

Current Sociology

<http://csi.sagepub.com/>

Sibling Relationships in Adulthood and Old Age : A Case Study of Taiwan

Pau-Ching Lu

Current Sociology 2007 55: 621

DOI: 10.1177/0011392107077646

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://csi.sagepub.com/content/55/4/621>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



International Sociological Association

Additional services and information for *Current Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://csi.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://csi.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

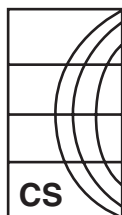
Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://csi.sagepub.com/content/55/4/621.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jul 5, 2007

[What is This?](#)



Sibling Relationships in Adulthood and Old Age

A Case Study of Taiwan

Pau-Ching Lu

Chengchi University, Taiwan

abstract: Using data from a study of 1996 adults aged 20 and older in Taiwan, this study examines the changing pattern of sibling relationships in adulthood across the life span, including young adulthood, middle age and old age. This study provides evidence that sibling ties in general provide more help in the form of social companionship and emotional support, and less in instrumental support. Furthermore, sibling contact and sibling support both vary inversely with age. In comparison to people in young adulthood and middle age, older people have less contact with siblings, and they also receive less assistance from siblings. This present study shows that the hypothesis generated by the life course perspective for analysis of changes in sibling relationships across life span is not supported. The results show that brother–brother dyads tend to provide the most help, which is different from the findings in western society where women are kin keepers. Such difference illustrates how the family–kinship institution affects sibling relationships across different cultures. Social companionship with siblings is a significant predictor of actual support from siblings, irrespective of whether it is emotional or instrumental in form.

keywords: family relationships ♦ sibling relationships ♦ siblings ♦ social support

Introduction

In the area of family studies, sibling ties get rather little attention from researchers. A growing number of studies in the gerontology field, however, point to the salience of sibling ties in terms of helping behaviours in old age. Additionally, prior research on sibling relationships tends to focus either on childhood or old age, without reference to sibling relationships in adulthood or middle age. More comprehensive analysis of sibling relationships will broaden the field of gerontological family studies (Allen et al., 2000). According to the hierarchy model of kinship, it is

Current Sociology ♦ July 2007 ♦ Vol. 55(4): 621–637
© International Sociological Association
SAGE (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore)
DOI: 10.1177/0011392107077646

normal for adults to give spouse, children and parents priority over siblings in terms of family obligation. In other words, the significance of the sibling support function depends on whether an individual is a parent, whether married and whether she or he has a surviving parent or parents. Just as the life course perspective suggests, life events occurring in specific life cycle stages, such as getting married, rearing children or loss of parents, will affect sibling relationships. Research on the sibling relationship in adulthood provides an opportunity to investigate the interplay between the kinship relationships developing in an individual's family of procreation (e.g. spouse relationship, parent-child relationships) and the sibling relationships rooted in the family of origin. Analysis of sibling relationships in adulthood draws our attention to the interlinking of different kinship ties across the life course.

The sibling relationship is influenced not only by family institutions, but also by cultural norms in individual countries (Bedford, 1995). The differing functions that the family institution serves in a society will contribute to the variation in the support function of siblings. In a society where family self-reliance is necessary to ensure family welfare, for example, siblings are an important source of economic aid (e.g. Peterson, 1990). Furthermore, the traditional norms governing the family-kinship system have been recognized as significant factors influencing the provision of social support by siblings. In modern western societies, the bilineal kinship system allows husband and wife to have nearly equal opportunities to maintain relationships with original family members. Therefore, the obligation of support for brothers will not be too different from that for sisters. In Taiwan, the patrilineal system gives priority to sons over daughters in inheritance. Accordingly, cultural norms call on sons, not daughters, to look after elderly parents. The pivotal status of sons in kinship relationships leads to stronger ties among brothers than sisters, and thus it is reasonable to propose the hypothesis that the relationships among brothers are greatly different from the relationships among sisters in the same sibling network. And being a distinctly patrilineal society, Taiwan provides an opportunity to examine how the family-kinship system affects sibling relationships.

The focus of this study is to describe the changing pattern of sibling relationships in adulthood across the life span, including early adulthood, middle age and old age, by using cross-sectional analysis to compare the fundamental characteristics of the sibling network as well as its support function among different age groups. Furthermore, the explanatory power of the life course perspective for analysis of changes in sibling relationships is explored by reference to life events. More particularly, the present study seeks to identify the key factors that affect the actual receiving support from siblings in adulthood and old age.

