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SOCIAL SUPPORT OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THE LIGHT OF TRUST

ABSTRACT. Being lonely is not only uncomfortable, but has its negative psychological, as well as physio-somatic side-effects. Therefore, it is important to be surrounded by peers, what is more, significant others, who provide support and through this create social capital for the individual. Humans are social beings; hence, social support has many forms and each is important in some way or another for individual's well-being and satisfaction with life. The paper endeavours to present the social capital of young adults in higher education, where the phase of leaving the parental home might heavily affect the perceived extent and strength of social support. The author aims to explore the notion of embeddedness and its variability across age, gender and in relation to the respondents' family status. In the research presented trust is also investigated as the essence of social support.

JEL Classification: A13, A14 **Keywords:** social support, HEI, trust, young adults, family.

Introduction

Higher educational institutions (HEI) have changed a lot during the past decades, mainly but not exquisitely owing to the Bologna process (Kryk, 2016). Universities used to create and foster strong communities, where teachers knew their students, developed their talents and have prepared them for life. Students used to form bonds for life and lasting friendships had been forged through/due to the demanding, but rewarding years of higher education (Baker, 2013; Androniceanu, Ohanyan, 2016; Jovovic *et al.*, 2016; Berechet, 2016).

However, the once elite education, which was available only for the selected few, has turned into something very different; showing the signs and bearing the disadvantages of mass education. The phenomenon is affecting not only the teacher-student, but the student-student relations. Students are not connected to each other the way they used to be; and the HEIs as means to create social embeddedness do not serve their purpose any more (Kezar, 2014). HEI have lost their power to retain their students (Gerdes, Mallinckrodt, 1994). Students do not identify themselves with their local university community; tend to make less and less friendships during their studies (Androniceanu, 2015; Popescu, Mourao, 2016). This lack of sufficient integration however, is affecting their commitment not only toward the HEI itself, but higher education in general (Tinto, 1987) and hence generates a vicious cycle. Online and blended learning, which is becoming a substantial component of the higher education system, is also an issue that cannot be neglected, when exploring the social embeddedness of students in HEI (Picciano, 2015; Shea, Bidjerano, 2010).

Does this detachment mean that the students are lonely and lack the necessary social support because of the present way of how higher education is organised; or are the students different from those in the past favouring different kinds of contacts and connections, finding substitutes for HEIs as providers of social connections easy? Are the students of the 21st century well off regarding social support? Do they trust their peers more than their family members?

The research presented in this paper aims to find answers to these questions. With the help of a quantitative research on 249 young adolescents in their bachelor studies I intend to identify the role of family and peers at the university in the social support of the respondents. Within this paper, I also tackle the importance of interpersonal trust and its effect on the social support of those in the sample.

I am well aware that the research presented in the paper is not suitable to validate relations of the variables investigated, however, the data presented are indicative, and thought inducing; and it can also form a basis for further research with a more targeted sampling.

1. Social support

Humans are social beings. Not only because in this modern age only very few of us would be capable of sustaining his/her life without the help of others, but because humans like to belong. Having (significant) others around provides motivation and reward, can be source of reassurance and punishment, offers resources and support in informational, tangible as well as emotional sense. Thompson (1995) defined social embeddedness as frequency of contacts with others, which has a potential to integrate individuals into a supportive community. Frequency of contact however is not the only feature to be taken into consideration when exploring social embeddedness. The social network, and its strength to provide resources and support for the individual is also dependent on the size, diversity, functionality and variability of the social network the individual possesses and the centrality of the very person within this network.

According to Bourdieu (1997) social support is a form of capital – namely that of social capital, which is strongly connected to the individual and hence can provide increasing return to its owner when utilised as a resource. In line with this, individuals should consciously strive to obtain, retain and enrich their social capital, even more so in this modern-day ICT society, where connectedness is extremely important (Ellison *et al.*, 2014). This applies to all social and public spheres (see e.g. Strielkowski and Weyskrabova, 2014; Raišienė *et al.*, 2014).

