

The Characteristics and Functions of Weak Ties

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### ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to identify dimensions of weak tie relationships including characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, or properties), functions (e.g., outcomes, purposes, or meanings derived from the interaction) and determinants of engagement to gain insight into the weak tie exchange process and develop frameworks that can be used to operationalize the concept. Data were collected through stories provided by participants during face-to-face interviews. Respondents recounted a situation when someone they did not know well and to whom they did not feel particularly close provided them with assistance. Over 70 stories were collected from 50 adults aged 65 and older who were active in their community. Stories collected were analyzed using an inductive approach that was supported by the concepts of interpersonal tie strength, loose connections, social exchange theory, and social support. Findings suggest that weak tie relationships occur in a variety of community settings and in response to a variety of daily challenges. The exchanges occur more frequently with acquaintances than strangers and the initiator of the exchange is generally the person offering support. The types of support offered are broad-based and include instrumental, emotional, and informational support. Weak tie exchanges range from one-time brief interactions to intermittent exchanges over extended periods, depending on the circumstances. Findings also suggest that weak ties have a specific task or purpose, encourage awareness about the value and purpose of social interactions, and influence participants' future social interactions. Six factors were identified as determinants of engagement in weak ties: situational factors, personal characteristics, judgments of responsibility, attitudes about helping behaviors, personal network type, and exchange history. The findings from this study provide a foundation for further conceptualization of weak ties and a framework on which to develop instruments to measure tie strength and the potential for engaging in weak tie exchanges.

*To Mom and Dad*

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

Personal relationships and the support received through them contribute significantly to how individuals cope with the challenges faced in daily life (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Erikson, 2003; Nelson, 1966; Weiss, 1974). Family members are the primary sources of actual and perceived support (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cohen et al., 2000; Schafer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981) because they tend to have the necessary insight, familiarity, emotional commitment and obligation to meet individual member's needs and expectations over time (Bott, 1971; Homans, 1961). While many scholars have focused on studying the dynamics of relationships between family members and friends, less work has been conducted on the supportive relationships between people who are not emotionally close or committed to one another. This study addressed that gap by examining weak tie relationships (Granovetter, 1973) to gain insight into the weak tie exchange process and contribute to the conceptual and empirical understanding of weak ties and secondary support (Shils, 1951).

The purpose of this study was to clarify the characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, or properties) and functions (e.g., outcome, purposes, or meanings derived from the interaction) of relationships known as weak ties. A weak tie exchange is a brief exchange between people who do not know each other well and share low levels of trust, commitment, and feelings of connectedness in their relationship with one another. In weak tie exchanges, interactions are limited to achieving a specific goal. Once the exchange has concluded, there is no expectation that the relationship will continue. However, during the course of the interaction participants encounter new people, material goods, and opportunities, making the weak tie connection an important conduit for accessing valuable resources (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). These brief, but nonetheless important sources of support represent an estimated 9-11% of all exchange relationships (Amato, 1990).

#### *Interpersonal Ties*

Granovetter's (1973) work on interpersonal tie strength informs the concept of weak ties. He posited that dyadic relationships vary in strength and intensity due to differences in shared feelings of trust, commitment, and connectedness (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). As a tie becomes stronger, the potential for developing a stable and long-term relationship increases due to increased levels of trust, commitment, and

connectedness (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993; Thye, 2000; Welch, Sikkink, & Loveland, 2007). The presence of trust implies fair and mutual support exists between participants. Both hold the belief that the other will meet unfulfilled needs in the future. Commitment is a pledge to remain in a relationship over time and forego immediate receipt of benefits until a later time. Connectedness refers to feelings of intimacy, cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging. Strong interpersonal ties depend upon high levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness to sustain relationships and are generally characterized by long-term ties with close family members and friends. Conversely, weak ties are brief interactions typically associated with acquaintances and strangers and based on low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness. However, as Bott (1971) has indicated, not all family member relationships are strong primary sources of support; some are more accurately described as weak ties. Thus, efforts to explore weak tie relationships must not be constrained by social positions or roles.

### *Measuring Tie Strength*

Measuring tie strength remains subjective and elusive, yet the concept of relational strength can be simply illustrated using a three-ply rope. Each ply represents a dimension of tie strength (trust, commitment, and connectedness) that gains strength as it twists around itself and the other two plies. As the strands twist tighter and tighter, each ply (dimension) provides support to the other, contributing to the overall strength and quality of the rope (or relationship). A rope with a tight twist represents a strong tie relationship containing high levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness. Conversely, a rope with a loose twist represents a weak tie relationship and is composed of low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness.

In a strong tie relationship, both parties trust that the other will be available to help in the future if needed, believe that the other is committed to the relationship, and share a bond that precludes either one from looking to someone else for the same level of support. In a weak tie relationship, the two participants may not have actually met one another until the moment they interact. They do not know enough about each other to possess feelings of trust or commitment. Any shared feelings of connectedness arise from the environment or circumstances in which they interact.

### *Weak Ties*

At face value, weak tie exchanges seem to be minor, insignificant, or unmemorable interactions. Nevertheless, weak tie engagement can result in significant and beneficial

outcomes. Granovetter (1973, 1974, 1982) highlighted the benefits of weak tie engagement for individuals seeking employment opportunities. He found that weak tie interactions produced more potential job leads, which resulted in more job offers, than strong tie interactions. This, he concluded, was explained by the lack of diversity in the resources available to individuals within a personal or family network. When people associate with others like themselves, they share comparable resources and information, which ultimately limits access to opportunities and growth beyond their own network. Weak tie relationships take place in the social network and as a result bring new opportunities and resources into personal networks that would otherwise be overlooked. Thus, as Granovetter found, weak ties expand options and possibilities for change among job seekers.

Weak ties may also be useful when help from a strong tie would be inconvenient or impractical. For example, enlisting the help of local acquaintances to assist with a household move is preferable to relying on a sibling who lives 500 miles away. By relying on acquaintances, fewer demands are placed on the person living at a distance and less stress is placed on the sibling relationship, reserving it for other more important times and situations. In emergencies, weak ties may also be considered default resources when strong ties are not available. That is, assuming that help from an acquaintance or stranger would be preferable to receiving no help at all.

Each of the previous situations mentioned illustrates weak ties as being brief, infrequent, and limited to providing specific types of help (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that weak ties may be accessed more frequently and for multiple types of support, as demonstrated by people confronted by significant life challenges, such as major medical problems (e.g. hospitalization) or recovery from natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina). In those situations, individuals may actually increase their reliance on weak ties and depend on them as a source of relief and support. Thus, weak tie exchanges between the same two people may take place beyond one interaction and extend over a period time.

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the conceptual and empirical understanding of weak ties by identifying characteristics and functions, and determinants of engagement. My interest in this subject emerged from observations I made while interviewing

older adult care providers. It became clear during the interviews that many of the adults were managing quite well despite their increasing medical problems and receiving limited support from their children and other family members. Some adults mentioned that they managed to get their needs met by trading services or support with people they did not know particularly well or knew only through a specific venue (e.g., daily breakfast at a local restaurant). Some individuals even commented that they received assistance from strangers and other people they had not seen in a long time. They frequently depended on strangers and acquaintances to help resolve some of the inconveniences they faced in their life. The situations described to me were consistent with the conceptual frameworks on weak tie relationships developed by Granovetter (1973, 1974, 1982) and Wuthnow (1998). Intrigued, I designed this study to identify dimensions of weak ties, more specifically, tie characteristics and functions, as well as determinants of engagement.

## Conceptual Framework

### *Indicators of Tie Strength*

In developing the concept of weak ties, Granovetter (1973) relied on the principles and assumptions of social exchange theory, which is based on the notion that exchanges are negotiated processes inherent to human nature. In any relationship or exchange, participants act as rational beings and weigh the costs and benefits of their participation throughout the exchange process. They make judgments as to whether or not potential benefits received outweigh perceived drains on time, energy, and resources in order to maximize benefits from each exchange.

Assumptions about human relationships made by social exchange theorists suggest that in order for relationships to be maintained, they must include levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness (Blau, 1964; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Homans, 1961; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993; Thye, 2000; Welch et al., 2007). Building from this assumption, Granovetter (1973) posited that four indicators influenced relational strength: length of time, which demonstrates commitment to the relationship, degree of intimacy, which demonstrates connectedness, emotional intensity or closeness, which influences commitment and connectedness, and the presence of reciprocity, which demonstrates trust. He characterized the strongest interpersonal ties as reciprocal, long-standing, and based on shared feelings of commitment and intimacy. Conversely, he identified

the weakest interpersonal ties as short in duration, lacking a shared sense of commitment, and limited to task specific interactions.

Other scholars have since suggested that tie strength is also influenced by indicators such as the extent of mutual acknowledgement of the relationship (Friedkin, 1980), duration of length of contact (Wellman, 1982), the extent to which individuals are connected to the same social network, and the frequency of contact between individuals (Lin, Dayton, & Greenwald, 1978). Whereas none of the characteristics serve as a reliable predictor of tie strength, three dimensions have consistently emerged as fundamental to the conceptualization and operation of interpersonal tie strength: trust, commitment, and connectedness. Of the three, the dimension of connectedness appeared to influence tie strength more than commitment and trust. Marsden and Campbell (1984) reasoned that apparent inconsistencies in defining and conceptualizing tie strength across disciplines is responsible for the lack of establishing a key indicator of weak ties.

#### *Loose Connections*

Wuthnow (1998) was the first scholar to identify characteristics specific to weak ties in his work describing the “loose connections” providing support within social networks. Based on principles and assumptions about relationships associated with social exchange theory, he identified eight characteristics consistent with Granovetter’s (1973, 1974, 1982) broader conceptualization. Wuthnow described weak ties in the following manner:

1. The overall length of the relationship is brief.
2. The relationship can easily be initiated or terminated by either person.
3. There is a lack of connection (emotional closeness) between people.
4. The interactions are infrequent.
5. The duration of the interaction is short.
6. The interaction is generally unanticipated.
7. The interaction is limited to specific tasks or activities.
8. The interactions occur in heterogeneous networks.

When Wuthnow’s eight characteristics are examined separately, the traits are easily identified with most relationships (weak or strong) at some point in time. However, when viewed collectively in the context of one interaction, the characteristics represent core features of a weak interpersonal tie, especially when coupled with the presence of low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness in the relationship.

Wuthnow's assumption that weak ties only exist in heterogeneous networks is informed by characteristics about homogenous and heterogeneous networks and is congruent with Granovetter's (1973) findings on gaining employment leads through weak ties. Homogenous networks include members who have similar characteristics, beliefs, and experiences and follow prescribed social norms (e.g., fraternities or brotherhoods) (Djelic, 2004; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Members share a strong sense of connectedness based on their similarities. Because of this homogeneity, network member resources tend to be comparable and thus limited in scope. Whereas the availability of resources may meet the current needs of network members, future needs may not be successfully addressed. Conversely, in a heterogeneous network members may share some common characteristics, beliefs, and experiences but do not share strong feelings of connectedness due to holding diverse interests and activities. The same diversity that could potentially polarize individuals also brings them together as their combined resources result in an eclectic assortment of assets that help them meet their daily needs. As Granovetter (1973) found, the potential number of informants with job opportunity information was much larger when workers reached out beyond their personal network into a larger, more heterogeneous social network and engaged in weak tie interactions.

Wuthnow's (1998) framework has provided a foundation from which scholars can examine weak ties further. However, the framework is narrow-focused when compared with anecdotal descriptions of weak tie interactions, as it does not account for variations in the characteristics of exchanges. Nor does it address external influences that could potentially mediate the exchange such as participant knowledge, skills, abilities, exchange histories, beliefs, social expectations, and desire to engage. Thus, the structure of weak ties may need to be conceptualized differently. This study was designed to identify the core characteristics of weak tie interactions as well as the influences participants bring to the exchange to advance conceptualization and inform development of instruments to measure weak ties.

### Research Questions

The characteristics identified by Granovetter (1973) and Wuthnow (1998) remain untested. While some scholars have chosen to incorporate the overarching concept of weak ties into their research there is a paucity of work that moves the concept from broad conceptualization to more concrete and testable terms. This study was designed to move the concept forward by identifying characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, or properties),

and functions (e.g., outcomes, purposes served, meanings derived from interacting) of weak tie interactions and determinants of engagement (i.e., what influences participants to engage).

Wuthnow (1998) hypothesized eight core characteristics of weak ties, yet he provided limited support for development other than referencing principles and assumptions of exchange theory. In light of this information, this study employed an inductive approach to understanding weak tie relationships to ensure that identification of dimensions were optimized and not constrained by current hypothesized frameworks.

The research questions developed for this study included:

1. What are the characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, or properties) of weak tie relationships?
2. What are the functions (e.g., outcome, purpose, or meaning derived from the interaction) of weak tie relationships?
3. What are the determinants that influence an individual to engage in a weak tie relationship?

Chapter 4 of this document presents the findings for this study in the form of two manuscripts. The first, Manuscript A: Characteristics and Functions of Weak Ties, addresses the first two research questions. The third research question is addressed in Manuscript B: Determinants of Engagement in Weak Tie Exchanges. Discussions of findings, study limitations, and conclusions for each research question are included in the respective manuscripts. Chapter 5 addresses implications for this work in research and applied settings.

### Terminology

To explore the concept of weak ties effectively, it was important to establish definitions for relevant terminology. Lack of consistency in defining terms associated with interpersonal tie strength has slowed progress on conceptualizing and operationalizing the concept further (Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Therefore, the following definitions were used to facilitate understanding and promote transparency in the findings of this study:

1. A *personal network* refers to all of the interpersonal relationships (actual or perceived and real or virtual) directly involving a specified person, who is the network owner. (Agneessen, Waeye, & Lievens, 2006; Wellman, 1983).
2. A *social network* refers to all of the direct relationships (actual or perceived and real or virtual) of a specified person (the network owner) and indirect relationships, which

include the relationships of people with whom the network owner interacts (Adams, 1967; Agneessen et al., 2006; Shils, 1951). For example, a network owner may have a relationship with a neighbor. The neighbor has a relationship with a coworker. The network owner may not know the coworker, but he or she becomes a potential source of support for the network owner and is considered part of the social network. A social network is a key source of information and support. It provides opportunities for direct exchanges with primary contacts as well as indirect exchanges introduced through secondary relationships (Shils, 1951).

3. *Interpersonal tie strength* is the degree to which two people demonstrate shared levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness in their relationship (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). Tie strength may vary over time as circumstances and opportunities change within the relationship (Granovetter, 1973). Dimensions of Interpersonal Ties (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993; Thye, 2000; Welch et al., 2007)

*Trust* implies fair and mutual support and reliance exist between individuals. Both participants hold the belief that the other will meet unfulfilled needs in the future.

*Commitment* is a pledge to remain in a relationship over time and forego immediate receipt of benefits until the future.

*Connectedness* includes feelings of intimacy, cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging.

Degrees of Interpersonal Tie Strength (Granovetter, 19973, 1974, 1982)

A *strong tie* refers to a relationship in which both parties share high levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness; strong ties are frequently characterized by relationships with close family members and friends.

A *weak tie* refers to a relationship in which both parties share low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness; weak ties are typically associated with acquaintances and strangers. However, some relationships with family members and friends may be more accurately categorized as weak ties than strong ties.

4. A *social expectation* is a shared perception about how a given person should behave as part of a social role (Thye, 2000).
5. A *social position* is a label associated with one's place within the larger culture or society (Thye, 2000). Examples of social positions referred to in this study include the following:

*Acquaintances* are people one has some personal knowledge or information about, but with whom one does not share feelings of emotional closeness or connectedness (Starzyk, Holder, Fabrigar, & MacDonald, 2006).

*Coworkers* are individuals who share a common workplace or work environment, and with whom social interactions may or may not take place.

*Family members* include individuals related by blood or marriage.

*Friends* are people with whom one shares an informal reciprocal relationship in some aspect of life. Close friends share a stronger and closer emotional commitment to one another than casual friends.

*Neighbors* include people who live near or close by each other.

*Strangers* are people one does not know and who are considered foreign to a specific environment.

6. A *social role* is a set of expectations, behaviors, and obligations associated with a social position and negotiated within the social environment (Thye, 2000).

7. *Social support* is a mechanism by which informal relationships provide support to reduce or meet the needs of individuals and contribute to improving quality of life, personal health, and well-being. Social support consists of activities and attitudes that provide assistance in the form of instrumental, emotional and informational support (Cohen et al., 2000; Erikson, 2003; Nelson, 1966; Weiss, 1974).

*Instrumental support* includes physical aid such as goods and services.

*Emotional support* includes buoying another's personal feelings by demonstrating kindness, empathy, and love.

*Informational support* includes sharing knowledge, opinions, and insight as well as offering options for solving challenges.

## CHAPTER 2. SUPPORTING LITERATURE

A discussion about the supportive nature of weak tie exchanges is best informed by the principles and assumptions associated with social support and social exchange theory. The concept of social support was useful in the identification of support types and related engagement processes and important in addressing the first two research questions. Social exchange theory provided a foundation of principles and assumptions that particularly informed the third research question on identifying determinants of engagement in weak ties. An overview of the supportive literature follows.

### Social Support

Social support is a mechanism by which informal relationships provide aid to assist individuals in meeting their needs. The benefits of which have been shown to contribute to the improvement of personal health, well-being, and quality of life (Berkman, 1995; Booth, Edwards, & Johnson, 1991; Campbell & Lee, 1992; Mancini, Martin, & Bowen, 2003; Pillemer & Glasgow, 2000; Moen, Fields, Meador, & Rosenblatt, 2000; Sarason, 1974). The types of support provided through strong tie relationships are well documented as are the social norms that influence support (Berkowitz, 1972; Thye, 2000).

Granovetter (1973) reasoned that because the characteristics of weak ties differ from strong ties, they would not follow the same obligations of exchange. Likewise, the support provided by both would not be expected to be the same. Wellman and Wortley (1990) found that strong ties provided a broader scope of support (including more emotional support and minor services) than weak ties, but found no significant differences in the provision of financial and major service support. Yet, anecdotal stories told to this researcher suggest that weak ties provide a wider range of support than previously identified, including instrumental, emotional, and informational support.

To explore the supportive functions of weak tie relationships this study looked to the model of functional specificity (Simons, 1983-1984) for guidance. The model was useful because it could be adapted to the study of interpersonal tie strength, as it did not rely on social position or role to identify support. The assumptions of the model include:

1. Support can be classified by type and function.
2. Relational support is negotiable with everyone sharing the same potential to provide the same types of support.

### *Support Type*

The three categories of support chosen for this study were the same used to describe support acquired through strong tie interactions: instrumental, emotional, and informational (Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & McKay, 1984; Schafer et al., 1981; Willis, 1985). The categories were selected because they accommodate the diversity of support that can be provided through weak ties. Instrumental support refers to activities that provide goods and services (e.g., carrying a bag of groceries for someone, donating money, or supervising a child while a parent runs an errand). Findings suggest that instrumental support is the primary type of support offered in weak tie interactions (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Emotional support includes aid that facilitates resiliency, mental well-being, and encourages individuals to help themselves (e.g., listening while a grieving widow expresses her feelings or cheering on a local sports team). Emotional support buoys the other person's feelings by demonstrating kindness, empathy, and love. Informational support includes sharing knowledge, opinions, and insight as well as offering options for solving challenges. It also includes offering guidance, which refers to acting as an authoritative figure and providing emotional support and leadership in solving a problem or promoting personal growth. Collectively, the three dimensions of support provide a base from which to explore the support provided through weak ties.

### *Function and Provision of Support*

The second assumption of the model of functional specificity is that relational support is negotiable. Everyone has the potential to share the same types of support. However, the provision of support is influenced by timing of events, proximity of potential providers, availability, and the personal strengths brought into a relationship (Connidis & Davies, 1990), and is consonant with Weiss's (1974) concept of provisional relationships.

Weiss (1974) suggested that the process of providing support is not the same for every person or relationship. Even though the goals of exchanges may be the same, the assumptions, expectations, and resources that each participant brings to the exchange influence the exchange process. Additionally, some relationships exist for the single purpose of achieving a specific goal and are specialized as well as provisional.

Weiss (1974) proposed that some specialized and supportive relationships provide specific types of support that encourage attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable reliance, and guidance. Emotionally close

relationships, which encourage feelings of attachment, promote a sense of security and place. These relationships assist individuals with becoming comfortable within their environment and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Relationships that provide social integration create a sense of belonging to a group. Engaging in relationships with others in the community provides a venue for sharing concerns, interests, and expanding personal networks. Relationships that provide opportunity for nurturance contribute to developing a sense of need and communicate the value for taking responsibility and care for others. Reassurance of worth is gained through interactions that utilize an individual's capabilities and demonstrate competence in social roles. This type of support is a source of self-esteem and is believed to be generated from relationships outside of the family. Relationships of reliable alliance offer unconditional support, as is generally expected from close family members. This includes knowing that one can count on the other when help is needed. Relationships providing guidance involve a relationship with someone who can provide expert advice. An authoritative figure provides emotional support and leadership in creating a plan to solve a problem.

