Support for Mothers Living in Social Exclusion and Urban Poverty

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Support for mothers living in social exclusion and urban poverty

Abstract

This article aims to construct a conceptual model of the "support" phenomenon reported by Mexican mothers in a marginalized area of Mexico City. Through an extensive literature review, the authors´ ten years of experience in the area and four focus groups we found that the "support" reported by the participants displays common features with the concept of exchange networks studied by social anthropology and with the concept of social support from social psychology. The "support" reported by the participants differs from the concept of social support in the function that it performs of contributing to survival in conditions of urban poverty and social exclusion. The contribution of "support" to survival is the concept´s core category form which three dimensions stem: a) willingness to break social norms if an act of support demands it b) unbreakable family loyalty bound by obligation, and c) the mother as the principal source of authority.

Introduction

In a community center in the ravines around Mexico City, the term "support" is frequently used by clients receiving psychotherapy services. Having detected that it represented an important resource for families, a more thorough investigation was conducted to explain how this plays a role in a mother refusing to report to the authorities that her son was being sexually abused. The mother argued that reporting it would risk losing the "support" of the alleged abuser – the boy's uncle. The term "support" appeared to be, at the same time, both a risk and a protective factor. In light of this, the urgency to understand the rationale guiding this mother's decision and the need to construct a conceptual model explaining this community resource became the main interest of the present research. A thorough understanding of "support" is needed in order to be able to implement interventions responding to the needs of the community in question.

Literature Review

After an extensive literature review for the construction of this theoretical framework, varying terms, concepts and approaches to explain the phenomenon were found. All of them shared elements however, none was sufficient to encompass the idea of "support"

observed in the field. Within these ideas are social support (Barrón & Sánchez Moreno, 2001; Castro, Campero, & Hernández, 1997; House, Umberson & Landis, 1988; Thoits, 1982), social networks and informal exchange networks (Adler Lomnitz, 1975; Belle, 1983; Enriquez Rosas, 2000). The following will explain the elements of these concepts; which do bring value to the theoretical framework of the observed phenomenon: "support."

There is no consensus on the definition of social support (Barrón, 1996; Castro et al., 1997; Thoits, 1982). In 1982, Thoits proposed the following definition for social support: "the degree to which a person's basic social needs are gratified through interactions with others" with basic necessities referring to: esteem, affection, belonging, identity, security and approval. House (1981) defined social support as interpersonal transactions of one or more types: emotional interest or support, instrumental, informational or evaluative support. Lin (1986) proposes three central elements of social interaction to define the concept of social support: (1) that these interactions be real or perceived, (2) that they be provided by the community, social networks and friends and (3) that they serve instrumental or expressive functions. With no consensus in terms of definition,

there is also no consensus on how to measure the effects of support on health, which could be studied as a direct or mediating effect. The direct effect has to do with belonging to a network, and therefore with the social integration provided by that network (Cohen & Syme, 1985). When that direct effect is measured, the expectation is that social support provides an individual with a generalized sensation of positive affect, stability, purpose, belonging, security, identity and recognition based on his or her ability to conform with the norms established by the group (Cassel, 1976; as cited in Cohen, Uderwood & Gottlieb, 2000; Cohen, & Syme, 1985; ; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sluzki, 1996; Thoits, 1982). The mediating effect comes into play when the person finds him or herself facing a stressful life event which provokes a readjustment in his or her life. In this case, the people who provide the support activate a series of actions in order to reduce the impact associated with the event (Barrón, 1996).

From the study of social anthropology, informal exchange networks are characterized as support structures where an exchange of goods, advice, information, loans of money and services takes place (Adler Lomnitz, 1975: 1998; González de la Rocha, 1986; Stack, 1974). The majority of authors identify the family group as the principal source of participation in these networks (Adler Lomnitz, 1975, 1998; Medellín Fontes, Rivera Heredia, López Peñaloza, Kanán Cedeño and Rodríguez Orozco, 2012; Palomar & Cienfuegos, 2007; Rivera González, 2006; Stack, 1974). Multiple studies show that in order to produce these reciprocal exchange relationships, the possibility of reciprocation must exist on both parts, as well as some minimum amount of material and emotional goods (Adler Lomnitz, 1975, 1998; Enríquez Rosas, 2000; González de la Rocha, 1986; Madariaga Orozco, Abello Llanos, Sierra García, 2003; Myers, 1993).