The Place of Sibling Tie in the Social Support Network

In order to analyse the position of sibling ties in social support networks, we must take all the relationship categories in the entire family into consideration. Three theoretical models have been proposed to explain the social support function of family relationship networks: (1) the hierarchical-substitution model, (2) the task-specific model and (3) the functional specificity of relationship model (Cicirelli, 1995; Connidis and Davies, 1992). According to the hierarchical-substitution model, if there is no spouse, or the spouse is not available, help from children usually comes next, followed by help from siblings and grandchildren. Thus siblings appear to serve a unique role as providers of care in the lives of older people who do not have a spouse or children. The task-specific model suggests that extended family members are more likely to provide occasional care and emotional support. The functional specificity of the relationship model hypothesizes that some categories of relationship are more likely to perform a given task function, but such function is not necessarily fixed to a particular relationship category. For older people, spouse and adult children are generally the key source of security. But for some, siblings also or instead provide security.

Sibling Helping Relationships in Adulthood and Old Age

The literature documents various types of social support provided by siblings. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) divide the support into three categories: instrumental support (tangible help or aid), emotional support (affect) and affirmation. Instrumental support is defined as supplying material and tangible support (goods and services), while emotional support includes, for instance, talking about personal problems and offering advice. Other types of support, such as social companionship support, are also suggested (Van der Poel, 1993). Social companionship refers to 'sharing of social activities'. Although such sharing is commonly regarded as mutually beneficial rather than supportive, such sharing is certainly supportive as well.

The helping behaviours of siblings have been outlined across the life span (e.g. Cicirelli, 1995; Goetting, 1986). In early and middle adulthood, helping behaviours include companionship and emotional support, cooperation in caring for elderly parents and occasionally provision of direct aid and services. In middle age, siblings often assist in caring for children and sharing other household responsibilities, and they are also seen as a source of companionship and support in times of serious family problems or other crises. In old age, helping behaviours include companionship and social support, and the provision of direct aid and services when called upon by a sibling (e.g. help in event of illness, help with business dealings, homemaking, home maintenance, transportation, shopping and the like). Notwithstanding that

the majority of older people say that they want to give tangible help to their siblings in time of need, relatively few actually rely on their siblings for such help (Cicirelli, 1989; Goetting, 1986). Because relatively few older persons actually receive instrumental help from their siblings, the latter are typically viewed as active providers of expressive support, but only potential reserves of instrumental support (Connidis, 1994).

Findings as to the relationship between sibling ties and age are somewhat inconsistent. The studies generally show that closeness and frequency of contact, along with the meaningfulness of the sibling tie all increase with increasing age. In other words, using emotional measures, several cross-sectional studies report a positive correlation between age and sibling attachment among older people (Connidis and Campbell, 1995; White and Riedmann, 1992). However, some other studies show an inverse relationship between age and sibling contact, and between age and actual provision of help by siblings (Miner and Uhlenberg, 1997; White and Riedmann, 1992;).

The following two observations may explain this apparent contradiction. First, correlation between age and sibling support may be positive or negative in a particular study, depending on whether its measures of social support are emotional measures or behavioural measures. Second, the relationship between age and sibling support is likely to be curvilinear rather than linear. White (2001) suggests that closeness and frequency of contact with siblings decline significantly during early adulthood, but stabilize in middle age and do not decline further in old age, while giving and receiving of help declines considerably during early adulthood through middle age, but shows a slight rise after 70 years of age.

Two different perspectives, the developmental perspective and life course perspective, are applied in studies of the relationship between age and sibling helping relationships (White, 2001). Each of these perspectives offers a framework for analysis of changes in sibling ties over time. Because the developmental perspective focuses on changes due simply to the passage of time, studies based on that approach indicate that sibling relationships become less important as individuals make the transition to adulthood, and then perhaps grow more important in later life. Studies based on the life course perspective rather indicate that such changes in sibling relationships are determined by a particular individual's series of life course events. This perspective suggests that sibling relationships become less central when individuals get married, have children or establish careers. The reduced influence of age is not seen as a developmental corollary of ageing; instead, it is seen as the result of specific life course transitions. Based on this perspective, it is assumed that the differences among age groups will be diminished after controlling for life events or life transitions (e.g. getting married, adding children and becoming widowed).

