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CONFERENCE LETTER

Social Network Analysis at the 2021 Annual Conference of the Italian Society for Economic Sociology (SISEC)

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The Italian Society for Economic Sociology (SISEC) is a national association that aims to represent Italy-based scholars in economic sociology, the sociology of work and labour markets, and the sociology of organisations. Since its foundation in 2016, the SISEC has promoted the development and diffusion of theoretically-informed, empirical studies on the links and overlapping areas between society and the economy. In this vein, the SISEC has held five annual conferences so far, hosted by various Italian academic institutions. The last two conferences—namely, the 4th edition, hosted by the University of Turin, and the 5th edition, hosted by the University of Catania—included rich and highly participated sessions on applications of Social Network Analysis (SNA), both titled: “Social Network Analysis as a tool for understanding the current socio-economic

transformations”¹. The success of both editions of the conference session was such that a new edition will be held at the 7th annual conference of the SISEC, scheduled for 8-11 June, 2022 and hosted by the University of Bologna.

Social scientists’ interest on networks as systems of social relations roots back to classic anthropology and sociology. Nonetheless, SNA as a set of coherent methods, practices, and techniques to collect and analyse empirical data of social relations is relatively younger and has just recently reached the international mainstream of the social sciences (Light and Moody, 2020). In its most basic form, SNA allows researchers to model social relations by means of graph theory as a set of *nodes* (or *vertices*)—representing individual or collective actors—and ties (or *edges*)—representing relations between nodes. Thanks to this formalization, social network scholars can calculate certain peculiar node- or graph-level properties, such as homophily (i.e., the tendency for nodes to form ties with similar nodes), centrality (i.e., the relative importance of a node due to its position in the network), or density (i.e., the relative degree of connectivity of the whole network)².

Recent advances in SNA have provided scholars with more sophisticated modelling techniques which allow statistical inference, thereby overcoming many limits of standard descriptive, case-based SNA. For instance, Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGM) and Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models (SAOM) allow researchers to test the effect of specific micro-level social processes (e.g., reciprocity, transitivity, homophily, etc.) in the formation of an empirically observed social network³.

Despite some early adopters (some of which were covered by Chiesi, 1996), SNA has never managed to gain a prominent role among Italian sociologists, with just a few exceptions of high international relevance (e.g., Diani, 1995). However, the rapid internationalization of Italian scholarly communities—including that of the social sciences—and the wider technological availability of learning opportunities have recently brought to a growing interest in SNA among Italian scholars, as also testified by the success of the related conference session at SISEC annual conferences.

In total, the two editions of the conference session hosted 24 oral presentations by international speakers based in various countries besides Italy (Belgium, Brazil, Switzerland, and United Kingdom). In the following, this note summarizes the works presented in the session held at the 5th SISEC annual conference.

The first part of the session was dedicated to a set of presentations dealing with network-based concepts of social capital, one of the most investigated concepts in the social sciences (Lin, 2002),

¹ Translated by the authors from the original Italian title: *La social network analysis come strumento per la comprensione delle attuali trasformazioni socio-economiche*. Co-chairs of the session were Alberta Andreotti (University of Milano-Bicocca; only at the 4th conference), Federico Bianchi (University of Milan, formerly at the University of Brescia), Niccolò Casnici (University of Brescia), and Antonello Podda (University of Cagliari).

² For a technical introduction, see Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson (2013).

³ For a general introduction, see Snijders (2011).

linked to various research areas such as the emergence of innovation, the establishment of cooperation among strangers or the resolution of collective action problems. Mario Diani (University of Trento) opened the session by focusing on the social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, which should bring about a radical rethinking of the way social actors conceptualize collective action. In his theoretical contribution on social movements and “modes of coordination” in contemporary societies, Diani emphasized the link between network structures and actors’ situational framing capacities and identities. He argued that already-existing conceptual scripts provide us with the analytical tools to understand contemporary social change.

Following the opening speech, speakers presented more empirically-oriented contributions. The first talk was given by Giacomo Solano (Migration Policy Group, Belgium), who illustrated a quantitative analysis on the relation between network and innovation in urban and rural Uganda. The author examined the impact of social capital on small business innovation performances with specific reference to the role played by network characteristics (e.g., multiplexity). The results showed a twofold tendency: first, the relational domain is paramount and closely related to entrepreneurial and organisational success; second, the effect of network characteristics depends on the context where social relationships take place. In other terms, the research underlined that the most important factor was the interaction between relational aspects, institutional arrangements and cultural frameworks (such as variable propensity towards individualism): if taken together, these elements could explain the emergence of entrepreneurial capabilities in that specific social context.

