Sharing and asking for help: Social support networks from the perspective of 4–6 year olds in three different eco-social milieus

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Abstract
In view of increasing diversity regarding the cultural background of children in pre-schools and the like, it is important to know how they differ in their perception of social networks. This study investigated the perception of social support networks in young children from three different eco-social milieus. Participants (N = 138, 4–6 year olds) were recruited from German urban nuclear families and two groups of rural extended families in Central America. The support networks were analyzed by means of two game scenarios for “Sharing” and “Asking for Help” with a family collage in addition. Results show significant differences between groups in regard to the size, structure, and relationship patterns of support networks. Networks of urban German children included mainly friends, parents, and siblings, whereas those from Central American children also included other members of the extended family. The perceived importance of father, mother, and siblings differed between groups. Children’s willingness to share correlated with parental socio-cultural orientation. Practical implications for early childhood education are discussed in view of children’s socio-cultural background.

Keywords
eco-social environment, preschool children, social support networks

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Introduction

The experience of social support is of central importance for the psychosocial development of preschool children. Often they can only manage a developmental task with the support of other people. At the same time, such experiences stabilize the “internal working model” (Bowlby, 1969), which regulates future social and emotional relationships with others. Social support has proven to be an important protective factor in dealing with psychological stress and in acquiring psychological resilience (Cohen, 1998; Laireiter and Lager, 2006; Malecki and Demaray, 2002; Taylor, 2011). More specifically, social support is reflected in emotional affection as well as in helpful behavior and sharing goods. Usually it is people from the immediate social environment (family, neighborhood, school etc.) who provide social support for young children and thus form a social support network (Belle, 1989; Laireiter, 2009).

Several studies with older children and adults have shown that social support networks differ in their structure and function between cultural groups (e.g. Kim and McKenry, 1998; Kim et al., 2008; Shavitt et al., 2016). Obviously they are closely linked to cultural norms and values that reflect the respective economic, ecological, and cultural context of a community (Tietjen, 1989).

Currently there are many children growing up in western postmodern societies whose family environment differs significantly from that of the host country as a result of migration. For example, in Germany as one of the main host countries in the western world, up to 29% of 3–6 year olds children visiting a day care center have a background of migration (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2018). A substantial proportion of them grow up in families that are rooted in traditional rural village communities and which maintain their cultural orientations. Unfortunately however, there are to the best of our knowledge no studies comparing social support networks of young children from urban western and rural non-western milieus. Furthermore, as the social environment of young children differs from that of older children and adults the results of previous studies cannot be readily transferred to this age group.

Present study

The present study builds on approaches in child development research that emphasize the need to compare results obtained in western eco-social milieus with those from non-western regions (Harkness and Super, 2020; LeVine, 2017). They claim that the findings based solely on studies in western milieus provide an incomplete picture of child development. Therefore, our aim was to compare the perception of social support from the perspective of young urban western children with that of children growing up in two different rural non-western milieus within the same geographic area. Since the socio-cultural orientation of the parents has proven to be an important part of the cultural environment of young children (Kärtner et al., 2020; Keller, 2020), we determined this in addition to the socio-demographic profiles of the families in order to differentiate between the milieus.

From a cross cultural perspective urban western and rural non-western milieus differ substantially in their family models as they have been described in detail by Kagitcibasi (2007). According to this description children in western urban middle-class families grow up together with their parents and few siblings. On average the parents have a high level of formal education and value their children’s autonomy, positive self-esteem, and emotional independence (Keller, 2013). Young children often come into contact with a larger number of peers for the first time by attending a day care center. In contrast, children in traditional non-Western rural extended families grow up in a common household with their parents, several siblings, and relatives. The parents often have little formal education and a low income. From an early age, their children have a variety of contacts
with related children as well as with children in their neighborhood. In education, hierarchical emotional relatedness within the family is highly appreciated (Keller, 2013).