Including the concept of provisional relationships in this study guides understanding of the process of engagement in weak tie interactions. The same external forces (people, situations, and environments) that influence the provision of support in strong tie relationships influence weak tie exchanges. Participant stories were collected in this study to gather examples that highlight factors that are unique to the provision of support in weak tie exchanges.

#### Social Exchange Theory

Principles and assumptions of social exchange theory (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993) were drawn upon to gain a better understanding of the underlying factors that influence weak tie engagement. Social exchange theory is derived from the notion that relationships or exchanges are based on reciprocity and are negotiated processes inherent to human nature. In any relationship or exchange, participants act as rational beings and conduct cost/benefit analyses throughout the exchange process. They make judgments on whether or not potential benefits outweigh perceived drains on time, energy, and resources, in order to maximize their benefits from each exchange.

Homans' (1961) rule of distributive justice reinforces the notion that benefits should be proportional to costs; that is, the greater the costs, the greater the benefits. When individuals

perceive only undesirable options are available, human nature leads them to choose the least costly alternative. Thus, every exchange involves a calculated risk.

As participants calculate how to maximize their own benefits, they must be mindful of the other person's need to perceive exchange equity. Participants must recognize that if the interaction is unbalanced or favors one person more than another, the relationship will deteriorate and no benefits will be gained. Relationship stability is achievable only when benefits are perceived to be equitable in the eyes of the participants (Thomese, van Tilburg, & Knipscheer, 2003). Without equity and stability, exchanges become one-sided, causing participants to withdraw and distance themselves from each other and future interactions (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

While participants retain a great deal of control over exchanges, other factors have influences on the exchange process and inform this study. Factors include cognitive and normative orientations (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993), exchange history (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), availability of exchange alternatives (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and relationship dependency (Levinger, 1982). A discussion of each factor is followed by a discussion of how the relationship characteristics of trust, commitment, and connectedness interact with the factors and influence the exchange process.

#### *Cognitive and Normative Orientations*

The personal orientations of participants influence the characteristics and timing of their exchanges (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Cognitive orientations represent the values and relationship ideals that influence the negotiation of exchange, such as the rule of distributive justice (i.e., costs should be balanced by benefits). Normative orientations are the social sanctions, mores, and expectations that prescribe acceptable and appropriate behaviors. Both orientations are intertwined and embedded in the exchange process, guiding negotiations and supporting exchange equity.

Two primary orientations that are of interest to this study are norms of reciprocity and norms of fairness (Berkowitz, 1972; Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Norms of reciprocity derive from social guidelines and constraints that help determine the course of engagement and its negotiation. Two types of reciprocal transactions inform this study, each influenced by different exchange orientations: direct and generalized reciprocity. Direct reciprocity includes the immediate exchange of benefits directly to the other participant. This occurs when participants

demonstrate a lack of confidence in each other or perceive that benefits will not be forthcoming; that is, the other participant will not continue the relationship or will leave without providing the support promised (Uehara, 1990). Relationships demonstrating low levels of trust and commitment between participants, such as weak tie relationships, are most likely to rely on direct reciprocity to maintain relationship equity.

Generalized reciprocity, a form of indirect reciprocity, occurs within networks where members share a general commitment to help each other and trust that support will be provided in the future when needed (Ekeh, 1974). The benefit earned for providing support will be repaid at a later time, but may be provided by someone else in the network one who is better suited or in a better position to offer support. While some tangible benefits may be delayed in this form of exchange, immediate benefits may include less tangible benefits such as respect and camaraderie (Uehara, 1990).

Establishing norms of reciprocity is part of the exchange negotiation process. Participant experiences and expectations inform the process about what should or should not take place. Once agreed upon, the rules of engagement (including reciprocity) are embedded and guide the relationship. Scanzoni (1979) suggested that when reciprocity is not honored, conflict arises with the degree of conflict proportionate to the degree of non-reciprocity. The motivation to reciprocate is fueled by personal feelings and the willingness to be indebted to the other person. Without motivation, the relationship terminates.

Norms of fairness are social interpretations of what is considered fair or not fair during the exchange process (Berkowitz, 1972, Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993). Norms of fairness vary among relationships because fairness is subjective and are based on participants' shared expectation of what will occur during the exchange. If participants agree to the terms of an exchange, then the terms are considered fair, even though the benefits, resources, and costs may not be equally shared. The perception of fairness is powerful and influences each participant's view of exchange quality and the potential for future interactions with the same individual.

When participants share cognitive and normative orientations, that is, they attach the same meaning and values to an exchange, the outcome of their interaction will be more productive and satisfying than if they did not mutually agree. There are multiple dimensions and influences on the development of exchanges, and some factors are more relevant to establishing stable and long-term exchanges than others. Factors that influence exchange outcomes that

inform this study include past experiences, availability of exchange alternatives, and relationship dependency.

#### *Exchange History*

Each participant's exchange history guides and informs their decision to engage, influences their satisfaction with engagement and their perceptions about the exchange process (Starzyk et al., 2006; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The lessons learned from previous exchanges shape expectations about what is realistically possible and guide expectations in future relationships. If costs exceeded benefits in an earlier, yet similar exchange, the individual will make adjustments and negotiate the new exchange by minimizing personal costs further. Whereas increased numbers of exchanges are more likely to provide a variety of experiences upon which to draw, the actual number and the frequency of exchanges does not appear to ensure exchange stability (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokhan, 1990; Litwin, 1999).

#### *Availability of Exchange Alternatives*

The availability of exchange alternatives also influences the decision to engage (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The *comparison level for alternatives* is the lowest level of exchange that an individual is willing to accept in light of available alternatives, a subjective assessment of available alternatives to a situation. If no better options for obtaining rewards exist, the exchange with the least desirable relationship is chosen. If the participant perceives that better options exist elsewhere, he or she will leave the relationship and seek the alternatives. However, when faced with a situation where better alternatives are temporarily unavailable, they may accept the least desirable alternative as a temporary replacement rather than delay the exchange.

#### *Relationship Dependency*

One final factor that influences weak tie exchanges and the exchange process is dependency (Levinger, 1982). Dependency is the degree to which a person believes that he or she is relied upon or relies upon others to receive rewards. Although norms of reciprocity foster the development of dependency to receive rewards, too much dependency in a relationship results in an imbalance that increases the costs for the individual being relied upon. Dependency is mediated by internal and external barriers, which can increase the costs of exchange and can create difficulty in terminating the relationship. Internal barriers include personal feelings of obligation and indebtedness, which can increase psychological stress. External barriers include the norms and expectations of group affiliations and community members. The pressure to act in

a defined manner and to adhere to prescribed codes of conduct creates a barrier, discourages dissolution of the relationship, and fosters dependence.

### *Trust, Commitment, and Connectedness*

Three factors associated with weak ties and interpersonal tie strength also influence the social exchange process: trust, commitment, and connectedness (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993; Thye, 2000; Welch et al., 2007). Trust develops following positive experiences with reciprocity and fairness in an exchange. Once established, individuals in the exchange will not take unfair advantage or exploit each other. The presence of trust allows individuals to rely on one another for support. As a result, individuals can cease looking for alternatives, as they know their needs will continue to be met in the future.

Commitment is a pledge to remain in a relationship over time. Individuals who commit to relationships perceive the relationship to be fair, equitable, and reciprocal. In a committed relationship, participants can defer benefits because they are dedicated to the relationship and believe the other person will be available to provide support to them when needed. Studies suggest that commitment is established through the exchange of benefits over time and continued demonstration of willingness to be engaged in a committed relationship. A negative result of commitment is that it can foster dependency, which can eventually curtail awareness of and access to alternative exchanges with others (Levinger, 1982).

Connectedness includes feelings of intimacy, cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging. The stronger the feelings of closeness shared, the more connected participants feel towards one another. Exchange patterns can also reflect levels of connectedness through the actions participants take to regulate the distance they maintain from one another. For instance, when participants are equally attracted to each other, exchanges occur with the least amount of difficulty. However, when one partner feels less attracted to or close with the other, he or she distances himself or herself from the exchange, ultimately creating an imbalance in the exchange process. If one partner increases efforts to engage, the other may distance him or her self proportionately (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

### Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

As social exchange theorists suggest, maintaining a relationship requires reciprocal exchanges and making a mutual commitment to stay in contact with one another, as in joining together to celebrate special events, offering assistance, and being available to provide support

when needed (Sabetelli & Shelton, 1993). Yet relationships consume personal time, energy, and commitment, and can become sources of burden when other areas of life, such as poor health and family issues, demand attention as well. Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995) suggests that when the challenges of daily life mount and become difficult to handle, individuals will voluntarily reduce the number of relationships in their personal network as a way to cope with emotional stress. Reducing or eliminating relationships relieves actual or perceived burdens of obligation, indebtedness, and reciprocity and allows individuals to focus more on themselves and their remaining relationships. As the size of personal networks becomes more manageable, individuals can cope with the demands of daily life, resulting in an improved quality of their life.

Reducing network size places more responsibility on close family and friends to help meet the challenges of daily life. Yet, stories told to this researcher by older adults suggest that family and friends are not always able to provide all of the necessary support or available to provide support. Some older adults need to reach beyond their circle of family and friends to meet the challenge of their daily lives even after they have reduced the size of their personal network. It is hypothesized that weak tie exchanges can potentially supplement the gaps of unmet needs resulting from a reduction in network size, without demanding increased emotional commitment or social obligation from participants in the exchange. The principles of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans 1961) imply that weak tie engagement does not require reciprocity, thus eliminating feelings of obligation, indebtedness, and stress associated with believing one has to repay support. Additionally, weak ties do not require establishing intimacy, which enables both parties to remain uninvolved in the details of one another's lives while remaining engaged in the support process.

Weak ties are a valuable resource for providing support. However, the caveats to relying on weak ties to fill unmet needs include the uncertainty of knowing how to access support, when support is available, and the scope of available support. The linkages among socioemotional selectivity theory, reduced personal networks, and weak ties can be used to help conceptualize how people with reduced networks of support access and rely heavily on weak ties for support.

#### Personal Characteristics

Identifying criteria for creating a sample for this study was challenging. Studies have shown that the effect of personal characteristics in predicting tie strength is inconclusive (Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Likewise, the influence of personal characteristics on the

exchange process is inconclusive (Morgan, Shuster, & Butler, 1991). Studies on social exchange have shown that human nature and exchange behaviors do not appear to vary between younger and older adults, although some factors linked with age, such as poor health and cognitive impairments, have been identified as limiting opportunities to engage in an exchange. Cultural and social expectations also influence behaviors associated with age and gender and may directly or indirectly affect the development and maintenance of social ties. Therefore, the personal characteristics chosen to guide the sample selection in this study were chosen based on current available information.

### *Age*

Age is not directly responsible for change in personal network composition. However, it is commonly used as a proxy variable for factors that influence the ability to perform daily activities, which may indirectly influence network size. For instance, as people age, their health status is likely to decline, which affects their ability to maintain relationships. Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995) suggests that reducing network size to accommodate health-related problems and reduce relationship stress is not a direct function of age, but a correlate of age. Another correlate of age is loss of mobility and physical access into the community (Antonucci, 2001; Berkman, 1995). Once limited, participation in community-based activities declines as do opportunities to develop and maintain relationships (Antonucci, 2001; Moen, Pillemer, Wethington, Glasgow, & Vesey, 2000).

Age is also used as a proxy for opportunities and experiences found in daily life. People of the same age group, or cohort, are more likely to have been raised with comparable systems of healthcare, technology, education, and cognitive orientations than those born during a different era. Subsequently, accounting for social and environmental influences and opportunities of particular cohort can help explain characteristics of that age group. Analysis of the normative events (e.g., high school graduation, marriage, raising children, retirement) and non-normative events (e.g., teen pregnancy, job loss, raising a child in late life) of a cohort can help explain the actions taken by individuals in the cohort to maintain relationships in their personal networks.

### *Gender*

Throughout life, opportunities to develop relationships vary according to the settings in which they take place (e.g., workplaces or churches), the availability and proximity of potential network members, and the personal strengths brought into the relationship (Connidis & Davies,

1990). In terms of relationship development, an individual's sex is not entirely responsible for the establishment and maintenance of relationships. Rather, societal influences create social norms and expectations that influence participation in relationships. Social exchange equity theorists suggest gender influences women and men to develop and engage in relationships differently (Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993).

Women are encouraged to be nurturers and thus engage in more supportive relationships with family and friends than men. They also provide more different types of support through their relationships than men do, including significantly more emotional support (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Additionally, women seek long-term relationships as sources of potential support for the future. When relationships end, women seek replacements to retain current levels of support.

Men tend to engage in fewer long-term relationships than women do and are less likely to search for or find a replacement when a relationship no longer exists. Men are also unlikely to include women, other than an intimate partner, described as nurturers in their personal networks. Research also indicates that as men age and lose relationships their lost ties are not replaced. The size of their personal network shrinks, resulting in fewer sources of support (Kahn, 1994; Pillemer & Glasgow, 2000).

Gender and age were the two personal characteristics chosen for this study to identify potential differences among the sample population. The indicator of gender was chosen because evidence indicates that men and women enter into and maintain their personal networks differently. Even though the nature of strong ties differs from weak ties, differences in how men and women engage in weak ties may emerge in the stories collected for this study. The indicator of age was chosen because it is a useful proxy for normal declines in daily functioning and may help identify differences among older adults with and without limitations, in their weak tie relationships.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### Inductive Inquiry

Previous research has focused more on applying the broader concept of weak ties than identifying and evaluating specific characteristics or functions. Numerous studies have focused on identifying the impact of weak ties within specific settings (e.g., the workplace) rather than examining the role of weak ties in the course of daily life and across various community venues. Therefore, the first step of this study was to collect examples of weak tie relationships to contribute to the development of the conceptual framework of weak ties.

This study used an inductive inquiry approach with a grounded theory methodology to capture participants' stories and identify weak tie characteristics and functions. Inductive inquiry is a qualitative approach that is useful in the development of a theoretical or conceptual framework when the generalization of findings to a larger population is not sought. When utilizing a grounded theory approach, the researcher is the instrument through which data are collected and analyzed (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005). The researcher's knowledge of the content area and sensitivity to the topic is essential in extracting meaning from the data. A grounded theory approach demands that data are systematically analyzed and reviewed. In the process, data that inform an emerging theory or concept are identified.

Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method of constant comparison was used in this study and complements a grounded theory approach. Throughout the analysis process, participant data (e.g., stories) were reviewed for patterns and themes. This method of recursive analysis allowed for the emergence of new themes and sub-themes, and accommodated changes in the course of theory development as nuances of themes became apparent. Reviewing and recoding data was conducted as appropriate.

I chose a grounded theory approach for this study because it enabled me to identify information that was not available through data produced by surveys or standardized tests. A drawback of using the approach was connected to sampling issues often associated with qualitative research. First, the study's participants were not randomly selected. Therefore, my sample consisted of people with similar qualities or characteristics. Second, the number of participants interviewed was influenced by my ability to gather, manage and analyze the information provided.

As in any qualitative study, sample size in this study was tentative and subject to increase as the interview process unfolded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two outcomes from the interview process that informed the final sample size were informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Informational redundancy occurred when no new information was gleaned from interviews with the respondents. Signs of informational redundancy surfaced following the first 29 interviews when it became evident that core concepts about exchanges within participants' stories were being repeated. After the first 35 interviews were coded, theoretical saturation occurred. No additional concepts or insights were found during analyses to support further interviews in developing the framework after that point. Even though informational redundancy and theoretical saturation occurred by the completion of the first 35 interviews, 50 interviews were conducted to meet the age criteria of the sampling matrix that was designed for this study (Table 1).

### Sample

Interviews for this study were conducted in southwest Virginia during July 2007 with a convenience sample of 50 participants, ages 65 and older (age range 65-84), who were active participants in their community church or square dance club. Senior centers in Montgomery and Giles Counties were initially targeted as recruitment sites for this study because the activities at the sites attract adults who are active in their communities, engage in interactions outside of their home, and thus have opportunities to engage in weak ties.

While recruiting the first group of participants, it quickly became apparent that limiting the sample to active older adults residing in Montgomery or Giles Counties would eliminate many available participants. The first participants were square dancers who informed me that because they traveled throughout southwest Virginia to participate in square dance activities, they did not necessarily live in the county in which they danced. I was invited to attend other club dances and participants were quickly identified using a snowball sampling technique. Tapping into the social network of the square dance community provided a sufficient number of contacts so as not to warrant recruitment techniques other than my presence at the nightly dances to solicit participation in the study. During the recruitment process, square dancers invited me to recruit participants from a church in Franklin County, which provided a division of the sample by community involvement rather than by county as originally planned.

Since more participants volunteered for interviews through the square dance club than through the church, the following steps were taken to place respondents in the sampling frame to meet sampling criteria and minimize bias. Those interviewed at the church were designated as part of the church group, and square dance members who talked about their feelings of connectedness to their church community were placed in the church group rather than the square dance group. Like the square dancers, the church members lived in different counties. Participants were not told about their group assignment nor asked additional questions to help in determining placement in the matrix. The final study sample included residents of Montgomery, Pulaski, Giles, Carroll, Henry, Bedford, Roanoke, and Franklin Counties and the City of Radford.

The sampling matrix designed for this study was based on 40 interviews, with the understanding that the sample size would be influenced by informational redundancy and theoretical saturation as the interview and coding process proceeded. The sampling matrix was divided by community activity. Within each activity, participants were categorized by sex and by age group sex (i.e., 65-74 and 75+). Each category within the activity included at least five participants. The quota was selected based on the assumption that at least 15 interviews would be needed to reach informational redundancy or theoretical saturation. Initially, a minimum of 40 participants were identified as necessary for conducting this study. The final placement of the 50 respondents who ultimately participated is presented in the matrix found in Table 1.

During the course of the interviews, I drew on my professional experience in the mental health field to determine whether a participant was capable of understanding the purpose of the study, the informed consent process, and the interview questions. Although I did not find that I needed to exclude any participants before or during the interviews, specific criteria were pre-established to inform my decision-making process. The interview would not proceed if the participant appeared confused or unable to understand the nature of the study questions. If the interview were already underway, I would tactfully conclude the interview process. If the interview had not begun, I would tactfully decline to conduct the interview. If the person refused to sign the informed consent or to have the interview tape recorded, he or she would not be included in this study. Additionally, if individuals were interested in participating in the study but did not fit the sampling frame criteria they would be placed on a waiting list and contacted if the sampling requirements changed.

## Interview Process

### *Informed Consent*

Data collection began after approval for the study (Appendix A) and the recruitment process (Appendix B) was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to asking the interview questions, each participant received a copy of the IRB approved informed consent document (Appendix C) to read and sign. Before conducting the interview and administering the survey, I reviewed the document with each individual, answered their questions about the process, and obtained their signature on the document signifying their agreement to participate.

### *Interview*

The interview process relied on two assumptions. The first assumption was that each participant understood that not all adult relationships are alike and do not hold equal status, and thus could distinguish differences in their relationships with others. The second assumption was that participants had not studied, much less thought about, the concept of weak tie relationships and the circumstances leading to weak tie exchanges. Therefore, to facilitate each participant's awareness and understanding of the concept and encourage recognition of their own weak tie relationships, an outline was developed to guide the interview process (Appendix D). As the interviews proceeded and I became aware of the language needed to increase participant understanding, I amended the interview process to be as efficient as possible while retaining the goal of finding answers to my research questions and remaining true to the overall study design. The final version of the interview process evolved into the steps outlined below.

After greeting the participant and exchanging pleasantries, I thanked individuals for their willingness to participate in the study. Each participant was seated at a table across from me in a setting away from other group members with the tape recorder placed between us on the table. None of the participants appeared to need to engage in any additional conversation in order to relax before the interview officially began. This could be attributed to the fact that word had spread quickly about what I was doing, and that the participants who agreed to participate were comfortable with the idea of talking to me.

Next, I described the purpose of the study and then presented each person with the informed consent to read and sign. If requested, I reviewed the form with them and answered questions concerning items on the form as they arose. If an individual stated that they did not come prepared with their reading glasses, I read the informed consent document to them and

indicated to them where they needed to sign their name. After the individual agreed to participate and to be tape-recorded, the interview began. To save transcription time, only the actual stories related by the participants and responses to follow-up questions were recorded.

