

Ego-Centric Kinship Networks: Dynamics of Family Ties in Italy

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Rising longevity and declining fertility have profoundly transformed family structures across Western societies, producing smaller, older, and more complex kinship networks. These demographic shifts are expected to intensify in the coming decades, with significant implications for social support and resilience. This study investigates the structure and dynamics of nuclear and extended kinship networks in Italy, a context characterized by strong family solidarity, high intergenerational contact, and limited formal care alternatives.

Respondents reported information on a wide range of relatives – including parents, children, siblings, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews, and cousins – allowing the reconstruction of their egocentric family networks. We employ ordinal probit models with random effects to examine how the frequency of contact between the ego and their alters varies according to the socio-demographic characteristics of both, accounting for the hierarchical structure of alters nested within egos.

We expect intergenerational ties to play a central role in adults' social integration, with younger kin occupying more central positions in personal networks. In the absence of vertical ties, horizontal relationships (e.g., siblings, cousins) may compensate by maintaining social connectedness. We also hypothesize gender and education differences.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, rising longevity and declining fertility have profoundly transformed family structures across Western societies. Recent generations are experiencing smaller, older and more complex family networks (e.g., Alburez-Gutierrez et al., 2023; Kolk et al., 2023; Pittavino et al., 2025). Families now often span multiple generations, but with only a few members representing each. These trends are expected to intensify in the coming years (Alburez-Gutierrez et al., 2023; de Bel et al., 2025), with potential implications for family support systems and social resilience. Such demographic transformations highlight the need to examine how family structures evolve and how these changes affect patterns of social interaction among relatives.

Kinship networks have long been recognized as a cornerstone of social life, shaping individual behavior, access to resources, and identity across generations (Bengtson, 2001; Umberson & Thomeer, 2020). In most societies, the family remains a key institution promoting social cohesion and individual well-being, by offering emotional and practical support, and fostering social participation.

A large body of research documents the protective role of family ties against social isolation, loneliness, and health decline (Umberson, 2020). However, most studies focus primarily on the nuclear family – that is, on parents and children – or on vertical intergenerational ties such as those between parents, children, and grandchildren (Furstenberg, 2020). This narrow focus often overlooks the significance of extended kin – including siblings, in-laws, aunts/uncles, cousins, and nieces/nephews – for individual well-being. Recent research calls for a broader understanding of kinship that considers not only the presence of close kin but also the structure, size, and configuration of extended kin networks (Kolk et al., 2023; Van Damme et al., 2025; Hünteler, 2022; Alburez-Gutierrez et al., 2023)

This study explores the dynamics and frequency of social interaction within both nuclear and extended kinship networks, spanning vertical (intergenerational) and horizontal (intragenerational) relationships. We focus on Italy, a particularly compelling case due to its family-centered welfare system, strong kinship bonds, and limited formal social-care sector, which together make kin networks crucial for social support and well-being. Italy is characterized by strong family solidarity, frequent support exchanges, and intensive intergenerational contact (Bordone et al., 2017; Hank, 2007; Kalmijn & De Vries, 2009), as well as high levels of residential proximity and co-residence between generations, with young adults leaving the parental home relatively late (Hank, 2007; Santarelli & Cottone, 2009).

2. Method

We adopt an egocentric network approach, which examines social structures centered on a focal individual (ego) and their direct connections (alters). Egocentric network analysis has proven valuable for understanding the dynamics of personal relationships and their effects on individual outcomes (Fiori et al., 2006; Bianchi et al., 2006; Shiovitz-Ezra & Litwin, 2012; Van Tilburg & Van Groenou, 2002; Vacca & Bianchi, 2024).

Respondents (egos) provided information on contact frequency and support exchanges with a wide range of relatives (alters) – including parents, children, siblings, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews, and cousins – along with socio-demographic information for both themselves and their relatives. These data allow the reconstruction of individuals' extended family networks, capturing both their structural characteristics and interaction patterns.

We model the frequency of contact between egos and alters as a function of the socio-demographic characteristics of both. To this end, we estimate mixed ordinal probit models, where ego-specific random effects allow us to account for the multilevel structure of the data, with alters nested within egos. This modelling strategy captures individual-level heterogeneity and dependence among alters connected to the same ego, providing a nuanced view of how family networks function within the broader social context.

3. Expected findings

We aim to describe the structure of extended kinship networks in terms of both the number and type of living relatives and the frequency of interaction between them.

Drawing on the Italian context, we expect intergenerational ties to play a central role in adults' social integration, shaping both network structure and interaction patterns. We anticipate that younger-generation kin will occupy more central positions in adults' personal networks than other alters and that middle-aged adults will maintain frequent contact with younger relatives, especially (grand)children. However, in the absence of vertical (intergenerational) ties, horizontal relationships, such as those with siblings or cousins, may act as compensatory connections.

Regarding socio-demographic variation, we expect that women, due to their greater involvement in caregiving roles, are likely to sustain more numerous and diverse relationships. Furthermore, individuals with lower educational attainment are expected to be embedded in family-centered personal networks, reporting higher levels of support from family members but less support from non-kin alters.

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