Since traditional rural family models are partially subject to change due to technical and economic modernization (Kagitcibasi et al., 2010) a hybrid family model has evolved in several non-western regions. Compared to traditional models, it is characterized by a higher level of formal education among parents and less material dependency among members of a community. Nevertheless, hierarchical relatedness within the family is also highly valued. Parents especially promote both individual skills and the sense of community and mutual support of their children. The hybrid milieu is typical of regions that are in a transition from a traditional rural way of life to western ways of life. Comparative cultural studies show that the family models outlined here can diversify further in many ways under specific economic, cultural, and historical conditions (e.g. Kagitcibasi et al., 2010).

The present study focused on children’s perceptions of social support networks, as the subjective view of social support is strongly related to their well-being (Chu et al., 2010). Furthermore, it provides a suitable access to effective pedagogical action. In particular we were interested in two questions: (1) With whom would children share a number of valuables and (2) who would they ask for help in a problem situation. The first question was aimed at identifying the network of people with whom the children feel emotionally connected, and the second question was about the people from whom they expect active assistance. In order to check the extent to which children’s perceived network of support corresponds to the perceived structure of their family, they were additionally asked for a presentation of their family. Since socio-cultural orientation in the upbringing of young children has proven to be an important distinguishing feature between western and non-western communities (cf. Kagitcibasi, 2007; Keller, 2016), the mothers were asked about their appreciation of “psychological autonomy” and “family attachment.” We wanted to find out if there was a correlation between children’s willingness to share with others and their mother’s socio-cultural orientation.

With regard to different family structures, we expected that western urban children would both share valuables with fewer people and ask fewer people for help than children from non-western extended farming families. In addition, we expected western urban children to consider their parents and, if there were any, their siblings as the most important persons in the support network, while for children from non-western extended farming families other relatives were also expected to be part of the support network. Due to the high value of friendships in western societies, we further assumed that friends were more important in the support network of western urban children compared to the network of children from non-western rural extended families. Finally we expected the most significant differences in the above-mentioned points between children from the western urban milieu and the traditional non-western rural milieu.

Method

Participants

The initial samples consisted of 65 German, 34 Costa Rican and 65 Nicaraguan children aged 4–6 years. German participants were recruited from two urban and one suburban public kindergartens in Osnabrück/Lower Saxony (approximately 165,000 inhabitants). The parents were informed about the study via a flyer and asked to participate. The majority of parents agreed to participate. From this group 45 participants were selected at random, considering a good balance between boys and girls. The recruitment of Costa Rican participants was made possible by the support of the University of Costa Rica. They lived in a village community in large farming families who belonged
to the indigenous tribe of Boruca (1386 members) in the southwest of Costa Rica. The Nicaraguan participants were contacted by the second author while studying in Central America. They also lived in large farming families in two village settlements on the sparsely populated Isla de Ometepe (29,684 inhabitants) in Nicaragua. The participants from Costa Rica and Nicaragua were selected at random from village preschool classes and kindergartens and through home visits. One German child, three Costa Rican and two Nicaraguan children had to be excluded from the sample because they did not understand the tasks or were unwilling to participate. The exact date of birth of three Costa Rican children was unknown as their parents did not remember. However, they were included in the analyses because they estimated their age in years. Finally, a total of 138 children between the ages of 48 and 83 months ($M=61.6$, $SD=9.0$) were included in the study, 44 (21 female) from Germany, 31 (22 female) from Costa Rica, and 63 (33 female) from Nicaragua. The groups did not differ significantly in age ($F(2.132) = 1.13; \ p = 0.33$) or gender distribution ($\chi^2 (2, N=138)=4.31; \ p = 0.12$). The different sample sizes of the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan groups were due to the different accessibility.

The Central American families were mainly engaged in agriculture and livestock farming for self-supply and, to a small extent, in trade. Most children attended a preschool from the age of 5. Due to poverty in many families, fathers in particular worked for a few months or even all year round in the capitals of the respective countries. In the Costa Rican group the influence of western urban lifestyles was stronger than in the Nicaraguan group due to contacts with international tourists and improved technical and social welfare (CEPALSTAT, 2019).

