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## *Family, Personal Networks and Social Capital in Italy*

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is, using a survey taken on a representative sample of the Italian population as our starting point, to verify whether support networks can still be considered a resource for Italians (and if so how far these networks reach and how intense the flows of help individuals can draw on in their primary networks are) and to investigate more closely to what extent the existence of such a network affects the degree of satisfaction the average Italian expresses regarding certain fundamental aspects of daily life: economic resources, family, friends, work, free time and health. The results of the study demonstrate that the primary social capital available to Italians has been seriously eroded in recent years and that satisfaction levels are linked much more closely to the stage an individual has reached in their life cycle than to the amount of social capital available to them.

Keywords: family, social capital, personal networks

### **1. Introduction**

Various studies have highlighted the persistence of social networks even in highly individualized societies and their vital role in providing social support. In fact, for a number of scholars, primary social networks are considered the foundations of relationships that generate resources for the individual – in other words, relationships generate social capital – while for others the relationships themselves constitute social capital.<sup>1</sup>

The debate on networks began in Italy around the 1980s-90s and in terms of empirical research the surveys<sup>2</sup> carried out in that period by the ISTAT (National Institute for Statistics) on mutual help between families helped to paint an accurate picture of the support provided by social networks. The results of the ISTAT surveys revealed that a significant exchange of goods and services between families still persisted; these exchanges involved above all (although not exclusively) mutual help between the generation of the children and the generation of the parents in families where the children no longer lived at home. This help led to the formation of a protective network that would guarantee a satisfactory quality of life for elderly individuals living alone, and support for young couples with small children and individuals in need of care (Di Nicola, 1986; 1998; 2002a). This persistence of social networks has always been considered a peculiarity of the Italian system, so much so that even at the beginning of the new millennium analyses of consumer behaviour showed that Italian families had a good capacity both for spending and for saving, despite having an average income lower than that of many other European countries. This is due to the fact that Italian families could access services and goods produced by their

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, Nan Lin's theoretical-empirical approach has been adopted. According to this approach, social capital is embedded in the primary relationships, the networks of personal acquaintances the social actor can activate to obtain resources, aid and support, whether material or immaterial. Networks of primary relationships are social capital. From Lin's point of view, generalized social capital, *i.e.* the resource circulating on a macro level and positively affecting the quality of life of a collective group, does not exist: on this level it is more appropriate to use concepts such as trust, civic pride and participation, which for Lin have nothing to do with primary social capital. See Lin: 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The first survey on family structures and behaviours, involving a sample of around 28,000 Italian families, dates back to 1983.

own members and therefore avoid having to turn to the market (Alesina/Ichino, 2009). Although some scholars describe the singularity of the Italian system in a negative light, we must bear in mind that the strength of the Italian family represents a highly important and decisive clearing house for the family's life strategies. Faced with a rather limited welfare system in terms of both provision of services and support to individuals, the strength of the Italian family was considered a strong element of protection and social security. At the beginning of the new millennium – therefore more than twenty years after the first studies on networks were carried out – many researchers were still stressing the persistence of primary relationships in Italian society. This factor, despite being seen by many as a negative influence as it held back the country's social and economic development and stopped it from moving beyond the traditional familism (Cartocci, 2002; 2007), was a source of reassurance, especially for the dominant political class that had failed to strengthen and exploit these family resources through carefully targeted social policies.

Family, primary networks and social capital in its various forms (primary and secondary, individual and generalized, bonding and bridging, micro and macro) have in recent times become the buzz words of a significant and intense theoretical and empirical debate that is seeing Italian researchers developing a unique and original path of study, one that is going into significant depth in this area.<sup>3</sup>

These in-depth studies – some of which completed with the aid of ISTAT statistics (Di Nicola, 1988; 1998; 2002a; 2009b) and others using surveys of population samples (Di Nicola, 2006; Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca, 2008; 2010) – have allowed us to reconstruct the structural profile of the (primary) personal networks characterized by the fact that they are not particularly large and at the same time ever more elective and delocalized,<sup>4</sup> at least until 2002-03.

Now, at the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium, we have to ask ourselves whether it is still possible to glean elements of reassurance from the singularity of the Italian system of social protection, or whether we need to open up to broader social dynamics and therefore no longer take the persistence of primary relationships for granted.

The aim of this article is, using a survey taken on a representative sample of the Italian population as our starting point, to verify whether support networks can still be considered a resource for Italians (and if so how far these networks reach and how intense the flows of help individuals can draw on in their primary networks are) and to investigate more closely to what extent the existence of such a network affects the degree of satisfaction the average Italian expresses regarding certain fundamental aspects of daily life: economic resources, family, friends, work, free time and health.

The study,<sup>5</sup> from which new and more in-depth information can be obtained, on the one hand attempts to give an account of the changing trends of networks in contemporary Italian society, reinforced by the knowledge that individualization processes have accelerated and become strongly accentuated in the past few decades, above all because of the changes that have been affected in the labour market and economic systems in force in Italy. It is important to assess whether we can effectively talk about persistence or whether, on the contrary, we need to analyze the dynamics and characteristics of primary networks in the light of the most recent social processes. However, this first level of analysis inevitably leads to another issue for consideration: it is important to also question whether these networks (whatever their strength or dimensions) are still a source of support, a source of social capital. Since in the study in question only the actors that the interviewees mentioned as people they would or could turn to in times of need were taken into consideration, and since the interviewees gave mostly cohabiting and non cohabiting family members, friends, co-workers, people with whom they share experienc-

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<sup>3</sup> Please see the attached bibliography, in particular the works of Amaturò, Bagnasco *et al.*, Barbieri, Cartocci, Di Nicola, Donati, Colozzi, Prandini, Stanzani and Tronca.

