

## Personality and Social Psychology

# The mechanisms behind the formation of a strong Sense of Coherence (SOC): The role of migration and integration

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Considering how much we know about the impact of the Sense of Coherence (SOC) on different health-related outcomes, we know surprisingly little about how a strong SOC actually develops. In this study we examine the mechanisms behind the formation of a strong SOC and study the role of migration, integration and general resistance resources (GRRs) in this process. We held 46 life-story interviews with women of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese descent. We divided the respondents in a relatively strong and weak SOC group in order to discern patterns of life experiences associated with SOC development. We find that, as Antonovsky predicted, experiencing consistency and load balance are associated with a strong SOC. In opposition to Antonovsky's claims, decision making power is not a necessary condition to develop meaningfulness. Moreover, the women's life narratives show that migration and integration are related to the mechanisms shaping SOC, yet, the impact is subjective and depends on the availability and use of GRRs. Our findings provide improvements to Antonovsky's salutogenic theory and provide suggestions for interventions aimed at strengthening SOC.

*Key words:* Sense of Coherence, migration, integration, general resistance resources.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Sense of Coherence (SOC) was introduced by Antonovsky (1987) to explain why, despite the abundance of risk factors, some individuals manage to stay healthy. According to Antonovsky, SOC is a general orientation to life indicating the extent to which individuals: (1) perceive arising issues as structured, predictable and explicable; (2) feel confident that they have the available resources to deal with these issues; and (3) are motivated and willing to do so. These three components are called comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Since the introduction of SOC more than 300 studies have found support for the positive effect of SOC on different health-related outcomes (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005). It is important to understand the mechanisms behind the formation of a strong SOC in order to be able to develop successful interventions which promote SOC, health and well-being. Yet, very little is known about how and through which mechanisms a strong SOC is formed.

Antonovsky (1987) argued that the development of SOC is fostered by specific patterns of life experiences; the comprehensibility component is fostered by experiencing consistency, the manageability component is promoted by experiencing a good load balance, and the meaningfulness component is strengthened by having decision making power in socially valued contexts. Only a few empirical studies have looked into factors which are associated with a high level of SOC. Despite the clear theoretical description that Antonovsky provides about the mechanisms that promote a strong SOC, none of these studies look into whether consistency, load balance and socially valued decision making power are indeed the

mechanisms through which SOC is shaped. In this study we aim to reduce this gap in the literature by examining whether SOC is shaped by these mechanisms, and if so, how they operate to shape SOC.

When considering the theoretically proposed mechanisms which are supposed to shape SOC, the formation of ethnic minority women's SOC is particularly interesting. The processes of migration and integration are likely to threaten consistency, load balance and decision making power. First, differences in socio-cultural norms may result in experiencing inconsistent expectations from the majority and origin community, and often especially so for women. Second, the particular experience of migrating and being a minority in the host country poses particular challenges to first and second generation migrants which may have a negative effect on their load balance. Lastly, many outcomes in the process of migration and living in a new country are difficult to influence or shape due to contextual factors, thereby reducing one's ability to partake in shaping outcomes in socially valued contexts. Thus, one may expect ethnic minority women to experience less consistency, load balance and decision making power, leading to less comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, in other words, a weaker SOC.

Antonovsky (1987) argued that General Resistance Resources (GRRs) contribute to the formation of a strong SOC. Antonovsky mentions a wide variety of GRRs such as education, social support, financial resources and culture. Individuals with more GRRs perceive more consistency, a better load balance and more decision making power, and are therefore more likely to have a strong SOC. The role of GRRs in the formation of SOC has, so far, not been studied empirically. Moreover, Antonovsky provides

no explanation on how GRRs contribute to the mechanisms shaping SOC. Therefore, we will study the role of GRRs in experiencing consistency, load balance and decision making power, and as such, in the formation of SOC.

In conclusion, this study has three main aims; first, we want to get insight into the mechanisms behind the formation of a strong SOC. Second, we want to understand how migration and integration influence the experience of consistency, load balance and decision making power. Third, we aim to study the role of GRRs in shaping experiences promoting the development of a strong SOC. In doing so, this study both contributes to the theoretical understanding of SOC formation, by examining Antonovsky's theoretically proposed development mechanisms, and adds to our understanding of existing SOC- and health-disparities. We will first explain more in-depth Antonovsky's theory about how individuals build a strong SOC and discuss the role of GRRs in the formation of SOC. In the analysis we examine how different patterns of life experiences influence the subjectively experienced consistency, load balance and meaningfulness and how GRRs are related to this through having life story interviews with first and second generation migrant women from Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese descent living in the Netherlands. In the discussion we will reflect on the theoretical and policy implications of our findings.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Consistency, load balance and shaping outcomes*

Antonovsky provided an elaborate theoretical description of how SOC develops and the mechanisms behind SOC formation. Below we provide an overview of Antonovsky's theory about how consistency, load balance and partaking in shaping outcomes in socially valued contexts form a pattern of prototypical experiences which would engender a strong SOC, as described in his famous books introducing the SOC concept (Antonovsky, 1985, 1987).

