Jolanta Grotowska-Leder

University of Lodz, Poland

INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORK OF LARGE CITY INHABITANTS – THE SELECTED ASPECTS (THE CASE OF LODZ)[1]

ABSTRACT

Many members of a society deal with their everyday problems on their own, but there are people who look for and receive support from other individuals, groups and institutions. Social networks are considered important providers of resources accumulated in and of services delivered by the local community. The article is focused on social support networks of families living in big city in comparison with families living less urbanized communes. The first part of the analyses presents social support networks in various theoretical approaches. The main subject of empirical reflection are the resources available to these families as a result of informal social relations. The main conclusions are that informal social network of studied families is important for solving their every-day problems and the main resource of support for them are close relatives, then friends and the most rarely-neighbors, but the patterns of support expected and received within informal networks vary according to age and quality of residence. The paper is based on the results of the research conducted in 2008–2009 (the quota sample – 500 families living in Lodz and 1000 families living in less urbanized communes) within the project "Social network and local

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Key words:
social networks, support networks, informal support networks, patterns of support networks, approaches of support networks

1. Introduction

The contemporary social sciences are characterized by two tendencies that are becoming increasingly clear: the interdisciplinary approach and the use of new categories in descriptions and explanations. Such practice is a reaction to the growing complexity of social life since describing and explaining a multi-dimensional and self-transforming reality becomes increasingly difficult. The interdisciplinary approach of exploring contemporary social phenomena is confirmed by, for instance, the application of the same categories, such as social capital, social exclusion, social networks, in sociology, psychology, pedagogics, social policy, and even economics and financial sciences. The new approaches inspire researchers to explore new aspects and contexts of the social world and enable a more comprehensive and detailed analysis. "Social support" and "social network support", which are more often used in the analyses of relations of support in the contemporary societies in psychology, pedagogics, sociology, gerontology and social policy[2], represent such contemporary categories. Similar to other notions used in the social sciences, they have various semantic contexts that come from their relationship to the categories and phenomena that are basic in the social sciences and have been applied in them for long time, i.e. social bonds, social exchange and social networks. When taking up the issue of informal social support available to inhabitants of a big city, it seems worth taking a deeper look at this reflection for both cognitive (as it reveals how the processes of supporting people in different life situations are/can be

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[2] The concept of social support and social support network is relatively new in the social sciences – it was developed in the 1960s – mainly in psychological and pedagogical studies. The support relations occurring in informal circles of human functioning as well as for institutional activities, are also analysed in these disciplines with the use of various notions such as help, care (pedagogics) or social security, support activity, securing basic means of support (social policy, sociology) or within-group/intergroup, intergenerational transfers/flows (sociology, economics).

studied) and practical reasons (as it reveals practices implemented in the social life). Let us also mention that although the supportive activities belong to the key behaviors of all living creatures, and, for a variety of reasons, they have gained importance in contemporary societies.

The supporting functions of informal networks for Lodz residents is the main subject of the paper while the main context is the ways they cope with difficult life situations, which is analyzed from the perspective of their participation in informal circles. The research perspective adopted in this article is grounded in the widely studied crisis of two basic security structures: the labor market and the state[3]. Although in Poland, as consequence of the on-going mass unemployment, significant levels of poverty are being observed, the share of people collecting unemployment benefits is small and the number of social assistance beneficiaries is falling[4]. So that the access to the resources of informal circles – family, friends and neighbors – is gaining importance for security everyday needs of people.

The theoretical reflection concerning the social support and support networks presented in this paper is not exhaustive. It briefly describes the position and direction of the analyses given that the phenomenon of supporting people in various life situations is complex, multifaceted, and studies in this area continue to be more empirical than theoretical.

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[3] Salary, old age and disability pensions, and social assistance benefits represent the key elements of the social security system. The last category is granted when the other elements of this system are unavailable or insufficient. Thus social welfare performs the function of a "network under the network" of the social security (P. Błędowski, *Miasta członkowskie ZMP wobec zadań pomocy społecznej w latach 1999–2008. Zasoby i funkcjonowanie* [Cities of ZMP Members to Social Welfare Tasks in the Years 1999–2008. Resources and Functioning], 2010, http://www.sas.zmp.poznan.pl/ opracowania/ Pomoc_spoleczna_2008.pdf [access: 20.09.2012]). In consequence of the reform of social welfare in the 1990s which included for example passing the responsibilities to local authorities, the access to support was limited.

[4] Within the past few years, the unemployment rate in Poland has remained at the level of 10% or higher (*Stopa bezrobocia w latach 2000–2011* [Unemployment Rate 2000–2011], Warszawa GUS, http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/5840_677_PLK_HTML.htm) [access: 20.09.2012]), between 2005–2009, the share of social welfare recipients in the total population has been systematically falling – from 13,2% to 9,8%, i.e. it fell by 3,4 percentage points, and in 2010, it was even lower – 8,7%. In that period, the number of beneficiaries fell by one fifth (*Pomoc społeczna w latach 2005–2009, Studia i analizy statystyczne* [Social Assistance in Poland 2005–2009, Statistical Analyses and Studies], GUS, Warszawa 2011, pp. 62, 69).

2. Support networks in the theoretical perspective

The subject of social support studied in the social sciences concerns various contexts of human life. Psychologists emphasize the meaning of messages sent by other people for the purpose of an individual's appropriate functioning in the group. Social pedagogues concentrate on the conditions of support and its consequences for the development of an individual's personality; while sociologists point at groups and institutions supporting people, their characteristics, and the share of the support provided. Economists determine the value of support in tangible equivalents[5].

2.1. Perspective of the social pedagogics and psychology

Pedagogues and psychologists emphasize behavior and the relative nature of social support, i.e. help results from a person's relationships with other people, social groups, and society at large[6]. It is often available under reference groups, under contacts with significant others[7]. It is a consequence of belonging to social networks[8]. Despite slightly different linguistic connotations, it usually refers to the situation of receiving help when it is needed.

In social pedagogy, social support is one of the classic problems. It is also a subject of broadly understood educational practices, especially of social work

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[5] The review of studies concerning social support reveals two important aspects of the phenomenon: cognitive, academic, practical, and applicable. Next to the discussion on the meaning of the categories, mechanisms and conditions identifying the type and reach of the available assistance, initiatives of organising assistance measures dedicated to resolve specific social problems are also presented (e.g. A. Bartoszek, K. Czekaj, K. Faliszek, A. Niesporek, D. Trawkowska, *Instytucje wsparcia a monitoring problemów społecznych w Katowicach* [Institutions Support and Monitoring of Social Problems in Katowice], Katowice 2012).

