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Families and informal support networks in Portugal: the reproduction of inequality

Karin Wall, Sofia Aboim, Vanessa Cunha and Pedro Vasconcelos, Portugal

Summary

This article analyses informal support networks in Portugal. Using data from a national survey on families with children (1999), it explores the dynamics of support, in terms of the characteristics of, and variations in, families' experience of support. The analysis underlines the importance of social factors, such as the position of families in social and educational structures, and family variables, such as position in the life course, in determining the extent of support received by families. The results show that many families have a low level of support and that extended kinship does not play a significant role in providing support. As in other European countries, assistance flows mainly from parents, from the wife's family and from women rather than men; it is also strongly related to families' position in social structure, with low educational levels and less favourable occupational categories determining lower levels of support over the course of married life. Thus welfare provision stemming from informal relationships reinforces existing social inequalities rather than compensating for them, and the idea of a strong pre- and post-modern welfare society must be challenged.

soutien au Portugal. Il utilise les données de l'enquête nationale sur les familles avec enfants (1999) et explore les dynamiques de soutien en termes de caractéristiques et de variations dans les expériences de soutien des familles. Il souligne l'importance des facteurs sociaux, tels que la position des familles dans les structures sociales et d'éducation et les variables familiales tel que l'âge pour déterminer l'étendue du soutien reçu par les familles. Les résultats montrent que de nombreuses familles ne disposent que de peu de soutien et que réseau de voisinage ne joue pas de rôle significatif dans l'apport d'un soutien. Comme dans d'autres pays européens, l'assistance provient surtout des parents, de la famille de la mère et plutôt des femmes que des hommes. Il est également fortement lié à la position des familles dans la structure sociale; un faible niveau d'éducation et une catégories professionnelle moins favorable impliquant un plus faible niveau de soutien au cours de la vie de couple. Dès lors, les dispositions de soutien provenant des relations informelles renforcent les inégalités plus qu'elles ne les compensent et les idées d'une forte société de bien-être pré et post moderne doivent être mis en cause.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les réseaux informel de

Key words

family, inequalities, informal support networks, support and care, welfare society

Introduction

Strong families and traditional support networks are regarded as key elements of societal welfare in Southern European countries. Broad generalizations of Southern Europe as a region characterized by a rudimentary welfare state underline the precariousness of state provision and the importance of informal networks, based on kinship, neighbours or

friends, in providing care and support (Leibfreid, 1992; Ferrera, 1996; Vogel, 1998). The key issue is that state failure to ensure social protection is buffered and compensated by traditional welfare guarantees stemming from households and informal networks.

In Portugal, debate on these issues during the last decade has revolved round the concept of welfare-society (*sociedade-providência*), defined as the informal networks of support and mutual acknowledgement based on kinship and neighbourhood relationships, whereby small social groups exchange goods and services on a non-commercial basis and within a logic of reciprocity similar to that described by Mauss (Henriques, 1993; Hespanha, 1993; 1995; Santos, 1993; Portugal, 1995). The central thesis in this debate is that the deficit in state provision is compensated by socially produced provision: 'in Portugal a weak welfare-state coexists with a strong welfare-society' (Santos, 1993: 46). Santos recognizes that the informal networks may vary in terms of extension, duration, scope and stability, but points out that these forms of welfare-society, predominantly centred on the values and practices of rural society (Kohli, 1994) have extended (contrary to common belief) to Portuguese contemporary society; in this sense Santos regards them as both pre- and post-modern. Welfare-society is considered to be a form of social capital, especially valued and put into practice by the more vulnerable social groups and families, that is, by those who are more directly affected by the lack of welfare from the state.

Recent research and discussion on community life and families in Portuguese rural society, past and present, led to an initial blurring, even if not to an open questioning, of the broad outlines of welfare-society as discussed above (O'Neill, 1984; Nunes, 1995; Silva, 1998; Wall, 1998; Sobral, 1999). Social inequality, separation through migration, poverty and isolation in the families of agricultural workers, unequal reciprocity, breaches in obligations and intrafamilial conflict – all part and parcel of rural society – stressed

other, more complex workings of 'traditional' families and society and suggested the need to elucidate the characteristics and limitations of informal support networks (Nunes, 1995). In urban society, on the other hand, the high levels of neglected children, lone elderly people and of demand for formal care services pointed to the fact that informal networks do not always answer families' needs for support (Castro, 1995; Capucha, 1998; Torres and Silva, 1998; Almeida et al., 1999). It has also become more evident over the last 15 years that the responses to many gaps in family caring and to the rising needs of an ageing population had been coming primarily from the 'third sector', that is, from private non-profit-making institutions sponsored by the state, making for the emergence of a new type of 'welfare mix' which combines different sectors and forms of provision. This led some researchers to consider broadening the notion of 'welfare-society' in order to include, within this concept, social provision produced by the non-governmental sector. In the case of Portuguese society, however, this idea has been approached with some caution as, on the one hand, most of these institutions are linked to the Church and have functioned historically more as a para-governmental structure than as a civil society organization and, on the other hand, the institutions' strong dependency on state support makes them more a part of the state than of civil society (Hespanha, 2000).

The aim of this article is to provide more systematic research evidence relating to these issues, in particular the strength and value of informal support and how it contributes to compensating for social inequalities and the limitations of the welfare system. On the basis of a national survey on family dynamics and networks, it describes and analyses the informal support networks of families with children in Portuguese society: the volume and kinds of support received by families, the main providers of care (by gender, by type of tie – relatives, friends, neighbours), and the variations in the experience of support. This article's main concern is to examine the extent

to which informal support networks are voluminous and to assess how they are distributed, whether evenly or, as in the hypothesis on the Portuguese welfare-society, with stronger primary support networks in the more vulnerable families and social groups.

