bad, or upset." Various visual prompts are used to remind children of possible support providers and to help them rate the nature of their feelings about these providers.

From data provided on the CISS, the following variables were scored for each child: number of people named as providing each of the following social support resources: recreation/play, advice/information, goods/services, emotional support, and positive feedback; number of types of support provided by mother; number of people who make the child feel angry, bad, or upset (negative network size); number of support providers who also sometimes make the child feel angry, bad, or upset (conflicted network size); total number of adults named as support providers; total number of children (under age 18) named as support providers; satisfaction with support received from family members (averaged over all five types of social support); satisfaction with support received from nonfamily members (averaged over all five types of social support); satisfaction

¹The wording changes in Vaux's Network Orientation Scale are as follows, with the new wording underlined and the original wording in parentheses:

In the past, I have been hurt by people I told secrets to (confided in).

If you tell secrets to (confide in) other people, they will use them against you (take advantage of you).

Even if I need something, I would not want (hesitate) to borrow it from someone.

with support received from family members for each type of social support; satisfaction with support received from nonfamily members for each type of social support; and rating of the quality of time spent with the mother.

Locus of control was assessed with the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973), which contains 40 questions to which the child answers either yes or no. The questions ask whether various interpersonal and achievement situations are within the control of the child or outside the child's control. Higher scores indicate a more external locus of control.

Coopersmith's *Self-Esteem Inventory* (Coopersmith, 1967) is a 25-item scale measuring evaluative attitudes toward the self in several domains. Items consist of short statements, to which children are asked to respond whether the description is "like me" or "unlike me." Higher scores indicate lower self-esteem.

The *Loneliness Scale* (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984) contains 16 primary items assessing children's feelings of loneliness, social adequacy, and subjective estimates of peer status in addition to 8 "filler" items concerning hobbies and activities, designed to encourage children to respond more comfortably to the questionnaire. Children are asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how much each statement is true for them (i.e., always true, true most of the time, true sometimes, hardly ever true, not true at all). Asher et al. report acceptable internal consistency and correlations with children's sociometric status. Higher scores on the Loneliness Scale indicate greater loneliness.

Children's behavioral adjustment was assessed through administration of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBC) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) to mothers. Total problem scores, as well as Internalizing and Externalizing problem scores, were computed from the mothers' responses. Extensive research with this measure has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity of subscale and total scale scores.

Results

Analyses examined the reliability and validity of adapting the Network Orientation Scale (NOS) for use with children. Specifically, we examined test-retest reliability and internal consistency, stability of responses over 4 years of study, intrafamilial agreement, and relationships to demographics, network characteristics, and child's adjustment.

Test-Retest Reliability

Test-retest reliability after 5 days was acceptable (coefficient of stability $r = .66$, $N = 16$, $p < .01$).

Internal Consistency

Internal consistency was examined for mothers and children. In order to assess whether there were age differences in consistency of NOS responses, the child sample was divided into those under age 10 versus those age 10 or older at each year of study. As shown in Table 1, internal consistency for children age 10 and older was acceptable at each year (coefficient alpha = .66-.83), and was very similar to internal consistency for mothers (alpha = .74-.82). In contrast, internal consistency for children younger than age 10 was very low. Accordingly, subsequent analyses included only children age 10 or older at time of study.

NOS means and standard deviations were very similar for mothers and children age 10 or older. (See Table 2.)

Table 1
Internal Consistency of Network Orientation Scale Responses

Study group	Coefficient alpha (<i>N</i>) by year of study participation			
	1	2	3	4
Mothers	.79 (50)	.74 (49)	.76 (48)	.82 (32)
Children				
Ages 6-9	.42 (19)	.25 (13)	— (5)	— (0)
Ages 10-13	.71 (29)	.66 (37)	.76 (43)	.83 (32)

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Network Orientation Scale Responses

Study group	By year of study participation			
	1	2	3	4
Mothers				
Means ¹	40.7	41.0	41.6	41.5
Standard deviations	6.1	5.4	5.8	5.9
<i>N</i> ²	50	49	48	32
Children ages 10+				
Means ¹	41.5	42.1	40.7	40.4
Standard deviations	5.1	4.5	5.1	5.9
<i>N</i> ²	29	37	43	32

¹Possible range of NOS scores is 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating more negative network orientations.

²The number of children ages 10 and up increases each year as children age. However, a sizeable proportion of participants did not complete the fourth year of data collection, thus the sample size drops considerably for Year 4.

Stability of Responses Over Time

NOS scores at each year of study were correlated with each subsequent year to assess to what extent network orientation remained stable over time. As is shown in Table 3, stability of mother's responses after a 1-year interval was very high (coefficient of stability $r = .74-.82$). Responses of children age 10 and older were significantly correlated with responses 1 year later ($r = .43-.66$); however, the correlations were not as robust as those for mothers.

