

Measuring Social Support: a comparison of the New Rural Economy Project and General Social Survey approaches

Bill Reimer

Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology
Concordia University
1455 boul. de Maisonneuve O
Montréal QC H3G 1M8

(514) 848-2424 x 2171
Fax: (450) 689-5435
Bill.Reimer@concordia.ca

March 30, 2011

Draft Version – Please do not quote without author's permission.

Measuring Social Support: a comparison of the NRE and GSS approaches

Bill Reimer

Abstract

This paper compares two surveys examining the nature and use of social supports by Canadians. The first includes 1995 cases from 22 rural communities in the *Rural Observatory* of the New Rural Economy (NRE) project and the second is the 2008 General Social Survey (GSS22) on social networks. The focus is on the major changes that occurred in the household and the social supports used by respondents to deal with those changes – a set of questions developed in the NRE study and replicated in the GSS22. Using the four types of normative relations proposed by NRE researchers, the two surveys are compared with respect to the nature of the changes and the types of supports used by the respondents. Particular attention is given to the relative use of supports by vulnerable populations in the GSS2: the poor, elderly, single parents, and those with low incomes. The results show considerable similarities between the two surveys – with some important differences most likely due to the way in which respondents were engaged. They also reinforce the NRE findings regarding the multiplicity of sources used by respondents and the vulnerability of the types of people identified above.

Measuring Social Support: a comparison of the NRE and GSS approaches¹

Bill Reimer

Introduction

The New Rural Economy (NRE) project has provided numerous insights regarding social capital and social support. As a result of this work, researchers have taught us how social capital is critical for community action (Reimer and Tachikawa 2008; Lyons and Reimer 2009), a key component of community resiliency (Alasia et al. 2008; Kulig et al. 2003), and manifested in multiple forms (Reimer et al. 2008). Much of this work has relied on a 2001 household survey conducted in 22 rural field sites. Just under 2000 respondents were interviewed regarding numerous issues including their employment histories, demographic characteristics, and relationships with the people and organizations in their community. The results provide a rich source of information regarding social networks, social capital, and social support, but they are limited to a relatively small number of rural communities.

The General Social Survey Number 22 (GSS22) provides an excellent opportunity to overcome this limitation. It was conducted as a telephone survey by Statistics Canada in 2008 including 20,401 respondents from the 10 Canadian provinces (2008 General Social Survey, Cycle 22: Social Networks 2008). This survey integrates one of the key modules regarding social support

¹ I would like to thank Lyn Charland, Hendrika Janssen, and Craig Mackie for the support they provided in the preparation of this paper.

as developed by the New Rural Economy researchers (cf. Section 3 of the GSS: Changes Experienced by the Respondent). This module asks the respondents to identify a major change that had occurred to them over the last year and follows it up with a series of questions regarding how they dealt with that change. In the process it gathers information regarding the sources, nature, and outcomes of the social support they received from family, friends, local groups, formal organizations, and others.

The similarity between the NRE and the GSS22 versions of this module provides us with an excellent opportunity to make comparisons of both a methodological and substantive nature. The GSS22 material will allow us to examine the similarities and differences between rural and urban communities and to expand the range of rural communities considered. The NRE data will allow us to assess the sensitivity of the GSS22 data to the details and dynamics of social support and social capital.

This paper will outline the results of the comparison between these two instruments in an effort to identify more general implications than those provided by the NRE data, to assess the correspondence between the two instruments, and to propose strategies for other researchers who wish to analyze social support and social capital using one or other of these approaches.

Social Support and Social Capital – A Framework

The NRE approach to social support makes use of a framework regarding four types of norms that facilitate co-ordinated action and structure the receipt of social support by people in their

communities (Reimer et al. 2008). Each of these forms can be represented by ideal types of normative relations as described in much of the NRE literature.

The first type, identified as market-based norms, includes relations based on the classical interpretation of exchange relations. These are relations in which people exchange goods, services, or favours in an open and relatively unconstrained market. They are the type of relationship one finds in commercial transactions, housing markets, and labour markets: those in which choices are made based on relatively free exchanges by relatively informed actors each seeking to satisfy their individual interests.

Bureaucratic-based social norms are those types of relationships in which behaviour is coordinated by general roles and principles of action – often formally prescribed in organizations. They can also be found in informal relations where we relate to others based on generally recognized and accepted roles such as employee, student, or citizen. These norms are prescribed in a formal or informal way and our actions are co-ordinated based on rules and principles. When we relate to our students, our coworkers, or government agencies, bureaucratic-based norms largely conditioned the nature of our relationships, even to the point where the distribution of resources within those relationships is determined by our roles and identifications. Merely by living to 65 years of age, for example, I am able to get state support or reduced fares. I need not offer anything specific in return since the norms on which we relate our based on my ascribed characteristics.

