

Relational Strategies in Italian Young Family Keepers

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Abstract Studying interaction between individual behaviour and contextual framework involves the analysis of socio-economic, cultural and relational ambits to which a person refers. After discussing the available data sources for analysing personal support networks in Italy, the aim of our study is to investigate the real opportunity to measure and analyse egocentered social and instrumental networks of Italian young family keepers by keeper's characteristics and by the different phases of family formation she/he is involved.

Key words: young-adults, social networks, instrumental networks, financial vulnerability, demographic behaviours.

1 Introduction

International research has shown in a convincingly way how it is important to include in the analysis of the micro processes not only the macro but also the meso level which refers to the network of relations binding the individual to the people who are close to him/her in his/her everyday life (Rivellini, 2006). Studying interaction between individual behaviour and contextual framework involves the analysis of socio-economic, cultural and relational ambits to which a person refers. The “social space” (Pattison, 2001) can take shape in household, among relatives, friends, workmates or schoolmates; it can generate strong or weak ties that interact with individual choices

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and it can appear in a form of “emotional support”, “instrumental support” or “social companionship”.

In the “*Life Course Dynamics between Context and Strong Ties*” national research project, an integrated approach has been adopted with the aim to consider the whole life course of individuals within the context they live and within the strong ties they have. As members of the research group of this project, we intend to study, by means of a network approach, the relational strategies observed among Italian young-adults, typically individuals aged from 18 to 34 years, that are living in the transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood (see Livi Bacci, 2008).

The scientific literature has been recognised this age group as the one who mainly witnessed the largest change in their demographic behaviours because to the negative effects of globalization and to the transformation of the welfare system.

Mainly in those countries, such as Italy, where the welfare system and the national agencies are weak and not able to limit the possible social negative effects, young generations tend to face greater difficulties in finding employment, in becoming financially independent and in developing their own professional careers. Such a situation contributes to generate a feeling of instability and uncertainty in the future with the consequent tendency to further postpone binding choices which would require taking responsibilities.

People generally interact when they feel well, but the need of support is much more stronger when they have problems or live in critical situations. Besides the network to which the youth refers when in need, we would also like to further study the topic of the relational context, of its role (how it affects choices) and of its evolution in the process of transition to adulthood. The first step of this process starts with the description of the ties that link an individual to his/her social space.

The paper is organized as follows: in section 2, a brief recall of networks analysis definitions useful to collect relational data is given. A discussion on the available Italian data sources providing relational information is presented in section 3. Preliminary considerations on type of support and on people that gave it to young family keepers derived from the “Famiglia e soggetti sociali” national survey data, are reported in section 4.

2 Describing and measuring the relational individual ties

On an empirical level there are several ways to define a network (see Wasserman and Faust, 1994). This paragraph will briefly outline some of the main concepts and definitions that can be useful for taking into account the *social space* in analysing the individual behaviour.

The *complete or whole network* is obtained by interviewing all the individuals from a closed population, collecting information about each actor’s tie with all the other remaining actors. The complete set of oriented relations among a group of eighteen (18) actors (nodes of the network) is visualized by the mean of a graph in Figure 1. Actors #1, #2, #3, #13 and #15 that share no links with other people in the network are defined “isolated” actors.

Generally speaking, based on relational data associated with a complete network, various steps of statistical analysis can be defined (Rivellini and Zaccarin, 2007):

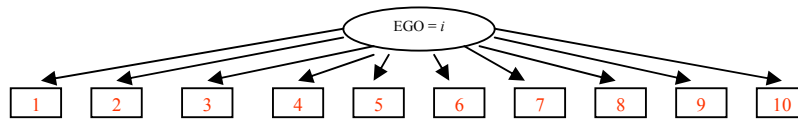
- In a different but simpler way from the viewpoint of empirical measurement, a network can be defined starting from a single node, measuring the set of relationships an individual has, thus obtaining an *egocentered* or personal network. In this case the network is considered starting from an individual and from the indications provided by the latter as regards connections to other individuals around him/her (relatives, friends, neighbours), not necessarily belonging to a closed set from a pre-defined list of names. Every ego reports about a set of others (*alters*) he/she is connected with and on the type of relationship (emotional or social support, for example) connecting them within that set. An example of a question generating the nodes in an egocentered network could read as follows: “*thinking of all your relatives, friends and people you know, could you indicate the individuals you think are more important for you and with whom you have relationships on a regular basis?*”. In general, for each node quoted, fundamental attributes can be defined, such as gender, age, the year the relationship started, marital