One of the initial concerns in designing this study was that participants would not be able to provide examples of weak tie relationships because they had not thought about their interactions with people that they did not know well. A second concern was that they would focus on proximate friendships rather than distal relationships. To ensure that each participant understood the type of relationships that I was interested in, a relationship map of concentric circles (Appendix E) was available for reference. Three of the 50 participants needed to refer to the map for clarification. In all three circumstances, the participants only needed to understand that if they placed themselves in the middle of the map, close family and friends would surround them, with people less close placed further away from the center. I pointed to the outermost circle on the map and asked that they talk about the people who they thought might be positioned there. The remaining 47 participants understood the types of relationships of interest without use of the map, and their stories and responses to follow-up questions confirmed their comprehension.

Another concern in designing the study was that in order to get individuals to talk about weak tie interactions, I would need to provide examples and would thus bias or limit the types of responses provided. Therefore, I took caution to be as brief as possible in the description of the study and the opening interview statement. After testing different approaches to present material to the first six participants, my interview started with the following sentences:

I am looking for examples of a time when someone you did not know, or someone you did not know well, helped you or provided you with some type of support. Can you recall a time when that may have occurred? Tell me about it.

If the participant struggled to come up with an example, I suggested, “Maybe there was a time at work, or a time when you were sick, or moving to a new home?”

I gave participants as much time as they needed to think, and the second question appeared to be enough to stimulate the participant’s memory and to provide an example. Participants were encouraged to relate as many examples as they wished, resulting in 72 examples. If a person began to tell a story that involved a strong tie relationship, I followed up by acknowledging their story and then asked them to think about weak tie interactions related to that

story. It was not difficult for participants to refocus on weak ties once redirected through questioning. One participant had no examples to provide to me during the interview time. However, after leaving the room the participant thought about it further and returned to relate a story to me.

Participants were initially asked to provide stories in which they were recipients of weak tie support, as it was assumed those situations might be easier to recall. However, during the course of the interview participants were encouraged to talk about times when they were providers of weak tie support. In the analysis of social exchange and weak tie exchange, delineating the roles of provider and recipient becomes somewhat artificial in the sense that one individual can occupy both roles simultaneously. A person can provide information or assistance and receive validation and social acceptance because of participating in a single exchange (Fiore, Coppel, Becker, & Cox, 1986; Jung, 1988). Therefore, the findings in this study do not differentiate providers from recipients within the proposed framework. In some categories, however, supporting evidence may focus more on one role than the other.

Several participants were retired educators or ministers who were very articulate in sharing their experiences. As a result, these participants needed fewer follow-up questions because they had already provided needed information in their responses. However, I continued to ask follow-up questions to extract more details about the exchanges, to increase my understanding about the circumstances surrounding the interaction and answer my research questions.

Follow-up questions were tailored to each participant's story and the nature of the questions depended on how forthcoming the participant was with information about the experience. General types of questions included:

Who initiated the interaction? What was the most important thing about this experience?  
How did this experience help you? Have you developed a closer relationship with this person since that time? Why do you think that person helped you? Have you experienced the same situation with someone else where you were the one that could provide help?  
Do you think this experience changed the way that you treat the other person today? Did your experience change your outlook on \_\_\_\_?

None of the participants had difficulty relating their stories during the interviews and the follow-up questions did not appear to cause distress. While I did not expect the interview

process to be emotionally difficult for the participants, I was prepared to respond in a supportive manner to those who found it stressful to recount their story. If that had occurred, I would have been prepared to treat each person respectfully and provide ample time for him or her to recall his or her experience. They also would have been encouraged to complete the interview process but allowed to end the interview if they chose to withdraw.

#### *Demographic Data Collection*

After the interview portion was completed, I asked each participant for demographic information not volunteered during the interview. Personal information was collected on participant age, sex, and length of time living in the area. None of the participants refused to provide personal information.

### Data Analyses

#### *Transcription and Identifying Information*

All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist for ease in analysis. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to disguise identity during reporting activities. Identifying information was stored separately from recordings and transcripts during the course of the project. Identifying information and recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the analyses and in accordance with IRB requirements.

#### *Reflexive Activities*

The purpose of using inductive analysis in exploring weak tie relationships was to let the data emerge naturally without forcing findings into the framework of previously hypothesized concepts (Patton, 2002). To enhance the outcome of naturally emerging themes, the evaluation process included two reflexive activities. First, I maintained a journal in which I wrote comments after each interview. I noted environmental, behavioral, and emotional influences and reactions in it as well as reflections on my personal perceptions and biases towards the participant and the interview process. I revisited journal entries throughout the coding process to raise my awareness of my biases and external influences in identifying themes within the stories provided.

The second reflexive tool was conferring with a second coder during the analysis of the transcripts. A doctoral student trained as a family therapist checked my coding on 70% of the

transcripts and provided feedback. Throughout the coding process, we discussed the coding framework, coding process, the identified themes and differences in interpreting the transcripts.

### *Coding*

Open and axial coding processes were used to identify the characteristics and functions of weak tie relationships. Coding was accomplished by using the computer software package, Atlas.ti 5.2 (Muhr, 2004) to facilitate identification of themes and sub themes and relationships among themes. The open coding process began with my reading each transcript and all related journal entries before any coding began. This helped to reacquaint me with the interview and any personal biases that might have influenced my ability to identify the themes. Each transcript was coded using the method of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process involves comparing themes identified in earlier transcripts to the current transcript to construct the most accurate theoretical or conceptual framework. As themes emerged and solidified, transcripts were reviewed at least three times and recoded to reflect the changing nature of the coding scheme. Axial coding began when the nuances of the overarching themes became apparent and subgroups emerged.

After I coded the first 10 transcripts, the second coder began reviewing my work. We corresponded regularly to develop the final framework and discussed the interpretation of findings. During the coding process, participant quotes that appeared to be exceptionally rich in describing weak tie interactions were identified by both coders for use in the final written analysis of this study.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

### Manuscript A: Characteristics and Functions of Weak Ties

#### Abstract

A conceptual framework of weak tie interactions was developed based on the inductive analysis of stories provided by 50 active community-living adults ages 65 and older. Analysis was influenced by the concepts of interpersonal tie strength, loose connections, social exchange theory, and social support. Results indicate that weak tie relationships occur in a variety of community settings and in response to a variety of daily challenges. The exchanges occur more frequently with acquaintances than strangers and the initiator of the exchange is generally the person offering support. The types of support offered are broad-based and include instrumental, emotional, and informational support. Weak tie exchanges range from one-time brief interactions to intermittent exchanges over extended periods, depending on the circumstances. Findings also suggest that weak tie exchanges have a specific task or purpose, encourage awareness about the value and purpose of social interactions, and influence participants' future social interactions. The framework developed provides a foundation for further testing of weak ties and the development of instruments to measure tie strength.

#### Introduction

Personal relationships and the support received through them contribute significantly to how individuals cope with the challenges faced in daily life (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Erikson, 2003; Nelson, 1966; Weiss, 1974). Family members are the primary sources of actual and perceived support (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cohen et al., 2000; Schafer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981) because they tend to have the necessary insight, familiarity, emotional commitment and obligation to meet individual member's needs and expectations over time (Bott, 1971; Homans, 1961). While many scholars have focused on studying relationships with family members and friends, less work has been conducted on the supportive relationships between people who are not emotionally close or committed to one another.

The purpose of this study was to clarify the characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, or properties) and functions (e.g., outcome, purposes, or meanings derived from the interaction) of relationships known as weak ties. A weak tie exchange is a brief exchange between people who do not know each other well and who subsequently share low levels of trust, commitment, and feelings of connectedness in their relationship with one another. In weak

tie exchanges, interactions are limited to achieving a specific goal. Once the exchange has concluded, there is no expectation that the relationship will continue. However, during the course of the interaction participants encounter new people, material goods, and opportunities, making the weak tie connection an important conduit for accessing valuable resources (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). These brief, but nonetheless important sources of support represent an estimated 9-11% of all exchange relationships (Amato, 1990).

## Literature Review

### *Interpersonal Ties*

Granovetter's (1973) work on interpersonal tie strength informs the concept of weak ties. He posited that dyadic relationships vary in strength and intensity due to differences in shared feelings of trust, commitment, and connectedness (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). The intersection of trust, commitment, and connectedness in a relationship influences the strength of the relational tie (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993; Thye, 2000; Welch et al., 2007). As a tie becomes stronger, the potential for developing a stable and long-term relationship increases due to increased levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness. The presence of trust implies fair and mutual support exists between participants. Both hold the belief that the other will meet unfulfilled needs in the future. Commitment is a pledge to remain in a relationship over time and forego immediate receipt of benefits until a later time. Connectedness refers to feelings of intimacy, cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging. Strong interpersonal ties depend upon high levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness to sustain relationships and are generally characterized by long-term ties with close family members and friends. Conversely, weak ties are brief interactions typically associated with acquaintances and strangers and based on low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness.

At face value, weak ties may be perceived as minor, insignificant, or unmemorable interactions. Nevertheless, weak tie engagement can result in significant and beneficial outcomes. Granovetter (1973, 1974, 1982) highlighted the benefits of weak tie engagement for individuals seeking employment opportunities. He found that weak tie interactions produced more potential job leads, which resulted in more job offers, than strong tie interactions. This, he concluded, was explained by the lack of diversity in the resources available to individuals within

a personal or family network. When people associate with others like themselves, they share comparable resources and information, which ultimately limits access to opportunities and growth beyond their own network. Weak tie relationships occur within the social network and have the ability to integrate new opportunities and resources into personal networks that would otherwise be overlooked. Thus, as Granovetter found, weak ties expand options and possibilities for change among job seekers.

Weak ties may also be useful when help from a strong tie would be inconvenient or impractical. For example, enlisting the help of local acquaintances to assist with a household move is preferable to relying on a sibling who lives 500 miles away. By relying on acquaintances, fewer demands are placed on the person living at a distance and less stress is placed on the sibling relationship, reserving it for other more important times and situations. In emergencies, weak ties may also be considered default resources when strong ties are not available. That is, assuming that help from an acquaintance or stranger would be preferable to receiving no help at all.

Each of the previous situations mentioned illustrates weak ties as being brief, infrequent, and limited to providing specific types of help (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that weak ties may be accessed more frequently and for multiple types of support as demonstrated by people confronted by significant life challenges, such as major medical problems (e.g., hospitalization) or recovery from natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina). In those situations, individuals may actually increase their reliance on weak ties and depend on them as a source of relief and support. These weak tie exchanges between the same two people may take place beyond one interaction and extend over a period time.

### *Indicators of Tie Strength*

In developing the concept of weak ties, Granovetter (1973) relied on the principles and assumptions of social exchange theory, which is based on the notion that exchanges are negotiated processes inherent to human nature. In any relationship or exchange, participants act as rational beings and weigh the costs and benefits of their participation throughout the exchange process. They make judgments as to whether or not potential benefits received outweigh perceived drains on time, energy, and resources in order to maximize benefits from each exchange.

Assumptions about human relationships made by social exchange theorists suggest that in order for relationships to be maintained, they must include levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness (Homans, 1961). Building from this assumption, Granovetter posited that four indicators influenced relational strength: length of time, which demonstrates commitment to the relationship, degree of intimacy, which demonstrates connectedness, emotional intensity or closeness, which influences commitment and connectedness, and the presence of reciprocity, which demonstrates trust. He characterized the strongest interpersonal ties as reciprocal, long-standing, and based on shared feelings of commitment and intimacy. Conversely, he identified the weakest interpersonal ties as short in duration, lacking a shared sense of commitment, and limited to task specific interactions.

Other scholars have since suggested that tie strength is also influenced by indicators such as the extent of mutual acknowledgement by participants of their relationship (Friedkin, 1980), the duration of contact (Wellman, 1982), the extent to which individuals are connected to the same social network, and the frequency of contact between individuals. Although the frequency of contact between individuals appeared to be an influence, it operated independently of tie strength and the two were not positively correlated (Lin, Dayton, & Greenwald, 1978). Whereas none of the characteristics serve as a reliable predictor of tie strength, three dimensions have consistently emerged as fundamental to the conceptualization and operation of interpersonal tie strength: trust, commitment, and connectedness. Of the three, the dimension of connectedness appeared to influence tie strength more than commitment and trust. Marsden and Campbell (1984) reasoned that apparent inconsistencies in defining and conceptualizing tie strength across studies and disciplines is responsible for the lack of establishing a key indicator of weak ties.

#### *Loose Connections*

Wuthnow (1998) was the first scholar to identify characteristics specific to weak ties in his work describing the “loose connections” providing support within social networks. Based on principles and assumptions about relationships associated with social exchange theory, he identified eight characteristics consistent with Granovetter’s (1973, 1974, 1982) broader conceptualization. Wuthnow described weak ties in the following manner:

1. The overall length of the relationship is brief.
2. The relationship can easily be initiated or terminated by either person.
3. There is a lack of connection (emotional closeness) between people.

4. The interactions are infrequent.
5. The duration of the interaction is short.
6. The interaction is generally unanticipated.
7. The interaction is limited to specific tasks or activities.
8. The interactions occur in heterogeneous networks.

When Wuthnow's eight characteristics are examined separately, the traits are easily identified with most relationships (weak or strong) at some point in time. However, when viewed collectively in the context of one interaction, the characteristics represent core features of a weak interpersonal tie, especially when coupled with the presence of low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness in the relationship.

Wuthnow's (1998) framework has provided a foundation from which scholars can examine weak ties further. However, the framework is narrow-focused when compared with anecdotal descriptions of weak tie interactions, as it does not account for variations in the characteristics of exchanges. Nor does it address external influences that could potentially mediate the exchange such as participant knowledge, skills, abilities, exchange histories, beliefs, social expectations, and desire to engage. Thus, the structure of weak ties may need to be conceptualized differently. This study was designed to identify the core characteristics of weak tie interactions as well as the influences participants bring to the exchange to advance conceptualization and inform development of instruments to measure weak ties.

#### Research Questions

The characteristics identified by Granovetter (1973) and Wuthnow (1998) remain untested. While some scholars have chosen to incorporate the overarching concept of weak ties into their research there is a paucity of work that moves the concept from broad conceptualization to more concrete and testable terms. This study was designed to move the concept forward by identifying the characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, or properties) and functions (e.g., outcomes, purposes served, meanings derived from interacting) of weak tie interactions.

Wuthnow (1998) hypothesized eight core characteristics of weak ties, yet he provided limited support for development other than citing principles and assumptions of exchange theory. In light of this, this study employed an inductive approach to understanding weak tie

relationships in order to ensure that identification of dimensions were optimized and not constrained by current hypothesized frameworks.

The research questions developed for this study included:

1. What are the characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, or properties) of weak tie relationships?
2. What are the functions (e.g., outcome, purpose, or meaning derived from the interaction) of weak tie relationships?

### Methodology

This study used an inductive inquiry approach with a grounded theory methodology to capture participants' stories and identify weak tie characteristics and functions. Inductive inquiry is a qualitative approach that is useful in the development of a theoretical or conceptual framework when the generalization of findings to a larger population is not sought. When utilizing a grounded theory approach, the researcher is the instrument through which data are collected and analyzed (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005). The researcher's knowledge of the content area and sensitivity to the topic is essential in extracting meaning from the data. A grounded theory approach demands that data are systematically analyzed and reviewed. In the process, data that inform an emerging theory or concept are identified.

Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method of constant comparison was used in this study and complements a grounded theory approach. Throughout the analysis process, participant data (e.g., stories) was reviewed for patterns and themes. This method of recursive analysis allowed for the emergence of new themes and sub-themes, and accommodated changes in the course of theory development as nuances of themes became apparent. Reviewing and recoding data was conducted as appropriate.

As in any qualitative study, sample size in this study was tentative and subject to increase as the interview process unfolded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two outcomes from the interview process that informed the final sample size were informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Informational redundancy occurred when no new information was gleaned from interviews with the respondents. Signs of informational redundancy surfaced following the first 29 interviews when it became evident that core concepts about exchanges within participants' stories were being repeated. After the first 35 interviews were coded, theoretical saturation occurred. No additional concepts or insights

were found during analyses to support further interviews in developing the framework after that point. Even though informational redundancy and theoretical saturation occurred by the completion of the first 35 interviews, 50 interviews were conducted to meet the age criteria of the sampling matrix that was designed for this study.

### Sample

Interviews for this study were conducted in southwest Virginia during July 2007 with a convenience sample of 50 participants ages 65 and older (age range 65-84) who were active participants in their community church or square dance club. Using a snowball sampling technique, recruitment for study participants began at a local senior center. Forty interviews provided the basis for the sampling matrix, with the understanding that the sample size would be influenced by informational redundancy and theoretical saturation as the interview and coding process.

The personal characteristics chosen to guide the sample selection in this study include age, gender, and community activity of participants. Studies have shown that the effect of personal characteristics in predicting tie strength (Marsden & Campbell, 1984) and effect on the exchange process is inconclusive (Morgan, Shuster, & Butler, 1991). Therefore, sampling criteria was based on current available information.

Studies on social exchange have shown that human nature and exchange behaviors do not appear to vary between younger and older adults, although some factors linked with age, such as poor health and cognitive impairments, have been identified as limiting opportunities to engage in an exchange. Other studies suggest that cultural and social expectations influence behaviors associated with age and gender and may directly or indirectly affect the development and maintenance of social ties. Therefore, age and gender were selected as criteria for the sampling matrix designed for this study. Additionally, participants were categorized by their involvement with a local square dance club or community church. Each participant was actively engaged in their activity and it was assumed that as a result of participation, each had many opportunities to engage in weak tie relationships. Similarities between the two groups were hypothesized to be greater than differences, based on the inclusive nature of weak tie exchanges.

In this study, the sampling matrix was divided by community activity. Within each activity, participants were categorized by sex and by age group sex (i.e., 65-74 and 75+). Each category within the activity included at least five participants. The quota was selected based on

the assumption that at least 15 interviews would be needed to reach informational redundancy or theoretical saturation. Initially, a minimum of 40 participants were identified as necessary for conducting this study. The final placement of the 50 respondents who ultimately participated is presented in the matrix found in Table 1.

### Interviews

The interview process relied on two assumptions. The first assumption was that each participant understood that not all adult relationships are alike and do not hold equal status, and thus could distinguish differences in their relationships with others. The second assumption was that participants had not studied, much less thought about, the concept of weak tie relationships and the circumstances leading to weak tie exchanges. Therefore, to facilitate each participant's awareness and understanding of the concept and encourage recognition of their own weak tie relationships, an outline was developed to guide the interview process. As the initial interviews proceeded and I became aware of the language I needed to use to increase participant understanding, the interview process was amended to be as efficient as possible while retaining the goal of finding answers to my research questions and remaining true to the overall study design.

One of the initial concerns in designing this study was that participants would not be able to provide examples of weak tie relationships because they have not thought about their interactions with people that they did not know well. Another concern was that they would focus on proximate friendships rather than distal relationships. To ensure that each participant understood the type of relationship in which I was interested, a relationship map of four concentric circles was available for reference. Three of the 50 participants needed to refer to the map for clarification. In all three circumstances, the participants only needed to understand that if they placed themselves in the middle of the map, close family and friends would surround them, with people less close placed further away from the center. I pointed to the edge of the outermost circle on the map and asked that they talk about the people who they thought might be positioned there. The remaining 47 participants understood the types of relationships of interest without use of the map, and their stories and responses to follow-up questions confirmed their comprehension.

Another concern in designing the study was that in order to get individuals to talk about weak tie interactions, I would need to provide examples and would thus bias or limit the types of

responses provided. Therefore, I took caution to be as brief as possible in the description of the study and the opening interview statement. After conducting the first six interviews, my interview started with the following sentences:

I am looking for examples of times when someone you did not know, or someone you did not know well helped you or provided you with some type of support. Can you recall a time when that may have occurred? Tell me about it.

If the participant struggled to come up with an example, I suggested, “Maybe there was a time at work, or a time when you were sick, or moving to a new home?”

I gave participants as much time as they needed to think and the second question appeared to be enough to stimulate the participant’s memory and to provide an example. Participants were encouraged to relate as many examples as they wished, resulting in 72 examples.

Participants were initially asked to provide stories in which they were recipients of weak tie support because it was assumed those situations might be easier to recall. However, as the interview process unfolded, they were encouraged to talk about times when they were providers of weak tie support. In the analysis of social exchange and weak tie exchange, delineating the roles of provider and recipient becomes somewhat artificial in the sense that one individual can occupy both roles simultaneously. A person can provide information or assistance and receive validation and social acceptance because of participating in a single exchange (Fiore, Coppel, Becker, & Cox, 1986; Jung, 1988). Therefore, the findings in this study do not differentiate providers from recipients within the proposed framework. In some categories, however, supporting evidence may focus more on one role than the other.

