Increasing Knowledge and Safeguarding Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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Circles of Support and Supported Decision-Making: Comparative Perspectives on Support, Rights, and Community Inclusion

Introduction: Circles of Support have gained increasing attention in social sciences as relational arrangements that connect disability rights, community inclusion, and supported decision-making beyond institutional settings. However, their meaning and implementation vary significantly across legal, welfare, and cultural contexts**. Objective:** This article examines how Circles of Support are conceptualised, implemented, and sustained across different contexts, and analyses their contribution to social intervention. **Method:** The study employs a qualitative multi-method design combining a targeted literature review, comparative analysis of practices, and exploratory stakeholder consultation through four focus groups conducted in two European countries**. Results:** Findings show substantial variation in the structure and function of Circles of Support across contexts. The most promising approaches combine person-centred planning, facilitation, relational continuity, and opportunities for community participation. At the same time, evidence remains uneven and limited in comparative and longitudinal terms**. Discussion and conclusions:** Circles of Support illustrate how autonomy, safeguards, and support are negotiated in practice across formal services, families, and communities. Their contribution is most significant when they reinforce rights-based and community-oriented interventions, particularly in relation to the exercise of legal capacity under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, while remaining connected to public responsibility, coordination, and appropriate safeguards.

Keywords: circles of support; supported decision-making; community inclusion; disability; social intervention; safeguarding.

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Ethical considerations: The study was developed in accordance with general principles of research ethics, including respect for participants, voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality in the treatment of qualitative contributions. All participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the exploratory stakeholder consultations, which were conducted with attention to the protection of personal information.

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1. Introduction

Since 1980 Circles of Support have become increasingly visible in debates on disability rights, community inclusion, and supported decision-making. Within social intervention, they are especially significant because they show how autonomy is sustained through relationships, how communities participate in care and safeguarding, and how formal and informal support systems interact in everyday life.

The concept is therefore pertinent to social work, social education, sociology, and related fields concerned with participation, vulnerability, interdependence, and the organisation of care. Research on supported decision-making has shown that legal recognition on its own is not enough. In practice, people need supportive relationships, accessible communication, and institutional conditions that make it possible to express and act on their preferences. (Shogren et al., 2019; Bigby & Douglas, 2020; Casey et al., 2023; Gudelytė et al., 2024).

At the same time, the international literature suggests that Circles of Support do not constitute a single transferable model. Rather, they appear in different legal, welfare, and cultural settings, with varying degrees of formality, facilitation, and institutional embedding. This variation raises a central question for social intervention and disability rights: under what conditions can these arrangements strengthen agency, legal capacity, and inclusion without reproducing inequalities, informal substitute decision-making, or shifting care burdens onto families and communities?

In the context of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this means asking when relational support enables the exercise of will and preferences, and when it risks reintroducing paternalistic or proxy forms of decision-making through informal means (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014; Bach & Kerzner, 2010; Gooding, 2015; Stavert, 2021). The objective of this article is to analyse how Circles of Support are conceptualised, implemented, and sustained across different contexts, and to examine their contribution to social intervention. More specifically, the article conceptualises Circles of Support as socio-relational infrastructures situated at the intersection of autonomy, care, participation, and public responsibility. It argues that Circles of Support are rights-compatible only when they strengthen the person's will and preferences rather than reproducing informal substitute decision-making.