status, place of residence, frequency of telephone conversations, type of support connecting the ego to the individual node, etc. This information is then duly processed in order to measure synthetically the network size and composition; this makes it possible to expand the case (ego) by variables matrix, adding to the individual variable group those pertaining to the personal network.

In the traditional statistical analysis approach, the measurement of egocentered networks entails formulating a model whereby the behaviour of the individual is a function of both the individual status and of a reference system and concrete exchanges, measured through the personal network. Furthermore, it is useful to consider that egocentered networks, observed at a given time t , clearly identify a *nested data structure*, where respondents (egos, level 2 units) are indicated by j and nominees, or relations with nominees (level 1 units), by i (see Figure 2). This structure generates a group in correspondence with each ego, given that the observations from the same group are generally more similar than those from different groups, therefore the assumption of independence between all observations is patently violated (Snijders *et al.*, 1995).

Moreover, the presence of longitudinal egocentered network data allows for an in-depth study of the causal effects between individual behaviour and personal network types.

Figure 2: An example of egocentered network



3 Available Italian data sources

Collecting data on a complete network is often far from the main aims of large surveys; it is time consuming, requires a lot of training, and it is only useful when the entire set of actors can be surveyed. As regards the Italian situation, the examples are few, regarding very often specific and small sample size population (Rivellini, 2007; Belotti, 2009). The only exception is ITAGEN2, a nation wide survey on second generation of immigrants, conducted in 2006 on the first-grade secondary schools with a foreign presence of higher than 10% (see Casacchia *et. al.*, 2008; Terzera and Rivellini, 2008). Looking at personal network data gathered on large sample surveys, the Multipurpose Survey Program carried out by the National Statistical Agency (ISTAT) offers some challenges to measure egocentered networks and to jointly analyse individual behaviour in critical situation, even if surveys goals are not specifically oriented to networks analysis. Focusing on our target population (young adults) some opportunities to reconstruct network information can be provided by the survey "Famiglia e Soggetti Sociali" carried out in 2003.

The survey collected data that allow to derive the size and composition of the egocentered social network for respondents aged 14 years and over. Moreover, it is also possible to detect what kind of support (instrumental or companionship) they need,

who is supporting them outside the family/household and if there is a reciprocity in the informal network, taking into account contemporary aid given and received. Specifically, a small set of “name generator” questions are devoted to:

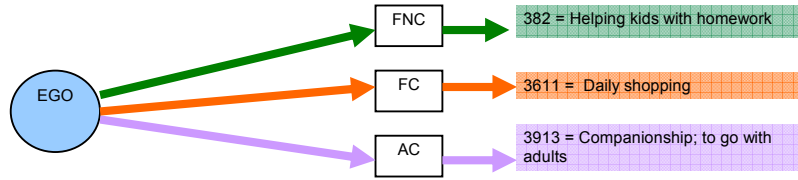
- a) Aid/help given to people (relatives and not) not living together, in the last four weeks (from the individual questionnaire, section 9): kind of support and receiver (18 typologies) of the most important aid. The focus is on the individual and on his/her propensity to give support and to be in relation with other people.
- b) Aid/help received in the last four week by the family or by a single member of the family, given by people not cohabiting in the last 4 weeks (from household questionnaire, section 3). The focus is on the family and her need of support, although it is possible to detect the single member (with a maximum of three of them), if any, who asked for the help.

The different focus (individual vs family/household) in the questions’ format does not limit in practice the possibility to establish a direct link between the social network and the instrumental network at individual level but it could be responsible for recall problems and mis-recording about the members asking for support and/or about the respondent’s (usually the family keeper) perception in her evaluation of a help shared by the family or by a specific person in the family (this is the case, for instance of house keeping and child assistance).