Social capital, however, is not for free. The procurement of social support is based on reciprocity. In order to create a well-functioning supportive belt, individuals have to dedicate tangible and intangible resources, plenty of time and cognitive and emotional labour. Hence establishing and maintaining social ties should be subject to a cost/benefit analysis, however they rarely are. Owing to the psychological nature of social embeddedness, social support is heavily influenced by individual factors, such as personality and basic affectivity, and societal factors, such as national culture and its underlying values and principles such as its individualistic or collectivistic nature (Fukuyama, 1995). Nonetheless, observing the whole picture it can easily be detected that situative factors are also influential. In line with this, Kohn (2009) emphasises that trust cannot be detected, when searched for out of the scope of the related situations, and can only be defined as a function of a set of behaviours.

The complex process of acquiring new social contacts, maintaining their social capital is even more complicated for young adolescents in the phase of gate opening. They face tasks such as academic adjustment moving from secondary to tertiary education) loosening of high-school ties, societal expectations to become independent from their parents and first steps

towards creating their own families at the very same time (Mallinckrodt, Leong, 1992a, 1992b). This turbulent phase of their life does not only affect their extent of social support, but also influences their sense of internal locus of control and self-efficacy as well (Crockett, Crouter, 2014). What is more, the individual's success in creating a sufficient protective (social) belt influences his/her coping behaviour and through it his/her psychological health (Frison, Eggernmont, 2015). In line with this, relatedness, through its psychosomatic effects, has a strong positive influence on general wellbeing (Salovey *et al.*, 2000), acts as a general preventive and protective agent against physical illnesses and even defines the actual immune state of individuals by influencing cell replication processes through modulating RNA transcription (Lutgendorf *et al.*, 2009). International research has also proved that people who perceive much social support from others report greater life satisfaction (Gallagher, Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Kong *et al.*, 2011).

Over time people accumulate social support; social connections to individuals, groups and organisations (Hansen *et al.*, 2001). This support can be provided in various forms, such as:

- informational support: data on different aspects of the environment.
- tangible support: material resources.
- empathetic support: being felt for; love, trust and respect.
- positive social support: quality time.

However, the process of acquisition is strongly connected to the individuals' ability to trust and accept dependency from others. Deelstra (Deelstra *et al.*, 2003) defined social support as the perceived helping behaviour of others. This definition emphasises the importance of the individual's perception. Not the deed itself, but how it is seen by the other is the core notion of social support. Time spent together with another person can either be time for positive social support – if the parties experience mutual trust – however, can also be time of hide and seek, deception, if the trust is not embedded in the relation of the two actors. What is more, even tangible support (free gifts) can be evaluated differently when trust is lacking. While in a trusting relation resources received as a form of tangible support are perceived as gifts representing the benevolence of the donating party, on the other hand, a "free" gift is perceived a troyan horse, with hidden drawbacks when the intentions of the other party are not clear or are not trusted.

2. Trust and social support

Trust is widely perceived as a proxy indicator of social capital. Trust describes the quality of people's relations and interactions, on a greater scale the relationships and their strength or fragility within a given community or the whole society (Gambetta, 2000). In order to be able to utilise one's contacts and their support, one has to be able to trust his/her peers. Nonetheless, investing in social ties, especially in establishing strong connections is like gambling. One can never be sure about reciprocity, about the return on investment. Hence, trust lies at the heart of each social relation. On a societal level it is regarded as a phenomenon that enables collective actions and improves social relations (Freel, 2000; Davis, 2016), on the individual level the beneficial consequences are much more personal (Burt, 2002). For this very reason Bunduchi (2013) recommends individuals with no prior common history to invest in creating basic trust. What is more, according to Fukuyama (1995), trust is a measurable economic factor. In order to understand, how it is so, the very nature of trust has to be captured.

In general, trust is a synonym for the individual's expectation that another person's future action will be in line with his/her interest (Dasgupta, Sarageldin, 2001). However, trust as a noun is also used as a substitute for various phenomena, such as empathy, solidarity,

reciprocity, respect, tolerance and fraternity (For a research on the field of meaning of trust for Hungarian students see Lazányi, Máté, 2017). Trust and through it social capital allows individuals to cooperate with each other and to form bonds, associations. What is more, Paldam and Svendsen (2000) as a main representative of the school of sociology of rational choice defines social capital as the level of trust within a group – which can even be the whole society if needed. Trust as an interpersonal relation describes a mutual understanding, where the trustor and the trustee develop shared values that enable them to communicate more openly and solve conflicts in a collaborative manner. This common ground, however, should consciously be created; necessitates resources and effort.