Data and methodology

Our focus is on assistance and support which is exchanged within informal groups in adult life (relatives, friends, neighbours). Who does what, for whom and in what circumstances? Is assistance forthcoming in the event of economic hardship, caring problems or having nowhere to live? The understanding of these issues has led over the last 20 years to a series of studies on the exchange of support in modern societies, mainly within kinship groups (Roussel and Bourguignon, 1976; Pitrou, 1978; Hareven, 1982; Brubaker, 1985; Finch, 1989; Dandurand and Ouellette, 1992; Martin, 1992; Bonvalet et al., 1993; Coenen-Huther et al., 1994; Attias-Donfut, 1995; Bawin-Legros et al., 1995; Mcglone et al., 1998). These studies led to a revision of Parsons's hypothesis, whereby kinship networks had shrunk, leading to the isolation of the nuclear family (Parsons and Bales, 1955). Results from this more recent research showed that fairly intense ties and support exist within close kin (grandparents, parents, children, siblings) but much less so within extended kinship and other informal groups (uncles and aunts, cousins, neighbours, friends). Thus, even if kinship still exists and plays an important role in family life, these studies also show that kinship has not returned in any major way.

Data for analysis of these issues in Portuguese families is taken from a national survey carried out in 1999 on the 'Structure, Dynamics and Social Networks of Families with Children in Portugal'.¹ The survey was conducted using face-to-face interviews and was based on an original target sample of

2,260 households which was representative of families with dependent living-in children where the wife (married or cohabiting) was aged between 25 and 49 and at least one child was aged between 6 and 16. The person interviewed was always the wife. Response of 79 percent of the original sample (overestimated by 25 percent in order to compensate for non-response) gave an achieved sample of 1,776 families. The multi-stage area probability sample was extracted by the National Statistics Office (INE) from a Master Sample of households built up for the National Labour Survey and allowed for a 95 percent level of confidence (sampling error $\pm 2.3\%$, $\alpha = .05$).²

The criteria imposed for the selection of the sample – women aged 25–49 (married or cohabiting) living with at least one child – imply that the study is looking at a generation of young or middle-aged couples who have been married on average for 17 years and have been through specific stages of family life – settling down, finding jobs and a place to live, giving birth and caring for small children – in which there can be a great need for support and assistance. Couples were asked whether they had received different kinds of support, and from whom, since the beginning of married life/cohabitation and at crucial moments in married life (finding a job, getting married, borrowing money, fitting out a house or a baby's room, during the first year of the child's birth, and so on). The introduction of these cues was essential to help respondents recall the different and potentially numerous occasions on which support of some kind (economic, moral, practical, gifts in kind, accommodation) had been received by the couple. Thus the results obtained refer to support and assistance actually received, in other words to the extent of support provided by an active network of relatives, friends and others, and not to potential assistance (e.g. to whom would you be able to turn for support if the need should arise?). The presentation of results will be broken down into the following topics: the volume of support received by

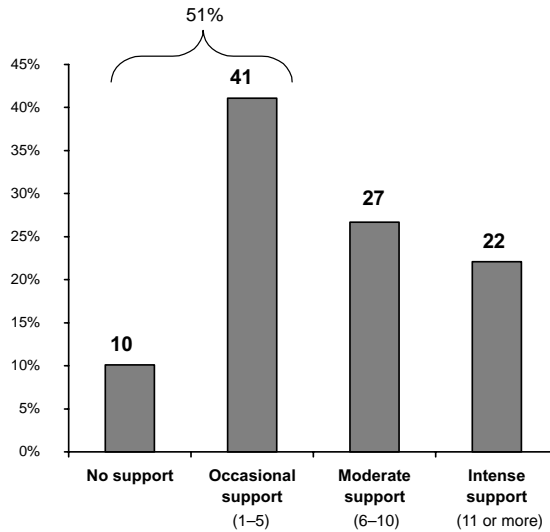


Figure 1 Families by type of support received (over 17 years of married life) (%)

families with children since the beginning of married life, the kinds of support received, the main providers of support and the variations in the experience of support.

Volume of support

How often do families with dependent children receive support or assistance from relatives, friends or other people who do not belong to the nuclear family (referred to in this survey as couples and children living in the same household)? In order to assess this, the study looked at the number of times families had received support since the beginning of married life, regardless of the kind of help received. Overall results show that some families never received support (no support), some families received support on a few occasions (occasional support, on 1 to 5 occasions), some on a fair amount of occasions (moderate support, on 6 to 10 occasions) and others on many occasions (intense support, on 11 or more occasions). Figure 1 shows the proportion of families who find themselves in one of

these four situations (no support, occasional support, moderate support, intense support). Only a small proportion (10 percent) of families with children had no support over an average of 17 years of married life, 41 percent received occasional support, 27 percent moderate support and 22 percent intense support.

In terms of the volume of support, these findings suggest that most families, about half in all (51 percent), have either no support or a very low level of assistance (support on 1 to 5 occasions), while just under one-quarter of families have a systematic presence of support (intense support). Overall then, the contributions of informal networks appear to be related to sporadic and localized moments of assistance, rather than to systematic support and cooperation in coping with family life.

Kinds of support

To understand the actual assistance offered to families it is necessary to separate out the types of support that pass between people and

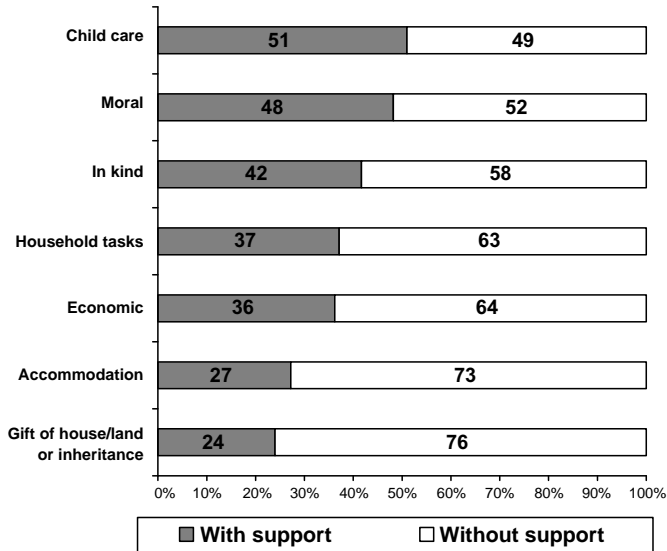


Figure 2 Percentage of families receiving different kinds of support

households. These may be grouped under six main headings: economic support (including money transfers and loans); gifts in kind (furniture, clothes, food, and so on); inheritance arrangements or bequests of assets; practical support (including child care and household help); emotional and moral support (talking, listening, giving advice); and accommodation (sharing a home with others on a temporary or permanent basis). In order to allow for a more detailed analysis of types of support, Figure 2 looks at these categories separately.

