

Kinship networks, kinlessness and friendship across the life course.

An extensive Analysis of the Italian case over a 20-year period

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Introduction

The intricate net of human relationships, particularly within the framework of kinship networks, unfolds as a pivotal aspect of individuals' life course experiences. With demographic shifts, evolving societal norms, and changing family structures reshaping the landscape, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to understanding the dynamics of kinship across the various stages of life. The importance of kinship networks extends beyond providing a mere structural framework; they act as critical sources of emotional, instrumental, and financial support, significantly influencing individual well-being and resilience (Patterson & Margolis 2023; Schwartz & Litwin, 2018).

In the wake of increased childlessness, declining rates of marriage, and heightened life expectancy (Lesthaeghe, 2014), concerns about *kinlessness* and *ageing alone* have permeated scholarly discourse (e.g., Carr 2019; Margolis & Verdery, 2017; Verdery et al., 2019). Kinship networks are relevant at any age, however. As individuals navigate through the life course, the availability and composition of kin networks play a crucial role in shaping their social support systems. The life course perspective emphasizes the dynamic nature of kinship networks, highlighting shifts in familial ties across different life stages and the varying roles that kin play over time (Wrzus et al. 2013). Similarly, the *Convoy Model* considers social relationships, like family or friends, as a *convoy* that moves with the person over the life course and evolves over time, e.g. in size and composition (Antonucci et al. 2014).

While the focus on kinship networks is indispensable, it is equally crucial to acknowledge the broader web of relationships in which the individual is embedded. Life course experiences are not confined solely within the boundaries of familial relationships; they extend to encompass interactions with friends and extended kin ties. The life course is marked by transitions and events that shape both kinship and friendship networks, influencing the overall social connectedness of individuals (e.g., Djundeva et al., 2018; Kalmijn, 2003).

Despite this recognition, the literature has often siloed the examination of kinship and friendship networks, neglecting the interconnections that exist between the two. As individuals age, the role of friends becomes increasingly pronounced, offering alternative sources of companionship and support, especially in the absence of close kin (Höllinger & Haller, 1990; Mair, 2019; Ng et al. 2021; York Cornwell & Goldman, 2021). The life course trajectory of social connections is dynamic, with the emphasis on different types of relationships shifting over time (Böger & Huxhold, 2018).

Our study contributes filling this gap. Specifically, we explore the prevalence of different kinship networks, the prevalence of kinlessness, and the dynamics of friendship across the life course. Focusing on Italy, our analyses are grounded on a robust dataset spanning from 1998 to 2016 and encompass various kinship configurations, including the number and types of kin: parents, children, grandparents, grandchildren, and siblings, thus aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the intricate tapestry of social connections and support systems that individuals weave throughout their lives. By presenting estimates over a 20-year period, we illuminate the trajectories of kinship networks and kinlessness, providing a nuanced perspective on how these patterns unfold over time and at different ages. Our study contributes to the global discourse on kinship studies, as Italy serves as a unique backdrop for our exploration. Although Italy is consistently classified as a *strong* family ties country, the specific dynamics of kinship networks and trajectories over the life course have yet to be systematically examined. Furthermore, we integrate the analysis considering the availability of friends. This approach allows us to unravel the multifaceted interdependencies between family structures and non-family social support, setting the stage for future research on the intricate interplay between family structures and non-family social support systems across the life course.

Data & Methods

Data is drawn from the Families and Social Subjects (FSS) survey carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), a nationally representative cross-sectional study based on private households living in Italy, which collects information on a range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

Although data would enable to consider four times point (1998, 2003, 2009, 2016), we present here results from the 1998 and 2016 surveys. The analytical samples of persons aged 18 and over only consider Italian citizenship in order to avoid the bias of split families, typical of migrants (e.g. grandparents usually remain in the country of origin), so the sample size is: 45,904 in 1998 and 23,387 in 2016. Each edition has its own sample weights in order to represent the adult population living in Italy.