Intrafamilial Agreement

NOS scores of mothers and children age 10 and older during the last year of study participation were compared and were found to be unrelated (Pearson $r = .00$, $N = 50$, n.s.).

Relationship to Demographics

NOS responses of children age 10 and older during the last year of study participation were significantly related to family income, with children from higher income families expressing more positive network orientations ($r = -.31$, $N = 50$, $p < .05$). NOS responses were not related to mother's education, to whether there were one or two parents in the home, or to the child's age (at least within the limited age range sampled here), gender, or race. An analysis of variance comparing the NOS scores of only children

Table 3
Longitudinal Stability of Network Orientation Scale Responses

Study group	Coefficients of stability r (N) by year of study participation			
	1	2	3	4
Mothers				
Year 1	1.00			
Year 2	.79 (52)	1.00		
Year 3	.75 (51)	.74 (50)	1.00	
Year 4	.62 (36)	.61 (36)	.82 (36)	1.00
Children age 10+				
Year 1	1.00			
Year 2	.66 (30)	1.00		
Year 3	.65 (31)	.43 (36)	1.00	
Year 4	.45 (17)	.36 (23)	.51 (30)	1.00

($N = 16$), first-born children with siblings ($N = 19$), and later-born children ($N = 16$) was not significant, $F(2,48) = .058$, n.s.

Relationship to Network Characteristics—Cross-Sectional Analyses

NOS responses of children age 10 and older during the last year of study participation were related to *extensiveness of network support* in the predicted direction, although only one correlation was statistically significant: the number of individuals from whom the child received positive feedback ($r = -.24$, $N = 49$, $p < .05$).

When NOS responses were correlated with CISS variables representing the child's *satisfaction with support received* from the network, correlations again were in the predicted direction (greater network satisfaction related to less negative network orientation), as is shown in the bottom half of Table 4. Satisfaction with emotional support from family members was significantly correlated with network orientation ($r = -.31$, $N = 50$, $p < .05$) as were satisfaction with positive feedback from both family ($r = -.26$, $N = 50$, $p < .05$) and nonfamily ($r = -.27$, $N = 50$, $p < .05$).

Correlations of NOS scores with CISS variables representing the child's relationship with the mother were particularly strong, specifically for the number of types of support the child indicated receiving from the mother ($r = -.50$, $N = 50$, $p < .001$) and for the overall perceived quality of time the child spent with the mother ($r = -.30$, $N = 50$, $p < .05$).

Relationship to Network Characteristics—Longitudinal Analyses

We tested the possibility that network orientation would affect later network characteristics by correlating NOS scores in the first year of the study with network characteristics in the fourth year of study participation. Our sample was necessarily restricted here because of the small number of children ($N = 20$) who were 10 years of age or older in the first year of the study and who completed all 4 years of data collection. Analyses revealed that NOS scores in Year 1 of the study did not significantly predict any network characteristics in Year 4 of the study.

We next tested the possibility that network characteristics would affect later network orientations by correlating CISS scores in Year 1 of the study with NOS scores in Year 4 of the study. Our sample here was somewhat larger because there were 32 children

Table 4

Relationships of Children's Network Orientation Scale Scores Assessed in Year 4 to: 1. Children's Satisfaction with Support at Year 1 (Longitudinal Relationship) and 2. Children's Satisfaction with Support at Year 4 (Cross-Sectional Relationship)

Type of support	Correlation (<i>r</i>) with Network Orientation Scale scores (Year 4)	
	a. from family	b. from nonfamily
1. Child satisfaction with support at year 1:		
any type of support	-.40* (30)	-.57** (30)
recreation/play	-.33* (30)	-.45* (30)
advice/information	-.35* (30)	-.62** (29)
goods/services	-.31* (30)	-.38* (30)
emotional support	-.35* (29)	-.38* (28)
positive feedback	-.22 (30)	-.24 (30)
2. Child satisfaction with support at year 4:		
any type of support	-.09 (49)	-.21 (49)
recreation/play	-.21 (49)	-.12 (49)
advice/information	-.21 (49)	-.02 (49)
goods/services	+.01 (49)	-.17 (49)
emotional support	-.31* (49)	-.20 (49)
positive feedback	-.26* (49)	-.27* (49)

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

who participated in all 4 years of the study and were 10 years of age or older when their NOS scores were measured in Year 4. Results, shown in the top half of Table 4, indicated that most of the network satisfaction variables assessed in Year 1 did significantly predict NOS scores 3 years later. As Table 4 shows, children who were more satisfied with family and nonfamily support of various kinds in Year 1 had significantly lower NOS scores in Year 4 than did children who were less satisfied with their family and nonfamily support in Year 1. In addition, the number of supportive resources the mother provided in Year 1 significantly predicted the child's network orientation score in Year 4 ($r = -.55$, $N = 31$, $p = .001$). Reported extensiveness of support network at Year 1 did not predict NOS at Year 4.