Trust as a verb can be best understood by the explanation of Cook, Hardin and Levi (2004) who conceptualise the terms of trust as a relationship of A (the trustor) and B (the trustee), where “A trusts B to do X”. Hence, trust as a verb is a collection of actions that create and inspire the state of trust. Williamson (1993) regards trusting behaviour as a calculative response of the actors, where the behaviour of the individuals is influenced by an incentive structure containing material, social and psychological rewards. The key element of Granovetter's (2005) concept of trust on the other hand is the monitoring and assessment of the others party's actions. Putnam (2000) on the other hand emphasises the dual nature of trust. He distinguishes thick trust – which is based on experiences embedded in personal relationships with kin and friends, and hence is not a function of time – and thin trust, which is based on the trustee's reputation, norms and signals - and this way is developed in time.

In line with this, present paper will distinguish between trust in family members and non-family members, and endeavour to identify their effects on the perceived level of social support.

3. Research method and research sample

The research presented in this paper was executed through an online questionnaire in the first half of 2016. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions generating over 200 variables. Some of them were intended to check for the demographic data of the respondents, some other aimed to quantify the number of social ties. The importance, and perceived level of social support along with the trust of respondents towards family members and peers (thick and thin trust) has also been investigated.

While present paper is a part of a long-term research on trust, supported by the New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Human Capacities, the data presented below are not representative of the whole Hungarian population, are only indicative about the young (19-25 years old) higher educational students. The aim of selecting this special subset was to explore the behaviour of those who – as already indicated in the literature review part – are in a vulnerable phase of their lives owing to numerous changes and societal expectations.

The sample has been gathered with a snowball methodology, and has started from students of Obuda University's Keleti Faculty of Business and Management. The members of the preliminary sample were requested to forward the questionnaire to peers in Hungarian HEI. Finally, 269 questionnaires have been gathered, 249 of which could be processed. Owing to the overrepresentation of male students at the starting point faculty, only 64 of the respondents were females. For this reason, the gender as a potential distinctive variable has been tested for the social support, as well as the trust influencing factors.

The average age of respondents was around 22,6 at the point of the research. Further statistics about the date of birth are presented in *Table 1*. As it is displayed, neither the total population, nor that of the male or female respondents can be considered a normal distribution. The respondents tend to be younger than the median age of 21, which is in line with their bachelor student status.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on date of birth of the respondents

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Total	249	1994.42	1.527	-.524	.154	-.444	.307
Male	185	1994.43	1.570	-.462	.179	-.613	.355
Female	64	1994.38	1.409	-.809	.299	.286	.590

The distribution of the sample by date of birth is presented on *Figure 1*. It is clearly visible that the ratio of males and females born in a given year is not constant. There were relatively more male respondents born in 1992, 1993 and 1996, while in other years the female respondents were relatively overrepresented. However, the independent samples t-test, could not detect any significant difference between male and female respondents concerning their age.