[6] *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka* [Psychological Portraits of Human], A. Brzezińska (ed.), Gdańsk 2005; *Wsparcie społeczne w rehabilitacji i resocjalizacji* [Social Support in the Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration], Z. Palak, Z. Bartkowicz (eds.), Lublin 2004; Z. Jaworowska-Obłój, B. Suza, *Pojęcie wsparcia społecznego i jego funkcji w badaniach naukowych* [The Concept of Social Support and Its Function in Research], "Przegląd Psychologiczny" 1986, No. 3.

[7] E.g. S. Cohen, B.H. Gottlieb, L.G. Underwood, *Social Relationship and Heath* [in:] *Social Support Measurement and Intervention. A Guide for Health and Social Scientists*, S. Cohen, B.H. Gottlieb, L.G. Underwood (eds.), Oxford 2000; J.S. House, R.L. Kahn, *Measures and Concepts of Social Support* [in:] *Social Support and Health*, S. Cohen, S. Syme (eds.), Orlando 1985.

[8] Pommerbach, 1988 [after:] *Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie* [Social Support, Stress and Health], H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (eds.), Warszawa 2005, s. 14; Bowling et al. 1991, p. 549 [after:] Ch. Phillipson, *Social Networks and Social Suport in Later Life* [in:] *Social Networks and Social Exclusion. Sociological and Policy Perspectives*, Ch. Phillipson, G. Allan, D. Morgan (eds.), Ashgate 2004, p. 37.

and care work, as care, assistance and support are extremely important considering that it can sometimes be a lifesaving development at various stages of a person's life. In general, pedagogues define support as the assistance available to an individual or group in difficult, stressful, and critical situations without which this individual or group would be unable to manage[9]. In pedagogical analyses, this category is used in studies on social and educational work, i.e. studies concerned with resolving the individual problems of a person in care through the direct, interpersonal relationships with him/her through the aid of various methods and techniques in order to reach the state wherein he/she will master skills and learn how to live his/her life independently. It is a specific type of educational-social and therapeutic work, where the person offering support deliberately implements a specific strategy adapted to a specific personality disorder, including symptoms of disorientation and feelings of loss, alienation, helplessness, developmental disharmony, and the disintegration of the person in care[10]. It is limited to professional help. M. Winiarski makes the position of the pedagogues more precise by limiting assistance to voluntary behaviors (i.e. he excludes actions motivated by compulsion) and to the relations among the entities that are not significantly asymmetric[11].

9 S. Kawula, *Wprowadzenie* [Introduction] [in:] *Wsparcie społeczne w różnych układach ludzkiego życia* [Social Support Systems in a Variety of Human Life], E. Kartowicz (ed.), Olsztyn 1997, p. 13; A.W. Janke, *Rodzina jako źródło wsparcia społecznego* [The Family as a Source of Social Support] [in:] *Wsparcie społeczne w różnych układach ludzkiego życia* [Social Support Systems in a Variety of Human Life], E. Kartowicz (ed.), Olsztyn 1997, p. 39; *Wsparcie społeczne w różnych układach ludzkiego życia* [Social Support Systems in a Variety of Human Life], E. Kantowicz (ed.), Olsztyn 1997, p. 96; M. Piotrowska, *Konieczne jest społeczne wsparcie…* [It Is Needed the Social Support…], "Nowa Szkoła" 2006, No. 2, pp. 18–23.

10 B. Aouil, *Pomoc psychologiczna online w systemie profilaktyki i wsparcia psychospołecznego młodzieży – analiza i propozycja* [Online Psychological Help in the Prevention and Psychosocial Support to Young People – Analysis and Proposal] [in:] *Zjawiskowe formy patologii społecznych oraz profilaktyka i resocjalizacja młodzieży* [Forms of Social Pathology, and Prevention and Rehabilitation of the Youth], T. Sołtysiak, J. Sudar-Malukiewicz (eds.), Bydgoszcz 2003; G. Gajewska, *Poczucie wsparcia społecznego u uczniów i wychowanków* [Social Support from Students and Alumni], "Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze" 2004, No. 2; A. Bujnowska, *Sieć i natężenie społecznego wsparcia młodzieży z trudnościami w uczeniu się* [Social Networking and the Intensity of Support for Young People with Learning Difficulties], "Auxilium Sociale" 2003, No. 1; A. Olubiński, *Wsparcie społeczne w pracy socjalno-wychowawczej (zarys problematyki)* [Social Support, Social Work and Education (Basic Concepts)] [in:] *Wsparcie społeczne w różnych układach ludzkiego życia* [Social Support Systems in a Variety of Human Life], E. Kantowicz (ed.), Olsztyn 1997.

11 M. Winiarski, *Wsparcie społeczne – pomoc – opieka w kontekście pedagogiki społecznej* [Social Suport – Help – Care in the Context of Social Pedagogy] [in:] *Wsparcie społeczne w różnych układach ludzkiego życia* [Social Support Systems in a Variety of Human Life], E. Kantowicz (ed.), Olsztyn 1997, pp. 27, 37–38.

According to psychologists, social support is an important category in the psychology of stress and stress management, which is used in analyses of assistance available to individuals in difficult situations, as defined in terms of stress. Emphasis is placed on the role of social support in traumatic life situations, which are usually caused by the illness or death of a relative or friend[12]. Two common hypotheses are usually verified: the "buffering hypothesis", which assumes that social support reduces the psychological effects of stress, and the "main effect hypothesis", which assumes that the effects of support is always positive, not only in a situation of intensified stress[13].

In the psychological approach, helping constitutes a type of a social interaction initiated by one or both parties, which involves the exchange of information, emotions, instruments to act, and tangible goods. And, where compatibility between the type of support and the needs of the recipient is of importance, it is assumed that support is a deliberate action and that the interaction leads to the resolution of a problem and the overcoming a difficult situation[14]. The motives and intentions of assistance-focused actions seem to be of a secondary importance. Some authors claim that not every instance of assistance constitutes support (a one-time, assistance-focused action is not support, which can only be delivered through regular assistance in a long-term perspective).

2.2. Perspective of the selected sociological approaches

The theoretical framework of the sociological analyses of social support is usually quite general; however, several perspectives have been organized as a result of studies: 1) intimate ties, 2) relationships and roles, and 3) exchanging relationships[15]

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[12] E.g. J. Stochmiałek, *Wsparcie społeczne w sytuacji umierania i śmierci* [Social Support in the Event of Death and Dying], "Auxilium Sociale" 2000, No. 3–4; M. Ciechomska, *Dysfunkcja wzrosku i wsparcie społeczne jako czynniki nabywania siły psychicznej* [Visual Dysfunction and Social Support as Factors Acquire Mental Strength], "Szkoła Specjalna" 2003, No. 2; B. Mazur, *Wsparcie osób z niepełnosprawnością ruchową* [Support for People with Physical Disabilities], "Auxilium Sociale" 2004, No. 3–4.

