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Social Support and Work in Italy: The Needs of Workers and the Role of Unions After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article presents some of the results of the PRIN 2022 research project "Social capital as resource of care practice in Italy: Caregiving and social support in pandemic time". In particular, this article presents the results of the part of the research dedicated to the issue of social support, which consists of the support actually deriving from social relationships, with reference to individuals in specific working conditions. This essay aims to report on the qualitative analysis carried out, which focused primarily on the relationship between working conditions and social support networks in Italy from two conceptual dimensions that are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic period: the first concerns the polarisation of the labour market between those at the top of the social stratification (permanent workers with high levels of education and good professional qualifications) and those at the bottom of the social stratification (temporary workers with low levels of education and low professional qualifications). The second dimension concerns the distinction between those who have been unemployed at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview (those who have benefited from the wage supplementation scheme and those who have not benefited from it). An additional source of information taken into consideration is the perspective of certain regional trade union secretaries. The study presented here was conducted according to the structural interactionist approach, which posits that the networks within which subjects find themselves are, at the same time, both a constraint and an emerging effect of their actions.

Keywords: social support networks, caregiving, working conditions, labour market polarization, post-pandemic period.

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1. Introduction

This article presents some of the findings of the PRIN 2022 research project "Social capital as resource of care practice in Italy: Caregiving and social support in pandemic time"[1]. This article presents the findings of the part of the research dedicated to addressing the issue of social support, which consists of the support actually derived from social relationships (Song et al., 2011), with regard to individuals in specific working conditions. With reference to positioning in the world of work, the links between conditions of need and the mobilisation of social resources to address them will then be investigated. The world of work has, as is well known, been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2020; Fana et al., 2022). However, this article will not address the vulnerabilities potentially linked, specifically, to individuals' health conditions, which is the subject of an in-depth study by Lonardi & Tronca (2025) in this issue of the Italian Sociological Review.

This essay aims to report on the qualitative analysis carried out, which focused primarily on the relationship between working conditions and social support networks in Italy. As we will see in the following pages, the universe of working conditions, linked to the theme of social support and caregiving, was considered from two conceptual dimensions that are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic period. The first concerns the polarisation of the labour market between: (a) those at the top of the social stratification, permanent workers with high levels of education and good professional qualifications; (b) those at the bottom of the social stratification, temporary workers with low levels of education and low professional qualifications. The second dimension concerns the analytical distinction between those who have been unemployed at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview: (a) those who have benefited from the wage supplementation scheme; (b) those who have not benefited from it.

[1] Research Projects of Significant National Interest (RPNI) – "Social capital as resource of care practice in Italy: Caregiving and social support in pandemic time" – Prot. 2022B58JHF, Italia Domani – the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) – Mission 4 "Education and Research" – Component C2, Investment 1.1, "Research Projects of Significant National Interest (RPNI)", Funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, Ministry of University and Research, CUP B53D23019350006 (Research Unit of the University of Verona). Principal Investigator: Prof. Donatella Bramanti (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore - Milano); Associated Investigator: Prof. Fabio Ferrucci (University of Molise); Associated Investigator: Prof. Luigi Tronca (University of Verona). Other members of the Research Unit of the University of Verona (Department of Human Sciences): Prof. Sergio Cecchi, Prof. Giorgio Gosetti, Dr. Giuseppe Grasso, Prof. Cristina Lonardi, Prof. Sandro Stanzani.

An additional source of information taken into consideration is the perspective of certain regional trade union secretaries, who were directly involved in the pandemic both inside and outside the workplace, regarding the reality of social support and caregiving. Caregiving, which is a specific form of social support, is defined in line with the approach taken in the European Health Interview Survey (EHIS), conducted in Italy in 2019 by Istat (2022, table 6.1.1). In the EHIS survey, a caregiver is defined as a person who provides care or assistance at least once a week to people with problems related to ageing, chronic diseases, or infirmity (Istat, 2022, table 6.1.1). In the research presented here, the term "infirmity" has been interpreted as "disability" to minimise overlap with ageing and chronic diseases and to enable respondents to identify persons with disabilities as people who have received help from them. Trade union officials were involved as significant witnesses, given their experience with individuals who had faced particular working conditions during the post-pandemic period preceding the data collection.

This approach guided the selection of interviewees and discussions with the trade union. Regarding the relevant aspects of work in the post-pandemic period, this division into subgroups of subjects accurately reflects the structural changes occurring in the world of work, driven by shifts in organisational profiles and the content of activities, often facilitated by recent technological innovations. However, it should be borne in mind that the polarising effect we will discuss predates the digital "revolution" and the most recent wave of innovations related to artificial intelligence systems, which have already become widely integrated into the production processes of goods and services. This trend is rooted in the definition of macro- and meso-level strategies for production chains and has had a direct impact on the micro-dimension of people's working lives. In the following pages, we will initially address some aspects of the theoretical framework from which the qualitative analysis originated, before moving on to illustrate the methodological aspects that guided the empirical research. Subsequently, we will analyze the evidence gathered from interviews with the subjects involved and examine the arguments presented by trade union representatives regarding the changes occurring in the world of work, for which the evidence from the qualitative interviews is relevant. During the discussion, we will have the opportunity to highlight the most relevant points of the study and, in particular, to emphasise those aspects that seem most worthy of consideration at a macro level, based on representative samples of the population residing in Italy. In line with the overall approach of our PRIN 2022 research, the study presented here was also conducted according to the structural interactionist approach. According to the structural interactionist approach, networks are both a conditioning factor and an emerging result of the actions of their nodes, i.e., the subjects that comprise

them (Degenne & Forsé, 2004; Tronca, 2013; Tronca & Forsé, 2022; Tronca & Sità, 2019).

2. Work, labour market and social support

2.1. Labour and labour market

The dimension of work, which still marks people's life trajectories, is changing in many ways. The research project was intended to observe by placing it in the background, especially the evolving structural dynamics of work influencing the labor market and the quality of life (working and general). Influence that directly intersects care processes as well, both in the direction of being an object person in need of care, and in the opposite sense of a person in the condition of promoting and generating care processes towards others. As emerges from a comparison with much of the sociological literature of recent years, the change taking place in the world of work affects three levels, which we can ultimately look at from the perspective of the concrete lives of people at work. Three analytically distinguishable levels help us identify and classify the social phenomena at work. Although they are referred to in many studies, we will limit ourselves here only to a nod to the main trends (Gosetti, 2024).

At the macro level, we are seeing a significant change in the systems that generate economic value. Processes are being redesigned through an extension of the capacity to generate value, expanding the scope well beyond the boundaries of traditional organisational systems. People's lives are becoming increasingly intertwined with the creation of value. The acceleration that has been impressed on capital valorisation cycles for some years now (Harvey, 2002, 2011) is combined with an extension of the scope of production that brings together a heterogeneous set of resources, in addition to traditional ones. The system also encompasses people's time, space, experiences, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors. In addition to technological innovations, this process is also supported by a narrative. Production systems have always utilized elements from the socio-cultural system to legitimize their actions; however, in this historical phase, social values and norms are directly involved in the design and governance of processes and in their implementation (Dardot & Laval, 2013).

Moving on to the meso level, we note that organisational models tend to take on an increasingly complex profile, adopting a networked morphology that redraws the division of labour and proposes new forms of fragmentation (Castells, 2002). Work is broken down into modules, assembled dynamically according to economic convenience, often in the short term. Since the 1980s, buzzwords such as "just in time", "minimal factory", and "self-activation" have

become widely used in the design of organisational models, following the shift linked to the spread of the Japanese model (Ohno, 2004). Flexibility has become the organisational concept par excellence, applied in various ways in the production of goods and services. This interpretation, embracing the logic of continuous change towards an ever-improving structure that is increasingly pervasive in people's lives, has led to an acceleration in operating methods and organisational innovations, which has translated more generally into social acceleration (Rosa, 2015).

At the micro level, we must note both elements of continuity and signs of profound change in the role of the individual at work. We now talk extensively about activation and the worker, or better still, "self-activation", as suggested by Ohno, identifying the proactive attitude of the worker as one of the fundamental assumptions of the Japanese model. People must be active in their work, solving problems by identifying, testing, and verifying solutions, but more generally, they must be active in life. To accommodate flexibility, they must learn to plan and manage their own working lives, manage the fragmentation of work and the succession of even heterogeneous work experiences, and take charge of their working identity, which becomes a task to be pursued rather than a given. Sociologically interesting, then, is the life course of people, of those workers who are asked to take initiative (unlike what Taylor believed), called upon to combine know-how (technical), interpersonal skills (relational and values-based), learning skills (continuously accumulating and applying knowledge), and action skills (taking responsibility for problem solving).

