Symbolic Interactionism and Social Network Analysis: An Uncertain Encounter

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The aim of this article is to respond to the question of whether social networks represent a possible terrain of application and investment for interactionist research. The answer to that question is, without a doubt, affirmative. What appears to be truly problematic, if not completely improbable, is that this investment can come about through a “coming together” of symbolic interactionism and social network analysis. The vocational focus that has evolved in the two perspectives, the conceptual frameworks and methods used for the study of social interactions and their interlinking in relational networks, presents aspects of extreme differentiation that render a possible convergence quite difficult.

Keywords: social networks, social network analysis, vocational focus, social interactions

The question remains whether human society or social action can be successfully analyzed by schemes which refuse to recognize human beings as they are, namely, as persons constructing individual and collective action through an interpretation of the situations which confront them.

—Herbert Blumer

Nick Crossley’s article in this issue poses a truly relevant rhetorical question, asking, if the concepts of social network and complexity can represent possible directions for interactionist research. I, too, for more than a decade, have been seeking an answer to the same question, after having concentrated my efforts on analyzing social networks (Salvini 2005, 2007, 2009). The reason I began this search lies in the recognition of the consistent limits of social network analysis in attempts to adequately grasp the processes that characterize the effective unfolding of social interactions in the daily life of the individuals whose networks are studied. Rather, in the current (and future) phase of development of social network analysis (SNA), this objective...
is not considered, and its methodological tools are not (yet?) equipped to pursue such an objective. The aim of this article, therefore, is to provide a response to the question of whether social networks can represent a possible area of application and investment for symbolic interactionist inquiry. My response to this question is, of course, in the affirmative, but what I instead consider truly problematic, if not completely improbable, is that this investment can come about through a “coming together” and a convergence of symbolic interactionism (SI) and SNA. The term network is frequently used in the symbolic interactionist tradition in both its classical and its contemporary literature; so the conceptual conditions exist that would allow a significant increase of interest in this direction. Nevertheless, the ways in which the two perspectives have developed the concept of network (and its conceptual derivations), as well as the technical and methodological frameworks coherent with that conceptualization, present aspects of extreme differentiation that make any possible convergence very problematic indeed. Each perspective has evolved a specific identity during its own historical development, a vocational focus that impedes, at least in our present conditions, foreseeing the possibility of any coming together. In contrast to a tendency currently in vogue within the social sciences, that of moving toward adopting mixed-method strategies of investigation (behind which are often concealed operations of theoretical hybridization), here I propose, as a further possibility, respecting the vocational focus of the two perspectives and to choose resolutely, according to the inclinations and intellectual interests of scholars, which of the two better corresponds to those inclinations and to those interests. Since the question relating to the comparison of the two disciplinary traditions is particularly delicate, it will necessarily be afforded more space in the following pages.

The declared aim of SNA is to measure the effects of the pattern of relationships on individual behavior and to verify in what way different network configurations produce different effects, at both the individual and the collective levels. In contrast, SI constitutes the most suited and coherent perspective for probing the ongoing dynamics in which people build their relationships with others, to grasp its processesuality and the implied meanings. Many contributions exist that indicate how this particular vocation of SI represents neither some form of sociologic reductionism nor a form of amnesia concerning the relevance of social structure (Blumer 1969; Fine and Kleinman 1983; Fine 1991; Maines 2001).

We have to reflect, therefore, on those conditions that make possible the confluence of the two perspectives, as well as on the costs that might arise from such an encounter, operating from the hypothesis that not necessarily does the theoretical and methodological convergence of two (or more) perspectives produce effective benefits for the parties involved. The temptation to join together SNA and SI is beginning to spread within the general sensibility, so much so that several recent essays have appeared in which the results of reflection and empirical research tending in this direction have been reported (De Nooy 2009). Such results often present aspects that are problematic and fail to contribute to any meaningful clarification regarding the theoretical-epistemological conditions in which this convergence could
take place; moreover, an encounter between the two perspectives is possible only at the cost of sacrificing a consistent portion of the conceptual apparatus on which symbolic interactionism is based, and at the cost of “forgetting” the intellectual vocation that paved the way for its birth in the early years of the last century. In other words, for the way in which it has been characterized up to now, this attempt to converge the two perspectives has had more a character of incorporation than of a reciprocal fecundation.