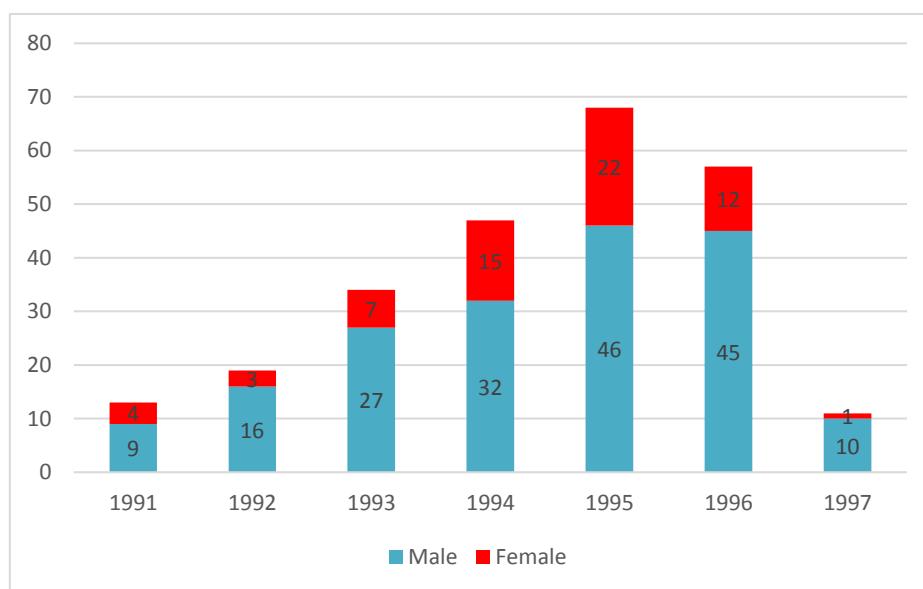


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by date of birth and gender

Only one of the respondents had a child, but 39 of them already lived with their spouses and not with their parents any more. This 39 living with their spouses and an additional group of 130 living with their parents (as those supposedly having more social support – thick trust) will be compared in the later part of the research with respondents living with their peers (12) or alone (68) (as those supposedly having less thick trust, and having rather/not even thin trust). As displayed in *Figure 2*, most of the respondents tend to live with their “old” or “new” families, however there is a gendered difference. Female respondents’ ratio living with their spouses was significantly higher than that of male respondents. The difference may lie in their inclination towards starting a family at a younger age. While females tend to establish a family before the age of 30, males in general get married after 30. Hence, the results of the research are in line with the overall demographic tendencies.

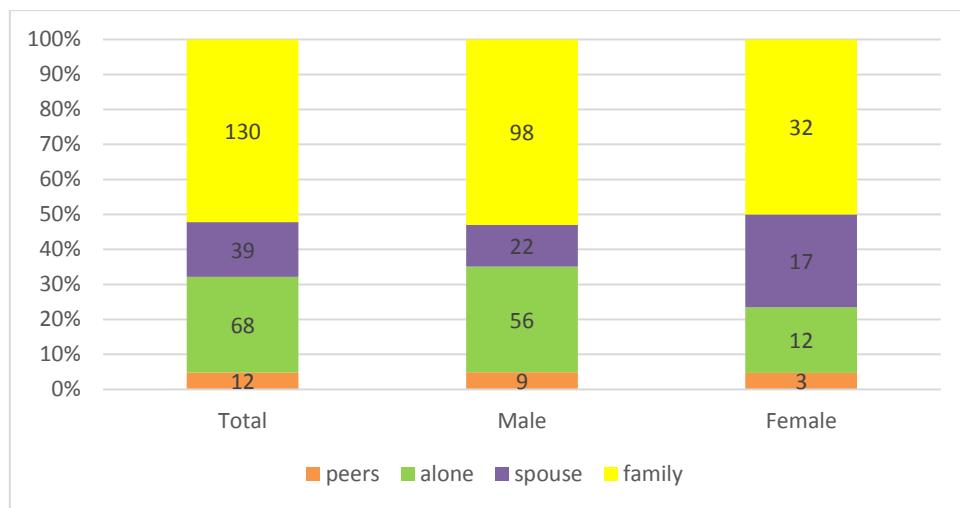


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents based on their cohabitation

4. Research results

The level of social support is hard to measure and quantify. For this reason, the topic has been approached with questions regarding frequency of contacts. Respondents have been requested to estimate the number of family member/peers they had contacts with within one week and the number of people they could totally be honest with.

Figure 3 represents the estimated number of the respondents' frequent contacts (Only responses stating not more than 30 contacts are displayed). It is important to note that there have been respondents to state that they have no regular contact with their family members or peers. The peek for every kind of regular contact is around 5 people.