The comprehensibility component of SOC forms through experiencing consistency; receiving consistent messages and stimuli. Comprehensibility is mostly based on the creation of a stable environment. A stable environment can be characterized by its consistency, continuity and permanence. The continuous recurrence of consistent responses to similar situations results in stimuli becoming more familiar and routinized and contributing to a sense of comprehensibility. Previous studies support Antonovsky's claims, showing that having divorced parents during childhood is associated with a weaker SOC in adulthood (Volanen, Suominen, Lahelma, Koskenvuo & Silventoinen, 2006). Moreover, the sudden evacuation of Israeli adolescents from the Sinai, an example of inconsistency and a lack of continuity, was negatively associated with SOC (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1986). The case of migrant women is especially interesting in this context. Norms differ greatly across cultures, especially so for women. Migrant women are likely to be confronted with inconsistent expectations from Dutch society and their own community. Moreover, second generation migrant women may be less at risk, because they grow up in the Netherlands and are therefore growing up in the socio-cultural context of the host

society. Ordering these stimuli into a consistent set of demands may therefore be specifically challenging for first generation migrant women.

The manageability component is mainly shaped by a good load balance throughout the life course. Good load balance means that an individual is able to meet posed requirements. Overload, higher demands than the individual can meet, can result in insecurity and the feeling of failing. Underload, when too little is required of an individual, can result in disinterest and demotivation. Therefore, it is important that individuals, in each role they perform in each stage of their life, can find a specific load balance which is challenging and engaging, yet not more than they can handle. In support of the importance of load balance, previous studies found that experiencing financial difficulties during childhood is associated with a weaker SOC (Volanen, Lahelma, Silventoinen & Suominen, 2004; Volanen *et al.*, 2006). Family situation during childhood, like family conflicts, family tension or bad relationships with parents, were also found to be associated with a weaker SOC (Lundberg, 1997; Silventoinen, Volanen, Vuoksima, Rose, Suominen & Kaprio, 2014; Volanen *et al.*, 2004, 2006). Moreover, Volanen and colleagues found that a lack of opportunity to use skills at work was negatively associated with SOC, however, that too much strain at work was also negatively associated with SOC (Volanen *et al.*, 2004). Migration and integration pose particular challenges, such as learning the language, rebuilding a social network and the potential exposure to discrimination on the one hand. On the other hand, ethnic minority women are overrepresented in unemployment statistics even more so than migrant men (Huijnk, Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2014), possibly resulting in a lack of options to use their capacities. Hence, first generation ethnic minority women seem to be at a higher risk of being exposed to overload or underload, which may threaten the development of the manageability component. Second generation migrant women grow up in the Netherlands, they are therefore likely to experience a smaller threat to load balance.

According to Antonovsky, the meaningfulness component is strengthened through participation in shaping outcomes in socially valued contexts. "When others decide everything for us – when they set the task, formulate the rules, and manage the outcome – and we have no say in the matter, we are reduced to being objects. A world thus experienced as being indifferent to what we do comes to be seen as a world devoid of meaning" (Antonovsky 1987, p. 92). This does not mean that an individual needs full control over decision making; participating in the decision-making process and the feeling to be heard is enough. However, participation in decision making is only beneficial if it is in an activity which is socially valued. Antonovsky mentions the example of the homemaker, who may be in charge of everything at home, but which won't provide her with any meaningfulness if the society in which she lives does not value her role. In Western societies individuals are often evaluated by their social mobility, in the case of homemakers they start and end on the same step and as such may therefore be not as socially valued as in other roles. Ethnic minority women in the Netherlands are predominantly homemakers which may threaten the development of strong meaningfulness in the Dutch context which values

social mobility. In support of Antonovsky, Volanen *et al.* (2006) found that a higher decision authority at work is associated with a higher SOC. Moreover, a higher occupational status has repeatedly been found to be associated with a stronger SOC (Hanse & Engstrom, 1999; Larsson & Kallenberg, 1999; Lundberg, 1997; Lundberg & Peck, 1994; Volanen *et al.*, 2004, 2006). These findings support Antonovsky's theory, as a higher job status allows for decision making within a job with a higher social status. In support of Antonovsky's claim that employment is an important source of social valuation in the Western world, previous studies found that unemployed individuals have a weaker SOC than working individuals (Feldt, Leskinen & Kinnunen, 2005; Hanse & Engstrom, 1999; Volanen *et al.*, 2004, 2006). Both first and second generation migrant women in the Netherlands are more often unemployed (Boerdam, Ooijevaar, Bloemendal *et al.*, 2016), which may threaten the development of a strong sense of meaningfulness.

Just like Antonovsky, Maddi (1970) argued that everyday decision making and actions create a sense of meaningfulness. However, other authors have focused on self-transcendence (the overcoming of the limits of the individual self and its desires in spiritual contemplation and realization) (Allport, 1961), achieving goals (Klinger, 1977), the development of a coherent life narrative (Kenyon, 2000; McAdams, 1993), or a sense of belonging (Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baumeister & Fincham, 2013) as ways to create a sense of meaningfulness. Even though we agree with Antonovsky that decision making power in socially valued contexts is important for developing meaningfulness, we think, based on the wider literature on meaningfulness, that it is plausible that there are multiple ways to developing a sense of meaningfulness and will study inductively how ethnic minority women develop such a sense of meaningfulness.

The empirical studies we refer to above show that various factors, which may be associated with consistency, load balance and decision making power, are related to a strong SOC. However, these studies only looked into correlates of SOC and did not look into the mechanisms behind SOC formation. This is an omission as similar situations may be perceived and experienced differently across individuals. The mechanisms behind the formation of SOC remain underexposed.

