

# HOW DO INDIVIDUALS MOBILISE SUPPORT IN EMERGENCIES?

Andreas Hoff, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), [a.hoff@lse.ac.uk](mailto:a.hoff@lse.ac.uk)

## *Abstract*

This research is concerned with the question of what role informal support networks play in the welfare mix of social welfare states. Lone mothers rely particularly on social support. Therefore, 116 interviews with lone mothers in Germany and the United Kingdom were carried out. Empirical evidence for an interdependence between informal and formal support mobilisation was provided. Informal support was clearly the dominant support source that contributed to the alleviation of social exclusion.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social support is a trait of human community. Thereby, support is understood as all activities that help to solve a problem. Our need of receiving support as well as our capacity of giving support changes over the course of our lifetime. Life periods in which people typically rely on support are childhood and old age. Support can be provided by a variety of sources, ranging from interpersonal relationships to state institutions. Assistance provided by individuals who are emotionally or geographically close to us is referred to as *informal* support in this research. In contrast, *formal* support is institutional help provided by professional supporters based on social welfare legislation or private law contracts.

Families with dependent children are particularly in need of support. This need is recognised through social welfare institutions designed to assist parents in raising their children. One of the most challenging characteristics of raising a child in today's society is having to do it as a lone parent. Almost always, they are lone mothers. Whatever the basic necessity of life for that child may be, they serve as the sole provider. Not only do they have sole responsibility for raising the child, they also have to earn their living on their own. Lone motherhood goes along with a high risk of being affected by poverty due to diminished earning capacities [1]. Hence, lone mothers are particularly in need of support from both informal and formal sources.

This research focuses on four elements: support services that lone mothers receive, who provides that support, how it helps lone mothers to adapt in emergency situations and how they themselves mobilise support. It is innovative in three respects:

- (1) It sets out to explore the interaction between informal and formal support mobilisation.

- (2) By doing this it contributes to the explanation of the impact of social welfare state regimes at individual action.
- (3) In order to realise these ambitions a new instrument for measurement of informal and formal support was developed, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

## 2 INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT MOBILISATION IN DIFFERENT WELFARE STATES

### 2.1 *Theoretical foundations*

Whether an individual actor decides to utilise informal or formal support is the outcome of a complex decision making process. In this research, individual behaviour is explained using a rational choice approach. Rational choice theory assumes that individual action is purposive and intentional, guided by a well-ordered hierarchy of preferences, and the expectation that individuals will choose those ways of action that satisfy their preferences to the greatest extent, considering given constraints [2]. Applying this approach to the decision between informal and formal support mobilisation that means in a simplified way: individuals need to know formal and informal support sources, they calculate costs and benefits for using alternative sources and finally, they choose that option which they expect to produce the highest subjective utility. Since it is extremely difficult to measure subjective utility the theoretical focus is on the cost side. Costs considered include non-monetary expenses, such as reliability of service, future obligations, long waiting hours, required effort, etc.

Crucial preferences relevant for this research include the interest to gain access to resources. This can only be achieved in exchange with other individual actors. Every exchange involves benefits and costs. The costs of exchanging support are obligations to reciprocate. Ultimately, every exchange presupposes the expectation that these obligations will be met. Hence, trust is an essential feature of social exchange processes that facilitates action. On the other hand, obligations resulting from exchange work like an insurance policy: since we support others when we are capable of doing it we are in the position to ask for 're-payment' when we need help. Kinship relations are characterised by high levels of mutual obligations [3]. Normative obligations to support each other result in high reliability of family support even in the absence of the capacity to reciprocate. Contrarily to exchange relations with non-relatives, support provision

does not require immediate reciprocity. The equilibrium in exchange relations will be restored over the course of a life time [4] or reciprocity will take the form of general exchange across generations, i.e. we will pass on support we received from our parents to our children.

In this research, an ego-centred network analytical approach in combination with the concept of social support was chosen to realise the goals of this research. The potential of social support to 'buffer' the individual against damaging external effects [5] makes it particularly valuable for lone mothers. Therefore, it was expected that lone mothers invest a lot of effort and time in creating and maintaining social support networks as an important element of their overall coping strategies. On the other hand, lone mothers are restricted in their network generating capacities. Whereas employed lone mothers need all their time and energy to combine their duties as breadwinners and family carers, not employed mothers lack financial resources and social contacts.