According to the research data, the maximum amount of frequently contacted family members was 20, with the mean being 4.15 (Std. Dev.: 2.150). The maximum number of frequently contacted friends was significantly higher (40). This could either mean that thick ties provide more social support, hence individuals need a greater number of thin ties to make up for a loss in thick contact, or that the young adults in the research sample had a good supportive belt. The average number of frequently contacted friends was 6.34 (Std. Dev.: 5.104), which is significantly higher than that of family members. Average number of contacts with acquaintances was 12.35 (Std. De.: 15.264), where the maximum number has been 150. This number clearly signifies that social support needs investment. Even a 5 minutes' chat with 150 people on a weekly basis takes half a day, and this 5 minutes could be much more for a given contact in a week.

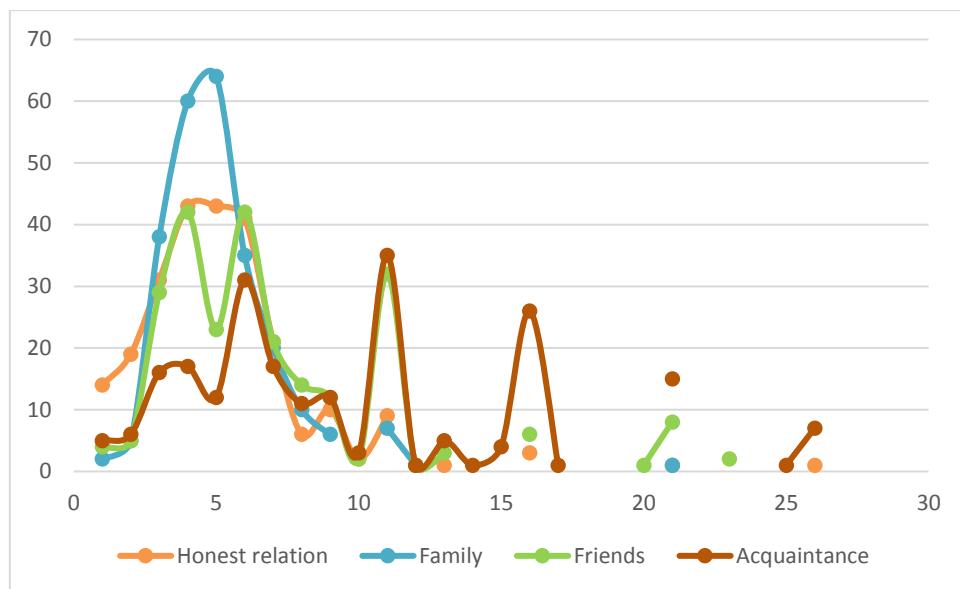


Figure 3. Number of family members and peers contacted on a weekly basis

Interestingly, there is a significant difference between males and females in regard to their average number of thin ties. Male respondents tended to have more friends (6.75; St. Dev.: 5.561), as well as acquaintances (13.47; Std. Dev.: 16.877) to interact with on a weekly basis than female respondents (Mean: 5.17; Std. Dev.: 3.254 and Mean: 9.16; Std. Dev.: 8.586 respectively). The differences' significance has been verified by the independent sample's t-test. The results are displayed in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Significant differences in social support by gender

Independent Samples' Test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	
Number of friends to be contacted on a weekly basis	Equal variances assumed	8.363	.004	2.147	244	.033	1.581	.736
Number of acquaintance to be contacted on a weekly basis	Equal variances assumed	4.676	.032	1.957	244	.051	4.316	2.205

It is yet to be tested, whether this differences means that males necessitate more thin ties than females, or that the support gained through thin ties is relatively higher for females – hence there is no need for more connection with peers – than for males.

However, the number of honest contacts were loosely connected with the number of peer contacts the respondents had. It had a Pearson correlation of 0.285 (Sig.: 0.000) with the number of friends, and a 0.207 (Sig.: 0.001) with the number of acquaintances. This slight and not so prevalent connection might indicate that there is not an exchange between quality and quantity when it comes to looser social ties, but it is rather a question of some other personal factors enabling the individual to make more and more efficient social contacts.

Respondents were requested to rate their level of trust towards their family members and peers on a five-point Likert scale on the basis of two questions. How often do You ask for advice from...? and How often do You act on the advice received from...? The scores are 1 – never/hardly ever; 2 – rarely, 3 – seldom; 4 – often; 5 – very often. The results of the respondents are displayed on *Figure 4* and *5*.