[13] *Diagnoza społeczna 2011* [Social Diagnose 2011], J. Czapiński, T. Panek (eds.), 2012, http://www.efs.gov.pl/AnalizyRaportyPodsumowania/baza_projektowbadawczych_efs/Documents/Raport_glowny_2011_INTERNET.pdf [access: 19.09.2012], p. 224.

[14] See H. Sęk, *Wsparcie społeczne – co zrobić, aby stało się pojęciem naukowym* [Social Suport – What to Do to Become a Scientific Concept], "Przegląd Psychologiczny" 1986, No. 3.

[15] E. van Sonderen, B. Ormel, E. Brilman, C. van den Heuvall, *Personal Network Delineation: A Comparison of the Exchange, Affective and Role-Relation Approaches* [in:] *Social Network Research:*

related to functional and structural analyses. Analyses of interpersonal relations in which assistance is transferred are focused on two key aspects of the phenomenon: a. referring to the structures existing among w set of relationships (focused on individuals, groups, and institutions that support people as members of households and families in meeting needs and resolving ongoing problems at difficult times)[16]; b. referring to the functional content of relationships (focused on the types of expected, available, and necessary help)[17]. Sociological studies of the social support contents are focused on assistance received in difficult life situations, however, they have a broader context than psychological studies. They are not limited to a particularly traumatic life situations like sickness, death, or loneliness, but they also concern every-day problems that are relatively often related to meeting basic social needs, such as work, paying for basic expenses, and coping with every-day duties. Sociological studies are focused on people

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Substantive Issues and Metodological Questions, K. Knipscheer, T. Antonucci (eds.), Amsterdam 1990; Their review includes: *Social Networks and Social Exclusion. Sociological and Policy Perspectives*, Ch. Phillipson, G. Allan, D. Morgan (eds.), Ashgate 2004.

[16] E.g. M. Racław, *Opiekunowie nieformalni. Krótkotrwała funkcjonalność nieopłacalnej pracy* [Informal Carers. Short-Term Functionality of Unprofitable Work] [in:] *O sytuacji ludzi w starszym wieku* [The Situation of Older People], J. Hrynkiewicz (ed.), Warszawa 2012; E. Giermanowska, *Instytucjonalna pomoc osobom niepełnosprawnym w drodze do zatrudnienia* [Institutional Support for Disabled People through Employment] [in:] *Sieci wsparcia społecznego jako przejaw integracji i dezintegracji społecznej* [Social Support Networks as a Manifestation of Social Integration and Disintegration], J. Grotowska-Leder (ed.), Łódź 2008; P. Szukalski, *Rodzinne sieci wsparcia w starzejących się społeczeństwach – kilka refleksji* [Family Support Networks in Aging Societies – Some Reflections] [in:] *Sieci wsparcia społecznego jako przejaw integracji i dezintegracji społecznej* [Social Support Networks as a Manifestation of Social Integration and Disintegration], J. Grotowska-Leder (ed.), Łódź 2008; I. Wójcicka, R. Rurasz, *Świadczenie opieki* [The Provision of Care] [in:] *Aktywność zawodowa i deukacyjna a obowiązki rodzinne w Polsce w świetle badań empirycznych* [Work and Learning and Family Responsibilities in Poland in the Light of Empirical Research], Warszawa 2007; A. Kacperczyk, *Wsparcie społeczne w instytucjach opieki paliatywnej* [Social Support in Institutions of Palliative Care], Łódź 2006.

[17] E.g. P. Szukalski, op.cit.; J. Grotowska-Leder, W. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, *Nieformalne sieci wsparcia ludności żyjącej w biedzie a przezwyciężanie biedy (na przykładzie gmin wiejskich i małego miasta w województwie łódzkim* [Informal Support Networks of People Living in Poverty and Overcoming Poverty for Example, Rural and Small Town in the Province of Lodz] [in:] *Sieci wsparcia społecznego jako przejaw integracji i dezintegracji społecznej* [Social Support Networks as a Manifestation of Social Integration and Disintegration], J. Grotowska-Leder (ed.), Łódź 2008; J. Grotowska-Leder, *Sieci wsparcia społecznego jako przejaw integracji społecznej w walce z wykluczeniem społecznym i biedą (na przykładzie wsi i małych miast)* [Social Support Networks as a Manifestation of Social Integration in the Fight against Social Exclusion and Poverty (for Example, Rural Areas and Small Towns)] [in:] *Socjologia jako społeczna terapia* [Sociology as a Social Therapy], A. Wachowiak (ed.), Zielona Góra 2008.

experiencing this type of problems, i.e. people living in poverty[18], unemployed[19], elderly[20], disabled[21], etc.

2.2.1. Perspective of the social ties

Sociological studies oriented towards social support apply a category of social ties, such as social interaction; interpersonal contacts that aim at meeting a specific need for assistance constitute a system which always involves two parties (i.e. the person being supported and the person providing support)[22]; and the relationship between them always occurs in specific social conditions. Assistance is possible in a group to which an individual belongs. And, support is a derivative of the functioning of this individual in a certain entirety and his/her integration with the group. Assistance is possible when the group is engaged in the lives of its members and it is founded on kinship, the feeling of love, spatial closeness, common interests and business, or this group obliges its members to cooperate in order to resolve various problems and meet important needs. Thus, social support analyses search for assistance-focused behaviors in families (kinship); groups of friends and colleagues (relations based on love, kindness, and trust); as well as groups connected due to a close geographical distance (neighborhood) or within a specific territory, such as a small settlement where people know each other, meet every-day, and, as a result, undertake specific mutual actions. Sources of support are located in formal, institutional resources that are used on the basis of citizenship confirmed by legal regulations (for example, social assistance benefits, unemployment benefits, grants for school).

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[18] J. Grotowska-Leder, W. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, *Informal Support Networks of the Population Living in Poverty (in Villages and Small Towns)*, "Polityka Społeczna" 2006, Special Issue "From Poverty to Social Inclusion".

[19] E. Giermanowska, op.cit.;

[20] J. Grotowska-Leder, *Osoby w wieku sędziwym a materialne wsparcie rodzinne (na przykładzie podopiecznych łódzkiej pomocy społecznej)* [People Aged and Family Material Support (the Case of Lodz Social Welfare Recipients) [in:] *Starość i starzenie się jako doświadczenie jednostek i zbiorowości ludzkich* [Old Age and Aging as the Experience of Individuals and Human Communities], J.T. Kowaleski, P. Szukalski (eds.), Łódź 2005; J. Grotowska-Leder, *Sieci społeczne seniorów w perspektywie teoretycznej i empirycznej* [Senior Social Networks in Theoretical and Empirical Perspective] [in:] *Pomyślne starzenie się w perspektywie nauk o pracy i polityce społecznej* [Successful Aging in Perspective of Sciences of Labor and Social Policy], J.T. Kowaleski, P. Szukalski (eds.), Łódź 2008; M. Niezabitowski, *Relacje społeczne i wsparcie społeczne osób starszych w środowisku zamieszkania* [Social Relationships and Social Support of the Elderly in the Place of Residence], "Przegląd Socjologiczny" 2010, No. 4.

