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Primary Network Support and Emotional Distress in Hong Kong and Beijing

Introduction

A person's social network may consist of primary ties (e.g., relations with family members, friends, neighbours or coworkers, etc.) as well as secondary relations (e.g., association with professionals, voluntary agencies or government departments, etc.). A number of studies in the West have revealed that in contemporary urban societies, it is primary groups, particularly close kin and friends, rather than secondary associations, that are the major sources of support to individuals in times of need or crisis (see, for instance, Litwak and Szelenyi, 1969; Höllinger and Haller, 1990; Wellman and Wortley, 1990; van der Poel, 1993). Similar findings have been found in Chinese societies, such as Singapore (Wong and Kuo, 1979), Taiwan (Ruan, 2001), Tianjin (Freeman and Ruan, 1997), and Shanghai (Lai, 2001).

In the summer of 2000, we identified similar patterns of social support in Beijing and Hong Kong (Lee, Ruan and Lai, 2005). Despite their social-political and economic differences, these two Chinese cities are strikingly similar in sources of social support. Close kin, especially spouses or partners, are the most prominent sources of support for dealing with both instrumental and emotional problems, while non-kin primary groups play an active role in providing emotional, but not instrumental, support. Professionals or social institutions do not form a significant part of the support network. These findings indicate the importance of studying the role that primary group support plays in mental health. In other words, we should pay special attention to how kin or non-kin primary relations can help a person cope with emotional difficulties.

2 Primary Network Support and Emotional Distress

Ever since Emile Durkheim's classic work a century ago on suicide, particularly egoistic suicide, social scientists have generally recognized the implications of social relationships for people's health (e.g., Cohen, 1988; House, Landis and Umberson, 1988; Levy and Pescosolido, 2002; Baron and Kerr, 2003:Chapter 10). An area of research that has generated enormous interest in recent decades is the impact of social integration on health, especially mental health (see, for instance, Hughes and Gove, 1981; Lomas, 1998; Berkman et al., 2000). Among the various aspects of social integration, social support has probably been the most frequently studied (for a concise introduction and review, see Cohen and Syme, 1985; House, Umberson and Landis, 1988; Vilhjalmsson, 1993).

The objective of this paper is to determine, on the basis of large-scale sample survey data, how mental health in contemporary Chinese societies is affected by primary network support, i.e., the support that people are able to derive from primary relations in their social networks. We share the view that support from personal social networks can affect mental health by helping to protect the focal individual against stressful events in life (Thoits, 1982). A lack of support may thus contribute to a person's risk of developing symptoms of mental disorder. To delineate the scope of study, we focus on one type of mental health issue, i.e., emotional distress as measured by the self-reported symptoms of depression (Lin, 1989). This is taken as the dependent variable. Our general hypothesis is: The prevalence of emotional distress is inversely associated with the strength of people's primary network support.

Previous studies have demonstrated that social support is a key factor in depressive symptomatology; however, perceived support is clearly more powerful than actual support in shaping people's emotional well-being (Gottlieb, 1981; Cohen and Syme, 1985; Lin, Dean and Ensel, 1986; Wethington and Kessler, 1986; Veiel and Baumann, 1992; Turner and Marino, 1994; Lin, Ye and Ensel, 1999; Turner, 1999). In this paper, we choose to focus on the perception of social support from primary groups, including spouses or partners, other family members or relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues, and study its impact on depressive illness.

In the present study, the strength of primary network support is the independent variable. It is defined as the extent to which primary social relationships are perceived to be available and proper for supporting the individual in times of need. Social support from primary relations is regarded as strong if the focal individual feels that the support is readily available and the relationships are adequate and satisfactory rather than demanding or burdensome. Accordingly, the strength of primary network support can be delineated into four dimensions:

- (1) Support availability, which refers to the extent to which the individual can easily find someone to give him/her the kinds of support that are needed, such as companionship, sympathy, sharing, care, and assistance.
- (2) Support quality, which refers to the extent to which the individual is satisfied with the relationships he/she maintains with the family, other relatives, and non-kin.
- (3) Support inadequacy, which refers to the extent to which the individual feels that he/she is not properly understood or cared about by other network members such as the spouse or partner, family members, and friends.
- (4) Network burden, which refers to the extent to which the individual feels bothered or pressured by the demands from other network members, including family members, other relatives, and friends.

