

INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL NETWORKS - SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG SINGLES AND PARTNERED INDIVIDUALS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The aim of the current study was to compare social networks among single and partnered individuals, while analyzing it in terms of social support against three constructs: 1) significant other, 2) family, 3) friends in a COVID-19 pandemic context. 125 people aged from 18 to 60 ($M=25,5$, $SD=6,63$) took part in the study, 79 people were in relationships and 46 were single. Participants completed the Polish adaptation of *The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (Adamczyk, 2013) in two versions - first with its statements, which should have been addressed based on current impressions and, in the second version, impressions from before the pandemic began. The findings revealed that participants in relationships experienced a higher sense of support from "significant others" compared to singles. The effects applied both before the pandemic ($r_g = -0,37$) and at present ($r_g = -0,33$). In addition, the study revealed the correlation between the choice of the significant person and being in a relationship or being single. Individuals in a romantic relationship most often chose a partner as a special person, while singles mentioned a friend. Cramer's V coefficient indicated a strong relationship: before the pandemic ($V=0.71$) and now ($V=0.77$). Current study confirmed previous research on perceived social support from significant others among singles and people in relationships. In conclusion, people in a romantic relationship seem to experience a higher sense of support from "significant others" compared to singles due to the choice of a partner as a special person.

Keywords: *Social networks, social support, singlehood, romantic relationships, COVID-19.*

1. Introduction

The dynamic development of the Internet has made it not only a communication tool, but the space to establish, maintain interpersonal relationships and fulfill social needs as well (Krejtz, Zajac, 2007). Social media and its network applications have given its users the opportunity to engage in social interactions (Iwanowska, 2016). Considering social media in the context of interpersonal relations, it constitutes a virtual social network, which is the circle of friends with whom a given user is in contact. A social network is a social structure that consists of individual elements („nodes") and their connections („ties"). Nodes can be understood as entities in the network, while ties are the relationships between them (such as friendship or kinship) (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2014).

Previous research has indicated the relevance of social networks for the mental health of individuals by being the source of a person's 1) integration and 2) social support, and thus providing an individual with a sense of security and belonging to a group (Cobb, 1976). This paper focuses on the second component - social support that can be considered in terms of its sources (f.e. family, friends, other closer people and various social groups (Sęk, Cieślak, 2012)) and categories, which usually include: 1) social integration and support networks, 2) social support received, and 3) perceived social support (Sarason et al., 1990).

Examining social networks from the perspective of having or not having a life partner provides an opportunity to broaden the subject of social networks. However, there are discrepancies in theories; some of them qualify living alone as an isolating factor for the individual (Durkheim, Rossi). They see such individuals as lonely and having limited social circles. Others (f.e. Bengston, Parsons, Bales), view living alone as the way of integrating a person with other people, while the marital relationship may contribute to weakening relationships (Sarkisian, Gerstel, 2015). Studies show that single people on average have more friends (Gillespie et al., 2014) and are more sociable than married people (f.e. Sarkisian, Gerstel, 2015). Putnam (2000) found that marriage does not increase networking with

friends and neighbours. It seems, therefore, that examining people living alone and in a relationship in terms of the element that makes up a social network: social support, may extend previous reports on the relationship between having or not having a partner. Adamczyk (2015) reported that single-life status was associated with greater romantic and family loneliness and less perceived support from family and significant others. In contrast, other research indicates that single people receive more support from their parents (Sarkisian, Gerstel, 2015) and from their siblings than married people (Campbell et al., 1999). Other researchers, however, in their studies have indicated that there is no difference in perceived support by marital status (Campbell, Matthews, 2003).

Exploring social networks, it seems necessary to include the COVID-19 pandemic perspective, because the pandemic and the restrictions imposed have changed many aspects of people's daily functioning (Mamun et al., 2021), thus changing the frequency and quality of communication between them (Ryu et al., 2022). Social isolation may have resulted in reduced accessibility to social support, but on the other hand, the pandemic contributed to more intense virtual contact and the search for intimacy through virtual interactions (Bakiera, Obrebska, 2021). One study indicated that among those who noticed a deterioration in contact during the pandemic, ratings of frequency of contact were associated with feelings of emotional and social loneliness. The authors of the study hypothesized that feelings of loneliness may be related to a lack of sufficient support during deteriorated contacts (Kosowski, Mróz, 2020). What's more, a study in Switzerland found that students who lived alone and had a narrow circle of friends were at higher risk of depressive symptoms. In contrast, students who received a lot of support from friends with whom they kept in touch online experienced less loneliness (Elmer et al., 2020). In addition, students who returned to their family homes for the duration of the pandemic reported better mental well-being compared to students who lived alone (Husky et al. 2020). Lastly, one of the more recent studies showed that the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with a decrease in friendship longevity (Jo, Harrison, Gray, 2021).