#### General resistance resources

Antonovsky claimed that the availability of general resistance resources (GRRs) would engender so-called prototypical patterns of experiences associated with a strong SOC (consistency, load balance and decision making power). GRRs are all resources available to individuals, directly or indirectly, material or non-material, that enable individuals to have meaningful and coherent life experiences (Lindström & Eriksson, 2005). Education, gender, identity, cultural stability, religion, social class and social support are all examples of such GRRs, which, according to Antonovsky, in definition shape patterns of life experiences which engender a strong SOC. Importantly, it is not only about what resources are available, but also whether individuals are able to flexibly use and re-use these resources (Lindström & Eriksson, 2005).

## METHODS

Antonovsky (1987) has emphasized the importance of using qualitative methods when studying SOC. Yet, so far most studies have used quantitative methods to study SOC and its outcomes. We answer to Antonovsky's call by having life-story interviews (Atkinson, 1998, 2012), which are particularly suited to examine how migration and integration influence the subjective experience of consistency, load balance and meaningfulness throughout the life course.

As discussed in the theoretical background, we suspect that especially migrant women's SOC formation is threatened and that there may be differences in these threats across the first and second generations. Hence, we particularly focused on the formation of SOC of first and second generation migrant women. We made use of data gathered as part of a larger research project about health and employment among women from different ethnic backgrounds living in the Netherlands. Life-story interviews (Atkinson, 1998, 2012) were held by the first author throughout 2015 with women of Moroccan (N = 19), Turkish (N = 19) and Surinamese (N = 8) descent (see Appendix 2). We used purposive sampling to select women living in the four largest cities of the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) who either suffered from regular headaches and/or regular shoulder and back aches. The respondents are between 26 and 55 years old, with an average age of 39 years old. Among Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese women respectively 47%, 68% and 38% were from the first migrant generation. The educational attainment of the women was relatively weak, half of the women only completed up to secondary education.

To examine how the assumed mechanism behind SOC formation are related to the level of SOC, respondents filled in the 13-item Orientation to Life Questionnaire which measures SOC (Jellesma, Terwogt & Rieffe, 2006). In the life story interviews women were asked to tell their life story and reflect on how they experienced the process of migration to and integration in the Netherlands. Three women made use of an interpreter due to their limited proficiency in Dutch. The interviews lasted from about 1 to 3 hours, were audio-recorded, transcribed *ad verbatim*, made anonymous by using fictitious names and coded using Atlas.ti. For the analysis, women were divided in a relatively strong and weak SOC group (see Appendix 3), such that we were able to discern specific patterns in experiences which are associated with developing a strong SOC and to examine whether Antonovsky's theoretically proposed mechanisms indeed play a role in the process of SOC formation. Next, we present a few key themes which arose in the interviews with women in the relatively weak and relatively strong SOC group.

## RESULTS

### Women with a weak Sense of Coherence

*'I just thought it would be different' – Pre-migration expectations and post-migration reality.* The first key theme among women with a relatively weak SOC is a mismatch between pre-migration expectations and post-migration experiences. An example is Rachida, a 44-year old woman from Morocco who has lived in the Netherlands for 8 years and who studied some years at university back in Morocco. "I said, I will go work! I thought I could improve my life in Holland. But, but it was very different. My university studies are not valued here. They all want to see a piece of paper. They don't care about my experience, that I worked in hotels for years and speak so many languages [...] I came here and lost everything and now my skills and experiences are not valued here." Another example is Emine, a Turkish woman who grew up in an affluent family. Her family in law paints a rosy picture of potential opportunities in the Netherlands with respect to studying and getting a job. However, her expectations stand in sharp contrast with her experiences. She

ironically remarks “so well, there I was cleaning someone else’s things, while I have never even had to clean my own stuff, ever! Our servants would take care of that, now I became the servant. Well, that was my bright future full of opportunities in this ‘rich’ country the Netherlands.” The irony and sarcasm seem to be drenched with the same type of disillusionment and sense of loss that Rachida expresses in her story. Even though both women are relatively well educated and full of ambition, the disappointment of the discrepancy of reality with their pre-migration expectations results in inconsistency. In the case of Rachida, this mismatch results in overload; “It is so tough. I don’t know how long I can still take this. I just thought it would be different. Not having a job, financial issues, not having a house, I worry all the time.” In the case of Emine, it results in underload; “Some of my friends continued their studies and have good jobs now. That is what I wanted. All I do is clean all day and take care of the children and my family in law. I wanted so much more.” Rachida summarizes how this disillusionment associated with the discrepancy between expectations and reality may threaten the sense of meaning of women; “In Morocco I had a good life, friends, a great job, holidays. Every hotel would take me there. But I came here and lost everything and now none of my skills or experiences are valued here. I feel worthless.” The discrepancy between pre-migration expectations and post-migration experiences appear to be a key threat to experiencing consistency, load balance and developing a sense of meaning.

*‘The day I arrived I turned deaf and blind’ – Devaluation of country of origin specific resources.* Besides the discrepancy between expectations and experiences, women with a weak SOC often refer to a sense of devaluation and loss of resources. Resources build up pre-migration are mostly origin-country specific resources which are less applicable in the host-country, and as such ‘lose’ value. The lack of useful resources, for example language skills, cultural knowledge and social contacts, results in feelings of dependency. Especially first generation Turkish and Moroccan women express these feelings. Ghizlaine from Morocco states “everything you used to know becomes useless the moment you arrive, that’s how it felt.” Many of the women express these feelings by making use of similar metaphors. Quotes such as “I was like a little baby, I had to re-learn everything,” “The day I arrived I turned deaf and blind, I lost my hands and feet” and “My world was left in Turkey, I was brought to someone else’s world, a place I knew nothing about” indicate this sense of loss, inapplicability of origin-country specific resources and an elevated sense of dependency. The inapplicability of most resources developed in the country of origin results in experiencing inconsistency, the effort to re-learn everything results in overload, and the general sense of loss threatens the sense of meaningfulness.