Work often becomes "hybrid" in terms of the content of activities and contractual forms (Murgia et al., 2020; Murgia & Pulignano, 2021; Demetriades et al., 2023), as a result of organisational and content-related transformations. Experiencing this means primarily trying to generate consistency within one's working biography (Muehlberger & Pasqua, 2009; Graceffa & de Heusch, 2017; Bologna, 2018; Conen & Schippers, 2019). Old and new are combined in organisational models and activity content: blue-collar and white-collar work, both of which are increasingly focused on data processing; productive work and reproductive work; work for the production of goods and services, and care work, when both are aimed at building functional solutions for generating economic value.In this scenario, it remains clear that participating in the formation of democracy requires a social organisation of work that allows individuals to exercise freedom of thought and action (Honneth, 2025) and self-determination (Gosetti, 2022a). This is particularly true at a time when the privatisation of welfare systems, which threatens the right to unconditional collective protection, and the consolidation of singularity as a distinctive and structural feature of society (Reckwitz, 2025), are prompting us to study very

carefully the changes taking place in the nature and availability of individual and family resources dedicated to care.

To remain within the scope of work, the set of changes at multiple levels mentioned above, and in particular the change we have placed at the meso level (the level that links macro and micro) relating to network organisational models, leads us to reflect on the polarisation taking place in the world of work. Inter-organisational production processes, distributed within long supply chains (Borghi et al., 2017), are often asymmetrical in that they involve interdependencies between a central node in a dominant position and other peripheral nodes, showing us the consolidation of the distance between core workers (in the central nodes) and peripheral workers (in peripheral nodes) (Castells, 2002). Centre and periphery are not interpretative parameters to be considered in traditional geographical terms, as they can be simultaneously present within limited spaces (such as the same company building) and distributed across multiple production areas that may be very distant from each other. What distinguishes the centre from the periphery is the strategic value rather than the instrumental value of the activity in relation to the overall production process. These are two dimensions of work that generate worlds of activity that are distant from each other in many respects, but primarily in terms of the quality of work. In the coming years, in addition to the now mature digitalization in many sectors of work, we will increasingly have to deal with the advent of artificial intelligence, which will change work even more than digitalization in terms of organization and content (Gosetti et al., 2024). For now, processes are consolidating the hourglass profile that the world of work has taken on.

Heterogeneity thus becomes polarisation between high-quality and low-quality jobs (OECD, 2017, 2019, 2020), and at the same time is also expressed in the diversification of conditions within the two poles. The result is a progressive distancing between the two poles, which risks becoming increasingly disconnected from each other. This process contributes to slowing down vertical social mobility and generating strong horizontal mobility (from job to job, especially in the lower part of the hourglass, where lower-quality jobs are located). For several years now, there has been consensus among the scientific community that employment in highly specialised professions (which also imply reasonable remuneration) and in low-skilled (poorly paid) professions is on the rise, while at the same time there has been a decline in employment in intermediate positions (Goos et al., 2014; Felten et al., 2019; Canal et al., 2024). Polarisation is therefore becoming coexistence and distancing in the labour market between new-generation, highly skilled jobs and old jobs that have benefited from a real upgrading of skills (in both cases often linked to technological innovations), and others that are suffering from neo-

Taylorist fragmentation, translated into the breakdown of work and the assignment of limited and prescribed tasks to be performed within tight deadlines (Crowley et al., 2010). Consider, for example, the diverse world of platforms (Eurofound, 2018; Pais et. al. 2021; Pais 2024). Ultimately, distancing should increasingly be viewed in terms of job quality, even more so than quality of working life, as work and life are becoming increasingly intertwined.

The growth of heterogeneity in the labour market, which translates into polarisation and growing inequalities, calls into question the representation and protection of workers' interests, and first and foremost the role of the intermediaries who have historically guaranteed workers' right to a voice and protection (Gosetti, 2022b), and new forms of activism (Hipp & Krzywdzinski, 2023). While access to work (searching and finding) still appears to be strongly linked to personal networks, although the use of other tools/channels is also increasing (Reyneri, 2011; Orientale Caputo, 2021), it is precisely a reflection on the changing nature of personal networks that helps us understand what resources a person has to manage the growing risk of vulnerability linked to labour market uncertainty. All the processes we have mentioned so far are being affected by the technological change referred to repeatedly in the literature (Carreri et al., 2020; Carreri, & Gosetti, 2024), primarily digitalisation, but also the progressive spread of artificial intelligence solutions in various areas of work. The literature often notes that the pandemic has also acted as an enhancer of the trends towards change, polarisation, and inequality mentioned above. However, above all, it has helped us understand how it is possible to organize work by redesigning traditional spatial and temporal boundaries, as well as some operational content (Albano et al., 2019; Zamperini, 2020; Butera, 2020; Bertolini & Vercelli, 2024). However, the pandemic has made it clear that managing remote working with flexible hours, perhaps even in the current form of smart working (De Masi, 2020; De Pisapia, Vignoli, 2021), requires resources to reconcile the different dimensions of work and life (Cellini et al., 2021; Della Ratta-Rinaldi, 2022; Fana et al., 2022; Canal et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is increasingly evident that rethinking work does not imply a reconciliation of life and work as separate dimensions, but rather the design of organisational models that overlap and integrate life and work within new working practices.

2.2. Social support and the labour market

The relationship between the levels of social support available to people and the labour market is strategic in terms of the psychological and physical well-being of the working-age population (Lakey & Cohen, 2000), their chances of finding employment (Chen & Fellenz, 2020), and the performance of the

labour market itself (Verhaeghe et al., 2015). This relationship has a significant impact on people's chances of finding employment, maintaining it over time, and coping with periods of unemployment. At the same time, however, work can also be a source of social support, providing people with an income that meets their needs and expanding the sphere of interpersonal relationships created within the work organisation. It should also be remembered that the workplace itself can, under the right conditions, become an environment in which important relationships of mutual support are formed between workers, with a positive impact on the work organisations themselves in terms of increasing their ability to retain workers and facilitate internal innovation processes. From a social perspective, this complex relational dynamic therefore has repercussions at the "micro" level (ease of access to the labour market; quality of employment; support when leaving work), "meso" (the breadth, density and structure of relational networks) and, finally, "macro" (levels of economic inequality in the population; levels of labour integration/segregation of social groups). Naturally, given that this relationship is so important both for people's lives and for the functioning of the labour market, public institutions have sought to regulate it through labour policies and by acting to meet the needs that are essential for the reproduction of the workforce (e.g., education and vocational training; unemployment benefits; hiring incentives; work-life balance policies). This has led to different configurations of relationships between personal support and the labour market, configurations that may see a greater or lesser presence of informal assistance or institutional interventions.

Social support provides a wide range of assistance that supports individuals from a) psychological perspective (emotional and affective support); b) material perspective (financial support and provision of goods and services); c) informational perspective; and, finally, from a d) social credentials perspective (the opportunity to meet other individuals who would otherwise be unreachable). The breadth, structure, and assets conveyed by social support networks play an important role in the well-being of workers. In particular, all indicators of psychological health and job satisfaction appear to be related to high levels of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Furthermore, we should focus on the opportunities provided by social support networks. In that case, we can see how supportive social relationships convey both information and credentials that can increase opportunities for accessing the world of work, as well as for improving one's professional position within the work organisation and, ultimately, for enhancing one's socio-economic status (Bourdieu, 2015; Kram, 1985).

Regarding the material resources (money, time, goods, and services) provided by social support, it is worth noting that even the most generous welfare systems have not entirely succeeded in eliminating the inequalities

generated by differences in family wealth linked to class stratification (Esping-Andersen, 2011). Obviously, in welfare systems – such as the Italian one – where public redistributive intervention is minimal and where families and kinship networks are invested with a great responsibility in ensuring material resources for their members, the distorting effects of inequalities acquired by birth tend to reproduce themselves over time, exerting a significant influence on individuals' chances of social advancement (Saraceno, 2021). Even about labour policies, i.e., that "composite set of public interventions aimed at achieving and maintaining a high and stable level of employment" (Ferrera, 2006, p. 123), we can see how different welfare systems demonstrate different capacities to reduce factors of social injustice by guaranteeing individuals similar opportunities to access satisfactory employment. In particular, Italy is characterized by low investment in active labor policies and in the level and duration of cash transfers for those who lose their jobs (Saraceno, 2022; Ranci & Pavolini, 2015).

In particular, public support for those who are not in employment tends to decrease, until it disappears altogether, depending on the degree of integration of the worker into the labour market. The longer the period worked and the higher the salary, the greater the protection received in the event of job loss. For those who have not yet started working, however, the level of public protection is almost non-existent, thus accentuating the inequalities produced by normal labour market dynamics. Not only are there virtually no general economic support schemes for individuals who have never worked, but public investment in increasing employment opportunities is also very limited in Italy compared to other major European countries (Ferrera, 2006). In this way, opportunities to access the labour market and climb the socioeconomic ladder are heavily influenced not only by the material and cultural resources of one's family, but also by the structure of social networks. In fact, we can say that in Italy, and in those contexts where social policies do not effectively counteract the weight of ascriptive factors, it is social bonding capital (Putnam, 2000) that exerts the most significant influence in reducing the chances of social advancement through work, especially for those belonging to the most disadvantaged social classes.