A second part of the questionnaire form is also devoted to the informal egocentered network activated by young people to cope with specific troubles, in particular the risk of financial difficulties experimented by young Italians in the first years of their autonomous life. Here the focus is on people aged 18 years and more, who left parental home. The information on the financial help received in order to overcome the difficulties, specifically the type of help and helper allow to analyse the informal support network to which Italian young people can effectively refer.

In this scenario, the “Famiglia e soggetti sociali” survey represents the only example providing network information referred to general population, offering a unique opportunity to carry out analyses on a very wide sample and with detailed information on individual and her/his family. The survey is also part of a broad International Generations and Gender Program developed by UNECE allowing for comparative analyses. Moreover, the specific novelty of the panel return carried out at the beginning of 2007 (“*Critical aspects in the work life course in a gender perspective*” for the ISTAT 2003 Italian survey) will provide evidence to verify the impact of the 2003 relational network on subsequent behaviours.

A further possibility to study relational strategies according to a network framework can be provided by the ISTAT, Mutipurpose Survey on Time Use (TUS, Romano, 2007). From this survey it is possible to detect the egocentered network of young people in performing their daily activities. As shown in Figure 3, we can specify the content of relation between i (ego) and j (typology pre-defined, where FNC means not cohabiting relatives, FC means cohabiting relatives and AC stands for other people). The relation is present when an activity is performed together. As can be noted, the set of alters is restricted to fixed and very wide categories allowing for a very limited analysis of network characteristics.

Figure 3: TUS. An example of egocentered network: individual ties in respect to the activities

4 Instrumental network of young family keepers

From the previous discussion, the 2003 “Famiglia e Soggetti Sociali” survey appears as the most challenging data set to recover the relational strategies of young adults in Italy. On the basis of the household focus followed in collecting information on instrumental network, we devote our attention only to family keepers in the 18-34 age class. Table 1 shows differences in the kind of help these families asked for in comparisons to families with keepers in older age classes. Some differences are clearly due to the different phase of family life-cycle people are living (i.e. economical aid and child assistance) while others are worthy of a deeper investigations (i.e. aid in administrative procedures).

Table 1: Families who received help by age class of family keeper and kind of aid (for 100 families with family keeper aged in the same classes).

Kind of aid	Age class						Total
	18-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	More than 75	
Economical aid	31.3	17.9	21.5	23.3	7.3	4.9	16.4
Medical assistance	6.1	7.6	15	25.2	30.5	35	19.2
Adults assistance	1.4	2.5	7.5	9.5	14.2	32.7	12.4
Child assistance	43.8	62.1	29.6	4.1	0.4	0.1	27.8
House keeping/work at home	28.9	21.2	18.8	30.9	43	55.1	33.9
Social companionship	8.4	7.9	12.6	18.7	34.2	39.6	20.4
Administrative procedures	13.7	9	9.5	9.9	24.6	38.7	19.1
Work outside home	3.8	2.9	7.3	6.8	1.8	0.6	3.2
Aid for studying	1.3	3.3	6.2	3.7	1.1	0.3	2.4
Food, clothes	16	7.8	7.5	6.7	6.4	4	7.9

In asking for help young family keepers also differ by gender as it is shown in Table 2 especially with regard to economical aid and child assistance, two of the most diffused needs among young families.

Table 2: Families who received help by gender of family keeper and kind of aid (for 100 families with family keeper aged between 18 and 34 years).

<i>Kind of aid</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Total</i>
Economical aid	28.2	46.3	31.3
Medical assistance	5.6	8.5	6.1
Adults assistance	1.3	1.9	1.4
Child assistance	46	33	43.8
House keeping/work at home	29.5	26	28.9
Social companionship	8.6	7.4	8.4
Administrative procedures	14.4	10	13.7
Work outside home	4	2.9	3.8
Aid for studying	0.8	3.6	1.3
Food, clothes	15.9	16.4	16

Source: ISTAT, 2006

The aim of our study is to better investigate the social and instrumental networks of young family keepers by keeper's characteristics (age, gender, education, residence and family background) and the different phases of family formation she/he is involved.

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