The definitions of social support from social psychology do not take into account the survival element that Adler Lomnitz (1975)

posits in terms of informal exchange networks among the poor. The need for survival when facing scarcity and economic crisis modifies social support as conceptualized by theoreticians, as the dimension of material exchange takes on vital importance. The decision to participate or not in a network goes beyond questions of health and well-being and back to the satisfaction of basic physiological necessities like having shelter and food.

As a first step towards understanding the "support" phenomenon, the following working definition was formulated to corroborate data generated in the field:

"Support" is the result of interaction between persons with the aim of meeting basic emotional and material needs. It is governed by existing loyalties between family members with mutual obligations and its function is to contribute to survival.

The Mexican Family

Leñero (1998) identifies three basic components of the Mexican family: ties based on bloodlines, affinity relationships stemming from marriage and, unity based on living in the same residential space. In terms of family loyalty, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Sparks (1984) suggest that to the extent that a person trusts he or she is being cared for, when he or she feels vulnerable and unable to care for him or herself a tie of loyalty is forged which will connect people for life. Studies about the Mexican family find that blood ties through three generations (parent-child-grandchild) take priority over affinity ties (spouse-spouse) (Adler Lomnitz & Pérez Lizaur, 2006; Leñero, 1998). As far as the power structure inside the impoverished Mexican family is concerned, there are two levels: one formal;in which authority is held by the father, and one real; in which the mother exercises power although it is not explicitly recognized as such (Leñero, 1983, 1998).

Poverty and Social Exclusion

Currently, poverty is understood as the absence of basic capabilities which enable an individual to insert him or herself into

society by means of the exercise of will (Sen, 2010). These capabilities also have to do with access to stable, paid employment, decent housing, quality education, health services, and efficient transportation. An individual who does not have access to cover his or her basic needs is incapable of taking an active role in the social and political life of his or her society. In this way, one consequence of poverty is social exclusion (Meseses Falcón, 2011; Sen, 2010). The subjects of this study belong to Mexico's poorest socioeconomic levels, classified as C-, D+ and D according to the Mexican Institute of Social Research (2014). This socioeconomic level means that the largest percentage of the household income is invested in food, transportation, and services, an average of 6 to 9 years of formal education, rigid gender stereotypes, high incidence of single mothers, and more than one family living in the same plot of land.

Methods

Subjects were mothers living in social exclusion and urban poverty in Mexico City, invited to participate by age group according to the family life cycle. Age groups were: 15-20 years old, corresponding to the stage of parenting small children; 21-35 years old, the stage of parenting school-age children; 36-55 years old, the stage of parenting adolescents and in some cases grandparenting; and 55-70 years old, now grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Each group had a different number of participants, between three and eight. Four group interviews were conducted in which interviewers inquired what these women define as support. The selected approach consisted of collecting information from the groups according to the guidelines of interviews previously conducted. The interviewers were community counselors with vast experience working with the community. The guideline for the interviews included open ended questions referring to: what did they understood by "support"; did they give or received "support"; What happened if they did not give "support" when asked for it and

when they did not received it; if it was the same for men and women; if they thought it could be harmful in any way; if they would keep supporting a member of their family if he or she denounced an illegal act of their son to the authorities.

Personal invitation letters were issued. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded, and the results would be used for research purposes, with their identities protected. All participants signed an informed consent form.

The four focus groups lasted approximately an hour and a half each. The information analysis began with the first focus group and continued as all focus groups were conducted, until theoretical saturation was reached.

Interviews were read using comparative methods and ideas were identified in order to form categories. Afterwards, relationships were sought between categories; identifying the central category. All these steps were carried out without following a specific order as it was required to backtrack and move forward depending on the emergence of relevant information in the eyes of the researcher. The final step was to try to integrate the categories based on coherent connections which would lead to an explanatory model of the "support" phenomenon. In the end, a conceptual diagram was created to describe the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

Following the data analysis, the following five categories were identified based on the study's purpose: the family as a source of support, the nature of this support, its contribution to survival, family loyalty and the mother as authority and transmitter of norms of support. These categories were then divided into others, all of which are explained below.

Family as a source of support

"Support" for these women has to do with belonging to a family group.

"Until now we have been, thank God, a close family which has supported each other at all times."