<sup>4</sup> By 'elective' we mean the primary relationships 'chosen' by the individual (*e.g.* networks of friends as opposed to family networks, which one has no choice about); by 'delocalized' we mean the primary relationships developed outside of the individual's habitual domain, *i.e.* family and work.

<sup>5</sup> The initial results of the study "Social Capital and Public Benefit: Personal Networks and Family Life Cycles" carried out by the research team at the University of Verona, coordinated by Paola Di Nicola and completed by Sandro Stanzani and Luigi Tronca, can be found in Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca, 2011. The survey was carried out as part of the PRIN study 2007-09 entitled *Reti societarie, capital sociale e valorizzazione dei beni pubblici* ("Network Society, Social Capital and Exploitation of Public Assets") coordinated by Pierpaolo Donati (University of Bologna).

es in an association, etc. (acquaintances in general) as potential helpers, we can say that the study was designed to answer two questions: a) how much social capital can Italians draw on?, and b) does this social capital protect them and increase their level of satisfaction with their everyday life?

In order to answer these questions, we made use of the data provided by an empirical study, which in terms of its theoretical and methodological structure forms part of a broader yet precisely defined research plan a group of researchers from the University of Verona (in particular Paola Di Nicola, Sandro Stanzani and Luigi Tronca) have been working on for over ten years on the topic of the structures, contents and forms of social networks, in particular primary networks (relatives, friendships, co-workers, acquaintances, etc.).<sup>6</sup> The data analyzed in this article are taken from a survey carried out on a probability sample of the resident population of Italy on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2008 aged between 25 and 80 years old (N = 42,333,051).<sup>7</sup> The size of the sample was 1,226 units.<sup>8</sup> A proportional stratification was made of the sample, according to the following parameters: gender, age (classes: 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-80 years old) and the geographical area interviewees were resident in (north-west, north-east, centre, south and the islands).<sup>9</sup> The data were gathered between the months of March and April 2009 by means of structured interviews performed face-to-face.<sup>10</sup>

In the general research plan, one section was dedicated to an assessment of the interviewees' levels of satisfaction regarding important aspects of daily life, with the aim of assessing whether the size and density of networks, the intensity of exchanges and the composition of the networks had positive effects on the interviewee, and whether there was a relationship between variations in the characteristics of the support networks and variations in the degree of satisfaction expressed about important aspects of daily life.

## **2. General Profile of the Sample**

Before dealing with the questions at the root of the study in question, we would like to trace an outline of the profile of the interviewees in order to give the reader some general information designed to help provide a grounding for the considerations that will follow below.

The sample was composed of 48.6% males and 51.4% females; the average age was 49 years old with ages ranging between the minimum age of 25 and the maximum age of 80. The majority of people in the sample group were married (55.2%), with 9.4% being separated, 10.0% widowed, 0.6% remarried and 24.8% single/unmarried. Almost all the interviewees were Italian nationals and 60.9% of them lived with a partner/spouse. Out of the interviewees, 46.0% had graduated from high school, 25.8% had left education after completing the junior high certificate or a professional training institute, 18.9% held a university degree and 9.2% had at most completed elementary school. If we set aside the 22% of pensioners, 12.7% of housewives and 2.5% of students, most of the people in the sample were employed, with employees in the private sector being the largest group, (accounting for 26.2% of the total), while public sector employees accounted for 13.1%, workers on temporary or special contracts 2.7% and the self-employed 16.6%. In terms of politics, the interviewees were divided almost equally between left and right wing. It must be said that 19% of those interviewed chose not to respond to that particular item, but out of those who gave their political allegiances 23.8% declared themselves to belong to the far left, 22.5% to the centre-left, 11.7% to the centre, 25.4% to the centre-right and 16.6% to the far right. As

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<sup>6</sup> The Verona research team forms part of a research network that has involved numerous different universities over the years, the Italian branch of which is coordinated from the University of Bologna, headed by Pierpaolo Donati.

<sup>7</sup> The methodology is to be attributed to Luigi Tronca, who also organized and coordinated the complex part of the study relating to the construction of indicators for the structure and form of personal networks. For the initial presentation of the data, see Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For 95% reliability of the sample and for estimates regarding the population at large, the maximum sample error is 2.8% in absolute percentage points.

<sup>9</sup> The following division of geographical areas was used: north-west – Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria; north-east – Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the Autonomous Province of Trent, the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, Veneto, Emilia Romagna; centre – Tuscany, Marche, Umbria, Lazio; south – Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria; islands – Sardinia, Sicily.

<sup>10</sup> The sample was constructed and the data gathered by the research company SWG S.r.l in Trieste.

far as religious beliefs are concerned, 11.4% of the group stated that they were non-believers, 29.3% that they were not very religious, 44.5% that they were fairly religious and 14.8% very religious.