The Central American families differed significantly in their socio-demographic profiles from urban German families (see Table 1). Fewer people lived in the common household of German children, and the number of siblings was lower than in the families of Central American children. The parents of German children were on average older, had a higher formal education and the majority had completed a vocational qualification. Mothers and, in some cases, fathers were mainly responsible for the upbringing and care of their children. In Central American families, it wasn’t just the mother who was responsible for bringing up and caring children but also grandmothers and, more rarely, siblings, other female relatives and fathers. The information on fathers refers to about 60% of the participants. Costa Rican and Nicaraguan families differed with regard to the vocational qualification and age of the fathers.

**Procedure**

The investigations took place between 2014 and 2017. All German mothers had previously given their written consent to participate. Because many Central American mothers were illiterate their verbal consent was obtained by bilingual (Spanish/English) research assistants.

In Germany, trained assistants, who were not familiar with the hypotheses of the study, conducted the examination with the mothers and children in separate rooms of the kindergartens. In Central America, the examinations were carried out by trained research assistants and the second author. The study took place at the premises of the kindergartens, schools, and preschools, where the mothers were also invited to separate appointments. If they could not attend, home visits were made. Because of illiteracy questions were read out and the answers recorded. In some cases, the examinations with the Central American children took place in the presence of other children or their parents, as they were not used to being alone in a room with a stranger. Those present were instructed not to intervene.

The perception of the social support network was examined by means of two game like scenarios in which the children were asked to select the figures/persons from an ensemble of 18 schematic figures (Figure 1) with whom they would (1) share tokens (substitutes for regional sweets)
and who they would (2) ask for help in a search task. (3) In addition, they were asked to represent their family by means of the figures. All tasks were performed in the above mentioned order without time limit. In preliminary investigations we had ascertained that preschool aged children had an adequate understanding of the fictional scenarios (see also Woolley and Wellman, 1990). Furthermore, previous research suggests that children at this age do already purposely distribute their resources (Kenward and Dahl, 2011).

The schematized figures (nine female and nine male, see Figure 1) were made of white laminated cardboard in three different sizes (height 139, 101, and 75 mm). Selected figures should be placed on a neutral white plastic surface (DIN A3 landscape format).

First, all figures were randomly laid out on the table in front of the children, and they were told that they “represent all the people you know.” Then they were asked to choose a figure representing themselves and to mark it with a colored pencil.

### Table 1. Mean age of children and parents, mean number of siblings, mean number of persons living in the household, formal education and vocational qualification of parents, and persons mainly responsible for education in three different samples.

| Sociodemographic variable                                | Urban Germany | Rural Costa Rica | Rural Nicaragua |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|
|                                                           | M             | SD              | M              | SD             | M              | SD             |
| Mean age                                                  |               |                 |                |                |                |                |
| Child (months)                                            | 63.2          | 8.7             | 61.6           | 9.4            | 60.6           | 9.0            |
| Mother (years)                                            | 36.9          | 5.2             | 31.3***        | 6.2            | 28.7***        | 5.9            |
| Father (years)a                                          | 39.1          | 7.2             | 35.0           | 15.3           | 33.8*          | 8.3            |
| Mean number of siblings                                    | 1.1           | 0.8             | 2.3**          | 1.6            | 2.0*           | 1.8            |
| Mean number of persons living in the householdb           | 4.1           | 1.0             | 5.2*           | 2.1            | 5.7***         | 2.2            |
| Mean years of school attendance                           |               |                 |                |                |                |                |
| Mother                                                    | 12.0          | 1.4             | 7.7***         | 3.2            | 7.1***         | 3.1            |
| Father                                                    | 12.2          | 1.3             | 6.9***         | 3.6            | 7.0***         | 3.8            |
| Vocational qualification mother                           | n = 40        |                 | n = 29         | n = 55         |                |                |
| Completed training (%)                                     | 80            |                 | 6.9            |                | 7.3            |                |
| Housewife (%)                                             | 15.0          |                 | 72.4           |                | 78.2           |                |
| Handycraft (%)                                            | 10.3          |                 | 1.8            |                |                |                |
| Vocational qualification father                            | n = 38        |                 | n = 18         | n = 39         |                |                |
| Completed training (%)                                     | 84.2          |                 | 22.2           |                | 17.9           |                |
| Farmer (%)                                                | 38.9          |                 | 41.0           |                |                |                |
| Handycraft (%)                                            | 27.8          |                 |                |                |                |                |
| Mainly responsible for education (%)                      |               |                 |                |                |                |                |
| Mother                                                    | 100c          |                 | 83.3           |                | 79.0           |                |
| Father                                                    | 50            |                 | 3.3            |                | 3.2            |                |
| (Great-)grandmother                                       | 10.0          |                 | 11.3           |                |                |                |
| Siblings                                                  | 3.3           |                 | 3.2            |                |                |                |
| Aunt                                                      | 3.2           |                 |                |                |                |                |