### Analysis

The purpose of using inductive analysis in exploring weak tie relationships was to let the data emerge naturally without forcing findings into the framework of previously hypothesized concepts (Patton, 2002). To enhance the outcome of naturally emerging themes, the evaluation process included two reflexive activities. First, I maintained an interview journal to note environmental, behavioral, and emotional influences and my personal perceptions and biases towards the participant and the interview process. I revisited journal entries throughout the coding process to raise my awareness of my biases and external influences in identifying themes within the stories provided. Second, a second coder checked 70% of the transcripts and provided

feedback on the emerging coding scheme. Throughout the coding process, we discussed the coding framework, coding process, the identified themes and differences in interpreting the transcripts.

### *Coding*

Open and axial coding was accomplished by using the computer software package, Atlas.ti 5.2 (Muhr, 2004) to facilitate identification of themes and sub themes and relationships among themes. The open coding process began a reading of each transcript and all related journal entries. Each transcript was coded using the method of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process involves comparing themes identified in earlier transcripts to the current transcript to construct the most accurate theoretical or conceptual framework. As themes emerged and solidified, transcripts were reviewed at least three times and recoded to reflect the changing nature of the coding scheme. Axial coding began when the nuances of the overarching themes became apparent and subgroups emerged.

### Findings

The inductive approach used in this study facilitated the emergence of characteristics (e.g., distinctive qualities, traits, and properties) and functions (e.g., outcome, purposes, or meanings derived from the interaction) of weak ties and challenging some previously held notions about weak tie exchanges. To help the reader gain a clearer understanding of weak tie relationships, excerpts from stories provided by study participants are provided.

### Characteristics

#### *Acquaintances and Strangers*

The stories provided by participants in this study confirm that weak tie relationships occur between people who do not know each other well, such as acquaintances. Most met the other person through social activities, work, church, community settings, or met through family members and friends, or friends of friends.

I asked a good friend of mine who's been on the board at the hospital for 20 years, "Can you give me the name of a great surgeon?" And he said, "I'll take care of it." And he talked to the director of the hospital, and she put me in touch with such a man. He diagnosed me and sent me to the hospital for tests. And this woman, this director, came down to see me to check on me. That's no credit to me. That's credit to my friend.

Strangers are not considered members of personal networks because they are unknown and unfamiliar to one another. Yet they are part of the overarching social network and do participate in weak tie exchanges. Interactions with strangers tended to occur during emergencies or in response to a pressing need.

I was at the hospital and there was a lady sitting with me in the waiting room by herself and a nurse came out and told her that her husband was dying. She was left alone to sit there. So, I took her by the arm and took her into the intensive care to be with him while he passed away. I didn't stay.

In many stories where a stranger was involved in the weak tie interaction, the relationship may have actually transitioned into an acquaintanceship prior to the actual exchange. The situation in which the strangers found themselves had a bonding influence that facilitated shared feelings of connectedness with each other. The situation was the impetus for establishing their relationship. For instance, two strangers standing in line for hours to buy tickets to a show will recognize fatigue in one another and may offer to reserve each person's place in line while they take turns stepping out of line to buy a drink or use the rest room. The act of sharing a situation makes it possible for strangers to make a connection and enter into an exchange.

### *Initiation*

More often than not, the person who initiated the weak tie interaction was the person providing support.

We were stranded quite a few years ago in Iowa when our radiator had dried. We were going to get some water from a place along the road, but then somebody came by, and they had water so they filled our radiator.

Generally, when individuals initiated an interaction on their own behalf, no alternatives for help were available. This finding suggests the influence of social expectations on weak ties. Many participants remarked that they expected that if they were capable of managing for themselves then they should do that before seeking help from others. In turn, they expected the same from others.

### *Circumstance, Settings, and Occurrences*

Although the most common reasons for weak tie exchanges were medical situations and crises, interactions occurred in a variety of community settings: neighborhoods, workplaces, medical environments, churches, public spaces, and social events. Exchanges frequently took

place in the same place where individuals initially met. However, initial introductions sometimes resulted in an exchange that took place during another time and in another place. The stories also suggested that weak tie exchanges between the same two participants could occur multiple times, even over the course of several years. Some weak tie exchanges occurred spontaneously, whereas others were planned.

The mediating effect of the setting or environment on the interaction process could not be determined from the data provided in this study. However, participant stories suggested that some settings carry more importance or generate more of a sense of immediacy or urgency. For instance, exchanges that took place in medical environments or during emergencies were viewed as more urgent and worthy of attention than those occurring under less demanding or less pressured situations.

#### *Response to Need*

The weak tie exchange was frequently based on one individual's perception or perceived need that another individual was under stress and could benefit from some support. The provider sometimes initiated support without the other participant reaching out for help.

It was in the summer and we were on vacation with the grandchildren. We were going down the highway and our car died. The electrical system just shut down. So, we pulled over to the side of the road. While we were sitting there this van stopped and the driver said, "Do you need help?" And we said, "No, we know help is on the way." So, he said, "Okay," and he went on down the road and about 15 minutes later he came back. He had gone to a convenience store and bought cold drinks for the kids and us because we were sitting up on the hill in the shade trying to keep cool and he said, "I just thought maybe you could use some refreshment while you were waiting."

In other instances, weak tie exchanges occurred in response to actual needs that were clearly recognizable. Many respondents provided examples of weak tie interactions that occurred in response to major medical situations. Stories relating to medical needs were generally told first when multiple stories were provided during the interview. This may be an artifact of the sample group and their age, as the likelihood of medicals become more acute and more frequent in their lives.

I was going through chemo and I started getting cards from parishioners here. Some I didn't even know or didn't know well. There were handwritten notes on them and things

like that. I ended up with 40 some. ... I mean I had the world's easiest bout of chemo, but my wife works in Vienna every day so I was alone every day feeling so tired that I couldn't, you know, work in the garden or in my workshop and those were definitely pick-me-up kinds of things. At the time it made me feel closer to those people. Now, if you asked me their names, I couldn't tell you, you know? I guess it made me feel closer to like the church as a whole rather than one particular individual.

However, some weak tie exchanges occurred in response to major life events that were not medical in nature.

We had just bought a house in a rural area. We hired somebody to move us down and on moving day this whole extended family, our new neighbors, showed up. When we got there, they were in our little shack with this great big huge sign that said, "Welcome". So, that really made us feel good. They spent the whole day with us and helped us and the movers.

Participants also recalled times when weak ties helped them or others face a minor daily challenge.

And this fellow came out of his house and saw my car parked alongside the road, took a gas can into town and filled it up and brought it back. Didn't even want money for the gas. But I ended up paying him for it. It was not a big thing, but it made a big difference in my day.

Participant stories indicated that weak tie exchanges occurred in response to a variety of needs that were either perceived by the participants or clearly apparent. Responses to need were not simply restricted to emergencies or less noteworthy routine activities. Medical-related issues dominated many participant stories, as might be expected among a sample of older adults. However, no differences in the ability to identify needs could be connected to participant characteristics (age, sex, and community activity).

#### *Effect on Relationship Status*

After relating their stories, participants reflected on whether their relationship with the stranger or acquaintance changed because of the interaction. Some stated that they had become closer and maintained a friendship. This generally occurred when the frequency and duration of interactions increased over time. However, the point at which weak ties evolved into strong ties was not discernable from data collected in this study. The possibility that this transformation

does occur is supported by the notion that once people share a common experience and perceive a shared benefit from the exchange, they feel more connected to one another, resulting in increased confidence to continue their exchange in the future. Their experiences contribute to building levels of trust, commitment and connectedness in their relationship, strengthening their relational tie. One participant reinforced this when he stated, “I suspect his initial motives were to give me guidance. But it grew to a very profound friendship, and it eventually moved into the father and son role I never had.”

In summary, a wide range of activities, circumstances, and conditions characterize weak ties. Exchanges primarily involve acquaintances although may include strangers. The interactions take place in a variety of formal and informal community settings and may be initiated by either participant. Interactions are generally brief and usually occur only once, though they may occur multiple times between the same participants and over many years. The exchange process happens in response to an actual or perceived need for help and may transpire spontaneously or be the result of planning. In light of these findings, it is possible to conclude that weak tie interactions include a broad spectrum of exchanges that take place throughout daily life.

#### Functions of Weak Ties

In this study, the functions of weak tie exchanges emerged as three distinct dimensions: outcome (type of support exchanged), purpose (the desired goal), and meaning (what it meant to the participant). In some instances, when the need for instrumental support was particularly strong and focused, the emergent themes among the three factors were less distinct as the outcome, purpose, and meaning held similar foci; to obtain needed support. Yet, overall, the emergent themes for outcomes, purposes, and meanings represented a diverse range of functions that broaden the scope and conceptualization of weak tie interaction.

#### *Outcomes*

Granovetter (1973) hypothesized that because weak ties are less frequent and intimate (i.e., close) than strong ties, they do not fall under the same obligations of exchange. Hence, expectation for the support provided by weak ties should not be the same as the expectation of the support provided through strong ties. Wellman and Wortley (1990) found that strong ties provided a broader scope of support than weak ties, including more emotional support and minor services. However, they found no significant differences between strong and weak ties in the

provision of financial and major service support. In this study, participant stories indicated that the types of support exchanged through weak ties fell into the same three categories of support identified through social support research: instrumental, emotional, or informational (Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & McKay, 1984; Schafer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981; Willis, 1985). Data also suggested that weak ties provide instrumental support more frequently than other types of support.

Instrumental support includes the provision of goods and services, such as carrying a bag of groceries for someone, donating money, or supervising a child while a parent runs an errand. It is represented by the following two stories:

We were walking up and down the streets looking for an apartment. This lady came along in a car and asked us what we were doing. So she put us in her car, a total stranger, and took us around and helped us find a beautiful little apartment overlooking the bay.

Consistent with Granovetter's (1973) work on securing employment, one participant recalled how a weak tie got him back into the workforce:

I was only out of work two weeks because I ran into a guy I had worked with on a project for the military in D.C. I worked for a small software firm up and he worked for IBM. He had left for some reason, but ended up heading up the Department of Health data processing group. Once we reconnected, he recognized me and where I had been, and he hired me on the spot. So that interaction was very good.

Emotional support facilitates resiliency, mental well-being, and encourages individuals to help themselves. The provision of emotional support can buoy one's feelings of self-worth through actions of kindness, empathy, and love, as the following example demonstrates.

Well before his operation, one couple we know through the church, said, "We'll come up and sit with you while you wait." And I thought that was very nice of them because, my son had already come up and we didn't have that close attachment with them. I think it made it easier for my son and I to cope. The day of the operation, we were just waiting you know, chitchatting and stuff and as soon as my husband got back to the room, they left.

A few individuals reported receiving an emotional and spiritual lift from the help of others in their church. One participant recalled, "At my church, ladies, some of them I didn't know that well, met every Saturday and prayed for me and my illness. I am Christian and that meant a lot to

me.” Some participants found support knowing that other people cared, even if they did not meet them face to face.

I was still recovering and sleeping a lot, and I'd wake up and find a note on the table from somebody. Oh, I was here at such and such a time, you were sleeping so I left you alone. And people would stop in and check to see how I'm doing and some of them would stay awhile and some of them would just come and leave.

Informational support includes sharing knowledge, opinions, and insight as well as offering options for solving challenges. Some participants recalled receiving needed information in the course of brief one-time interactions.

This happened about I'd say 30 some odd years ago. We were living in New York, and I had to go to the airport in Newark, and that was before the interstate went directly to the airport, and I had to drive down there by myself, and I thought I knew where I was going. As I got closer to Newark, I found out I didn't know where I was going so I pulled over to the side of the road and took out a map to orient myself to see if I could figure out where I was and how to get to the airport and some guy pulls up behind me, gets out of his car and says, “Are you lost?” And I said, “I'm trying to get to the Newark Airport.” He says, “Okay, follow me.” So I followed him, and he directed me to the entrance of the airport!

Another form of informational support includes offering guidance, in which one person acts as an authoritative figure and provides support and leadership to help solve a problem or to promote personal growth (Schafer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981). The most unexpected finding in this study was the emergence of mentorships originating from weak tie relationships.

One day while I was sitting on the stool in the drug store, this gentleman, I had seen him at church, says, “Why don't you come to work for me at the drug store?” And I did, and he sort of took me under his wing. He had worked out a schedule to where I could work. I would come down from school and work the lunch crowd, eat my free lunch, and then get back to school for the afternoon classes and then go back to work after school let out.

And so one day he says, “Well, why don't you start thinking about going to college.” So I did. He was always guiding me and most of the time he would show me a way to make the money or apply for funds but on occasion, he would actually pull money out of his own pocket to help me. He helped me until I the day I graduated from pharmacy school.

Four participants recalled a mentorship that began as a weak tie. Each example was

different in content and focus. The example presented above occurred during adolescence, one took place during young adulthood, and the other two occurred during mid-life. Three related to professional development, one related to personal growth, and two ended when the mentorship process ended. None of the participants recalled seeking out the guidance they received. Each believed they just found themselves in a situation where there was someone wanting to nurture their development and provide them with guidance, thus influencing the course of their lives.

In contrast to Granovetter's (1973) conceptualization of weak ties, the types of support identified in this study included a wide array of instrumental, emotional, and informational support. Support ranged from seemingly inconsequential support such as offering spare change to helping individuals cope with major life events such as illnesses, moving into a new home, and professional development. Participants frequently described interactions that occurred outside of their regular routines and beyond the border of their own communities, suggesting that weak tie exchanges can take place anywhere. The descriptions also indicate that weak ties are more likely to take place when a source of regular support or strong tie support is unavailable.

#### Purpose

The stories of weak ties provided by participants contained at least one identifiable purpose and included at least one of the following activities: to ease a hardship or inconvenience, facilitate personal or professional growth, improve personal outlook on life, offer a thoughtful gesture, or facilitate spiritual growth. As earlier research has suggested (Granovetter, 1973; Wuthnow, 1998), many weak tie exchanges are brief and exist only long enough to ease an inconvenience. For example, one participant remarked, "She had some children that were older than mine so she would regularly give us their hand-me-downs and I was glad to take them." Other brief exchanges facilitated personal growth for recipients and providers of support, even when support was unexpected. One man recalled, "Now, receiving the cards has made me, ah, more inclined to reach out and talk to people who are going to be experiencing the same thing. It's taught me to open up more." Another participant commented, "I felt good after the time we spent together. And they helped me probably more than I helped them."

The purpose of some weak tie interactions was to provide a thoughtful gesture, a hug, or a few kind words. For example, "She always had an encouraging word. She always had time to sit and talk a moment." Some weak ties seemed to appear from nowhere with the purpose of reaffirming personal faith. "It was like the Lord sent him to me. And maybe that's what

happened and whatever the case I've said, 'Thank you, Lord' and I mean that."

In some situations, weak tie relationships contributed to improving a person's outlook on life:

So, his taking me under his wing was an extension of his generosity. He taught me what to do and I've found it socially rewarding, but also maybe importantly emotionally rewarding because I think better of myself now since I'm no longer failing as often.

Other weak tie exchanges are avenues for alleviating, though not necessarily remedying, hardships:

I was having trouble with my investment portfolio, and there was a nice gentleman sitting over to the side, but I had no idea how he made his living. And it turned out he had an interest in stocks and trading stocks and things like that including options, and so since I was hurting at the time I briefly took the liberty of telling him the fix that I was in and not expecting him to do anything with it, but maybe see if he had a new idea I hadn't considered since he was doing the same sort of thing, but it turned out that he was actually a very wealthy, very successful stock trader. So much so that he had his own personal seat on the Stock Exchange. And he took me under his wing and taught me. At the point when we began talking, we were casual acquaintances. Not friends.

Consistent with Granovetter's (1973) findings about weak ties in the workplace, some weak ties serve the purpose of facilitating professional development.

It's only upon reflection that I look back and recognize what those two men were to me. I did seek from them understanding of the people around me and things I had to be sensitive to and so on. They were very helpful in that fashion. So, I enjoyed that support, and I think it did help me in my career.

For providers of support, the purpose of their engagement in a weak tie was sometimes a way to repay support they had received from someone else in the past. The basis for this form of indirect and generalized reciprocity is the notion that payment for the provision of support can be deferred to someone else in need. Participants in this type of reciprocal exchange tended to share a general commitment to help others and held the expectation that help they once provided would come back to them in the future.

No two ways about it. I will go out of my way to reach out to people that I really don't know that well. No two ways about it because I know how important a touch, a hug, a

kind word can be. And everybody, I mean even the people in this community that I am not close to, was certainly there for me when I needed them.

However, for some providers of support, weak tie exchanges are vehicles through which they can make themselves available to others to provide support without the expectation of anything in return.

We eat breakfast a lot at a little restaurant, just a little tiny restaurant in a little bitty town, and the reason we go there is because we enjoy it. We like to be able to listen to people's stories. People just need to have somebody listen to them like right now. This is good to talk.

The purpose of weak ties is clearly to help individuals meet their unmet needs. The stories provided demonstrated this for all three types of support: instrumental, emotional, and informational. Generally, when participants related a story in which they were the initiators and primary providers of support, the purpose was connected to an emotional or social responsibility. They used weak tie interactions as a way to express their generativity, their generosity, and their compassion for others. In some instances, participants believed that it was their responsibility to help provide for others, and weak tie interactions were a means to accomplish their goal.

### *Meaning*

The meanings that participants attached to their weak tie experiences ranged from simply having needs met to serving as an impetus to reach out and help others, gain a better sense of self and validation, and recognize the importance of showing concern and kindness to others. For many, the meaning derived was not the same as the help provided or the purpose of the exchange; for some, however, the interaction simply fulfilled unmet needs:

When we first got married, people used to help me, they knew I was struggling to make ends meet, and they would come by and give me a little something for my children or whatever and I would just thank them and they'd keep on going. Because they knew I was raising three children on \$35 a week and they knew we needed help. That's the way it was.

Some participants gained personal validation from weak tie exchanges. The interaction left them feeling valued and important in the eyes of others at a time when they did not feel that they had much to contribute.

I had coached for a number of years and was really feeling a little bit, ah, depressed I

guess you could call it, with having three losing seasons. Then another coach unexpectedly nominated me for the High School League Hall of Fame. Now we had had some really tough games and shared some strong words sometimes, but he had nominated me for the Hall of Fame, and that really boosted my ego and even though we were having losing seasons, I went on to coach five more years after this, but this sort of gave me a boost in my career, my ego, and I was really indebted in him for doing this.

For others, the meaning derived from weak tie interactions was in recognizing the importance of extending a helping hand or showing concern and kindness to others.

The day before my wife had open-heart surgery, I got a telephone call from a friend of my sister's, and she lived in the area, and she said, "We would like to come and pick you up this evening and take you to our home, and we'll bring you back in the morning." And so they did that for about a month. Every evening, they came and got me, and fed me, clothed me, washed my clothes, and treated me like a king. It was amazing how they gave of their home and their time and they went out of their way for someone they didn't know. Their friendship and their love was so unselfish.

Some unexpected gestures and displays of genuine concern left a lasting impression with participants on the value of caring about others.

Well, I guess it made me feel good. I mean she was kind of a stranger. I mean, you know, just a customer. Somebody that would come in and out, say hello/good-bye and such. So, it really made an impression on me that she would stop and offer to pray for my son with me. I've remembered it through all these years, and I thought it was really nice of her to do that.

A few participants found their own faith reaffirmed through support offered through their weak tie exchanges.

There were people that, ah, were praying for me through this whole thing. It wasn't cards so much as I found out I got a call or something from people that went to another church. They heard about my situation, they knew me so they were praying for me. I was getting so much support from that.

As might be expected, not all weak tie interactions hold one meaning for a participant. Some participants attached multiple meanings to their exchanges, such as recognizing the kindness of others and the possibility for establishing a friendship.

I remember the Easter my ex-wife took off and left me with three kids. I went next door to ask how to cook a ham and the lady offered to fix it for us with all the trimmings. So, we had a great Easter meal. I'll never forget that. That was an act of kindness and later we became good friends.

The meanings of weak ties are congruent with the findings on the purposes of weak tie exchanges. Whereas providers indicated having emotional and social agendas driving their actions, recipients of support drew meaning from recognizing the importance of extending a helping hand or showing concern and kindness to others. The meanings extracted by participants also contributed to shaping future interactions with others. Many reflected on how meaningful the support they received had been to them and how they have since extended the same kind of support to others. One participant remarked, "It made me feel comforted to know that somebody cared enough to come and visit me. It motivated me to help other people, which is what I do now."

#### Discussion and Conclusions

As the stories in this study indicated, the nature of weak ties is more varied and includes a wider range of interactions than what had been previously conceptualized. Wuthnow's (1998) model for "loose connections" provided a core framework on which to compare the findings that emerged from this study. Of his original eight indicators, five were consistent with the findings of this study:

1. Either participant could initiate or terminate the interaction.
2. Interactions were generally unanticipated.
3. Interactions were limited to specific tasks and responsibilities.
4. Exchanges occurred outside of the personal network.
5. Participants were not emotionally close to one another.