The nature of the support

Reciprocity

When one makes the decision to support, this is done with the consciousness that one is investing in a system of favors. In this system, one can be certain that in the future, one will be called upon to provide support or will require it.

"Because they ask me a favor and I do them a favor and vice versa."

Motivation for support

In some cases, subjects say they give support out of generosity or caring for family members, at times they do it out of commitment and obligation, and finally, they say their desire to support is based on the suffering they have experienced.

"Because sometimes it's like another responsibility to support a sibling… I have to support him because in a while I will need him."

Temporary nature

The women are willing to wait and be understanding when support is not received in a timely manner, although they recognize this can be painful.

"…and she asks me again for support and well, I can just speak for myself and I'm not like that, and if she did this for me, I will give her support in return."

Types of support

These can be divided in three groups: economic, unpaid work and moral. The types of support identified range from the most basic like having a place to sleep, food to eat, or even company and advice.

"It depends on the support, because if it's economic support, I can't really… but if it's that someone had an accident, well, I can stay all day in the hospital, you go rest. There are different types of support, because if it's economic, there I can't… but if it's making sandwiches, or taking care of

lunch or taking care of the kids, there I can help."

It is interesting how these women talk about generosity when they are asked about support, and they say they do not expect anything in return, yet upon analysis well-defined guidelines were detected; determined by the mother.

"I have two that live with me and they say, 'Mom, I'm going to pay the electricity bill, property taxes and water bill.' They give me $400 pesos, twice a month… and my daughter also helps me, and my son-in-law sends groceries."

Contributing to survival

As these families face poverty, the lack of an active support network can even put their members' lives at risk. Families with active support networks, when faced with situations of great vulnerability, are able to move forward with greater ease.

"My husband had an accident and could not work for a month and I was pregnant…. So my brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law helped us a lot…. They were the ones who brought us milk and diapers…. and my mother…brought us groceries and things to eat."

There are narratives of mothers who did not have the support of family members, and in these cases it becomes evident that the absence of support networks can lead to the deaths of the most vulnerable family members.

"My sister has had a lot of serious things happen… her five-year-old son was run over and died… her other son, the older one, was assaulted…. He was stabbed 48 times… and later her son had an accident … he went down the ravine… and he slipped …. My sister came home from work… the boy died then… no one helped except her; alone… she had to be strong…."

"We were a family of six brothers and sisters…. My sister…. she was the youngest, the *xocoyolt*… I was seven… My mother made me take care of her, change her

diapers, feed her... I got distracted, playing... My little sister died."

Loyalty

Blood relationship vs. affinity

To blood relatives, loyalty is unshakeable. This loyalty obligates them not to abandon members of the family network, while in the case of relatives based on affinity (daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, parents-in-law, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, etc.) the obligation to, and interest in providing support is on a lower level.

"A husband can send you packing at any time; your family will always be there."

Trigenerational family

It is accepted for three generations of a family to live on the same property. Children or grandchildren add on rooms at the top of the home. In these arrangements, it is common to find grandparents living on the ground floor and children or grandchildren building additions upstairs.

"Mine lives upstairs. He's independent. He has his two bedrooms, living and dining room upstairs. He added on. Because he told me, 'I'm going to rent something.' I told him, 'Don't rent, and add on here.'"

Living on the same property as parents, even if relatives do not share common areas, strengthens loyalty between parents and children and puts a couple's relationship at a relative disadvantage. In this type of living arrangement, the loyalty to parents is primary and loyalty to partner is secondary. The strong ties of loyalty towards blood relatives, causes conflict between partners.

"My mother was very sick at the hospital and I couldn't visit her, my husband said it was ok to visit my mother but my mother-in-law did not agree .... I cried for many days because I could not see her"

The mother continues to have an important role. Children, either out of generosity or obligation, support their mothers economically even if they have to hide it form their partners.

"My son who is married gives me money in secret, never in front of her (his wife)."

Ties of loyalty weaken when grandchildren/children (third generation) gain control over decision making or economic assets.

"So we agreed, because we siblings are very united, and my eldest brother said, 'Let's help Chuchito,' and I said, 'Why? So his children can keep bankrupting him? There's no use.... Giving him money, things, would be giving them to his children, and his children are a bunch of parasites."

The threat of being left out of the network forces members to offer support, even when they are not in favor of doing so, which means that in the majority of cases, it is not a satisfactory experience for them.