Factors Leading to Variations of Sibling Support

Empirical research in western societies indicates that the social support function of siblings varies among individuals. In addition to the age effect as discussed earlier, a variety of other factors lead to variation in sibling helping behaviours (Avioli, 1989; Bedford, 1995; Cicirelli, 1989):

Gender. Women are the family 'kin-keepers' and they are more likely to initiate and maintain ties with kin, including siblings. However, in Chinese society, being a patriarchal family system, 'married daughters are just like spilt water' (meaning that daughters 'marry into' the husband's family, and may also be said to 'marry out' of the family of origin – a bride's ties with her husband's family supplant and diminish the ties with her family of origin). Hence the hypothesis is generated that women are less likely to interact with or receive help from brothers in Chinese society.

The Experiences of Life Events.

1. Getting married (marital status): the importance of sibling relationships for married individuals is significantly lower than for single individuals (White and Reidmann, 1992).
2. Rearing children (number of children): frequency of sibling contact and exchange of help are lower for elderly individuals with adult children. Besides, sibling interaction is less important and less frequent among the elderly with children than among childless elderly.
3. Loss of parents: the death of parents tends to pull siblings closer together and strengthen their ties (Connidis, 1992).

Characteristics of the Sibling Network. The following four characteristics of sibling network influence social support functions among siblings: size of sibling network, gender composition, frequency of contacts and geographic proximity. A substantial body of research indicates that (1) the sister–sister dyad has stronger relationships than either a brother–brother or brother–sister combination; also, contact is greater between sister–sister dyads than in mixed-gender dyads, with brother–brother dyads have the least contact; (2) larger sibling size leads to greater exchange of help and contact; (3) more contact leads to more frequent helping behaviour; and (4) geographic proximity is important in sibling relationships.

Affective Ties between Siblings. Those who feel emotionally close to their siblings are likely to show more frequent helping behaviour than their less bonded counterparts.

Prior Empirical Research in Taiwan

Lin's (1993) study is based on the assumption that siblings serve as a key source of support for the elderly. Lin finds that for older people with a family network that comprises spouse, adult children and siblings, the siblings only provide limited assistance, mostly in the form of emotional support and material goods. Another study (Lin, 2002) explores sibling relationships in later life. Lin (2002) finds that the following factors may affect sibling relationships in later life: the sibling interactions in early stages, the relationship with parents and others (non-siblings) in the family of origin, the circumstances of a sibling's family of procreation (such as the quality of sibling's spousal relationship) and previous experiences in caring for frail parents. Chen (1999) shows that the average size of the sibling network for older people is 2.83, but the average number of siblings with whom frequent contact is maintained is only 1.25. As indicated earlier, prior studies on the sibling support function in Taiwan have mainly been directed towards old age; empirical research into sibling helping behaviour in middle age is scarce.

Methods

Sample

Our sample is drawn from the 2002 Taiwan Social Change Survey. This survey interviewed 1996 respondents aged over 20. Because sibling support is the focus of the present study, those without any living sibling are excluded, leaving a sample of 1896 respondents. In the analysis of characteristics of the brother network, respondents who do not have a living brother are excluded, leaving a sample of 1682. In the analysis of characteristics of the sister network, respondents who do not have a living sister are excluded, leaving a sample of 1610. To understand the support function of the sibling network, respondents residing with their siblings are also excluded, for the reason that no further information regarding their interaction with or exchange of help with co-resident siblings is provided in the questionnaire.

Measures

Dependent variables measure support received from siblings. Four types of support are examined: (1) childcare assistance, (2) material goods, (3) advice and (4) financial support. For each type of support, respondents indicate whether or not they have received such support from any sibling during the previous month (yes = 1, no = 0).

The sets of independent variables in our logistic regression model are: respondent characteristics, including gender (female as reference group for dummy coding) and age. Age is the primary independent variable; it is

treated as a category variable to represent the developmental stages in the life course. Respondents of chronological age 20 through 39 are classified as early adulthood stage, age 40 through 64 as middle age and 65 and over as old age. Each age group is coded as a dummy variable. The three variables indicating life events are: marital status (the three categories never married, married and divorced/separated/widowed are coded as dummy variables), surviving status of parents (three dummy variables code both parents alive, one alive and both deceased) and number of children.

The variables indicating characteristics of the sibling network are sibling network size, frequency of sibling contact, geographic proximity to the nearest sibling and frequency of social companionship. All are entered as continuous variables. Sibling contact is measured by a set of response categories as to the frequency of contact, ranging from 'almost every day' (scored 8) to 'nearly no contact' (scored 1). Geographic proximity is measured by transportation mode and travel time between respondent's house and the nearest sibling's house (proximity scored as 6 = short walk through 1 = international travel). The social companionship variable has a set of scores ranging from 'very often' (4) to 'never' (1).