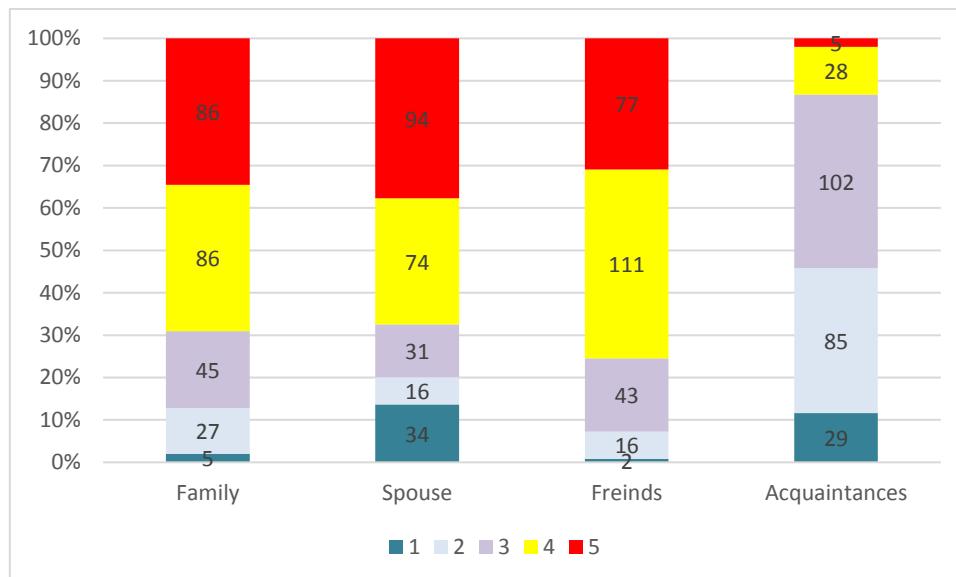


Figure 4. Frequency of asking advice from various actors

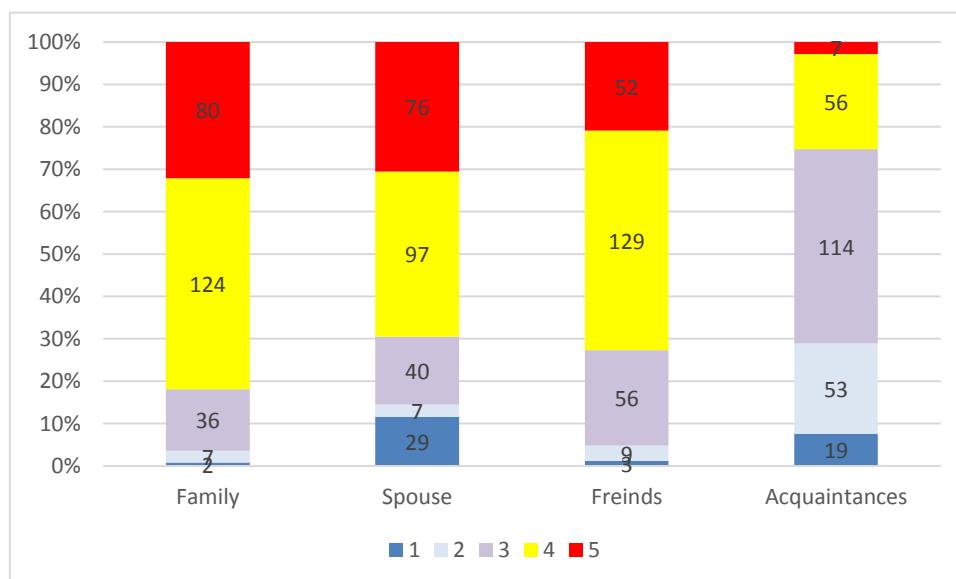


Figure 5. Frequency of acting on an advice received from various actors

As displayed on the graphs, respondents trust their families more than their peers when it is about asking for, on acting on others' advices rated with 5. Hence, Fukuyama's theory about thick and thin trust has been verified by our research as well. Nonetheless, friends are also very much trusted if it comes to the overall rating of trust, since the average score for family was 3.89 (Std. Dev.: 1.064), for spouses 3.71 (Std. Dev.: 1.384) and that for friends 3.98 (Std. Dev.: 0.902) regarding asking for advice. The reason for the relatively lower score