Considering the importance of cyberspace in the everyday life of many people, it seems to be extremely important to broaden the research on the existence of social networks. This study attempts that by considering them from the perspective of living alone and living in a relationship, because researchers are constantly engaging in a debate about the relationship between living alone and the nature of social ties. The aim of the current study was to compare social networks among single and partnered individuals, while analyzing it in terms of social support against three constructs: significant other, family, friends in a COVID-19 pandemic context.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 125 people took part in the study, including 93 women, 30 men and two people who specified their gender in the other category. The age distribution ranged from 18 to 60 years ($M = 25.5$, $SD = 6.63$). Responses regarding education were dominated by the students, which accounted for 41.6% of all responses ($N=52$). Among survey participants, the largest group were those living in a city with a population between 200,000 to 500,000 people (39.2%).

The majority of respondents ($N=79$, 63.3%) declared that they had a life partner, 39 people gave a negative answer (31.2%), while 7 people said they had never been in a relationship. Respondents were also asked about the length of time since they have or have not had a life partner. In the group of those in a relationship, the range of responses was from 2 to 408 months ($M=56.15$, $SD=61.88$). And in the group without a partner, from 2 to 360 months ($M=41.92$, $SD=77.68$). Among the respondents, as many as 44% ($N=55$) were in an informal relationship, while 36.8% ($N=46$) were single.

2.2. Procedure

The survey was conducted using the online tool Google Forms. Participants were obtained by posting information about the study along with a link to the survey on various Facebook groups, some respondents were obtained using the so-called snowball method by directly sending a link to a person with a request to send to as many people as possible.

Respondents were asked to complete Polish adaptation of The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Adamczyk, 2013), which was included in the survey in two versions; the respondents were to refer to the statements guided by their current impressions and, in the second version, impressions from before the pandemic began. Another part of the form included a personal data questionnaire to collect basic sociodemographic data and the choice of a special person.

2.3. Measures

The following tools were used in the study:

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) (Polish adaptation - Adamczyk, 2013) consists of 12 statements to which the respondent relates using a seven-point Likert scale: completely disagree (1), completely agree (7). The MSPSS allows for the assessment of three sources of support: a significant other (e.g., "I have that significant other in my life who is there for me when I am in need") family (e.g., "My family tries very hard to help me") and friends (e.g., "I can count on my friends when my affairs go wrong "). The Cronbach's α index of the Polish adaptation for the total score took a value of 0.89, for the Friends subscale 0.89, Family 0.94, and Significant Other 0.90. In the self-report survey, the reliability of the subscales was $\alpha = 0.93$ for the Friends subscale, $\alpha = 0.91$ for the Family subscale, and $\alpha = 0.95$ for the Significant Other subscale.

The Personal Data Questionnaire was created for the study. It included questions on age, gender, education, place of residence, and a question on having a life partner, relationship status, and length of time in a relationship/living alone. The metric examining social networks included questions about the number and frequency of contact with close people in two options; direct contact and contact via social media.

3. Results

Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS Statistics 27. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of variables analysed are included in Table 1.

In the next step, it was assessed whether there was a significant difference in perceived social support between those with and those without a life partner. Analysis using the Mann-Whitney test showed that there was a significant difference in perceived social support between those with and without a partner on the special person subscale: perceived support before the pandemic ($p < 0.001$, $U = 1138.0$), perceived support now ($p = 0.002$, $U = 1223.5$). Those in a relationship felt a higher sense of support from a special person than those living alone. The strength of the effect was weak: $r_g = -0.37$ (before the pandemic), $r_g = -0.33$ (now).

The responses of respondents regarding a special person at present - people who are in a relationship most often indicate a partner as a special person ($N = 43$), 11 respondents mentioned several people, which include friends, family members or other close people, while in third place is the answer friend ($N = 8$). Among the group of people without a partner/friend, the answer friend dominates ($N = 24$), the second most frequently selected category is no special person ($N = 7$), 6 people pointed to their mother as a special person for them.