*‘In between two worlds’ – Threat to identity and belonging.* Another major theme that arose in the interviews with women with a weak SOC was issues relating to identity and belonging. More specifically, respondents mention the tension between belonging and non-belonging, managing inconsistent cultural norms and expectations, and battling stereotypes. Especially second generation migrant women, irrespective of their ethnic background, refer to these themes.

Women with a relatively weak SOC often refer to an ongoing tension between belonging and non-belonging to both the own ethnic community and the mainstream. Rowena, a second generation migrant woman from Suriname, highlights; “It is actually funny, Surinamese people don’t see me as Surinamese because I act too Dutch. And I am . . . I also think the mentality is not really . . . Haha, so I always say I don’t really have a thing for Surinamese people, haha. [. . .] I am of course Surinamese but I don’t feel like I necessarily need to identify with them. Or to behave like them, if I don’t think that’s okay. I have a very clear opinion on that. It’s not my thing. [. . .] I don’t like Surinamese people that much, and they don’t like me.” Here, Rowena clearly distances herself from her Surinamese background. Yet, the tension in this process of belonging and non-belonging becomes clear in the following excerpt where Rowena seems to make an opposite argument. “I do have a lot of Surinamese friends, and I do notice, I was thinking the other day, that somehow I do get along better with Surinamese people [compared to native Dutch people]. Simply, it is just an entirely different vibe. That I can be myself. That I don’t have to keep up some kind of image and pretend to be better than I am [. . .] I also said to my mom, well mom, I don’t think I will bring a Dutch guy home later because we don’t really vibe. Haha!” Rowena is a clear example of other respondents who refer to an ongoing tension between belonging and non-belonging, both to the mainstream and to the ethnic community. Behavior, identification and the acceptance of the group all play an important role in this ongoing process.

A second, and related, issue is the inconsistent norms and expectations between which these women maneuver. Many women refer to living between different worlds and how the pressure to conform to both results in inconsistency and overload. An example is Songül, a woman of Kurdish-Turkish origin. She migrated at the age of 19, is highly educated and has many Dutch friends. The different norms and expectations among her Dutch friends create difficulties. “As a mother I had a very difficult time. Also because with my background . . . Can you imagine, I don’t even know what day I was born? And then I saw among my Dutch friends, maybe also a product of capitalism, but they all kept a so-called babybook in which they commemorated everything, first step, first bite, first this and that, and, well to keep track of everything. And of course I tried again to be like my Dutch friends, but eventually also that failed.” The pressures to conform do not only originate from the host-society’s population, but also from the own ethnic community and family. Songül reflects on the fact that it is very sensitive to use too many Turkish words when speaking Kurdish, or vica versa, and is ashamed when she does not speak Dutch perfectly. “So, well, it is very tiring, whatever language I speak, I must always watch how I speak. My shoulders always cramp up and then I get these horrible headaches. Only when I am on my own I don’t have to worry about that, what people may think.” Most women refer to cultural differences in norms and expectations, yet many women also refer to class as a source of inconsistency. “You are simply in a world with mostly highly educated people, and my mother, not because of religion, but just culturally, she would wear traditional local clothing. So also, well, not a headscarf, but really such a cloth to the back, like farmer women. And she probably wore this for such a long time that she would not wear other

clothes anymore when she arrived in the Netherlands. And I was only thinking, oh my, imagine if my mother comes to visit, what would people think of me?." As the excerpts by Songül highlight, inconsistent norms and expectations, may they be based on culture or class or both, are strongly related to worries about group acceptance and exclusion, 'what may people think?' seems to be a continuous question and source of inconsistency, overload and threat to meaningfulness.

A third important theme among women with a weak SOC concerning identity and belonging is coping with stereotypes. Especially many second generation migrant women discuss their active effort to not confirm existing stereotypes about their ethnic group. Selin, a second generation Turkish woman, 28 years old, emphasizes her desire to not "be that Turkish girl." "I always wanted to be different, different than other people. I didn't want to be like my family. That was my goal, I guess. I don't know how else to put it in words. I didn't want to be that Turkish girl with all her Turkish girlfriends, I just wanted to be with other kinds of people ... Yeah, just with Dutch people." Rowena also discusses her efforts not to confirm existing stereotypes about her ethnic group. "For example at that organization I am the only black girl. [...] And then I also think oh, then I absolutely do not want to behave like the stereotypical image, to be like ... I don't know, sometimes that really bothers me, how I am supposed to behave. I don't want to confirm those stereotypes you know, but then I also start to behave really different. Yeah, you know, sometimes I am also like black people, then I am loud and I say the wrong things a lot, hahaha, that kind of stuff. And then you are, you know it is pretty difficult when you are kind of in between those things. So, that is actually pretty hard." She puts effort into not confirming stereotypes, yet at the same time she actually holds those stereotypes about Surinamese people herself. The excerpts from the talk with Rowena and Selin show how they are constantly working on fitting in and distancing themselves. As a token of their group they are very concerned with what people think of them. Just like Selin, she does not want to be like the stereotypical 'Surinamese girl' as Selin is trying not to be 'that Turkish girl'. It takes effort to constantly disprove stereotypes, resulting in overload and stress. Moreover, this threatens a secure sense of identity, and as such, meaningfulness.