Obviously, this in no way means that it would be useless to reflect on and invest energy in a possible such encounter; this is why I feel that Crossley’s contribution is relevant. Nevertheless, it is necessary to carefully consider the conditions in which such a possibility could be realized, as well as what the potential costs might be. What has to be avoided, clearly, is the risk that this meeting should produce an incorporation, with symbolic interactionism being denatured, entirely or partly, in those theoretical-methodological characteristics that determined its birth and success.1

What has to be accepted without delay from Crossley’s essay is the invitation to stress the theoretical importance of the concept of network within the intellectual tradition of interactionism, more than has been done up to now. As is rightly underscored, the concept of network is not foreign to this tradition, although it does remain greatly underdeveloped; at this level, too, the question has to be asked in what conditions would it be possible to consider a reevaluation of the concept of network within the domain of SI, evaluating the compatibility with its theoretical premises and the possible enrichment that could be derived from a more decided “adoption” of the concept in interactionist discourse. I propose to develop my contribution along two principal axes, distinguishing the question relative to the convergence of SI and SNA from that related to the development of a more conspicuous interest in the concept of network within SI.

As regards the first thematic axis, I would like to articulate my reasoning in two points: the first concentrates on the existence (or lack thereof) of the theoretical-epistemological conditions in which it would even be possible to postulate a convergence of the two perspectives; the second, instead, concentrates on the existence, or not, of some utility of such a convergence, especially on the methodological and empirical level. Propaedeutically for developing these two points, it is necessary to devote some space to describing those traits by which SNA defines itself, through the literature and those authors currently most cited in the mainstream of this perspective so as to comprehend the proposal on the theoretical-methodological level, as well as to the general and specific tendencies on which it is now planning its further advances. Understanding these traits allows a more circumstantial assessment of whether the conditions exist for a possible convergence with SI.2 The fundamental thesis I put forward is that such a convergence is possible only if there is a shared common conceptual vocabulary, not only in the theoretical premises but also in the modality by which those premises are translated into methodological orientations and coherent analytic techniques. Therefore the absence of such a common lexicon (i.e., shared) would render this convergence impossible. For the second thematic
axis, I would like to suggest a few possible ways to better use the concept of network within SI, taking up and amplifying what is already to be found within the perspective’s conceptual tradition.

WHAT IS SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS?

The discipline of sociology is characterized by a certain quantity of theoretical references that can be more or less wide-ranging. Quite some time has already passed since the refusal of the “totalizing” ambitions of the “grand theories,” and the richness of sociology resides in the availability of theoretical perspectives to use as lens through which to understand social phenomena. These perspectives, as we know, can diversify, either only slightly or more widely, in specific reference to what, on the one hand, would be the common epistemological matrix in which all of these are rooted and, on the other, from which they each draw resources and find inspiration for further advances; in virtue of this reference to specific basic assumptions, these theoretical perspectives may not even have any point in common (Wallace and Wolf 1999).

The development of SNA, especially in the last ten years, has overcome the limit articulated by Collins in 1988, who described it as a technique in search of a theory; as I show below, although even today a large part of the advances obtained by SNA regards the techniques of data analysis, the methods of data gathering, the graph visualization and computerized analysis using highly sophisticated software (Carrington, Scott, and Wasserman 2005), it is also clear by now that all of this has made possible the systemization of a group of coherent concepts, also shared by many other scientific disciplines, within a strongly unified framework that has been given the name “network theory” or “network theories” (Freeman 2004; Monge and Contractor 2003; Wellman 1988; Tindall and Wellman 2001). In particular, in his seminal work published in 2004, Linton Freeman reevokes the development of SNA within the social sciences, thereby contributing to the delineation of the current mainstream traits of SNA, in relation to the dynamics of continuity–discontinuity that have emerged historically, starting from the time of Auguste Comte.