Means differing from the urban German sample are marked by asterisks.

aComplete data available for n = 40 Germany, n = 39 Costa Rica, and n = 21 Nicaragua.
bIncluding target child.
cMultiple entries were obtained for mother and father.
*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001 (ANOVA with post hoc Tukey-Test or Games-Howell-Test).
Thereupon the children received a box of 10 glass stones (substitutes for sweets) and were asked if they would like to share them with someone. If so, they were asked to choose from the ensemble of figures/persons those who were to receive the “sweets” and place them one after the other on the surface. Finally they were asked to put as many “sweets” for each selected figure as that person was to receive. As soon as no more “sweet” was distributed, all figures except the self-figure were removed from the surface and distributed again in random order on the table.

For the scenario “Asking for help” the box with the glass stones had been removed unnoticed. Now it was told that a monster had come and stolen the “sweets.” The children were then asked who should help them to find the stolen sweets. The selection and placement of the figures/persons should be done in the same way as before. As soon as no more helpers were selected, all the figures, including the self-figure, were again randomly distributed on the table and the children were now instructed to place the figures/persons on the surface that belong to their family and to name the family members.

The instructions were given in either Spanish (Central America) or German (Germany) and were adapted to the children’s understanding as needed. With a few exceptions, all children in the “Share” and “Asking for help” scenarios spontaneously named the selected characters, for example “Mum,” “Uncle.”

**Measures**

**Socio-cultural orientation.** The appreciation of “psychological autonomy” was measured with the subscales ARQ-A and Realo A1 of the *Three Component Individualism Scale* (Realo et al., 2002). They included 23 items from the subject areas “individual responsibility” (nine questions, e.g. “It is important to plan one’s own life”), “decision making” (eight questions, e.g. “Everyone should decide for themselves what is important in their lives”), and “uniqueness” (six questions, e.g. “It is important for me to be different from others”). The attitude toward “family attachment” was
measured with nine items of the Family Allocentrism Scale (Lay et al., 1998) (e.g. “The opinion of one’s own parents should be important for everyone”). Agreement with the items was assessed on a 4-point Likert scale, with the highest value expressing the strongest agreement. In previous studies, the overall scales of the applied questionnaires have proven to be sufficiently reliable (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.74–0.95; Keller and Lamm et al., 2006; Lamm and Keller, 2007). The questionnaires were available in a Spanish and German version. Individual terms were adapted to local Spanish usage. All evaluations refer to fully completed questionnaires (82%–89%).

Data analyses. The socio-cultural orientation of mothers was determined by comparing the scale values for “family attachment” and “psychological autonomy” within each group using non-parametric Wilcoxon tests.

The number of people with whom tokens were shared and who were asked for help as well as the number of perceived family members were compared between the groups using univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) with subsequent post hoc tests. In addition, Chi-square tests were computed to examine group differences concerning the frequency with which individual categories of people were chosen in the sharing and helping scenario. The number of people within each category with whom tokens were shared was analyzed by a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Finally, group comparisons were made for the number of tokens shared with others using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the number of recipients as a covariate. All calculations were made with SPSS 26. Error probability was set at $\alpha = 0.05$ with two-tailed tests.