"It makes me angry that my sister leaves late, at 12:00 p.m..... she says she's going to work and she leaves her kids all dirty..... I spend the whole day with them."

Mother as authority and transmitter of rules of support

The mother is the first reference point for support.

"I feel more support from my mother than from my girlfriends."

Through their behavior, mothers model the way in which the rest of the family members should participate in support-giving activities.

"They see how you offer support and so they help, too."

"Whenever I needed something, she [my mother] was always there; she even lost her job to be with me."

Within the family, the mother is the one tasked with transmitting and communicating the norms of support, and supervising to see that they are carried out. By communicating needs between different family members, the mother activates the networks.

"So I talked to my son-in-law and I said to him, 'Pedro, can you give my daughter your

twin bed?' And he said, 'Yes, yes I will give it to her.'"

Frequently, these women exercise their authority to activate the network between family members. This decision can cause discomfort for the others, as in some cases it can mean sharing smaller spaces, diminishing their ability to buy material goods or causing them to take on new responsibilities.

"Mariela helped me a lot when I had to take my father, so that I wouldn't have to take a taxi, she told me, and 'I'll take you'…. She didn't like it but she did it for me."

Gender

Upon analyzing the data from all groups, one can infer that the women are much more rigid and strict amongst themselves in terms of support. Within their narratives there was no instance of a man being left out of the support network. In fact, the women said that even if the support were not reciprocated, they would continue supporting the men. However the data revealed that in certain situations women were excluded from the network.

Women seem to be responsible for building and directing their own support network, or contributing in a significant way to the network created by their mother while men are seen as participants and beneficiaries. The man is supported unconditionally, but not the woman, as she is expected to be the one offering support.

When the network is not activated

Participants shared narratives in which they and their children were left out of the blood-based support system. These were the only circumstances in which they related that support was cut abruptly and these women had to move forward on their own, in most cases working two jobs and raising their children at home without supervision.

The data showed that the support network does not activate in cases of domestic violence, whether because the woman's story is in doubt or because the woman

must endure violence as a consequence of her ill decision in choosing that partner.

"In my case, when I decided to leave my ex-husband, my family did not support me at all. They didn't believe me… I had to leave alone with my children, with the 20 pesos I had in my pocket."

These mothers, upon deciding to leave their partners, leave behind the support system of their family of origin and create a strong sense of loyalty with their children through whom, when possible, they build a new support network with themselves at the center.

"When I am tired of working and I have to get ready… for the next day's sales, my eldest tells me, 'I will cut the limes.'… and the youngest says, 'Mommy, I put away the clothes, now I'm going to sweep,' or they tell me, 'Mommy, go on to bed now.'"

Types of support according to gender

Men provide more economic support and women help more with work and moral support. Nevertheless, there are also cases in which the woman helps economically when she has a job.

"Men can help with money and women with their hands."

Women participate more frequently in the networks.

"All my sisters are there helping my mother who got sick … it's really sad to see that we are ten siblings and my brothers do not help at all. As men, they do not provide support…"

In general, women reported having received less support growing up than men.

"My mom also supported the men because they are going to bring home their wives and they need more space. They are the owners of the home and the women have nothing."

Survival ethics

In order to carry out this study, it was considered necessary to investigate the ethical reasoning that leads to a decision about whether or not to support family

members. To reach this goal the following questions were asked: "If your *compadre*[3] who is a police officer, catches your child or your sibling doing something illegal, what would you expect him to do?" or "If your *compadre* and your child work for the same business and he catches your child committing some illegal act, what would you expect him to do?" or "If your compadre were to report or turn your child in, would you still invite him to family gatherings?"

In some cases, women agreed that the *compadre*'s responsibility was to report the person or turn the child in, but they said that it would be for the child's own good. In other groups, they agreed that family should come first and that the *compadre* should inform the family before turning the person in.

"I think that the *compadre* can also say, 'Sorry, but he made a bad choice and I am going to turn him in.'"

"I say, if it's my child, I would talk to my *compadre* and say, 'You know what, please just look the other way, give him a chance, but if my child makes the same mistake again, then go ahead.'"

"With how things are now, you give them some money and they keep quiet."

In all the groups, the women agreed that if the *compadre* decided to turn the child in, they would not invite him to family gatherings. The consequence of not supporting the group is one's exclusion.