The analyses also showed that there was a correlation between having vs. not having a partner/friend and choosing a special person in both the pre-pandemic and current variants ($p < 0.001$). Cramer's V coefficient indicated a strong relationship: pre-pandemic ($V = 0.71$) and current ($V = 0.77$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistic of variables.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social support - significant other (now)	5.92	1.44
Social support - family (now)	5.33	1.49
Social support - friends (now)	5.55	1.27
Social support - significant other (before the pandemic)	5.59	1.45
Social support - family (before the pandemic)	5.36	1.56
Social support - friends (before the pandemic)	5.48	1.36

4. Discussion

This paper presents a comparison of social networks among people living alone and those in a relationship in terms of social support against three constructs: 1) significant person, 2) family, 3) friends, in the experience of respondents before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study also explored differences in the choice of a special person between those living alone and those in a relationship.

The results of the study indicated that there was a difference in perceived social support (experienced support before the pandemic, as well as during it) between those living alone and those in a relationship, but only in the support received from the "significant person". It turned out that those not in a relationship experienced lower levels of social support from a significant other than those in a relationship. These findings correspond with previous research, the results indicated lower reported levels of perceived social support from a significant other among those living alone compared to those in a relationship (Adamczyk, 2015). The results obtained may be related to the selection as a significant person of a life partner/kid by people in a relationship and answering questions on the subscale,

"significant person" precisely with them in mind. In contrast, a lower sense of perceived support by those who are not in a relationship may be associated with answering questions on the "significant person" subscale with friends in mind, or simply the absence of such a person. These results raise thoughts about the frequency with which people living alone declare the absence of a person in their lives whom they could characterize as particularly important to them.

Analyses also looked at declared social support from family and friends. The study did not confirm significant differences between the groups with regard to perceived support from family, which probably reflects the ambiguity of the studies conducted so far addressed in the theoretical section. On the one hand, these studies indicated that those living alone received more support from their parents than those who were married (Sarkisian, Gerstel, 2015). Similarly, in relationships with siblings - those living alone reported higher levels of support received from siblings than those in relationships (Campbell et al., 1999). On the other hand, other studies found no significant differences between the groups (Campbell, Martin-Matthews, 2003).

The analyses also revealed no significant differences between the study groups in perceived support from friends. These results are puzzling in relation to the research addressed in the theoretical chapter, which indicated that single people were more likely to stay in touch with friends, receive help from them, and offer it, compared to married people (Sarkisian, Gerstel, 2015). The results obtained seem to encourage further consideration of possible reasons for the lack of expected differences between the groups. It is therefore legitimate to look at them from the perspective of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies have shown that the pandemic contributed to isolation and deterioration of contacts with loved ones, and a decline in overall well-being among those living alone was also noted (Husky et al. 2020), which may have had a role in the respondents' perceived social support in the category of "family" and "friends".

Another focus of the study was on the difference in the choice of "special person" between those living alone and those living in a relationship. The analyses showed that there was a correlation between being in a relationship or living alone and the declaration of choosing a particular person. Those in a relationship were most likely to choose a partner, while the category of friend came in second place. People living alone most often cited a friend/friend as a special person, with the second most frequent category being, "no special person. Therefore, it can be assumed that people in a relationship declared a higher level of experienced support from a special person than people living alone due to their choice of a partner or partner as a special person. Such a result prompts thoughts on the qualitative differences between the support received from friends and partners, as well as thoughts on the reasons and consequences of people living alone declaring the lack of a special person in their lives, which could be further developed in future studies.

It also appears that the results obtained regarding experiences before the pandemic began may have been affected by the way the data were collected retrospectively. The researchers were supposed to refer to their experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have been difficult to recall during the pandemic and may have led to distorted results. Another limitation of the study is that the sample used in the research may have been too small. Perhaps repeating the study some time after the COVID-19 pandemic ended and on the bigger sample would provide answers to the doubts that arose.

The subject of social networks seems to be a very broad topic, containing many elements that make up a social network in an individual's life. Given how social support is important to the mental health of individuals, the results of this study about the greater social support from significant others among those in a relationship than in those living alone raise questions about the potentially greater negative consequences on the well-being of singles, and the potential for preventive and therapeutic interventions. It is possible that the nature of the romantic/sexual relationship plays a significant and specific role in building perceived social support, and that the presence of family or friends is not a sufficient source of it for individuals (perhaps f.e. due to their existing parallel relationships, inability to pay sufficient attention, or the very nature of the relationship). To compensate for the lack of a life partner, it is possible that it is worthwhile to expand the social network of a person living alone and the sources of social support he or she receives. In psychological practice, an example of this might be to encourage patients to participate in support groups or group therapies, which can be a space for support and a sense of community, maybe especially in the time of crisis like worldwide pandemic.

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