Support network and family. The size and composition of the support network as well as the family network were determined by the number and identity of the selected figures. In addition, it was recorded which figures were selected first or second. We assumed that the first and second choice represented the two most important persons of the network. Based on the interpretation of family representations in children’s drawings (Bombi et al., 2007), we also recorded which person was placed closest to the self-figure. In line with the above-mentioned authors we assumed that this positioning is indicating psychological closeness. The number of tokens shared with other people served as a measure of the appreciation of community.

Results

In the following, the results for both Central American groups are summarized unless they differed significantly from each other or there were special reasons for showing them separately. When two consecutive values are reported, the first stands for Costa Rica and the second for Nicaragua.

Socio-cultural orientation

Within-group comparisons showed that the German mothers rated “psychological autonomy” higher than “family attachment” (Wilcoxon test, $z = -4.80, p < 0.001$), while the opposite was true for Nicaraguan mothers (Wilcoxon test, $z = -5.23, p < 0.001$). For Costa Rican mothers there were no significant differences between the two scales.

Sharing

A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the number of persons with whom tokens were shared revealed a significant difference between the groups (see Table 2a). On average, German children shared with fewer persons than Central American children ($p < 0.02$).
Table 2. Mean number of persons (a) with whom tokens were shared, (b) who were asked for help, and (c) who were represented in the family collage (without self).

|                | Germany |         |         | Costa Rica |         |         | Nicaragua |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|------------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|                | N   | M    | SD    | n   | M    | SD    | n   | M    | SD    | F   | p    | η²   |
| (a) Sharing    | 44  | 4.9  | 2.3   | 28  | 5.9  | 2.0   | 60  | 5.9  | 2.5   | 2.81 | 0.05 | 0.04 |
| (b) Help       | 44  | 4.6  | 1.9   | 31  | 5.9  | 3.5   | 63  | 6.1  | 3.0   | 3.72 | 0.03 | 0.05 |
| (c) Family     | 44  | 4.9  | 1.4   | 31  | 6.8  | 3.2   | 63  | 7.5  | 3.3   | 11.24| 0.001| 0.14 |

F, p, and η² for univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVA). Three Costarican and three Nicaraguan children were excluded from the analysis of sharing due to unclear decisions.

Table 3. Frequencies of choice (in %) for different persons in the (a) “sharing”-scenario, (b) “asking for help”-scenario, and (c) family collage.

|                | (a) Sharing | (b) Help | (c) Family |
|----------------|-------------|----------|------------|
|                | G | CR | Ni | p | V | G | CR | Ni | p | V | G | CR | Ni | p | V |
| Mother         | 70 | 48 | 60 | .15 | .09 | 70 | 48 | 60 | .15 | .09 | 95 | 61 | 76 | .00 | .31 |
| Father         | 75 | 48 | 49 | .02 | .25 | 57 | 42 | 46 | .38 | .12 | 93 | 59 | 64 | .00 | .34 |
| Siblings       | 84 | 71 | 73 | .31 | .13 | 61 | 68 | 73 | .42 | .11 | 84 | 71 | 73 | .31 | .13 |
| Grandparents   | 12 | 45 | 49 | .00 | .35 | 16 | 26 | 44 | .00 | .27 | 26 | 36 | 67 | .00 | .38 |
| Cousin         | 7  | 36 | 43 | a   | .31 | 5  | 29 | 35 | .00 | .31 | 42 | 46 | a   | .40 | .44 |
| Aunt/uncle     | 26 | 27 | 22 | .00 | .31 | 5  | 29 | 37 | .00 | .32 | 5  | 39 | 52 | .00 | .44 |
| Friends        | 56 | 29 | 22 | .01 | .29 | 47 | 29 | 16 | .01 | .29 | 19 | 10 | a   | .40 | .44 |

G: Germany; CR: Costa Rica; Ni: Nicaragua; V: Cramer’s V. Statistical analyses with χ² tests.