The third type, associative-based norms, refers to those that predominate when we are operating in volunteer groups, clubs, faith-based, or other informal social organizations. Within these norms, we typically coordinate our behaviour around the sharing of common objectives and so long as those objectives are being met or we have the promise of being met, we remain willing to sacrifice our individual interests on behalf of the group. These norms do not support an open market type of arrangement where loyalties change according to market conditions. Nor do they rely on generally prescribed roles that remain relatively unchanged. Instead, both choices and roles vary according to the shared objectives of the group.

The fourth type of normative system is identified as communal-based by the NRE researchers. These norms are those typically found in the interactions among family members, close friendship groups, clans, or gangs. They are largely characterized by strongly formulated identities that justify preferential treatment often based upon characteristics such as age, gender, or kinship. Under communal-based norms, for example, I may feel a commitment to my neighbour, not because of anything he may have done for me, but for something he did for my daughter.

All of these norms may operate within any given situation but typically one or two become predominant. This is partly because one needs the assurance of clear expectations when coordinating behaviour with others. In order to do so, it is necessary to make assumptions about the norms guiding the other's behaviour and to organize our own responses to accommodate those norms. The identification of such norms provides a basis for what we mean by trust – an essential element of social interactions.

These four normative systems are not always compatible, however. We notice when students treat their grades as a basis for negotiation rather than a reflection of their ability as assessed through our role as teacher; we are suspicious when our friend tries to sell us insurance; and we often resist the attempts of others to turn our group's night out together into a structured event. Successful co-ordination of action requires that we are not only skilled in operating within one or the other of the systems, but that we appropriately identify the one that is shared by others with whom we wish to interact.

NRE researchers have used this fourfold classification to interpret and understand numerous ways in which groups and individuals interact or fail to interact within the rural setting. They have argued that rural communities tend to be particularly strong and skilled when dealing with associative and communal-based relations but are often at a disadvantage when it comes to market or bureaucratic-based ones (Reimer and Tachikawa 2008). At the same time, most of the resources within modern urban society are organized and distributed based on market and bureaucratic principles. For that reason, they argue, rural communities must develop their skills and strengths in the market and bureaucratic relations to match those of the associative or communal-based type. They go on to argue that the strength of associative and communal-based relations is sometimes overlooked in this transformation. These two types of normative systems can serve as a basis for learning and developing skills and strengths in market and bureaucratic types once they are recognized as equivalent systems of social organization.

One of the important distinctions made in the NRE research is between the way in which social capital can be available but not used (Reimer et al. 2008). Social organizations, both formal and informal, stand as available sources for social capital often based on bureaucratic or associative-based norms. From an individual point of view these available resources may or may not be used. One of the ways in which these researchers have sought to measure the level of the use is by examining the stresses or crises faced by households and to ask the question about where they turned for help in the face of these stresses. This is at the core of the measurement of used social capital as adopted by the NRE researchers. It is also the approach that informs the module on social support as developed by the GSS.

The two measures differ in some important ways, however. In the NRE survey, information was also collected on the extent of sharing that took place among households – sharing that included articles, food, services, and other resources that play an important part of the informal economy within the communities. Some of this information was integrated into their index of social support. None of it is available in the GSS22 study.

Since the NRE project focused on household level data within a community context, the researchers also have access to information about the community in which the household is located. This is the type of information that is used to measure the extent to which social capital is available to the various households. Businesses, social organizations, government services, recreation facilities, and educational institutions are all potential sources of social capital that are available to the people in the community. Information on these organizations is easily available for the NRE data, but difficult to identify for the GSS22 survey. Only a few questions on the

GSS22 get information regarding the services in the community – and they all rely on the respondent’s familiarity and knowledge about such services. For this reason, the analysis in this paper will concentrate on the comparison of used, as opposed to available, social capital and social support.

Indicators of the types of social support

Although the two instruments attempt to measure similar things, the populations to which they are addressed and the nature of the data gathering mean that there are several important differences in the details. The NRE survey randomly sampled households in the same community in order to generalize within clearly defined limits to the communities chosen. The GSS22 survey, on the other hand, was a telephone survey that focused on individuals across the country, using a tightly structured survey and selecting individuals with little regard to the community in which they lived. As a result, it is unlikely that there will be more than one respondent in any one of the smaller rural communities.