Albeit in a different field, the influence of social relationships on individual performance clearly emerged from a study by Erika Uberti (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan), Gianluca Argentin, Tiziano Gerosa, Paolo Riva, and Marco Romito (University of Milano-Bicocca). The authors collected longitudinal relational data from a sample of social science students attending bachelor degree courses in Milan, Italy. The aim was to understand if the learning process of freshmen was a personal or a community experience, and how each student formed his/her social networks. In line with the previous presentation, this study underlined the importance of keeping into consideration relational variables, individual characteristics and environmental features. However, analysing these elements in a separate fashion would be misleading; on the contrary, investigating the co-evolution of the three domains remains the best analytical strategy.

A presentation held by Davide Barrera, Sara Romanò, and Francesca Tomatis (University of Turin), tried to answer the following research question: How does the relationship between personal networks, interpersonal trust and well-being vary according to the degree of individualism and tightness present in different countries? To investigate this issue, the authors collected data from the International Social Survey Program 2017 and illustrated how differently these variables interacted in 16 different countries.

With a different focus, the following presentation focused on the socio-demographic antecedents of the COVID-19 diffusion. Raffaele Vacca (University of Florida⁴), Federico Bianchi (University

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of Milan), Matteo Piolatto (University of Brescia⁵), and Flaminio Squazzoni (University of Milan) tested the Intergenerational Contact (IGC) hypothesis—according to which the higher fatality rate of COVID-19 in Southern European countries would be linked to higher contacts between older adults and younger generations—against rich personal network data on a sample of older adults in Brescia, Italy. They found that IGC was prevalent among older adults in Brescia and was positively associated with their age and certain socio-economic characteristics.

The second part of the session hosted a series of contributions about SNA in organizational settings. In the last years, due to its considerable analytical power, the popularity of this approach has been tremendously increasing inside and outside academia. In the latter case, SNA has been used as a supporting tool for managers (Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993), while in the former case scholars have utilized it to study cooperation and competition (Lazega, 2001), innovation (Burt, 2004), trust and social support (Bianchi, Casnici, and Squazzoni, 2018).

The presentation held by Valentina Pacetti (University of Milano-Bicocca) opened the discussion and reconstructed the fundamentals of the SNA approach in organisational sciences, under the assumption that social relationships might explain economic behaviour better than individual attributes. This is particularly true in the post-Fordist era, where flexible organizational models and decentralised governance arrangements can better cope with globalization, market complexity and knowledge economies.

Network effects in governance structures was also the topic of a work by Giulia Ganugi (University of Bologna), who presented her research on poverty, social exclusion and homelessness in Northern Italy. By using a comparative research design, the author explored the complexities related to public interventions in this specific field of analysis. In particular, Ganugi showed that the relationships between public agencies and non-profit organizations, beyond regional differences, tended to be highly path-dependent, leading to socially undesirable outcomes.

While in some circumstances social relationships might be associated with inertia and conservatism, in other cases inter-organisational ties are able to provide key resources to economic actors. This was the case of a study by Federica Bianchi and Alessandro Lomi (Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland), which focused on interbank connections in a quasi-experimental research perspective. They showed that, even in a social context dominated by self-interest, direct and generalised reciprocity ties between financial institutions helped them to cope with market uncertainty and triggered group-oriented behaviours, which turned out to be beneficial for all the actors involved.

The following presentation, held by Maria Camilla Fraudatario (University of Naples) and Giuseppe Giordano (University of Salerno), provided another example of how social connections might be vital for the survival of organisational actors. By carrying out a comparative analysis between the Pakistani community in Manchester and the Sri-Lankan community in Naples, the

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authors illustrated how the entrepreneurial success of both groups not only depends on contextual factors (i.e., urban histories, market opportunities, institutional arrangements), but is also shaped by their own relational capital.

While social networks can be beneficial for organisations operating in the legal markets, they can also be crucial for their illegal counterparts (Papachristos, 2014). In this respect, the presentation by Maurizio Catino, Giuseppe Vittucci and Sara Rocchi (University of Milano-Bicocca) showed how 'Ndrangheta organisations increased their own resilience by performing a purely relational strategy based on the management of marriages. On the one hand, such a network-building scheme allowed criminal organisations to preserve their power, reinforce their alliances and prevent unwanted members from interfering in their own business. On the other hand, strategic marriages proved to be an efficient tool for partner selection by which families recruited skilled workforce outside their closer social circles, while simultaneously securing new members' loyalty.

In conclusion, the success of the sessions on "Social Network Analysis as a tool for understanding the current socio-economic transformation," organised at the annual conferences of the SISEC is a sign of promising growth for SNA among Italian social scientists. The diversity of research interests characterizing the current global state of social network research was appropriately represented among the selected contributions. This adds to recent international publications by Italian-based scholars in the field of economic sociology in research lines such as the link between economic and social exchange (Bianchi, Casnici and Squazzoni, 2018; Bianchi, Flache and Squazzoni, 2020), organizations (e.g., Manzo et al., 2014), the sharing economy (e.g., Arcidiacono and Podda, 2017). Moreover, the methodological tools displayed during the conference sessions testified that the current state of Italian research on social networks manages to keep the pace of the global academic community.

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