The findings show that, in Portugal, one in every two families with dependent children had received child-care support (Figure 2). A high percentage had also been given moral support and support in kind. A somewhat lower percentage, just over one-third of all families, had received assistance with household tasks and economic support (money transfers, loans) and 27 percent had been taken in at some stage of married life, usually by parents or parents-in-law and in early married life. There is a lower percentage for distribution of assets (24 percent of all families). Thus practical support, centred in particular on caring for

small children, emotional support and transfers in kind seem to be the resources which are most shared and received by families.

Main providers of support

Different types of support usually flow between different people. Popular images of informal support networks in Portugal often underline the importance of close relatives as well as extended kin in offering assistance, especially where day-to-day, practical support is concerned. Apart from kinship, community relationships, especially between neighbours, are often mentioned as being of considerable importance. How does this popular imagery accord with research evidence?

Not surprisingly, the overall results (Table 1) show that close kin are by far the most important source of support: 71 percent of actual assistance was given by parents or parents-in-law. Siblings also play a reasonably important role while extended kin (other relatives such as aunts and uncles, nieces and

Table 1 Providers of support by kind of support received (%)

Kind of support	Main providers				Total	Lateralization			Gender ^a			
	Parents	Brothers and sisters	Other relatives	Friends, neighbours and others		Wife's family	Husband's family	Total	Women	Men	Couples	Total
Economic	77.6	7.3	7.4	7.7	100.0	59.8	40.2	100.0	28.7	26.4	44.9	100.0
In kind	68.4	13.6	7.2	10.8	100.0	64.5	35.5	100.0	44.9	12.7	42.4	100.0
Household tasks	73.7	18.1	3.9	4.3	100.0	65.8	34.2	100.0	78.5	15.5	6.0	100.0
Gift of house, land or inheritance	88.6	0.2	9.7	1.5	100.0	53.5	46.5	100.0	22.6	35.8	41.6	100.0
Moral	54.8	19.8	5.8	19.6	100.0	81.8	18.2	100.0	80.2	5.4	14.4	100.0
Child care	79.5	12.0	5.5	2.9	100.0	68.4	31.6	100.0	90.1	2.5	7.4	100.0
Accommodation	80.6	7.2	7.8	4.4	100.0	54.3	45.7	100.0	29.5	11.5	59.0	100.0
All types of support	70.6	13.4	6.2	9.8	100.0	65.1	34.9	100.0	55.9	14.0	30.1	100.0

Note: ^a We refer to the person(s) doing the supporting. Thus the column 'Women' refers to women who offer *individual* help, including those who are living in a couple, while the column 'Couples' refers to partners who *jointly* offer some support.

nephews, cousins, grandparents) play a definitely minor role in the provision of support. However, friends, neighbours and other persons (colleagues from work, for example) play a slightly more active role than extended kin, almost equivalent to that of siblings, with 10 percent of support flowing to families from this type of bond.

These findings are similar to those found in surveys on kinship support networks in other European countries. Sources of help are predominantly centred, as in France, Belgium, Switzerland or the UK, on parents and parents-in-law (Finch, 1989; Bonvalet et al., 1993; Coenen-Huther et al., 1994; Attias-Donfut, 1995). More distant relatives seem to be relegated to the margins of family assistance, with care and support converging on present and former nuclear families (parents and siblings) or, as Bonvalet has labelled them, on the 'close' kinship (Bonvalet et al., 1993). As some authors have pointed out, this characteristic polarization of an informal support network on very close kin represents its strength as much as its weakness (Kellerhals and Burton-Jeangros, 1995). It makes for a structured system of support when close kin are available and have resources; however, due to the small number of persons involved, it is especially vulnerable to family conflict, separation, geographical distance, lack of resources and death.

Sources of support vary considerably according to the type of support. Families with dependent children relied heavily on parents for economic support, practical support, accommodation and distribution of assets. As Table 1 shows, eight in ten of those couples with children were helped by their parents if they had financial difficulties or needed help around the house with domestic chores or child care. A similar pattern is evident in relation to accommodation. However, when problems were emotional, relatives belonging to the same generation (brothers and sisters) and non-relatives seem to have mattered more: 40 percent received moral or emotional support from either

siblings or friends and neighbours. Siblings are also an important source of help for support in kind and household tasks, while friends and neighbours are of some importance in offering support in kind (11 percent of assistance received).

Finally, the structure of support networks is strongly marked by the relative importance of the husband's family and the wife's family in offering help and support and by gender differences. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of support flows from the wife's side of the family rather than the husband's (Table 1). The wife's relatives are by far the most important providers of support in kind, household tasks, child care and moral support while the importance of the husband's family is greater in terms of economic aid, inheritance and accommodation. There are also clear gender differences, with women providing very high proportions of household tasks (78.5 percent), child care (90.1 percent) and moral support (80.2 percent). Men, though, provide a very low proportion of total support (14 percent), but are of more significance in distributing economic support (26.4 percent) and assets (35.8 percent), while couples are important providers of economic support, support in kind, distribution of assets and accommodation.

It thus seems that, as in many other studies, the patterns of support in Portuguese society are highly gendered and more centred on blood relatives, with men and in-laws entailing less and different types of exchange. As Finch concludes, in her review of support in Britain and in other countries, mothers (and we could add women) *do* things while mothers-in-law *give* items (Finch, 1989). Evidence from this survey suggests, however, that the gender divide is greater than the relationship divide. In-laws, usually mothers-in-laws, provide a fairly substantial part of care in Portugal, whereas men as a category seem almost excluded from certain types of exchange such as household tasks and child care. This gender divide appears to be linked, in most studies on support structures, to three

main factors (Finch, 1989): first, women and men have different access to resources, especially financial resources; second, they continue to have different responsibilities accorded to them in the domestic division of labour; and third, women's and men's lives are organized differently in terms of paid and unpaid work, with a built-in tendency for men's lives to be organized around paid work.

Variations in the experience of support

The main issue here is whether variations in families' experience of support are related systematically to social factors, such as the position of families in social and educational structures, and to some key family variables, such as position in the life course, integration in specific household structures (nuclear versus complex families) or partnership forms (cohabiting couples versus married couples, first partnership versus other partnerships).