In addition, the styles of question delivery were different in the two surveys. The NRE survey was conducted face-to-face with the respondent. The question about social support, for example, was asked in an open fashion (“Briefly describe how your household is managing or trying to resolve this change.”) with follow-up questions about selected types of peoples such as family, friends, and business people. The responses were subsequently coded into 37 categories of people or organizations with multiple types of responses permitted. In the GSS survey, the equivalent question was asked as a series of “Did you get help from...?” questions with each of

the selected types of social support (i.e. family, friends, co-workers, etc.) being specifically asked in turn. This meant that the respondent was prompted with each possible type of support rather than left to identify those types in their own words. As we see in the data analysis, this difference in delivery style may have produced some important differences in the resulting distributions of responses.

Our first challenge was matching the questions and answers between the two surveys.

Table 1 provides a summary of this process. Using the NRE as the point of reference we identified the questions and answers on the GSS22 survey that were basically equivalent. It should be apparent that they are largely equivalent in general with some minor differences in specific formulation of the questions (usually to accommodate the difference in delivery) and response categories.

Table 1: Comparison of NRE and GSS22 survey on social support module questions (major differences in response categories are in bold)

NRE Survey Question	GSS22 Survey Question
18. Which of the following changes, either positive or negative, were experienced by you or someone in your household in the last 12 months? Financial or income, employment, health, parenting or child care, home care of sick or otherwise disabled, education, legal, living arrangements, family relationships, personal achievements, another important change	RCE_Q110 to RCE_Q220. Which of the following changes, either positive or negative, have you experienced during the past 12 months? Have you experienced changes to do with...? finances or income, employment, health, parenting or child care, home care of a sick or disabled person, death of a loved one , education, legal matters, living arrangements, family relationships, personal achievements, any other changes
19. Which one of the changes you identified has had the most impact on your household?	RCE_Q230. Which one of these changes had the greatest impact on your life?
20. Would you say that this change is ongoing or that it has been resolved or ended?	RCE_Q250. Is this change still ongoing/situation still affecting you?
21. [If ongoing]: Briefly describe how your household is managing or trying to resolve this change. [If resolved]: Briefly describe how your household dealt with or managed this change. Are you also seeking help from.../Did you also	RAG_R110 to RAG_Q270. Now we want to know about any resources that may have helped you during the change to do with the greatest impact. By resources, we mean people, organizations or sources of information. We will ask you about many possible resources. Some of these questions may not apply to you but we need to ask everyone

NRE Survey Question	GSS22 Survey Question
<p>seek help from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family resources or people such as spouse, parent, children other relatives; • friend or neighbour such as a close personal friend, friend, work-make, neighbours, other; • business people such as your employer, your financial advisor/accountant, business friend, a business, other; • professional people such as a doctor or other health professional, a lawyer or other legal professional, a teacher or other education professional, accountant, other professional; • local government resources such as mayor/council member, staff, economic development officer, other; • other government resources such as one or more departments, government employees, apply to one or more programs, elected representative/their office, other; • community or voluntary organization resources such as health organization, law & justice organization, social services, society & public benefit organization, religious organization, education/youth development group, employment & economic organization, other; • information or media resource such as newspaper, TV, newsletter or bulletin, radio, books, magazines, Internet, other. 	<p>the same questions. Did you get help from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • your family (Such as your spouse/partner, parents, children or other relatives); • your close friends; • your friends other than your close friends; • your co-workers; • your neighbours; • business people such as your employer; financial advisor or a business friend; • other professional people, such as a doctor, a lawyer or a counsellor; • local government resources, such as the mayor or a municipal service; • other government resources, such as a provincial or federal department; • a public institutions such as a high school, college, university or library; • a social service or a health organization; • a law or justice organization; • a religious organization; • another community organization; • other information or media resources, such as newspapers, books, TV or radio; • any other type of resource not mentioned here
	<p>IRG_Q160 Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with the help you have received from [each resource]? Are you: very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied?</p>
<p>21. How helpful is or was this source of support? Not very helpful, not helpful, neutral, helpful, very helpful</p>	<p>RAG_Q300 Of all your sources of help, which did you find the most helpful? your family; your close friends; your friends other than your close friends; your co-workers; your neighbours; business people; other professional people; local government resources; other government resources; a public institution; a social service or a health organization; a law or justice organization; a religious organization; another community organization; the Internet; other information or media resources; any other type of resource not mentioned before</p>

NRE Survey Question	GSS22 Survey Question
22. [If ongoing]: Is the way in which your household is dealing with this change making any of the following aspects more positive or more negative for your household? [If resolved]: Did the way in which your household dealt with the change make any of the following aspects made more positive or more negative for your household? [for each of the following: more positive, no difference, more negative, can't tell] Wealth; family; friends; personal safety and security; good physical health; work success; mental well being	OLG_Q010. Did you make new social contacts because of the change to do with % greatest impact %? OLG_Q020. Did you lose some previous social contacts because of this change? OLG_Q030 to OLG_Q070. As a result of this change is... [for each of the following: much better, somewhat better, the same, somewhat worse, much worse] your financial situation generally: your employment situation (in general)? your physical health (in general)? your mental well-being (in general)? your personal safety and security (in general)?