As much as SNA represents a truly vast area of scientific engagement and is still marked today by nonlinear dynamics of expansion, it is endowed with a consolidated methodological and conceptual framework that can be referred to as a perspective; more than once Freeman underlined how SNA constitutes a “normal science,” capable of basing itself on a systematic and shared accumulation of common knowledge (Freeman 2004; Kuhn 1962; Hummon and Carley 1993). SNA presents itself as the most theoretically coherent and well-equipped perspective for analyzing networks, but also, more generally, for studying social phenomena tout court, according to the “structural approach” (Wellman 1988). If we go back to Barry Wellman’s 1988 essay on the basic premises of SNA (only slightly “amended” in 2001), we find there expressed the ambition of constituting SNA as an approach capable of more adequate descriptions and explanations of social phenomena than conventional social science.
Consequently—as was so clearly highlighted by Crossley—no attempt to emphasize the concept of social network in theoretical and empirical investigation (and this is particularly true for SI) can avoid taking into account the body of accumulated knowledge to be found in SNA; nevertheless, the convergence of interest on this concept yields no automatic guarantees on the compatibility of the implied theoretical perspectives; rather, it remains necessary to verify the conditions in which this convergence would be made possible. To understand how SNA defines itself and calls itself to our attention, the contributions of two authors, whose authority is unquestioned within the vast and heterogeneous community of network analysts, are brought to bear: Barry Wellman and Linton Freeman. Tindall and Wellman (2001:266) thus define SNA:

Social network analysis is the study of social structure and its effects. It conceives of social structure as a social network, that is a set of actors (nodes) and a set of relationships connecting pairs of these actors. The actors can be groups, organizations or even nation-states as well as persons, and the relationships are flows of resources that reflect relations of control, dependence, and cooperation. Network analysis’s core concern is to understand how social structures facilitate and constrain opportunities, behaviours, and cognitions. Network analysts investigate patterns of relationships that connect members of social systems, and how these patterns channel resources to specific locations in social structures. Their basic premise is that knowledge about the structure of social relationships enriches explanations based only on knowledge about the attributes of actors.

It can already be understood from this definition what the specific vocation of SNA is, which is sufficiently made explicit in the following specification relative to the logic of the scientific reasoning adopted:

Social network analysts reason from whole to part, from structure to relation to individual, from ties to behaviour. The paradigm is explicitly anti-reductionistic, studying the parts of a system by analyzing relations among the parts. It is often multilevel, examining how larger level organizing principles affect individual outcomes, e.g., from structure to relation to individual. (Tindall and Wellman 2001:266–67)

These defining traits are generally shared by the community of network analysts and are promptly reproduced in official form: on the INSNA (International Network for Social Network Analysis) Web site we can find the following definition, attributed to Freeman himself (http://www.insna.org/sna/what.html):

Social network analysis is focused on uncovering the patterning of people’s interaction. . . . Network analysts believe that how an individual lives depends in large part on how that individual is tied into the larger web of social connections. Many believe, moreover, that the success or failure of societies and organizations often depends on the patterning of their internal structure. . . . From the outset, the network approach to the study of behavior has involved two commitments: (1) it is guided by formal theory organized in mathematical terms, and (2) it is grounded in the systematic analysis of empirical data.

In the work in which he recounts the development of SNA within the social sciences, Freeman individuates four distinct characteristics that define SNA: structural
intuition (the fact that the pattern of social connections within which the actors are embedded has, for these same actors, relevant consequences); the use of systematic (empirical) relational data; the adoption of graph representations of networks; the use of mathematical and computational models. For Freeman, what characterizes network analysis is the combination of these four elements—as if the failure to adopt any one of these elements would constitute only a partial vision of SNA. We therefore are in the presence of a unitary body of theoretical references that produces coherent effects on the twofold level of conceptual formalization and of the adoption of methods and techniques of analysis; this coherence is visible both on the substantive level (i.e., of further theoretical corollaries that follow from the given definitions) and on that of tools of analysis. As concerns the first, it’s important to again refer to Tindall and Wellman (2001:270–72), who, coherently with the defining premises just proposed, lay out a series of general principles for SNA:

- Structured Social Relationships are a More Powerful Source of Sociological Explanation than the Personal Attributes of System Members . . .
- Values, Attitudes, and Norms Emerge from Location in Structural Systems of Social Relationships . . .
- Social Structures Determine the Operation of Dyadic Relationships . . .
- Social Systems are Networks of Networks . . .
- Social Network Analysis is Based Upon General Principles . . .