Data from the survey on families with children suggest that all these variables account for considerable differences in informal support received but that the position in socio-educational structures is, in Portugal, one of the most important factors of differentiation in families' experience of support.

Life course and family variables

Starting from the key family variables, position in the life course emerges as a first variation of considerable importance. If we distinguish between two levels of support received (with support and without support) and three different stages of married life (first year of married life, first year of first child's life, and present married life, that is, support received over the last year), we find that the second stage of married life, when a child is born, represents access to support for a very high proportion (70 percent) of families.

During early married life, 56 percent of families had some support whereas during the current stage of married life this proportion drops back to 49 percent of all families with at least one child between age 6 and 16.

Life-cycle variables, linked to age and family dynamics, are important in families almost by definition. The survey suggests that they operate in Portuguese families as in other countries, with support flowing more strongly between the older and the younger generations at the beginning of married life and after the birth of a child. This result is important not only in itself but also in methodological terms. It points to the need to examine the system of support over the course of married life as – if it is only analysed after the birth of the first child, a stage where nearly all families receive some assistance – it is likely to be more difficult to highlight variations and inequalities in informal support.

Cohabiting couples and couples in a second or third partnership represent only a small minority of all Portuguese families with children (4 percent and 5 percent respectively, in the 1999 survey) but their impact on the experience of support is similar. As Table 2 shows, both cohabitation and new partnerships imply slightly lower levels of support for the families concerned. The conclusions of some in-depth studies on family relationships after remarriage thus appear to be supported by this research (Martin, 1992; Lobo, 1995): in spite of a potentially larger family network, separation and remarriage seem to decrease the likelihood of a more supported family life.

Household structure and family forms also have some impact on the volume of support. Complex family households represent a fair minority in our survey: 11.9 percent of couples at the time of the survey were living with other people and 37 percent had, at some stage in married life, shared a house with others for a certain length of time. Three main reasons are given to justify this strategy: lack of housing facilities, especially in early married life; support in times of illness or dependency (mostly of the older generation);

Table 2 Type of support by type of partnership (%)

Type of partnership	Type of support				Total
	No support	Occasional support	Moderate support	Intense support	
Wife in 1st partnership					
Married (N = 1,645)	8.8	41.2	27.3	22.7	100.0
Cohabiting (N = 35)	25.7	42.9	20.0	11.4	100.0
Wife in 2nd (or 3rd)^a partnership					
Married (N = 53)	22.6	37.7	22.7	17.0	100.0
Cohabiting (N = 43)	32.6	39.5	16.3	11.6	100.0
All families (N = 1,776)	10.1	41.1	26.7	22.1	100.0

Note: ^a 2 cases.

and support for being alone or in family crisis (e.g. widowhood, temporary absence of husband). Findings indicate that sharing a house on a more or less permanent basis has some influence on the exchange of resources and support. As Figure 3 shows, couples who always lived in nuclear family arrangements (in other words, who never shared a home with other persons) tend to have lower levels

of support than couples who shared a home with other persons at some stage of married life and couples who always lived in complex family households. In the latter families, the proportion of those receiving intense support rises to 35 percent. In short, sharing a common household increases the propensity for higher levels of support.

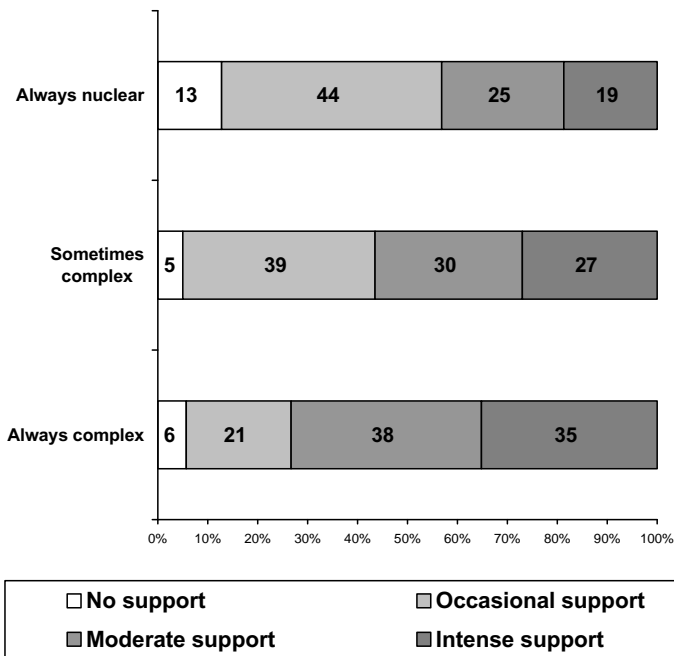


Figure 3 Type of support by type of household (%)

Social inequalities

To analyse the effect of social inequality on the patterns of informal support, two main variables were chosen: the wife's educational level and the wife's social class.³ Looking at the wife's social position, rather than the husband's or the couple's position in social structure,⁴ is a choice which hardly changes the explanatory significance of the social inequality variable. Initially we thought that the variations produced by the wife's social position might, due to her key-role in caring, structure the support system in a specific way. However, when we controlled this variable by comparing the effect of the husband's, the wife's or the couple's social position in structuring the system of support, the same large differences were to be found. This may be explained by the strong educational, geographical and social homogeneity which characterizes most couples in this survey.

Variations in educational level and social class are without doubt key elements in patterns of informal support in Portuguese families. Families where women have different educational levels differ radically in the volume of support received. As Table 3 shows, in couples where the wife has no schooling, a high proportion of families (71 percent) had no support or very low levels of support. However, the higher the wife's educational level, the more likely families are to receive intense support. When we reach the top of the educational scale, where wives have a university education, almost half (47 percent) of families have intense support over the course of married life; in contrast, this systematic type of support only covers approximately one in eight families when the wife's educational level is below primary school level and one in five families when the wife has completed her compulsory education (nine years). Educational levels in Portugal have increased steadily but slowly over the last few decades and families with low educational levels therefore represent a high proportion of the total number of families in the survey: 44.4 percent of mothers had

no schooling or were educated only to primary school level and 33.4 percent had completed compulsory education. This means, therefore, that the number of families with low levels of support are likely to be not few and far between but many and close together.

