

Abstract

Owing to increasing longevity and the erosion of traditional family support systems, older persons faces various forms of psychological distress, especially in urban India. This situation highlights the need to examine how informal social relationships play a key role in enhancing the psychological well-being (PWB) of older urban Indians. This research thus aims to (a) identify and validate the multidimensional social network types in old age; (b) determine the association between social network types and PWB outcomes (depression, loneliness, and life satisfaction); and (c) examine the intermediary role of social support in the relationships between social network types and PWB outcomes. An adequate sample of 378 older persons (60+) was recruited through a cross-sectional primary survey using a multi-stage stratified random sampling design in the Kalyani Municipal Area (KMA) of West Bengal, Eastern India. Cluster analyses using twelve network variables revealed five distinct social network types: Other, Distant Family, Friend, Children (living away), and Spouse and Children (living together). The distant family network, comprising nearly half the respondents, is the most common network type in the community. Bivariate analysis showed that family-based networks mostly comprised young-old individuals (60-69 years) who were married, co-residents, economically well-off, and enjoyed healthy lives. Non-family networks predominantly consisted of oldest-old individuals (≥ 80 years) who were widowed, living alone, financially dependent, and had worse health outcomes. HLR showed that better networks with 'distant family' significantly reduced depression and enhanced life satisfaction, while ties with 'spouse and children' and 'children' protected against loneliness. Mediation analysis revealed that both providing and receiving social support partially mediate the relationships between social network types and PWB outcomes. Interestingly, providing social support correlated with improvements in PWB outcomes, whereas receiving social support was linked to poorer outcomes, possibly reflecting underlying need or vulnerability. In a nutshell, different aspects of social relationships play distinct roles in influencing a range of PWB outcomes. Family-based network types significantly enhance PWB among older urban Indians. The findings suggest that establishment of urban community centres and geriatric unit may facilitate healthy ageing.

Keywords: Social networks, social support, psychological well-being, cluster analysis, hierarchical regression, ageing, India.