Relationship to Adjustment—Cross-Sectional Analyses

Negative network orientations were significantly associated with self-reports of more external locus of control ($r = .47$, $N = 49$, $p < .001$) and lower self-esteem ($r = .26$, $N = 50$, $p < .05$). There were no relationships between network orientations and mothers' reports about children's behavioral adjustment on the CBC.

Relationship to Adjustment—Longitudinal Analyses

Again, we first correlated network orientation scores in Year 1 of the study with adjustment variables in Year 4, using the small sample ($N = 20$) of children aged 10 or older in the first year of the study. None of the correlations between first-year NOS scores and fourth-year adjustment variables was significant.

We next correlated Year 1 adjustment scores with Year 4 NOS scores, using the somewhat larger sample of children for whom we have 4 years of data and who were

at least 10 years of age at Year 4. One correlation was statistically significant: More external locus of control at Year 1 was associated with more negative NOS scores at Year 4 ($r = .43$, $N = 32$, $p < .05$).

Summary and Discussion

These analyses support the adaptation of Vaux et al.'s (1986) Network Orientation Scale for use with children age 10 and older. Specifically, test-retest reliability was acceptable, although not as robust as reported for noncollege adults. Internal consistency for children age 10 and older was as good as for their mothers and for adults studied by Vaux and his colleagues. Internal consistency for younger children was poor and recommends against using the scale with children younger than 10 years. Network orientation scores of children age 10 and older were in the same range as found for adults. They were somewhat stable over 4 years of study, although not as stable as was observed for adults.

It is interesting to note that children's network orientations were not related to those of their mothers, in contrast to the retrospective findings reported by Colletta. Perhaps for Colletta's respondents current values colored memories of early family experience. Alternatively, perhaps the children in the present study will come in time to hold network orientations more similar to those their mothers now hold.

As was noted earlier, children in this sample came from families representing diverse income and parental education levels. Children from higher income families had more positive network orientations, although children's network orientations were not related to other demographic indicators. The association of positive network orientation with higher income was found earlier in Eckenrode's study of urban mothers, although Eckenrode also found that more education predicted more positive network orientations as well. The stresses associated with low family income may militate against an optimistic view of social network members as potential support providers.

As Vaux et al. found for adults, children's network orientations were related to both the extensiveness of support available to the child and the child's satisfaction with that support. Support from and satisfaction with the relationship with mother was the strongest correlate of the child's network orientation in the cross-sectional analyses. The particular importance of mothers as support providers has been documented in many studies. (See Belle, 1987, for a review.) As Reid, Landesman, Treder, and Jaccard (1989) note in a recent paper, "Children perceive their mothers as being the best multipurpose social provider available" (p. 907). Perhaps children's orientation to the network as a whole is shaped in large part through their experiences with the greater or lesser supportiveness of their mothers.

Children with positive network orientations experienced a more internal locus of control and greater self-esteem than children with more negative network orientations. Eckenrode's and Colletta's earlier research with adults found associations between positive network orientations and both internal locus of control and higher self-esteem, so the current study has extended this finding to an earlier point in the life course. Although network orientation thus appears related to the child's self-appraisal and experience of self, we find no relation between the child's network orientation and the child's behavioral problems, as assessed by the mother. Perhaps behavioral consequences of network orientations might become apparent in times of particular stress, in which the child's coping capacity is severely challenged. On the other hand, it may be that the child's attitudes toward the network have implications only for other attitudes of the child (e.g., locus of control, self-esteem) and not for the child's behavior.

The longitudinal analyses correlating network orientation with network characteristics and adjustment should be interpreted with caution, given the small sample sizes involved. However, the analyses do suggest that children's satisfaction with their networks may actually have a stronger effect on network orientation assessed some years later, rather than at the same point in time. If such results are replicated in other research, it would be important to determine whether there are certain crucial periods of childhood during which network experiences affect network orientation more powerfully than at other times.

This preliminary study suggests that network orientation can be reliably and validly assessed in children as young as 10 years of age, and that children's orientations to their networks are systematically related to children's experience of self and of the social network. Because the children in the current study all had parents who were employed full-time, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings to other populations, and future studies should assess the network orientations of children with mothers who are not employed full-time.

It will be important to determine whether the child's network orientation offers a useful focus for intervention and prevention work with children. Children who are reluctant to seek assistance from network members in times of stress may be forgoing useful coping resources. School-based interventions that encourage children to evaluate the potential supportiveness of network members, and then to consider turning to them in times of difficulty, could increase the effectiveness of children's coping patterns. For some children, however, a negative network orientation may reflect a sad history of failed efforts to elicit support from others. In such cases, alternative supportive resources may be necessary if children are to find effective helpers in times of difficulty.

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