[21] M. Racław, op.cit.

[22] M. Buber, *Problem człowieka* [The Problem of Human], Warszawa 1993.

2.2.2. Perspective of intimate ties, relationships and roles

In the sociological analyses of social support, it is considered to be important to indicate the scope and structure of relations. Two approaches are applied for this purpose: a) perspective of intimate ties and b) perspective of relationships and roles[23].

In the first approach, the structure of social relations of an individual is established by identifying persons around him/her according to the *degree of closeness*[24], i.e. his/her environment is reconstructed by identifying (asking him/her to identify) three groups of persons: the closest ones (i.e. the person cannot imagine living without these persons;, the persons with whom he/she does not maintain such close relations, however, they are very important to him/her; and the persons with whom she/he does not maintain close relations and they are not too important to him/her. Then, the individual is requested to identify the types of support he/she receives from members of the three groups. This analysis mainly covers elderly people and its results are not homogenous. Other studies related to this paradigm concern the structure of contacts due to the type of help delivered. It has been demonstrated that there are various types of help received by individuals in the informal circles, that members of the network usually deliver specific help, and that the persons in the middle of the network receive various types of help from various persons with whom they maintain contacts[25]. Wellman also analyzing communities as structures that enable people to draw upon different kinds of resources distinguishes *community saved* and *community liberated*. The first one protect people directly by provide means. The second, provides them opportunities to produce the means engaging with the outside world[26].

In the second approach, which is focused on relationships and roles[27], the social position is defined through the relations an individual has with members of the group in terms of formal roles, i.e. friends or work colleagues[28]. In this type of study, the key persons that support individuals and their families are identified as being neighbors, distant relatives, co-workers, classmates, and other types of colleagues. Then, their place of residence, the frequency, and the content of the relations[29] are

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[23] Ch. Phillipson, op.cit.

[24] Kahn and Annoucci,1980; Pahl, Spencer, 1997 [after:] Ch. Phillipson, op.cit.

[25] Wellman, Wortley, 1989 [after:] Ch. Phillipson, op.cit.

[26] Wellman, 1990 [after:] Ch. Phillipson, op.cit.

[27] E.g. Cochran et al., 1990; Knipscheer, 1995 [after:] Ch. Phillipson, op.cit.

[28] Antonucci, 1985 [after:] Ch. Phillipson, op.cit.

[29] E.g. in the studies of networks of support to young people and their families by Cochran et al., 1990 [after:] Philipson, op.cit.

indicated. The results of many studies[30] showed that the relations with relatives prevailed, firstly, with biological (as well as adopted) children and siblings. This was followed by relationships with cousins, aunts, and uncles, while regards non-relatives, neighbors, and friends came next, followed by colleagues from organizations and work[31].

The observed social network subject renaissance is related to the intensified social mobility[32], also in perspective of relations of people determined by new IT ways of communication[33]. There are stressed that the relations become more complex and hidden[34] and social relations transforms from life in small groups, where membership overlaps, thusly, strengthening the relations in a greater feeling of responsibility, to the "network" system, in which relations are spatial dispersed, and membership hardly ever overlaps[35]. Nowadays social relations become more hetero – than homogeneous in nature. It is observed that the social life of an individual concentrates on the people and matters important to this individual, i.e. on friends, family, schools, and shopping[36]. The social space of every-day activities covers his/her "obligations and abilities", activities essential for support relations.

In turn, the theory of the exchange network, a combination of the classic perspective of social exchange and network analyses facilitates studies of reciprocity (symmetry) or its lack in the assistance relations. According to R. Emerson[37], its author, the exchange does not only occur in the dyadic arrangement, but is a combination of at least two related exchange relations. The exchange network is characterized to a significant degree by the independence of the partners. Their par-

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[30] E.g. Knipscheer, 1995 [after:] Ch. Philipson, op.cit.

[31] I.e. studying living conditions of Dutch seniors, Knipscheer identified members of the networks of contacts according to seven dimensions: members of the household, excluding partners, children and their parents, other relatives, neighbours, persons from work, school and organisation, and friends, and defining their gender, the type of relations and frequency of contacts with the respondent (Ibidem).

[32] J. Uhrry, *Spojrzenie turysty* [Tourist Gaze], Warszawa 2007, p. 260.

[33] "Network society" by Castells – M. Castells, *Społeczeństwo sieci* [Network Socjety], Warszawa 2007.

[34] "Networks of life" by Capry.

[35] K. Axhausen, *A Dynamic Understanding of Travel Demand: A Sketch*, Cambridge 2002, p. 9; Hampton, Wellan, 2001 [after:] J. Uhrry, op.cit., p. 265.

[36] K. Axhausen, op.cit.

[37] To R.M. Emerson, the author of the theory of the networks of exchange, authority as an unequal dependence occurring between partners of the exchange (versus authority resulting from an ability of using compulsion) is the key element of the analysis; this type of relation is characterised by the lack of balance – one of the partners is able to convince the other to incur higher cost than he himself has to incur in case of implementing some actions (*Współczesne teorie wymiany społecznej* [Contemporary Social Exchange Theories], M. Kempny, J. Szmatka (eds.), Warszawa 1992, pp. 5–72).

ticipants are autonomous subjects, which implies exchange relations are voluntary and lack compulsion. Similar interests and freedoms in communication are sufficient to develop a network of exchange, where the key conditions necessary to shape it, and relevant limitations, may include – next to the shortage of resources or motivation – group standards, i.e. who should/should not help whom, e.g. family members representing different generations should support one another. It is assumed that various social groups have their own internal systems of exchange, e.g. a group of friends, neighbors, and families, which are necessary to regulate and sanction the behaviors of individual members in order to ensure that they will act according to common standards, making exchanges with other actors, i.e. that they act collectively. Studies concerning the exchange networks indicate there is an option to establish coalitions of specific actors[38]. Joint and integrated actions by siblings to organize help for a sick parent is one such example. Identifying the so-called simple social networks, i.e. networks involving objects of the same type in dyadic and complex relations, composed of various elements and their mutual relations is also interesting, however, the number of and differences in the elements of the network are expressed by the size, scope, and density.

The exchange network approach has been applied in the studies dating back to the 1980's of persons that reciprocate various forms of support[39]. They cover the whole populations[40] and specific social categories, senior citizens in particular[41]. Classical studies under this movement, e.g. Claude Fischer's *To Dell among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City*[42], searched for corelations between the support networks and key structural factors, such as education, material status, gender, and place of residence. Their results showed that the key determinant of the support network – their density, range, and diversity – was the level of education, the material status of a household measured in income, and the place of residence. Persons who are better off have more unrelated people in their networks, they meet, and support one another more often, while the poor have less access to such support. In comparison to rural populations, city residents have greater access to the various institutions that provide help. The results of the study of the English and German support networks of the elderly[43] have shown that seniors could count on help and

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[38] J. Mazur, *Grupa społeczna* [Social Group] [in:] *Encyklopedia Socjologii* [Encyclopaedia of Sociology], t. 2, Warszawa 1998, pp. 263–263, 266.