This restricted and redundant configuration of social ties in which individuals belonging to lower social classes are embedded indeed ensures a minimum level of material and psychological support in case of need. However, it does not facilitate access to better job positions. As will be seen below, the analysis of the interviews conducted confirms that individuals with higher employment and educational status possess different resources within their social support networks compared to those with lower socioeconomic status. At the same time, no significant differences appear to emerge regarding the

structure of social networks between the different subgroups of respondents, even though differences can be observed among the respondents themselves.

3. Method

In the research presented in this article, we aim to explore the role of work in individuals' daily lives in relation to caregiving and the search for social support. The perspectives examined will be those of workers[2] and trade unionists, whom we consider particularly well-informed on the topic under investigation. As mentioned above, the aspects taken into consideration are:

I. the polarisation of the labour market between: (a) those at the top (permanent workers with high levels of education and good professional qualifications) and (b) those at the bottom (fixed-term workers with low levels of education and low professional qualifications) of the social stratification;
II. The analytical distinction between workers who lost their jobs during the immediate post-pandemic period between (a) those who received redundancy benefits and (b) those who did not;
III. The perspective of union functionaries, directly involved in the pandemic inside and outside the workplace, on the reality of social support and caregiving.

About the polarisation of the labour market, the following in-depth interviews were conducted to study the conditions of workers: (a) individuals with permanent contracts, high qualifications and high levels of education [research category: W1]: 8 in-depth online interviews; (b) individuals with fixed-term contracts, low qualifications and low levels of education [W2]: 8 in-depth online interviews.

For the analytical distinction relating to workers who had been unemployed at least once in the 12 months before the interview, the following in-depth interviews were conducted: (a) those who had benefited from the redundancy fund [W3]: 8 in-depth online interviews; (b) those who had not benefited from it [W4]: 8 in-depth online interviews. These 32 interviewees' personal support networks were also surveyed using a questionnaire, per the personal network analysis (PNA) research strategy. Finally, four in-depth online

[2] As will be seen below, some of them were not working at the time of the interview; however, in such cases, they were included in the survey precisely because they had lost their jobs within the 12 months preceding the interview.

interviews were conducted about trade union functionaries. All interviewees are residents of Italy[3], and data collection took place in Italian.

The research team developed all the survey tools. While the interviews with trade unionists were conducted in pairs by Sergio Cecchi and Giorgio Gosetti, the research company Ipsos S.r.l., based in Milan, carried out the data collection relating to workers. Ipsos S.r.l. identified the people to be interviewed by activating its network of selectors distributed throughout Italy, which Ipsos uses to select appropriate participants for qualitative surveys based on established criteria and characteristics.

The online interviews with workers were always preceded by completing a quantitative questionnaire (PNA). The questionnaire for the quantitative phase was sent via email to each interviewee ahead of time. The email provided a unique link for completing the online questionnaire, which interviewees were advised to access after reviewing the questions. Alternatively, they could choose a guided option where an interviewer read the questions aloud and entered their responses into the online form.

Before starting the qualitative interviews, the quantitative data were downloaded and shared with the qualitative moderator to confirm that the interview aligned with the findings from the previous quantitative phase. Once all the information collected had been provided to Ipsos S.r.l. moderator, the qualitative interview was conducted face-to-face and online on the Teams platform. In addition to the interviewee, each interview was attended by a moderator and another person providing technical support to the moderator. All online interviews were recorded and transcribed into Word text format[4].

Regarding the interviews with trade union representatives, we decided to invite the three regional secretaries of the three confederal trade unions and the regional secretary of an independent trade union (ORSA) to participate. This decision was motivated by the fact that the four regional secretaries could offer a broad and concise overview of the issues under investigation. The interviews were conducted online between May and July 2025, using the Zoom platform. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in Word format.

[3] We would like to point out that those who were interviewed because they had lost their jobs in the 12 months prior to the data collection were resident in Italy even when they lost their jobs.

[4] The authors conducted the analysis of data received from Ipsos S.r.l. Individual quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23 (Release 23.0.0.0). Relational data on support networks were processed using Ucinet 6.560 software (Borgatti et al., 2002) and visualized with NetDraw 2.158 software (Borgatti, 2002).

Data on the 32 workers was collected from 8 to 30 May 2024. The online interview questionnaire, consisting of 15 questions, was designed to explore the relationship of help given and received over the last 12 months from the time of the interview. Respondents were asked to focus on this time frame and think about all the people with whom they had been in contact and whom they had supported in some way, or from whom they had received some form of support. The contents of the online interviews were analysed using the traditional paper-and-pencil qualitative content strategy, which is particularly effective in facilitating the combined reading of the interview contents and the structural characteristics of the respondents' personal support networks, which emerged thanks to the PNA. Table 1 presents some socio-demographic characteristics of the 32 workers interviewed. The table shows a balance between genders, ages, and geographical areas of Italy (North, Centre, South, and Islands).

Table 1. The workers interviewed.

Respondent ID	Research category	Gender	Age	Geographical area of residence	Educational qualification	Work / employment status	Italian citizenship
1008	W1	Male	61	South	Degree (all types)	Manager	Yes
1018	W1	Male	63	South	Degree (all types)	Manager	Yes
1023	W1	Female	53	North-east	High school diploma	White-collar worker	Yes
1031	W1	Female	25	North-east	Degree (all types)	Executive employee	Yes
1034	W1	Male	46	Centre	Degree (all types)	White-collar worker	Yes
1036	W1	Female	63	Centre	Degree (all types)	Manager	Yes
1037	W1	Female	40	Islands	Degree (all types)	Manager	Yes
1038	W1	Male	34	Islands	Degree (all types)	Manager	Yes
1003	W2	Female	32	South	Middle school diploma	Service worker	Yes
1004	W2	Male	55	North-east	Middle school diploma	Service worker	Yes
1006	W2	Male	64	North-east	Middle school diploma	Industrial worker	Yes
1012	W2	Female	19	Centre	Middle school diploma	Executive employee	Yes
1030	W2	Female	25	South	Middle school diploma	Executive employee	Yes
1039	W2	Female	48	Islands	Middle school diploma	Service worker	Yes
1040	W2	Female	37	South	High school diploma	Executive employee	Yes

1041	W2	Female	48	Islands	Middle school diploma	Executive employee	Yes
1007	W3	Female	48	South	Degree (all types)	Unemployed	Yes
1013	W3	Male	44	Centre	Vocational diploma	Unemployed	Yes
1022	W3	Female	64	North-east	High school diploma	White-collar worker	Yes
1024	W3	Male	28	Islands	Degree (all types)	Service worker	Yes
1025	W3	Female	37	Centre	Middle school diploma	Housewife	Yes
1027	W3	Male	31	North-east	Degree (all types)	White-collar worker	Yes
1029	W3	Male	25	South	High school diploma	Redundancy fund / redundancy worker (formerly an executive employee)	Yes
1033	W3	Male	63	Islands	Middle school diploma	Unemployed	Yes
1009	W4	Male	46	Centre	Degree (all types)	White-collar worker	Yes
1021	W4	Male	40	South	High school diploma	Unemployed	Yes
1026	W4	Male	24	North-east	High school diploma	Executive employee	Yes
1028	W4	Female	27	North-east	Degree (all types)	Self-employed	Yes
1032	W4	Male	36	Islands	Middle school diploma	Unemployed	Yes
1035	W4	Male	55	Centre	Middle school diploma	Unemployed	Yes
1042	W4	Female	31	South	Degree (all types)	Unemployed	Yes
1043	W4	Female	25	Islands	High school diploma	N.A.	Yes

In the questionnaire used to collect personal and contextual information and relational data for the PNA practice, respondents could always choose "I do not know" or "I prefer not to answer" for each question. The analyses we will present were carried out exclusively on valid values. Name generators, interpreters, and a name interrelator were used to identify the personal support network of the 32 workers (Tronca, 2013). Following the order of appearance in the questionnaire, we present these tools. Name generators produce lists of names (alters) and were used to reconstruct the support network links of the respondents (egos). Here is the first name generator included in the questionnaire: "In everyday life, we sometimes have to deal with needs or solve problems. Very often, it is essential to rely on the help and support of the people

we are in a relationship with. Let us now talk about the people to whom you provided free support or help in the past 12 months and whom you may no longer support or help today. Could you indicate below how many people you provided support or assistance to in the past 12 months, even for a short or very short period, when they needed it in their daily lives?".

This question identified up to eleven alters that the ego helped[5]. After compiling this list, name interpreter questions were used to gather details about these alters and their relationship with the ego. The following text introduces the name interpreters: "I would now like to ask you to indicate some of the characteristics that these people have or had (if they are deceased), whose number you have just mentioned and whom you have helped by providing them with support or assistance when needed in their daily lives".

The name interpreters have potentially provided the following information about each alter: a) Gender[6]; b) Age in years; c) Educational qualification[7]; d) Social circle[8]; e) Help during this period[9]; f) "In the past 12 months, were you the caregiver for this person? A caregiver is the main person who provides care

[5] Due to technical reasons, it was necessary to set a maximum limit for responses. The same limit also applies to reports of received support only. The value eleven was derived by multiplying the average number of alters identified as potential help sources in a sample of Italian adults by the Household Consumption Monitoring Centre of the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Verona in 2022, which is 2.86 persons (Tronca, 2023), by four. Allowing a higher number, potentially equal for alters from whom help was received without reciprocation, would have complicated collecting relational data involving the named interrelator.