for spouses might be a result of the questionnaires inadequacy, since all respondents had to rate their relation to spouses, even if they did not have one at the time of the research. Though, the difference between family and friend scores is still relevant. It signals that in the young adult phase, where students try to get more detached from their families, the importance of friends is bigger. Young adults try to open up to new people and establish their own social supportive belt, that is not connected to that of their families'.

The willingness to establish new contact, however, is not equal to trust. When it comes to action (trust as a verb), young adults still behave in line with their families' expectations and follow their advices the most (Average score: 4.10; Std. Dev.: 0.802). The second highest score goes to friends (3.88; Std. Dev.: 0.821) yet again gaining upon spouses (mean: 3.74; Std. Dev.: 1.251) most possibly because of the aforementioned reason.

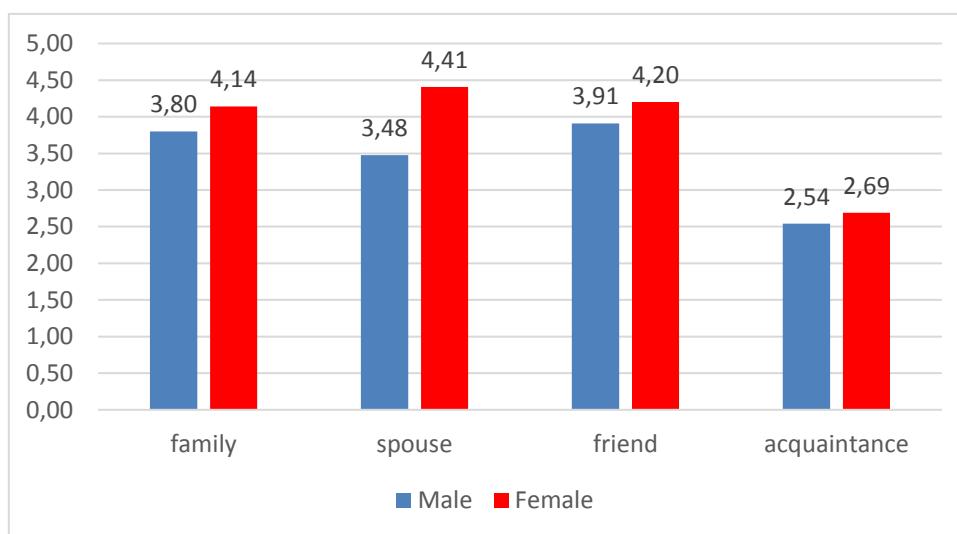


Figure 6. Average rating of asking for advice from various actors by gender

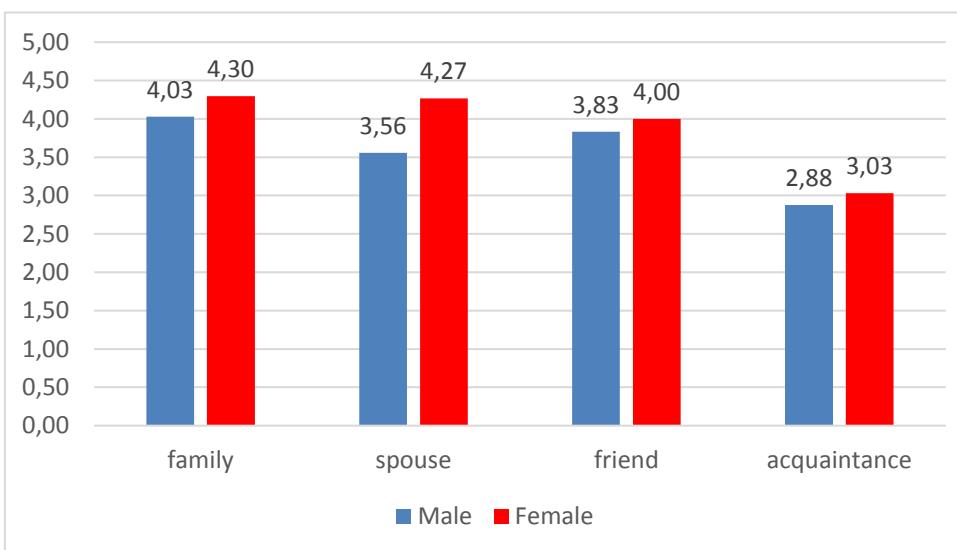


Figure 7. Average rating of acting on advice from various actors by gender

Female and male respondents were different in their relations with their social contacts. As displayed in *Figure 6* and *7*, females ask for and act on advice of others more.

All in all, they tend to trust more. The most striking differences are in connection with their trust toward their spouses. This might be a result of their difference in family status (already addressed in connection with age and societal expectations and demographic tendencies).

The difference between their levels of trust has been proved to be significant (with the help of an independent samples t-test) with almost all variables explored. The details of the statistical test are presented in *Table 3*.

Table 3. Significant differences in trust by gender

Independent Samples' Test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	
Ask for the advice of family	Equal variances not assumed	.543	.462	-2.295	116.143	.024	-.341	.148
Ask for the advice of spouse	Equal variances assumed	18.187	.000	-4.843	247	.000	-.931	.192
Ask for the advice of friends	Equal variances not assumed	.001	.969	-2.403	121.790	.018	-.295	.123
Act on the advice of family	Equal variances not assumed	.197	.657	-2.572	132.142	.011	-.270	.105
Act on the advice of spouse	Equal variances assumed	12.649	.000	-4.026	247	.000	-.709	.176

To explore the relation of trust and social support Pearson correlation coefficients have been calculated. Interestingly only very few and weak correlations have been identified. Those, who had more family members whom they have contacted regularly seemed to ask for advice of them more often (Correl.: 0.138; Sig.: 0.030). Those on the other hand, who had more people to confide in tended not to ask advice from their friends that often (Correl.: -0.125; Sig.: 0.049). These results