Since all individuals in a given social system face the same opportunities and incentive structures a cross-national comparison was necessary to prove the interdependence of informal and formal support mobilisation. The cases of Germany and the United Kingdom were selected for this purpose. Germany is an example of a corporatist, conservative welfare state regime whose core is a comprehensive, compulsory social insurance system. Entitlement to these relatively generous benefits is based on previous contribution records of the (typically male) breadwinner. Contrarily, the United Kingdom represents a liberal, residualist welfare state in which means-tested, modest welfare transfers dominate. Entitlement is entirely needs based [6].

However, individual support mobilisation behaviour is not only influenced by the availability/non-availability of social policy measures. Diverging historical-cultural traditions which are imprinted in different norms and values are likely to have an impact at individual resource mobilisation as well. Castles [7] stressed the crucial importance of distinguishing political-institutional and historical-cultural factors in comparative welfare state analysis in their '*Families of Nations*' concept. Thus, the historical legacy of Catholicism has formed norms and values in German society, resulting in the preservation of traditional family values, a strong commitment to security, and the notion of subsidiarity [8, 9]. In contrast, religious doctrines have not had a similar impact in Britain where the dominant liberal work ethic assigns paramount importance to the individual responsibility for earning a living in the market sphere [10].

Rational choice and exchange theories, social support and social network approaches, and social welfare state typologies were combined into an integrated theoretical model in an attempt to explain the support mobilisation behaviour of lone mothers in the context of different welfare state regimes. This model was specified in the research hypotheses below.

## 2.2 Hypotheses

The main objective of this research was to explore whether individual decisions on the utilisation of informal support sources was dependent on the availability/non-availability of formal support alternatives. The main hypothesis that proposes the existence of an interdependence between formal and informal support mobilisation was specified in several stages.

Informal support is a trait of social networks in which every human being is enmeshed. Therefore, informal support is normally easily accessible, i.e. its mobilisation involves low costs. Many informal relationships are long-term exchange relations and, thus, do not require immediate reciprocity. In contrast, formal support mobilisation involves relatively high access costs in terms of information collection, bureaucracy, long waiting hours, or public stigmatisation. Thus, the first specification of the main hypothesis is:

### *(1) Dominance hypothesis*

*Informal support is more prevalent than formal support, i.e. individuals maintain more informal than formal support relations.*

German social policy is based on the subsidiarity principle whereby priority is accorded to the smaller unit (e.g. family) over the wider community and the state. As a consequence, self-help and informal support provision have priority over formal support:

### *(2) Subsidiarity hypothesis*

*Individuals will turn to informal support sources first before they consider to use formal support.*

However, people who unsuccessfully tried to solve their problems using informal means will use formal support instead:

### *(3) Compensation hypothesis*

*Individuals with no or little access to informal support will use formal support to a larger extent.*

All three aspects of the main hypothesis are closely related and specify the interaction between informal and formal support mobilisation. Next, context factors of individual decisions on support mobilisation will be looked at. First of all, differences in formal welfare provision may cause diverging needs of informal support mobilisation. For example, in the absence of affordable and good quality childcare facilities mothers of young children rely on their informal supporters for childcare.

### *(4) Welfare state hypothesis*

*Support mobilisation strategies used by German lone mothers differ from those used by British lone mothers.*

The question whether successful informal support mobilisation correlates with certain demographic characteristics (education, age of youngest child, number of children, etc.) has been subject to much debate. D'Abbs [11] and Diewald [12], for example, showed that well educated people were more likely to mobilise informal support than individuals with poor educational attainments.

*(5) Demography hypothesis  
Availability and use of informal support varies depending on demographic properties.*

Finally, as outlined in the previous section the expectation of reciprocity is a universal principle of interpersonal exchange relations [13]. However, some authors suggested that reciprocity is partly or entirely absent in family relations (e.g. [14, 15]).

*(6) Reciprocity hypothesis  
The closer interpersonal relationships are, the more likely it is, that support is provided without the expectation of reciprocity.*

### 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 3.1 Sampling

In order to test these hypotheses two separate case studies in Germany and the United Kingdom were conducted. They were realised in the city state of Berlin and Greater London. Both are metropolitan cities and have the largest lone mother populations in both countries. In Berlin, only women from the western part of the city were considered.