[39] E.g. McCallister, Fischer, 1978; Fischer 1982 [after:] Ch. Phillipson 2004.

[40] C.S. Fischer, *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City*, Chicago 1982.

[41] Kendig, 1986; Wegner, 1984; Keating et al., 2002 [after:] Ch. Phillipson 2004.

[42] Fischer, 1982 [after:] Ch. Phillipson 2004.

[43] Wanger, 1984; Keating, 2002 [after:] Ch. Phillipson 2004.

receive it from relatives, and, moreover, that the composition of their support networks depended on the patterns of marriage, number of children, migration, personality factors, as well as health conditions. The results of the study of support networks within local communities reveal that the support networks of seniors from rural communities have less access to informal support compared to the urban population. Other important findings of these studies indicate that broad networks are less accessible to those who really need them, that the networks of support to urban populations are more developed, than rural populations.

It is hard to consider the available studies on social support – even the ones that are classified under the categories of support networks – as network analyses in a strict sense; they may only be classified as quasi network analyses. They identify givers and takers of the support, i.e. actors receiving assistance and providing it, taking into consideration their social-demographic characteristics. They also reveal the structure of the system, i.e. persons that usually provide assistance, sometimes relations of mutual assistance (dyadic relations in the network analyses), and relations considered to be of key importance to the functioning of an individual or a group defined as a household, but are not identified as elements of the network system by using methods of the network analysis, i.e. all the actors being interrelated. They do not reveal the entirety of the network actors that are related based on assistance through identifying the initiator of network development and individual elements of the set, which, in case of the network of support, would facilitate the recreation of the process of the development of the "chain of kindness", which is of importance both to the analysis specific individual's network of support and to the analysis of organizing local systems of support in the context of local partnership development.

3. Social networks and support networks of Lodz residents – study results

In contemporary societies, including Poland, support measures have been professionalized and "institutionalized"[44], i.e. they have been included in the framework of various structures of the state social policy. The development of professional activities, accomplished through establishing institutions, that are designed to secure citizens' needs has limited the importance of support provided under informal

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[44] A. Kamiński, *Funkcje pedagogiki społecznej. Praca socjalna i kulturalna* [The Functions of Social Pedagogy. Social Work and Cultural], Warszawa 1974, pp. 292–304.

circles (relatives, friends, neighbors), as well as excluded it from the area of scientific analyses. The observed renaissance of this type of assistance-focused behaviors is related to the increasing need for such support.

Studies performed among Lodz residents aimed to answer questions concerning their potential and real resources of support, such as:

1. Do they request help from other persons when they find themselves in difficult life situations?
2. Who can they approach to request help and who provides it to them within informal circles and welfare institutions?
3. Who most often supports them in such situations?

Helpers were identified among relatives living separately from the respondents;, neighbors;, friends; as well as professional helpers, such as social workers, health service workers, banks, and even the Catholic Church.

Social relations aimed at assistance represent a derivative of the social rooting of a person and his/her readiness to seek the resources available in his/her social environment, as defined in terms of institutions and informal circles. Supporting other people and helping them is an indicator for social integration. In the microstructural scale, such relations, links, and bonds result from needs, trust, or obligations. They are based on the feelings of responsibility for others, obligations towards others, and altruism. In the macrostructural scale, they include the areas of social solidarity, including the generational one, covered in the framework of local, regional, and national social policy rules. The distribution and flow of institutional resources and resources accumulated in the informal groups are defined by social, economic, cultural, and political factors that are conditioned upon one another, i.e. access to institutional resources results in the withdrawal, although not resignation, from the support available in the informal circles, and vice versa[45].

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[45] Complex conditions of distribution of the institutional resources reveal historically developed ways of resolving social problems, which evolved from the traditional model (the citizen is entitled to receive support based on the principles of social solidarity and citizenship; assistance-related tasks are performed by social assistance institutions, previously they were delivered as charity and philanthropic activities, nowadays professionals (social workers, carers and therapists) determine the type of support for a person/group experiencing specific deficits), to the model of active social policy (covering the public management model in which a citizen experiencing problems and requiring support determines the type and scope of support that he/she needs, because he/she is entitled to select the type of services to resolve his/her problems, and the social economy model, in which the citizen becomes a more active entity because he/she takes part in organisation of assistance, demonstrates assistance-focused activities that he/she uses himself/herself). This transformation limits redistribution-based public function of the public assistance institutions, and as a result, increase of the role of the informal groups in securing needs of citizens.

The following assumption has been made in the studies: access to help differs depending on the stage of life, and it is defined by age (five categories have been distinguished – from the youngest – persons aged up to 29 years, between 30–40 years, 41–50 years, 51–60 years, and the oldest – persons aged at least 60 years). Analyses of patterns of support received by Lodz residents are in part presented in comparison with people living in non-urbanized and less urbanized areas[46].

3.1. Reaching for the resources of institutions

In selecting sources of institutions available to people, their importance in terms of meeting important needs both in the households of younger and older citizens and the cost of living were taken into consideration. The index of analyzed behaviors, which means the obtaining of specific resources, was very broad – it included the use of tax exemptions and credits, housing benefits, care services, subsidized medication, material assistance (including meals and clothing), and various forms (meal allowances, various school activities, school textbooks and accessories, and scholarships) of institutional support to meet the needs of the youngest family members. A great majority of Lodz residents, i.e. 64%, declared that they had not sought such institutional resources; and, a small group, i.e. 3.4% of the total number (particularly families with children and the oldest Lodz residents), declared that they had been social assistance beneficiaries within the six-month period

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[46] The study performed in 2009 covered 500 adult Lodz residents. The structure of the study population corresponds with the structure of the total number of adult inhabitants of the city in terms of two key variables: age and gender. Females prevailed in the number of Lodz respondents – they represented almost 55% of the total number – and persons representing the middle age cohorts (aged between 30–59 years) – over 52% of the total number. At the same time the share of the youngest (aged up to 24 years) and oldest (aged at least 65 years) categories of respondents reached 10,4% and 19,4% respectively. A large group of respondents – over 1/3 – included graduates of higher schools, almost 45% – of secondary schools, almost every fifth respondent completed basic vocational education level. The sample was dominated by married people (almost 51%) (unmarried people constituted 26%, widows and widowers – over 15%, and the divorced and separated – over 8%. The majority of the respondents lived in small households composed of two or three members (over 59%), represented two-generation families (51%), full nuclear or extended (41% and 5,6% respectively). Every 5th respondent lived in a one-member household. The study for a less urbanized areas was conducted in 2008 on the sample of 1000 adult residents randomly selected in 10 rural and urban-rural communes of five provinces based on an interview survey. More information on this research (J. Grotowska-Leder, *Sieci wsparcia społecznego…*, op.cit.).

prior to the study. The following forms of institutional assistance were taken into account: tax exemptions and credits (approx. 25% of the total number of respondents); subsidized medication, although it was declared much more rarely (approx. 9%); and care services (approx. 4%). Lodz residents sporadically – no more than 0.5–2% of the total number of respondents – use the other forms seen in the study. The youngest and oldest Lodz residents more often demonstrate such behaviors, which is obvious.