With whom were tokens shared? Table 3a shows how often different persons were chosen as recipients of tokens. Significantly more German than Central American children shared the tokens with their father and friends, while significantly more Central American children shared with grandparents, cousins, and aunts/uncles. Regarding the order in which people were selected as recipients, it was found that about 52% of German children opted for their mother in the first or second choice, as opposed to 22%–23% of Central American children, χ² (N=138) = 7.53, p = 0.02, Cramer’s V = 0.23. German children placed the mother closest to the self-figure more often than Central American children (52% vs 13%–16%), χ² (N=138) = 23.10, p < 0.001, Cramer’s V = 0.41. Further, more German than Central American children selected friends in their first or second choice as recipients of tokens (32% vs 11%–13%), χ² (N=138) = 8.22, p = 0.02, Cramer’s V = 0.24.

In contrast to these results Central American children selected most often siblings in their first or second choice as recipients of tokens.

Since all other categories of persons, with the exception of parents, can include several individuals, we also determined the number of individuals within each category with whom tokens were shared. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed a significant difference between the groups, F (10, 262) = 5.81, p < 0.001, Wilk’s Λ = 0.67, η² = 18. Post hoc comparisons revealed that Central American children shared their tokens with significantly more siblings,
grandparents, cousins, and aunts/uncles than urban German children (all \( p \)'s < 0.05, Games Howell tests). In contrast, the latter shared the tokens with twice as many friends ([equation] \( M=1.89, SD=2.17 \) as Costa Rican children ([equation] \( M=0.94, SD=2.03 \) and with more than four times as many friends as Nicaraguan children ([equation] \( M=0.41, SD=1.01 \)).

**How many tokens were shared?** For the number of tokens shared with other persons, a single factor covariance analysis (ANCOVA) with the number of recipients as a covariate was computed. It showed a significant difference between the groups, \( F (2,130)=22.81, \ p<0.001, \ \eta^2=0.23 \). Post hoc comparisons revealed that urban German children on average shared fewer tokens with other persons, \( M=5.3, SD=2.5 \), than Central American children, \( M=8.1–8.3, SD=1.8–2.1 \), Tukey test, \( p<0.001 \). The number of tokens that German children on average gave to one person was also significantly lower, \( M=1.2, SD=0.59 \), than that of Central American children, \( M=1.7–1.7, SD=0.61–0.73 \); \( F (1131)=17.63, \ p<0.001, \ \eta^2=0.22 \).

There was a significant positive correlation between the number of tokens shared with other persons and the maternal appreciation of “family attachment,” \( r=0.23, p=0.01 \). The stronger the appreciation, the more tokens were given to other persons.

**Asking for help**

A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed for the number of people who were asked for help. There was a significant difference between the groups (see Table 2b). Urban German children asked fewer people for help than Central American children. According to post hoc comparisons the difference between German and Nicaraguan children was significant, \( p<0.01 \), Games-Howell test. Apart from this there was a significant correlation between the number of persons selected in the “sharing” and “asking for help” scenario , \( r=0.39, p<0.01 \).

**Who was asked for help.** The frequencies with which different people were asked for help were largely similar to the results on sharing (see Table 3b). Apart from the differences between the German and the combined Central American group, it turned out that there were also differences between the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan group. About 20% more Nicaraguan than Costa Rican children asked their grandparents for help, \( z=1.90, p=0.03 \). In contrast, Nicaraguan children asked friends for help less often than Costa Rican children.

With regard to the order in which the persons were chosen both scenarios differed to some extent. The father was asked for help by 57% of the German children as the first or second person. In comparison, 29% chose him as the first or second person in the sharing scenario (\( \chi^2 (2, N=138)=10.08, p<0.01 \), Cramers \( V=0.27 \)) In contrast, Costa Rican children primarily expected help from their mother and Nicaraguan children from their siblings. The groups also differed significantly with regard to friends. German children asked them more often than Central American children for help (32% vs 26% -11%), selected them more often in their first or second choice, \( \chi^2 (2, N=138)=7.25, p=0.03 \), Cramer’s \( V=0.23 \), and placed them more often (21% vs 4%) next to the self-figure, \( z=3.03, p<0.001 \).