This core group of indicators remains an important foundation, a base for the framework developed in this study, one that future studies can use to clarify weak tie relationships and identify differences among the diverse populations and environments in which they occur.

Wuthnow's (1998) remaining three indicators must be reconsidered before inclusion in future conceptual frameworks. He suggested that weak tie relationships were brief and the duration of the interaction was short. Yet participant stories suggested that some relationships lasted years and were not brief, and further, that the time spent in the exchange could take hours.

It was also difficult to conclude that all exchanges were infrequent because some exchanges took place regularly over a course of days or years depending on the situation, such as when the square dance club members and parishioners regularly assisted a fellow member throughout recovery from an illness. Many would work together to make sure the sick member was comfortable, was transported to doctor's appointments, and had a hot meal each day. Most reported that they would not call the person a friend, but by virtue of belonging to the same organization, they felt connected to the individual and felt the need to provide support. Upon the reduction or elimination of the need, the relationship resumed its former character and returned to infrequent interactions.

Three new characteristics, identified through analysis of participant stories, are less specific than the previous five characteristics but no less important to the conceptualization of weak ties:

1. The participant's response to actual or perceived need.
2. The exchange environment.
3. The participant's sense of social obligation, expectation, and normative behavior in relation to the exchange.

The emergence of these characteristics is a reminder that even the shortest and briefest of weak tie exchanges is influenced by external pressures that shape participant perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes.

Conceptualization of a new framework for weak ties was also informed by the functions (i.e., outcome, purpose, and meaning) of weak tie exchanges. Findings suggested that the outcomes of an exchange varied among participants and were not limited to one type of support over another, although instrumental support was most frequently offered. The purposes and meanings held by participants in weak tie exchanges were diverse and could be categorized by themes that emerged during analysis of the stories. However, the strength in this particular finding was that participants ascribed multiple purposes and meanings to their exchanges, suggesting that participants attached some degree of importance and value to their weak tie exchanges.

### *Conceptual Framework*

The key to future conceptualization of weak ties is recognizing that weak tie exchanges are complex, serve multiple purposes and meanings for participants, and are affected by personal

and contextual influences. Many variations are due to the unique personal characteristics, exchange experiences, and social expectations introduced into the exchange by participants. As a result, each exchange is potentially different, even for similar individuals engaged in similar exchanges. Based on the stories presented in this study, the following framework provides a broader and more inclusive base for conceptualization than previously described. This new framework suggests that a weak tie:

1. Involves people who do not feel emotionally close to one another (e.g., acquaintances or strangers)
2. Is initiated or terminated by either participant
3. Is generally unanticipated
4. Is limited to specific tasks or activities during each exchange
5. Is in response to actual or perceived need
6. Occurs in heterogeneous networks

Other personal, social, and environmental influences that inform the nature of weak ties include the:

7. Exchange environment
8. Influence of social obligations, expectations, and norms
9. Type of support provided
10. Purpose served to each participant
11. Meaning drawn by each participant

Expanding conceptualization of the weak tie framework to encompass a wider range of interactions does not detract from the fundamental concepts and assumptions about exchanges. Rather, it enhances understanding and strengthens the notion that weak tie exchanges are activities that contribute to improving quality of life. This framework provides a sound base for creating an instrument with which to measure and test weak ties.

#### *Participant Characteristics*

No differences were detected in the analysis of the data by participants' age, gender, and community activity (church or square dance club). Outcomes were examined by the characteristics of each respondent with no differences attributable to any particular group or subgroup. Several factors may have influenced this finding, one of which is the small sample size. Although participants provided a sufficient number of stories for the analysis to reach

informational redundancy and theoretical saturation, a larger and more diverse sample may have been needed to detect differences. Men and women generated similar stories and appeared to be equally reflective of the meaning they derived from exchanges. As might be expected, older adults selected for this study were generally concerned about their health. Consequently, many recalled stories related to health problems, which may have resulted in more examples of weak tie exchanges related to medical care than might surface if the sample focused on a younger age group. Even though some of the participants related stories about their church or faith, the role of the church did not appear to add a different dimension to identifying the characteristics and functions of weak ties. Likewise, the social activities of those in the square dance club did not provide additional insight into weak tie interactions.

#### *Study Attributes and Limitations*

The attributes of this study were consistent with similarly designed studies. The primary benefit of utilizing a qualitative approach was the ability to collect a broad range of examples of weak tie exchanges and use them to develop a framework for weak ties. Inductive analysis and the use of open and axial coding allowed themes to emerge naturally without being constrained by prior conceptualizations based on untested hypotheses. Data collection was facilitated by the use of a snowball sampling technique that provided access to more potential participants than were needed to complete the interviews. Additionally, the study design was responsive to the research questions and guided sampling and analysis using informational redundancy, theoretical saturation, and the sampling matrix.

The limitations to this study are also attributes, as each provides guidance for developing future investigations on weak tie relationships. While the use of a snowball sampling technique was beneficial in recruiting participants, it contributed to creating a homogenous sample. Not only did participants share common interests (square dance club and church), they may have shared other common personal characteristics that contributed to their participation in the activity. One such characteristic was that they appeared to be embedded in their communities. That is, participants had lived in their community for at least eight years, with most living in the area for 20 or more years. In general, they had established lifestyles and routines, which may have potentially influenced their opportunities for engaging in weak ties and the types of weak tie interactions they experienced. If the sample had included adults who were new to the area, stories that focused on slightly different topics, such as difficulties in establishing relationships

or reliance on weak ties to become established in the area may have emerged. Future studies would benefit from including a more diverse sample that would provide a different perspective to weak ties.

A second participant characteristic that informed but limited the study was that each respondent was healthy and active. Even though some may have experienced serious health problems in the past, all retained their mobility and their ability to communicate and engage with one another at the time of the interviews. Thus, the health status of participants precluded them from needing to rely on weak ties to meet their daily needs. As a result, the experiences of individuals not needing to rely on support from weak tie relationships to meet their daily needs were included in this study.

Finally, while the stories collected were rich in information about weak tie exchanges, most participants told their stories from a recipient's perspective, providing a non-dyadic perspective to the exchange process. Identifying characteristics from the recipient and provider perspective of a single exchange would help further understanding of the exchange process and help identify differences in the characteristics and functions of weak tie exchanges between recipients and providers of support.

#### *Future Studies*

The results of this study mark a turning point for the discussions of interpersonal tie strength and weak tie interactions in social networks. Based on the stories provided in this study, a weak tie is no longer a vague concept. The characteristics and functions identified provide a rich framework on which to develop the concept further and inform future development of instruments to measure the concept.

## Manuscript B: Determinants of Engagement in Weak Ties Exchanges

### Abstract

The factors that influence an individual's decision to engage in a weak tie exchange are identified through the inductive analysis of stories about weak ties exchanges provided by 50 active community dwelling adults ages 65 and older living in southwest Virginia. Findings were supported by the concepts of interpersonal tie strength and social exchange theory. Analysis of the participant stories resulted in the emergence of six distinct themes that represent determinants of weak tie engagement: personal characteristics, normative orientations, social network type, exchange history, situational factors, and judgment of responsibility. Each theme was supported by multiple participant stories. Even though the specific details of exchanges may have varied among participants, the emergent themes represent a common group of contextual influences found in weak tie exchanges. The framework provides a foundation for further conceptualization of weak ties and a foundation on which to develop instruments to identify a person's potential for engaging in weak tie exchanges.

### Introduction

Social relationships are valuable resources that help people cope with the demands of daily life by providing connections to social and emotional support, information and guidance, and physical assistance. Factors related to engaging in the provision and receipt of support have long been articulated for strong tie relationships (i.e., those existing between spouses, family members, or close friends) but remain undeveloped in relation to weak tie exchanges (i.e., exchanges between acquaintances and strangers) (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokhan, 1990; Haines, Hurlbert, & Beggs, 1996; Welch, Sikkink, & Loveland, 2007). The purpose of this study is to identify determinants of engagement in weak tie relationships in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the weak tie exchange process and develop a reliable framework on which to guide future research.

### Literature review

#### *Weak Tie Exchanges*

A weak tie exchange is a brief exchange between people who do not know each other well and share low levels of trust, commitment, and feelings of connectedness in their relationship with one another. In weak tie exchanges, interactions are limited to achieving a specific goal. Once the exchange has concluded, there is no expectation that the relationship will

continue. However, during the course of the interaction participants encounter new people, material goods, and opportunities, making the weak tie connection an important conduit for accessing valuable resources (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). These brief, but nonetheless important sources of support represent an estimated 9-11% of all exchange relationships (Amato, 1990).

Granovetter's (1973) work on interpersonal tie strength informs the concept of weak ties. He posited that dyadic relationships vary in strength and intensity due to differences in shared feelings of trust, commitment, and connectedness (Granovetter, 1973, 1974, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Wuthnow, 1998). The intersection of trust, commitment, and connectedness in a relationship influences the strength of the relational tie. As a tie becomes stronger, the potential for developing a stable and long-term relationship increases due to increased levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993; Thye, 2000; Welch et al., 2007). The presence of trust implies fair and mutual support exists between participants. Both hold the belief that the other will meet unfulfilled needs in the future. Commitment is a pledge to remain in a relationship over time and forego immediate receipt of benefits until a later time. Connectedness refers to feelings of intimacy, cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging. Strong interpersonal ties depend upon high levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness to sustain relationships and are generally characterized by long-term ties with close family members and friends. Conversely, weak ties are brief interactions typically associated with acquaintances and strangers and based on low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness.

### *Social Exchange Theory*

To gain a better understanding of the underlying factors that influence weak tie engagement, the principles and assumptions of social exchange theory guided this study. Social exchange theory is derived from the notion that relationships or exchanges are based on reciprocity and are negotiated processes inherent to human nature. In any relationship or exchange, participants act as rational beings and conduct cost/benefit analyses throughout the exchange process. They make judgments on whether or not potential benefits outweigh perceived drains on time, energy, and resources, in order to maximize their benefits from each exchange.

Homans' (1961) rule of distributive justice reinforces the notion that benefits should be proportional to costs; that is, the greater the costs, the greater the benefits. When individuals perceive only undesirable options are available, human nature leads them to choose the least costly alternative. Thus, every exchange involves a calculated risk.

As participants calculate how to maximize their own benefits, they must be mindful of the other person's need to perceive exchange equity. Participants must recognize that if the interaction is unbalanced or favors one person more than another, the relationship will deteriorate and no benefits will be gained. Relationship stability is achievable only when benefits are perceived to be equitable in the eyes of the participants (Thomese, van Tilberg, & Knipscheer, 2003). Without equity and stability, exchanges become one-sided, causing participants to withdraw and distance themselves from each other and future interactions (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

While participants retain a great deal of control over exchanges, other factors have influences on the exchange process and inform this study. Factors include cognitive and normative orientations (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993), exchange history (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), availability of exchange alternatives (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and relationship dependency (Levinger, 1982). A discussion of each factor is followed by a discussion of how the relationship characteristics of trust, commitment, and connectedness interact with the factors and influence the exchange process.

#### *Cognitive and Normative Orientations*

The personal orientations of participants influence the characteristics and timing of their exchanges (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Cognitive orientations represent the values and relationship ideals that influence the negotiation of exchange, such as the rule of distributive justice (i.e., costs should be balanced by benefits). Normative orientations are the social sanctions, mores, and expectations that prescribe acceptable and appropriate behaviors. Both orientations are intertwined and embedded in the exchange process, guiding negotiations and supporting exchange equity.

Two primary orientations that are of interest to this study are norms of reciprocity and norms of fairness (Berkowitz, 1972; Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Norms of reciprocity derive from social guidelines and constraints that help determine the course of engagement and its negotiation. Two types of reciprocal transactions inform this study, each influenced by different

exchange orientations: direct and generalized reciprocity. Direct reciprocity includes the immediate exchange of benefits directly to the other participant. This occurs when participants demonstrate a lack of confidence in each other or perceive that benefits will not be forthcoming; that is, the other participant will not continue the relationship or will leave without providing the support promised (Uehara, 1990). Relationships demonstrating low levels of trust and commitment between participants, such as weak tie relationships, are most likely to rely on direct reciprocity to maintain relationship equity.

Generalized reciprocity, a form of indirect reciprocity, occurs within networks where members share a general commitment to help each other and trust that support will be provided in the future when needed (Ekeh, 1974). The benefit earned for providing support will be repaid at a later time, but may be provided by someone else in the network one who is better suited or in a better position to offer support. While some tangible benefits may be delayed in this form of exchange, immediate benefits may include less tangible benefits such as respect and camaraderie (Uehara, 1990).

Establishing norms of reciprocity is part of the exchange negotiation process. Participant experiences and expectations inform the process about what should or should not take place. Once agreed upon, the rules of engagement (including reciprocity) are embedded and guide the relationship. Scanzoni (1979) suggested that when reciprocity is not honored, conflict arises with the degree of conflict proportionate to the degree of non-reciprocity. The motivation to reciprocate is fueled by personal feelings and the willingness to be indebted to the other person. Without motivation, the relationship terminates.

Norms of fairness are social interpretations of what is considered fair or not fair during the exchange process (Berkowitz, 1972; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993). Norms of fairness vary among relationships because fairness is subjective and based on the participants' shared expectation of what will occur during the exchange. If participants agree to the terms of an exchange, then the terms are considered fair, even though the benefits, resources, and costs may not be equally shared. The perception of fairness is powerful and influences each participant's view of exchange quality and the potential for future interactions with the same individual.

When participants share cognitive and normative orientations, that is, they attach the same meaning and values to an exchange, the outcome of their interaction will be more productive and satisfying than if they did not mutually agree. There are multiple dimensions and

influences on the development of exchanges, and some factors are more relevant to establishing stable and long-term exchanges than others. Factors that influence exchange outcomes that inform this study include past experiences, availability of exchange alternatives, and relationship dependency.

#### *Exchange History*

Each participant's exchange history guides and informs their decision to engage in an exchange and influences their satisfaction with engagement and their perceptions about the exchange process (Starzyk, Holder, Fabrigar, & MacDonald, 2006). The lessons learned from previous exchanges shape expectations about what is realistically possible and guide expectations in future relationships. If costs exceeded benefits in an earlier, yet similar exchange, the individual will make adjustments and negotiate the new exchange by minimizing personal costs further. Whereas increased numbers of exchanges are more likely to provide a variety of experiences upon which to draw, the actual number and the frequency of exchanges does not appear to ensure exchange stability (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokhan, 1990; Litwin, 1999).

#### *Availability of Exchange Alternatives*

The availability of exchange alternatives also influences the decision to engage (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The *comparison level for alternatives* is the lowest level of exchange that an individual is willing to accept in light of available alternatives, a subjective assessment of available alternatives to a situation. If no better options for obtaining rewards exist, the exchange with the least desirable relationship is chosen. If the participant perceives that better options exist elsewhere, he or she will leave the relationship and seek the alternatives. However, when faced with a situation where better alternatives are temporarily unavailable, they may accept the least desirable alternative as a temporary replacement rather than delay the exchange.

#### *Relationship Dependency*

One final factor that influences weak tie exchanges and the exchange process is dependency (Levinger, 1982). Dependency is the degree to which a person believes that he or she is relied upon or relies upon others to receive rewards. Although norms of reciprocity foster the development of dependency to receive rewards, too much dependency in a relationship results in an imbalance that increases the costs for the individual being relied upon. Dependency is mediated by internal and external barriers, which can increase the costs of exchange and can create difficulty in terminating the relationship. Internal barriers include personal feelings of

obligation and indebtedness, which can increase psychological stress. External barriers include the norms and expectations of group affiliations and community members. The pressure to act in a defined manner and to adhere to prescribed codes of conduct creates a barrier, discourages dissolution of the relationship, and fosters dependence.

#### *Trust, Commitment, and Connectedness*

Three factors associated with weak ties and interpersonal tie strength also influence the social exchange process: trust, commitment, and connectedness (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Sabatelli & Shelton, 1993; Thye, 2000; Welch et al., 2007). Trust develops following positive experiences with reciprocity and fairness in an exchange. Once established, individuals in the exchange will not take unfair advantage or exploit each other. The presence of trust allows individuals to rely on one another for support. As a result, individuals can cease looking for alternatives as they know their needs will continue to be met in the future.

Commitment is a pledge to remain in a relationship over time. Individuals who commit to relationships perceive the relationship to be fair, equitable, and reciprocal. In a committed relationship, participants can defer benefits because they are dedicated to the relationship and believe the other person will be available to provide support to them when needed. Studies suggest that commitment is established through the exchange of benefits over time and continued demonstration of willingness to be engaged in a committed relationship. A negative result of commitment is that it can foster dependency, which can eventually curtail awareness of and access to alternative exchanges with others (Levinger, 1982).

Connectedness includes feelings of intimacy, cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging. The stronger the feelings of closeness shared, the more connected participants feel towards one another. Exchange patterns can also reflect levels of connectedness through the actions participants take to regulate the distance they maintain from one another. For instance, when participants are equally attracted to each other, exchanges occur with the least amount of difficulty. However, when one partner feels less attracted to or close with the other, he or she distances himself or herself from the exchange, ultimately creating an imbalance in the exchange process. If one partner increases efforts to engage, the other may distance him or her self proportionately (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

In summary, trust, commitment and connectedness exist minimally in weak tie exchanges. Due to the brevity of weak tie interactions, relationship time and prior history are not

intense enough to encourage development of these characteristics unless participants are motivated by other influences to pursue a stronger tie. Studies on weak tie relationships have not yet explored the factors that influence engagement, even though conceptual frameworks for strong ties exist. Although weak ties may include characteristics that are the opposite of those found in strong ties, it should not be assumed that the process of engagement is inherently the same. This study provided for the collection and analysis of stories from study participants to identify determinants of engagement specific to weak tie exchanges.

## Methodology

### Inductive Inquiry

This study used an inductive inquiry approach with a grounded theory methodology to capture participants' stories and identify weak tie characteristics and functions. Inductive inquiry is a qualitative approach that is useful in the development of a theoretical or conceptual framework when the generalization of findings to a larger population is not sought. When utilizing a grounded theory approach, the researcher is the instrument through which data are collected and analyzed (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005). The researcher's knowledge of the content area and sensitivity to the topic is essential in extracting meaning from the data. A grounded theory approach demands that data are systematically analyzed and reviewed. In the process, data that inform an emerging theory or concept are identified.

Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method of constant comparison was used in this study and complements a grounded theory approach. Throughout the analysis process, participant data (e.g., stories) was reviewed for patterns and themes. This method of recursive analysis allowed for the emergence of new themes and sub-themes, and accommodated changes in the course of theory development as nuances of themes became apparent. Reviewing and recoding data was conducted as appropriate.

As in any qualitative study, sample size in this study was tentative and subject to increase as the interview process unfolded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two outcomes from the interview process that informed the final sample size were informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Informational redundancy occurred when no new information was gleaned from interviews with the respondents. Signs of informational redundancy surfaced following the first 29 interviews when it became evident that core concepts about exchanges within participants' stories were being repeated. After the first

35 interviews were coded, theoretical saturation occurred. No additional concepts or insights were found during analyses to support further interviews in developing the framework after that point. Even though informational redundancy and theoretical saturation occurred by the completion of the first 35 interviews, 50 interviews were conducted to meet the age criteria of the sampling matrix that was designed for this study.

### Sample

Interviews for this study were conducted in southwest Virginia during July 2007 with a convenience sample of 50 participants ages 65 and older (age range 65-84) who were active participants in their community church or square dance club. Using a snowball sampling technique, recruitment for study participants began at a local senior center. Forty interviews provided the basis for the sampling matrix, with the understanding that the sample size would be influenced by informational redundancy and theoretical saturation as the interview and coding process.

The personal characteristics chosen to guide the sample selection in this study include age, gender, and community activity site of participants. Studies have shown that the effect of personal characteristics in predicting tie strength (Marsden & Campbell, 1984) and effect on the exchange process is inconclusive (Morgan, Shuster, & Butler, 1991). Therefore, sampling criteria was based on current available information.

Studies on social exchange have shown that human nature and exchange behaviors do not appear to vary between younger and older adults, although some factors linked with age, such as poor health and cognitive impairments, have been identified as limiting opportunities to engage in an exchange. Other studies suggest that cultural and social expectations influence behaviors associated with age and gender and may directly or indirectly affect the development and maintenance of social ties. Therefore, age and gender were selected as criteria for the sampling matrix designed for this study. Additionally, participants were categorized by their involvement with a local square dance club or community church. Each of the participants were actively engaged in their activity and it was assumed that as a result of participation, each had many opportunities to engage in weak tie relationships. Similarities between the two groups were hypothesized to be greater than differences, based on the inclusive nature of weak tie exchanges.