The first two dimensions are positively worded, while the last two are negatively worded. This is to reflect that primary social relationships can be double-edged in consequence. They can have positive as well as negative effects on the focal individual.

To assess the impact of the four dimensions of primary network support on depressive symptoms, we need to consider people's social-demographic characteristics. Previous studies have shown that there are social-demographic differences in social support and also in emotional well-being (see, for instance, Lin, Dean and Ensel, 1986; Turner and Marino, 1994 and also the articles in Becker and Kleinman, 1991; Horwitz and Scheid, 1999). In the present study, we include four social-demographic variables: gender, age, and two socioeconomic

status (SES) indicators, namely, education and household income. We hypothesize that the impact of primary network support on emotional distress is independent of the social-demographic characteristics.

The above hypothesis is examined on the basis of survey data collected in Beijing and Hong Kong. The two Chinese cities are different in terms of degree of urbanization and modernization and with regard to organizations of work and community life. We expect that the impact of network support on emotional distress would be significant in both cities. However, the socioeconomic situation in the two cities should make a difference. Despite having undergone market reforms in recent years, Beijing is still a socialist society with a higher degree of social cohesion and social control and a lower degree of modernization and urbanization than the capitalist city of Hong Kong (Shaw, 1996; Yeung, 1998; Beaverstock, Taylor and Smith, 1999; So, Lin and Poston, 2001; Ogden, 2003). Beijing is a relatively close-knit society, while social life in Hong Kong has become highly individualistic. Personal supportive relationships should mean more to Beijing residents. It is thus expected that while the symptoms of psychological distress are more prevalent in the highly modernized and urbanized society of Hong Kong, the effects of personal network support on emotional well-being are stronger in the socialist city of Beijing.

Data and Method

The data come from two random sample surveys, one conducted in the urban areas of Hong Kong and the other conducted in the city districts of Beijing, in the summer of 2000. In both surveys, the target populations were aged 18 or above and the data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a largely identical questionnaire. The final samples comprised 1,121 respondents in Hong Kong and 1,004 respondents in Beijing. The response rate was about 47% in Hong Kong and about 71% in Beijing. Compared with the census data, both samples were found to be representative with regard to a number of social-demographic characteristics, with the exception of age distribution (for details, see Lee, Ruan and Lai, 2005). Older people were over-represented in both samples.

Social-demographic Distributions

As mentioned earlier, the social-demographic characteristics under study included gender, age, education, and income. In this section, we compare the two samples in terms of their social-demographic distributions.

The Hong Kong sample consisted of 53.8% females and 46.2% males, while in the Beijing sample the corresponding figures were 53.5% females and 46.5% males. The gender distributions in the two samples were thus very similar, with more females than males. It should be noted that when Pearson's correlation and regression analysis are conducted in the following analysis, gender will be constructed as a dummy variable (female = 1).

Age was measured in years. In the Hong Kong sample, the mean age was 44.42, the median was 42.00, and the standard deviation was 15.70. In the Beijing sample, the mean age was 48.19, the median was 47.00, and the standard deviation was 15.04. The age distributions in the two samples were thus rather similar, although on the average Beijing respondents appeared to be slightly older.

Education and income were used as indicators of SES. In both Hong Kong and Beijing samples, the level of education was measured as follows: 0 = no schooling or kindergarten, 1 = primary, 2 = lower secondary, 3 = upper secondary or vocational, 4 = tertiary without degree, 5 = tertiary with degree, and 6 = postgraduate. The data showed that in both samples, most respondents received either a lower secondary or primary education. On the whole, the Beijing respondents were better educated than the Hong Kong respondents. The median education in Beijing was upper secondary school, while the median education in Hong Kong was lower secondary school.

The income variable was measured by the total household income per month as reported by the respondents. The Hong Kong sample was divided into ten monthly household income categories, ranging from "less than HK\$5,000" to "HK\$70,000 or more". The Beijing sample was also arranged into ten monthly household income categories, ranging from "less than RMB500" to "around RMB7,000 or more". The household income distributions in the two samples

were quite similar, with most respondents falling into the middle or lower income groups. The median household income was located in the fourth level in both the Hong Kong sample (HK\$15,000-19,999) and the Beijing sample (around RMB2,000).