The FSS questionnaire investigates the size and composition of respondents' kinship networks in a very detailed way, although with some age restrictions, making it possible to determine the network of close kin, other relatives, and friends for each respondent. As for close kin, the presence of parents (mother and father separately) is collected for people aged 18-69; the presence of siblings, cohabiting partners, children and friends is collected for all people; the existence of grandchildren is asked only to people aged 35 and over, and that of grandparents to people up to the age of 49. The questionnaire has a specific item, asked without age limits, to record any other relatives (e.g. uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.), and friends on whom the respondent can rely in case of need.

To analyse the consistency of the network and its characteristics, descriptive analyses were carried out taking into account the presence or absence of each type of kin, by age and sex, for all survey editions. Furthermore, to evaluate possible additive or substitution effects, we crossed the presence of close kin with that of friends and other relatives.

First results

A close look at each specific kin reveals that, in 2016, as expected, the presence of parents remains significant through adulthood (around 90% among those aged 40-49) and then starts to decrease (approximately 75% for those aged 50-59 and less than 30% for those in their sixties (Fig. 1). Conversely, young people (18-29) usually lack partner and children. Specifically, the presence of a partner reaches 75-85% at the age of 50-70, then it reduces, especially for women, whereas about 60% of women has children at the age of 30-39, relative to 40% for men. The percentage increases across the life course, due to the higher fertility rate of older generations. The presence of living siblings is not negligible, maintaining at 80-85% till the age of 80, then reducing at higher ages due to mortality. Finally, about 80% of young people has grandparents, declining to 15-18% at the age of 40-49. In parallel, 11-20% of people aged 50-59 has grandchildren (although with variations by gender), but the percentage overcomes 70% at older ages.

Figure 1 – Presence of the given kin type, percentage values by age class. FSS data, 2016. Weighted values.

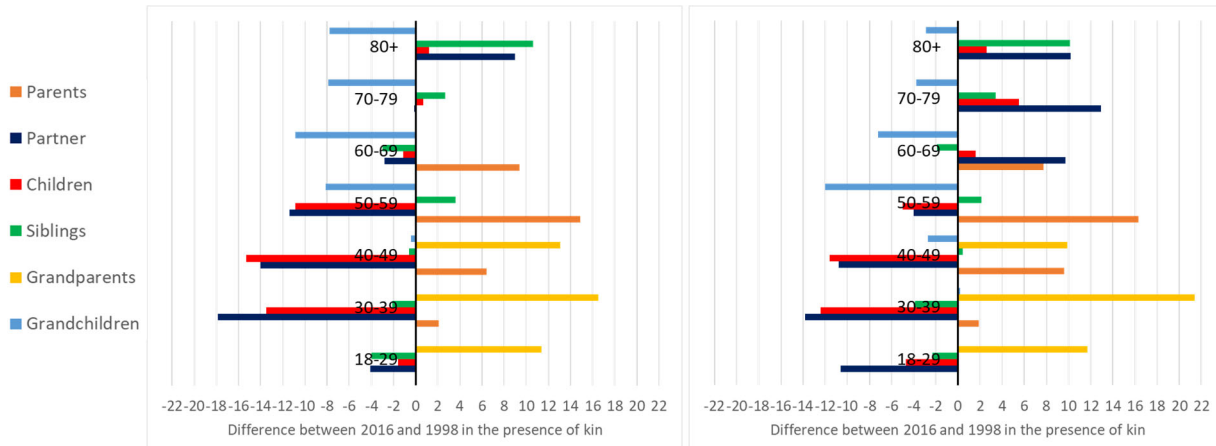


Source: authors' elaboration of 2016 FSS data.

Important variations in kinship emerge when considering the last 20 years (Fig. 2). While the presence of living parents has increased for adult people, both men and women, we detect a reduction of a partner presence at younger and adult ages, but an increase among older people. The well-known fertility reduction among younger cohorts is visible in the reduction of the children presence, and, similarly, in the reduced number of living sibling for younger people. Finally, the effect of increased longevity is

manifested by the increased presence of those having grandparents till in adult age. Currently there are fewer grandparents than 20 year ago.

Figure 2 – Difference 2016-1998 in the presence (% val.) of a given kin type. FSS data, 1998 and 2016. Weighted values.



Note: A positive value means that the presence of a specific kin has increased in the period 1998-2016, whereas a negative value implies a decrease. *Source:* authors' elaboration of 1998 and 2016 FSS data.

