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***Informal social support:  
an international perspective***

Livia García-Faroldi

Sociology Department- University of Málaga (Spain)  
lgarcia@uma.es

# Introduction

- The social support available to the individual is a phenomenon of growing interest, as it influences the subject's well being through different mechanisms. This research studies the closest relationships (partner, family and friends) to which the individual may turn to seek informal support (as opposed to formal support, that offered by institutions).
- Intimate relationships are the greatest source of social support. The partner plays a critical role in giving various kinds of support and is the person who provides almost all of the kinds of help for married people. Given this importance, **this paper focuses on people in a stable couple** (both married and living together). Marital relationships provide a relatively homogeneous context for examining social support, since the exchanging help is normative within this relationship.
- Cultural changes we are living today affect family structure and family roles. Scholars who follow the theory of individualization believe that traditional ties with family and friends are eroded in developed societies. Our first goal is to **confirm the importance of the personal network** in providing well being. Our second goal is to **discover what factors influence** choice of the person to whom one turns in a situation of need. We study 3 types of variables: sociodemographic variables, characteristics of personal networks and national contexts. Macrosocial factors influence the way of understanding the different relationships and thus structure the sociability.

# Hypotheses

These goals can be specified in three hypotheses:

- (H1) **Informal social support continues to be the main source of help** in cases of need among people in couples, since most turn first to their spouse and second to close relatives (parents and, to a lesser extent, children and siblings).
- (H2) **There are individual characteristics and characteristics of the composition of networks that influence** choice of the person from whom one requests aid. People with a higher degree of individualism are more likely to turn to their spouse and friends, whereas those with a more collectivist or group character turn first to their parents, children and siblings.
- (H3) **Countries' degree of defamiliarization influences the decision** of whom one turns to when asking for help. Liberal and social democratic countries are more defamiliarized and thus turn more to elective relationships (partner and friends) and less to family than conservative and Mediterranean countries.

# Methodology

- **Database:** Module on social support “Social relations and support systems”, International Social Survey Programme (2001).
- National samples from 13 Western countries: Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, East and West Germany, Great Britain, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Spain and the United States. These countries are a representation of all the welfare state regimes (liberal, social democratic, conservative and Mediterranean).
- We have only chosen people with a stable partner (married or living together).
- **Three dependent variables:**
  - **Domestic support:** *who would you ask for help first if you have the flu and must stay in bed?*
  - **Economic support:** *who would you ask for help first if you need a large amount of money?*
  - **Emotional support:** *who would you ask for help first if you feel depressed and you would like to talk?*

**Table 1.** Distribution of frequencies by country of first person whom respondents in couples would ask for support<sup>a</sup>