The relationships among the four social-demographic variables in the Hong Kong and Beijing samples are shown in Table 1. In both samples, there was no gender difference in age or household income, but women were less educated than men. Also, in both cities the older people were less educated and the less educated tended to have less household income. However, while the older people in Hong Kong generally had less household income, there was no age difference in household income among the Beijing respondents.

Perceptions of Network Support

The support from primary social networks was delineated into four dimensions: availability of support, inadequacy of support, quality of support, and network burden. How were these support functions perceived and assessed by the different social-demographic groups?

Availability of Support

This perception was measured by five questionnaire items that asked each respondent how easy (not easy at all, not so easy, rather easy, very easy) it was for him/her to find someone, over the last six months, for the following purposes:

- to share secret (Sharing secret)
- to do things for each other (Mutual help)
- to feel close to (Feeling close)
- to care about him/her (Care about)
- to listen to him/her (Being listened)

Table 2 shows that both samples were very similar. Most of the respondents in both cities perceived that the various types of support are easily or very easily available. On average, 75.9% of Hong

Table 1 Correlations among social-demographic characteristics, perceived support scales, and emotional distress in Hong Kong (upper corner) and Beijing (lower corner)

	Gender (F)	Age	Education	Income	Availability	Inadequacy	Quality	Burden	Distress
Gender (F)	—	-0.01	-0.12***	-0.02	0.08**	0.04	-0.02	-0.07*	0.07*
Age	-0.03	—	-0.55***	-0.31***	-0.14***	-0.13***	0.08*	-0.31***	-0.17***
Education	-0.16***	-0.34***	—	0.53***	0.19***	0.13***	-0.07	0.25***	0.11***
Income	-0.03	-0.02	0.42***	—	0.17***	0.04	-0.01	0.17***	-0.02
Availability	0.08**	0.02	0.07*	0.09**	—	-0.19***	0.24***	0.02	-0.17***
Inadequacy	0.15***	-0.19***	0.07*	0.01	-0.26***	—	-0.39***	0.48***	0.52***
Quality	0.03	0.11***	-0.08*	0.00	0.41***	-0.41***	—	-0.23***	-0.36***
Burden	-0.06*	-0.31***	0.15***	0.04	-0.06	0.51***	-0.23***	—	0.49***
Distress	0.06	-0.19***	0.01	-0.09**	-0.21***	0.60***	-0.35***	0.53***	—

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2 Percentage of respondents indicating the support available

	Hong Kong	Beijing
Sharing secret	69.3	64.5
Mutual help	77.5	79.1
Feeling close	79.0	76.5
Care about	77.9	78.2
Being listened	75.7	74.1

Kong respondents, as compared with 74.5% of Beijing respondents, perceived support as being easily available to them in times of need.

The perceived availability of support was scored as follows: 1 = not easy at all, 2 = not so easy, 3 = rather easy, and 4 = very easy. The five items were found to correlate highly with each other in both samples. In the Hong Kong sample, the Pearson's correlation ranged from +0.53 to +0.72 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.90. In the Beijing sample, the Pearson's correlation ranged from +0.48 to +0.61 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.85.

Since the five items in both samples had a high degree of internal consistency, their response scores were added up to form a scale of the perceived availability of social support. The total score ranged from 5 to 20, with higher scores indicating that the support was perceived to be more available. The mean and standard deviations were 14.75 and 3.50, respectively, for the Hong Kong sample, and 14.36 and 2.70, respectively, for the Beijing sample. On the whole, therefore, Hong Kong Chinese were only slightly more positive than Beijing Chinese about the availability of social support.

From Table 1, we see that women were more likely than men in both the Hong Kong and Beijing samples to find social support easily or very easily available to them. Also, the better educated or the higher income groups were more likely to report that they could find support. However, while older people in Hong Kong found it more difficult to get support, age made no difference in Beijing.