A major concern was to design both samples in a way that guaranteed a high degree of comparability, despite of a small number of cases. Therefore, several selection criteria were chosen. First, only lone mothers were considered since the vast majority of lone parents are women. Secondly, only mothers with children in pre-school age were interviewed. Thirdly, only women with German / British nationality respectively were considered – members of ethnic minorities were excluded. A fourth sampling criterion resulted from the chosen sampling strategy: exclusively lone mothers who were affiliated with self-help groups or other voluntary organisations for lone parents were selected. The two biggest lone parent organisations in both countries – Gingerbread in the UK and 'Verband Alleinerziehender Mütter und Väter' (VAMV) in Germany – mediated access to prospective interview participants.

Altogether 116 interviews were carried out – 58 each in Berlin and London. This was an exhaustive sample of the specified population that was accessible in summer / autumn 1998. The non-response rate was very low at 15 per cent in London and 8 per cent in Berlin. Next, some basic statistics of both samples will be briefly discussed. It is striking that both samples are very much alike in several respects. Age of the interviewed lone mothers as well as

that of their youngest child was almost exactly the same in London and Berlin. Employment status differed hardly at all either – 60 per cent in both samples were not employed. Statistically significant differences (t-test) were identified in respect to number of children and school education. In line with nationally representative data British lone mothers had more children than their German counterparts. Furthermore, respondents in both samples had achieved above-average educational attainments. In Berlin, the share of respondents with A-levels was even higher than in London. Selected demographic results are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Selected demographic sample characteristics

		mean	standard deviation	range
Age of mother (years)	London	33.7	6.2	30
	Berlin	34.4	4.6	21
Number of children	London	1.9	1.1	5
	Berlin	1.2	0.5	2
Age of youngest child (years)	London	3.0	1.5	4.9
	Berlin	3.0	1.9	5.8
School education (years)	London	10.7	1.4	4
	Berlin	11.2	1.1	4

#### 3.2 Research instrument

The research instrument was constructed in a way that allowed a mix between qualitative and quantitative methods. To realise the qualitative ambitions of this research face-to-face interviews were conducted. Quantitative elements included demographic and family background variables, housing conditions, general satisfaction, etc. Motives and a detailed description of supportive relations, however, required a qualitative approach.

Informal and formal support identification and measurement are clearly the centrepiece of the research. Based on the social support research, variations of support were selected which were assumed to be particularly relevant for lone mothers. These types included: personal, material, financial, and emotional support. For each support type selected, a relevant scenario was constructed. These scenarios were designed in a way that interviewees were asked to recall when a specific problem occurred and what they did to solve it. The intention was to measure support mobilisation behaviour in suddenly occurring, difficult situations – and not day-to-day support. In the following the scenario for the measurement of personal support that was based on the example of child care provision is presented:

*'Please imagine that your child got ill and has to be cared for at home. You cannot stay at home all the time because you have an important appointment. Did anything like this happen to you before? What did you do?'*

Responses to these scenarios were open, i.e. no response options were given. The entire interview was tape-recorded and then verbatim transcribed. Depending on whether informal or formal mobilisation behaviour was reported, a battery of detailed standardised questions followed. The extent of the support network (up to 7 supporters) was measured using a name generator. A variety of demographic, network and other characteristics were collected in a subsequent name interpreter.

### 3.3 Data analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded in full length. Quantitative data were transformed into questionnaire format and subsequently a SPSS file was produced. Based on this quantitative data a number of measures were computed, such as network size, the extent of received support, network coverage rates, or the multiplexity of support relations. The aim of this part of the analysis was to explain specific aspects of mobilisation behaviour using multivariate procedures, including regression, variance and factor analyses.

Qualitative information was transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were partly coded and subsequently made available for statistical analysis. Other procedures used included text analysis, single-case analysis, and typological classification. The resulting quantitative and qualitative outcomes were continuously set in relation to each other and compared.

## 4 RESULTS

At the beginning of this research relevant services of the British and the German welfare states for lone mothers were analysed. Social assistance and the British income support respectively are the most important income sources for lone mothers in both countries. However, German lone mothers whose youngest child was under 2 years old received slightly more financial state support than their British counterparts. This difference was entirely caused by parental leave benefit (*Erziehungsgeld*) that was introduced in 1986. After the entitlement period expired most mothers returned to work. However, those who continued to live on social assistance had to cope with less money than their British counterparts who received income support. Other differences in welfare provision included the availability of more childcare facilities in Berlin. Although this list of differences could be continued they are not reflected in diverging support mobilisation behaviour.