3.2. Informal social support network

3.2.1. Social "rooting" as the basis for informal support relations

The social "rooting" of an individual, i.e. the reach of his/her functioning in the basic informal social groups of relatives, neighbors, and friends, is the basis for access to assistance under them.

The social "rooting" of Lodz residents, which constitutes the potential of support they expect and receive under the three above-mentioned types of informal circles – family, friends and neighbors – is relatively big. Lodz residents function within the developed social networks. They declared that they maintained regular contact with many persons – almost 19 on average. A very small number of respondents (40 persons, representing 0.8% of the total number of respondents) lived outside the sphere of such social relations. Lodz residents' network of informal relations mainly includes relations with family; friends; and, much more rarely, with neighbors. The lack of regular contact with close relatives (adult children, parents, and siblings) was declared by every twenty-seventh Lodz resident (3.6% of the total number of respondents). Every third (almost 34%) respondent reported a lack of regular contact with more distant relatives. The lack of relations with friends was declared by every eleventh respondent (8.8%), and with neighbors by almost every second (over 48%). In comparison to the networks of residents of non-urbanized, as well as less urbanized areas, the social networks of Lodz residents are smaller and have a different structure. An increase in the level of urbanization of the place of residence results in the shrinking reach of the informal social networks, in terms of relations with family and neighbors in particular. The social networks of Lodz residents are characterized by relations with family and friends to a greater extent, while the networks of residents in non-urbanized or less urbanized environments are characterized by relations with neighbors (Table 1).

Table 1. The scope of social networks and the urbanization level of residence (persons)

	The level of urbanization (%)	Total	Close family members	Distant family members	Friends	Neighbors
Rural communes	0.0	30.1	8.6	8.0	8.4	5.1
Urban-rural communes	50.8	27.3	8.1	6.4	7.7	5.1
The city of Lodz	100.0	18.7	5.7	3.6	7.6	1.8

Source: Author's own studies 2008–2009.

3.2.2. Readiness to request help

Membership in informal circles facilitates the feeling of safety for an individual. Additionally, the awareness of the availability of group support is important to feel happiness and success, as well as to resolve difficult situations. A "rich" social network, i.e. the one involving many people with whom an individual maintains frequent contacts, still does not guarantee support when an individual experiences problems since only some of the relationships are supportive in nature. The transformation of social networks into potential and real networks of support depends on the nature of interpersonal relationships (closer or more distant), the readiness to request help from other people, the readiness of the network members to provide support, and the compatibility of the needs declared by the person needing support with the resources possessed by potential helpers.

Table 2. Receiving help from other people by Lodz residents when they are in a difficult situation by age (%)

In difficult life situation	Total N=500	Age categories				
		Up to 29 n=108	30–39 n=78	40–49 n=76	50–59 n=107	60+ n=131
Receives help from other people	59.2	66.7	62.8	52.0	51.4	61.5
Does not receive help from other people	40.8	33.3	37.2	48.0	48.6	38.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's own studies 2008–2009.

The readiness of Lodz residents to look for support from other people is relatively high and is differentiated by age (this dependence is very weak and statistically insignificant). Six out of ten respondents declared that they requested the assistance of other people when they experienced problems. Such expectations

were relatively less frequently declared by middle-aged Lodz residents and more often by the younger (18–39 years) and the oldest (60+) respondents. The youngest and oldest are usually less able to cope with difficult situations since they more often experience, due to various reasons, situations where they need the help of other people. At the same time, they have poorer access to key resources to meet basic needs (such as income).

3.2.3. Potential informal support networks

Potential networks of support for Lodz residents, identified by the persons from whom support is expected, are relatively large, although they are significantly smaller than the social network – almost 11 and 19 persons, respectively. However, nearly all of the respondents declared that they had access to informal sources of assistance. The majority of Lodz residents function in small circles of support, composed of up to five persons (56.4% of the total number of respondents), and they perceive there is an option to receive assistance in the circles comprising both family and non-family members. Their relatives prevail in these networks (in total, they constitute half of the potential networks of support on average – 5.54 persons), and a little more often they include friends rather than close relatives (parents, children, and siblings) – 3.92 and 3.62 persons respectively (Table 3).

Table 3. Size and structure of potential support networks of Lodz residents

Specification	Potential support networks					
	In total	Close family members	Distant family members	Friends	Neighbors	Other*
In total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No network of support (%)	0.3	3.3	43.9	13.7	60.1	86.4
Small (1–5 persons) (%)	56.4	76.4	49.5	69.0	36.9	12.6
Medium (6–10 persons) (%)	39.0	17.6	5.3	13.3	3.0	1.0
Large (at least 11) (%)	4.3	1.7	1.3	4.0	0.0	0.0
Average size of the potential support network (persons)	10.82	**3.69**	1.85	**3.92**	1.00	0.36
Average size of the social network (persons)	18.58	**5.64**	3.57	**7.66**	1.71	X

* Respondents indicated also persons in professional assistance-related roles, such as a nurse, physician, pedagogue, advisor, etc.

Source: Author's own studies 2009.

Age and the level of urbanization of the place of residence differentiate the reach of potential support networks, although to a lesser extent (Tables 4 and 5). Lodz residents aged between 50–59 years declared the highest number of potential support networks with the highest membership (11.1 persons). By contrast, the youngest and younger Lodz residents (aged between 18–29 and 30–39 years) declared smaller potential support networks (10.7–10.4 persons respectively). Respondents aged between 40–49 years (7.3 persons) and the oldest ones (60+) (8.7 persons) declared the networks with the smallest memberships. The structure of the potential networks of support of the youngest Lodz residents includes relatively more friends and closer relatives. The oldest residents have the smallest number of friends and the highest number of close relatives. Neighbors and relatively rarely representatives of various institutions providing help to the needy are the members of the potential networks of the oldest Lodz residents.