"You would lose all trust."

When there is a serious problem with a family member and the best thing for that person would be, for example, to put him/her in rehab, report abuse, etc., the mother takes into account the risk to the group's survival. It is apparent that these mothers have adequate moral development; however, they make difficult but practical

decisions with respect to the family group's well-being.

"My father is an alcoholic, and we were going to send him to rehab, but since he also helps us a lot, a lot. If we put him in rehab, he is not going to support us."

Discussion

The results demonstrate that subjects share a collectivist ideology which is particular to the Mexican family (Inglehart, 2004). The results also show that the primary source of support continues to be the family (Adler Lomnitz, 1975;1998; Medellin Fontes et al., 2012; Palomar & Cienfuegos, 2007; Rivera González, 2006; Stack,1974).

This study indicates that "support" is the principal resource mothers turn to, so support from relatives continues to be a way in which poverty is confronted (Adler Lomnitz, 1975, Adler Lomnitz et al., 2006; Herrera López, 2010).

This support shares theoretical elements with the exchange networks posited by Adler Lomnitz (1975) such as mutual help based on trust and the network's role in contributing to survival. Because of this, exchange networks continue to apply as a resource to face poverty, contrary to what some authors have suggested (Enríquez Rosas, 2000; González de la Rocha, 2001).

"Support" as referred to by subjects is understood through social psychology as social support. This study's contribution to social psychology is the importance of "support" as means of survival for the population in question. This "support" is characterized by the importance of economic or material aid, which is scarce for the population studied. The function of contributing to survival is shown in Figure 1 as the central category governing decision-making. There are three dimensions that depend on this function, and those are:

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[3] The *compadre* is a term used to describe a substitute parent invited to participate in the bloodline family exchange network based on a relationship of trust and closeness (Lomnitz 1975).
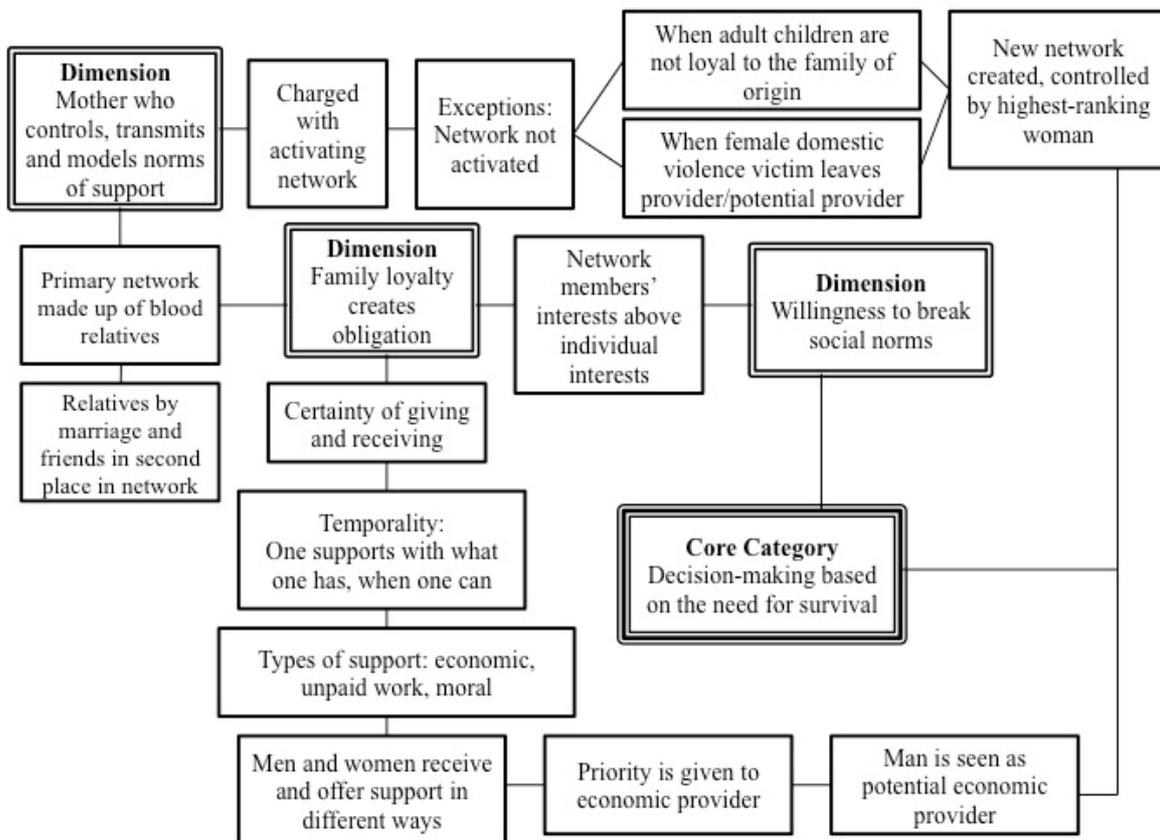
Figure 1. *Dynamic integration between core category, dimensions and sub-dimensions*