In conclusion, women with a relatively weak SOC seem to experience more inconsistency, less load balance and less meaningfulness. In opposition to Antonovsky's theory, a lack of decision making power was not the only mechanism through which meaningfulness was threatened, issues with identity and belonging were more often mentioned in relation to weak levels of meaningfulness. Moreover, the women in our study often mention migration and integration as key threats, from which three major themes arise; the incongruence between pre-migration expectations and post-migration experiences, migration resulting in a sense of loss and a threat to identity and belonging. We argued, based on Antonovsky's theory, that GRRs play an important role in shaping a strong SOC. We focused on women with a weak SOC, as such it was to be expected that the GRRs shine in their absence. Women with a weak SOC appear to have less access to GRRs or are not able to use them to their advantage.

#### *Women with a strong SOC*

*"We always knew" – Pre-migration expectations meet post-migration experiences.* We found that women with a strong SOC experienced the process of migration and integration as logical and self-evident. These women emphasized the correspondence between their expectations and experiences and perceive less threat of migration and integration to their consistency, load balance and development of meaningfulness. Sandra, for example, moved to the Netherlands from Suriname when she was 17. "It seemed to be the best option to go to the Netherlands. Everyone did it. It was easy to move there, there were good education opportunities, and well, nobody knew how it would be like in Suriname after independence, people were a little scared." Sandra narrates the reasons to migrate to the Netherlands in such a way that it seems like the only logical option, as she suggests; "everyone did it." Samira, who migrated as an 8-year-old girl from Morocco to the Netherlands, says; "We always knew we would join my father, but he just had to arrange everything and find a job and a house of course. So when it finally happened it was very exciting." Again, the logical and self-evident nature of migration is emphasized, "we always knew," reflecting a strong correspondence between expectations and experiences. The way women with a strong SOC describe the migration process as natural, logical and sensible result in a limited threat to SOC formation.

*'I just picked up right where I left off' – transferrability and quick development of resources.* Besides the subjective experience of correspondence between expectations and experiences, women with a strong SOC emphasize the smooth nature of the integration process due to the transferability of country of origin specific resources or the quick development of host country specific resources. Sandra elaborates; "I actually never really consciously thought about that I migrated or about integration. I spoke the language, I was familiar with Dutch culture, I had heard so many stories from other people that moved here ... I just picked up right where I left off, only a few days after my arrival I started school and got a job. I just went with the flow." Sandra's story reflects the experiences of many other Surinamese women, who, due to the colonial ties between Suriname and the Netherlands, already knew the language and developed important knowledge and skills which were easily transferrable to the Netherlands. Samira, who migrated as a child from Morocco, reflects; "After starting school I quickly learned the language, made new friends, for me it felt very normal to live here. I think it is easier as a child, you just adapt more easily, you think everything is normal." Just like Sandra, Samira emphasizes the ease with which she developed host-country specific knowledge and skills. Samira's story is a good example of the experiences of women who migrated at a young age to the Netherlands. By going to school in the Netherlands they have plenty of opportunity to learn Dutch and develop 'Dutch resources'. Moreover, many women who migrated at a young age emphasize the specific ability of children to easily adapt to new situations. In conclusion, the transferrability of country of origin specific resources and the opportunities women receive to develop host-country specific resources protect individuals from feelings of loss and dependence, thereby protecting their sense of consistency, load balance and meaningfulness.

*'Then it is not so hard' – The role of general resistance resources.* Many women referred to GRRs like social support, religion and collective narratives which enable these women to subjectively perceive more consistency, load balance and meaningfulness, despite facing migration, integration or other adversities.

Many of the women with a strong Sense of Coherence refer to the important role of social support. Antonovsky identified social capital and social support as important GRRs. The story of Naima, a Moroccan marriage migrant who moved to the Netherlands at the age of 21, highlights how migration and integration do not necessarily have to result in inconsistency and overload. "It was very hard, everything was different, I was far away from my family and I could not speak the language. Of course it was difficult, of course. But my sister in law she was so nice, she is my best friend now, she went to the market with me, helped me practicing Dutch, we went to the community center together, just nice stuff. And also my husband, always helping out. Then it is not so hard, you know? And step by step I learned the language and found my way." Naima highlights how everything was different and that it was difficult, yet her subjective experience is not a story of inconsistency and overload. The social support Naima and women like her received enable these women to subjectively experience the migration and integration process as 'not so hard' (load balance). The story of Anna, a second generation Surinamese woman who struggled a lot with identity and group-belonging, indicates the importance of social support in the development of a secure identity and sense of belonging. "Everything changed when I found them, people like me. People who were also in between, not really Dutch, not really Surinamese, highly educated and ambitious. I don't have to struggle to belong either to this, or that . . . We created our own group, our own family to belong to. They understand me, support me, and provide me with a space where I can be this mixed gray bag of me." Sharing her experiences, receiving support and forming a group with like-minded people, allow Anna to create a secure sense of identity and belonging and protect her sense of meaningfulness.

Many women refer to religion as an important resource during the integration process. An example is Naima, a woman of Moroccan origin who arrived as a marriage migrant in the Netherlands. She reflects on her integration into Dutch society; "Of course there are differences, between Dutch and Moroccans, of course. But you know, I am a Muslim, religion is very important to me, and Allah wants us to be good people, to everyone, so that is how I try to live. I try to be a good Muslim, help my old neighbor, a Dutch lady, or volunteering at the primary school, and so I never have problems. They all like me, because I am a good person, not because I am Moroccan or Dutch, just because I am a good person." Some women who were struggling with identity and belonging, find resolution and belonging in religion. An example is Tugba, a young Turkish woman who struggled severely with her identity during her teen years. Tugba reflects; "It [Islam] gives me hope, support, and something to hold on to, those things . . . Yeah, everyone needs something to hold on to in life, and this is my anchor."

