ABSTRACT

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SESSION III: FUNCTIONS OF FAMILY SOCIAL NETWORKS

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FAMILY SOCIAL NETWORKS IN LITHUANIA: THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Key words: family, social support, types of support, social support network, the older birth cohort, the younger birth cohort, parents, siblings, friends, neighbours

Recent demographic trends in European and other post-modern societies (population ageing and changing balance between the young and old, increase in the number of childless couples and single persons, the spread of new partnership forms, decline in rates of birth, etc.) rise concerns about family capability to ensure wellbeing to its members and challenge the potential of family as provider of social support.

The paper focuses on mutual social support networks of Lithuanian families, aiming to reveal the extent to which the resources of different types of assistance are both given and received in relationships between members of a family of procreation/orientation as well as between more distant kinship and other persons, i.e. friends / neighbours, etc.

Individual experiences in provision and receipt of support are analysed basing on the data of qualitative research, conducted in the frame of the ESF-funded research Project “Trajectories of family models and social networks: Intergenerational perspective” (code No.VP1-3.1-ŠMM-07-K-01-106).

The field-work (sixty in-depth interviews) was carried out in summer 2012 June-August, 2012 in the six regions of Lithuania (10 interviews in each region). The informants were sampled from the list of persons who had previously (at the end of 2011 – beginning of 2012) participated in the quantitative survey basing on the age, gender and living place criterion. Respectively 15 persons

All informants were interviewed individually face-to-face, the interviews were recorded. Average duration of the interviews was 54 minutes (the longest interview was 2 hours and 30 minutes, the shortest – 18 minutes). Afterwards records were transcribed (the transcribed texts make 850 pages).

The in-depth interviews were conducted using the interview guidelines (a set of open questions) that covered five topics - partnerships and family formation, parenthood, education trajectories, professional career trajectories, mutual assistance. The last topic was elaborated by open questions regarding the exchange of material and financial assistance, psychological support, the experiences of provision/receipt of other help, etc. Analysis of qualitative data was performed using qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti7.

Configurational perspective on family as a complex set of personal ties and interdependencies that extend far beyond its boundaries and include not only more distant kinship, but also friends (Widmer, 2010) makes a theoretical framework of analysis. The first part of presentation focuses on the conceptualization of social support as a multidimensional category that has been variously defined and measured taking into account various aspects – the structure of supportive resources, normative attitudes and the perceptions concerning the availability of assistance, the social support network – its givers and receivers (Schafer, Coyne, Lazarus, 1981; Kahana, Kahana, Johnson, Hammond, Kercher, 1994; Willis, Martin, 2005; Scabini, Lanz, 2006; Miller, Perlman, Brehm, 2007; Regan, 2011, etc.).

Basing on the qualitative survey data, the eight types of social support are distinguished and defined: (1) emotional support (verbal and nonverbal behaviours (e.g., listening, being together) that communicate closeness and affection, warmth and sympathy, concern and support); (2) informational support (giving advice, information and clarification that help to find solutions in stressful situations); (3) financial support (giving money regularly or episodic / one-off help (a gift, interest-free loan) for the large purchases); (4) material assistance (release of various household appliances, furniture, clothing, children’s things, agricultural products, etc.); (5) rendering of dwelling (release of a room / flat - temporarily or for altogether); (6) instrumental support (provision of direct physical assistance in household tasks and farming); (7) care of the older and/or ailing persons (provision of permanent or episodic assistance to physically impaired, seriously ill individuals and the elderly); (8) child care (provision of permanent or episodic assistance in looking after the children in pre-school or younger school age).

Analysis of mutual support networks is based on the comparison of individual experiences of informants of two birth cohorts – the older (born in 1950-1965) and the younger (born in 1970-1985). These two birth cohorts are representatives of two different generations - those who were socialized and experienced transitional to adulthood life events in different historic periods - the soviet and during the years of Lithuania’s political and socio-economic transformations and entry into the EU. The older and younger cohorts also differ by some socio-demographic characteristics (marital status, presence of children) and, respectively, by the performed social roles.

The accomplished investigation enables to make the following conclusions:

- The social support networks of the older cohort are more extensive, however, all interviewed persons, regardless of their age, talked more frequently about the cases of received support rather than about personal experiences of helping the others.

- All in all, parents most often are net givers of assistance to their adult children, thus, in a family the intergenerational support flows are most often one-way and “downward”. Whereas among peers (siblings, friends, etc.) some balance between received and given assistance is observed, in this respect it is possible to talk about the exchange of support.
Family of origin takes a most important place in support networks, first of all, parents. Although references to the spouse and children as assistance providers are less frequent, a particular role of a family of procreation as supporter in stressful situations is reflected in individual narratives otherwise, when talking about family as a personal core value.

Mutual support ties with kinship are rather fragmented and one-sided, in this respect friends are much more important, particularly as providers of emotional and financial assistance. The role of friends is more significant in the younger age cohort, especially among women – their mutual support practices are closely related with female family roles. Meanwhile men also help each other in professional life, their mutual support relationships intertwine with personal material interests.

The inhabitants of rural areas maintain firm support relationships with their neighbours, and these relationships are grounded both on pragmatism and solidarity. Meanwhile, neighbours’ support ties in towns and cities are sketchy and not substantial.

„Other” persons (acquaintances, business associates, co-workers) take a relatively insignificant place in mutual support networks, they are providers of some irregular support (informational, financial and instrumental).

References