Country	Partner	Mother	Father	Children	Siblings	Close friend	Other	None
<b>Great Britain n=495</b>	1: 94.3 2: 34.7 3: 74.3	1: 1.8 2: 9.5 3: 2.6	1: 0.2 2: 5.5 3: 0.2	<b>1: 1.8</b> 2: 2.2 3: 4	1: 0.2 2: 1.8 <b>3: 2.8</b>	<b>1: 0.4</b> 2: 0.6 3: 9.9	1: 1.1 2: 37.8 3: 1.7	1: 0.2 2: 7.9 3: 2.4
<b>United States n=561</b>	1: 88.2 2: 21.1 3: 56.3	1: 3.4 2: 12.4 3: 6.1	1: 1.1 2: 14 <b>3: 1.1</b>	1: 2.3 2: 3.6 3: 3.8	1: 0.7 <b>2: 9.5</b> 3: 5.9	1: 1.6 2: 2.5 3: 18.9	1: 1.8 2: 25.4 3: 5.2	1: 0.9 2: 11.5 3: 2.7
<b>Canada n=856</b>	1: 89.3 2: 21.9 3: 64.5	1: 1.4 2: 7.9 3: 1.6	1: 0.2 2: 5.7 3: 0.2	1: 5.2 2: 3.2 3: 4.2	1: 1.1 2: 3.3 3: 4.2	1: 1.4 2: 0.9 3: 14	1: 1.2 2: 53.5 3: 8.6	1: 0.2 2: 3.6 3: 2.7
<b>New Zealand n=800</b>	1: 94.6 2: 27.5 3: 66.9	1: 0.8 <b>2: 5.3</b> 3: 2.9	<b>1: 0</b> 2: 5.5 3: 0.1	1: 2.9 2: 2.3 3: 3.4	<b>1: 0.1</b> 2: 3.2 3: 3.3	1: 0.5 <b>2: 0.3</b> 3: 13.3	1: 0.9 2: 51.8 3: 6.3	1: 0.2 2: 4.1 3: 3.8
<b>Austria n=613</b>	1: 84.3 2: 31.9 3: 71.3	1: 4.1 2: 5.8 3: 2.6	<b>1: 0</b> 2: 4.3 <b>3: 0</b>	1: 6.5 2: 7.6 3: 5.5	1: 0.3 2: 2.5 3: 3.3	1: 0.5 2: 1.8 3: 10	1: 4.3 2: 36.3 3: 3.7	1: 0 2: 9.8 3: 3.6
<b>West Germany n=666</b>	1: 83.9 2: 24.8 3: 71	1: 5.2 2: 7.7 3: 2.9	1: 0.6 2: 10.5 3: 0.8	1: 4.6 2: 4.1 3: 4.4	1: 1.6 2: 5.3 3: 2.9	1: 2 2: 1.7 3: 13.7	1: 1.9 2: 40.9 3: 2.6	1: 0.2 2: 5 3: 1.7
<b>East Germany n=314</b>	1: 85.1 2: 14.1 3: 73.6	1: 3.3 <b>2: 17.3</b> 3: 3.8	<b>1: 0</b> 2: 7 3: 0.6	1: 5.3 2: 5.4 3: 3.1	1: 0.7 2: 3.5 3: 2.9	1: 3 2: 1 3: 10.8	1: 2.3 2: 36.7 3: 2.7	1: 0.3 2: 15 3: 2.5
<b>France n=964</b>	1: 86.5 2: 19.2 3: 54.3	1: 3.4 2: 11.5 3: 5	1: 0.2 2: 10.4 3: 0.3	1: 3.8 2: 2.1 3: 4.1	1: 0.5 2: 3.6 3: 5.3	1: 1.1 2: 2 3: 15.8	1: 2.9 2: 45.7 3: 11.8	1: 1.6 2: 5.5 3: 3.4
<b>Norway n=800</b>	<b>1: 96.1</b> 2: 32.5 <b>3: 76.9</b>	1: 0.7 2: 6.8 <b>3: 1.5</b>	1: 0.1 2: 7.9 3: 0.2	1: 2 <b>2: 1.2</b> <b>3: 2.2</b>	1: 0.1 2: 1.5 3: 3	1: 0.5 2: 0.7 3: 9.5	1: 0.3 2: 48 3: 4.3	1: 0.2 2: 1.4 3: 2.4
<b>Denmark n=905</b>	1: 89.7 2: 22.4 3: 71.9	1: 1.6 2: 6 3: 1.8	1: 0.3 2: 7.9 3: 0.4	1: 4 2: 1.9 3: 3.1	1: 0.9 <b>2: 0.7</b> 3: 3.8	1: 0.9 2: 0.7 3: 11.2	1: 3.3 2: 57.2 3: 6.3	1: 0.2 2: 3.2 3: 1.5
<b>Finland n=875</b>	1: 94.5 <b>2: 36.6</b> 3: 73.1	<b>1: 0.3</b> 2: 6.6 3: 1.7	<b>1: 0</b> <b>2: 4.2</b> 3: 0.1	1: 3.3 2: 1.8 3: 2.9	1: 0.3 2: 2 3: 3.4	1: 0.5 <b>2: 0.3</b> 3: 11.2	1: 0.5 2: 44.3 3: 4.9	1: 0.6 2: 4.2 3: 2.7
<b>Italy n=871</b>	<b>1: 50.7</b> <b>2: 14.1</b> <b>3: 36.6</b>	<b>1: 26.8</b> 2: 12.9 <b>3: 6.6</b>	<b>1: 3.1</b> <b>2: 22.6</b> 3: 0.9	1: 4.6 2: 4.8 3: 5.1	<b>1: 4.6</b> 2: 8.9 <b>3: 7.8</b>	<b>1: 4.4</b> 2: 3 <b>3: 3.3</b>	1: 4.8 2: 29.2 3: 5.4	1: 1 2: 4.5 3: 4.6
<b>Spain n=790</b>	1: 64.6 2: 22.8 3: 61.5	1: 13.7 2: 11.7 3: 5.5	1: 1.1 2: 9.3 3: 0.5	<b>1: 12.5</b> <b>2: 12.8</b> <b>3: 9</b>	1: 3.5 2: 8.4 3: 6.5	1: 1.4 <b>2: 3.1</b> <b>3: 7.8</b>	1: 3.3 2: 28.3 3: 5.6	1: 0.9 2: 3.6 3: 3.6
<b>All interviewees n=9,775</b>	1: 84.6 2: 25.2 3: 65	1: 5.3 2: 8.9 3: 3.3	1: 0.6 2: 9 3: 0.4	1: 4.5 2: 3.9 3: 4.2	1: 1.2 2: 4 3: 4.2	1: 1.3 2: 1.4 3: 14	1: 1.9 2: 42.4 3: 5.6	1: 0.6 2: 5.2 3: 2.9

a  
1. If you had the flu  
2. If you need money  
3. If you feel depressed.