In this study, the sampling matrix was divided by community activity. Within each activity, participants were categorized by sex and by age group sex (i.e., 65-74 and 75+). Each

category within the activity included at least five participants. The quota was selected based on the assumption that at least 15 interviews would be needed to reach informational redundancy or theoretical saturation. Initially, a minimum of 40 participants were identified as necessary for conducting this study. The final placement of the 50 respondents who ultimately participated is presented in the matrix found in Table 1.

### Interviews

The interview process relied on two assumptions. The first assumption was that each participant understood that not all adult relationships are alike and do not hold equal status, and thus could distinguish differences in their relationships with others. The second assumption was that participants had not studied, much less thought about, the concept of weak tie relationships and the circumstances leading to weak tie exchanges. Therefore, to facilitate each participant's awareness and understanding of the concept and encourage recognition of their own weak tie relationships, an outline was developed to guide the interview process. As the interviews proceeded and I became aware of the language needed to increase participant understanding, I amended the interview process to be as efficient as possible while retaining the goal of finding answers to my research questions and remaining true to the overall study design. The final version of the interview process evolved into the steps outlined below.

One of the initial concerns in designing this study was that participants would not be able to provide examples of weak tie relationships because they had not thought about their interactions with people that they did not know well. A second concern was that they would focus on proximate friendships rather than distal relationships. To ensure that each participant understood the type of relationship I was interested, a relationship map of four concentric circles was available for reference. Three of the 50 participants needed to refer to the map for clarification. In all three circumstances, the participants only needed to understand that if they placed themselves in the middle of the map, close family and friends would surround them, with people less close placed further away from the center. I pointed to the edge of the outermost circle on the map and asked that they talk about the people who they thought might be positioned there. The remaining 47 participants understood the types of relationships of interest without use of the map, and their stories and responses to follow-up questions confirmed their comprehension.

Another concern in designing the study was that in order to get individuals to talk about weak tie interactions, I would need to provide examples and would thus bias or limit the types of responses provided. Therefore, I took caution to be as brief as possible in the description of the study and the opening interview statement. After conducting the first six interviews, my interview started with the following sentences:

I am looking for examples of a time when someone you did not know, or someone you did not know well, helped you or provided you with some type of support. Can you recall a time when that may have occurred? Tell me about it.

If the participant struggled to come up with an example, I suggested, “Maybe there was a time at work, or a time when you were sick, or moving to a new home?” I gave participants as much time as they needed to think, and the second question appeared to be enough to stimulate the participant’s memory and to provide an example. Participants were encouraged to relate as many examples as they wished, resulting in 72 examples.

Participants were initially asked to provide stories in which they were recipients of weak tie support, as it was assumed those situations might be easier to recall. Although during the course of the interview, participants were also encouraged to talk about times when they were providers of weak tie support. In the analysis of social exchange and weak tie exchange, delineating the roles of provider and recipient becomes somewhat artificial in the sense that one individual can occupy both roles simultaneously. A person can provide information or assistance and receive validation and social acceptance because of participating in a single exchange (Fiore, Coppel, Becker, & Cox, 1986; Jung, 1988). Therefore, the findings in this study do not differentiate providers from recipients within the proposed framework. In some categories however, supporting evidence may focus more on one role.

### Analysis

The purpose of using inductive analysis in exploring weak tie relationships was to let the data emerge naturally without forcing findings into the framework of previously hypothesized concepts (Patton, 2002). To enhance the outcome of naturally emerging themes, the evaluation process included two reflexive activities. First, I maintained an interview journal to note environmental, behavioral, and emotional influences and my personal perceptions and biases towards the participant and the interview process. I revisited journal entries throughout the coding process to raise my awareness of my biases and external influences in identifying themes

within the stories provided. Second, a second coder checked 70% of the transcripts and provided feedback on the emerging coding scheme. Throughout the coding process, we discussed the coding framework, coding process, the identified themes and differences in interpreting the transcripts.

### *Coding*

Open and axial coding was accomplished by using the computer software package, Atlas.ti 5.2 (Muhr, 2004) to facilitate identification of themes and sub themes and relationships among themes. The open coding process began a reading of each transcript and all related journal entries. Each transcript was coded using the method of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process involves comparing themes identified in earlier transcripts to the current transcript to construct the most accurate theoretical or conceptual framework. As themes emerged and solidified, transcripts were reviewed at least three times and recoded to reflect the changing nature of the coding scheme. Axial coding began when the nuances of the overarching themes became apparent and subgroups emerged.

### Findings

Analysis of the participant stories resulted in the emergence of six distinct themes that represent determinants of weak tie engagement: personal characteristics, normative orientations, social network type, exchange history, situational factors, and judgment of responsibility. Multiple participant stories supported each theme. Even though the specific details of exchanges may have varied among participants, the emergent themes represent a common group of contextual influences found in weak tie exchanges.

### *Personal Characteristics*

Three distinct personal characteristics appeared to influence engagement in a weak tie exchange: the participant's helping nature, their willingness to engage, and their ability to engage. Age, sex, and community involvement (e.g., square dance club or church) did not influence their decision to engage in weak tie interactions. This was consistent with findings from comparable studies on strong tie engagement (Morgan, Shuster, & Butler, 1999).

*Helping nature.* The personal characteristic that appeared most frequently in stories (directly or indirectly stated) was the participant's helping nature. In many of the stories collected, it was quite apparent by the manner in which stories were told and the circumstances under which exchanges occurred that some people were natural helpers. Some participants

openly acknowledged their tendency to want to help others. One participant admitted, “Well, it comes natural to me. I've always been that way... a helper. Try to help people out.”

Helpers engaged in a variety of exchanges providing or arranging for assistance when needed. For example, if a member of a club was recovering from hip surgery, other members would take turns to meet that member’s needs. Some members took turns preparing a hot meal for dinner and delivered it to the house. Others drove the member to medical appointments. The coordination of help aided in the recovery process and removed some of the burden from the shoulders of more intimate ties. Many of the helpers organized and participated in activities as a way of expressing their helpful nature. Some helpers attributed their helping style to their upbringing as well as their belief that it was simply the right thing to do.

I believe it is family upbringing. We was taught to help. I lost my mother when I was 11 so my upbringing was primarily my father and my brother. It was help your neighbor if you can.

*Willingness to engage.* Many of the participants who were self-proclaimed helpers acknowledged that it was not in their nature to accept support, which sometimes conflicts with the second characteristic, the willingness to engage in an exchange.

I was very independent. When I first met Bob, he says, "You will not let anybody do anything for you." I said, "I've done things all my life," and you know once in a while it's hard. He'll say, "Let me do that." "Nay, I've got it," you know. Just little things. But I knew folks were there if I needed them. A faucet one time got to running, and I couldn't get it off. Well, I knew I could call the guy next door, but if there's anything I could do, I'm going to do it myself.

Some people, who did not like to accept support, needed the encouragement of others to enter into an exchange.

A person from our church came up to me while I was standing there and offers me a check from people. And I said, "Oh, no." In other words, we are not in that category. And you know, you just don't – But my daughter took the check and handed it to me and said “Mom, take this, you need it”. So I did.

Participants commented that they were less willing to engage in an exchange if they did not get a good feeling from the situation or from the other person. One individual remarked, “Of course, you are always a little cautious. You look at, you know, the individual and the type of

car they have. It gives you a feeling of whether or not you should help them.” Others recognized that there are people in the world that take advantage of others and they were willing to risk being taken advantage of by deceitful tactics on some occasions.

I accept help when I need it, and I know if I need it, I won't take advantage of them. And I'll let people take advantage of me now and then and that's okay. I know it's happening and it's all right.

*Ability to engage.* Findings also suggested that if the participants had the ability to engage (i.e., possessed the necessary material goods, time, or energy) they were more likely to enter into an interaction than if they did not have the ability. For example, some participants lamented not having the time or energy to support others due to commitments in their lives, like the person making the following quote:

I feel the need to help. So, if I had more free time, I would do that. I feel guilty that I don't have the time that I would like to have to do the things for others that I need to do. My neighbor across the street had a hip replacement about the time Mother had broken her leg. So, guess who didn't get over there, you know?

When an individual possessed all three characteristics (i.e., helping nature, willingness to engage, and ability to engage) the likelihood of engagement increased, as demonstrated in the following example.

I said "You came and fixed the roof and you didn't even bother to come to the door." He said, "I just wanted to get it done." And, you know, he didn't have any ulterior motive at all for doing it, you know, he wasn't trying to date me or come on to me or anything. He just came and fixed the problem.

Participants engaged in weak ties share low levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness. They do not know each other well and thus do not share a common bond or an inherent desire to engage with one another. Therefore, the presence of characteristics such as being a natural helper and a willing participant facilitate the exchange process. The ability to engage also influences engagement in weak ties. If an individual were unable to deliver a needed benefit, the interaction would probably not take place. It is noteworthy that none of the participants offered insight into whether or not they judged others or felt judged by others regarding their ability to provide support. Social expectations may not be a determinant under that situation, but are important to other aspects of engagement.

### *Cognitive and Normative Orientations*

The second determinant of engagement addressed participants' cognitive and normative orientations, their attitudes about exchange behaviors, including norms of social responsibility and reciprocity. Many participants who expressed having a helping nature also indicated that they felt they had a social responsibility to help those who were dependent on others for assistance. The stories collected suggest that these individuals participated in interactions in which they were the primary providers of support.

Participants who claimed to be fiercely independent and did not like to accept support also followed prescribed norms of social behavior, such as being as self-sufficient as possible. Some commented that because they were self-reliant they found it difficult to accept support even when needed.

I didn't want to accept their food because we could have done that ourselves, you know. It's really hard after you've been totally independent to realize that you have to be dependent on other people.

*Norms of reciprocity.* Participants' attitudes about reciprocating the support they received through a weak tie exchange reflected two norms of reciprocity: direct and generalized. Most weak tie exchanges included direct reciprocal behaviors because the engagement time was brief and the relationship was not built on the trust needed to ensure that benefits would be delivered. Weak tie interactions resulted in an exchange of benefits after which participants went their separate ways. At least one participant indicated that the pressure to maintain exchange equity was in the forefront of his mind when he stated, "I don't expect people to give to me. I'd rather give to them. But if I accept, I feel like, you know, I need to reciprocate."

Engaging in weak tie relationships also appeared to be an avenue for some participants to give back to society some of the benefits they had received from others in the past. Through the weak tie exchange, they were able to give back in the form of generalized reciprocity, which was a source of pride and accomplishment for some participants.

Other people have come along who needed help, and I have taken what he had given to me and tried to pass it on to a number of other people. And since there was no way, he never accepted a dime of payment from me for his kindness and service to me, in like fashion I've done the same thing. I've tried to help other people.

Other participants also suggested that they engaged in weak tie exchanges as a way to

bank future support, with the hope that if they were supportive in the present someone would be helpful to them in the future. One person remarked, “It’s about helping them get through their difficulties in life. Hopefully someone will do the same for us if we need it.” Still other individuals felt that a weak tie interaction was like a gift, a source of support that suddenly became available to them because they had provided assistance in the past. The following quote summed up this perspective: “You know, I felt like we were probably getting back what we gave, you know? It was a good feeling, you know? I just had not had an opportunity to be on the receiving end.”

In some respects, the same normative orientations guide participants in weak tie exchanges as in strong tie exchanges. However, in weak tie exchanges the social expectations and roles identified through participant stories were more limited in number and scope, but were no less meaningful, than what is associated with strong ties. The difference in social expectations may be attributed to the lower levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness shared between participants. Because the strength of the social tie between participants is weaker, maintaining social roles, obligations, and expectations are not as meaningful and the expectation to adhere to social norms is lowered as well.

#### *Social Network Type*

In the course of analysis, social network characteristics also appeared to influence participants’ engagement in weak tie interactions. This is consistent with Litwin’s (1999) work on identifying strong tie exchanges in the networks of older adults. Whereas Litwin’s work identified six network types, in this study three social network types emerged: expanded, standard, and restricted.

*Expanded networks.* Participants from expanded networks regularly engaged with a large group of people extending from immediate family members to friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Their association with social groups, clubs, and formal organizations provided them with many opportunities to build social connections and to provide and receive support.

Well, you know, I have always been a giver myself - taking people to cancer treatments and different things, and I was never used to having people give to me and that was hard for me. Like people bringing in food and things like that. That just overwhelmed me -- their generosity. And it just amazed me how people would, you know, go out of their way and do that.

*Standard networks.* Participants from standard networks routinely relied on family members and the friends, neighbors, and acquaintances they associated with during the course of daily life. Interactions with people outside of the family took place only when formal support could not be obtained or family members could not provide support. Neighbors were viewed as potential supporters but only relied upon when necessary.

She's a good neighbor. She doesn't interfere with anything, and she doesn't want anybody to interfere with her business. I've got a key to her house. She needs me, she yells. If I need anything, I yell. But other than that we just speak when we walk out of the door at the same time.

Participants from the expanded and standard networks shared the social expectation that they did not need to look far for assistance as they anticipated that someone would show up and help them out when they needed it.

*Restricted networks.* The fewest number of participants belonged to restricted networks. These individuals differed from the others because they relied almost exclusively on people with whom they shared a close relationship, like a spouse, a child, or a sibling.

Neither my husband nor I are ones to reach out for help. I mean that's one of the deficiencies in our lives I guess. It's just that, you know, we were brought up, both families were brought up that when things get tough, you pull together as a family. Buckle down, you know, chin up. Smile on your face.

The ability to link oneself with potential resources is connected with the ability and willingness to engage in weak ties. Participants embedded in inclusive networks were least likely to engage in a weak tie exchange and were thus limited to the resources available through their small networks of support. Participants who routinely exchanged support with a broader group of people whom they did not know well were more likely to have access to a wider array of resources.

### *Exchange History*

Studies on strong tie exchanges suggest that a participant's history of social exchanges influences his or her willingness to provide support as well as the manner in which they provide it in the future (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990). When exchanges result in prompt payment and receipt of benefits that meet the expectations of participants, both will be more likely to engage in similar exchanges in the future. Exchanges that did not meet expectations will not be

readily repeated. The stories provided in this study suggest that the same applies to the engagement in weak ties. Some participants indicated that not only did earlier interactions make engaging in later interactions easier, but that the engagement process also influenced their future engagements.

No two ways about it. I will, I go out of my way to reach out to people that really I don't even know that well. No two ways about it because I know how important a touch, a hug, a kind word can be. And everybody, I mean even the people in this community that I am not close to was certainly there for me.

Some stories suggested participants agreed to engage in an interaction because it was the best alternative to the situation at the time. Although they may have hoped other options were available, choices were limited. For example, when one couple locked their keys in the car, they would have preferred a family member come by with a spare set of keys to help them get out of their predicament. However, after several phone calls resulted in no immediate prospects for help, they agreed to accept an offer from a weak tie acquaintance to drive them back to their house to pick up another set of keys.

A few participants commented that their experience with weak ties was limited. They had no need to exchange support when they had someone else on whom they could depend. For example, one woman admitted, "I don't know if I can accept help from others. I hope so, but I'm not sure. Because I still have my husband, and we still take care of each other."

Findings suggest that participant exchange history was also connected to social network type. Participants who were from an inclusive network and dependent on another individual such as a spouse or child for support were less likely to engage in weak tie exchanges. Hence, they had a limited exchange history and did not possess many references on which to base future exchange decisions.

### *Situational Factors*

The environment and the circumstances surrounding a potential weak tie interaction contributed to whether or not a participant engaged in a weak tie exchange. Several participants remarked that media stories about the dangers of being taken advantage of or being hurt when helping others had made them cautious about engaging with people they did not know. If participants did not come across a situation requiring immediate assistance, they generally learned about someone needing help through their own social network, especially clubs and

church groups. In effect, their network ties arranged the weak tie interaction. In many instances, the self-described natural helpers ran the committees that organized support.

Members will talk to each other and they'll say, well, so and so needs a ride to the hospital, and we need to do something. When you get help, you don't have to ask for it. It is voluntarily given.

If faced with an emergency, respondents felt that support generally became available when they needed it. Those who did not like to accept help were more willing to accept it when pressed for help and faced with limited options for remedying the situation.

As he was taken to the burn unit the neighbors and store owners came by to see me, and one said, "Judy, I'll take you home," which was quite a ways away, you know, across the bridge, whatever. So, I refused, I mean literally I said, "no, no, no, I'll go home myself". But I went with her. That was probably the first really good-hearted thing that was done for us after the fire.

In another example, a participant recalls how his emergency, albeit not life threatening, left him with limited options, one of which he gladly accepted.

We were in England and I needed to go to the bathroom at the train station, and the bathroom takes a coin to get in, and I didn't have any coins. So, a guy, two guys behind me handed me a coin to put in there so I wouldn't have to jump the gate to get in.

Participant stories suggested that most weak tie exchanges tended to occur spontaneously, with participants responding to the moment in which they found themselves. Benson and colleagues (1980) and Amato (1985) suggested that helping in spontaneous situations allows little chance for participants to evaluate their behavior, preferences, and abilities when faced with the demands of the situation. This supports the notion that weak ties would be an ideal source of support in an emergency because the need to maximize personal benefits and realize the pressures of social expectations diminishes under the circumstances.

When weak tie exchanges were planned, it was generally the result of members of an organization getting together to help a fellow member manage through difficult times. In the decision to engage in a planned weak tie, it appeared that the participants' commitment to their club was the strongest factor. A number of participants indicated that they did not know fellow club member's names or much about them other than what they learned during the course of their meetings. Yet when called upon by club members to help, they were willing to do their

part, because next time they might be the ones in need. Club members who were self-proclaimed helpers often led the organization of meal delivery and transportation to medical appointments.

### *Judgments of Responsibility*

Weiner (1995, 1996) posited that if a situation requiring support developed and the individual needing help was perceived as not responsible for the problem, responses from others would be forthcoming. The findings in this study support this premise. A support provider's judgment of responsibility on the person receiving help appeared to influence actions in many situations. If an individual was perceived to have some control over a situation, they were less likely to receive support from the participant. For instance, in the following scenario, a participant recalls how his opinion to help a man changed after he witnessed the man engaging in an activity that he felt was contrary to a statement given earlier by the man.

One guy rode with me and kept complaining he didn't have any money, and I was getting ready to make a rest stop and so I made up my mind I'll give him a couple of bucks.

When I get through unloading the bus, I'll give him a couple of bucks to get him a sandwich and something to drink. So I finished unloading the bus and walked in the bus station. It was a 30-minute rest stop. So there he was playing a pinball machine. I said, ah, the guy had money.

Like the other determinants identified in this study, simply making a judgment about responsibility is not the only determinant that influences weak tie engagement. The following example demonstrates the complexity of the engagement process and the multiple factors that converge to influence whether or not people engage in a weak tie exchange.

Have you ever had the urge to help somebody just out of the clear blue? I had that happen today. There were some people on the street corner, poor people, and a man actually got out of the car and went to him. I've never seen that happen before, and when I drove by, it kind of made me want to stop. I didn't. But you know, because he looked so helpless, and he was asking for work. And I know that they say that they are playing us sometimes, you know? That they are not trying to help themselves, but he looked so pitiful today. And it's hot, and he had a sweatshirt on. And I thought he probably hasn't eaten very much to be cold with that much heat.

## Discussion

This study was based on the premise that trust, commitment, and connectedness are key dimensions found in weak tie interactions. The degree to which each is present influences exchange characteristics and functions. However, the mere presence of the three dimensions is not enough to warrant or predict engagement. The decision to enter into a weak tie relationship is reliant on other forces external to the actual exchange process. In this study, six themes emerged as determinants of engagement in weak tie exchanges: personal characteristics, normative orientations, social network type, exchange history, situational factors, and judgment of responsibility. Five of the six themes represent social and personal influences on participant background and one represents the contextual influence of the exchange setting. Together, the themes support the importance of context in development of weak tie exchanges.

As the findings suggested, participants face the decision to engage armed with a background of personal exchange experiences that guide them in their decision-making process. Additionally, they are influenced by expectations and values shared by their family, friends, and personal network. Community endorsement and the broader social expectations guide participants as well. Through the support of the social network, participants learn to make judgments about potential exchanges. Passing judgments of responsibility may appear to be a personal decision, but it is informed by a lifetime of reinforcement about what is acceptable and what is not. Likewise, members of the family and personal network model the types of exchanges that they consider appropriate. Through this, they identify whom they can rely on and whom they should or should not help. Some individuals come from networks that limit access to others outside the group, which results in a loss of potential resources and creates dependency on those within the group (Litwin, 1999). This perspective has the potential to discourage individuals from ever entering into social exchanges, regardless of their own feelings about the situation.

Whether examining determinants of engagement through seemingly innocuous and brief relationships or through complex interactions, the notion that weak tie exchanges are simple begins to disappear as contextual influences emerge. The social and environmental influences present pressures, challenges, and barriers to engagement. Yet the exchange process moves forward. Participants analyze the situation and take a calculated risk regarding whether or not to interact.