By combining the detailed responses in strategic fashion, however, we have been able to construct equivalent measures on 17 items:

Table 2: Construction of equivalent indicators for NRE and GSS22 variables

NRE	GSS22	Normative system
spouse, parent, children other relatives	your family (Such as your spouse/partner, parents, children or other relatives)	Communal
close friend	your close friends	Communal
friends	friends other than close friends	Communal
work-mate	co-workers	Communal
close neighbour; other neighbour	neighbours	Communal
employer; financial advisor; business friend; business person; accountant; employment & economic organizations	business people	Market
doctor; lawyer; counsellor; teacher; other professional	professional people	Bureaucratic
mayor; council member; municipal staff; economic development officer; other local government	local government	Bureaucratic
government department; government employee; government program; elected representative; other government sources	other government	Bureaucratic
education organizations	public institutions (schools or library)	Bureaucratic
social services	social services	Bureaucratic
law/justice organizations	law/justice organizations	Bureaucratic
religious organization	religious organization	Associative
community health, law & justice, social service organizations; society and public benefit; youth; other organizations	community organization	Associative
the Internet	the Internet	
newspapers; TV; newsletter or bulletins; radio; books; magazines; other	other media	
other	other	

Indicators of the major changes

Developing common indicators of the major changes was less problematic except for the basic focus of those changes. In the NRE project survey the question was asked about major changes in the **household**, whereas in the GSS22 questionnaire, the focus was on the **individual** respondent. There is little we can do about this since we have no way of knowing the significance of the difference. As a result, we have had to assume that any major changes occurring to the individual will be shared by the household in which they live and vice versa. Examining this assumption would require the delivery of an instrument that includes both types of questions.

The classification of changes in the two surveys provides very comparable items. For this question, the response categories were supplied in the NRE survey – and essentially copied in the GSS22 version. They are identified in Table 3. The only difference is the addition of “Death of a loved one” in the GSS22 survey. For the purposes of comparison, we have treated this as a reflection of a change in health status according to the NRE categories.

Table 3: Classification of major changes in NRE and GSS22 surveys

NRE (Household focus)	GSS22 (Respondent focus)
Financial or income	Finances or income
Employment	Employment
Health	Health Death of a loved one
Parenting or child care	Parenting or child care
Home care of sick or otherwise disabled	Home care of sick or disabled person
Education	Education
Legal	Legal matters

NRE (Household focus)	GSS22 (Respondent focus)
Living arrangements	Living arrangements
Family relationships	Family relationships
Personal achievements	Personal achievements
Other	Any other change

Results

Graph A provides results for the distribution of major change types for the NRE and GSS22 surveys. It includes the percentage of respondents who identify the various types of changes as being of major importance. The analysis includes a separate bar for those respondents who live outside Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA), Census Agglomerations (CA), and Prince Edward Island (PE). This provides a proxy indicator for rural and small town Canada – making it more equivalent to the sites selected for the NRE survey.