Inadequacy of Support

This appraisal of social support was measured by ten items that asked each respondent how often (often, sometimes, occasionally, never) he/she had felt the following over the last six months:

- does not have enough close friends (Friends not enough)
- spouse or boy/girl friend does not understand him/her (Spouse doesn't understand)
- family members do not understand him/her (Family doesn't understand)
- friends do not understand him/her (Friends don't understand)
- spouse or boy/girl friend does not really care about him/her (Spouse doesn't care)
- family members do not really care about him/her (Family doesn't care)
- friends do not really care about him/her (Friends don't care)
- spouse or boy/girl friend does not spend enough time with him/her (Spouse no time)
- family members do not spend enough time with him/her (Family no time)
- friends do not spend enough time with him/her (Friends no time)

Table 3 presents the percentages of respondents who often or sometimes have these various feelings of inadequate support. The average percentage was 32.9 in Hong Kong and 25.5 in Beijing. Apparently, most Hong Kong or Beijing Chinese never or only occasionally found their social support to be inadequate. However, Hong Kong people considered their social support to be inadequate more often than Beijing people did, especially with regard to people understanding or caring about them.

The feeling of inadequate support was scored as follows: 4 = often, 3 = sometimes, 2 = occasionally, and 1 = never. The ten items were positively and significantly associated with each other. The

Pearson’s correlation coefficient ranged from +0.19 to +0.69 in the Hong Kong sample and from +0.17 to +0.64 in the Beijing sample. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were 0.85 and 0.83 in Hong Kong and Beijing, respectively, indicating a high degree of internal consistency.

The ten items were combined to a form a scale of perceived inadequacy of social support. The total score ranged from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicative of the support being more often regarded as inadequate. In Hong Kong the mean was 19.86 and the standard deviation was 6.36, while in Beijing the mean was 17.71 and the standard deviation was 5.80. These statistics reconfirm the above percentage findings that Hong Kong Chinese, more often than Beijing Chinese, considered their support to be inadequate.

Table 1 shows that women in Beijing were more likely than men to complain about the inadequacy of social support, while in Hong Kong there was little difference between the genders. In both cities, this feeling of inadequate support was negatively associated with age, positively related to education, and not associated with household income.

Table 3 Percentage of respondents indicating that the support they receive is inadequate

	Hong Kong	Beijing
Friends not enough	41.6	39.6
Spouse doesn’t understand	38.1	23.5
Family doesn’t understand	36.9	23.9
Friends don’t understand	37.4	23.1
Spouse doesn’t care	28.6	16.8
Family doesn’t care	23.7	11.9
Friends don’t care	28.2	18.4
Spouse no time	28.5	26.5
Family no time	21.6	26.9
Friends no time	44.4	44.5

Quality of Support

This dimension was measured by five items that asked each respondent to indicate the extent to which he/she was satisfied (very satisfied, satisfied, average, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied) with:

- family relations (Family)
- other kin relations (Extended kin)
- relations with friends (Friends)
- relations with neighbours (Neighbours)
- relations with colleagues (Coworkers)

Table 4 shows the percentages of respondents who were satisfied (including satisfied and very satisfied) or dissatisfied (including dissatisfied and very dissatisfied) with each of the five types of relations. Both Hong Kong and Beijing Chinese were most satisfied with their family relations, but least happy about their relations with neighbours. On average, 59.3% of Hong Kong Chinese and 72.5% of Beijing Chinese were satisfied with the various types of relations, while only 5.4% of Hong Kong Chinese and 3.2% of Beijing Chinese were dissatisfied. Apparently, the Chinese in both cities were mostly positive about the quality of their social support, but Beijing Chinese appear to feel relatively more positive about it than Hong Kong Chinese.

Table 4 Percentage of respondents who are satisfied or dissatisfied with particular relationships

	Hong Kong		Beijing	
	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Family	80.4	3.7	91.3	2.1
Extended kin	48.3	6.8	67.4	3.9
Friends	71.0	2.0	78.3	2.5
Neighbours	33.9	11.8	57.5	5.2
Coworkers	63.0	2.8	68.1	2.3

The perceived quality of support was scored as follows: 5 = very satisfied, 4 = satisfied, 3 = average, 2 = dissatisfied, and 1 = very dissatisfied. The five items were positively and significantly associated with each other. The Pearson's correlation ranged from +0.22 to +0.45 in Hong Kong and from +0.23 to +0.48 in Beijing. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.70 in Hong Kong and 0.70 in Beijing.