Data Analysis

Because 'support received from sibling' is a dichotomous dependent variable (yes or no), logistic regression is used. The total sum of types of support might be a good dependent variable, but previous studies indicate that the set of factors influencing each type of support (instrumental vs emotional support) can be different. This study, therefore, estimates the regression model for each type of support separately.

Results

Characteristics of Respondents

The sample gender distribution is 49.6 percent male and 50.4 percent female. The age distribution ranges from 22 to 88 years old; 39.2 percent of the sample is in the age group 20 through 39, 47.4 percent in the age group 40 through 64; and only 4.5 percent in the age group 65 and over. The average age of respondents is 45.7 years. Distribution of marital status is: 71.3 percent married, 17.3 percent never married, 7.5 percent widowed, 2.6 percent divorced and roughly 1 percent separated. For respondents who are married, separated, widowed or divorced, the average number of children is 2.8. Both parents are alive for 44 percent of respondents, just one parent is alive for 25.6 percent and both parents deceased for 30.3 percent of respondents. The comparison of these three age groups indicates that individuals in old age are more likely to have more children, to alter their marital status (divorced/separated/widowed) and to have both parents deceased.

Table 1 *Characteristics of Sibling Network*

| Characteristics | Brother network (%) | Sister network (%) |
|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Sibling contact | | |
| Co-residence | 12.8 | 7.8 |
| Almost every day | 13.7 | 13.0 |
| At least once a week | 29.5 | 31.2 |
| Less than once a week | 44.0 | 47.9 |
| Sibling proximity | | |
| Co-residence | 13.0 | 7.8 |
| Within 15 minutes | 16.7 | 12.8 |
| 15–30 minutes | 27.8 | 30.6 |
| Over 30 minutes | 42.5 | 48.8 |

The Characteristics of Sibling Network

As to the size of sibling network, the average number of siblings is 3.94. For respondents who have living brothers, the average number of brothers is 1.95; for those who have living sisters, the average number of sisters is 1.98. Among the three age groups, the average number of siblings (4.63) is largest for the 40–64 age group, followed by the age group 65 and over (4.27) and then the age group 20–39 (2.95).

As shown in Table 1, among respondents who have a living brother, almost 13 percent reside with their brothers; 44.0 percent of respondents contact their closest brother less than once a week. As to the geographic proximity, 42.5 percent of respondents have the closest brother over 30 minutes away. The percentage of respondents living with a sister is nearly 8 percent, 47.9 percent have contact with their closest sisters less than once a week and 48.8 percent have the closest sister over 30 minutes away. The association between respondent's gender and the likelihood of co-residence with a sibling is also noteworthy: the higher percentage of respondents living with brothers as compared to living with sisters indicates that the patrilineal residence pattern still prevails as the norm in Taiwan.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the comparison between respondents in different life stages shows that individuals in old age tend to have less contact with their closest sibling than individuals in middle age. As in Connidis's (1994) study, our results indicate there is an inverse relationship between age and frequency of sibling contact.

Social Companionship Provided by Sibling

To what extent do brothers serve as a source of social companionship? As shown in Table 2, only 16.1 percent of respondents reported 'often', and

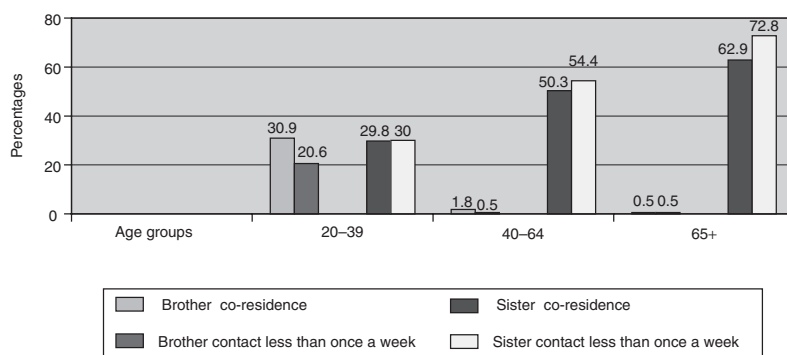


Figure 1 Sibling Contact by Age Groups

more than one-third reported that they 'seldom' have a brother as their companion in social activities. To what extent do sisters serve as a source of companionship? The percentage distribution is generally similar to that for brothers. Therefore, these results suggest that siblings do not function as an important source of social companionship in Taiwan.