### *Participant Characteristics*

No differences were detected in the analysis of the data by participants' age, gender, and community activity (church or square dance club). Outcomes were examined by the characteristics of each respondent with no differences attributable to any particular group or subgroup. Several factors may have influenced this, one of which is the small sample size. Although participants provided a sufficient number of stories for the analysis to reach informational redundancy and theoretical saturation, a larger and more diverse sample may have been needed to detect differences. Men and women generated similar stories and appeared to be equally reflective of the meaning they derived from exchanges. This finding is consistent with prior studies on strong tie interactions that were unable to connect personal characteristics with predictors of engagement (Morgan et al., 1991).

### *Study Attributes and Limitations*

The attributes of this study were consistent with similarly designed studies. The primary benefit of utilizing a qualitative approach was the ability to collect a broad range of examples of weak tie exchanges and use them to develop a framework for weak ties. Inductive analysis and the use of open and axial coding allowed themes to emerge naturally without being constrained by prior conceptualizations based on untested hypotheses. Data collection was facilitated by the use of a snowball sampling technique that provided access to more potential participants than were needed to complete the interviews. Additionally, the study design was responsive to the research questions and guided sampling and analysis using informational redundancy, theoretical saturation, and the sampling matrix.

The limitations to this study also provide guidance for developing future investigations on weak tie relationships. While the use of a snowball sampling technique was beneficial in recruiting participants, it contributed to creating a homogenous sample. Not only did participants share common interests (square dance club and church), they may have shared other common personal characteristics that contributed to their participation in the activity. One such characteristic was that they appeared to be embedded in their communities. That is, participants had lived in their community for at least eight years, with most living in the area for 20 or more years. In general, they had established lifestyles and routines, which may have potentially influenced their opportunities for engaging in weak ties and the types of weak tie interactions they experienced. If the sample had included adults who were new to the area, stories that

focused on slightly different topics, such as difficulties in establishing relationships or reliance on weak ties to become established in the area may have emerged. Future studies would benefit from including a more diverse sample that would provide a different perspective to weak ties.

A second participant characteristic that informed but limited the study was that each respondent was healthy and active. Even though some may have experienced serious health problems in the past, all retained their mobility and their ability to communicate and engage with one another at the time of the interviews. Thus, the health status of participants precluded them from needing to rely on weak ties to meet their daily needs. As a result, the experiences of individuals not needing to rely on support from weak tie relationships to meet their daily needs were included in this study.

Thirdly, while the stories collected were rich in information about weak tie exchanges, most participants told their stories from a recipient's perspective, providing a non-dyadic perspective to the exchange process. Identifying characteristics from the recipient and provider perspective of a single exchange would help further understanding of the exchange process and help identify differences in the characteristics and functions of weak tie exchanges between recipients and providers of support.

#### *Future Studies*

Analyses of participant stories found two new areas of interest that can be expanded upon in future studies. First, the interviews suggested that the participants' social networks and engagement histories were connected to their engagement in weak ties. In this study, limited data were collected from participants during the interview process to conduct an in-depth analysis of those influences. Yet, it is believed that rich information related to determinants of engagement could arise if participants are asked to describe their interactions with family members and friends, their social network, and their exchange experiences. The information provided could be used to compare and contrast engagement in weak ties with strong ties to identify differences between the two. Second, future studies could address the social obligations, expectations, and norms that influence participant behaviors in weak tie exchanges. Participant stories revealed that this was an important predictor of engagement, but nuances influencing engagement could not be determined from the information gathered. If information about the personal and social networks and engagement histories of the participants were known, insight into the normative orientations of each individual could also be extracted.

### *Implications*

From a research perspective, the information provided in this study expands development of the conceptual framework of weak ties. Notions about weak ties abound, yet few scholars have attempted to identify specific and potentially measurable characteristics. The findings in this study make a small but meaningful contribution towards identifying factors useful in the development of an instrument to test the concept.

From a community service perspective, being able to predict participation in weak tie exchanges could provide valuable insight into how older or more vulnerable adults living in the community manage to have their daily needs met. Knowledge of how much an individual uses or depends on weak ties to gain support is valuable information for human service organizations. When organizational resources are limited, individuals identified with the greatest need, those at risk of losing their health and their ability to remain living in the community, are targeted to receive the most resources. Distributing resources to the most deserving becomes paramount as the number of individuals requesting support increases. Therefore, the ability to recognize the need for current and future support can help human service organizations plan service delivery strategies to meet the needs of the greatest number of people while including those who might otherwise slip through the cracks of service delivery programs.

The study of weak ties and the results of this study also contribute to furthering understanding of how weak ties occur in social and personal networks. This is especially meaningful to the small population of adults who no longer have access to support provided through strong tie relationships. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the prevalence of older adults depending on weak tie interactions to meet their daily needs may be greater than most people realize. This is due in part to their isolation from people not connected with their daily activities. Explanations for their dependence on weak ties may be associated with the inherent nature of their personal network and interaction patterns or changes to their personal network structure caused by the death of a spouse, location of family members in other areas of the country, or the selective reduction of network size (Carstensen, 1995).

Future research can explore if and how predictors of engagement identified by this study can identify a person's potential for engaging in weak tie interactions, or their reliance on weak ties. Both would provide valuable information to community outreach programs designed to provide support to individuals in need.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings generated in this investigation inform theoretical, methodological and practical applications of future research focusing on weak tie relationships.

### *Theoretical Contributions*

Social exchange theory was used as a theoretical underpinning for this investigation and ultimately guided development of the research questions examined in the two manuscripts. This theory was chosen because it supports the notion that weak ties are exchanges based on rational choice that require active involvement and conscious decision-making from both participants. Additionally, the use of social exchange theory eliminates the notions that weak ties are merely incidental interactions that are devoid of purpose and meaning. The findings in this study confirmed that the assumptions and principles of social exchange theory are consonant with the concept of weak ties and support the framework for weak ties on which Wuthnow (1998), and Granovetter (1973) based their work.

Participant stories presented in the first manuscript confirmed that weak tie interactions are characterized by the assumptions and principles of social exchange. While the degree of involvement or the exchange outcomes may vary in type or intensity from strong tie interactions, weak ties are also negotiated and reciprocal processes conducted by rational beings who calculate the cost, benefit, and risk of their involvement in an exchange. Each participant's past experiences with weak tie interactions informs their future engagement and they are mindful of the need to maintain exchange equity in their weak tie relationships.

In the second manuscript, participant stories provide insight into the influence of mediating factors on social exchange and the individual's decision to engage in a weak tie relationship. Social exchange theorists recognize the powerful influences that personal, social, cognitive, and normative orientations exert on the exchange process. Each factor contributes to making each interaction unique and influences an individual's participation in future interactions.

This study laid the foundation for future studies to address additional influences on weak tie engagement, including the hierarchical importance, systematic characterization and correlation among the identified characteristics. The weak tie experiences of participants in this study suggest that variations in strength, frequency, and importance exist among some characteristics. For example, a range of experiences and perspectives were described by participants regarding the sense of urgency they perceived in the situation, the exchange venue,

and their sense of social obligation and expectations towards the exchange. However, additional research will need to be conducted to clarify those findings because personal and social factors may mediate or moderate weak tie interactions.

### *Methodological Contributions*

The theoretical insights gained in this study have implications for methods used in the exploration of weak tie interactions. This study highlighted the value of collecting participant stories to guide the development of a framework. The use of an inductive approach allowed the data to emerge naturally without being constrained by earlier assumptions and hypotheses proposed by scholars. By gathering actual examples of weak tie exchanges from participants, a broader scope of weak ties was identified and a better understanding of the concept was achieved.

While the collection of participant stories was paramount in capturing the scope of weak tie interactions, future research questions based on the framework provided are more likely to benefit from the use of survey data to forward measurement of the concept. At this juncture, operationalizing the dimensions of the model has not been begun. The findings generated in this study can be used to support this endeavor. For example, identifying items that represent the dimensions of trust, commitment, and connectedness will help forward measurement of tie strength. Taking a quantitative approach to verifying the relationships among the factors will contribute to building reliability and validity of measures and reliability of a proposed model.

This is not to say that the study of weak ties can no longer benefit from taking a qualitative approach. In fact, a mixed method approach may be preferred if the focus of future research questions are on the primary provider and receiver of an exchange with the intent of capturing a better understanding of the reciprocal relationship and the personal orientations and social backgrounds that influence entering into an exchange. The data indicate that a variety of factors influence the decision to engage, and in order to parcel out the importance of each in contributing to the exchange, additional conversations may be in order before operationalizing measures and creating a testable model.

*Weak tie recollections.* The approach used in this study to stimulate participants to talk about weak tie interactions was intentionally designed to be open-ended to collect a wide range of examples. The stories collected included similar characteristics that provide some guidance for the design of future studies exploring this topic. What was most remarkable about the

recollected stories was that participants recalled exchanges that were meaningful to them rather than report their most recent weak tie interaction. This suggests that weak ties may generally be considered unmemorable or inconsequential until they serve a more important purpose and argues for differentiating tie strength from type of tie. The information provided through the participant stories was not enough to explore this finding further; however, future studies may establish design strategies that focus on identifying similarities and differences among weak tie engagements occurring within a specified period of time or based on other classifications such as the social network background or social exchange experiences of the participants.

*Distinguishing providers from receivers.* Exchange theory is based on the principle that exchanges are based on reciprocity, allowing for a range of exchanges in which with each participant receives some form of benefit from the interaction. In the analysis of weak tie interactions, delineating the roles of provider and recipient becomes somewhat artificial in the sense that one individual can occupy both roles simultaneously. A person can provide information or assistance and receive validation and social acceptance because of participating in a single exchange (Fiore, Coppel, Becker, & Cox, 1986; Jung, 1988). Therefore, the task for future studies is to recognize the differences between the roles in what predicts involvement and the expectations connected with engagement.

#### *Practical Contributions: Implications for Community Research*

*Social organization.* The importance of exploring the concept of weak ties lies beyond the exchange of benefits described in this study thus far. Just as weak ties are capable of connecting resources from disparate social networks to benefit individuals, the interactions can also link the social processes responsible for developing competent and resilient communities (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003; Mancini, Martin, & Bowen, 2003; Furstenburg & Hughes, 1974). Community capacity theorists suggest that the ability of a community to meet the needs of its members is dependent on three factors: network structure, social capital, and community capacity (Bowen et al, 2003; Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000, 2001; Mancini et al., 2003). Weak ties facilitate development across all three components. For example, a community's network structure includes the nexus of formal (i.e., agencies and organizations structured to serve the collective) and informal (i.e., voluntary, unorganized personal relationships) relationships and the networks each creates. The function of weak ties in this process has already been described by this study.

Weak ties also generate benefits used in the development of social capital, which is useful in building communities. Social capital is the accumulation of intangible resources (symbols, opportunities, information, and supports) by and for community members to help meet the challenges of daily life (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Wuthnow, 1998). A weak tie is a valuable resource in the community for members who are unable to generate resources independently. As the stories in this study indicated, weak tie exchanges can provide benefits such as information and opportunities that contribute to the building of social capital.

The weak ties found within the community network structure that generate social capital are also the fuel to build community capacity. Community capacity is developed as community members share in the responsibility of taking care of each other and demonstrate collective competence in handling situations that threaten the community. Weak tie exchanges provide opportunities for people to support one another, thus contributing to the development of community capacity.

*Leverage points.* A community-level focus for weak ties to enhance sustainability of social networks is found in the discussion of social system leverage points. Leverage points are items, characteristics, or functions within a system that when pressured, disrupt the system enough to cause change or provide opportunities for changes to be implemented. Communities and the systems within them are dynamic and under constant pressure to respond to the influences of social and environmental forces. Meadows (1999), a system dynamics theorist, posited that to effect change in a system too complex to manipulate as a whole, leverage points can be used as points of intervention to improve management. System dynamics theory includes a set of twelve leverage points, some responsible for more intense responses than others. Weak ties have four qualities that can be considered low leverage points, meaning the disruptions created are minor and when placed under pressure will not bring the social network to a halt.

The first leverage point in a social system is the ability of weak ties to expand parameters of support. By virtue of the relationship of weak tie participants (people who are not emotionally close), the weak tie engagement process brings together people from a variety of backgrounds and social networks. Thus, with each weak tie exchange the access and availability of new resources expands exponentially, enlarging the parameters of support for individuals and the network.

The second leverage point refers to the flexibility of relationships and the ability to change quickly in response to a situation. Weak ties are very adaptable to situations. Most weak tie interactions occur spontaneously, and as such require participant flexibility in meeting the demands of the exchange. Weak ties are not constrained by social expectations and obligations, nor are they attached to specific social positions or roles, permitting more exchange flexibility.

The third leverage point is the ability of relationships to promote or reinforce normative orientations (social obligations, norms, and expectations) throughout the social network. Even though weak tie exchanges are not bound by social obligations and expectations, interactions that include altruistic behavior or simple acts of kindness, such as lending a helping hand or going out of the way to help, reinforce social norms such as ‘help your neighbor’ and ‘treat others as you would like to be treated’. Demonstrations of kindness and helpfulness provided through some weak tie exchanges also reinforce desirable normative behaviors and the value of maintaining a civil society.

The fourth leverage point is the ability of relationships to act as conduits of information throughout the community. Because weak ties facilitate social connections within the community, they have the potential to introduce new information, facilitate discussion, and promote understanding of issues across social networks. This quality is the same one needed to generate social capital and build community capacity.

Examining the leverage points within communities provides insight into how social networks influence the development of social organization. Once high pressure and low pressure leverage points are identified, frameworks for social action and change can be implemented. Then efforts to promote sustainability within community systems, as well as services and programs, can be established.

*Intervention and prevention.* Weak tie relationships are ideally suited to assist in establishing prevention and intervention efforts. Many individuals who participate in at-risk behaviors or live under conditions that put them at risk for poor health outcomes are good candidates to receive assistance through weak ties. Some social support groups, including 12-step groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous) already depend on the support provided through weak ties, and provide the opportunity and venue for weak ties to evolve into strong tie relationships. Participants receive encouraging support from others experiencing the same problem. The support initially provided through the weak tie, coupled with professional support, helps

eliminate or reduce behaviors such as substance abuse, while promoting healthy behaviors, positive self-image, and improved well-being.

Likewise, adults who find themselves without the strong support of family members and friends can potentially utilize the support garnered through weak ties to meet the challenges of daily life. Occasional support obtained through weak ties can help individuals manage basic tasks and may help delay dependence on formalized systems of home and community-based care for support. Weak ties can potentially provide needed support when strong tie relationships are unavailable. The result is that weak ties contribute to improving quality of life.

#### *Study Attributes and Limitations*

The attributes of this study were consistent with similarly designed studies with three key benefits. First, utilizing a qualitative approach provided the opportunity to collect examples of weak ties in order to help forward understanding and conceptualization of the concept. Weak tie exchanges have been referenced in scientific literature, but until now, scholars have not provided concrete examples for analysis and review. Secondly, the use of an inductive approach allowed the concept of weak ties to emerge naturally without being constrained by preconceptions about how weak ties should be constructed. Data collection was facilitated by the use of a snowball sampling technique that provided access to more potential participants than were needed to complete the interviews. Additionally, the study design was responsive to the research questions and guided sampling and analysis using informational redundancy, theoretical saturation, and the sampling matrix. Lastly, the ability to view weak tie exchanges in the context of participant lives helped demonstrate how personal, social, and environmental pressures influence the development of the exchange. Taking a qualitative approach provided more insight into the dimensions of weak ties than a quantitative study could have provided.

The limitations of this study also provide guidance for developing future investigations on weak tie relationships. While the use of a snowball sampling technique was beneficial in recruiting participants, it contributed to creating a homogenous sample. Not only did participants share common interests (square dance club and church), they may have shared other common personal characteristics that contributed to their participation in the activity. One such characteristic was that they appeared to be embedded in their communities. That is, participants had lived in their community for at least eight years, with most living in the area for 20 or more years. In general, they had established lifestyles and routines, which may have potentially

influenced their opportunities for engaging in weak ties and the types of weak tie interactions they experienced. If the sample had included adults who were new to the area, stories that focused on slightly different topics, such as difficulties in establishing relationships or reliance on weak ties to become established in the area may have emerged. Future studies would benefit from including a more diverse sample that would provide a different perspective to weak ties.

A second participant characteristic that informed but limited the study was that each respondent was healthy and active. Even though some may have experienced serious health problems in the past, all retained their mobility and their ability to communicate and engage with one another at the time of the interviews. Thus, the health status of participants precluded them from needing to rely on weak ties to meet their daily needs. As a result, the experiences of individuals not needing to rely on support from weak tie relationships to meet their daily needs were included in this study.

Third, while the stories collected were rich in information about weak tie exchanges, most participants told their stories from a recipient's perspective, providing a non-dyadic perspective to the exchange process. Identifying characteristics from the recipient and provider perspective of a single exchange would help further understanding of the exchange process and help identify differences in the characteristics and functions of weak tie exchanges between recipients and providers of support.

#### Strengths and Weaknesses of the Interview Process

In conducting this study, I was careful to note how I perceived the participants and the environment in which they were interviewed, so as not to bias my interpretation of findings. I made notes throughout the process and referred to them periodically during my work. This became particularly helpful during times when I found myself wanting to transfer a personal characteristic onto a dimension of weak ties.

One strength of the interview process that helped me remain objective and focused was working in a calm interview environment at each venue. That is, at each location, participants were interviewed in a comfortable setting where others could not eavesdrop on the conversation and noises from the community activity were kept to a minimum. We were not interrupted and there was no pressure to rush and finish the interview. Even though the interviews took place across five different locations, the calm and comfortable interview setting helped me remain consistent in my interview strategy.

However, I found myself rushing to cut the interviews short during the last evening of interviews when I realized that I was not hearing any new information from the participants. I had to remind myself to allow the interviews to proceed and interject the same amount of energy that I had provided to the other participants so that I would capture nuances in the stories. A review of the transcripts indicated that my interview technique remained relatively consistent once I made the effort to conduct a full interview.

My greatest strength during the interview process was my ability to view participant experiences in an objective manner. I did not find myself feeling overly positive or negative about participants during the interviews. I always felt comfortable talking to people and listening to their stories. I believe I can attribute this ability to remain detached but involved to my professional background, interviewing skills, and the countless interviews I have conducted with people over the years.

The biggest weakness in this process was having to communicate long-distance with the second coder. Having face-to-face conversations would have been easier for me. I also think that the second coder's unfamiliarity with the subject slowed the analysis a bit more than expected. However, the fresh outside perspective that the second coder brought into the discussion far exceeded my expectations and helped me think about how weak tie exchanges could be applied to different theoretical perspectives.

#### Next Steps for My Research

##### *Trust, Commitment, and Connectedness*

The stories collected for this study suggest that the levels of trust, commitment, and connectedness shared by participants in the exchanges are dynamic and affected by contextual influences. The strength of each dimension informs development in the others. While the stories provided some sense that the feeling of connectedness was the most dominant, the findings in this study cannot definitely support that notion, nor was this study designed to identify the strength of the three dimensions. Now that characteristics and functions of weak ties have been identified, a future study can be designed to capture the variances within the feelings of trust, commitment, and connectedness found in weak tie exchanges.

##### *Getting by on Weak Ties*

This study was based on the realization that some older adults rely heavily on weak tie interactions to get their needs met. Since they lack the direct support of family members and

close friends, they manage their daily affairs by getting by on the support provided through weak ties. In order to understand their reliance on weak ties, it was necessary to explore weak tie engagement among the general population first to identify a foundation of core characteristics, functions, and determinants of engagement. Now that a framework has been identified, measures to test the framework need to be developed as well as measures that identify a person's potential or propensity for engaging in weak tie exchanges. By developing these measures, a better understanding of active support networks can be achieved and insight gained into how people manage to get by with seemingly little support from family and friends. The knowledge provided through this work can be further incorporated into developing an instrument that community-based services can use to identify clients at risk for support. As a result, people who may go unnoticed or 'fall between the cracks' in service delivery can be identified. Additionally, programs will be able to allocate scarce resources more effectively to clients with the most need and the individuals served will experience an improved quality of life.

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## APPENDIXES

## Appendix A

### Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board  
2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-4991 Fax 540/231-0959  
e-mail moored@vt.edu  
[www.irbvt.edu](http://www.irbvt.edu)  
IRB # is IRB0000067

DATE: July 16, 2007

MEMORANDUM

TO: Jay A. Mancini  
Nancy Brossole

FROM: David M. Moore 

Approval date: 7/16/2007  
Continuing Review Due Date: 7/1/2008  
Expiration Date: 7/15/2008

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:** "The Characteristics and Functions of Weak Ties", IRB # 07-365

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective July 16, 2007.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

**Important:**

If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, this approval letter must state that the IRB has compared the OSP grant application and IRB application and found the documents to be consistent. Otherwise, this approval letter is invalid for OSP to release funds. Visit our website at <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/newstudy.htm#OSP> for further information.

cc: File  
Department Reviewer: Fred P. Piercy

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## Appendix B

### Recruitment Script

I am currently collecting stories as part of my dissertation research through Virginia Tech and am hoping you will be interested in recounting an experience you had with me. As you might guess, our family and close friends are a reliable source of support when we need help in facing the challenges of daily life. We depend on them to lend us a hand, share with us needed information, or simply provide an occasional shoulder to cry on.