The five items were combined to form a scale of perceived quality of social support. The total score ranged from 5 to 25, with higher scores indicating perceptions by the respondents of better quality. In Hong Kong the mean and standard deviation were 18.14 and 2.40, respectively, while in Beijing they were 19.20 and 2.36, respectively. Again, we can see that Beijing Chinese were more positive about the quality of support they were receiving than were Hong Kong Chinese.

From Table 1, we see that the perceived quality of support was weakly or insignificantly related to gender, age, and SES. It appears that, regardless of their social-demographic characteristics, both Hong Kong and Beijing Chinese were much more likely to be satisfied than dissatisfied with their relations.

Network Burden

The implications of social relations were double-edged. A person's relationship with others could be supportive but could also, at times, be burdensome. In the present study, the respondent's feelings of being bothered or burdened by the demands of others in the social network were measured by six items that asked each respondent to indicate how often (often, sometimes, occasionally, never), over the last six months, they had been bothered:

- by family members or other relatives making too many demands (Kin demanding)
- by friends making too many demands (Friends demanding)
- by family members or other relatives having too many interfering ideas (Kin interfering)

- by friends having too many interfering ideas (Friends interfering)
- by spending too much time with friends and relatives (Time excessive)
- by feeling guilty about being unable to meet the needs of friends and relatives (Needs unmet)

Table 5 presents the percentages of respondents who often or sometimes felt bothered by their support networks. On average, only 14.1% of Hong Kong Chinese and 13.8% of Beijing Chinese had such feelings. The data in Table 5 suggest that, relatively speaking, people in both cities were more likely to be bothered by relatives than by friends. Nevertheless, network burden did not appear to be a problem for most people in Hong Kong or Beijing, although the experiences of Hong Kong Chinese were slightly more negative.

The feeling of being burdened was scored as follows: 4 = often, 3 = sometimes, 2 = occasionally, and 1 = never. The six items were positively and significantly associated with each other. The Pearson's correlation ranges from +0.23 to +0.53 in Hong Kong and from +0.23 to +0.48 in Beijing. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.78 in Hong Kong and 0.75 in Beijing.

The six items were combined to form a scale of perceived network burden. The total score ranged from 6 to 24, with higher

Table 5 Percentage of respondents who feel burdened by the networks

	Hong Kong	Beijing
Kin demanding	19.7	16.3
Friends demanding	7.0	6.1
Kin interfering	21.8	16.9
Friends interfering	9.7	7.3
Time excessive	10.5	8.9
Needs unmet	15.9	27.5

scores indicative of a greater burden felt by the respondents. The mean and standard deviations were 9.41 and 3.19, respectively, for the Hong Kong sample, and 8.87 and 3.03, respectively, for the Beijing sample. Hence, it was again confirmed that Hong Kong Chinese were more likely than Beijing Chinese to consider their support networks to be a burden.

Table 1 shows that the gender difference in network burden was small in both the Hong Kong and Beijing samples, with men being somewhat more likely than women to be bothered by their relatives and friends. In both cities, the younger, the better educated, and the higher income groups were more likely to feel such a burden.

Network Support and Depressive Symptoms

We have constructed four scales of perceived support: availability, inadequacy, quality, and burden. They are indicative of the strength of the primary network support. As argued before, if an individual (1) finds his/her primary ties easily available for support, (2) considers that his/her primary ties can usually provide adequate support, (3) is generally satisfied with his/her primary ties, and (4) does not feel that primary ties are burdensome, then he/she can be regarded as having strong support from primary social networks.

As Table 1 shows, the four scales of perceived support are related to each other in the expected directions. Availability is positively associated with quality, and is negatively related to both inadequacy and burden. Inadequacy is positively associated with burden, but negatively with quality. The relationship between quality and burden is negative. The question is: How do the four aspects of network support affect the emotional well-being of Chinese adults in Hong Kong and Beijing?

Among the various instruments for measuring emotional distress, we chose to use the Chinese version of the 22-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression (CES-D) scale. This scale is, in effect, a measure of depressive symptomatology (Lin, 1989). It appears to have been a very reliable measure for use in our sample

surveys in Hong Kong and Beijing. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the 22 items was 0.92 in Hong Kong and 0.89 in Beijing. The total score — the sum of the 22 items (each scoring from 0 to 3) — ranged from 0 to 66, with higher scores indicating more emotional distress. In Hong Kong the mean and standard deviations were 18.13 and 12.28, respectively, while in Beijing they were 15.10 and 10.66, respectively. It appears that life is more stressful in Hong Kong than in Beijing.