2. Method

The study employed a qualitative multi-method design to examine Circles of Support as both a conceptual and practice-based phenomenon across different welfare and service contexts. First, a targeted literature review was undertaken to identify academic publications, policy documents, and practice guides addressing Circles of Support, supported decision-making, safeguarding, and community-based disability support. Sources were selected purposively to include both historically influential and more recent contributions, with attention to conceptual relevance and diversity in welfare and policy settings rather than exhaustive geographical coverage. Second, a comparative practice analysis was conducted to examine how circle-based or functionally analogous arrangements were described and implemented across national and regional contexts. The analysis focused on similarities and differences in purpose, degree of formalisation, actors involved, support and safeguarding mechanisms, and links with public service

infrastructures. Third, exploratory stakeholder consultation was carried out through four focus groups conducted in France and Spain. Across the four groups, approximately 15–20 participants took part, including social-sector professionals, academics, family members, and persons with disabilities. These focus groups were used to contrast the documentary material with practice-based perspectives and to identify recurring tensions, facilitators, and implementation challenges. All material was analysed thematically in an iterative manner, moving between documentary sources and focus-group insights to identify cross-cutting patterns and analytically relevant differences.

3. Results

The analysis identified substantial variation in how Circles of Support are defined and operationalised. Across cases, variation was most visible in five areas: the problem the circle was designed to address, the degree of formalisation, the actors involved, the mechanisms used to support will and preferences, and the extent to which public systems sustained or relied upon the arrangement. In some contexts, especially Canada and Ireland, circles are described as person-centred and relationship-based networks intended to strengthen self-determination, community participation, and long-term security. In others, such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the best-documented models are in criminal justice and reintegration settings and combine support with accountability and public protection (Lowe & Willis, 2019) but also with neurodiverse and persons with other disabilities.

In still other contexts, similar practices are embedded in broader traditions of kinship, mutual aid, community care, or humanitarian support rather than in formal disability-service frameworks. Recent work from Poland also suggests that circle-based approaches may be institutionalised as part of wider community-based reform and local service coordination (Grabowska & Skrzypczak, 2025).

Australian evidence adds a further layer to this comparative picture by showing substantial variability even within one national setting: a comparative case analysis of three programs found shared overarching aims alongside important differences in programme logic, target populations, strategies, and perceived outcomes, shaped in part by the organisational missions in which circles were embedded (Araten-Bergman & Bigby, 2022).

Overall, these differences suggest that Circles of Support are best understood not as a single intervention, but as a family of socio-relational practices shaped by institutional and cultural conditions. Across contexts, these findings also suggest that Circles of Support are not inherently compatible with the exercise of legal capacity under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Their rights compatibility depends on whether they effectively support the person's will and preferences, include appropriate safeguards, and avoid reproducing informal substitute decision-making through family, professional, or community dynamics.

A comparable configuration can be identified in relational and community-based intervention models developed within Southern European social services. For example, the relational-vincular model implemented in Catalonia (Viñas et al., 2018) conceptualises support not as individual service provision, but as a distributed socio-relational process involving professionals, community networks, and service ecosystems.

These configurations should not be treated as rigid categories, since some models combine elements from more than one type. They are more useful for understanding the differences between models than for classifying them.

The rights-based and person-centred configuration is most closely aligned with supported decision-making and the exercise of legal capacity, especially where circles help sustain will and preferences through facilitation and long-term trusted relationships. Institutionally coordinated configurations are important because they show how relational support can be connected to formal service systems rather than left entirely to informal goodwill. Accountability-oriented configurations illustrate that circles can travel into settings where support is intertwined with supervision and risk management, which changes their normative emphasis. Informal and community-based configurations highlight the adaptability of circle-like practices, but also their dependence on local social resources, reciprocity, and pre-existing relationships.

Across all configurations, three cross-cutting issues recur. The first is facilitation and governance: circles appear more stable and effective when there is some recognised form of coordination, whether through a facilitator, service infrastructure, or durable community role. The second is rights compliance: relational support is not inherently compatible with Article 12, and in some settings remains vulnerable to paternalism, informal proxy decision-making, or the prioritisation of safety over the person's expressed preferences. The third is inequality: access to circle-based support is uneven where people lack trusted networks, communication support, or coordinated services. Taken together, these findings suggest that the value of Circles of Support lies less in a fixed organisational model than in their capacity to mobilise trusted relationships around a person's goals while remaining connected to accountability, public responsibility, and adequate safeguards.