Support Received from Siblings

What type of support do the respondents receive from siblings? As shown in Table 2, help that respondents are most likely to receive from brother is advice (64.1 percent), followed by material goods (28.7 percent) and financial support (20.3 percent), while the help they are least likely to receive from a brother is childcare assistance (13.3 percent). Help received from sisters, listed in descending percentage order, is as follows: advice (67.3 percent), material goods (34.1 percent), financial support (20.0 percent) and, least, childcare assistance (16.1 percent). Like the majority of studies in western societies, indicating that the sibling network mainly provides emotional support, the present study shows that individuals generally receive more emotional support (advice) and less instrumental support (material goods, financial support) from either the brother network or sister network.

The percentages of receiving help from brothers and sisters by age groups are presented in Figure 2. No matter which type of social support, comparison among the three age groups indicates that respondents in the age group 65 and over are least likely to receive help from their siblings. This result supports the hypothesis that as age increases, the actual help provided by siblings decreases.

Table 2 Sibling Social Companionship and Sibling Support

| Support function | Brother network (%) | Sister network (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Social companionship | | |
| Never | 16.8 | 15.1 |
| Rarely | 31.3 | 28.4 |
| Seldom | 35.8 | 36.2 |
| Often | 16.1 | 20.4 |
| Type of support | | |
| Childcare assistance | 13.3 | 16.1 |
| Material goods | 28.7 | 34.1 |
| Advice | 64.1 | 67.3 |
| Financial support | 20.3 | 20.0 |

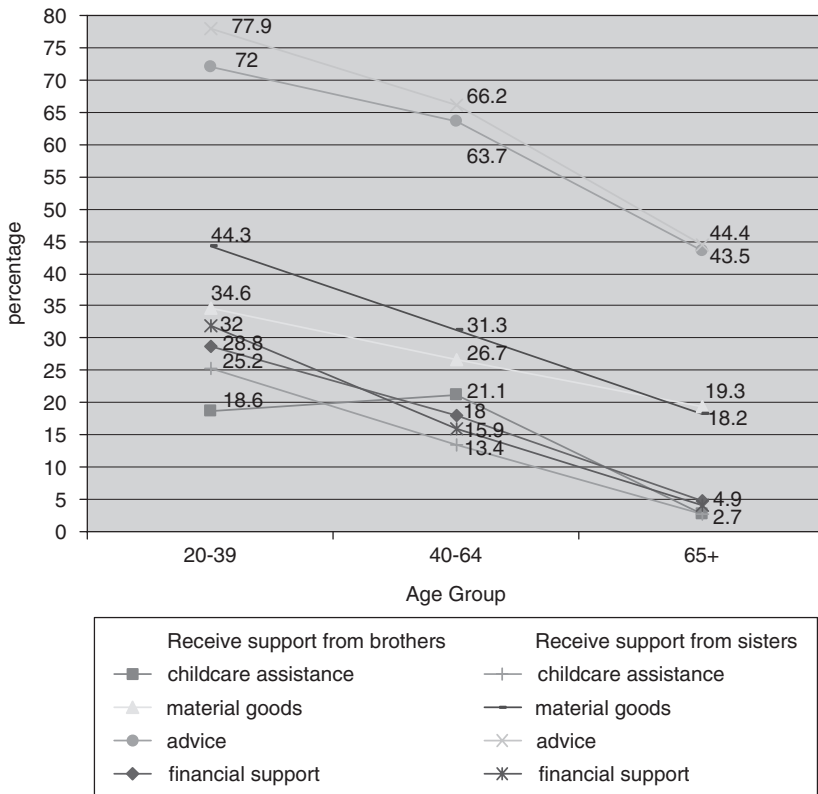


Figure 2 Sibling Support by Age Group

Factors Influencing Social Support of Sibling

In order to identify the factors that influence the observed variations of the support function of siblings, a logistic regression model is estimated. In this part of the analysis, offering financial support is treated as a measure of instrumental support, and providing advice is treated as a measure of emotional support. Receiving help in the form of childcare assistance is uncommon for individuals in old age, as is receiving material goods. For that reason, these two types of support are excluded in the multivariate analyses. A total of nine variables have been included in the model. These include two individual characteristics of respondents (age, gender), four characteristics of sibling network (number of siblings, frequency of contact with siblings, geographic proximity and social companionship with siblings) and three life events in adulthood and old age, indicated by marital status, number of children and surviving status of parents. The findings of factors are presented as follows.