Table 1 shows that the gender difference with regard to distress was small, with women being somewhat more likely to be emotionally disturbed in both Hong Kong and Beijing. Distress was negatively associated with age in both cities. It was positively related to education in Hong Kong, and negatively associated with household income in Beijing.

Multiple correlation and regression analysis can be used to study the joint and relative effects of social factors on mental health. Models 1 and 2 in Table 6 reveal that gender and age were relatively more important than the two SES indicators (education and household income) in accounting for the variance in emotional distress in both Hong Kong and Beijing. Nevertheless, their total impact was minimal. Model 3 shows that the four social-demographic characteristics could jointly explain no more than 5% of the variance in distress in both cities, specifically, 4.2% in Hong Kong and 4.9% in Beijing.

Furthermore, by comparing the coefficient of determination in Model 3 with that in Model 1, we can see that on top of gender and age, the introduction of the two SES indicators into the regression equation increases the explained variance in distress only by very little. It added 1.1% in Hong Kong and 1.3% in Beijing. These statistics suggest that after controlling for gender and age, the contribution of SES to mental health was small in both Chinese cities.

How is emotional distress affected by the support of primary networks? Table 1 shows a similar pattern for Hong Kong and Beijing: emotional distress was negatively associated with both availability and quality, and positively related to inadequacy and burden. In other words, in both cities those who perceived social support as being unavailable, inadequate, unsatisfactory, or bothersome were

Table 6 Regression of emotional distress on perceived support scales and social-demographic characteristics in Hong Kong and Beijing

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	HK	BJ	HK	BJ	HK	BJ	HK	BJ	HK	BJ
Gender (F)	0.06*	0.06			-0.08*	0.05			0.07*	0.03
Age	-0.16***	-0.19***			-0.14***	-0.20***			-0.09*	-0.03
Education			0.16***	0.07	0.11*	-0.01			0.06	-0.03
Income			-0.11**	-0.12**	-0.12**	-0.09*			-0.07	-0.11***
Availability							-0.05	-0.06	-0.06	-0.04
Inadequacy							0.31***	0.37***	0.29***	0.36***
Quality							-0.14***	-0.09**	-0.14***	-0.11***
Burden							0.33***	0.35***	0.32***	0.35***
R	0.177	0.196	0.140	0.109	0.205	0.222	0.626	0.678	0.643	0.694
R ²	0.031	0.036	0.020	0.012	0.042	0.049	0.392	0.460	0.413	0.482

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001 (two-tailed test).

Notes: HK = Hong Kong; BJ = Beijing.
The figures in the table are standardized regression coefficients.
All multiple correlations are statistically significant beyond 0.01.

more likely to be emotionally disturbed. Model 4 in Table 6 shows that these four scales had a significant effect on emotional distress, jointly accounting for 39.2% of the variance in distress in Hong Kong and 46.0% in Beijing. The standardized regression coefficients suggest that inadequacy and burden have a more powerful effect than availability and quality on the mental health of both Hong Kong and Beijing Chinese.

Model 5 presents the total impact of all of the social-demographic factors and network support scales on emotional distress. They jointly explain 41.3% of the variance in Hong Kong, which is somewhat less than the 48.2% in Beijing. A comparison of Model 5 with Model 3 reveals the explanatory power of the four support scales after eliminating the effects of the four social-demographic variables. We see that the addition of the support scales to the social-demographic characteristics greatly increases the explained variance in distress in both cities. Specifically, it increases the explained variance from 4.2% to 41.3% in Hong Kong and from 4.9% to 48.2% in Beijing. These results clearly confirm the important role of network support in mental health. Network support is much more powerful than such social-demographic factors as gender, age, education, and household income. The impact of network support on psychological distress is also independent of these social-demographic characteristics.

Summary and Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to analyse and compare the impact of primary network support on the emotional well-being of adult residents of Hong Kong and Beijing. The data came from representative sample surveys carried out in the two cities in 2000. The focus was on the support received from informal, rather than formal, social networks.

The social-demographic profiles of the Hong Kong and Beijing samples were quite similar, although not identical. To some extent, the Beijing respondents were older and better educated than the Hong Kong respondents.