If we look at the intensity of support networks according to the wife's social class, we can also see that greater levels of support are to be found among the wealthier classes (Table 3). Thus it is among the bourgeoisie and the intellectual and scientific bourgeoisie that we find the highest levels of intense support (32 percent and 36 percent respectively). In all other classes not only do we find a higher incidence of situations of no support (approximately 10 percent), but the predominant situation is one of occasional support. The case of the agricultural classes (self-employed farmers and agricultural workers), which, together with the industrial workers, exhibit the lowest levels of intense support, is particularly significant. It seems to contradict the idea of a rural world where (at least nowadays) solidarity and mutual exchanges prevail. Once again the structural imbalance of informal support networks becomes clear, thus indicating that what we have here is not a situation of social welfare, but rather a system which reproduces social inequalities and asymmetries.

Educational levels and social class also have an effect on the participation of different providers of support: the lower the educational level, the lower the degree of participation by parents in the support network, even though parents continue to be the main group of givers (Table 3). Within these groups having low educational qualifications (particularly those with no schooling and with only primary education), support from siblings is slightly higher and support provided by friends, neighbours and others is also of greater significance. This seems to demonstrate the relative dependency of the more disadvantaged social groups with regard to networks of neighbourhood acquaintance (the local neighbourhood and the area where they

Table 3 Type of support and main providers by wife's educational level and social class (%)

<i>Characteristics of women</i>	<i>Type of support</i>				<i>Total</i>	<i>Main providers</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>No support</i>	<i>Occasional support</i>	<i>Moderate support</i>	<i>Intense support</i>		<i>Parents</i>	<i>Brothers and sisters</i>	<i>Other relatives</i>	<i>Friends, neighbours and others</i>	
Educational level										
Illiterates/primary incomplete	9.0	61.5	16.7	12.8	100.0	53.0	14.8	8.2	24.0	100.0
Primary (4 years)	13.9	44.3	24.2	17.6	100.0	64.0	18.4	6.3	11.3	100.0
Compulsory (9 years)	8.2	39.6	29.4	22.8	100.0	73.2	12.7	5.8	8.3	100.0
Secondary	6.5	35.7	30.7	27.1	100.0	76.9	8.5	7.9	6.7	100.0
University incomplete	6.8	39.8	30.1	23.3	100.0	76.8	10.1	3.5	9.6	100.0
University	5.3	22.3	25.5	46.9	100.0	78.2	5.6	6.5	9.7	100.0
Social class										
Agricultural workers	12.3	43.9	26.3	17.5	100.0	74.6	11.0	3.4	11.0	100.0
Industrial workers	10.4	46.6	25.2	17.8	100.0	69.3	17.1	6.0	7.6	100.0
Non-qualified service workers	12.2	41.0	24.0	22.8	100.0	64.3	15.8	6.3	13.6	100.0
Administrative and service workers	9.1	39.2	30.4	21.3	100.0	73.5	10.6	7.2	8.7	100.0
Farmers	9.8	42.4	29.3	18.5	100.0	65.5	14.6	8.9	11.0	100.0
Small property owners and self-employed persons	11.4	41.2	24.1	23.3	100.0	70.8	15.0	6.1	8.1	100.0
Technical and intermediate professions	11.1	31.7	33.3	23.9	100.0	69.7	11.1	7.7	11.5	100.0
Intellectual and scientific bourgeoisie	5.2	32.2	26.3	36.3	100.0	78.8	7.0	5.0	9.2	100.0
Bourgeoisie	5.2	42.1	21.1	31.6	100.0	79.8	7.9	5.8	6.5	100.0
All women (N = 1,776)	10.1	41.1	26.7	22.1	100.0	70.5	13.4	6.3	9.8	100.0

Table 4 Percentage of families receiving different kinds of support by wife's educational level

<i>Wife's educational level</i>	<i>Kinds of support</i>						
	<i>Economic</i>	<i>In kind</i>	<i>Household tasks</i>	<i>Gift of house, land, inheritance</i>	<i>Moral</i>	<i>Child care</i>	<i>Accommodation</i>
Illiterates/primary incomplete	29.5	41.0	29.5	43.3	46.2	30.8	25.6
Primary (4 years)	28.7	35.6	33.2	23.9	46.5	46.1	27.6
Compulsory (9 years)	37.0	44.4	41.7	20.7	49.2	54.6	28.7
Secondary	48.2	44.7	33.7	23.1	54.8	60.8	23.1
University incomplete	47.5	49.5	25.7	30.7	40.6	57.4	25.7
University	57.0	59.1	47.3	34.4	52.7	65.6	24.7
All families (N = 1,776)	36.3	41.8	36.3	24.1	48.3	51.6	27.1

live) and in relation to brothers and sisters. This may be explained by the younger generation's greater capacity to share resources and offer support. Among working-class families, the older generations often have few resources to share and are very likely to be receivers rather than providers of support. In the case of women with higher educational qualifications, particularly those who have completed a university course, the concentration of support from parents is very important. Two factors might explain this tendency. First, it may be evidence not just of day-to-day support, but also of intergenerational transfer of wealth. In-depth studies on the Portuguese middle and upper-class families have shown that family reproduction here is not something passive, but rather is consciously adopted as a strategic choice, even if there is no explicit calculation involved and it still falls within the normal patterns of giving (Pina-Cabral, 1991; Guerreiro, 1996; Lima, 1999). Second, the higher the educational and social level of the family, the more selective families tend to be of the relevant key-persons with whom to exchange services and emotional support (Wall, 1998). Family obligations between parents and children are usually strong and parents are counted upon to distribute resources to the younger generations, but exchange between siblings also depends on personal preference and may be ignored or replaced by friends.

Evidence regarding the kinds of support in

families indicates that the availability of economic support and of child-care support are also strongly affected by educational levels (Table 4). Among families where the wife has a very low educational level (primary or less), less than one-third received financial aid, compared with 57 percent of families where the wife has a university education. At the level of child-care support, the contrast is similar: only 46 percent of wives with primary schooling received support compared to 66 percent of wives with a university education. Families where the wife has higher educational levels are also likely to receive more support in kind and for household tasks but the variations in relation to the average are less marked than for financial help and child-care support. Emotional and moral support, however, as well as accommodation, hardly vary according to the wife's educational level, whereas distribution of assets is of greater significance both at the very bottom and the top of the educational scale. This means, of course, that we are looking at distribution of assets in two different social groups: in small peasant families on the one hand and in the wealthy middle class on the other hand.