Receiving Emotional Support from Brothers. As shown in Table 3, in the model for receiving advice from brothers, the significant factors are age group, gender, brother contact and social companionship. The results show that respondents who more often have contact with their brothers and those who have more social companionship with brothers are more likely than others to receive advice from brothers. After controlling for life events and the characteristics of the sibling network, age still has a significant influence on receiving advice from brothers. Respondents in the 20–39 age group are most likely to receive advice, followed by the 40–64 age group, and respondents in 65 and over age group are least likely to receive advice. This result suggests that even if respondents in old age have the same sibling network characteristics as their younger counterparts, and the same experience of life events as people in middle age, the probability of receiving advice from brothers decreases. As to the effect of gender, male respondents are more likely to receive advice from brothers than female respondents.

Receiving Instrumental Support from Brothers. The estimation model for receiving help as financial support is presented in Table 3. The results for receiving financial support from a brother are almost identical to those for receiving advice. The only difference is that brother contact is not a significant factor in the case of receiving instrumental support.

Receiving Emotional Support from Sisters. The estimation model for receiving advice from sisters is presented in Table 4. The respondents in the youngest age group, those who contact sisters more often and those who have more social companionship support from sisters are also more likely to receive advice from sisters. Respondents in the 20–39 age group are most

Table 3 Logistic Regression Coefficients for the Likelihood of Receiving Support from Brothers

| Independent variables | Support function | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------|--------|-------------------|--------|
| | Advice | | Financial Support | |
| | Coefficient | Exp(B) | Coefficient | Exp(B) |
| Age | | | | |
| 20–39 | – | – | – | – |
| 40–64 | –.270 | .763 | –.474* | .623 |
| 65+ | –.642* | .526 | –1.482*** | .227 |
| Gender | | | | |
| Female | – | – | – | – |
| Male | .416** | 1.516 | .390* | 1.477 |
| Marital status | | | | |
| Never married | – | – | – | – |
| Married | –.242 | .785 | –.078 | .925 |
| Divorced/separated/ widowed | –.110 | .896 | –.109 | .897 |
| Number of children | .061 | 1.063 | –.029 | .972 |
| Status of parents | | | | |
| Both parents alive | – | – | – | – |
| One parent alive | –.027 | .974 | .051 | 1.053 |
| Both parents deceased | –.309 | .734 | .012 | 1.012 |
| Number of brothers | .031 | 1.031 | .089 | 1.094 |
| Brother contact | .136** | 1.145 | .100 | 1.105 |
| Geographic proximity | –.053 | .949 | –.033 | .967 |
| Brother companionship | .592*** | 1.808 | .617*** | 1.853 |
| Constant | –.587 | .550 | –2.850*** | .058 |
| χ^2 | 169.420*** | | 125.470*** | |
| R^2 | .160 | | .142 | |
| N | 1440 | | 1440 | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

likely to receive such help from sisters, followed by the 40–64 age group, while this is least likely for the 65 and over age group. As to the effect of gender, there is no significant difference between male and female respondents as to receiving support from sisters in the form of advice.

Receiving Instrumental Support from Sisters. As shown in Table 4, the model for receiving financial support from sisters, the significant factors are age group, sister contact and social companionship. The data show that respondents in the youngest age group, those who have contact

Table 4 Logistic Regression Coefficients for the Likelihood of Receiving Support from Sisters

| Independent variables | Support function | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| | Advice | | Financial Support | |
| | Coefficient | Exp(B) | Coefficient | Exp(B) |
| Age | | | | |
| 20–39 | – | – | – | – |
| 40–64 | –.216 | .806 | –.601** | .548 |
| 65+ | –.696* | .498 | –1.558*** | .211 |
| Gender | | | | |
| Female | – | – | – | – |
| Male | .203 | 1.226 | .412** | 1.509 |
| Marital status | | | | |
| Never married | – | – | – | – |
| Married | –.507 | .602 | –.375 | .687 |
| Divorced/separated/ widowed | –.357 | .700 | –.173 | .841 |
| Number of children | .063 | 1.065 | –.027 | .974 |
| Status of parents | | | | |
| Both parents alive | – | – | – | – |
| One parent alive | .007 | 1.007 | .152 | 1.165 |
| Both parents deceased | –.126 | .881 | .125 | 1.133 |
| Number of sisters | –.005 | .995 | .040 | 1.041 |
| Sister contact | .209*** | 1.233 | .231*** | 1.260 |
| Geographic proximity | –.082 | .922 | –.099 | .906 |
| Sister companionship | .463*** | 1.588 | .643*** | 1.901 |
| Constant | –.344 | .709 | –3.202*** | .041 |
| χ^2 | | 154.987*** | | 177.888*** |
| R^2 | | .146 | | .192 |
| N | | 1462 | | 1462 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