Table 4. Size of potential support networks of Lodz residents according to age (persons)*

Support expected of:	Age				
	do 29 n=108	30–39 n=78	40–49 n=76	50–59 n=107	60+ n=131
Close relatives	**2.90**	**2.42**	**2.16**	1.64	**2.44**
More distant relatives	1.19	1.47	1.14	0.97	0.92
Friends	**3.70**	**2.83**	1.71	**2.26**	1.39
Neighbors	0.61	0.53	0.51	0.54	0.75
Other people**	0.26	0.31	0.16	0.25	0.18
In total	10.68	10.37	7.33	11.11	8.71

* average value calculated for the whole sample; ** respondents indicated also persons in professional assistance-related roles, such as a nurse, physician, pedagogue, advisor, etc.

Source: Author's own studies 2009.

Table 5. The scope of potential social networks and the urbanization level of residents (persons)

	The level of urbanization (%)	Total	Close family members	Distant family members	Friends	Neigh-bours
Rural communes	0.0	**12.09**	**4.38**	**2.90**	3.03	**2.00**
Urban-rural communes	50.8	11.09	3.88	2.16	2.95	1.86
The City of Lodz	100.0	10.96	3.85	1.85	**3.92**	1.00

Source: Author's own studies 2008–2009.

3.3. Real support networks

The conviction about the possibility of reaching for help is not the same as actually getting this assistance. Usually, the practical utility of the support network is definitely smaller/weaker than its potential utility. To establish the patterns of support/assistance that is actually delivered to those in need in Łodz, it was ascertained which percentage among those that are waiting for help gets it from the particular non-formal circles and in extremely difficult life situations. Difficult cases that involve engagement of other people include organized care of the dependent family members during illness, acquisition of the loan in case of financial problems, conversation in case of personal problems, help with looking for a job (unemployment), or help with major household works (renovation).

Lodz residents expecting help in all the above categories usually receive it from their relatives, however, when they have personal problems or problems with work, this support is most often provided by friends rather than relatives. Friends are a more common source of support than neighbors. Support resources for Lodz residents are quite dense, as relatively often the members of all the informal circles also identify them – although the scope differs in specific life problems categories.

Table 6. Lodz residents receiving support according to the categories of helpers and types of help (% of the respondents declaring their need for help with a given problem)*

Type Person	Money	Personal problems and worries	Problems with work	Administrative problems	Housework	Renovation and work in the household
Neighbors	13.5	30.1	7.5	10.5	25.0	14.9
Friends	51.7	**83.5**	**68.0**	32.0	26.8	25.3
Family	**64.0**	73.1	58.0	**79.1**	**81.1**	**75.9**
All	2.2	24.6	8.0	2.0	4.9	2.3
In total	17.8	69.2	10.0	30.6	32.8	17.4

* Percentage in the columns does not add up to 100 because the members of the informal circles identified also played the role of helpers.

Source: Author's own studies 2009.

In non-formal circles, the most available form of support offered to the people in Lodz is psychological and emotional help that is given when they have personal problems. The least available form of support comes when they experience job problems; financial issues; or with the organization of everyday life, including taking care of non-independent family members (Table 6). People who help the

most are usually the closest relatives – spouse, parents, children, and siblings – of those in need, rarely friends, neighbors, and, even more rarely, professionals representing the institutions called to provide assistance. The list of helpers changes when one takes into consideration the character of the problem. In personal matters, the role of friends increases;` in financial issues – banks. It should be emphasized that support of institutional resources is rarely visible (Table 7).

Table 7. Lodz residents receiving support in the life situations analyzed according to the categories of helpers (% of declarations)

Supporter	Shopping at the time of sickness	Financial loan	Conversation in case of personal problem
Husband/wife	**50.3**	12.3	**47.2**
Mother/father	**38.6**	**43.3**	**28.2**
Daughter/son	**46.0**	**32.4**	**27.8**
Daughter-in-law/son-in-law	5.4	0.0	1.3
Sister/brother	17.6	20.6	16.6
Other relative	9.6	14.9	12.6
Neighbor	9.6	2.4	5.6
Friend	13.2	19.9	**45.8**
Employer, colleague from work	1.3	7.4	6.9
Social worker, physician	0.0	X	0.6
Other	5.6	2.3	2.0
Bank	X	**25.5**	0
Priest	X	X	2.4
There is no such person	2.9	14.9	4.6

Source: Author's own studies 2009.

The patterns of the given support are distinctly differentiated in the perspective of the unit's life circle and the gender of supporters. But, the exposed dependencies are strongly and statistically crucial. In the age categories of the youngest and oldest people of Łodz, in case of illness, those helping are rarely spouses, because part of the former did not start a family yet, and the latter – is widowed. In those difficult situations, the youngest are mostly supported by their mothers, fathers, and siblings; while the oldest are supported by their daughters, spouse, sons, and sons-in-law. The youngest residents were most often supported in this case by (as ranked by the respondents) mothers, fathers, and siblings. The oldest identified their benefactors as daughters, spouses, sons, daughters-in-law, and sons-in-law. Middle-aged respondents were most often are helped by their spouses, and as they grew

older, they received help from their children (Table 8). The patterns of help available
to adult Lodz residents in event of financial difficulties are a little different (Table
9). Financial support offered by parents becomes less important when growing
older while support from children gains in importance. However, institutions like
banks or loan sharks become equally important, particularly for middle-aged peo-
ple. Friends and work colleagues perform a significant support role in this category
of Lodz residents. The fact that a high rate of Lodz residents declared that they have
no one to turn to for help in case of financial difficulties is an interesting finding.
Every seventh respondent of the sample declared such situation. And, in the case of
the oldest Lodz residents – every fifth. A similar finding was observed for the cat-
egory of 40–49 year olds. In case of personal problems (Table 10), the youngest Lodz
respondents most often declared (as ranked by them): friends, mothers, spouses,
and sisters. Meanwhile, the middle-age group declared their spouses, friends, moth-
ers, and sisters. The oldest one respondents mentioned their daughters, friends,
spouses, and, relatively often, female neighbors, sons, and more distant relatives.

Table 8. Lodz residents receiving support with shopping during the time of sickness according to age and the categories of helpers (% of declarations)

Helper	In total N=500	Age				
		Up to 29 n=108	30–39 n=78	40–49 n=76	50–59 n=107	60+ n=131
Husband/wife	50.3	37.0	74.9	76.8	62.5	25.6
Mother	29.7	76.7	47.3	11.6	10.7	0.0
Father	8.9	26.0	10.3	4.7	1.8	0.0
Daughter	33.1	0.0	2.0	39.5	46.4	68.3
Son	12.9	0.0	2.0	19.3	21.5	24.4
Daughter-in-law/son-in-law	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	18.3
Sister	12.6	19.1	14.4	18.6	8.9	4.8
Brother	5.0	6.9	8.2	2.3	5.4	2.4
Other relative	9.6	6.8	12.3	7.0	1.8	17.0
Neighbor	9.6	1.4	4.1	7.0	16.1	17.1
Friend	13.2	20.3	16.4	11.6	8.8	8.6
Employer, colleague from work	1.3	0.0	2.0	0.0	3.6	1.2
Someone else	5.6	4.1	2.0	4.7	5.4	9.7
There is no such person	2.9	1.4	4.1	2.3	5.4	2.4

VC=0.413 and 0.409, p=0.00 (the survey established whom R. will request assistance from
in a given situation first and second)

Source: Author's own studies 2009.