Concerning the aspects more closely associated with culture, 12.6% of those interviewed did not read a single newspaper in the week, while those who read papers did so 4 times a week; 43.2% did not use the Internet except at work, while those who did went online on average 2.5 times a week. 66.75% were not members of any association: the average number of associations per person is 0.4. Those who were members of associations tended to be involved in sports clubs, family associations and organizations for the public good (27.8%), while 21.1% of interviewees were trade union members, 17.5% were involved in voluntary organizations and 12.1% formed part of social or cultural movements. The areas of activity that the association members showed most commitment towards were cultural and sporting activities (representing 8.3% and 8.2% respectively), voluntary work (7.5%) and religious organizations (6.0%): there was a preponderance of involvement in activities dedicated to the self (sports, cultural activities) over those for the good of society. Moreover, it appeared evident from the data that being a member of a trade union or a political movement did not necessarily mean taking an active part in the activities performed by the group the interviewee was a member of. This is further confirmed by the fact that only 6.9% of interviewees had given money to a political party (as a subscription, membership fee or donation), while 32.1% had given money to an association.

Regarding the social, economic and political situations in Italy, most of those interviewed – with numbers ranging from 70-80% and above – listed the following as the most urgent problems in the country: unemployment (94%), crime (91.2%), the inefficiency of the judicial system (88.3%), poverty (86.9%), immigration (85.6%), tax evasion (82.7%), public debt (82.3%), environmental pollution (79.9%), the inefficiency of the public health service (78.4%) and the inefficiency of the education system (74%). From this profiling, the average Italian emerges as a person who is very worried about the biggest and most urgent problems in the Italian system and who follows their country's affairs quite closely: so much so that 44.7% of the sample declared that they checked up on Italian politics every day, while 24.5% did so several times a week. Nonetheless, while the need for information is potentially satisfied by watching television programmes and debates, a lot less people habitually go beyond the need for mere information by taking an active part in political initiatives, such as going to a rallies or marches: only 10% of the interviewees declared they had done so.

A comparison of the degree of worry about the country's problems and the degree of satisfaction with one's daily life shows us a polarized image of the Italian citizen, who counteracts 'public vices' with 'private virtues': it is only in the sphere of primary relationships that we find significant elements of satisfaction. An Italian is a person who has little trust in their fellow citizens: when faced with the question "How far do you agree with the following statement: "most people are trustworthy"?, on a scale of 0 (complete lack of trust) to 10 (complete trust), Italian citizens come in at an average value of 5.16. This could be interpreted as a sign of prudence, but at the same time also of indifference. The private sphere appears to be a source of satisfaction, while everything that happens outside the home and the closest personal sphere displays more significant degrees of dissatisfaction. 22.1% of those interviewed declared that the economic resources their family could count on were barely adequate or completely inadequate, but 54.9% considered them reasonably adequate and 22.9% highly or perfectly adequate. The degree of satisfaction about relational resources, *i.e.* the support that relatives, friends and acquaintances can provide to help with the management of family responsibilities, was the same: while 20.7% considered these resources to be barely adequate or completely inadequate, 53.5% considered them to be reasonably adequate and 25.9% highly or perfectly adequate. The greatest source of satisfaction was revealed to be family relationships, which was given as a source of reasonable or great satisfaction by more than 88% of those interviewed, followed in order by reasonably and highly gratifying friendships (86% of interviewees) and health (79%). Despite a tendency to be placed in the first positive category ('reasonably adequate'), economic conditions are a source of dissatisfaction for around 40% of Italians, while 29% are dissatisfied with work and 36% with their free time.

What emerges is the image of a family and a community of friends and acquaintances forming a "haven in the heartless world" that excludes around 30% of those interviewed (hardly a small figure!), a community bonded by blood and in spirit that forms a sort of bastion for its members, mitigating any problems arising from work, worsening health or lack of free time. It potentially provides relief from the problems of a sphere (work) that is

ever more invasive and pervasive, the expression of an economic rationality that penetrates the worlds people's daily lives (*i.e.* family and community life) and that has already eaten significantly into their free time: over the course of each year free time becomes more and more limited and fragmented.

### 3. Personal Networks: the Structure Underpinning Social Capital

The structural characteristics of networks tend to vary depending on the social characteristics of the individual at the centre of each network (denominated Ego). In other words, networks of sociality – personal networks – vary depending on the age, gender, social status/class and geographical location of Ego. This is because personal networks are not the expression of an unvarying and unchangeable structural context; rather they reflect the social characteristics of the individuals who form part of them. Just as personal networks vary depending on the social characteristics of an individual's context, which changes both according to the individual's social status and the environment they live in – which may be in the south of the country rather than the centre or the north, in a big city or a small town, a metropolis as opposed to a tiny village in the countryside. Cultural background and local traditions form a premise according to which individuals come to form part of one personal network rather than another and therefore construct a life environment that becomes unique to them in that particular social context and geographical location. However, before looking in detail at the variations in the structural features of these networks, let us examine for a moment the general tendencies of their structures.

