



Social structure and support networks in Beijing and Hong Kong[☆]

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Abstract

This study examines personal support networks in Beijing and Hong Kong, based on survey data collected in 2000. It was found that these two Chinese cities, which share a common Confucian cultural heritage, are similar in many aspects of social support. The supportive roles of spouse or partner are prominent and diffuse. Other close relatives are more involved in instrumental than emotional support. Non-kin primary ties specialize in emotional support. Neither extended kin support nor institutional support is significant. Nonetheless, the two cities differ in certain aspects of social support, reflecting their differences in such macro social-structural forces as economic modernization, urbanization and the social organization of work. Compared to the Hong Kong Chinese, the Beijing Chinese are more likely to seek support from close kin or coworkers, but less likely to rely on institutional help. Sources of support in both cities are also affected by the micro social-structural positions people occupy, particularly marital status and household income. It is noted that about 10% of the respondents in both cities reported “no one” to turn to for support. Among the various types of support, emotional comfort is the most difficult to find.

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1. Introduction

This paper compares two Chinese cities, Beijing and Hong Kong, with regard to the composition of people’s social support networks. Both social-structural and cultural factors

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are taken into consideration in analyzing a person's choice of sources for social support, i.e., the kinds of people he/she would turn to for support in times of need or crisis. It should be underscored that the two cities under study belong to "one country" but they represent "two systems" (Kuan and Lau, 2002; So, 2003). Beijing is the capital of China and is a socialist society, while Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China and is a capitalist society. These two Chinese cities share a common heritage of cultural traditions, but they are quite different in social-structure. Comparing the two cities would allow us to have an effective assessment of the impact of social-structure on people's social networks and social support.

Research on personal or ego-centered social networks and their social support functions have become a major topic in social science studies in recent decades (see, for instance, Cohen and Syme, 1985; Finch, 1989; Fischer, 1982; Freeman and Ruan, 1997; Gottlieb, 1981; Hollinger and Haller, 1990; House et al., 1988; Kogovsek et al., 2002; Lai, 2001; Litwak and Szelenyi, 1969; Marsden and Lin, 1982; Newman, 2003; Schweizer et al., 1998; Thoits, 1982; Wellman et al., 1988). It is generally postulated that when an individual is related to others to form a social network, the interpersonal ties and their embedded resources constitute the focal individual's social capital which can help him/her not only for pursuing political or economic goals but also for coping with crises or emergencies (Baron et al., 2000; Bian and Ang, 1997; Levy and Pescosolida, 2002; Lin, 2001; Marsden and Lin, 1982; Thoits, 1992, 1995). The question is: who would turn to whom for what kinds of support under what social-cultural conditions?

Sources of support to the focal individual may include a variety of people or institutions, such as spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend, neighbor, colleague, as well as the various kinds of professionals and work organizations. These various sources of support can be broadly classified in terms of close kin (e.g., spouse, children, parents and siblings), extended kin (e.g., uncles and aunts), non-kin primary groups (e.g., friends, neighbors and coworkers) and secondary groups (e.g., professionals, voluntary agencies and government departments). Different sources of support may serve different support functions for the focal individual, such as financial aid, job finding, household assistance, care during sickness, social companionship, emotional comfort, advice on family problems, elderly care and baby sitting (Cohen and Syme, 1985; Thoits, 1982; Vaux, 1988; Veiel and Baumann, 1992). What kinds of support the focal individual obtains from which sources would depend not only on the structural characteristics of his/her personal social network (Laireiter and Baumann, 1992; Marsden, 1987; van der Poel, 1993a; Wellman, 1992), but also on macro social-cultural forces, such as economic modernization, urbanization and cultural orientations (Hollinger and Haller, 1990; Wellman, 1979).

It is commonly postulated that in the course of economic modernization and urbanization, kinship ties are loosened while non-kin relations tend to gain importance in personal social networks (see, for instance, Fischer, 1982; Hollinger and Haller, 1990; Wellman, 1979). It is not only the non-kin primary groups such as friends, colleagues and neighbors, but also the secondary groups such as professionals, voluntary associations and government agencies that would emerge as a major source of support to individuals in times of need or emergencies. It has been explained that increased geographic mobility, the separation of workplace from residence, the growth of professionalism, the expansion of public services and bureaucratic divisions of labor and the increased freedom for people to choose and shape

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