Figure 1: Major changes by NRE and GSS22 Surveys

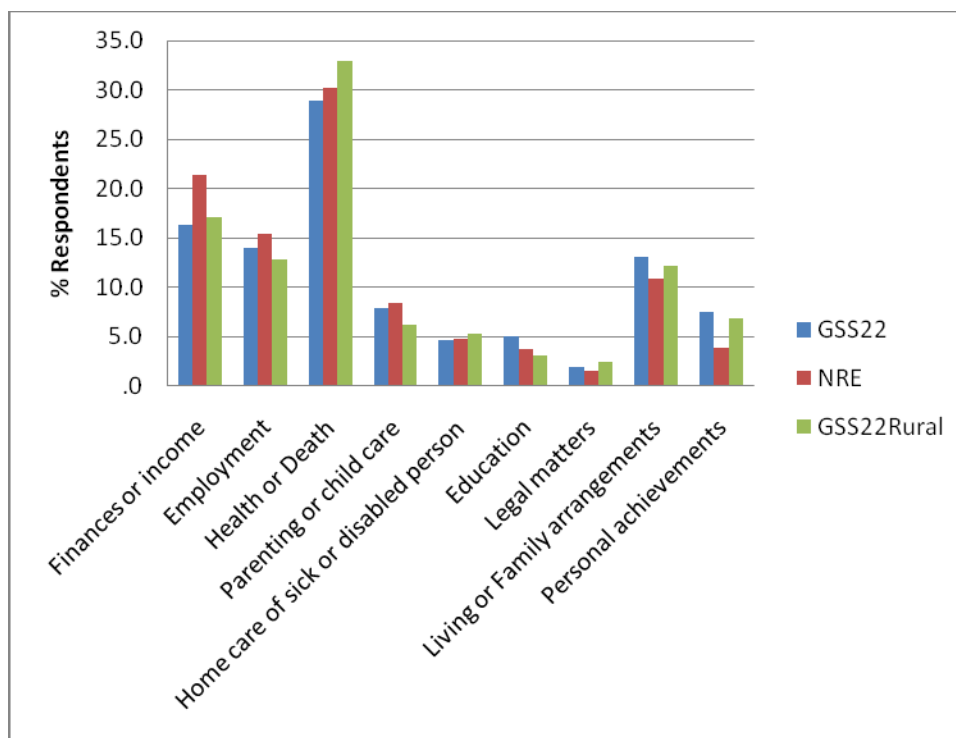
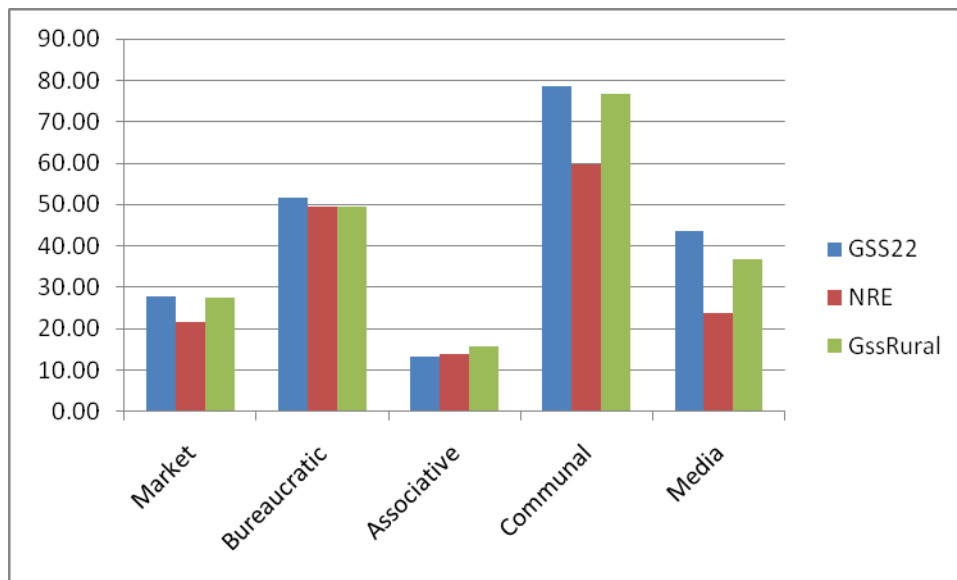


Figure 1 makes it clear that the distribution of responses between the two surveys is remarkably similar. There was a major difference in the “Other change” category, where 10.6% of the respondents in the NRE survey identified this type of change whereas only 1.0% of the GSS22 survey did so. This is likely due to the presentation format of the two surveys since the NRE survey permitted open-ended responses that were later coded by the researchers. Many of these “other” categories may be re-coded into the other ones, but have not been treated in this fashion in order to leave options for subsequent analysis. We have not been able to take the time to re-evaluate the details of these “other” responses but can do so from the specifications included once resources become available. For the time being, we have chosen to leave this category out of the analysis for both surveys.

The other notable differences are found with the ‘finances or income’ and ‘personal achievements’ categories. The former is over-represented by 4.3% and the latter is under-represented by 3.1% in the NRE survey (as compared to the rural-focused GSS22 survey). The other categories are within 3%. The rank order of percentages is the same for the two surveys except for the order of ‘home care’ and ‘personal achievements’. In the NRE survey ‘home care’ ranks higher than ‘personal achievements’ (ranks 6 and 7) while in the GSS22 survey they rank 7 and 6 respectively.

The encouraging similarity of these two surveys for the major changes is also found when we examine the sources of support that were used in order to meet the challenges of these changes. Figure 2 provides this information using the four types of normative systems identified in Table 2 above.