The mean size of the sample's personal networks is 4.27 components. The figure ranges from 1 to 14; the standard deviation is relatively high, but overall 85.7% of those interviewed gave six as the maximum number of components of any given network. The mean size of networks is very limited and has shrunk compared with other studies and surveys (including those conducted by ISTAT) from a few years ago (Di Nicola, 2002). It is not simple to draw a comparison with the data from other studies carried out on a national level (Donati and Colozzi, 2007; Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca, 2008) as the samples are different: in the study analyzed in this article the interviewees were all aged between 25-80, while in the previous national survey ages ranged from 18-65.<sup>11</sup> Therefore what we have here is a slightly more adult sample (a decision spurred by the need – imposed by the general research programme – to shift attention onto the family life cycle, therefore neglecting the members who have just become adults and for the most part still live at home like children and teenagers). Compared with the youngest generations, adults tend to display smaller but denser networks (Di Nicola, 2008). Nevertheless, we would like to underline that, while in the previous study the mean size of support networks (relatives were deliberately left out of the calculation) was 4.8 components, composed of 4.12 friends, 1.14 neighbours and 1.06 co-workers (Di Nicola, 2008), in this latest study we find ourselves looking at a smaller circle in terms of components (denominated Alters) and one where family members play the most important role (2.55 components, more than half of the total), backed up by a significant contribution from friends (1.67) and a marginal contribution from acquaintances (0.06).<sup>12</sup> Therefore the primary circle is more 'contextualized' and less 'elective' compared with the picture that emerged from the previous survey, a characteristic further confirmed by the high density of the networks: 75% of the network components know and entertain reciprocal relationships with each other. The fact that the network is 'dense' and highly homologous to its focal node (*i.e.* Ego, the interviewee) is also confirmed by other indicators. In particular, the degree of reciprocity is high – 4.14, almost equal to the size – meaning that the interviewee is willing to 'reciprocate' (with material and intangible help) with almost all the compo-

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<sup>11</sup> The reference here is to a sample survey involving 2002 individuals aged between 18 and 65, carried out as part of the PRIN study *Terzo settore, mondi vitali e capitale sociale in Italia* ("Non-profit-making Organizations, Lifeworlds and Social Capital in Italy") coordinated at national level by P. Donati (Donati & Colozzi, 2007). The Verona team, led by P. Di Nicola, worked particularly on the topic of community networks and the forms of social capital connected to them. For more on the Verona team's work, see Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca 2008, and for more on just the structural characteristics of personal networks please see the first chapter in particular (Di Nicola, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> These figures – which are getting smaller all the time – are very similar to those obtained in the city of Verona, which was used for an analysis of the forms and contents of social capital. A representative sample of its population was used to pilot the use of the research model adopted again for this latest study. For the results of the study on the population of Verona, see Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca, 2010.

nents of their network; moreover, the difference between the age and average status index of Ego compared with the components of their network (Alters) is very small. Compared with their Alters, the interviewee is slightly younger (49 years old as opposed to 50) and with a lower social status (4.52 vs. 4.71), but the differences are not particularly sizeable. Moreover, the fact that more than half of the network is made up of family members – who Ego does not choose but who are ‘imposed’ on him – explains the low figure obtained for sex homophily, which regards just 59.49% of those interviewed.

To conclude this brief presentation of the general characteristics of the network, it remains only to point out the fact that among the Alters there is a slight over-representation of women, who are identified more often than men as the providers of help and support – whether material or intangible – rather than the receivers.

Overall, the personal networks examined are small in terms of their size, deeply rooted in the context of the nuclear and extended family, and very dense (*i.e.* composed of people who all know each other and display high levels of homogeneity with the interviewee in terms of both social status and age). We can imagine that these networks provide considerable support and constitute an abundant reserve of social capital, but this social capital tends to be mono-dimensional, as the person offering support displays in many ways the same characteristics as the individual receiving support, and at the same time the latter expresses a strong tendency to reciprocate in the same terms and with a rather similar intensity. They are networks where the resources circulating are few in number and generally of the same type. Indeed, if we consider the forms of help that circulate within these networks, it becomes clear that material resources on the one hand and relational resources on the other constitute the goods that circulate the most and, above all, that they are put into circulation with almost the same intensity by friends as by family members. Therefore we can conclude by stressing that in order to obtain material and ‘moral’/affective support (being able to talk, let off steam, ask for advice, etc.), the majority of those interviewed turn most often to relatives living under the same roof – therefore we imagine members of their nuclear family – and perhaps to a friend or two, who is then helped and listened to in turn.

We can note how the structural characteristics of personal networks<sup>13</sup> vary according to certain variables in the profile of the interviewee. For this further study, an analysis of variance<sup>14</sup> was performed, taking the structural characteristics of the networks as dependent variables and the objective characteristics of the interviewees – such as gender, age, marital status, social status, academic qualifications and geographical location – as independent variables. The size of the network, its density, the outdegree (reciprocity: the amount of alters the ego is willing to help), number of friends, and sex and age homophily with the components that make up the network are the structural characteristics that were taken into consideration. Therefore, we analyzed not only the size of the networks, but also the degree of internal cohesion, as well as the degree of differentiation from and similarity with the interviewee’s profile. The results of this analysis can be found in Table 1.

As can be seen, the characteristics of the networks vary considerably depending on the profile of the interviewee, with high levels of significance in general, the only major exception being gender. Compared with men, women have slightly bigger and denser networks, characterized by similar social status; in these networks, women display a slightly lower number of friends than men and they confirm their status as individuals more willing to give help than to receive it, but none of these distributions is statistically significant, with the sole exception of status homophily. Therefore there are no significant differences between women and men when it comes to the structural characteristics of their personal networks, with a sole exception regarding women’s tendency to refer to networks composed of members who enjoy a similar social status.

Age, however, is a strong discriminant. As can be seen in Table 1, the size of networks tends to shrink as the age of the interviewees increases, just as the progressive shrinkage of networks with advancing age is coupled

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<sup>13</sup> The structure statistics are all the measurements that describe components regarding structure: how many members (nodes) there are in a given network, how many of these nodes have reciprocal connections, how many and what type of links join the various members of a network, and the level of affinity (homophily) between these nodes and the focal node (Ego) in terms of age, gender and social status.