with sisters more often and those who have more social companionship support from sisters are also more likely to receive financial support from sisters. As to the effect of gender, males are more likely than their female counterparts to receive financial support from sisters.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study, based on the network analysis approach, analyses sibling relationships in adulthood, including early adulthood, middle age and old

age. As is usual in network analysis, behaviour measures are used to describe the relationships. Some measures are applied to describe the structure of the sibling network, such as sibling contact and sibling companionship; while other measures focus on the help provided by siblings, mainly including instrumental and emotional support. Results indicate that the sibling tie in general provides more help in the form of social companionship and emotional support (such as advice), and less in the form of instrumental support (material goods, financial support, child-care assistance). This study provides evidence supporting the presumption made in the task-specific model: that is, extended family members are more likely to provide occasional care and emotional support.

Regarding the pattern of changes in sibling support across the life span, the results show that support from siblings is most likely to be received in early adulthood, followed by middle age, and least likely in old age. Respondents in early adulthood are also more likely than respondents in middle age or in old age to have the companionship support of a brother or sister. The same pattern is also observed in the relationship between age and sibling contact; respondents in old age tend to have less contact with their closest sibling and live furthest away from their closest sibling. These findings support the hypothesis that as age increases, the support provided by siblings decreases. Consistent with Connidis (1994), the results suggest that there is an inverse relationship between age and sibling support, and also between age and sibling contact. After controlling for other variables, the effect of age group remains significant. In other words, differences in sibling support between respondents in early adulthood, middle age and old age cannot be fully attributed to their different experiences in life events over the life cycle stages. This observation does not support the utility of the life course perspective for the analysis of change in sibling relationship. The reason that our respondents in old age receive the least support from their siblings may partly be due to the fact that older people are highly likely to have older siblings, whose health condition and resources are not as good as their younger counterparts. As a result, people in old age exchange less support between siblings.

This study shows that brother–brother dyads provide more instrumental support than brother–sister or sister–sister dyads. Somewhat different from findings in western society – that women are kin-keepers – results here show that brother–brother dyads tend to provide the most help. This finding probably reflects the Chinese cultural norm governing a married woman's family relationships. As indicated by the Chinese proverb 'married daughters are just like spilt water', the sibling tie of females, as to both male and female siblings, is attenuated after marriage, when those sibling relationships are largely supplanted by the husband's family relationships. In addition, this result can probably be explained by the

patrilineal family system in Taiwan, in which the obligation of support for brothers is sustained by the traditional pattern of co-residence in the home of their father, and more brothers imply more providers of social support. The normal hereditary sharing of family-of-origin assets among sons, but not daughters, results in more exchange of social support between brother–brother dyads.

Overall, respondents who have more social companionship with siblings are also more likely to receive any kind of help from siblings. As expected, social companionship is not only one dimension of social support, but can also serve as a proxy to measure the strength of sibling ties. Frequency of contact is another broad measure of the strength of sibling ties, significantly affecting emotional support provided by brothers and sisters. The results confirm that strong sibling ties lead to more help from siblings.

In the multivariate analysis, variables indicating life events or transitions, such as marital status or number of children, appear to have no significant influence on any type of sibling support. This result might be due to imprecision of these variables as indicators of particular life events or transitions. The variable ‘number of children’, for example, without more detailed information such as the ages of children, fails to indicate whether the children are a possible source of support or a potential need of support by way of childcare assistance. For a respondent in old age, children may be assumed to be adults and therefore a potential source of support along with siblings. But for respondents in early adulthood or in middle age, ‘number of children’ might rather indicate a need for childcare assistance. Hence, the variable ‘number of children’ taken alone may signal either an enlarged pool of source of support or increased potential need for support.

It is somewhat surprising that the marital status of respondent has no influence on any type of sibling support. During early adulthood or middle age, a single person may have more resources and more freedom to exchange with siblings, as compared with their married counterparts, who are likely to be constrained by obligations within the family of procreation. Thus for respondents in early adulthood or middle age, marital status, like ‘number of children’, without more detail, is ambiguous, possibly indicating an enlarged pool of potential support, or possibly indicating an increased potential need for support (to meet family obligations). On the other hand, loss of a spouse in old age most likely indicates loss of a source of emotional and possibly material support. The widowed, divorced or never-married elderly are therefore more likely to receive support from siblings than their counterparts who have a spouse. Thus, it is expected that the effect of a respondent’s marital status on sibling support depends on the respondent’s particular life stage.