**Sharing and asking for help in the context of the family**

There are numerous similarities between the results of sharing and asking for help and the family collage (Tables 2c and 3c). It is noticeable, however, that with the exception of Costa Rica, parents and also grandparents appear more frequently in the family collages than they were selected in the sharing and help scenarios. On the other hand, friends were not or only rarely shown in the family
collage, whereas they were selected as recipients of tokens and selected as helpers. With regard to
the order of selection, it was found that German children more often than Central American chil-
dren represented their siblings as the first or second person in the family collage. In contrast, the
mother was chosen primarily in the sharing scenario and the father was chosen primarily in the
helping scenario.

Discussion

In the present study three different eco-social milieus have been selected representing different
family models. Their socio-demographic profiles correspond well with those from related studies
(e.g. Kagitcibasi, 2007; Keller, 2016) and also to some extent with profiles from German migrant
families with non-western rural background (Tietze, 2012). Thus we believe that many of our
results may be valid beyond the borders of Germany and Central America.

In line with our expectations, young children growing up in the milieu of small urban western
families differ significantly in their perception of social support networks from children living in
non-western extended farming families. This applies not only to their willingness to share a num-
ber of valuables with others but also to ask others for active assistance. For young urban western
children, parents, and siblings are the most important family members in their support network
which is in line with a study which applied the Convoy Model of Social Relationships in 8 year
olds and older children from the United States and Japan (Antonucci et al., 2004).

The perceived support network of children from rural non-western extended families includes
parents and siblings as well as relatives to whom most children feel a close emotional bond. Con-
sistent with this, Katz et al. (2017) found that young urban Israeli children only sought help
from an extremely limited number of family members. An earlier study comparing the perceived
support network of US fourth and sixth graders with that of Costa Rican peers found that
American students’ networks were mostly limited to their nuclear family and friends, while it
was more extensive among Costa Rican students (DeRosier and Kupersmidt, 1991). However,
different from the present study Costa Rican networks also included other persons from their
social environment such as teachers, neighbors, etc. Regarding the importance of certain people
as supporters, an observational study of young children living in the suburbs of Nairobi, Kenya,
revealed that unrelated children were the greatest source of social support, followed by mothers,
while fathers played a minor role (Maturana, 2016). Socio-demographic profiles of the families
were similar to those of the current study. This finding agrees with the recent study on the rela-
tive importance of the mother, but not on the importance of the father and unrelated children. In
view of similar socio-demographic profiles no simple explanation for these differences is pos-
sible. However, it should be noted that specific living conditions in the overpopulated suburbs of
Nairobi possibly produced different social support networks compared to the rural communities
in Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

The fact that western urban children preferred their mother more than children from non-west-
ern extended farming families can be seen as an indication of strong emotional closeness, as
reported by other authors (see Zelkowitz, 1989). Consistent with this, Gernhardt et al. (2014) found
in a previous study on self and family drawings among urban German and Turkish pre-school-age
children that only about 20% of children from a rural Turkish milieu, but 42% of urban German
children, placed the mother directly next to the self-figure.

The lower demands on the father of Central American children as a helper can best be explained
by his rarer presence in the common household.

Besides the parents, siblings are important persons in the support networks of all children who
participated in the present study. It is worth noting that Central American children expected help
from siblings more often than from parents and were also willing to share with them first. This is in line with reported closer sibling relationships in non-Western families compared to Western (European-American) families (e.g. LeVine, 1996; Maynard, 2019; Updegraff et al., 2005). It is often referred to the co-responsibility of older siblings for younger ones. In the present study, however, an effect of the sibling position could only be shown descriptively for Nicaraguan children due to the small age range and small number of cases. Older siblings shared more often with younger or same-age siblings than younger ones with older ones ($p < 0.10$).