do not seem unexpected, are in line with relations suggested by international literature. However, there were two other unexpected correlations as well. Both were connected to the number of people the respondents could be totally honest with. Interestingly, the more honest contact the respondent had, the less often he/she acted on the advice of his/her family members (Correl.: -0.156; Sig.: 0.014) or friends (Correl.: -0.204; Sig.: 0.001). The correlations are very low, however their existence – if not merely due to the relatively small sample size – rises further questions about trust and social support of young adults to be investigated.

Summary

Young adults—especially when entering higher education – are facing an important yet very hard phase of their lives. They distance themselves from their childhood friend, loose contact with high school classmates and by conforming to the societal expectations try to distance themselves also from their parents and family to search for freedom and establish

their own families. Present paper endeavoured to explore their social support and in connection to this their level of trust (thick and thin).

Data of the research presented in the paper indicated that respondents were mostly not alone and devoid from social contacts, however, there were some students, who stated not to have regular contact with either family members, or peers. The number of family member on average has been around 4, while that of friends around 6 and for acquaintances 12. Nonetheless there has been a big variance within the data and a significant difference regarding the average number of friends and acquaintances in favour of the male respondents.

Respondents tended to ask for advice from their friends more often, however when it came to action, they behaved more often in line with their families' advice. There were many significant differences between male and female respondents in this regard. The most striking was connected to trust in spouses. Female respondents asked for and acted upon the advice of their spouses much more often than the male respondents did. This difference however might not indicate a gendered aspect of trust, but is due to the average age of respondents (hem being students in HEI) females were more likely to be in a stable relation with their spouses than male students.

Regarding the relation of social support and trust, the results of the research were mostly in line with the relevant international literature. Those, who had more family members whom they have contacted regularly asked for their advice more often. Hence family ties and the thick trust they incorporate could be pointed out in the research sample.

However, present research, neither in scale, nor in scope is sufficient to verify hypotheses. It is sufficient to point out further directions of future research and underline the importance of social capital and its relationship with trust.

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