The hypothesis proposing the dominance of informal support was clearly verified. All respondents indicated having used informal support to cope with a crisis. In the literature, the roles of families and friends as primary supporters was controversially debated. The outcomes of this research confirmed the paramount importance of close relatives, in particular of parents as emergency supporters. Besides, friends played a major role, especially when close relatives were not living locally or

when the relationship with them was strained. A group of lone mothers who were deprived of kinship and friendship support alike was identified. Nevertheless, the majority was well embedded in social networks and received a considerable amount of support this way. On average, every respondent had five supporters.

Availability of support was mainly determined by network structural variables, such as network size, geographical distance to supporters, and relationship quality. The amount of mobilised informal support in the previous year was recorded using the measure of *support units*. It represents the total number of supportive acts by members of lone mothers' informal support networks in all four scenarios. Thereby, all activities were equally weighed. The number of informal support units per year as dependent variable were included in a multiple regression equation. The standardised regression coefficients (beta weights) are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Standardised regression coefficients (OLS) with the amount of informal support units per year as dependent variable

Variable list	Beta
Separation of parents in childhood (1 = yes)	-.36 **
Age of lone mother (years)	.06
Number of children	-.32 *
Age youngest child (years)	.16
School education (years)	.11
London/Berlin indicator (1 = Berlin)	-.001
Recipient social assistance (1 = yes)	.13
How long in current flat? (years)	-.06
Travel time to own mother (min.)	-.50 **
Average travel time to brothers/sisters (min)	.24
Total number informal supporters	.22 *
Frequency of talking with friends (per year)	.29 **
Time spent on housework (1 = yes)	-.27 *
Friends should help each other (1 = yes)	.19 *
It is difficult to ask for help (1 = yes)	-.13
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.41

Significance levels: \* = .05, \*\* = .01

By far the strongest effect had a network variable – geographical distance to the lone mother's mother. The further away she lives the less support she is able to provide. This underlines the extraordinary importance of mothers as primary supporters. It also points out the difficulties individuals face whose families live far away and, thus, cannot help out in emergencies immediately. Contact frequency to friends and the number of informal supporters contributed to the strong effect of network variables. The larger informal support networks are, the greater is the likelihood of receiving much support through them. Beside that, divorce/separation of lone mothers' parents during their childhood decreased the likelihood of having access to informal support – which was the second most powerful effect. The number of children had the expected decreasing effect on the

likelihood of mobilising much informal support. As the results in table 2 show the London/Berlin variable, as an indicator of welfare state affiliation, had no effect at all at the amount of informal support. That means that the amount of informal support that was mobilised in the previous year was nearly the same in both samples.

In contrast to informal support mobilisation, merely utilisation or non-utilisation of formal support were analysed to determine the likelihood of using formal support in emergencies. Based on this dichotomous variable a logistic regression model was computed. Results of the analyses are presented as a series of odds ratios (see table 3 below). Although the utilisation was well distributed across the data set it was very difficult finding common characteristics of formal support users. Lone mothers who approached formal emotional supporters, such as a counsellor, a doctor, or who took part in a psychotherapy did not look for formal financial support and vice versa. Hence, it was necessary to examine financial and emotional support incidents separately. The other two support incidents were omitted since they did not provide enough cases. Table 3 summarises the results for use of financial (second column) and emotional support (third column).

Table 3: Odds ratios of formal support use in selected crisis events

Variable list	financial support	emotional support
School education (years)	.57 *	1.07
Age of lone mother (years)	1.05	1.07
Never married/ever married (1 = ever married)	.61	4.27 *
London / Berlin (1 = Berlin)	1.23	.93
Number of children	1.02	.49 *
Age of youngest child (years)	1.14	.97
Social assistance (1 = yes)	3.63 *	2.07
Number informal supporters	.27 **	1.04
Duration lone motherhood (years)	.99	1.01
Regular use of childcare facility (1 = yes)	not computed	2.94
Friends should regularly talk about personal concerns. (1 = yes)	not computed	2.98 *
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.21	.13