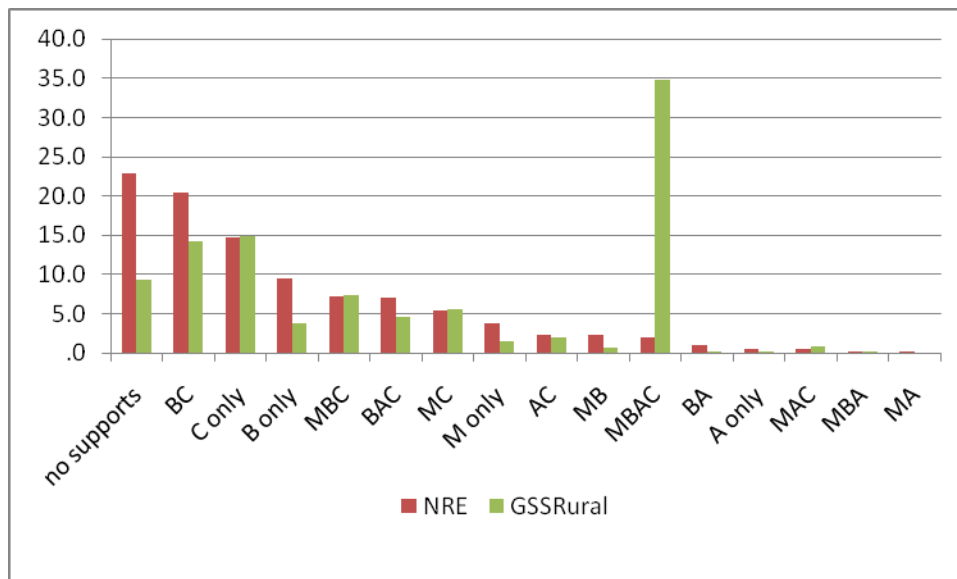
Figure 2: Sources of support by 4 normative systems and media (NRE and GSS22)



In this case, the rank order is preserved and except for Communal and Media supports, the percentages are within 6%. The most noticeable difference is in the Communal category, where the NRE estimates that 59.6% of the households seek such support whereas the GSS22 survey estimates 76.8% for the rural places. This is a difference of 17.2%. A closer look at the individual response categories from which these indexes were developed shows that the NRE survey showed a much lower percentage in the “close friends” and “co-workers” categories: both of them with communal-based normative systems. It is hard to interpret the significance of this, particularly since the NRE percentages were larger than the GSS22 ones only for “community organizations”. There may be some effect due to the presentation protocols of the two surveys since the GSS22 procedure took the respondent through each of the categories in sequence, but at this point we are not able to independently verify such an interpretation.

Our NRE analysis demonstrated that these various types of support are typically used in combination – an important point for the development of policy initiatives within government and community organizations (Reimer 2004). An analysis of the GSS22 data confirms this pattern in general, but does so in a manner that differs from the NRE research in a few dramatic ways (cf. Figure 3).

Figure 3: Social support by combinations of normative types (NRE and GSS22 Rural)



The most noticeable feature of the comparison is that the GSS22 respondents were much more likely to use multiple types of normative systems than those in the NRE survey. Thirty-five % of the GSS22 respondents indicated they did so while only 2% of the NRE respondents used resources related to all four systems. On the other hand, the NRE respondents were more likely to make use of no supports, bureaucratic and communal supports in combination, and bureaucratic supports alone than those answering the GSS22 survey.

The results are consistent with the NRE findings about the importance of multiple sources of support for managing changes although they differ with respect to the amounts on some of the

particular combination. They reinforce an approach to social support that is multidimensional. Addressing social support and inclusion by augmenting bureaucratic, associative, or market-oriented infrastructure alone will provide only a partial solution to the problem. Instead, each of these approaches should be seen as part of a package: one in which support for communal-based relations is critical. They also imply that those with weak communal supports are likely to face social exclusion when faced with all types of household changes.

Following the previous NRE work on social support (Reimer 2004) I focused on the circumstances of vulnerable populations when testing for external validity of the GSS22 indicators. Age, gender, employment, income, housing, health, family structure, ethnicity, length of time in the community, and specially challenged populations have all been shown to be particularly vulnerable to exclusion in rural areas (Shucksmith 2000; Reimer 2004). Our analysis begins with an examination of most of these types of people, but with particular attention to the four types of relations to which they turn for support.

Since we expect these household characteristics to be related, simple bivariate analysis is likely to be misleading. As a result, we have employed logistic regression analysis to examine the relative strengths of the relationships between these characteristics and the use of various types of social support.