[6] Valid values: 1) Male; 2) Female; 3) Other.

[7] 1) No educational qualification; 2) Primary school certificate; 3) Middle school certificate; 4) 2-3 year upper secondary school vocational qualification (level II) that does not allow enrolment at university; 5) 4-5 year upper secondary school leaving certificate (level II) that allows enrolment at university; 6) Non-university tertiary diploma (academy of fine arts, conservatory, etc.); 7) University diploma; 8) Degree (all types); 9) Level I or II Master's degree, Specialisation diploma; 10) PhD.

[8] Text of the name interpreter: "This person is/was (if deceased), for you (if, in theory, you can indicate more than one answer, indicate the one that appears first in the list: for example, if, for one person, you could indicate both "Relative not living with you" and "Neighbour", indicate "Relative not living with you"). Valid values that are permissible include: 1) Partner living with you; 2) Partner not living with you; 3) Relative/family member other than your partner, living with you; 4) Other person, not a relative and other than your partner, living with you; 5) Relative not living with you; 6) Friend; 7) Neighbour; 8) Work colleague; 9) Association colleague; 10) Other (specify: ___).

[9] Text of the name interpreter: "Are you still assisting this individual during this period?". Valid values: 1) No; 2) Yes.

or assistance, at least once a week, to a person with problems due to ageing, chronic conditions or disabilities"[10]; g) (if applicable) "Are you the caregiver for this person during this period?"[11]; h) (if applicable) "What kind of problems does/did the person you are/were the caregiver have? (multiple answers possible)", followed by the responses: 1) Problems due to ageing; 2) Problems due to chronic conditions; 3) Problems due to disability.

Other name interpreters related to these alters have been used to reveal the content of these supportive relationships.: "In particular, what kind of support or help have you provided or are you providing to each of these people? (more than one type of support per line)". Data were collected on the transition of various forms of assistance, using Parsons' AGIL scheme's relational version along with the related symbolic and generalised means of exchange (Donati, 1991), applied to social capital or social resources (Tronca, 2007). The relational aspects involved are indicated in square brackets: Money [A]; Other material assistance, e.g. personal care (cooking, personal hygiene, etc.), accompanying to a medical appointment, etc. [A]; Information [A]; Reputation and credentials (the fact that you know them has increased the attention, esteem and/or consideration that this person has enjoyed/enjoys from others and therefore the possibility of achieving their goals: for example, this person has contacted a professional on your behalf who has helped them) [G]; Contacts and interpersonal connections (introduced this person to someone who could help them: for example, introduced this person to someone who became part of their support network and helped them) [I]; Did you provide this person with the most appropriate strategies to achieve their goals (e.g., in terms of advice, moral or psychological support, reassurance, an opportunity to vent, etc.) [L]; Other (specify: ___).

An extra name generator was employed to finish mapping the respondents' support networks, pinpointing the alters who provided help to the ego, even if the ego did not offer assistance them: "How many people, other than those we have mentioned so far, have provided you with support or help, in the past 12 months, even for a short or very short period, when you needed it in your daily life?". Each respondent could name up to eleven people. For each person named, several name interpreters were administered. The section of the questionnaire on these name interpreters began with the following introductory text: "I would now like to ask you to indicate some of the characteristics that these people, whom you have just mentioned and who helped you by providing support or assistance when you needed it in your daily life, have or had (if they

[10] 1) No; 2) Yes.
[11] 1) No; 2) Yes.

are deceased)". Here are the name interpreters used: a) Gender; b) Age in years; c) Educational qualification; d) Social circle[12]; e) Help also during this period[13].

Similarly, name interpreters were employed to ascertain the contents of the support ties: "In particular, what kind of support or help has each of these people provided or is providing to you? (more than one type of support per line)". The following content was indicated (in square brackets, the reference to the AGIL scheme is highlighted): Money [A]; Other material help, e.g., personal assistance (cooking, personal hygiene, etc.), accompanying someone to a medical appointment, etc. [A]; Information [A]; Reputation and credentials (the fact that you know this person has increased the attention, esteem, and/or consideration you have enjoyed/enjoy from others, and therefore the possibility of achieving your goals: for example, you contacted a professional on behalf of this person who helped you) [G]; Contacts and interpersonal connections (this person introduced you to someone who could help you: for example, they introduced you to someone who became part of your support network and helped you) [I]; This person provided you with the most appropriate strategies to achieve your goals (e.g., in terms of advice, moral or psychological support, reassurance, an opportunity to vent, etc.) [L]; Other (specify: ___).

Finally, using a name interrelator, information was collected on the presence of direct support ties between alters and toward the ego, specifically from the alters identified with the first name generator: "Overall, in the past 12 months, were there any bonds of support or help, in case of need in daily life, between the people you mentioned and towards you from those you helped? Please answer, indicating for each person you mentioned whether they provided support or help, in case of need in daily life, to each of the others listed".

Using this final tool, the support network structure of each interviewee was potentially reconstructed. The resulting graphs were directed and related to ego-centered, or ego-centric, networks of support. Having collected information about these networks, we were able to calculate specific measures and analyze the morphology of the identified personal support networks. The first measures

[12] Text of the name interpreter: "This person is/was (if deceased) to you (if, in theory, you can indicate more than one answer, indicate the one that appears first in the list: for example, if, for one person, you could indicate both "Relative not living with you" and "Neighbour", indicate "Relative not living with you"):". Valid values that are permissible include: 1) Partner living with you; 2) Partner not living with you; 3) Relative/family member other than your partner, living with you; 4) Other person, not a relative, other than your partner and not a care professional, living with you; 5) Relative not living with you; 6) Friend; 7) Neighbour; 8) Work colleague; 9) Association colleague; 10) Other (specify: ___).

[13] Text of the name interpreter: "Is this person also assisting you during this period?". Valid values that can be indicated: 1) No; 2) Yes.

determined and examined are those of local centrality. These measures allow us to understand, respectively, how many people the respondents have supported and how many people have supported them. These are the outdegree (d_O) and indegree (d_I), along with their normalised versions, the outgoing (C_{OD}) and incoming (C_{ID}) centrality indices, which range from 0 to 1 (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). These measures equal 1 when an ego has supported or been supported by all the alters mentioned overall, and 0 if they have not supported or been supported by any of them.

Additionally, a global centrality index, specifically Freeman's betweenness index (Freeman, 1979), was calculated for the respondents. This index, which will be discussed in its normalised form as a percentage (C_B), measures how well each ego can manage its personal support network as a broker, acting as an intermediary between its alters by placing itself on the shortest paths that connect them.

Another measure we will use for analysis is network density (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), in its ego-centric version (Scott, 2000). Density (Δ) is a property of the entire graph and is calculated as the ratio of the number of actual direct ties to the total number of potential direct ties. It therefore ranges from 0 to 1. In its ego-centric version (Δ_e), it is obtained by removing the ego from the graph and, obviously, its ties. Density assesses social cohesion and shows how closely the interviewee's personal support network resembles a true community, where everyone is connected through mutual aid.

These measures can help define the structural features of the support networks examined and, as a result, offer a foundation for analyzing how interviewees attribute meaning to the supportive dynamics that arise from the interviews.

4. Results

4.1. Interviews with workers

In this section, we will analyse the content of 32 interviews conducted with four categories of respondents (conditions at the time of the interview): 1. Eight people with permanent contracts, highly qualified and highly educated; 2. Eight people with fixed-term contracts, low qualifications, and low levels of education; 3. Eight people who had been unemployed at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview and who had received unemployment benefits at least once; 4. Eight people who had been unemployed at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview and who had never received unemployment benefits during the same period. The interview analysis aims to verify how, in

the content expressed by the interviewees, social support interacts with the working dimension. As will be seen, since all the interviewees are Italian, a particular configuration of relationships will emerge between the social support available to respondents and their relationship with the labour market. This specific configuration confirms, in the Italian case, the centrality of social relationships in providing support to people both when they are in the labour market and when they leave it.

It is worth noting that only four respondents indicated that they had acted as caregivers. Specifically, IDs 1006, 1041, and 1025 for one person, and ID 1007 for four people. All the persons indicated are assisted as caregivers by the four respondents, even at the time of data collection. We report that IDs 1006 and 1041 are part of research category W2, while IDs 1007 and 1025 are part of research category W3.

After a combined case-by-case analysis of the textual content of the 32 interviews and the information that emerged from the 32 network sheets, divided into four subgroups of eight interviews each, we identified the following six areas of investigation:

1. Prevalence (in number) of help given/received
2. Prevalence (in number) of help given/received to/from work colleagues;
3. Prevalence (in number) of help given/received within or outside one's family network;
4. Prevalence of different types of help (material, emotional, information, credentials)
5. Prevalence in the different categories of subjects of motivations expressed in giving help: a) family ties, b) friendship, c) solidarity, and d) reciprocity.
6. Prevalence of different reflections generated by the experience of help given/received: a) importance of family, b) friendship, c) solidarity, and d) reciprocity.