Economic hardship, women's work, and child care

The results on the low levels of support for a substantial number of families raise some

Table 5 Type of support by type of attitude towards family support over the course of married life (%)

<i>Attitudes towards receiving family support</i>	<i>Type of support</i>				<i>Total</i>	<i>All the families</i>
	<i>No support</i>	<i>Occasional support</i>	<i>Moderate support</i>	<i>Intense support</i>		
Have tried to always have support	8.1	38.8	26.8	26.3	100.0	54.3
Have tried to have support only in times of need	10.5	43.1	27.2	19.2	100.0	34.0
Have tried to manage alone	18.4	45.4	25.1	11.1	100.0	11.7
All families	10.1	41.1	26.7	22.1	100.0	100.0

additional questions as to the effective vulnerability of some families and, in particular, of those with low educational or social status. One might argue, for example, that families with low levels of support do not need and seek informal support or even that some of these families are trying, for different reasons, to remain independent of their family networks. An indicator of couples' attitudes towards informal family support was included in the questionnaire by asking couples if, during married life, they had sought to have systematic support and assistance or if, on the contrary, they had sought support only occasionally in case of need or had tried to be self-sufficient. Cross-tabulation of these attitudes with the type of support received shows that in Portuguese society a high percentage of families (54 percent) seek systematic support and only a low proportion (11.7 percent) try to manage on their own.⁵ As would be expected, those who seek support are also those who have higher levels of support (see Table 5). Nevertheless, we also find that among couples who tried to have systematic support, some (8.1 percent) had no support and many (38.8 percent) had only occasional support.

These results seem to show that most families with children in Portugal expect to be supported systematically or in times of need by their families. A high proportion of them do receive this support but quite a fair number either expect and do not receive (or only occasionally receive), or do not expect and do not receive informal support. The families who tend to have no support, or low levels of

support, are also more likely to have low educational levels and low social status. Can we assume, however, that these families are more vulnerable, economically and socially, and that low informal support means more unsolved problems or unmet needs?

Although we cannot answer this last question directly, it is possible to examine at least three indicators that may shed light on this issue. The first two are related to poverty in Portuguese society and to those families in our sample who explicitly mention their economic problems. The third indicator is related to the question of women's participation in the labour market. One of the main types of support needed and received by families with children, especially if the wife is working, is child-care support. It is important, therefore, to analyse informal support in families with low educational and social status where the wife has always worked full time and to examine whether there is more informal support.

Studies carried out in recent years on poverty and social exclusion in Portugal have shown high levels of households in poverty⁶ and a strong correlation between poverty and low qualifications and educational levels (Almeida et al., 1992; Bruto da Costa, 1992; Ferreira, 1992; Cardoso, 1993; Departamento de Estatística, 1996; Capucha, 1998). This does not mean that other factors such as long-term unemployment, illness or addiction do not sometimes lead to a process of 'falling into poverty', through what has been described in other European societies as a process of *social disqualification* (Paugam, 1996), but that,

overall, poverty is a state – defined by low education, few qualifications, low standard of living (aggravated by old age and absence of partnership) – rather than a process linked to adverse events. The understanding of this ‘state’ has led to in-depth studies on the ways of life of families living in poverty, by looking at how specific combinations of difficult economic circumstances and cultural systems form a set pattern of life (Capucha, 1998). Findings have shown that, apart from the *destitute* and the *marginal* ways of life produced by extreme poverty and social exclusion where people are unable to provide for themselves and live off public and private charity, many families in poverty have a *restricted* way of life. Resources in these families are allocated entirely to their day-to-day survival, and are insufficient not only to ensure basic material needs but also to sustain any process of upward mobility. The poorly educated and low-qualified industrial and service workers, salaried workers in agriculture, those with irregular low incomes and elderly persons with low pensions are the groups most often found in this way of life.

Poor families with slightly more income (albeit below the poverty line) are more likely to lead a *savings* way of life or an *investment in mobility* way of life. The former is often to be found among the peasants and industrial workers with part-time farming. Consumption is as far as possible restricted to the products of the farm and families try to save by combining multiple sources of income and by pooling the wages and the work of several family members. Savings are part of a defensive strategy (to provide for old age, coping with upsets) but may also give rise to investment plans. In spite of the relative scarcity of resources, some families also tend to invest in upward social mobility by giving preference to expenditure on their children’s education. Conformity to the social norm, a strong work ethic and sacrificing immediate gratification while guaranteeing the family’s, but especially the child’s, basic well-being are central features in this way of life.

Difficulties in making ends meet in order to guarantee material well-being and the education of children are thus a common feature in the everyday life of these families. We can therefore expect many women with low education and qualifications in our survey to be more vulnerable to these problems. Interviewees were asked to mention the family’s main problems, if any, at the time of the survey, that is, after an average of 17 years of married life. This implies, in principle, more economic stability in families, as investment in housing is usually a major economic setback during the first years of married life. Findings show that, in spite of this, a high proportion of women interviewed answered that economic difficulties were the main problem of family life: 51 percent of the families where the wife has no schooling and 36 percent of those where the wife has education to primary-school level (as opposed to 8 percent of families where the wife has a university education). In the words of the women themselves, they were experiencing ‘lack of money’, ‘difficulties in making ends meet at the end of the month’, ‘debts and lack of money to finish building/redesigning the family home’, ‘low wages’. Health problems, lack of decent housing facilities, worries related to the ‘education’ of children (mainly ‘schooling’ problems, such as learning difficulties and drop-out) and lack of time in general were other problems frequently mentioned by women with low educational levels. Child care as a specific problem was not mentioned, which does not mean that it is not (or was not) a need. Moreover, it is important to note that families with a low standard of living or living in poverty will have had difficulty in paying for caring services.