<sup>14</sup> Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is a statistical procedure that analyzes the distribution of means between groups and within groups in order to ascertain to what extent belonging to a certain group (*e.g.* a group of females as opposed to a group of males, groups of interviewees who belong to the upper classes as opposed to the lower classes, etc.) can be a discriminant in the mean distribution of the values for the dependent variable. A high significance (*e.g.* .000) means that the differences in the mean values for the dependent variable in the groups examined have not been caused randomly.

with an increase in their density. With age, of course, the need for help increases, therefore the elderly are more passive (receiving help) than active (willing to help others) in the exchange system; at the same time, as age increases the number of relatives in the networks increases while the number of friends decreases, and the support network becomes very homogeneous in terms of the social status of its members – this because it is made up of the same people who form the family Ego lives with and, naturally, shares the same social status with. The significance is high, confirming that the distribution of structural characteristics based on age is not merely random.

The academic qualifications variable confirms what we have already seen regarding the distribution of structural characteristics according to age. We can see that the youngest interviewees – often those with the highest academic qualifications – have networks that are larger, less contextualized, less dense and less homogeneous in terms of social status. The elderly, on the contrary, often have much lower academic qualifications and their networks are distinguished by their small size, high density, high levels of contextuality and of social status homophily. For this variable, levels of significance are again very high, confirming the close covariance between age and level of schooling.

The importance and centrality of age is indirectly given further confirmation when we examine the interviewees' marital status. From this point of view, unmarried young people and widows/widowers display diametrically opposed structural characteristics in their networks (those of the former being large and not particularly dense, while those of the latter are small and very dense), with married couples finding themselves in the middle. However, the separated and divorced on the one hand and people who had remarried on the other display some different and specific characteristics. Separation and divorce lead to a situation where networks have to be rebuilt: they become smaller and at the same time less dense, less contextualized and less homogeneous in terms of social status. The situation changes for those who remarry: their networks grow slightly and are less dense and less contextualized than the networks of either married couples or the separated. Evidently, changes in marital status – *i.e.* separating from one's spouse or remarrying – introduce elements of discontinuity and change in personal networks. When these changes occur, networks are at least partially renewed as new members enter, many of whom have no connection to the other components of the network; at the same time the role of relatives as providers of support diminishes while friends gain in importance. In this case as in the others, the statistical significance is high, the sole exception being reciprocity, which does not display any significant variations between the different social networks.

The data above confirm the results of the previous surveys carried out by the Verona research team on the subject of social networks (Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca, 2008; 2011). The social status variable is a highly discriminating variable and also one whose distribution confirms that individuals with a higher social status possess more social capital and resources. There is clearly a regular and systematic increase in the size of the networks as we progress from low to high social status, accompanied by a decrease in density, an increase in reciprocity, a greater proportion of friends compared with the total number of components and less social status homophily. Therefore anyone who finds themselves at the lower reaches of society can count on networks that are smaller, less varied from the point of view, for example, of social composition, and very similar in terms of age. Therefore there are less resources circulating in these networks, and those that do circulate are of a similar kind, leading to a rather paradoxical situation as the people who in theory need the most social capital in reality possess the least. What we have, then, is a privileged situation for the upper classes, who can count on more varied social circles; these are less connected but at the same time are more efficient vehicles for resources other than those possessed by Ego. The significance indices are all high, confirming that social stratification exists also when it comes to social capital and support networks, and that relational resources are more easily available to those to also hold a higher level of human and economic capital.

We would like to finish this presentation by analyzing the distribution of the structural characteristics of networks in relation to geographical location. If we premise that in this case as in the others the levels of significance are extremely high (with the exception of social status homophily), the distribution reveals some interesting results. First of all, we can note a higher concentration of larger networks in the centre and north-east of the country: networks that are not very dense, are very active and are distinguished by a large number of friends and an average age very close to the interviewee's. The greater importance of relatives in the south and on the islands is once again confirmed, while networks in the north-west are relatively closed. However, it is the singularities



of the north-east and especially the centre of Italy that stand out – if we were to classify the networks based on size, lack of density and lack of contextualization, the list would be as follows: centre, north-east, north-west, south and the islands. Contrary to a series of clichés that have always depicted the south of Italy as the heartland of networks of support and exchange, the results of this study show that the strongest and most differentiated social capital is concentrated in the centre and the north-east. Once again, levels of significance are high.

A general reading of the data contained in Table 1 reveals clearly that the structural differentiation of the networks follows three main directions: generational, social and geographical.

Table 1: Analysis of the variance between the structural characteristics of networks and the variables in the interviewee's profile