- Family loyalty which creates obligation
- The survival ethics according to which people are willing to break social norms
- The mother as the principal source of authority, maximizing her role as protector

Roles, Structures and Limits to the Support Network

The results show that the mothers are the ones in charge of modeling "support" behavior, activating networks, deciding whom to support and whom not to support and exercising their authority to ensure the norms are carried out. In other words, the mother's role includes convincing, helping and forcing others to share duties, offer support or exchange favors (Adler Lomnitz, 1975, González de la Rocha, 1986, 2006). The role of the network's members is to follow the norms even when they go against the members' individual interests and incur a high price in terms of their own growth and personal development. A younger sister might be asked to quit school to take care of her dying grandmother; a teenage boy might drop out of school to bring income to the household if his uncle got sick or lost his job; a wife might receive even less money to feed her children if her mother in law demands economic support from her husband; a father might not go to rehab in order to keep providing; a child might endure sexual abuse to protect his mother and siblings. For the family as a whole, the benefits of pertaining to a network outweighs the individual costs the members might endure.

The structural composition of the network favors, first of all, blood relatives because they have the highest degree of trust (Adler Lomnitz and Pérez Lizaur. 2006). The

primary network is made up in most cases of mother/grandmother, children and siblings, whether or not they live on the same property. In second place, and with less importance, come spouses, partners, siblings-in-law, parents-in-law and friends. The trigenerational living arrangement (parent-child-grandchild) take priority over affinity ties (spouse-spouse) (Adler Lomnitz & Pérez Lizaur, 2006; Leñero, 1998).

These loyalty relationships between mother and child put spouses or partners at a disadvantage. Children show loyalty to their mothers, sometimes without the knowledge of their partners. These arrangements, which promote well-being, are not a panacea and also have costs for network members, like having one´s in-laws imposing in personal and family decisions.

Over the years, women who succeed in building strong networks with their children, if fate allows, will hold power over the family network, with all the associated responsibilities. As a process of natural selection, the most capable woman will maintain control of the distribution of support.

Family Loyalty as an Obligation to Break with Social Norms

The certainty that the family support network will respond when needed has to do with a high degree of perceived social support. This certainty offers individuals the benefits of the direct effect of social support (Cassel,1976, cited in Cohen et al,2000; Cohen & Syme, 1985; Cohen & Wills 1985; Sluzki, 1996; Thoits, 1982). The decision to support can spring from caring or an obligation felt to network members. There is also a motivation to support based on one's own experience of suffering. Boszormenyi- Nagy et al.,(1984) suggests that to the extent that a person feels cared for in a trustworthy manner when he or she feels vulnerable and unable to care for him or herself, an unbreakable loyalty tie is developed which links people for life. The strong emotional connection generated through suffering between mother, children and siblings is what later confers authority

on the mother in her own network, based on her adult children's loyalty. These experiences of support through the suffering of survival generate loyalties which form the base of the collectivism that emerges in scenarios of poverty. The family loyalty which springs from suffering is knitted together from the inside of the network and will not become an accepted group norm, reinforced by the mother, until later on.

Within the obligatory nature of support, motivation is found to be anchored in the loyalty created during the network's development as well as motivation rooted in the need to belong to a support system. This need is based on the understanding that not offering support will lead to exclusion from the network. This is why, although occasionally one offers support without agreeing and/or one has to assume costs on an individual level, one understands that noncompliance is not an option, as it could imply even higher costs for the individual. The obligatory nature of support is a function of the impossibility of surviving alone in a context which does not provide what is necessary for subsistence. The obligatory nature of support gives members the confidence that the network will respond when necessary. These networks act as a sort of insurance against the unemployment that results from informal labor relationships. The networks offer certainty within the family system, which is the only institution the members perceive as sure and trustworthy.

