Author's response to reviews

Title: Social Cohesion and Belonging Predict the Well-Being of Community-Dwelling Older People

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Version: 4 Date: 9 February 2015

Author's response to reviews: see over
Reviewer's report
Title: Social Cohesion, Belonging, and Changes Therein Predict the Well-Being of Community-Dwelling Older People
Version: 3
Date: 24 January 2015
Reviewer: Piers Dawes

Reviewer's report: I would like to thank the authors for their thoughtful responses to my comments on the first draft of this manuscript. The manuscript is greatly improved. I still have some concerns about the description of the sample, and several minor issues described below.

Major revisions

1. Description of the sample and sampling bias

In the previous version of the manuscript, I was concerned that it wasn’t clear why 4 particular districts of Rotterdam were chosen. It was also unclear whether the demographics of these districts were comparable to the general Dutch population, or whether there was something unusual about them. The response rate was somewhat low, so I was concerned this may have introduced selection bias.

In the present version of the manuscript, the authors have provided more information about the context of the study, but I don’t feel that they have addressed my concerns.

Please delete the additional information provided in the Methods (lines 159 to 166).

*Since the selection of the 4 districts is still unclear to the reviewer we choose not only to keep the information but add further information to better explain why these neighborhoods were chosen: This study took place in the context of a larger evaluation of a transition experiment aiming to facilitate independently-living frail elderly persons (70+) to live the life they wish to live, improving their well-being. The transition experiment started two Rotterdam districts (Lage Land/Prinsenland and Lombardijen) and was later extended to the Oude Westen and Vreewijk districts. The larger evaluation consisted of an inventory (this study) as well as an experiment with a controlled pre-post measurement (including only 185 older people). The inventory is taken among the elderly (70+) in the four districts of Lage Land/Prinsenland, Lombardijen, Oude Westen, and Vreewijk to investigate the general situation of elderly in these districts where the experiment takes place. A detailed description of the study design can be found in the study protocol [30].*

Please add an explanation for the following:

i) why were these particular neighbourhoods chosen for this study? Convenience? Are there particularly high levels of deprivation in these neighbourhoods that make them interesting? There must be some reason these locations where chosen. Its not sufficient to say that these neighbourhoods were chosen because they were chosen for a larger study. There must be some sensible reason for choosing to recruit from these particular neighbourhoods.

*The selection of the districts was made by the municipality. These districts differed in terms of income level, educational level, social cohesion etc.*

ii) the authors have provided a good description of the demographics of the sample. What is missing is a comparison to the Dutch general population. Eg is 83.3% Dutch natives typical of the Dutch general population? Or does this sample have an unusually high proportion of non-natives? It would be useful to report a comparison with the general population so one
knows whether the study sample is typical, and the results generalizable or not. Its not useful to report how similar the study sample is to the ‘original sample (n=1440)’ (please delete this information – lines 216 to 219). It is much more important to know how the study sample compares to the general population. Please add this information, if you can. The comparison statistics for the general population could be added as an extra column in Table 1 (eg for the equivalent age range, what is the proportion of male, married, low educational level & born in the Netherlands?).

As suggested by the reviewer we deleted lines 216-219. In addition, we added a comparison of the percentage of being born in the Netherlands and those with male gender among 70 plus people in the Netherlands: These figures are comparable to the mean percentage of males (43%) and being born in the Netherlands (87%) among older people (aged ≥ 70 years) in the Dutch population in 2013 [36].

iii) A response rate of ~60% is pretty good. However, that could still be a source of bias. Do the authors have any information about non-respondents? If so, it would be useful to report this. If not, selection bias should be mentioned as a possible limitation.

We followed the reviewer’s advice and mentioned selection bias as a possible limitation of our study: While the response rate was quite high, well-being may also be higher compared to older adults not responding at all, which may limit generalizability of our study findings.

Minor revisions:

Further simplify the title to “Social cohesion and belonging predict the well-being of community-dwelling older people”

We changed the title accordingly.

Abstract

Line 22 remove “since they spend a greater proportion of their lives in their neighbourhoods”
Line 24 change “these factors” to “the social environment and well-being”
Line 26 remove “(instrumental goals to achieve)”
Line 31 remove “(changes in)”

We adjusted all the suggestions for the abstract accordingly.

Methods

Line 158 remove “in June 2011”

We removed this from the text.

Discussion

Line 301. It sounds like the most novel aspect of this study is the longitudinal analyses; the previous work showed an association between social cohesion and well-being in cross-sectional analysis. Could you please rephrase these two sentences beginning line 301. I suggest you rephrase as follows: “We previously reported that the social environment is related to the well-being of community-dwelling older adults in Rotterdam in cross-sectional analysis [9]. The present study showed that social cohesion and belonging are related to the social and physical well being of community-dwelling older adults in the Netherlands measured longitudinally”
Line 330 change “these individuals” to “community-dwelling older adults” (if that is who you refer to?)
Line 330 change to “In order to improve well-being in aging societies, policy makers and governments should invest in these amendable neighbourhood social environments through measures aiming to improve social cohesion and belonging”

We followed the reviewer’s advice and changed the sentences (lines 301, 330, 330) accordingly.

Line 376. Good addition. Could you also say what the effect of non-response bias would be? It sounds like the sort of bias would have resulted in under-estimation of the effect of social cohesion on well-being.

We added the reviewer’s suggestion of the effects of this non-response bias in the discussion.