Source: ISSP (2001)

# Methodology

**Three categorical dependent variables** were created:

- Ask for help to the partner, mother or offspring if you have the flu
- Ask for help to the partner, parents or siblings if you need money
- Ask for help to the partner, mother or close friend if you are depressed

- **Independent variables:**

- Individual/sociodemographic variables: sex (0 for woman, 1 for men), age, education, time of residence, religious practice, habitat
  - Network variables: visit to the father, visit to the mother, visit to the sibling whom one has most contact, size of friendship network.
  - Countries: *dummies* for each country, Spain as reference category
- It could be that differences among countries are due to the differing **availability of parents and friends** among respondents. To test this, we restricted the sample to individuals who have available, in addition to the partner, both parents or at least the mother and one close friend. National differences continue even when the sample is more homogeneous in terms of the composition of the network (data not shown).
- We carried on **multinomial logistic regression analysis**, one for each dependent variable.

## Marginal effects of the probability of asking for domestic help among interviewees with a partner, both parents or the mother living, and close friends. Multinomial logit model

### a) **Importance of sex and age:**

- 1) Men turn more often to their partner and women to their mothers and children.
- 2) People aged 45 to 64 turn more often to their partners and offspring and less to their mothers, while people from 25 to 34 turn less to their offspring.

b) Respondents who **visit their parents** more often turn least to their partners and more to their mothers.

### c) **Importance of national contexts:**

- 1) In all countries except Italy individuals turn more to their partner than in Spain.
- 2) 10 of the 12 countries ask for less help from the mother, and in Italy individuals request more help from them.
- 3) All countries except East Germany and Italy differ from Spain in turning less to their children.

We can observe a **strong family solidarity between parents and children in the Mediterranean model**, even when we control for geographical proximity and family contact.

## Marginal effects of the probability of asking for economic help among interviewees with a partner, both parents or the mother living, and close friends. Multinomial logit model

### a) **Importance of sex and age:**

- 1) Women turn more often to their partner and men to their parents and siblings.
- 2) People aged 45 and over turn more often to their partners and less to their parents, and younger respondents (18 to 34) show the opposite behavior.

b) Respondents who **visit their parents** more often turn least to their partners and more to their parents (contrary to previous studies). Those who **visit more their siblings** ask them more frequently for money and ask their parents less. People **with more friends** turn more to their partners.

### c) **Lower importance of national contexts** than in the previous analysis:

- 1) In Austria, Norway, Finland and Great Britain people turn more to their partners than in Spain. At the other extreme, USA, East Germany and Italy request such aid less.
- 2) Economic support from parents is significantly lower in Finland and Austria and higher in USA, France, Italy and East Germany.
- 3) All countries that differ from Spain in asking for economic help from siblings ask these aid less frequently, except Italy. Economic solidarity between spouses and between parents and childrens is extensive throughout Western countries.

## Marginal effects of the probability of asking for emotional help among interviewees with a partner, both parents or the mother living, and close friends. Multinomial logit model

### a) **Importance of sex and age:**

- 1) Men turn more often to their partner and women to their friends and mothers.
- 2) Young people turn less to their partners and more to their mothers, while people aged 55 and over turn more to their partners and less to their friends.

b) Respondents who **visit more their mothers** seek less aid from one's partner and more to the mother and close friends. The **size of network of friends** does not influence the decision to turn to a friend when one is depressed.

### c) **National contexts show greater homogeneity:**

- 1) In no country do individuals turn more to the partner than in Spain, and four countries turn less (USA, Canada, France and Italy).
- 2) The same four countries, in addition to West Germany, have more probability of asking for emotional help from friends.
- 3) No country requests more emotional support from mothers than Spain, and five seek less: USA, Canada, Norway, Denmark and Finland.

# Conclusions

- As expected (H1), **the main source of social support in Western countries is the family**: first, the partner, and second, the closest relatives (parents, children and siblings). This main source is the same in all of the countries analyzed. Traditional ties with family and friends have not been eroded.
- Emotional and domestic support are provided fundamentally by women to their husbands, whereas women turn to friends and mothers (*support gap*).
- Variables have different influence on social support depending on whether one turns to an elective relationship (partner or close friend) or to a “compulsory” relation of blood ties. H2 assumed that people with a higher degree of individualism would turn much more to their partners, but **results are mixed**: young people and less religious people turn less to their partners, and people with university degrees do not ask more help to them.
- **Informal social support varies according to national contexts (H3)**. Italy and Spain differs from the other countries in that individuals request less help to their partner and more to their parents, siblings and offspring, as opposed to liberal and socialdemocratic countries. This pattern remains even in a sample with the same providers of support available and after controlling for the degree to which people maintain face-to-face contact with family members.
- **Although countries with the same welfare state show similar patterns, we can find some differences among each group**. This result shows the need to perform future research analyzing the countries separately.