Using the six areas of focus as a classification criterion, we sought to construct a collective profile for each of the four subgroups by counting the responses relating to each area of content for each interview. The collective profile thus obtained allowed us to characterise each subgroup according to the prevalence of the different types of variables investigated. This classification criterion was therefore certainly an advantage in the investigative process, but at the same time, it also showed its limitations. In fact, the mere number of instances of help provided or received, within or outside the family network, their different types, and the prevalence of motivations and reflections expressed by the interviewees fail to capture the full complexity of the intertwining relationships of support provided and received by the interviewees.

For example, in some cases, the number of instances of help given within the family network prevails. However, the only support provided outside the family is perceived by the interviewee as particularly significant from an existential perspective. The presentation that follows outlines the collective profiles of each of the four subgroups, incorporating excerpts from the interviews to provide a more precise and more comprehensive understanding of the survey results. Finally, for each subgroup, we have also chosen to report the configuration of the social support networks of a "typical" interviewee, i.e., the one who most closely matches the characteristics of the collective profile of their subgroup. The analysis produced the following results.

Subgroup 1: individuals who, at the time of the interview, were employed on a permanent contract and possessed high qualifications and a high level of education.

Collective profile:

1. Prevalence of only giving help (5 out of 8 cases) compared to those who gave and received help (3 out of 8 cases)
2. Significant presence of help provided to work colleagues (4 out of 8 cases)
3. All help is provided outside the family network, such as through friends and acquaintances (in 8 out of 8 cases). Help received mainly from the family network (3 out of 8 cases)
4. Prevalence of informational and credential-related help (6 out of 8 cases)
5. Prevalence of work-related motivations (job search, job advice) in the help provided (6 out of 8 cases)
6. Strong presence of reflections on the help given related to reciprocity in support in the workplace (4 out of 8 cases)

In summary, for this subgroup, the workplace emerges as a space where new supportive relationships are formed. Work, especially permanent employment (Gallino, 2014), is confirmed as the setting in which it is possible to establish supportive relationships with colleagues. 'Teamwork' is discussed here as a mechanism that facilitates the creation of mutually supportive relationships, even when a colleague has health problems that reduce their work performance at home:

> "In his case, he was completely immobilised for those 15 days, which was different, due to a physical impediment, let us say (...). I went to do things that he could not physically do, in short. (...) Team spirit, unity, manifests itself in this way too, doesn't it?" (interview with ID 1008).

In this subgroup, it emerges that the assets conveyed by supportive relationships are mainly informational (relating to work procedures) and credentials for finding new jobs in case of need, and that all this also has elements of reciprocity:

> "If you help a colleague in difficulty, then '(...) if you need help, the other person will be able to help you. On the other hand, when someone only thinks of themselves and does not share information, they tend to turn to another colleague when they are in difficulty or have a request to make, and that colleague will always say no. This also motivates me (to help)" (interview with ID 1031).

It is interesting to note that the element of reciprocity associated with supporting others extends beyond simply helping one another. For example, recommending a person considered reliable for a job outside one's own organisation increases the social credentials of the sender. We could talk about "instrumental external legitimisation" as one of the characteristics of reciprocity that emerges in this subgroup:

> "I was not afraid of making a bad impression and presenting him to another company, and I received thanks because they told me, 'Look, this person is extremely talented,' so I felt gratified from that point of view as well" (interview with ID 1034).

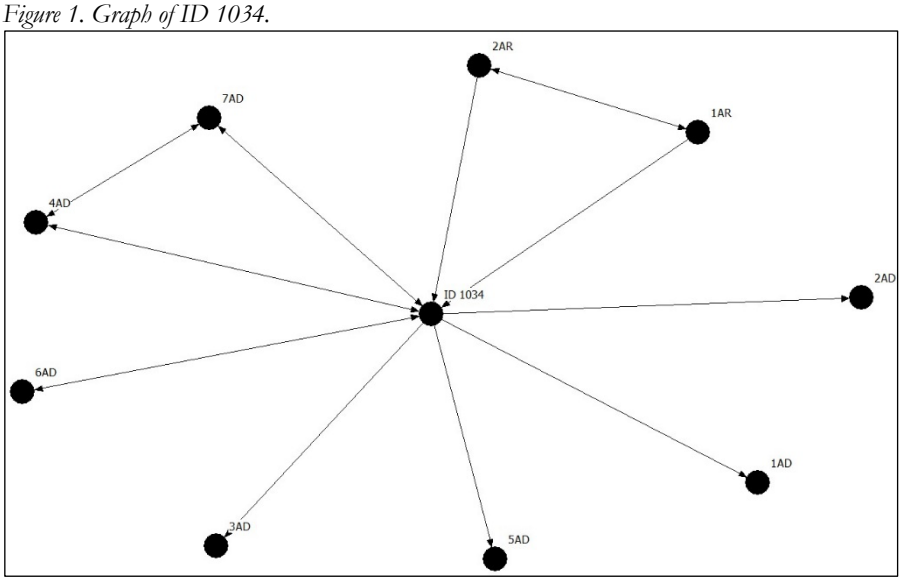
Finally, this reciprocity, which respondents identified as something they thought about after helping their workmates, affects not only relationships but also the quality of work. Specifically, helping each other among colleagues serves to speed up the learning of new procedures, solve unexpected problems, support colleagues in new tasks, and all this has an undoubted positive impact on the efficiency of work processes:

> "(...) However, collaboration between several people improves things, and at least from my experience, because you interact differently. (...) Helping C. also benefited me because it was a new operation for me. This mechanism needed to be assimilated; it was not something I assimilated immediately... through discussion, certain aspects emerge that one does not initially focus on (...)" (interview with ID 1008).

Finally, it is worth noting that in all eight interviews, assistance provided outside the family network, particularly to friends and acquaintances, was prevalent.

About the network configurations, we chose subject ID 1034, who we could define as the "ideal type" of the first subgroup in relation to the six areas investigated in the interview: prevalence of help given (seven cases) over help received (two cases of subjects who help him but whom he does not help); significant presence of work-related help provided (2 out of 7 cases); all help given is provided outside the family network and help received comes from both inside and outside the family network; the help provided is mainly of an informational nature and related to finding new employment (4 out of 7 cases) and, finally, clear reflections are expressed on the importance of helping as a means of increasing one's social credentials (2 out of 7 cases).

Figure 1. Graph of ID 1034.



The structure of the social network in this ideal case of the first subgroup is that of the graph shown in Figure 1. The density of the network is low (Δ=0.178), as is the egocentric density (Δ_e= 0.056), while the global centrality index of Ego is high (C_B=41.667%). Here we have a support network in which the interviewee plays a significant brokering role, connecting members of the network itself. This network consists mainly of work colleagues, acquaintances, and friends. It tends to exhibit some characteristics of 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1998), such as facilitating contacts outside the network, as seen in the case of

the information and accreditation provided by the interviewee to a member of his support network regarding job finding.

Subgroup 2: people who, at the time of the interview, were working on a fixed-term contract and had low qualifications and low levels of education.

Collective profile:

1. Prevalence of help given and received (5 out of 8 cases) compared to help only given (3 out of 8 cases)
2. Absence of work colleagues in the help given and received
3. Prevalence of help received outside the family network (especially from friends, in 5 out of 8 cases). Help was received mainly from family and friends, as well as from trade unions (in 2 out of 8 cases).
4. Prevalence of emotional support over material support provided (6 out of 8 cases).
5. Prevalence of motivations for help given related to belonging to the circle of friends (5 out of 8 cases).
6. Prevalence of reflections on help given related to personal gratification, closeness, and personal growth (6 out of 8 cases).

This subgroup stands out for being composed of people who are both providers and recipients of help, mostly from their networks of friends. This help is mainly emotional, but material resources also play an important role in the support given and received. Furthermore, this subgroup comprises the only two respondents (out of 32 participants in the study) who stated that they had turned to a trade union to address work-related problems. These personal problems do not seem to involve a "collective" sphere:

> "[I was helped, Ed.] by a trade union I have been a member of for some time, both because I asked for advice on a type of contract I was about to sign, but also for patronage such as for the 730 [tax return form, Ed.] and things like that." (interview with ID 1003)

> "I turned to a patronage organisation to deal with problems related to an accident" (interview with ID 1004)

The work dimension, as a space for relationships and support, is absent here, which is likely because the interviewees are temporary workers. Finally, the interviewees highlight how the support provided to others (especially friends) was an opportunity to reflect on the value of social support as a tool for strengthening family and friendship relationships, while also opening up spaces for reflection on the fragility of one's own existence:

> "But it is another confirmation that... that... well, you know, if we have to live, let us try to live better, because at any moment something can happen that completely changes your life." (interview with ID 1006)

Reciprocity is discussed here as a mechanism that involves both people in a process where giving and receiving support shape the relationship:

> "And the reasons also... let us say... also to help her... who helped me in some way, because I also needed to relate to someone, to connect with someone, so in this way it also helped me to get out of my family sphere and, let us say, I was also able to calm some of my anxieties with her. So we helped each other a little." (interview with ID 1012)