Based on the presence/absence of each specific kin, we are able to provide an overview of kinship network types reporting in Table 1 the proportion of individuals who lack any family kin, those who have only one type of living kin, two, three or more, by age groups and sex, and overall (2016 FSS survey).

About 1% of Italians are kinless – i.e. they lack all types of kin considered – although this percentage starts to increase in adult-old age, and with gender differences. The percentage of men lacking close kin is 1.1% at the age 60-69 and reaches 2.5% after the age of 80; for women, a high proportion is found at the age of 70-79 (2.9%), and then increases to 6.8% among the oldest age group. It is also remarkable that around 5.5% can count only on one type of close family tie, again with age and gender differences: as for men, the results are above the average already at the age of 50-59 (6.1%), while for women the most critical values appear from 60 years old and more, reaching high values at 70-79 years old (9.0%) and even 13.5% after the age of 80. Slightly less than 18% have only two types of kin, whereas 3 out of 4 Italians, on average, are found to have 3 or more types of close kin. At the younger ages (18-39), there are higher proportions of large kinship ties for women than for men.

Table 1 – Percentage of people lacking close kinship ties, by number of kin and sex, Year 2016

Age classes	Kinship network types											
	none			one type			two types			3 or more types		
	all	men	women	all	men	women	all	men	women	all	men	women
18-29	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	2.6	1.9	25.9	28.6	23.0	71.8	68.9	75.0
30-39	0.1	0.1	0.0	3.1	4.4	1.7	20.9	27.2	14.6	76.0	68.3	83.6
40-49	0.2	0.4	0.0	4.1	5.2	3.0	16.1	17.7	14.5	79.6	76.7	82.6
50-59	0.7	0.9	0.5	5.0	6.1	4.0	14.9	15.4	14.5	79.3	77.5	81.0
60-69	0.9	1.1	0.7	7.1	6.6	7.6	12.5	13.1	12.0	79.4	79.2	79.6
70-79	2.4	1.8	2.9	8.3	7.5	9.0	14.6	12.9	16.0	74.7	77.9	72.2
80+	5.1	2.5	6.8	11.3	7.6	13.5	21.5	14.8	25.5	62.1	75.2	54.2
All	1.1	0.8	1.3	5.5	5.5	5.4	17.6	18.8	16.6	75.8	74.9	76.7

Source: authors' elaboration of 2016 FSS data

In this framework, it is imperative to understand if and to what extent the elective network of people (friendship) compensate– or add – to the kinship one. Preliminary analyses (not shown here) demonstrate that as slightly more than one-third of the respondents (37.3%) has no close friends, with percentages that increase by age: around 17% among the youngest, surpassing 50% for those in their seventies, and reaching nearly 70% for those in their eighties and older. Considering the kinship and friendship configurations together, we found that among those who have no close kin, overall 51% also lack close friends, with important age differences: all younger people, from 18 to 39 years old, have friends; in the

40-49 age class the percentage of those declaring the absence of close friends is reduced (15.2% overall), and a percentage below the average is found also at higher ages (70 and more). It is possible that in these cases the lack of close family networks is compensated by a greater variety in the network of relationships outside of immediate family ties. This situation is especially marked for women, and at a lower extent also for those who have only 1 type of close kin.

Finally, when enlarging the observation of kinship ties also considering “other relatives” (e.g., aunts and uncles, cousins, etc.), for just over half of the respondents, these kin either do not exist or they are not mentioned among individuals on whom to count on, with variations from around 40% for younger people, both men and women, to 67% for the oldest. It thus seems that when kinship networks are absent, people are able to activate friendship networks on which they rely.

Conclusions

From this extensive description, it clearly emerges that a large share of Italians can still count on a rather diversified network of close kin during all their life, although some criticism appears at older ages, especially for women. The life course perspective enables us to put in evidence that the current trends in demographic behaviors – visible in the current kinship ties of younger people – anticipate a future shrinking of the close support network of individuals. Although those lacking close kin, or who can count only on 1 type of kin (sometimes only on one person), are not a large group numerically, this calls for an urgent need to understand their characteristics, frailties, and needs. In addition, further development to deepen the complex interplay between family structures and non-family social support is still needed.

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