The presumed effect of life events on sibling support function is generated from the study of sibling support for older people. Results of the present study indicate that models explaining social support for people in old age are not necessarily appropriate for explaining social support in early adulthood and middle age. In studies on sibling relationships in middle age, inclusion of additional variables indicating opportunity and obligation in the entire family context is suggested. Certainly, more information on the circumstances of the siblings might improve our understanding of sibling helping behaviours. Moreover, the present study only analyses receiving help from siblings. Additional explanatory factors may be uncovered by analysing help-giving behaviour of siblings, and such additional factors might have value in understanding observed patterns in receiving help. Finally, in any further studies targeted to perceive the changing pattern of sibling helping behaviours across the life span, a longitudinal data set will be indispensable.

References

- Avioli, P. S. (1989) 'The Social Support Functions of Siblings in Later Life', *American Behavioral Scientist* 33(1): 45–57.
- Allen, K. R., Blieszner, R. and Roberto, K. A. (2000) 'Families in the Middle and Later Years: A Review and Critique of Research in the 1990s', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62(4): 911–26.
- Bedford, V. H. (1995) 'Sibling Relationships in Middle and Old Age', in R. Blieszner and V. H. Bedford (eds) *Handbook of Aging and the Family*, pp. 201–21. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Chen, E. C. (1999) *The Three Treasures of the Elderly: Savings, Spouse and Friend*. Taipei: Institute of Economics, Academia Sinica (in Chinese).
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1989) 'Helping Relationships in Later Life: A Reexamination', in J. A. Mancini (ed.) *Aging Parents and Adult Children*, pp. 167–75. Boston, MA: Lexington.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1995) *Sibling Relationships across the Life Span*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Connidis, I. A. (1992) 'Life Transitions and the Adult Sibling Tie: A Qualitative Study', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54: 972–82.
- Connidis, I. A. (1994) 'Sibling Support in Older Age', *Journal of Gerontology* 49: 5309–17.
- Connidis, I. A. and Campbell, L. D. (1995) 'Closeness, Confiding and Contact among Siblings in Middle and Late Adulthood', *Journal of Family Issues* 6: 722–47.
- Connidis, I. A. and Davies, L. (1992) 'Confidants and Companions: Choices in Later Life', *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 47(3): S115–S122.
- Goetting, A. (1986) 'The Developmental Tasks of Siblingship over the Life Cycle', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 48: 703–14.

- Kahn, R. L. and Antonucci T. C. (1980) 'Convoys over the Life Course: Attachment, Roles, and Social Support', in P. B. Baltes and O. G. Brim (eds) *Life-Span Development and Behavior*, Vol. 3, pp. 253–86. New York: Academic Press.
- Lin, S.-L. (1993) 'Social Support Source and Social Needs of the Elderly', in Wang Kuo-yu (ed.) *Issues on Social Security*. Chia-Yi: Department of Social Welfare, Chung-Cheng University (in Chinese).
- Lin, J.-P. (2002) *Sibling Solidarity in Later Life*, Research Report. Taipei: National Science Council (in Chinese).
- Miner, S. and Uhlenberg, P. (1997) 'Intragenerational Proximity and the Social Role of Sibling Neighbors after Midlife', *Family Relations* 46: 145–53.
- Peterson, J. T. (1990) 'Sibling Exchanges Complementarity in the Philippine Highlands', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52(2): 441–51.
- Van der Poel, M. G. M. (1993) 'Delineating Personal Support Networks', *Social Networks* 15: 49–70.
- White, L. (2001) 'Sibling Relationships over the Life Course: A Panel Analysis', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63(2): 555–68.
- White, L. K. and Riedmann, A. (1992) 'Ties among Adult Siblings', *Social Forces* 71: 85–102.

Pau-Ching Lu is a professor of social work at the Chengchi University in Taiwan. Professor Lu's areas of interest and expertise are family care, gerontology, ageing and social policy. She is currently conducting research into the effects of spouse death on life adjustment of older persons, and also on the health and social care of older persons. She is the author of *Elder Care: Older People, Family and Formal Services* (in Chinese, Taipei: Wu-nan Culture Enterprise, 2001). Recent articles include 'Assessment of Physical Functioning in Disabled Persons: A Comparison between Self-Report and Proxy Reports from Family Caregivers', *Taiwan Journal of Public Health*, 2004, 23(3) (in Chinese).

Address: Graduate Institute of Social Work, Chengchi University, 64, Chin-Nan Rd, Sec. 2, Taipei, Taiwan. [email: pclu@nccu.edu.tw]