Table 1: Odds ratios for significant variables relating to types of social support (GSS22 survey, N = 15891) (p<.05 for all coefficients shown)²

	Type of Support Used			
	Market odds ratio	Bureau. odds ratio	Assoc. odds ratio	Commun. odds ratio
Nagelkerke R ²	.034	.042	.077	.021
Constant	1.391418	2.585224	0.830491	7.509941
Resp age 15-24*				
Resp age 25-34	0.472332	0.34283	0.174895	
Resp age 35-44	0.516082	0.359813	0.251463	
Resp age 45-54	0.604232	0.421595	0.351708	0.655684
Resp age 55-64	0.719075	0.511619	0.450451	0.786162
Resp age 65-74	0.707983	0.553983	0.550809	0.770739
Resp age 75+		0.668635		
Sex of resp (M=1)	1.141489	0.906303		
No person in HH employed in last year	0.753999	1.526106		
Highest Educ: BA/MA/PhD*				
Highest Educ: Diploma		1.425898	0.827496	1.473357
Highest Educ: Some univ.		1.259805	0.785136	1.126266
Highest Educ: High school		1.22286	0.760324	
Highest Educ: Less than HS				
No HH income or loss*				
HH income < \$5,000				
HH income \$5,000-\$9,999			1.965591	
HH income \$10,000-\$14,999	0.657576			
HH income \$15,000-\$19,999	0.666882			
HH income \$20,000-\$29,999	0.669901			
HH income \$30,000-\$39,999	0.69682			
HH income \$40,000-\$49,999	0.649266			
HH income \$50,000-\$59,999	0.693493			
HH income \$60,000-\$79,999	0.823803			
HH income \$80,000-\$99,999	0.889065		1.14814	
HH income \$100,000+			1.145682	
Live alone*				
Live with spouse only	1.20283	1.316883	1.253148	
Live with spouse and single child <25 years old		1.27293	1.346308	
Live with spouse and single child 25+ years old		1.480358	1.455478	
Live with spouse and non-single child(ren)			1.594949	
Live with spouse and other person		2.09949		
Live with no spouse and single child <25 years old		2.099703	1.922497	
Live with no spouse and single child 25+ years old		1.574201		
Live with no spouse and non-single child		2.026776		

² These regression equations explain only a small percentage of the variation in the type of support. This is to be expected because of the complexity of the social support processes. However, we are still able to learn with confidence from the coefficients since they reflect impacts using a relatively large sample. Note that odds ratio coefficients that are less than 1.0 indicate a negative relationship with the dependent variable.

	Type of Support Used			
	Market odds ratio	Bureau. odds ratio	Assoc. odds ratio	Commun. odds ratio
Live with 2 parents				
Live with 1 parent			1.45002	1.395139
Other living arrangements		1.271554	2.072001	
No elder care in HH (none=1)	1.342085		1.546748	
Atlantic*				
Quebec		0.832715		
Ontario		0.848486	0.782632	
Prairies	0.900956	0.882386	0.880074	
BC			1.137265	

* = reference category

This analysis demonstrates that age, sex of the respondent, employment, education, household income, family arrangements, the existence of elder care, and region are all related to the use of social support. They all relate differentially by the normative systems within which that support is provided. The age of respondent is the only one that is consistently related across the normative systems – with ages between 45 and 74 showing the strongest (negative) relationships to the use of all types of social support. Where the respondent is between the ages of 25 to 44 he or she is less likely to use market, bureaucratic, or associative-based types of support over communal types. The coefficient of 1.14 for the sex of the respondent in the market-based column indicates that men are more likely to use market-based supports in response to household changes. The coefficient of .09 in the bureaucratic column indicates that men are less likely to use these types of supports (since the value is less than 1.0).

The high school to diploma education categories show positive relationships with bureaucratic and communal-based supports, but negative ones with associative based supports. The income in the household is only related to the use of market-based supports – except for people from households from very low (\$5,000 to \$9,999) and very high (\$80,000+) households. In these two

latter cases, they are more likely to seek support from associative-based sources. This may reflect the U-shaped pattern of participation in the informal economy that has been identified in the literature (Reimer 2006). The family composition of the household appears to be most important for the use of bureaucratic and associative-based systems of support. Couples living with children, parents, or other living arrangements are positively related to the use of these supports. Where there is no elder care in the household, the members are more likely to use market or associative-based types of support.

Finally, we see that the type of support used is also related to the geographical region of the respondent. Respondents from the prairies are less likely to use market-based supports and those from Québec to the prairies are less likely to use bureaucratic ones. Those from Ontario and the prairies are less likely to use associative-based supports, while respondents from BC are more likely to use them. These results are consistent with our NRE results showing the higher levels of participation in voluntary groups among people from BC

Conclusions

In summary, the results of our comparison and analysis confirm the sensitivity of the GSS22 information to the variety of ways in which people use various normative systems as outlined in the work of Reimer et al. (2008). They provide similar results to the NRE analysis with some important differences – most likely due to the style of the encounter with respondents (face-to-face vs. telephone), the ways in which the questions were asked, the focus of the change (household or individual), and the scale of the two surveys. They provide implications for

researchers interested in the impacts of various forms of data collection, those wishing to analyze social support and the relationship to normative systems, those policy-makers wishing to provide useful support to citizens in all parts of the country, and to people wishing to extend rural research in strategic directions. I will discuss each of these in turn.