3.1 Comparative international configurations of Circles of Support Comparative analysis suggests that Circles of Support are better understood through types of configurations than through a country-by-country inventory. A first configuration is rights-based and person-centred. Here circles are oriented towards self-determination, community inclusion, and long-term relational continuity, often linked to disability rights and person-centred planning. A second configuration is institutionally coordinated. In these cases, circle-like practices are embedded in wider welfare reform, social innovation, or inter-agency coordination, with stronger links to service planning and public infrastructure. A third configuration is accountability-oriented. In criminal justice and reintegration settings, circles combine support with supervision, risk management, and public protection. Finally, a fourth configuration is informal or community-based, where analogous arrangements emerge through kinship, mutual aid, neighbourhood support, or humanitarian response rather than through formal disability-service systems.

The exploratory focus groups reinforced these findings by highlighting tensions familiar to social care and educational practice. Participants described support as essential for making everyday and major life decisions, but also pointed to recurring barriers such as paternalistic attitudes, concerns about risk, lack of time for relational work, and uncertainty about who should coordinate support. They also identified several facilitators, including accessible communication, trust, continuity, and opportunities for the person to express preferences in ways that were meaningful in daily life. These insights underline that circle-based support depends not only on principles, but also on practical conditions that enable participation.

4. Discussion

The findings position Circles of Support as a relevant topic because they bring together questions of autonomy, interdependence, safeguarding, participation, and the organisation of care. Their significance extends beyond disability policy: they offer a lens through which to examine how social intervention is distributed between services, families, communities, and informal networks. From this perspective, Circles of Support are better understood not as technical tools, but as socio-relational arrangements shaped by power relations, institutional structures, and cultural assumptions about care, responsibility, and citizenship.

Empirical evidence from relational and systemic intervention models further supports this interpretation. The relational-vincular model developed in Catalonia (Viñas et al., 2018), for instance, demonstrates how decision-making support can emerge from structured relational environments rather than predefined group configurations. In this model, support is enacted through ongoing relationships, professional facilitation, and network-based coordination rather than through formally constituted circles.

This reinforces a key analytical insight: circle-based support may be understood less as a specific organisational form and more as a relational logic that can be embedded in diverse service systems and community practices.

However, such approaches also reveal important limitations. Not all relational support is rights-compliant support. Circle-based arrangements are compatible with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities only when they assist the person to form, express, and enact their will and preferences, rather than replacing them through collective judgement, risk-based paternalism, or informal proxy decision-making (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014; Gooding, 2015; Stavert, 2021). A relational approach should therefore not obscure the fact that circles are traversed by unequal authority, emotional dependency, professional expertise, and normative assumptions about what counts as a reasonable decision (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). In practice, appropriate safeguards may include accessible communication support, periodic review, attention to conflicts of interest, the possibility of changing circle composition, and forms of facilitation capable of detecting undue influence without reverting to substitute control (Craigie, 2021; Dixon et al., 2022). This discussion must also be connected to Article 19 of the Convention, since the exercise of legal capacity depends in practice on access to community-based supports, relational continuity, and material conditions for living in the community on an equal basis with others (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2017; Bannister & Venkatapuram, 2020). A rights-based approach also requires recognising the person's right to take risks, because support becomes incompatible with autonomy when safety is treated as a justification for filtering out unwanted but meaningful choices.

From this perspective, Circles of Support may also be understood as possible forms of informal or relational safeguarding. Although they are not safeguards in a formal legal sense, they can perform an important protective function when they reduce isolation, distribute the work of support across more than one relationship, create opportunities to notice conflicts of interest or undue influence, and help ensure that the person's will and preferences remain central over time. Their safeguarding potential, however, should not be presumed. A circle only functions protectively when it is person-centred, communicatively

accessible, open to review, and capable of resisting paternalism, proxy decision-making, and the concentration of authority within the support network.