Besides religion, we found that many women draw from collective narratives to create consistency, load balance and

meaningfulness. Especially Surinamese respondents refer to a common self-concept as being strong independent women. For example Sandra says; "We are strong women, independent women. We work hard for our children, for ourselves." In the same vein Samantha, a second generation Surinamese woman, says "We know how powerful we are, how much strength we have. Moving to the Netherlands? Raising a child alone? We do it, we can do anything." Interesting here is how both Sandra and Samantha refer to 'we'. They seem to draw from a collective cultural narrative about independent strong women. This existing collective narrative allows Sandra and Samantha to see themselves as strong and independent women, despite different adversities they encountered. Difficulties are transformed into examples of their strength and independence. Many of the respondents of Surinamese descent made similar statements, referring back to a collective self-understanding of 'us', Surinamese women, as independent and strong.

In conclusion, women with a strong SOC (subjectively) experience more consistency, load balance and meaningfulness. Migration and integration are less of a threat to developing a strong SOC due to pre-existing knowledge about the language and culture among Surinamese women and the better opportunities for migrant children to invest in host country specific resources. Moreover, we found that GRRs can neutralize the threat of migration and integration on developing a strong SOC. Especially social support, religion and collective cultural narratives appeared to play an important role in fostering the experience of consistency, load balance and meaningfulness.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Many studies have shown the role of SOC in explaining health disparities (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005). Yet, much less is known about how and through which mechanisms a strong SOC is formed. According to Antonovsky, SOC is formed through experiencing consistency, load balance and decision making power in socially valued contexts. The development of a strong SOC of ethnic minority women is particularly interesting in this respect, as migration and integration may result in patterns of experiences which are less favorable of developing a strong SOC. Migrant women have a higher incidence of health problems (Gerritsen & Devillé, 2009; Klaufus, Fassaert & de Wit, 2014) and SOC is known to be strongly related to health-outcomes (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005). Hence, we focused on migrant women as we suspected them to have weaker SOC levels. Moreover, we included both first and second generation migrants because we expected that there are differences in the process of SOC formation across migrant generations. In this article we study the mechanisms behind the formation of a strong SOC, examine how migration and integration influence the experience of consistency, load balance and decision making power, and aim to better understand the role of GRRs in shaping experiences favorable of developing a strong SOC. This study both contributes to the theoretical understanding of SOC formation by testing Antonovsky's theoretically proposed development mechanisms and adds to our understanding of existing SOC- and health-disparities.

The first aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of whether and how consistency, load balance and decision making

power contribute to the formation of a strong SOC. By contrasting women based on their relative SOC strength, we found that women with a strong SOC subjectively perceive more consistency and load balance throughout their lives. These findings support Antonovsky's hypothesis that consistency and load balance are mechanisms through which a strong SOC develops. However, in opposition to Antonovsky's theory, our results show that meaningfulness does not only develop through decision making power in socially valued contexts. Even in cases where women were not able to shape outcomes in the most important aspect of their lives, some manage to develop a strong sense of meaningfulness. We found that religion, helping others, achieving goals (Klinger, 1977), and the sense of belonging (Lambert *et al.*, 2013) were important paths to developing a sense of meaningfulness among the women in our sample. Moreover, we found that the three mechanisms are mutually reinforcing. Based on our findings and the wider literature on meaningfulness, we propose to elaborate the theoretical model of Antonovsky by including different paths to achieving meaningfulness besides decision making power in socially valued contexts and to account for the reinforcing relation between consistency, load balance and developing meaningfulness in the process of SOC formation.

The second aim of this study was to examine how migration and integration influence the three mechanisms which shape SOC. We found that migration and integration, in some cases, pose additional threats to SOC development. We found that the limited transferability, and as such a devaluation, of country of origin specific resources threaten the three mechanisms which shape SOC. According to the literature, country of origin specific human capital is less applicable and/or less valued in the host country, resulting in a devaluation of those resources (Basilio, Bauer & Kramer, 2013; Friedberg, 2000; Kanas, Van Tubergen & Van der Lippe, 2009). The limited transferability and devaluation of resources trigger feelings of loss and dependency which threaten the experienced consistency, load balance and the development of meaningfulness. Due to the colonial ties between the Netherlands and Suriname, Surinamese women already speak the Dutch language before migrating to the Netherlands, are already more familiar with Dutch culture and are predominantly Christian (Carabain & Bekkers, 2011). As such, the consistency, load balance and meaningfulness of Surinamese women is less at threat than those of Turkish and Moroccan women. The greater similarities result in greater consistency, and as they already speak the language and are more familiar with Dutch cultural norms, integration will less likely result in overload.

Besides more 'objective' differences in experiences, we found that especially the subjective experience is important in experiencing consistency, load balance and meaningfulness. First, we found that especially a discrepancy between pre-migration expectations and post-migration experiences form a particular threat to SOC. Second, we found that especially second generation migrant women narrate issues with belonging and identity in relation to a threat to their experienced consistency, load balance and meaningfulness. It was surprising to us that especially second generation migrant women, who were born and grew up in the Netherlands, had a particularly weak SOC. These findings seem to relate to the theory of the integration paradox (Buijs, Demant & Hamdy, 2006). This theory, which holds that

especially migrant who are better integrated experience more cultural conflicts and discrimination, has received empirical support both in Dutch and international studies (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2004; Gijsberts & Lubbers, 2009; Gijsberts & Vervoort, 2007; Lacy, 2004; Sizemore & Milner, 2004). Our findings concerning issues with belonging and identity seem to support the first explanation of the integration paradox, the theory of exposure, which argues that better integrated and second generation migrants are exposed more to Dutch public discourse and Dutch individuals and as such encounter more discrimination (van Doorn, Scheepers & Dagevos, 2013).