While a direct reading of the text is encouraged to acquire a more complete degree of understanding, it is essential, in the economy of our discussion, to call attention to how Tindall and Wellman (2001:272) individuate a tenuous affinity between SNA and the cultural atmosphere of postmodernism, an affinity that becomes manifest in the refusal to produce wide-ranging theories and in the way in which the social world is viewed as being composed of networks, in contraposition to the structures of hierarchical and closed relationships—such as groups—which can be considered as specific, even if not widespread, forms of networks. However, much more substantial are the areas in which the two perspectives decidedly differ; regarding this point, the observations of Tindall and Wellman (2001:272) are particularly instructive for my discussion:

- By contrast to post-modernism, social network analysts adopt a realist ontology, viewing social structures as real entities. . . . Where post-modernists provide “accounts”; network scholars provide “analyses.” They see patterns of multiple ongoing relationships as having real consequences for resource flows, and for providing opportunities and constraints for social behaviour. . . . Network analysis is an inherently generalizing enterprise. Analysts want to tease out the structural patterns that underlie the surface noise of social systems and use knowledge of these patterns to understand social interaction. They adhere to the possibility of objectivism in principle even if they recognize the challenges to this ambition in practice. They contend that while social structures are cognitively interpreted and imaged by agents, they cannot be reduced to social constructions.

Although it’s necessary to acknowledge a growing interest in recent years within SNA in the role of social actors in relational structures, the focus of its methodological
and theoretical interest remains that of verifying how structural patterns produce constraints and opportunities in respect to the action of individuals; social interactions can be fully understood only in function of those patterns and their structural differences. Furthermore, networks are considered real entities that, for as much as social actors cognitively interpret them, they impose their own obdurate reality on actors.

Consequently, social interactions are not considered as processes in which meanings are constructed and negotiated by the social actors, but as a flow of resources that can be either favored or impeded by the structural framework in which they take place. The focus of interest, then, is neither social interaction as such, nor even the interpretative act performed by the actors within the ongoing dynamics of symbolic and social interactions, but the topological dimension of the relational structure. In their study of structural models that link together pairs of social actors (nodes), network analysts attempt to uncover substantially two types of patterns: those that present clusters of actors linked together in more or less cohesive social groups (relational approach) and those that show subgroups of actors who occupy equivalent social roles or positions (Freeman 2005). Finally, network analysts try to uncover how the structural characteristics of these patterns and their differences produce different social outcomes, for example, in terms of well-being, health, productivity, social support, and so forth.

To realize these objectives, network analysts collect data referred to as “relational,” since the presence (1) or absence (0) of a tie between pairs of actors is recorded (as might also be the synthetic measure of the “strength” of those ties). The data thus collected are then organized into squared matrixes, which constitute the basis both for the construction of typical graph visualizations (nodes and lines) and for further and more sophisticated mathematical or statistical analyses. Most recently, statistical modeling has represented by far the central methodological focus of interest of network analysts; statistical modeling, flanked by the use of computer simulation, has become necessary to verify if observed network patterns exhibit (or not) structural tendencies that had been previously hypothesized, or if they demonstrate peculiar traits other than that which we might expect to find in random networks.

AN UNCERTAIN AND PROBLEMATIC ENCOUNTER

The adoption, on the part of a researcher, of the perspective of social network analysis cannot and must not be a totalizing choice, but it also cannot be reduced to a mere technical possibility, equal to others; as I have already shown, even if briefly, SNA has developed not only a quite sophisticated technical apparatus but also its own vocabulary, a coherent lexicon (which is neither monolithic nor static) shared by the community of network analysts, which characterizes its typical methodological and conceptual orientation. A closer reading of this lexical and conceptual system reveals how in SNA the theoretical, methodological, and technical dimensions are all “structurally” connected; as a consequence, the decision to consider in any empirical investigation the network dimensions of phenomena cannot but imply
also the adoption of certain epistemological premises that predominate in the logic of the construction of network properties and of the indicators necessary for their measurement.4