If we now examine women’s labour market trajectories over the course of married life, it is first important to note that the majority of women interviewed (52 percent) have ‘always worked’ over the course of married life (almost always full time and very rarely part time). A fairly high proportion have been ‘in and out’ of the labour market (36 percent)

Table 6 Type of support and percentage of families receiving different kinds of support by wife's labour market trajectory

<i>Wife's labour market trajectory</i>	<i>Type of support</i>				<i>Kinds of support</i>						
	<i>No support</i>	<i>Occasional support</i>	<i>Moderate support</i>	<i>Intense support</i>	<i>Economic</i>	<i>In kind</i>	<i>Household tasks</i>	<i>Gift of house, land, inheritance</i>	<i>Moral</i>	<i>Child care</i>	<i>Accommodation</i>
Always working (N = 918)	8.3	43.5	26.2	22.0	34.2	40.3	36.2	23.2	48.0	60.5	23.4
Full time (N = 778)	8.8	43.8	25.8	21.6	33.8	39.7	36.4	20.8	47.9	61.4	22.9
Part time (N = 34)	5.9	52.9	20.6	20.6	44.1	35.3	38.2	26.5	44.1	50.0	23.5
Sometimes full sometimes part time (N = 106)	5.7	37.7	31.1	25.5	34.0	46.2	34.0	39.6	50.0	56.6	27.4
In and out of work (N = 635)	10.9	37.0	28.3	23.8	41.3	45.2	37.2	23.9	49.0	47.1	31.7
Never working (N = 218)	15.6	43.6	24.3	16.5	30.3	38.1	33.9	28.0	46.8	26.6	29.8
All women	10.1	41.1	26.7	22.1	36.3	41.8	36.3	24.1	48.3	51.6	27.1

Table 7 Families with 'always working (full-time)' wives: percentage of families receiving different kinds of support by wife's educational level

<i>Wife's educational level</i>	<i>Kinds of support</i>						
	<i>Economic</i>	<i>In kind</i>	<i>Household tasks</i>	<i>Gift of house, land, inheritance</i>	<i>Moral</i>	<i>Child care</i>	<i>Accommodation</i>
Illiterates/primary incomplete	29.4	52.9	41.2	23.5	64.7	41.2	23.5
Primary (4 years)	26.9	35.3	33.2	19.8	49.8	56.5	26.9
Compulsory (9 years)	34.3	42.5	43.6	20.7	46.4	65.0	21.4
Secondary	41.0	39.3	28.2	18.8	49.6	65.0	19.7
University incomplete	46.3	34.1	22.0	29.3	29.3	63.4	22.0
University	47.5	52.5	45.0	25.0	52.5	67.5	15.0
Total of 'always working (full-time)' wives	33.8	39.7	36.4	20.8	47.9	61.4	22.9

and low proportions have had 'never-working' or housewife trajectories (12 percent). Strong differences exist, however, according to the wife's educational level: the proportion of 'never-working' trajectories is as high as 26.9 percent for women with no schooling and 15.2 percent for those with primary school and as low as 1.1 percent for women with a university education.

The wife's trajectory in the labour market has a considerable effect on the type and the kinds of support received. As Table 6 shows, wives who never worked are more likely to have had no support or only occasional support. However, a very low percentage of families with 'never-working' wives received child-care support: only 26.6 percent compared to almost two-thirds (61 percent) of families with always-working (full-time) wives. This would seem to indicate, then, that full-time working women who most need child-care support do in fact receive more support. However, if we look specifically at the kinds of support received by full-time working wives who most need informal support – i.e. those with low educational levels – we find that these 'poorer' women are those who received less child-care support and less economic support from informal networks (Table 7).

These results indicate that women with low educational levels and qualifications may find

themselves in a difficult situation. Although labour market participation is an important, sometimes inevitable, strategy to improve the material existence of the family, combining child care and work may not be easy. Informal support is there less often than in other social groups and economic resources are more scarce. One possibility is, of course, for the mother to stay at home or to withdraw from the labour market while the children are very young. This seems to be a frequent option in the more disadvantaged social groups. If we examine the main day-care arrangements⁷ used by families for the first-born child when it was aged between 1 and 2 (Table 8), we can see that in families where women have low educational levels (primary-school or less), there were two main strategies: the child either stayed at home with the mother (by far the most important arrangement) or was taken care of by a relative, usually a grandmother. Among the other arrangements, nannies stand out as the most important day-care solution, whereas the crèche was used by a very low proportion of families. Nannies are usually unlicensed, offer long hours of care and are cheaper than paid crèches and nursery schools. They are therefore a frequent option for low-income families, especially as free public child-care facilities for the under-3s are rare and the private non-profit-making sector, in spite of expansion over the last 15 years,

Table 8 Day-care arrangements (children aged 1–2) by wife's educational level and economic activity (%)

<i>Characteristics of women</i>	<i>Day-care arrangements</i>								
	<i>At home with mother</i>	<i>With relatives</i>	<i>Mother and relatives</i>	<i>Crèche</i>	<i>Nanny</i>	<i>With mother at work</i>	<i>Domestic employee</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
Educational level									
Illiterates/primary incomplete	60.9	20.8	3.4	5.7	6.9	—	—	2.3	100.0
Primary (4 years)	46.5	28.7	3.2	7.0	10.7	1.7	—	2.2	100.0
Compulsory (9 years)	36.1	30.0	3.7	15.2	10.8	0.9	0.2	3.1	100.0
Secondary	18.3	33.0	2.1	24.9	15.7	0.5	2.5	3.0	100.0
University incomplete	13.0	29.6	—	24.1	21.3	0.9	6.5	4.6	100.0
University	4.5	34.8	7.6	24.3	9.1	—	16.7	3.0	100.0
Economic activity									
Employed	17.8	39.4	3.0	17.5	15.7	1.5	1.8	3.3	100.0
Housewife	81.9	7.7	3.1	3.5	2.3	0.4	—	1.1	100.0
Unemployed	54.4	17.2	4.3	10.3	9.5	—	—	4.3	100.0
Other	27.1	29.2	6.3	16.7	10.4	—	6.3	4.0	100.0
All families	36.9	29.5	3.2	13.4	11.7	1.1	1.4	2.8	100.0

often has long waiting lists and some fees (albeit low, as they are means-tested).