These findings also have implications for policy transfer. Comparative analysis suggests that the most useful lesson is not the replication of a single circle model, but the translation of core principles such as person-centredness, relational continuity, facilitation, and accountability, into locally appropriate institutional forms. Australian evidence is particularly instructive in this regard, since variation across three programs within the same national context shows that even where rights-based aspirations are broadly shared, circle-based support may still take different organisational forms depending on service missions, target groups, and implementation settings (Araten-Bergman & Bigby, 2022). This is especially important in social work, where interventions are always shaped by welfare regimes, professional cultures, and community infrastructures. Policy borrowing without attention to these conditions risks turning a relational practice into a procedural or under-resourced intervention.

For social work and social education, this has practical implications. First, it suggests that supporting decision-making should not be reduced to information-giving or procedural compliance, but understood as a relational and pedagogical process. Second, it points to the need for services that recognise the time, coordination, and ethical reflection required to sustain supportive networks. Third, it reinforces the importance of analysing support not only at the interpersonal level, but also through broader questions of social policy, resource allocation, and institutional accountability. In this respect, Circles of Support open a productive dialogue between micro-level practices of accompaniment and macro-level debates on rights, welfare, and community-based care.

The social implications of these findings are especially relevant for contemporary debates on welfare transformation and the redistribution of care. Circles of Support can contribute to social inclusion by strengthening belonging, reciprocity, and participation in everyday community life, but they also expose the structural conditions under which inclusion becomes possible or remains limited. Where public systems invest in facilitation, accessible communication, and coordinated community-based services, circles may widen opportunities for participation and reduce dependence on segregated or substitute forms of support. Where these enabling conditions are absent, however, the language of community and choice can mask a silent transfer of responsibility onto families, neighbours, volunteers, and unpaid carers. From a social-policy perspective, this means that circles should not be romanticised as low-cost alternatives to public provision. Their social value depends on whether they operate within an ecology of rights, services, and material supports that makes relational autonomy viable rather than merely aspirational.

There are also broader implications for professional practice and the role of applied social sciences in shaping more democratic forms of support. For social workers, educators, community practitioners, and policy designers, the findings suggest that support should be understood not only as service delivery, but also as the cultivation of social conditions in which people can exercise agency with others. This requires attention to mediation, trust-building, conflict negotiation, and the recognition of interdependence as a normal feature of citizenship rather than a sign of deficit. In this sense, Circles of Support have transformative potential because they challenge individualistic understandings of autonomy and instead promote a relational view of decision-making, participation, and belonging. They also invite a rethinking of community intervention: not simply as mobilising

informal help, but as creating accountable spaces in which people with disabilities and other minoritised groups can influence the networks, services, and collective arrangements that shape their lives. For applied social sciences, this underscores the importance of linking micro-level accompaniment with broader commitments to social justice, accessibility, and inclusive citizenship.

This study has several limitations. The evidence base remains heterogeneous and relies heavily on practice-oriented literature, case material, and policy guidance, with limited comparative and longitudinal evaluation. Not all of the cases examined are formally equivalent models: some are explicitly named Circles of Support, while others are treated as functionally analogous arrangements that mobilise trusted relationships around decision-making, participation, or coordinated support. In addition, the stakeholder consultation was exploratory and cannot be treated as representative. Future research would benefit from more comparative and longitudinal designs capable of examining how circles evolve over time, under what conditions they improve quality of life and decision-making outcomes, whose voices carry authority within them, and how persons with disabilities themselves evaluate whether support reflects their will and preferences. There is also a need for stronger attention to inequality, including the distribution of care labour, the role of gender, and the extent to which circles depend on service resources that remain unevenly available across contexts. Even so, the analysis supports a clear conclusion: Circles of Support are most useful when they combine person-centred planning, relational continuity, facilitation, and public responsibility. For applied social sciences, their importance lies not in offering a universal model, but in showing how rights-based and community-oriented forms of support can expand inclusion when they are adequately resourced, ethically grounded, and connected to formal systems of accountability.

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