Table 9. Lodz residents receiving support with borrowing s money in financial diffi-culties according to age and the categories of helpers (% of declarations)

Helper	In total N=500	Age				
		Up to 29 n=108	30–39 n=78	40–49 n=76	50–59 n=107	60+ n=131
Husband/wife	12.3	19.2	14.0	14.3	12.5	6.1
Mother	28.1	63.0	42.8	18.7	16.1	1.2
Father	15.2	41.1	20.4	7.0	3.6	1.3
Daughter	19.2	0.0	0.0	9.4	17.9	65.1
Son	13.2	0.0	0.0	2.3	9.0	34.6
Daughter-in-law/son-in-law	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sister	12.3	8.2	6.1	18.7	21.4	10.0
Brother	8.3	9.6	16.4	4.6	5.4	6.2
Other relative	14.9	12.4	20.2	14.0	25.0	6.3
Neighbor	2.4	0.0	2.0	4.7	1.8	3.7
Friend	19.9	16.5	20.2	32.6	26.7	11.2
Employer, colleague from work	7.4	8.2	12.2	4.6	14.3	0.0
Someone else	2.3	0.0	0.0	4.7	4.4	2.5
Bank, usurer	25.5	13.7	28.6	51.5	23.2	29.8
There is no such person	14.9	6.9	12.2	20.9	16.1	20.0

VC=0.467 and 0.377, p=0.00 (the survey established whom R. will request assistance from in a given situation first and second)

Source: Author's own studies 2009.

Table 10. Lodz residents receiving support with talking about personal problems ac-cording to age and the categories of helpers (% of declarations)

Helper	In total N=500	Age				
		Up to 29 n=108	30–39 n=78	40–49 n=76	50–59 n=107	60+ n=131
Husband/wife	**47.2**	**41.1**	**65.2**	**67.5**	**53.6**	**26.9**
Mother	**23.9**	**45.2**	**38.7**	**20.9**	**18.1**	1.3
Father	4.3	9.6	8.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Daughter	**22.2**	0.0	0.0	16.3	32.5	51.8
Son	5.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	18.7
Daughter-in-law/son-in-law	1.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.0
Sister	16.6	**20.6**	14.3	**21.0**	14.4	13.6
Brother	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other relative	10.6	10.9	4.0	6.9	10.9	16.3
Neighbor	5.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.4	17.3

Table 10. cd

Helper	In total N=500	Age				
		Up to 29 n=108	30–39 n=78	40–49 n=76	50–59 n=107	60+ n=131
Friend	**45.8**	**63.1**	**51.0**	**46.2**	**39.7**	**30.9**
Colleague from work	5.6	2.7	6.1	7.0	12.7	2.5
Psychologist, physician	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	1.2
Someone else	2.0	4.1	2.0	2.3	0.0	1.2
Priest	2.4	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	7.5
There is no such person	4.3	2.7	6.1	11.6	3.6	5.0

VC=0.342, 0.369, p=0.00 (the survey established whom R. will request assistance from in a given situation first and second)

Source: Author's own studies 2009.

4. Conclusion

In contemporary societies, defined as the risk societies, the phenomenon of social support has become particularly important due to the increase in the number of people in need of assistance (the unemployed, the poor, the sick, the disabled, and the elderly population), because of the crisis of basic security institutions – the labor market, social assistance, but also the family. Citizens' access to resources is becoming increasingly limited, which results in the worsening of problems with providing support resources. The practical dimension of the phenomenon that gains significance and, since 1960s, stimulates the development of theoretical reflection on social support and support networks. In addition to studies in the field of psychological and educational sciences, which had taken the question of social support was taken up relatively earlier; the increasing interest in this issue in sociology, social policy, and economics can be observed.

The achievements of sociological studies on social support allow the formulation of a number of more general remarks:

First of all, social support is operationalized as a complex phenomenon, as the activity that is aimed at and results in a reduction or elimination of difficulties experienced by the individual in everyday functioning or difficulties which cannot be resolved on one's own without access to the social environment resources. The problem is analyzed in the functional, but also structural perspective. Research questions usually relate to the problem if people have anyone to turn to for help, for the resources of which institutions, persons they reach to overcome problems,

how many people give them support, and who these people are in the context of social roles performed. Less emphasized is the prospect of ethical analysis of the problem, i.e., above all, who should be supported and why; who has access to support; and the psychological perspective, i.e. what personality traits contribute to attitudes of expecting, seeking, and providing support?

Secondly, the problem of support relations is mostly related to its scope and nature, and the institutional and informal resources are analyzed.

Thirdly, the research focuses not only on the categories for which the access to assistance is particularly important, i.e. experiencing deficits in various aspects of life, but are also carried out among the general population on specific territory (country, city, etc.), which allows to reveal the complexity of the phenomenon and its differentiation in the basic dimensions (e.g. age, gender, place of residence, and economic status). An example of such studies is the analysis presented in the second part of the paper, concerning the access to social support among the adult residents of Lodz. In the course of the scientific investigation, it was revealed that most of Lodz inhabitants in difficult situations reach for the resources of informal circles and institutional resources when they experience financial deficits or have problems with organizing everyday life, although a small proportion of them are officially beneficiaries of social assistance.

Lodz inhabitants under the framework of complex social networks share support relations, but their scope is clearly smaller than their entire network. The adult residents of Lodz do not tend to "close" in family circles, but these dominate in the structure of their networks, but relatively few of them expect and receive support from neighbors and distant relatives.

The structure of informal social networks – both potential and real ones – is differentiated according to quality of residence and age. With the increasing urbanization of the place of residence, the range of social networks 0 both among families and neighbors – shrinks. In the social networks of big city residents, supporting by family and friends are much more important in the comparison with the networks of the residents of less urbanized communities, in which support of neighbors are relatively more important.

The support resources of Lodz inhabitants are pretty dense, because, quite frequently, but it differs according to specific life problems, they receive support from members of all distinguished informal circles, most frequently from the closest relatives. The life problems of Lodz inhabitants often involve women, i.e. their mothers, daughters, and sisters, rather than fathers, sons, and brothers.

The analyses of the access to support are particularly important for organizing activities in the field of social policy at the local and the global level. A diagnosis

of opportunities to meet the needs via formal and informal contacts reveals the existence of deficient areas and points at the need to run appropriate actions to modify existing solutions, which helps to better identify and, therefore, solve contemporary social problems: multidimensional and diversified manifestations of social exclusion, and contributes to improvement of the quality of peoples' lives.

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