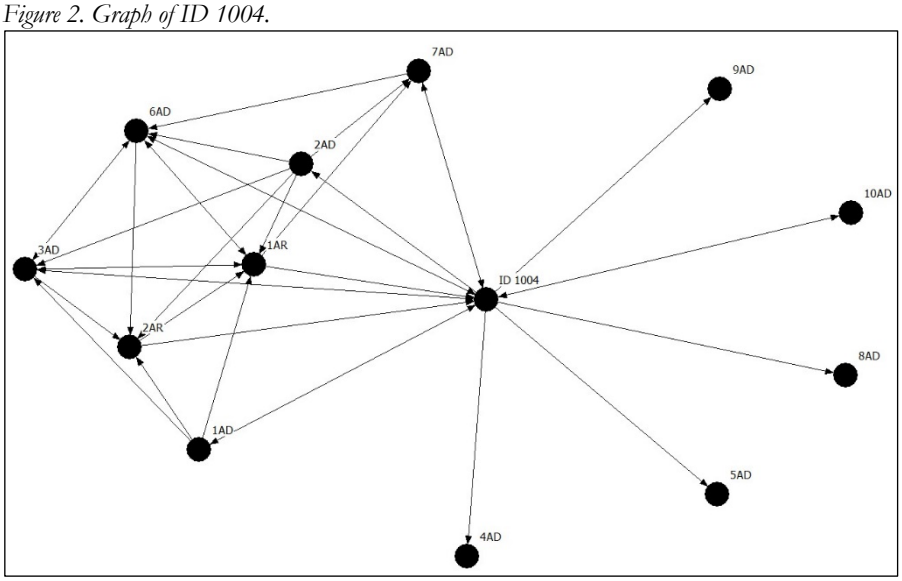
> "Yes, [giving help, Ed.] made me grow on a... level, that is, giving him advice made me, little by little, I do not know... as if I had grown on a... mental level. It made me mature" (interview with ID 1040).

It should be noted that in this subgroup, the aspect of "instrumental external legitimisation" that we saw emerge in the first subgroup is absent.

Regarding the configuration of the support network in the ideal case, interviewee ID 1004 was chosen, as he best reflects the general characteristics of the second subgroup. Specifically: prevalence of help given (9 cases) over help received (2 cases of individuals who help him but whom he does not help); all help given is provided outside the family network and help received comes from within the family network; the help provided is both expressive and material; finally, emphasis is placed on helping as a means of expressing solidarity and emotional and friendly closeness.

The network density is low (Δ=0.231) (although higher than the ideal case of the first subgroup), as is the egocentric density (Δ_e= 0.144), while the global centrality index of Ego is high (C_B=46.843%). As we can see from the graph, the network has a distinct structure in two configurations: on the right-hand side, we have five relationships with individuals who do not belong to the interviewee's family or parental network and who have no direct relationship with each other. On the left-hand side, we find a denser portion of the network consisting of relatives, the partner, and a work colleague of the interviewee, which indicates a stronger community anchor for Ego's support ties (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Graph of ID 1004.



Subgroup 3: people who have been unemployed at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview and who have received unemployment benefits at least once during the same period.

Collective profile:

1. Prevalence of help given (7 out of 8 cases)
2. Presence (albeit a minority) of colleagues (including former colleagues) in the help given/received (2 out of 8 cases)
3. Balance in the help provided both within and outside the family network. Prevalence of help received mainly within the family network (3 out of 4 cases)
4. Balance in help given between material and emotional resources
5. Prevalence of economic/work-related motivations for help given and received (5 out of 8 cases)
6. Prevalence of reflections related to the importance of reciprocity with respect to help given/received (5 out of 8 cases)

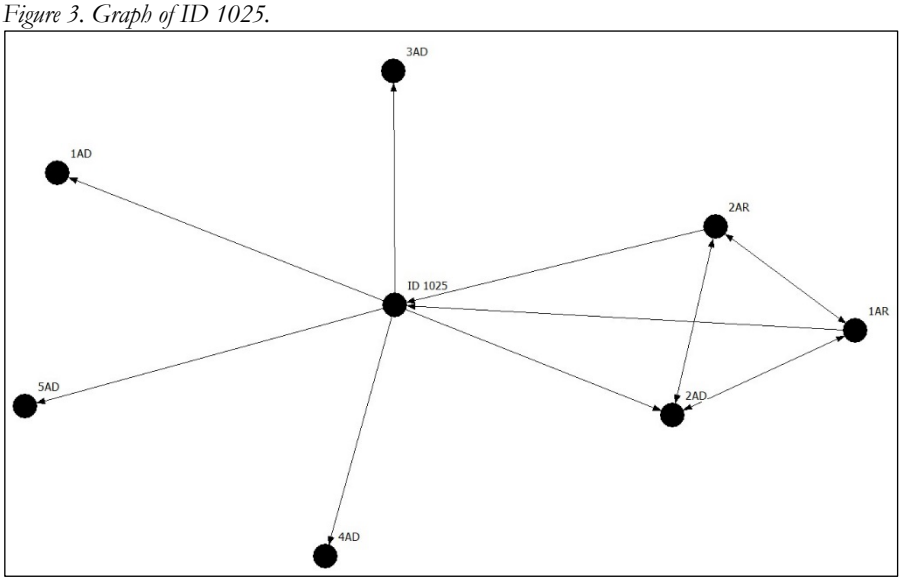
In this subgroup, respondents stated that they mainly provided emotional and material support. This support was provided both within and outside their family network, and among the people identified as belonging to the support network, we also find two work colleagues. While the support received primarily came from their own families, the support given was distributed both within and outside the family network, with material needs and work-related problems being the main justifications for this exchange of goods. This confirms that

family and friend support networks play a vital role in providing the resources needed to cope with times of need. Finally, we also find in this subgroup that giving support is considered an experience that gives rise to important reflections on the importance of reciprocity, seen as a relationship that binds participants in a framework of shared responsibility, through which care is received in times of need or which contributes to improving the quality of social life:

> "Yes... more than helping him with pleasure... anyway, something I also notice on my part... I mean, anyway, it was a help in a situation, in a difficult period for him, so, something that maybe even tomorrow I will still have... I will not say support, but anyway, a favour that I did that I think he will not forget." (interview with ID 1027)

> "[Helping] is a wonderful thing and it gives you satisfaction, that is, a satisfaction that makes you say... I... maybe we can improve this world!" (interview with ID 1029)

Figure 3. Graph of ID 1025.



The ideal interview for this subgroup is that of ID 1025, as it summarises the general characteristics of the support networks of the third subgroup. Specifically: a prevalence of help given (5 instances of help) over help received (2 cases of people who help him but whom he does not help); slight prevalence

of help given within the family network (3 instances of help) compared to outside the family network (2 instances of help). The help received all comes from within the family network; the help provided is both expressive and material; finally, emphasis is placed on helping as a means of expressing solidarity and emotional and friendly closeness.

Here too, the network density is low (Δ=0.232), as is the egocentric density (Δ_e=0.143), and Ego's global centrality index is also relatively low (C_B=28.571%) (Figure 3). In essence, compared to the more stable work situations we have observed so far, Ego's ability to perform the function of broker within his support network appears to be weaker in this instance. This state of affairs could indicate that Ego does not coordinate his support network.

In addition to this, Ego acts as a caregiver for node 2AD, who suffers from problems related to ageing and disability.

Subgroup 4: people who have been unemployed at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview and who have never received unemployment benefits during the same period.

Collective profile:

1. Almost all help given and, at the same time, received (7 out of 8 cases)
2. No cases of support from/to work colleagues
3. Prevalence of help given within the family network (5 out of 8 cases). Help received mainly outside the family network (4 out of 6 cases)
4. Balance of material and emotional resources in the help given
5. Prevalence of material motivations in help given/received (8 out of 8 cases)
6. Reflections related to reciprocity with respect to help given/received (6 out of 8 cases)

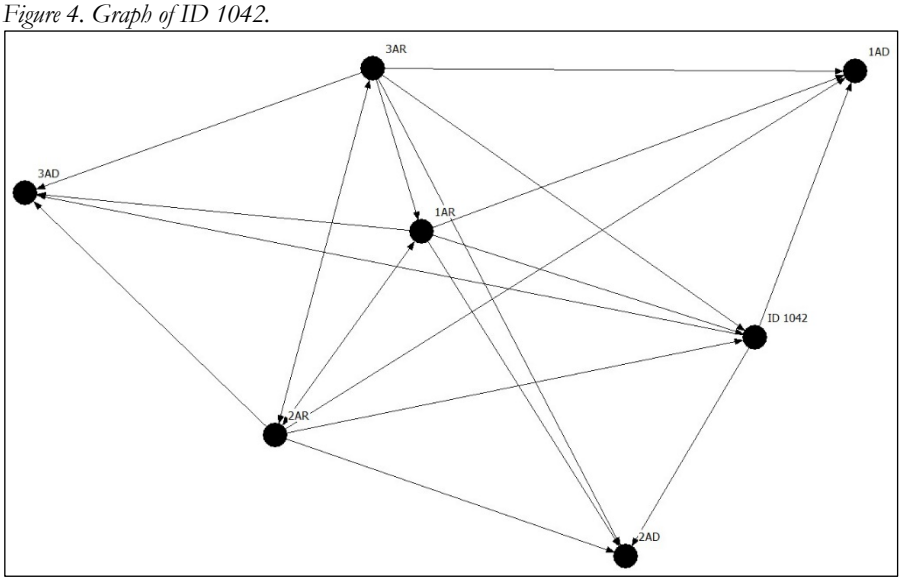
The fourth subgroup has a similar profile to the previous subgroup, although work colleagues are not represented here, and the support given and received is familiar to almost all respondents. For the rest, in this subgroup, we also see a balance between material and emotional resources, a prevalence of material motivations underlying the exchange of resources, and a set of reflections on solidarity in support networks, confirming that helping each other is perceived as an effective mechanism for strengthening mutual solidarity with important social repercussions:

> "(…) let us say… parents are… if it were not for them, we would not be here, I mean, for me, let us say for our generation, we will never be able to do what they did. [speaking about his father, Ed.] He did so much for the family, so it is only right that I do something for him, too. I could never reach his level, but I am trying." (interview with ID 1032)

> "That... in the end... still on the subject of help... regarding life, it is nice to help, I mean... I really mean it when I say that if everyone helped their neighbour, even in small ways, life would be easier for everyone, you know? Both in small and big ways, so both in the family and at work, with employers, with those who govern us, and everything." (interview with ID 1042)

The ideal interview for this subgroup is that of ID 1042, as it summarises the general characteristics that characterise the support networks of the fourth subgroup. Specifically, there is a balance between the help given (by three people) and the help received (from three cases of people who help him but whom he does not help); all the help given is within the family network. Help received comes from both inside and outside the family network; the help provided is both expressive and material. Finally, emphasis is placed on helping as a means of expressing solidarity and emotional and friendly closeness.

Figure 4. Graph of ID 1042.



The network density is relatively high (Δ=0.476), as is the egocentric density (Δ_e= 0.467), which is very similar to the density that also takes into account Ego and its connections. On the other hand, the Ego's ability to act as a broker is negligible, since its global centrality, based on normalised betweenness (C_B), is equal to 0.00% (Figure 4). In fact, the fact that the two

densities we have determined are almost identical leads us to evaluate the presence of brokers within the graph and thus to identify subject 2AR, who helps Ego without being helped by the latter and is the only node to perform a brokerage function, as it is the only one to record a global centrality value other than 0.00 (C_B=3.33%). In this network, Ego's inability to coordinate his social support network, which we have already identified in the network shown in Figure 3, is greatly exacerbated, and another subject clearly emerges who is fully recognised as performing this function. The network appears to confirm that we are dealing with a subgroup characterized by the presence of strong ties in dense networks, composed of family members, relatives, and friends. This strong support network, which is not dependent on the characteristics or actions of the interviewee, is ideal for providing material and emotional support but is not very effective in connecting the nodes of the network to the outside world. In fact, the Ego itself appears to be in a sort of "protective" relationship with one of the other members of the network.

4.2. Work and networks between care and representation: the trade union's point of view

The part of the research project that specifically studied work dynamics began with evidence that our national labour market has been undergoing a phase of strong internal diversification for several years, with trends towards change that have highlighted a specific polarisation of conditions. As mentioned in the introduction, it was based on this evidence, now well established in sociological research, that it was decided to interview four types of subjects: those with permanent contracts, high qualifications and high levels of education; those with fixed-term contracts, low qualifications and low levels of education, those who had been unemployed at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview, and those who had or had not received unemployment benefits. In the previous paragraph, we examined the evidence from the interviews with these four types of subjects. Based on this four-part division of our context, the trade union world has also been involved, which in recent years has been questioning its repositioning within the ongoing changes in the world of work, changes that affect both organisational aspects and the content of work. Four interviews were therefore conducted with key trade union representatives, who were able to provide information on the labour market and workers' conditions, in order to identify the specific characteristics of the working environment of the 32 individuals involved in the in-depth interviews. As anticipated, with regard to trade union officials, three regional trade union secretaries and one regional trade union secretary from an autonomous

grassroots trade union, among the most representative in the Italian trade union world, operating in the north-east of the country, were interviewed.

This in-depth phase allowed us to reflect across the board on the context that forms the backdrop to the four subgroups of interviewees, seeking to understand how the union fits into it and how it intercepts and is intercepted by workers. The findings were grouped into four thematic areas: (a) the reference populations, (b) established and emerging issues, (c) contact with the trade union, and (d) trade union representation.

(a) Reference populations

A first aspect that emerges from the interviewees' arguments concerns the sharp increase in the heterogeneity of the working population. For several years now, a process of increasing differentiation within the working population has been underway, affecting both contractual aspects and the cultural dimensions of work. About cultural aspects in particular, there has been a change in the meanings attributed to work. We are now far removed from the ideological phase of work that characterised the post-war period until the 1970s, when work was seen as all-encompassing in relation to people's lives and plans, as well as their individual and social identity. The dimension of work remains central. However, the process of pluralisation of the meanings attributed to work, which has been the focus of much sociological research in recent years, is fully mature and emerges clearly from the arguments of the interviewees. As field analyses also show, work is important. However, in the ranking of values, it leaves the top spot to other dimensions (the sphere of sociality and time for oneself), and the heterogeneity of the social composition of work can also be seen in the diversification of meanings attributed to work (instrumental, expressive, relational, etc.).

According to the interviewees, the demand for security is a common denominator among various working populations. Although there are heterogeneous positions even within the same populations, certain divisions appear to be consolidating, particularly those between generations, as well as those between local populations and migrants. Not necessarily in terms of conflict, but certainly in objective terms (contractual conditions, economic recognition, job stability and protection, etc.) and subjective terms (attitude towards work, expectations and aspirations). While it is undeniable that the migrant population expresses a diversity compared to the local population, often translating into a greater level of acceptance (forced and not chosen) of unfavourable working conditions, one fact that worries the union is the distance of the young population from union politics.

(b) Established and emerging issues

With regard to issues, respondents report a generalised state of uncertainty, which affects both social life in general and working conditions, with job insecurity linked to the dismantling of the organisational models that have characterised the world of work for many decades. More generally, there is a reported increase in vulnerability, and therefore in widespread risk, which can lead to situations of marginalisation when even minor traumatic personal events occur that can have serious consequences. Insecurity therefore also becomes identity insecurity.

One issue that the union is addressing is the contrast between populations with structured and unstructured conditions, two employment situations characterised by different levels of job continuity, which form the basis of the level of structuring of the career path. This contrast is often generational, and as recent research has shown, it is combined with an increase in horizontal mobility among young people and a lack of vertical mobility, which primarily affects three groups: young people, women, and migrants.

More specifically, respondents report the consolidation of issues that come to the attention of trade unions, such as working poverty (people working for low and irregular wages) and housing (finding and affording housing). As far as work is concerned, it is becoming increasingly urgent to consider measures to support employment and maintain skills in the workplace. One trend that has emerged in recent years is the need to balance work and life. This requirement still appears to be predominantly female, and concerns the possibility of maintaining a work-life balance while also fulfilling other responsibilities outside of work. This is clearly the legacy of a long-established male-dominated work culture. However, in recent years, this need has become increasingly widespread, to the extent that new organisational models are also putting pressure on the boundary between work and life, gradually blurring it within a work organisation model that tends to merge the times and spaces of life and work.

The pandemic has helped shift attention to health and safety issues. It has had a significant impact on direct relationships between people (contact) and on communities' self-control through relationships. It has exacerbated existing crises, generating new needs, but above all, it has contributed concretely to consolidating and exacerbating existing inequalities. In some ways, the pandemic has therefore accelerated trends and processes. Regarding trade unions more directly, respondents note that the pandemic has had a direct impact on the isolation of workers and, consequently, on the stability of the relational system. During that phase of physical isolation, it was not competent working, but rather home working. However, this experience highlighted the dangers of detaching

workers from their workplace, as it translates into distancing them from colleagues with whom they can share not only work moments but also social and solidarity situations. Already now, but even more so in the coming years, we must/will have to deal with new technologies, not only digital ones, but in particular artificial intelligence, a technology that we first need to learn more about, also in order to understand how to deal with it in collective bargaining fully. Technologies are increasingly a factor in the organisation of work, and their concrete application in organisational processes is becoming a subject of discussion between the parties. More generally, attention must also be paid to the development model and sustainable development, within which the role of work must be redesigned.

(c) Contact with the trade union

Contact with the trade union presents a situation of significant fragmentation of demands, directly linked to the fragmentation currently affecting work and the labour market. We are witnessing a growth in pragmatism and individualized contact for specific problems (housing, tax issues, etc.), which are often individual and rarely collective, or perhaps better to say, individualized and shared collectively. Contact is often made by people who are not union members, who view the individual trade unionist (often regardless of the union to which they belong) as a point of contact to address and resolve specific personal issues.