Profile of Ego	Size of network	Density	Out-degree (reciprocity)	Total friends	Status homophily	Average age of alters
<b>Gender of Ego</b>						
Males	4.23	.76	4.05	1.68	1.93	50
Females	4.32	.77	4.20	1.65	2.17	50
<i>F</i>	.62	.11	1.51	.16	34.55	.17
<i>Sig.</i>	.428	.736	.219	.688	.000	.674
<b>Age of Ego</b>						
25-34	4.65	.71	4.46	1.95	1.89	41
35-44	4.42	.74	4.22	1.75	1.97	49
45-54	4.21	.75	4.08	1.63	1.93	51
55-64	4.09	.77	4.00	1.56	2.11	54
65-80	3.97	.78	3.85	1.42	2.37	58
<i>F</i>	4.03	5.41	3.04	5.93	20.36	134.62
<i>Sig.</i>	.003	.000	.017	.000	.000	.003
<b>Marital status</b>						
Single/unmarried	4.40	.74	4.22	1.91	1.90	45
Married	4.32	.77	4.18	1.57	2.08	52
Separated/divorced	4.26	.68	4.10	1.91	2.00	52
Widow/widower	3.78	.80	3.71	1.34	2.43	55
Remarried	4.43	.63	3.90	1.71	1.71	50
<i>F</i>	1.98	7.06	1.46	6.32	13.57	57.48
<i>Sig.</i>	.094	.000	.211	.000	.000	.000
<b>Social status of Ego</b>						
Low	3.67	.81	3.55	1.16	2.81	53
Lower middle	4.19	.75	4.03	1.67	2.24	49
Upper middle	4.64	.73	4.47	1.87	1.69	50
Upper	4.57	.72	4.45	1.87	1.28	49
<i>F</i>	10.89	8.96	10.63	15.14	332.98	7.91
<i>Sig.</i>	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
<b>Academic qualifications</b>						
Max. elementary school certificate	3.53	.84	3.48	1.12	2.63	54
Junior high diploma	4.00	.77	3.86	1.51	2.38	52
High school diploma	4.42	.73	4.23	1.76	1.94	49
Degree and postgraduate studies	4.66	.73	4.71	1.89	1.63	49
<i>F</i>	10.01	12.11	9.15	11.22	95.97	9.70
<i>Sig.</i>	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
<b>Geographical location</b>						
North-West	4.38	.75	4.22	1.79	2.09	50
North-East	4.92	.71	4.80	1.74	2.01	53
Centre	5.03	.70	4.80	2.23	2.01	51
South	3.26	.79	3.20	1.28	2.05	48
Islands	3.43	.88	3.41	.95	2.18	47
<i>F</i>	37.83	25.63	32.97	29.80	1.69	11.17
<i>Sig.</i>	.000	.000	.000	.000	.148	.000

As far as support networks (and therefore social capital) are concerned, young people who have studied to a relatively advanced level, belong to the upper social classes and live in the central and north-eastern areas of the country have a privileged existence compared with the elderly, the lower classes and anyone who lives in the southern part of the country or the islands. However, we must not forget that this situation of privilege is only

relative and that the networks any Italian can rely on are in general small, very dense and – for about 50% of the population – contextualized (composed of nuclear and extended family members).

The data show us an Italy that has seen its social capital eroded in recent years and that therefore risks losing a precious resource just at the time when the economic and political situation in the country make that resource all the more vital. The central role of the family, with its system of exchanges and reciprocal support seems to have become a kind of handicap penalizing the parts of the country (in particular the south) that in the past relied most heavily on strategies involving family members. As in the rest of the country, the big family – the extended family that can be relied on for help – no longer exists in the south: the people who receive calls for help are the members of the very small nuclear family. The fact that these networks have not been and still now are not supplemented with the presence of individuals that have no blood ties with the interviewee means that, in addition to the grave social problems the south has to deal with, there has been a reduction in the informal resources citizens can draw on in times of need.

#### 4. Social Capital and Degree of Satisfaction

In order to assess their degree of satisfaction, the interviewees were given a set of questions designed to evaluate their satisfaction about various important aspects of their daily lives.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the interviewees were asked to specify their degree of satisfaction (not at all, barely, reasonably and completely satisfied) regarding the following: economic status, health, relationships with family members, friendships, free time and work. As we mentioned earlier, the overall levels of satisfaction were high, with the highest levels being displayed regarding relationships with family members and friends. Using the six questions constituting the items in the set, we created a satisfaction index ranging from 0 to 6.<sup>16</sup> The mean turned out to be 2.89, while both the mode and median were 3. Therefore the satisfaction index approximates a normal curve (mean, mode and median basically coincide) that sees most of the interviewees concentrated around the middle values, while 5-6% of the sample find themselves at one or other end of the scale (to be precise: not at all satisfied, 6.7%; completely satisfied, 5.1%).

Once the satisfaction index had been created, we went on to analyze whether there were any links existing between the index and the structural characteristics of the personal networks in question. This was in order to respond to our second question: does being able to rely on a support network affect the degree of satisfaction expressed by the interviewees and, especially, is there a correlation between variations in the distribution of the index and variations in the structural characteristics of the networks?

An initial explorative analysis was carried out by calculating the coefficients of correlation between the structural characteristics of the networks and the satisfaction index. An examination of the data revealed – rather surprisingly – that the satisfaction index failed to correlate to any of the structural features of the networks. The correlations are lower-than-low and above all have no significance whatsoever. In order to investigate this lack of correlation more closely and make sure that no logistical errors had been made in the construction of the index, we moved on to a calculation of the coefficients of correlation between the structural features of the networks and the frequencies of each of the six items used in the construction of the satisfaction index. Once again, the correlations were low and, more importantly, completely insignificant.

Once the absence of ties between the index of general satisfaction and the structural characteristics of the networks had been established, *i.e.* once it had been ascertained that there is no link between satisfaction and social resources (in other words between subjective personal satisfaction and social capital), we then attempted

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<sup>15</sup> For a presentation of the concept of wellbeing and quality of life in modern and contemporary society, including from a historical perspective, see Secondulfo's recent and well-researched work (2011).