The third aim of our study was to examine the role GRRs play in shaping subjectively experienced consistency, load balance and meaning. Our results show the importance of GRRs, and more particularly the importance of social support, religion and collective narratives. Social support may reduce and even neutralize the threat migration and integration pose to experiencing consistency, load balance and meaningfulness. These findings confirm the important role of social support and social networks in the migration and integration process (Hovey, 1999; Hovey & Magaña, 2000; Ryan, Sales, Tilki & Siara, 2008; Shen & Takeuchi, 2001; Vega, Kolody, Valle & Weir, 1991). Our findings confirm that religion is a versatile GRR; it may provide individuals with resources for the integration process (Connor & Koenig, 2013), a sense of belonging (Bhugra & Becker, 2005) and identity (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010), resources for how to cope with adversity (Hess, Maton & Pargament, 2014) and a moral compass. Lastly, we found that collective narratives can be resources from which women are able to draw strength and enable them to reinterpret experiences. Collective narratives encode shared beliefs from which individuals derive coherence and group cohesiveness (Nelson, 2003). Simultaneously, these collective narratives provide resources and interpretative frames to create consistency, load balance and meaningfulness. However, some GRRs seem to work in a different way than Antonovsky originally expected. Unexpectedly, we found that educational attainment and socio-economic background may complicate developing a strong SOC. A better pre-migration socio-economic background elevated, or even inflated, pre-migration expectations. These expectations do not match post-migration experiences, resulting in disillusionment and frustration, which creates a major threat to SOC. These findings relate to the second explanation of the integration paradox, the theory of rising expectations, arguing that better integrated migrants have higher expectations than their less integrated counterparts, and as such experience more relative deprivation (van Doorn *et al.*, 2013).

Our findings raise questions about Antonovsky's salutogenic theory. The results of this study show that experiencing consistency, load balance and development of meaningfulness is very subjective. This raises the issue, to what extent the initial level of SOC influences the ongoing subjective experience of consistency, load balance and the development of meaningfulness, in other words, the ongoing process of SOC development. Antonovsky argued that especially individuals with a strong SOC would be able to maintain a stable level of SOC by seeking out experiences which further engender the strengthening and stabilizing of SOC, as opposed to individuals with a weak SOC whose SOC would be subject to more fluctuation and change

(Antonovsky, 1987). Nilsson and colleagues indeed find that initial weak SOC scores were associated with more changes and a stronger decrease in the level of SOC (Nilsson, Holmgren, Stegmayr & Westman, 2003). This suggests a circular process or a so-called feedback-loop, in which the end-product, SOC, again feeds into the mechanisms which shape itself. This is associated with a lack of conceptual distinction between the mechanisms and the subsequent components of SOC. First the comprehensibility component, the ability to “perceive arising issues as structured, predictable and explicable,” seems to describe the subjective experience of consistency. Second, the manageability component, the extent to which individuals feel “confident that they have the available resources to deal with these issues,” seems to describe good load balance. Only the conceptual distinction between the third component, meaningfulness, and the hypothesized mechanism to achieve this, through decision-making power in socially valued contexts, is clear.<sup>1</sup> What is the conceptual difference between the mechanisms and the SOC components they are supposed to shape? We believe this issue is insufficiently clear at the moment and the lack of empirical research about the mechanisms behind and the process of SOC formation complicate this issue further. Future research should further study theoretically and empirically the role of initial SOC levels promoting further SOC development and the conceptual differences between the mechanisms that shape SOC and the components that make up SOC.

This study has several limitations. First, the specific nature of our sample should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Due to the wider focus of this research project, only respondents were selected who reported to sometimes have headaches and/or shoulder/back/neck pain. As these are the most common health complaints among women of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese background living in the Netherlands (Hessing-Wagner, 2006; van Lindert, Droomers & Westert, 2004), this selection criterion is unlikely to influence the transferability of the findings. More empirical research among the wider population would provide more insights into which aspects of the mechanisms behind SOC formation are specific to this particular group and which may be considered more universal. Another issue is that we interviewed our respondents at one point in time. The current situation of the women, and their current strength of SOC, may therefore influence how they narrate their past experiences. Longitudinal mixed methods research combining the monitoring of SOC by using the SOC-scale and in-depth interviews to study the mechanisms behind SOC formation through time would therefore further add to our understanding of how a strong SOC develops.