The political translation of the demands made to the union is therefore relatively poor (if not non-existent), a situation that causes the union to lose its role as a political actor (bonding agent) with respect to the working population. In fact, the union becomes a "listening place", sought mainly for concrete problems, but which can also become a subject capable of providing general security, offering psychological and legal support. CAFs and patronage organisations, for example, deal with people and situations on various occasions, primarily for tax matters. The work that the trade union is called upon to do is therefore to transfer individual pragmatic requests into a collective claim.

In this section of the findings that emerged from interviews with trade unionists, it is worth reiterating their reflections on the need to engage with younger generations (using various opportunities, such as Job Orienta, etc.) and to make themselves known to them. The younger generations have little contact with trade unions, know little or nothing about them, and perceive them as distant entities (perhaps primarily interested in defending other segments of the population). It is therefore essential for trade unions to listen to younger generations, as well as to populations with traditional needs, with whom they already have long-standing experience and

tradition, in order to identify common denominators of conditions that they can represent and protect.

(d) Trade union representation

Representation clearly has to contend with the heterogeneity and fragmentation mentioned above. While it is clearly challenging to engage specific populations that lack a political fabric at the grassroots level, which unites and produces identity, the diversification of working conditions (which also translates into diversification of needs and expectations). It is also necessary to address the issue of representation in situations that are new to trade unions, such as self-employed workers and hybrid jobs. The latter are the result of a process of change in the organisation and content of work, which makes it clear that the traditional job classifications on which representation has always been based are being called into question.

As mentioned above, this section also includes the interviewees' reflections on the need to transform individual requests into collective demands. More generally, this concerns the need to value the heterogeneity of the situations to be represented simultaneously, as well as the aspects they have in common, which can serve as connectors between the different situations. These connectors can be elements of strength for trade union action, which otherwise risks being very fragmented and, therefore, weaker in fact.

The central role of delegates involved in specific situations remains evident. To fulfill its role as a representative of workers' interests, the union must continue to be a local union that practices territoriality, knows how to be on the street, and thus expresses its primary vocation. To achieve this, it must operate within a network logic, aiming to create a "variable geometry" network with local entities, establishing stable relationships based on the issues/needs of workers. Local authorities and the third sector (the world of associations in general), therefore, become privileged interlocutors, with whom a system needs to be created, although the current scenario remains very fragmented.

Building strong relationships with various local actors also strengthens the role of territorial bargaining, a decentralized level of trade union action between the national and company levels, which is crucial for defining local welfare policies. However, it should not be forgotten that the redesign of production systems at a global level requires trade unions to consider international networks in addressing the issues of long supply chains and migrant flows.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Although caution is warranted given the low number of respondents per subgroup, we can nevertheless highlight some points for reflection that seem to emerge primarily from the analysis of the interviews:

a) Work, especially permanent employment, is an important variable in fostering supportive relationships. The first subgroup illustrates how a stable working environment enables people to support one another both at work and, occasionally, outside the workplace. As we have seen in all the subgroups, helping a member of one's support network (and being supported in return) makes people feel that they are part of a network of relationships in which shared responsibility is one of the most important components. Only in the first subgroup is this reciprocity explicitly discussed as a means of legitimising those who help. This component of "personal promotion" outside the support network is an exciting element to investigate, as this mechanism combines emotional and solidarity-based motivations with material and ego-centred ones.

b) The fact that solidarity ties within a work organisation can generate a wider network of social relationships that benefits individuals as well as social organisations (starting with work organisations) confirms Durkheim's assertion about the particular nature of organic solidarity in modern society, (...) a solidarity that arises on a functional, i.e. material, basis (...) and then extends to the whole social body. However, we must emphasize here that the first subgroup was also characterized by two other important variables: a high level of education and vocational training. These variables, combined with permanent employment, likely outline a profile of above-average social status compared to that of the other three subgroups. This could also explain why the issue of social credentials generated by helping someone else is so important in this subgroup, even though the help itself is recognised as an opportunity to appreciate the importance of solidarity towards those in need.

c) The family is mentioned in the interviews as the most important source of support. However, when it comes to providing support to others, we see a difference between the first two subgroups (those whose interviewees were working at the time of the interview) and the remaining two groups (those whose interviewees had experienced at least one period of unemployment). In the first subgroup, all support is provided outside the family network, mainly by work colleagues and friends. In the second subgroup, most support is mainly directed

towards friends. In the third subgroup, support is directed equally both within and outside the family, whereas in the fourth subgroup, it is mainly within the family network. Regarding the type of resources provided by the assistance, the first two groups are dominated by emotional and intangible resources. In contrast, the third and fourth subgroups exhibit a balance between tangible and intangible resources. The limited number of interviews and the qualitative design of the research do not allow us to go beyond a few explanatory hypotheses.

d) The reasons behind the help given and/or received are varied and range from material needs to expressive needs, informational needs, or social accreditation needs. Reciprocity is frequently discussed as a feeling often associated with the experience of giving or receiving support in relation to these needs. Reciprocity is an experience that makes respondents feel that they are not alone in times of need and encourages them to show solidarity towards others. This mechanism of social cohesion arises when support is both given and received. Some interviews report that reciprocity has stimulated reflection on the need to show solidarity even with those who do not belong to one's family, friendship, or work networks. All this confirms how important it is for each of us to experience supportive relationships (whether receiving or providing support) and how such relationships have a "political" significance that encompasses the entire social sphere.
e) Finally, about the configurations of the four networks examined, we can summarise the findings of the analysis by stating that the most marked difference in the structures of the support networks seems to emerge from a comparison between the ideal-typical network of the first subgroup and those of the other three subgroups. The network of the first subgroup, which comprises individuals with permanent jobs, has a low density and is primarily composed of people who do not belong to the family or parental networks of the interviewee, who plays a significant role in connecting the different nodes of the network. In contrast, the network of the fourth subgroup, composed of individuals who had experienced at least one episode of job loss within the 12 months preceding the interview, exhibits the typical characteristics of strong ties, with significant internal density and a completely absent role for the interviewee as a broker.

Considering the above, the configuration of welfare systems can influence how networks are structured. For instance, welfare systems can shape network formation by determining access to services, the distribution of home care, social care, and integrated health and social services, and by fostering community involvement as active participants in social and health policies. One

goal of welfare systems should therefore be to activate various community resources and support more effective network arrangements.

Regarding this potential work plan for welfare systems, the role and perspective of trade unions seem to be very significant. In fact, trade unions are social actors capable of forming networks due to their extensive territorial reach, which extends beyond the workplace. Besides being entities able to directly establish networks, identify needs and expectations, and act as spokespeople outside the workplace, interviews reveal that they are a true "node" in the support network. Trade unions are increasingly approached pragmatically by workers, regardless of their union membership, because of their ability to address and work toward resolving individual problems. In fact, the trade unionists interviewed highlighted several elements that are particularly important for understanding social support for workers.

The in-depth discussion with trade union representatives also brought to light some evidence that we can revisit in the final discussion. A cross-sectional reading of what was argued by the interviewees leads us to highlight some points that may trigger a need for further quantitative analysis:

a) Despite structural trends in the changing world of work, which affect all working populations and appear to be common to all, diverse situations of strength and weakness are becoming established in relation to the labour market. These situations are indeed linked to specific characteristics of individuals (primarily their skills and available support networks), but also to their specific working environment (geographical area and field of work). However, two aspects are common to both: a change in work culture, moving towards de-ideologisation, and a search for security, expressed primarily in economic terms, but not necessarily limited to this dimension alone. The relationship between cultural change and the search for security should be analysed further. We should also examine new demands, primarily that of reconciling work with other aspects of life, generated by both cultural changes (lifestyles) and structural transformations in the world of work (organizational models that blur the boundary between work and life).
b) The increased perception of vulnerability sees an expression of demands that increasingly take on an individual form and pragmatic content, often marking, precisely based on these elements, a significant generational divide. The trade union becomes an agency for solving concrete, personal, or family problems, often understood as a place where people can be listened to in a way that they cannot find elsewhere. Here too, an in-depth analysis of this attitude and its subsequent translation into concrete behavior could utilize the discriminating variable of age, but it could also be interesting to study

whether having a significant social network leads people to turn to trade unions or other support agencies.

Moving beyond a generational perspective, it could still be interesting to develop further the examination of the relationship between belonging to associations of some kind (social, recreational, etc.) and the expression of requests for support, trying to capture the space reserved more generally for the set of organisations directly linked to the world of work. As some of the literature has been telling us for some time now, workplaces are increasingly less identified as agents capable of producing individual and/or collective security, as sociological surveys once told us. This concerns trade unions, but not only them; it also concerns businesses and their trade associations, training agencies, and those responsible for governing the labour market. Our country has always been characterized by a high level of reliance on personal channels to access work (e.g., parents, friends). These channels are utilized in job searches and have proven effective in finding employment. However, this aspect must also contend with the redesign of personal networks and the emergence of new systems connecting individuals and the world of work, often linked to new technologies that feature connectivity and a high capacity for information management.

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