<sup>16</sup> The index was created by dichotomizing each individual item: the value 0 was attributed every time an interviewee stated their degree of satisfaction as none or little, and 1 every time they stated it was reasonable or high. In the distribution of the index, the figure 0 denotes that the interviewees expressed little or no satisfaction regarding any of the six areas in question (economic status, health, relationships with friends, free time, work and family); 1 means that they were satisfied with only one area, and so on. The figure 6 denotes satisfaction in all six areas considered by the index.

to assess which variables in the interviewees' profiles could have an influence on their degree of satisfaction. To do this, we analyzed the variance, using gender, age, marital status, social status, academic qualifications, perceived level of security (according to the area they live in), political orientation, religious beliefs, involvement in cultural and socially useful activities, civic pride index<sup>17</sup> and geographical location as independent variables. The satisfaction index was adopted as the dependent variable; the results of this analysis can be seen in Table 2.

As can be seen from the figures, there are no significant differences in the distribution of the satisfaction index between men and women, although men declared themselves to be slightly more satisfied than women. What is significant, however, are the variations in the distribution of the mean values for the satisfaction index compared with the other interviewee profile variables. The highest degree of satisfaction was expressed by the interviewees in the age groups 45-54 and 55-64. The least satisfied were the elderly and young people between 25-34 years old. Being in the stage of mature adulthood would seem to lead to a good degree of satisfaction, a hypothesis corroborated by the fact that being married was generally expressed as a source of satisfaction. Those who expressed the greatest levels of satisfaction were the remarried, the married and the separated/divorced, while the people who live alone, especially those who are advanced in years, expressed the lowest levels of satisfaction. Both for age and marital status the levels of significance are extremely high, as are the levels of significance in the distribution of the satisfaction index in reference to Ego's social status and their level of education. The most satisfied interviewees belong to the lower-middle and upper-middle classes, followed by the upper classes and, lastly, the lower classes; as far as education is concerned, the greatest degree of satisfaction was expressed by those with average schooling. While it is easy to explain the fact that individuals with a low level of education and belonging to the lower classes (who are mostly elderly) have a low satisfaction index, it is evident nonetheless that belonging to a higher social sphere and having advanced academic qualifications is not enough to produce satisfaction, perhaps because these social groups have greater expectations than people from the middle classes who are married and have an average level of schooling.

As we mentioned above, our aim was to investigate more closely whether there are any ties between the satisfaction index and the other variables in the interviewees' profiles and behaviours. From the data (see Table 2) it appears that the people who expressed the greatest degree of satisfaction were those living in the 'normal' parts of the city: neither in the exclusive residential areas nor the poorer neighbourhoods. As far as political orientation is concerned, the highest levels of satisfaction were expressed by those who identify with the centre-right in first place followed by the centre, while as far as religion is concerned, the "quite religious" were the most satisfied. However, an examination of the data regarding involvement in cultural activities, civic pride and geographical location show no significant links to levels of satisfaction. Even though the individuals involved in voluntary work and those who display a high civic pride index displayed higher degrees of satisfaction, in reality these last two distributions are random.

An analysis of the data just mentioned, when coupled with the lack of any type of correlation between the distribution of the satisfaction index and the structural characteristics of the interviewees' networks, seems to suggest that satisfaction is more closely related to the events that occur in the course of individual lives. This is why the period of mature adulthood, when one has built a family (even if it has subsequently fallen apart), is in the mature adult phase between 35-54 years of age – when a person can start seeing the fruits of what they have created and at the same time still has enough time ahead of them to potentially change their life in the future – is a source of satisfaction, especially for individuals belonging to the middle classes; their life plans consider the period when they build a family as an important time leading to fulfillment and stability. Young people, on the other hand, still have a long way to go to attain many of their goals, while the elderly cannot fail to be aware that their health is starting to get worse, that their economic resources have been less abundant since they retired, that they are beginning to have less friends around and that they risk being left alone once their spouse passes away.

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<sup>17</sup> For the construction of the civic pride index, please see the paragraph on methodology in the master study, *i.e.* Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca, 2011.

Table 2: Analysis of the variance between variables in the interviewees' profiles and satisfaction index

Profile of Ego	Satisfaction index	Profile of Ego	Satisfaction index	Profile variables	Satisfaction index
<b>Gender of Ego</b>		<b>Academic qualifications</b>		<b>Involvement in activities</b>	
Males	2.97	Max. elementary school certificate	2.27	Religious	2.55
Females	2.82	Junior high diploma	2.88	Voluntary work	3.17
<i>F</i>	3.233	High school diploma	3.06	Political	2.71
<i>Sig.</i>	.072	Degree and postgraduate studies	2.81	Trade unionism	2.88
<b>Age of Ego</b>		<i>F</i>	6.801	Cultural	2.73
25-34	2.73	<i>Sig.</i>	.000	Sporting	2.72
35-44	2.92	<b>Sense of security</b>		No involvement	2.97
45-54	3.29	None	2.75	<i>F</i>	1.803
55-64	3.04	Little	2.66	<i>Sig.</i>	.095
65-80	2.55	Reasonable	3.09	<b>Civic pride index</b>	
<i>F</i>	8.612	High	2.68	None	2.89
<i>Sig.</i>	.000	Total	2.56	Very low	2.96
<b>Marital status</b>		<i>F</i>	6.488	Low	2.92
Single/unmarried	2.76	<i>Sig.</i>	.000	Medium	3.01
Married	3.02	<b>Political orientation</b>		High	2.44
Separated/divorced	3.0	Far left	2.83	Very high	3.07
Widow/widower	2.39	Centre left	2.78	<i>F</i>	.873
Remarried	3.9	Centre	3.01	<i>Sig.</i>	.499
<i>F</i>	5.227	Centre right	3.21	<b>Geographical location</b>	
<i>Sig.</i>	.000	Far right	2.64	North-West	2.93
<b>Social status of Ego</b>		<i>F</i>	4.633	North-East	2.74
Low	2.51	<i>Sig.</i>	.001	Centre	3.05
Lower middle	2.89	<b>Attitude to religion</b>		South	2.73
Upper middle	3.15	Non-believer	2.87	Islands	3.01
Upper	2.87	Not very religious	2.96	<i>F</i>	2.458
<i>F</i>	8.013	Quite religious	3.02	<i>Sig.</i>	.044
<i>Sig.</i>	.000	Very religious	2.42		
		<i>F</i>	7.097		
		<i>Sig.</i>	.000		