The comparison of the NRE and GSS22 approaches to soliciting information provides some encouraging news and cautions at the same time. It is encouraging that there are so many similarities in the general patterns even though two very different ways of collecting information were used. However, there are also sufficient points of variation that we should be cautious about assuming a simple equivalence between the two. The relatively high representation of financial changes identified by respondents in the NRE survey and the lower representation of communal-based and media supports leave us uncertain about the source of these differences. They may be an artefact of actual differences within the locations selected by the NRE project – and therefore a limitation on the sensitivity of a large-scale survey like the GSS22 – or they may be the result of the different ways in which the questions were asked.

This means that researchers interested in using the GSS22 to explore the nature and processes of social support are left with a dilemma. If we assume the limited sensitivity of the GSS22 it is important to consider that this survey may underestimate the financial-related changes and overestimate communal-based responses and the use of media supports. If, on the other hand we assume the differences are related to the nature of the solicitation, then our theoretical frameworks and analysis must take those into account. This latter interpretation lends credibility to social scientists arguing that interviews of any sort create their own “social space” that

conditions the type and amount of any data collected – even the least controversial and descriptive (Spradley 1979).

The results of our analysis also provide important implications for policy-makers who are interested in supporting citizens. Both the NRE and GSS22 surveys make clear that the sources for their support are varied and integrated. Using a bureaucratic-based service such as a hospital, college, or licence bureau, for example, frequently requires people to use other services that are associative or communal-based as they seek information, arrange for transportation, or free themselves from the obligation of child or elder-care. Providing resources within one type of normative system is not enough – since many of these supports involve the integration of multiple forms.

Our work also identifies some specific types of people and supports that require special policy attention. The heaviest demand on bureaucratic-based services is from those with children and those who are relatively well educated, for example. It means, therefore, that those living alone, with lower levels of education, or the elderly, are less likely to use these services – even though they may need them more. These are also the types of people who do not have easy access to other types of support as shown by our analysis.

Finally, this analysis encourages us to continue this line of inquiry in more detail. We have not examined, for example, the extensive information regarding the success of the various forms of support. The GSS22 allows us to examine this question along with the ways in which the services have failed to meet the needs of the respondent. This type of analysis will help us

identify the directions for policy and program development to overcome these limitations. Given the extensive information in the GSS22 regarding the details of the respondent's networks, knowledge of individuals with specific skills, and their civic participation activities, we have significant material with which to elaborate the processes relating to the extent and nature of social support.

Reference List

- Alasia, Alessandro, Ray Bollman, John Parkins, and Bill Reimer. 2008. An Index of Community Vulnerability: Conceptual Framework and Application to Population and Employment Changes, 1981-2001. *Agriculture and Rural Working Paper Series* Catalogue No. 21-601-MIE, no. 88.
- Kulig, Judith C, Ambra Gullacher, Bill Reimer, Ivan Townshend, Dana S. Edge, Katja Neves-Graca, Murray McKay, Dave Hutton, Michael Barnett, John Clague, and Andrew Coghlan. 2003. *The Lost Creek Fire: Lessons Learned*, Resiliency in Rural Settlements that have Experienced Wildfires, University of Lethbridge.
- Lyons, Tara, and Bill Reimer. 2009. A Literature Review of Capacity Frameworks: Six Features of Comparison. *Remote Control: Lessons in Governance for/from Small and Remote Regions*. Godfrey Baldacchino, Rob Greenwood, and Lawrence Felt, 63-76. St. John's, NL: ISER Press.
- Reimer, Bill. 2004. Social Exclusion and Social Support in Rural Canada. *World Congress of Rural Sociology* Concordia University, Montreal: Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology.
- Reimer, Bill. 2006. The Informal Economy in Non-Metropolitan Canada. *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 43, no. 1: 23-49.
- Reimer, Bill, Tara Lyons, Nelson Ferguson, and Geraldina Polanco. 2008. Social capital as social relations: the contribution of normative structures. *Sociological Review* 56, no. 2: 256-74.
- Reimer, Bill, and Masashi Tachikawa. 2008. Capacity and Social Capital in Rural Communities. Chapter 6 in *Revitalization: Fate and Choice*. Eds Peter Apedaile, and Nobuhiro Tsuboi, 15. Brandon: Rural Development Institute.
- Shucksmith, Mark. 2000. "Exclusive Countryside?: Social Inclusion and Regeneration in Rural Areas." Joseph Rowntree Foundation, North Yorkshire.
- Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division. 2008. *2008 General Social Survey, Cycle 22: Social Networks*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Spradley, James P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.