Our findings are particularly relevant in a context in which women of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese descent living in the Netherlands have a disproportionately high incidence of health problems (Gerritsen & Devillé, 2009) and fall behind on the labor market (Huijnk *et al.*, 2014). Previous studies have shown that interventions, not even specifically designed to improve SOC, varying from mindfulness-based stress reduction (Weissbecker, Salmon, Studts, Floyd, Dedert, & Sephton, 2002), parenting programs (Ying, 1999), up to elaborate multi-dimensional intervention programs (Forsberg, Björkman, Sandman & Sandlund, 2010), had a significant positive effect on SOC. Our

findings may contribute to designing more effective interventions specifically aimed at increasing SOC and diminishing health disparities in the context of migration and integration. Our results indicate the key threats to developing a strong SOC among first and second generation migrant women but also highlight potential solutions and resources which may ‘neutralize’ these threats. Special attention needs to be paid to women from relatively high pre-migration socio-economic backgrounds and second generation migrant women, who we alarmingly found to have a weaker SOC than their first generation counterparts. The integration paradox seems to be at play here (Buijs *et al.*, 2006), ‘better integrated’ individuals seem to experience more threats to developing a strong SOC and to their health. With a weak SOC and a higher incidence of health problems, we must develop targeted interventions in order to prevent creating a reserve of ‘lost potential’ among these groups.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> However, as described before, our findings provide support for alternative paths to meaningfulness, including religion and a sense of belonging.

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#### APPENDIX 1: THE FLUCTUATING OR STABLE NATURE OF SOC

Much discussion has gone into the ‘claimed’ stability of the SOC construct. In accordance with Antonovsky, Feldt and colleagues found that SOC was relatively stable and that individuals over 30 had a more stable level of SOC than individuals under 30 (Hakanen, Feldt & Leskinen, 2007). Various studies also found support for the moderately stable nature of SOC (Feldt, Leskinen, Kinnunen & Mauno, 2000; Kivimäki, Feldt, Vahtera & Nurmi, 2000). In contrast, other studies found that a variety of life-events alter the level of SOC (Carmel & Bernstein, 1990; Karlsson, Berglin & Larsson, 2000; Nilsson, Holmgren, Stegmayr & Westman, 2003; Nilsson, Leppert, Simonsson & Starrin, 2010; Schnyder, Büchi, Sensky & Klaghofer, 2000; Snekkevik, Anke, Stanghelle & Fugl-Meyer, 2003). One study found support for the fluctuating nature of SOC in a general population not associated to specific life events (Smith, Breslin & Beaton, 2003). Moreover, several interventions have been found to increase the level of SOC (Delbar & Benor, 2001; Forsberg, Björkman, Sandman & Sandlund, 2010; Vastamäki, Moser & Paul, 2009; Weissbecker *et al.*, 2002; Ying, 1999). We conclude from these findings that SOC is relatively stable but is not set in stone. Major life events, age and interventions are able to influence the level of SOC.

#### APPENDIX 2: WOMEN OF TURKISH, MOROCCAN AND SURINAMESE ORIGIN LIVING IN THE NETHERLANDS

Most Turkish and Moroccan women living in the Netherlands arrived through family reunification joining their husbands who arrived as so-called ‘guest-workers’ and through family formation;

marrying someone already living in the Netherlands (Entzinger, 2006). Suriname is a former colony of the Netherlands and most women from Suriname arrived in the Netherlands around the time of independence of Suriname or to study (Entzinger, 2006). Surinamese women were already more familiar with Dutch culture and the Dutch language before arrival, are predominantly Christian and in general have a better socio-economic position in the Netherlands (Carabain & Bekkers, 2011). Turkish and Moroccan women, on the other hand, did not speak the language at arrival, are predominantly Muslim, and are from a lower socio-economic background (Carabain & Bekkers, 2011). The women differ in their cultural and migration background, yet share their weak position on the Dutch labor market (Huijnk, Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2014).

#### APPENDIX 3: GROUPING WOMEN WITH A WEAK AND A STRONG SOC

Antonovsky predicted that scores on the seven-point scale between 1.00–2.33 are weak, between 2.34–4.66 are average and between 4.67–7.00 are strong. Converted to the 13-item SOC scale, scores between 13 and 30 are weak scores, between 31 and 61 are average scores and between 62 and 91 are strong scores. Antonovsky made a first theoretical prediction about what would constitute a strong, medium or weak SOC in the book that introduced the SOC-scale, yet these values were not based on empirical research (Antonovsky, 1985). Empirical research suggests a higher average level of SOC.

We weighted the reported SOC means from an elaborate systematic review of the SOC-scale in this study by their respective sample size and found an average SOC of 62.96 in 156 studies covering in total  $N = 93,550$  respondents (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005). In our sample SOC scores range from 31 up to 84, with an average of 56.59 ( $SD = 2.23$ ) and a median of 56. In order to more clearly analyze patterns of life experiences and mechanisms associated with developing a strong or a weak SOC, we divided respondents in three groups. We labeled the third of the respondents with the weakest SOC, ranging from 31 up to 47, the weak SOC group ( $M = 39.53$ ,  $SD = 7.70$ ,  $N = 15$ ). We labeled the third of the respondents with the strongest SOC, ranging from 66 up to 84, the strong SOC group ( $M = 74.47$ ,  $SD = 5.33$ ,  $N = 15$ ).

We found that certain groups were overrepresented in the strong or weak SOC group. In the total sample, Surinamese women have the strongest SOC ( $M = 66.00$ ,  $SD = 10.80$ ), with subsequently the Moroccan women ( $M = 55.32$ ,  $SD = 15.176$ ) and the Turkish women ( $M = 53.89$ ,  $SD = 15.18$ ). Yet, there was no significant difference in SOC across ethnic groups  $F(2) 2.013$ ,  $p = .146$ . Surprisingly, we found that second generation migrant women have a significantly weaker SOC ( $M = 51.32$ ,  $SD = 10.38$ ) compared to first generation migrant women ( $M = 62.86$ ,  $SD = 17.53$ ). The levels of SOC differs significantly across migrant generations ( $F(1) = 7.660$ ,  $p = .008$ ).