If we look at the day-care solutions for children aged 1 to 2 of working women only (Table 8), an additional finding must be emphasized. Some of the working women (but especially those with low educational levels) indicated as the main day-care arrangement 'staying at home with mother' (17.8 percent). If we cross-check for their social group, we find, as expected, many women belonging to farmer or small business couples (49 percent) but we also find women belonging to wage-earner couples in the agricultural, industrial and service sectors (43 percent). Although some of these women may in fact work at home (textile industries in the North, for example, sometimes put out work), there is some likelihood that some of them were working outside the home and leaving their children alone. Of course, these findings must be analysed with care and checked in future studies, but it is possible to argue that they coincide with similar data on child-care arrangements in local surveys (Torres and Silva, 1998), as well as with in-depth studies and reports describing situations of very

young children left alone, with another child or asleep while their parents work (Almeida et al., 1999). It is also important to place these results within the economic and family contexts – of extreme poverty, of child labour and neglect, mainly in rural society – experienced during childhood in the 1950s and 1960s by the generation of men and women interviewed in this survey. Protection, care and education of children, as priorities of family life, were values which many adults did not experience in the recent past and which have emerged only gradually over the last 40 years (Wall, 1998).

Conclusion

This article addressed two main questions. How strong is informal support in Portuguese families today and what are the main characteristics of support networks? Do families belonging to the more vulnerable or needy social groups have access to more informal assistance?

Analysis of the main characteristics of infor-

mal support networks in Portuguese families with children showed that many families have no support or a low level of support over many years of married life and that extended kinship does not play a significant role in support networks. Assistance flows mainly from parents, from women rather than men and from the wife's side of the family rather than the husband's. Experience of support also varies according to the life-cycle and to family forms, with assistance provided to higher proportions of families after the birth of a child, to legally married couples and in complex family households. Finally, with regard to social structure, informal support networks were found to be unevenly distributed in Portuguese society: needy families with low educational levels and a less favourable class position have the lowest levels of support over the course of married life. Working-class women who work full time have had less access to informal support and unequal access to child-care facilities.

Thus, far from compensating for social differentiation between families, welfare provision stemming from informal relationships would appear to reproduce and reinforce existing social inequalities and to offer less support for those who most need support. In this respect, Portuguese society is a reminder of what has already been stated about family caring in other contexts: assistance from kin and other close relationships is often insufficient and may be more or less important according to social class (Martin, 1993; 1995; Coenen-Huther et al., 1994; Jones, 1995; Déchaux, 1996). It is that much easier to provide help if resources are plentiful and if those who are being helped are less needy (Martin, 1995).

In the light of these limitations of informal support networks, the idea of a golden pre- and post-modern welfare-society in which support is widespread and extra strong for those who most require it needs to be challenged. Evidence from this research suggests that informal support networks in Portugal do not take the form of a 'welfare society' in

which all families and individuals, but especially the poorest, have systematic access to informal assistance. Informal support networks should rather be seen as part of the system of strategies for family reproduction (Bourdieu, 1979).

In the light of these findings, we could say that it is not informal support that compensates for failure in state provision, it is weak state and market provision that does not always compensate for the gaps in informal support. In the past, begging, private charity, church organizations and asylums tried to fill in for the family's failure to provide assistance (Wall, 1998); at present, some of the latter, as well as non-governmental and state provision, try to support those who have needs and do not have informal networks. As is well known, however, cash benefits are still low in Portugal and formal care services, public and non-governmental, have only expanded somewhat more rapidly over the last decade (Wall, 1995, 1997). The fact that public policy in this type of welfare regime insists on family responsibilities for caring (Esping-Andersen, 1999) does not mean that primary social networks in fact fulfil the social protection role of a 'welfare society'. On the contrary, failure to combine and balance these different elements of welfare, in weak or still expanding welfare states such as Portugal, usually leads to high levels of poverty and neglect and to a dramatic overload of work for women.

To understand the implications of these findings in terms of public policies, it is necessary to consider some of the underlying principles as to how families with children are expected to cope in Portuguese society. Until recently, policies appear to have been based on the assumptions that, except in cases of extreme poverty or breakdown, families with children will depend on their informal networks to solve caring and other problems, and will expect women to take up the slack when public or public-supported services are lacking. Evidence from this survey shows that informal support only responds partially, and more often at the wealthier end of the income

scale, to this challenge. This has two consequences: first, it is important that policies should be sensitive to the more disadvantaged families' needs for access to public and public-supported facilities, not only to substitute for complete lack of informal support but also to allow families to combine formal services with an informal system of support which is likely to be occasional or sporadic rather than systematic. Second, public policies will be to some extent confronted by a gender divide which more or less systematically leads some women to an overload of work or to withdrawing from occupational activity. In summary, the problems of gender and of inequality in families (including inequality of access to informal support) are the main issues which, in the light of the findings of this research, public policies might in the future have to address.

Notes

- 1 Excluding the Azores and Madeira.
- 2 The Master Sample is a probabilistic sample based on the Population Census. It is stratified by region (five regions in the mainland, the Azores and Madeira) and has 1,143 Census Blocks (each Census Block has about 300 households).
- 3 The wife's social class was defined by reference to the wife's own occupation and, in the case of housewives, by reference to the husband's occupation. The high percentage of economically active mothers in Portugal, as in the families interviewed at the time of the survey (73% were employed, 6% unemployed and only 18% were housewives), makes the adoption of the wife's own occupation methodologically more correct than definition by reference to the husband's socio-professional situation. Reference to the father's occupation would, however, be even more inadequate, not only because it ignores the educational and professional status attained by women as individuals but also due to the fact that it passes by the deep intergenerational changes in occupations and levels of education in Portuguese society over the last 40 years (Costa and Viegas, 2000).
- 4 This is an indicator which combines the wife's and the husband's social class and has been used

systematically to analyse other results of the survey (Wall et al., 2000).

- 5 Familialism, with a high proportion of families wishing for systematic exchange of resources between relatives, thus seems to be more important in Portugal than in some other European countries. A survey in Switzerland, for example, showed that only 10% of all families seek to have systematic support and cooperation from relatives (Coenen-Huther et al., 1994).
- 6 Households which fall below the threshold of 50% of average income.
- 7 Interviewees could indicate one- or two-day care solutions.

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