

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSNATIONAL AND LOCAL FAMILY TIES  
IN THE SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS OF REFUGEES

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**Abstract for Submission at the  
“Workshop on the Integration of Refugee Families in Host Countries: Research Advances,  
Policy Improvements, and Data Challenges”**

Date of Submission: 30.06.2022

**Abstract**

The immediate and extended family plays a major role in the life of recently arrived refugees. Several studies find that the social network of these individuals is mainly made up of intra-ethnic contacts (Makwarimba et al., 2013; Schweitzer et al., 2006). This is often explained by high levels of trust, common understanding, and mutual trust. Being able to receive support from a close network of people through collective problem-solving and sharing information related to a new country, language, or culture is reported to be beneficial (Ager & Strang, 2008; Choi et al., 2015; Nakhaie, 2018). However, forced displacement is often accompanied by physical separation from relatives (Löbel, 2020; Löbel & Jacobsen, 2021). This leads to disrupted and spatially fragmented social networks of recently arrived refugees with family members being accommodated in other countries or still living in the region of origin.

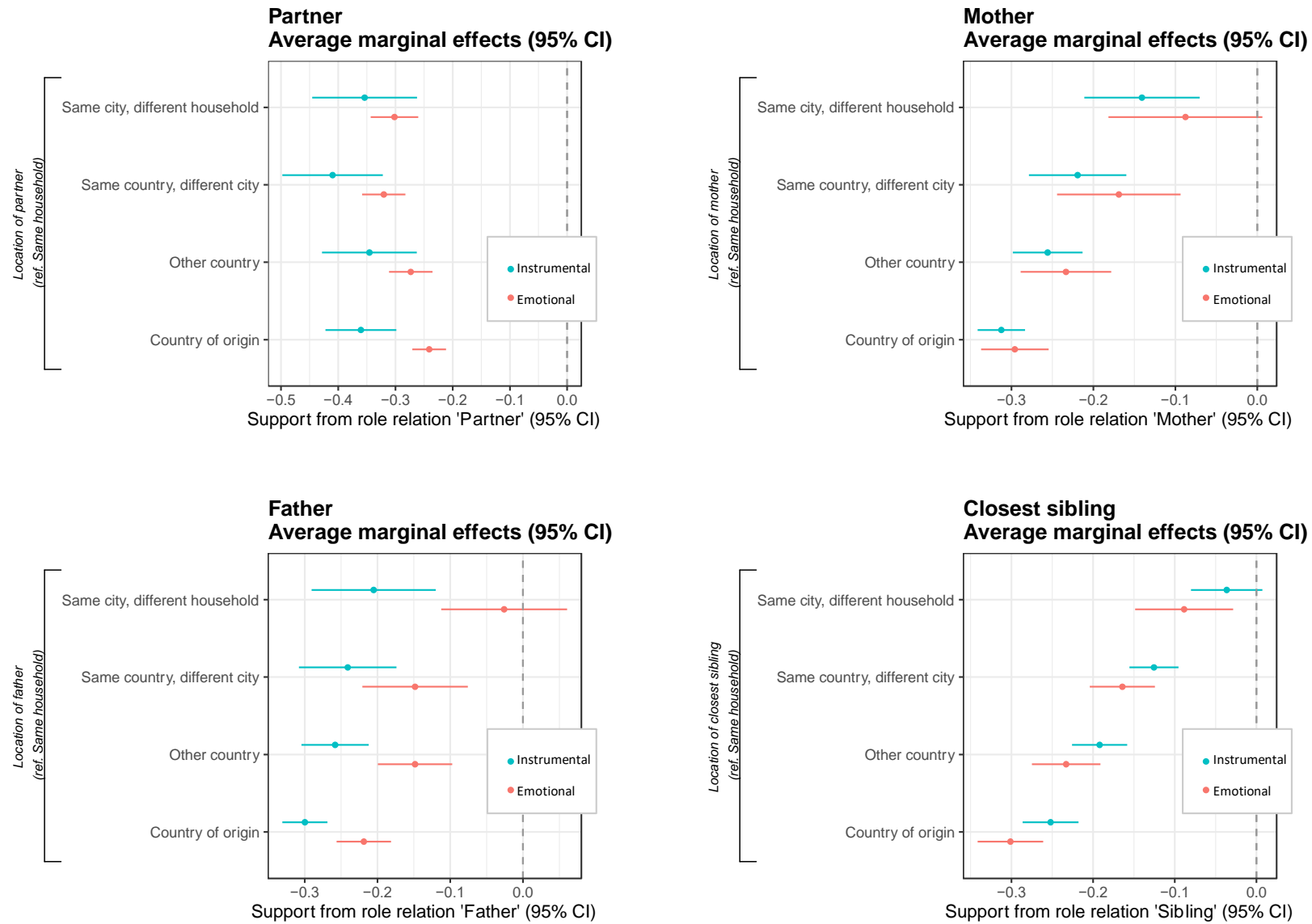
While local social networks of refugees and the support they provide have become a powerful predictor for integrational success, little is known about the composition of refugees' networks that extend beyond the immediate spatial proximity. How does the support network of local as well as transnational ties of refugees work and what are the dynamics of providing support?

This paper aims to localize the family ties of recently arrived refugees and what their role within the social support network is. It further disentangles this structure by examining what types of support are provided by which role relations. Using data from the socio-economic panel study (SOEP, 2020) and the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees (Brücker et al., 2016) offers the opportunity to study the residential location of close family members as well as other important network characteristics such as the provision of two different types of support as well as the relative importance of role relations for these types. The sample consists of 12,075 individuals (mean age 33.7, 61.1% male) with refugees residing in Germany for, on average, 1.8 years. The main countries of origin include Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Preliminary results show that the social support network of refugees is, in line with previous findings, mainly centered around the immediate and extended family. Children and siblings play a big role in providing emotional and instrumental support. While respondents living longer in the country indicate that more family members relevant to the network are residing in the same household or city, the share of those living in Germany the longest, namely more than 3 years, still reports a proportion of 0.55 transnational ties in the network. In terms of the provision of different support types, emotional support is mainly received from the partner and mother, while the father, as well as male siblings, are important for instrumental support. Lastly, investigating the residential location of relevant family members shows that increasing distance to the respondent is associated with a decrease in support (see [Figure 1](#)). This is visible for both support types, but stronger for instrumental and for emotional support, meaning that refugees in the sample share intimate thoughts and feelings with family members important to them, even across a greater distance. Instrumental support, however, entails location-bound aid and tasks and is therefore not transmittable via greater distances.

**Keywords:** social support | social networks | refugees | types of support | family ties

**Figure 1.** AME of the effect of residential location of a certain family member on the probability to receive support.



**Note:** Samples constrained on existence of respective role relation. Control variables not shown (Age, gender, time since migration, marital status, country of origin, size of nuclear family).

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