As expected, the choice of friends among German children reflects the high appreciation of friendship held in Western societies (cf. Howes, 2009; Wehner, 2005). This matches well with recent findings that showed a positive relation between sharing with friends and children’s kindergarten peer status (Essler et al., 2020). Though friendship is also valued in other societies, mothers in Central American extended families tend to promote interaction with related children (siblings, cousins) more than contacts with unrelated children (Howes et al., 2008).

As suspected, western urban children and children from rural non-Western extended families also differ in their general willingness to share a contingent of valuables with others. Obviously, different value orientations are expressed in this. While in Western middle-class families the individual possession of goods is generally regarded as valuable (Minnameier, 2018) and children are supported at an early age in treating valuables as personal property, community use is common and vital in poor, non-Western extended farming families (Gibson et al., 2018). This view is supported by the significant correlation between maternal appreciation of family attachment and the number of shared tokens. Our results are confirmed by a recent study on sharing in 7–8 year old children from India and the United Kingdom (Weltzien et al., 2019). The authors found that Indian children shared ressources more generously than British children. This finding was attributed to higher emphasis on interdependence in traditional extended Indian families compared to higher appreciation of individuality and independence in urban western families. Beyond this the greater willingness of non-Western children to share is suggested to be related to the greater grandparental involvement in social support. (Van Heerden and Wild, 2018; Yorgason et al., 2011).

Overall, these results show that family structures, relationship patterns and values that characterize small western urban families and extended rural non-Western families (Kagitcibasi, 2007) affect young children’s perception of the social support network. At the same time, however, it is appropriate to distinguish different non-Western rural milieus. This follows from the greater appreciation of family attachment, the importance of grandparents as supporters and the priority given to siblings in the family collage of Nicaraguan participants compared to the Costa Rican sample. In view of the more marked differences between the German and Nicaraguan sample, Nicaraguan families can be regarded as representing the milieu of traditional rural non-Western communities, while Costa Rican families tend to represent the transition from a traditional peasant milieu to a Western-style milieu (cf. Kagitcibasi, 2002; Greenfield, 2016). From a more general perspective the present findings underline the importance of eco-social contexts and family models for the perception of social support networks in young children as shown when looking for help and sharing with others.

For the practice of early childhood education, our findings have several implications: Since children growing up in urban western families differ in the perception of their social support network considerably from children living in families with a rural non-western background they are challenged in different ways by changes in their social and non-social environment. This is first of all important if certain people to whom they are emotionally attached are not available in the long term, for example as a result of loss, divorce, or migration. Educators should keep in mind that especially grandparents are perceived as highly valued supporters by young children with a traditional rural non-western background whereas friends take an important position in the support
network of urban western children. This should not only be reflected in pedagogical measures, but also in administrative decisions concerning the family network. With regard to children’s well-being it is not sufficient to consider actual providers of social support but to take into account children’s perception of available supporters (Chu et al., 2010). In general, western educators should be cautious to transfer their beliefs about young western children’s perception of social support networks to children from other eco-social milieus.

**Limits of the study and outlook**

There are some limitations of the present study. Concerning the comparatively small sample size, especially of the Costa Rica group, extrapolations should be made with cautions. Nonetheless there are some similarities with related studies on children’s social support networks using different methodological approaches. Thus the present investigation may be used as a starting point for future research with larger representative samples and more specific criteria to define hybrid milieus within non-Western communities. In view of results, which suggest that the ontogeny of prosocial behavior is related to the costs of beneficial behavior (House et al., 2013), it remains open to what extent the valuables (tokens) provided by a stranger without consideration in the sharing scenario were perceived differently by children with different socio-economic backgrounds. Likewise a more precise differentiation between the instrumental and emotional aspects of helping as well as a review of the external validity of the fictitious game scenarios would be desirable.

Since the social environment and family structures of young children can change in the medium and long term (Seltzer, 2019), the effects of such changes on the perception of social support networks should also be given greater consideration in future.

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