Significance levels: \* = .05, \*\* = .01

Half of the interviewed lone mothers used formal support on at least one occasion. This almost exclusively referred to financial and emotional crises. Three variables had significant effects on the likelihood of the utilisation of *formal financial support*, after controlling for other variables: education, receipt of income support/social assistance, and the number of informal financial supporters. Receipt of income support/social assistance

had a strong positive effect: it increased the odds of turning to formal financial support sources in emergencies by a factor of 3.63. A value below 1 for education means that with an increasing number of years spent on education the odds of using formal financial support decrease. This is a plausible result since better educated people tend either to be employed in relatively well paid jobs that enable them to accumulate savings for times of need or come from resource rich social backgrounds that are more capable of providing equivalent support [16, 17, 18]. In a similar way the odds of using formal financial supporters decrease with an increasing number of informal financial supporters. Every informal financial supporter reduces the odds of turning to formal financial support by the factor .27 (i.e. by 73 per cent). These outcomes applied to both samples alike. The demographic variables age of respondent, number of children, and age of youngest child had no significant effect.

Almost all interviewees (n = 111) had experienced emotional distress to an extent that they needed someone else's support. A third of them turned to formal supporters. The odds ratios of the utilisation of *formal emotional support* can be found in the third column of table 3. Three variables other than those in case of the financial support incident had significant effects on the odds of utilising formal emotional support: a never married vs. ever married indicator, the necessity that friends should regularly talk about personal concerns, and the number of children. The odds of using formal emotional support for ever married lone mothers were four times higher than those for never married ones. Dissolution of a marriage often involves very dramatic changes of socio-economic circumstances and social networks alike that come along with high levels of emotional distress. The odds of using formal emotional support were three times higher for interviewees who did not perceive the necessity of talking with friends about personal concerns regularly. This suggests that individuals who do not want or cannot talk about their problems with friends may be more prepared to undergo therapy or medical treatment. Surprisingly, each additional child significantly decreased the odds of turning to a formal emotional supporter. In contrast to the financial support model, neither the number of informal supporters nor education had an effect on the odds of formal emotional support.

This quantitative analysis was followed by a qualitative examination of individual decisions about the utilisation of formal support. Most lone mothers used formal support only if no informal support was available. However, two exceptions of this rule were identified. First, people who were entitled to formal support based on private law contracts (e.g. a tenancy agreement, membership in rescue services) utilised these entitlements without considering informal alternatives. Secondly, a number of respondents indicated to have problems so serious that they required professional assistance from a counsellor or doctor.

Generally speaking, people who disposed of little or no informal support mobilised formal support more frequently which confirms the compensation hypothesis.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The selected procedure was successful in capturing individual support mobilisation behaviour. It was confirmed that lone mothers needed a lot of support. If such support is available to a sufficient extent it can compensate for the lack of resource, notably financial means and time – thereby alleviating social inequality. Poverty as well as the double burden of lone mothers as sole breadwinner and sole family carer restricts their children's developmental opportunities. The provision of social support can improve the general circumstances of lone mothers and the opportunities for their children. It enables them to fully participate in social, political, and cultural life and to master their lives on their own. Social support generally facilitates employment of lone mothers. Moreover, it is also a crucial pre-requisite for the success of welfare-to-work programmes that is often overlooked.

However, lone mothers are no homogeneous group. Not all of them are poor or see themselves as disadvantaged. They differ in their capacities to master their lives on their own or to mobilise support. People who are unable to mobilise sufficient informal support rely on formal support alternatives. However, it is a misunderstanding to assume that a lot of support translates directly into happiness. People who receive much support are likely to have particularly serious problems. Extreme cases in this research included a mother of a disabled child and a woman working as stewardess on long-distance flights. The measures for actual support provision in this research are biased in the sense that they over-emphasise those who get much support. But there are diverging support needs. This is one disadvantage of asking for actual, rather than hypothetical, support provision.

No indications of varying support mobilisation behaviour that were caused by the different social welfare state regimes in Germany and the UK could be found. Similarities in lone mothers' circumstances outmatched differences with the result that support mobilisation behaviour in both countries was very similar. However, this is possibly a sampling effect. The majority of lone mothers in Britain and Germany are not affiliated to lone parent organisations, have lower educational attainments, and are considerably younger. It would be desirable to compare the findings of this research with the support mobilisation behaviour of lone mothers who are not members of lone parent organisations.

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