## 5. Conclusions

Various different studies have demonstrated the importance of the role that primary social capital plays in determining the quality of individuals' lives. On a micro level, these studies highlight the importance the fact of being able to count on a certain amount of informal resources – on so-called primary social capital – has for the individual in order to improve, if not their actual quality of life, then at least the perception they have of it. On this note, we would like to remind you of the Italian adage according to which “a friend is the best medicine”. When one considers the growth in individualization processes in our society brought about by post-modernity and globalization, one is led to think that primary social capital plays such an important role as it helps to contain the feeling of solitude and loneliness that social actors often experience over the course of their lives. Taking these considerations as a starting point, this study aimed to provide an answer to two questions: firstly, whether the average Italian still has primary social capital available, and if so, to what extent having this resource available varies depending on the characteristics of each interviewee's profile, and secondly, whether social capital affects the degree of satisfaction that the average Italian citizen feels in reference to the most fundamental aspects of daily life, *i.e.* family, work, free time, health, friendships and economic status.

As far as the first question is concerned, the data confirm that social capital is a resource concentrated in the hands of strong social actors: young people, people with advanced academic qualifications, members of the middle and upper classes and residents of the centre and north-east of Italy. The study highlights the importance of the area the interviewees live in, as from the data it can be clearly seen that not only do residents of the south of the country have less social capital to draw on, but there is also a significant influence from family relations in the distribution of resources in the south.

However, it must be stressed that the privileged position in terms of social capital that strong social actors enjoy is nonetheless a situation of relative privilege, as the data highlight the significant shrinkage of the primary

social capital circulating among Italians: their support networks are made up for the most part of family members (whether they live under the same roof or not) and, to a much smaller extent, friends. The social capital Italians have to draw on, considering the structural characteristics of the networks that produce it, is a very concentrated resource that tends to circulate among individuals of similar age and social status. Therefore these personal networks enable the circulation of a set of goods with little differentiation between them, goods that circulate rapidly given the average level of density displayed by the networks.

Therefore, regarding the first question we set ourselves, we can assert that the social capital available to Italians is not particularly significant in terms of either quantity or quality. It is a resource that is more concentrated in the areas of the country where the quality of life is higher, where economic development has reached optimum levels and where the welfare system is particularly efficient and helps a broad section of society. From this we can state that primary social capital is a resource that tends to be more persistent in the parts of the country where the social environment in question is a "rich" one. Social capital tends to grow in tandem with economic capital and human capital, and it has a more significant role in the areas of the country that display the highest levels of wellbeing. Therefore primary social capital does not form any kind of compensation for the lack of other resources and with this study we have a further confirmation that the relationship between primary social capital and the quality of life people experience forms a virtuous cycle, inasmuch as the former fuels the latter, and vice versa.

With this in mind, social policies with the clearly stated aim of encouraging the development of primary social capital through initiatives (which could be cultural or otherwise) that would allow citizens to collectively enjoy events, special moments and experiences, and to exploit relational assets, could represent for many parts of the country the first step in the direction of an increase in and development of primary social capital and a shifting of focus away from family ties and the domestic sphere.

Finding an answer to the second question – whether social capital varies with the degree of satisfaction of the person exploiting this resource – was not a simple task. The data we analyzed only highlighted the complete lack of any connection between the amounts of social capital available and the degree of satisfaction expressed. We pointed out previously how the sample of interviewees displayed a high degree of satisfaction in their daily lives, despite their awareness of the grave problems in their country. We said that Italians counteract 'public vices' with the 'private virtues' of a shared life (whose confines only rarely go beyond the doorstep). Although work, free time and economic status are the areas that most frequently affect the degree of dissatisfaction felt by around 30% of the interviewees, 70% of this group is on the contrary very happy with the situation in their family and in their small circle of friends. Yet this satisfaction has nothing to do with the amount of social capital available, as the data show that reaching the full ripeness of adulthood (between around 40-50 years of age) is a fundamental criterion for feeling fulfilled, at least for individuals with limited social expectations. This sense of fulfillment is one that an individual reaches more through arriving at a certain stage in life than through having a certain amount of social capital available. The family would appear to be vital, although it is also true that it represents a source of satisfaction for those who are separated or divorced, while the importance of family obviously increases for those who remarry.

Taken all together, the data paint us a picture of a broad middle class that is worried about the country's social problems but not very willing to take any action or help the situation by becoming more involved in civic and socially useful activities; it is class of people who nevertheless feel satisfied with their private lives, due to the fact that they have achieved a number of things of vital importance to them (such as having a family, having a job, being in good health); a middle class that expresses equally "middling" levels of social expectation. With regard to these situations, primary social capital (which, as we have seen, is in short supply) is a resource that has no influence on levels of satisfaction, which, we repeat, depend less on the availability of resources than on the relationship between expectations, the social targets set by each individual for their life and the achievement of these goals at the appropriate stage in life, in other words when they have 'matured'.

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