These mothers, guided by the desire to ensure their family's well-being, have to make decisions based on survival ethics, which creates a different way of solving problems from a place of scarcity. Guided by the principle of the greater good, these mothers are willing to allow their own suffering or the suffering of some family members, as well as "looking the other way" in order to maintain the survival status quo. They have an adequate moral development; they recognize that a child who behaves badly deserves punishment; they have a clear ability to discern between good and

bad; nevertheless, in practice, they can´t afford to lose a provider, whether that is because he needs to go to rehab or because he has broken the law.

Contribution to Survival

These family support networks provide the individual with benefits as a direct effect. They offer belonging and family identity and also allow for the efficient use of resources and a reduction in the burden of daily chores (Cassel, 1976; cited in Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & Wills 1985; Thoits, 1982; Sluzki, 1996). In addition, networks offer a mediating effect as they activate in times of crisis (Castro et al., 1997; Cohen & Syme 1985; Wei-Qing et al., 2009). The study of social support is a complex phenomenon associated with an individual's health (Anderson, 199; Cassel,1976; as cited in Cohen et al., 2000, 1985; Maulik, 2010) and the absence thereof with illness (Barrón, 1996, Barrón et al., 2001; House et al., 1988).

In this study, we found that the impact of social support is more relevant than previously described. According to our data, the lack of support can lead to death. Our findings show that when these women do not have access to networks, they face a higher probability of experiencing the death of someone within their family. This is the result of not having the economic or social resources to cover basic needs.

Types of Support

Important differences exist in terms of types of support pertaining to gender. This creates significant dilemmas, as men, regardless of their ability or employment status, are seen as potential economic providers, in situations in which economic support is scarce. This means that men are supported more, their shortcomings condoned and certain maneuvers are conducted in order to prevent them from leaving the network.

Exclusion from the Network

It is interesting to note that the women did not directly share any experience in which they had decided not to offer support.

Nevertheless, an analysis of the data showed two situations in which the network does not activate.

The first situation in which the network does not activate has to do with the failure of the loyalty system in families with adult children. This happens when people perceive that the child of the supported person is taking advantage and using resources improperly without taking into account the norms of "support."

The second situation has to do with domestic violence, in the face of which the network does not activate. Women narrated experiences in which they were excluded from their network upon suffering domestic violence. This can be explained under the survival principle through which it is expected that women will bear up under mistreatment by their husbands. The network of the family of origin is not in a position to absorb a single mother who, in the best-case scenario, would bring in minimal resources to provide for her children. Choosing a partner unwisely and not being able to keep that partner represents a failure in terms of family loyalty, because the woman herself witnessed how her own mother made efforts to help her family get ahead while experiencing scarcity. In this case, the mother of higher status presents her daughter with one option: to leave the family network and start a new life without the support of her family of origin. This difficult decision for the mother in charge of the "support" system, to exclude a woman from the network, is a clear example of the high price women pay for the survival of the group.

In general, women who participate in the network receive fewer benefits and perform more sacrifices for the family's subsistence. Not until they exercise power will they appear in a higher position in the family hierarchy, above other members, including men. Reaching a position of power is an arduous task for women. Once a woman holds authority within the family system, she does not have the luxury of losing a man,

since, as previously mentioned; men represent economic providers in situations in which money is lacking.

The results of this study conclude that social support for mothers living in social exclusion and urban poverty is the result of interaction between blood relatives. This interaction is governed by the mother who maximizes her role as protector, contributing to the survival of network members. This network has norms of loyalty and obligations of mutual reciprocity, in which certainty exists that one will both require support and be called on to provide support at some time. These norms are based on a survival ethic under which members are willing to break social norms. Types of support are: economic support, unpaid work and moral support. Within the networks flexibility exists in terms of temporality, which makes the network relatively durable.

Community service providers must be aware of this family dynamics when implementing programs as early dropout or resistance to change might be embedded in this obligation to belong to a network. If the service provider promotes health and well-being form an individualistic rationale, they might achieve their clients to advance in their personal development without being aware of the implications this might have in the long run. The service provider must seek to work with clients respecting these culturally built mechanisms that have proved to be of value when scarcity is the norm. More research is required to further generalize these findings.

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