However, there is reason to believe that many people rely on acquaintances and strangers to get the support they need when friends and family are not available or they do not have the resources to access help. My goal is to collect examples of how acquaintances have helped people such as yourself in recent years. Perhaps someone offered you a ride, spent time listening to you, or gave you information on a medical condition. No matter how simple or involved your interaction may have been, those are examples of the interactions I want to collect.

I am looking for 40 adults age 65 and older who are willing to spend up to 20 minutes talking with me about one or two experiences they have had interacting with an acquaintance in their neighborhood or community. No personal identifying information will be collected other than your age, marital status, and the length of time you have lived in your community. I will ask follow-up questions to get a better sense of how the interaction you recall has been supportive. The entire session will be taped recorded.

If you are interested in being a part of this study or learning more about it, please contact me, Nancy Brossoie, at 540-731-4339 at your earliest convenience. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you!

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent

Project Title: The Characteristics and Functions of Weak Tie Relationships

Investigators: Nancy Brossoie, M.S. Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech  
Jay A. Mancini, Ph.D. Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the help older adults receive from others in their community. The examples collected will help us understand how and when adults are helped. We will also learn how help impacts their daily lives. One result of this study is to help human service professionals recognize the different ways older adults may receive support.

#### Procedures

Examples will be gathered during tape recorded interviews. The interviews are expected to take up to 20 minutes. The interview will take place at a time and place of your choosing.

#### Risks

We anticipate no risks to you from participating in this study. Your decision to participate is voluntary. Your name will not be connected to this study. The research team will not tell anyone that you were a participant.

#### Benefits

This study may help you think about how people in your community provide support.

#### Confidentiality

The information you provide in this study will be kept in confidence. The research team is the only group who will have access to your interview. Contact information will be kept in a secure location and destroyed at the end of the study. Recordings will be kept in a password protected electronic file and erased at the end of the study. There will be no way to identify you in any written reports. We will replace your name and the names of people you mention with false names. Your name will not be included in any publication or presentation made by the research team.

#### Compensation

You will not be paid for participating in this study.

#### Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions. Your decision not to respond will not affect your standing in your social activities.

Approval of Research

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Subject's Permission

I agree to participate in this study. I have read and understand the information stated above. I know that I may stop participating in this study at any time without penalty.

I give my consent to participate in this study by signing my name on the lines provided below.

I \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

I agree to have my interview digitally recorded. Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

Participant Initials \_\_\_\_\_

---

Participant Signature

Date

---

Interviewer's signature

Date

## Appendix D

### Guided Interview Dialog and Questions

#### I. Introduction to the study

##### Sample dialog:

As you know, family and close friends provide a lot of help to us in our daily lives. We depend on them to lend us a hand or an occasional shoulder to cry on. In this study, I am looking at how our acquaintances also provide us with support. Acquaintances are people we recognize, but may only know a little bit about. I think all of us have quite a few acquaintances even though we may not think about them too much. They may include people such as neighbors, members of our church, the cashier at the gas station, even the man or woman who delivers our mail. I am collecting examples of how acquaintances have helped people in their daily lives and I would like to hear about your experiences.

To help you think about some interactions you have had with your acquaintances, I have a chart I would like to show you.

#### II. Relationship Chart

##### Sample dialog:

Here is a relationship chart (found in Attachment D) that is designed to help you identify the relationships you share with people in your life.

In the center is a ring that includes all people you feel closest to. In your life, who might those people be?

The middle ring includes people who are important to you but less close than those people in the center ring. The people in this ring generally include friends and family members as well. In your life, can you tell me the names of people who you would place in this ring?

The outer ring includes the people I want to talk to you about today: acquaintances. These are the people you recognize or know, but you do not know well. Sometimes acquaintances are friends of friends, neighbors, or parents of our children's friends. Unlike friends, we do not feel close to acquaintances. Can you name some of your acquaintances?

### III. Examples of Weak Tie Interactions

During the course of a week, many of us interact with acquaintances. For the most part, the interactions are not memorable because they do not result in anything of great importance.

However, sometimes we do engage in interactions that are memorable because they are meaningful to us or benefit us in some way.

For example,

I like to go to a coffee shop each day on my way to work to buy a cup of coffee. I go there because I like the coffee, and the service is quick. I could go to another coffee shop, but I don't because the woman who waits on me makes me feel happy. She always seems genuinely pleased to see me and is quick to ask me if I have been feeling poorly when I have not stopped by for a few days. I don't know her name or where she lives and I doubt if she knows anything about me. But she is the reason I patronize that coffee shop.

Another example,

My aunt and uncle go to Hardees most mornings to eat a biscuit and sit and chat with other diners. On a recent visit, my uncle was describing to the manager how his car was not running

well and he couldn't figure out what was wrong yet couldn't afford to take the car to the dealership for repair. The manager offered to take them to a mechanic he knew that very day. My aunt and uncle agreed and followed him down the road. They left the car with the mechanic for a few days and the manager drove my aunt and uncle back home. When the car was fixed, the manager picked up my uncle and drove him to get the car. My uncle was very appreciative and never tires of retelling that story.

#### IV. Interview Questions

1. Now I would like you to tell me about an interaction you have had with someone in your neighborhood (i.e., someone who lives near you or that you would consider a neighbor) who you would also consider an acquaintance.

Sample clarification prompts to identify weak tie characteristics in scenario:

*Who, what, when where, how often*

What was the situation in which the relationship occurred?

Did you initiate it? If yes, why?

How did you meet/know this person? (church, club, neighbor?)

Was your involvement planned or spontaneous?

How much time did the interaction take? Preparation and actual time?

Sample clarification prompts to identify weak tie functions in scenario:

Has the relationship continued? On a regular basis? Turned into a friendship?

What did you like best about the interaction? What did you like least?

Could this interaction just as easily have occurred with someone else if that person had been present?

Would you interact with this person again if the opportunity arose? Why or why not?

What did you get out of this exchange?

What made this exchange stick out in your mind?

2. Now I would like you to tell me about an interaction you have had with someone in your community (i.e., outside of your neighborhood) who you would consider an acquaintance.

Sample clarification prompts to help identify weak tie characteristics in scenario:

*Who, what, when where, how often*

What was the situation in which the relationship occurred?  
Did you initiate it? If yes, why?  
How did you meet/know this person? (church, club, neighbor?)  
Was your involvement planned or spontaneous?  
How much time did the interaction take? Preparation and actual time?

Sample clarification prompts to help identify weak tie functions in scenario:

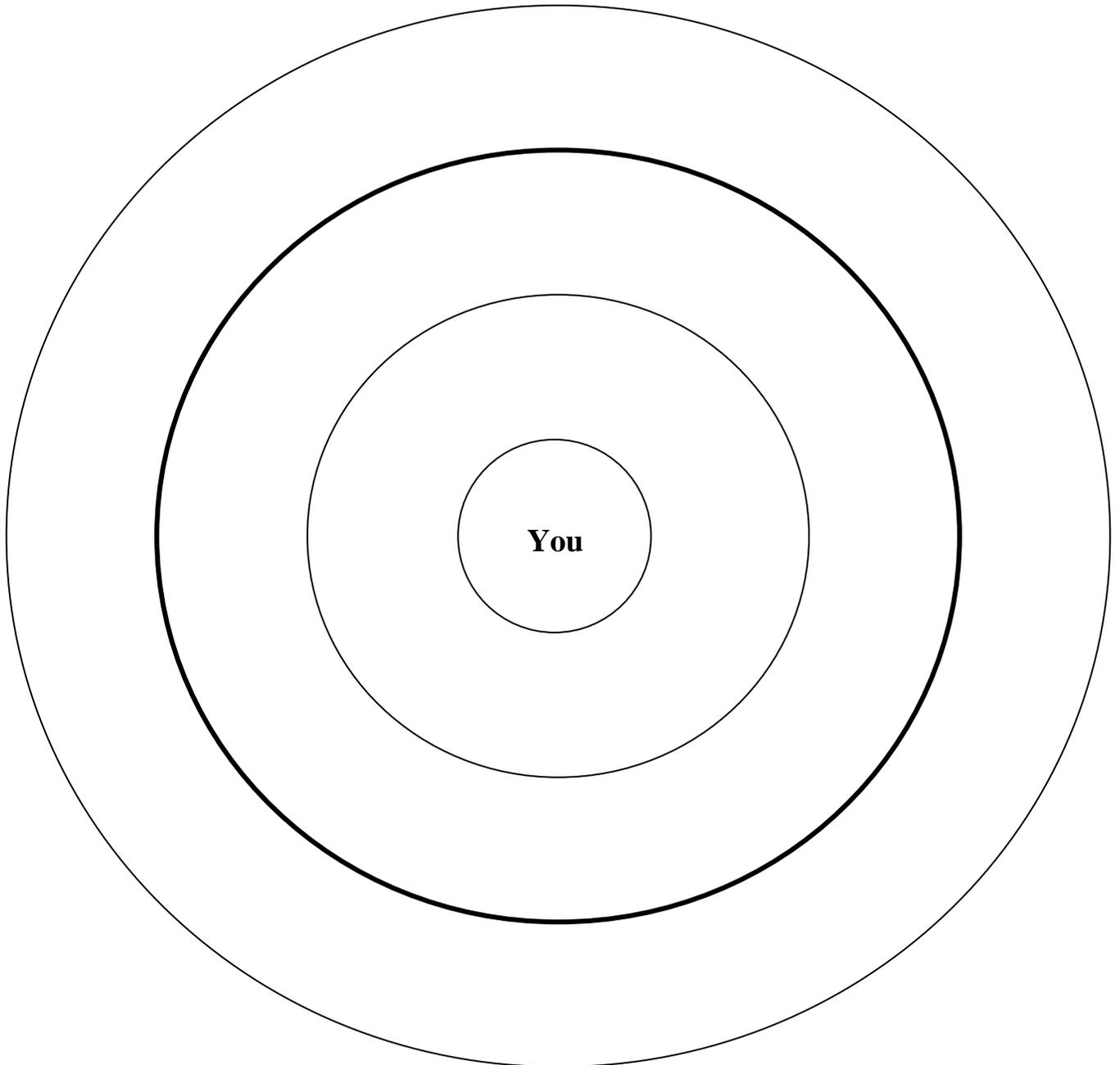
Has the relationship continued? On a regular basis? Turned into a friendship?  
What did you like best about the interaction? What did you like least?  
Could this interaction just as easily have occurred with someone else if that person had been present?  
Would you interact with this person again if the opportunity arose? Why or why not?  
What did you get out of this exchange?  
What made this exchange stick out in your mind?

#### V. Demographic Data Collection

As the interview closes, personal information not offered during earlier conversation will be requested:

Length of time living in current neighborhood

Appendix E  
Relationship Map



*Very Close*

*Less Close*



## Appendix F

### Curriculum Vitae

Nancy Brossoie

#### EDUCATION

- PhD 2007 Human Development (Adult Development and Aging), Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA  
Dissertation title – *The characteristics and functions of weak ties*
- MS 2003 Human Development (Adult Development and Aging), Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA  
Thesis title – *Community connections and sense of community among older adults*
- Certificate in Gerontology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA
- BS 1976 Home Economics, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT

#### RESEARCH/ EVALUATION EXPERIENCE

##### Senior Research Associate

Center for Health Policy, Planning, and Research, University of New England  
2007- present

##### Project Coordinator, Project Manager, Data Analyst

Center for Gerontology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
2002-2007

##### Assessment Team Evaluator – *National Demonstration Program for Citizen Soldier Support.*

Supported by congressional funding to the H. W. Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, University North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
2006-07

##### Consultant and Survey Analyst – *Older Adults/Intergenerational Ministries Council.*

Blacksburg United Methodist Church, Blacksburg, VA.  
2006-07

##### Quality Improvement Supervisor – Mental Health services

New River Valley Community Services, Blacksburg, VA  
2003-05

## PUBLICATIONS

### Refereed Journals

- Brossoie, N., Graham, B., & Lee, S. (2005). Families and communities: An annotated bibliography. *Family Relations, 54*, 667-676.
- Brossoie, N., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Glass, A. P. (2005). Assuring quality care: Exploring strategies of Medicaid E&D waiver providers. *Home Health Care Services Quarterly, 24*, 83-103.
- Glass, A. P., Teaster, P. B., Roberto, K. A., & Brossoie, N. (2005). Elderly and disabled services: Important dimensions of care from the client's perspective. *Home Health Care Services Quarterly, 24*, 59-77.

### Non-juried Research Reports

- Roberto, K. A., Duke, J., Brossoie, N., & Teaster, P. B. (2007). The Need for Public Guardians in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Center for Gerontology.
- Roberto, K. A., Brossoie, N., Teaster, P. B., & Glass, A. (2005). Quality Assessment Measurement Matrix and Implementation Plan (Research Report 2-05). Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Center for Gerontology.
- Brossoie, N., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Glass, A. (2005). Elderly & Disabled Waiver Services: Development of the Client Satisfaction Survey – Short Forms (Research Report 1-05). Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Center for Gerontology.
- Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Brossoie, N. (2004). Elderly and Disabled Waiver Services: Consumer Statewide Report (Research Report 2-04). Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Center for Gerontology.
- Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Brossoie, N. (2004). Utilization Review for the Elderly & Disabled Waiver Program: Summary Report (Research Report 1-04). Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Center for Gerontology.
- Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Brossoie, N. (2003). Elderly and Disabled Waiver Services: Important Dimensions from the Client's Perspective (Research Report 2-03). Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Center for Gerontology.
- Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Brossoie, N. (2003). Elderly and Disabled Waiver Services: Provider Survey (Research Report 1-03). Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Center for Gerontology.

### Brochures

- Virginia Cooperative Extension (in press). *Long Distance Caregiving: 5 Steps to Providing Effective Care*. (#350-XXX). Blacksburg, VA: Author
- Virginia Cooperative Extension (in press). *Taking Care of the Caregiver: Strategies for Reducing Stress*. (#350-XXX). Blacksburg, VA: Author
- Virginia Cooperative Extension (in press). *Choosing Community Based Services for Older Adults and Their Families*. (#350-252). Blacksburg, VA: Author

- Virginia Cooperative Extension (in press). *Substitute Decisions by and for Older Adults and their Families*. (#350-253). Blacksburg, VA: Author
- Virginia Cooperative Extension (in press). *Living Options for Adults Needing Assistance* (#350-254). Blacksburg, VA: Author
- Center for Gerontology at Virginia Tech. (2006, October). *Mild cognitive impairment (MCI): What do we do now?* (VT/0178/1006/4M/271046). Blacksburg, VA: Author
- Center for Gerontology at Virginia Tech. (2005, August). *Improving quality: A guide for Virginia's personal care providers*. (VT/0178/08/05/600/260235). Blacksburg, VA: Author.

## PRESENTATIONS

### Professional Conferences

- Jarrott, S. E., Brossoie, N., & Mancini, J. A. (November, 2006). *Factor analysis of a community capacity index for shared site intergenerational programs*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Dallas, TX.
- Jarrott, S. E., Gigliotti, C. M., Brossoie, N., Mancini, J. A., & Fenyk, S. (November, 2005). *Good neighbors are hard to find: Development of a community capacity measure for shared intergenerational communities*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Washington, D.C.
- Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Brossoie, N. (November, 2005). *Personal care services: Race, gender, and location comparison*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Washington, D.C.
- Brossoie, N. (February, 2005). *Teaching and learning strategies: The undergraduate perspective*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, Oklahoma City, OK.
- Rogers, S. & Brossoie, N. (February, 2005). *Preparing the future professoriate: Integrating a successful teaching apprenticeship program*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, Oklahoma City, OK.
- Brossoie, N., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Glass, A. P. (November, 2004) *Assuring quality care: Exploring strategies of Medicaid E&D waiver providers*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Washington, D.C.
- Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Brossoie, N. (November, 2004). *Satisfaction with Elderly and Disabled waiver services: Results of a statewide survey*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Washington, D.C.
- Brossoie, N., Mancini, J. A., Roberto, K. A., & Blieszner, R. (November, 2003). *Community connections and sense of community among older adults*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego, CA.
- Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. A., & Brossoie, N. (November, 2003). *Medicaid Elderly and Disabled waiver services: What do we know about providers?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego, CA.
- Brossoie, N., & Mancini, J. A. (April, 2003). *Predictors of community connections among older adults living in Appalachia*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Gerontological Society, Richmond, VA.

Glass, A., Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., & Brossoie, N. (March, 2003). *Elderly & Disabled waiver services: What do we know about providers?* Poster presented at the meeting of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services: Living and Working in the Community 2003, Baltimore, MD.

#### Invited Lectures and Trainings

- Brossoie, N. (April, 2007). *10 myths of aging*. University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO.
- Brossoie, N. (March, 2007). *Caring for the caregiver*. Sponsored by Older Adult Ministries, Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (November, 2006). *Caring for the caregiver*. Sponsored by Intergenerational Ministries, Blacksburg United Methodist Church, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (November, 2006). *Family risk and rResilience: Caregiving across the lifespan*. Undergraduate course HD 4324: Individual and Family Risk and Resilience, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (October, 2006). *Mild cognitive impairment: Effects on the family*. Sponsored by *tlc4ltc*, Roanoke, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (June, 2005). *Program evaluation: Challenges for evaluators in the applied setting*. Undergraduate course HD 4344: Community Programs for Family Life, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N., Graham, B., & Grass, S. (January, 2005). *Atlas.ti software training*. Presented a training session on Atlas.ti, a qualitative software program to faculty and graduate students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (September, 2004). *Careers in gerontology*. Undergraduate course HD4344 Community Programs in Family Life, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (July, 2004). *Community-based services: Who's paying?* Undergraduate course HD 4114: Community Services for Older Adults, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (March, 2004). *Mothers panel*. Undergraduate course HD1004: Human Development I, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- Brossoie, N. (October, 2003). *Careers in human services*. Undergraduate course HD 2335: Principles of Human Services I, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

#### ACADEMIC TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

- HD1004: Human Development I: Early Childhood Development (Summer II, 2005 & 2006)
- HD2336: Principles of Human Services II (Summer II, 2003)
- HD3004: Human Development II: Adult Development and Aging (Spring & Fall, 2004)
- HD3114: Issues in Aging (Spring 2006)
- HD4644: Community Programs in Family Life (Fall 2005, Spring 2006)

## PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT

### Awards and Honors

- AARP National Scholar* (2005-06). AARP, Academic Affairs Office, Washington, DC.
- Futures Board Scholarship* (2003). Center for Gerontology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA
- Ora Goodwin Roop Scholarship* (2005). College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA
- Peggy Lavery Gerontology Research and Professional Development Award* (2005). Center for Gerontology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA
- Sigma Phi Omega*, National Honor Society (2002-present)
- Co-President, Alpha chapter (2003-04)
  - Secretary, Alpha chapter (2002-03)

### Professional Development

- Atlas.ti* (November, 2004 & April, 2005). Research Development Associates, New York
- Microsoft SQL 2005* (December, 2006). Flying Bridge Technologies, North Carolina.
- EndNote* (March, 2007). Virginia Tech Libraries, Blacksburg, VA.
- ARC GIS* (May, 2007). Virginia Tech Faculty Development Institute, Blacksburg, VA

### Professional Membership and Service

- American Evaluation Association (2004-present)
- Gerontological Society of America (2002-present)
- Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (2002-present)
- Faculty Development Committee Member (2004-present)
- National Council on Family Relations (2002-present)
- Journal of Family Relations – reviewer (2005-present)
- Senior Citizen's Coordinating Council (2007), Roanoke, VA
- Council member
- Southern Gerontological Society (2003-present)
- Abstract reviewer (2004)
- Virginia Association on Aging (2004-2006)
- Board of Directors, Student Representative (2004-06)
- American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Disorders – reviewer (2007)

### University Service at Virginia Tech: Dept of Human Development

- Center for Gerontology faculty search committee, Student Representative (2006)
- Graduate Student Assembly, Student Representative (2004-05)
- Graduate Policy Committee, Student Representative (2004-05)
- Developmental Science Initiative Colloquium, Student Representative (2004-05)

TABLES

Table 1. *Sampling Matrix*

	<i>Ages 65-74</i>		<i>Ages 75+</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
Square Dance Club	7	10	5	6	28
Church Community	6	6	5	5	22
Total	11	16	10	11	50