The data showed that most of the respondents in the two cities were positive about their informal support networks. Most of

them perceived social support as being easily available, adequate, satisfactory, and not bothersome. In general, Hong Kong Chinese were less positive than were Beijing Chinese. This could be due to the higher degree of modernization and urbanization in Hong Kong, which might have weakened the function of social support networks.

Using the 22-item CES-D scale as an instrument for measuring emotional distress, we found that the mean for Hong Kong Chinese was greater than that for Beijing Chinese, indicating that social life may be more stressful in Hong Kong than in Beijing. Again, this result may be due to the higher degree of modernization and urbanization in Hong Kong, which is making social and economic life increasingly competitive, individualistic, and stressful.

In both Chinese cities, the prevalence of depressive symptoms was related to social-demographic characteristics as well as to network support. First, gender and age were more important than indicators of SES (education and household income) in explaining emotional distress. Second, the support from primary social networks was far more powerful than factors of social-demographic and SES in determining emotional distress. More importantly, the data from both Beijing and Hong Kong lend support to the hypothesis that the impact of primary network support on emotional distress is significant and is independent of social-demographic characteristics. Specifically, those who perceived social support as being easily available, adequate, satisfactory or not burdensome were more likely to enjoy better mental health. This was the case in both Hong Kong and Beijing.

The data also revealed that the strength of primary network support, as indicated by the four perceived support scales, explains a larger percentage of the variance in distress in Beijing than in Hong Kong. This suggests that the mental health of Beijing Chinese is more dependent than that of Hong Kong Chinese upon the functioning of their informal support networks. One reason for this could be the lower degree of modernization and urbanization in Beijing than in Hong Kong. The informal support network is generally more important to people living in a less modernized or less urbanized society (Wirth, 1938; Fischer, 1976; Wellman, 1979) than in one that is more modernized or urbanized. Hong Kong Chinese, living in a

highly modernized and urbanized society, might have greater access than Beijing Chinese to other sources of support, such as professional counselling services, the church, welfare agencies, or financial institutions (see Lee et al., 2005). Another reason could be the higher degree of social cohesion and social control in the workplace and community life in Beijing (Shaw, 1996; Ogden, 2003), giving people more access to and thus making them more dependent on support from primary ties.

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Primary Network Support and Emotional Distress in Hong Kong and Beijing

Abstract

From face-to-face interview data collected from random sample surveys in Beijing ($n = 1,004$) and Hong Kong ($n = 1,121$) in the summer of 2000, we found that most adult residents aged 18 or above in these two Chinese cities perceived their primary social ties as being (1) easily available for providing support and (2) often capable of rendering adequate assistance. Also, most of them (3) were satisfied with their social relations and (4) did not feel burdened by the demands of others in their personal social networks. Compared with their counterparts in Beijing, the Chinese in Hong Kong were less positive about their primary group support networks and were also more expressive of symptoms of emotional distress as measured by a Chinese version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale. In both cities, the support of primary networks as reflected by the above four perceived support functions was far more powerful than social-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, and income) in affecting emotional well-being. Its impact on emotional distress, however, was stronger in Beijing. These findings could be explained by the difference between the two cities in modernization and urbanization and in social cohesion and control.

香港與北京的首屬網絡支持與情緒困擾

李沛良

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(中文摘要)

2000年夏在北京和香港以結構性問卷和家訪方式分別進行隨機抽樣調查，北京樣本共1,004人，香港樣本共1,121人，皆是18歲或以上成年居民。研究結果顯示，兩地大多數居民都認為其首屬社會聯繫（一）可以隨時提供支持和（二）常能提供合適的援助。再者，他們大多（三）滿意其社會關係的質素和（四）不認為他人的要求會構成負累。與北京居民比較，香港人對其首屬群體支持網絡的評價較差，自報情緒困擾病徵（以流行病學研究中心憂鬱症量表中文版測量）也較多。無論是北京或香港，上述四項自覺性的首屬群體支持對情緒病狀的影響，皆超越性別、年齡、教育和入息等社會人口因素的效果。但是，相對來說，首屬網絡支持的情緒效果在北京更為顯著。這些研究結果，可以兩地的現代化和都市化以及社會凝聚和控制的差異來解釋。

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