As much as this observation may signal a certain “exclusiveness” of the perspective, it evokes a general principle of coherence between the theoretical and the technical-methodological dimensions, a coherence often lost in the routine of empirical inquiry. Over the last three decades, we have witnessed a conspicuous growth in the statistical analysis of relational data, which has been accompanied by an equal growth in mathematical formalization (Pattison 1993). The paths of further development of SNA currently run in three directions: the first consists of moving from the explorative and descriptive analysis of data toward a more confirmative and inferential focus; the second consists of adopting analytic frameworks that are multitheoretical and multilevel; the third consists of the passage from a merely structural kind of explanation to one in which the statistical models take into account both the properties of network and the attributes of the social actors (Contractor, Wasserman, and Faust 2006). The development of an ad hoc statistical modeling for the study of social networks depends, in fact, on the specific nature of the relational data, which differs noticeably from that of the micro-data normally used in surveys; the statistical models and the techniques of analysis must take into account the fact that the hypotheses about the causal connections between network configurations and individual behavior are based on the assumption of interdependence between the considered actors, and of the nested-like structure of the data set that defines the social network (Snijders, Spreen, and Zwaagstra 1995; Snijders, Van de Bunt, and Steglich 2010). This obviously isn’t the place for a technical treatment of the models being proposed for the study of the influence of the hypothesized structures of dependence in social networks, nor to attempt to forecast their future development. However, the identification of causal processes is particularly complicated when analyzing relational data, not only because of the extreme technicality required for elaborating the models, their analysis, and their interpretation but especially because there exists the risk of not paying enough attention to how certain social mechanisms operate in observed relational dynamics (Doreian 2001); the efforts to take into consideration the role played by the actors in changes in network structures are necessarily based on simplified assumptions about these same actors, their behavior, and their relationships.5 Nevertheless, the current evolutionary stage reached in statistical modeling represents, without doubt, remarkable progress in the attempt to more closely connect the techniques of analysis with the conceptual premises; these developments must be encouraged and, if possible, rendered always more suitable for widespread use, and not only employed in a “niche area.”

In the extent to which we move away from the viewpoint from within SNA toward evaluating its “compatibility” with other theoretical-methodological perspectives, such as SI, or even toward identifying possible areas of convergence, the matter certainly becomes ever more complicated. It should not be forgotten that network analysis (emblematically deprived of the attribution “social”) has found fertile ground
for its diffusion also and especially in the natural and physical sciences. Studies focused on the Internet, on the spread of viruses in health care environments just as in informatics and communications settings, the “discovery” of “scale-free” and “small world” properties of certain network configurations (complex networks) have, in fact, favored the development of an important effort of comparison among various disciplinary areas, such as physics, biology, economics, and logistics (Watts 2003; Barabási 2002; Caldarelli 2007). On one side, this convergence of diverse scientific areas must be judged positively, in relation to the widespread call for accessing the complex dynamics that characterize the organization and evolution of reality; on the other, we must not be blind to the fact that this tendency is marked by considerable ambiguities, first among them being related to the emblematic omission of the term social in this new area of disciplinary junction. Because the “grammar” and the lexicon of graph theory takes on the universalistic character of nodes and arcs, it’s obvious that the social dimension in the study of networks risks becoming an “optional”; at most, the social constitutes a mere metaphor for interconnections, for interlinking, but neither graph theory nor statistical simulation, nor even the nature of the phenomena studied, are currently configured or intended for application to specifically social actors, that is, to individuals and interactions in situated social contexts. Although, as already stated, no theoretical perspective constitutes a monolithic and unvarying corpus, SNA presents itself—at least in its mainstream dimensions—as a rather homogeneous and coherent proposal in the linkage it shows among its fundamental assumptions, its theoretical developments, and its technical-methodological framework; in other words, we cannot expect from SNA, precisely on the basis of these characteristics, that it takes adequate account of conceptual elements and methodological tendencies belonging to other traditions of intellectual and scientific endeavor. As is obvious, within the rich panorama of sociologic perspectives, every one of these enters into competition with the others with reference to its own capacity to penetrate social phenomena or to offer facets not otherwise available from other points of view; in consequence, it is not strictly necessary to build “bridges” between diverse intellectual traditions, at least until the compatibility between differing conceptual apparatuses hasn’t been demonstrated or until the hypothesized reciprocal utility (e.g., in terms of yielding a better understanding of a given social phenomenon) doesn’t produce too high a cost (e.g., in terms of the denaturing of the perspective itself). “Adopting any orientation involves risks and benefits. All theoretical perspectives have strengths and weakness. So let many flowers bloom—but let’s not treat them as if they were all the same plant” (Harris 2008:243). It’s not by accident that still today, even given the recognition of the necessity to overcome the old dichotomies that have for so long characterized sociological theorization and inquiry (micro vs. macro, quality vs. quantity, agency vs. structure), there is no synthetic proposal on the horizon that would appear capable of guaranteeing in a coherent and systematic manner anything that would constitute true movement forward.

In this scenario, the encounter between SNA and SI, as much as every attempt at comparing these two perspectives is to be encouraged, is seen to be highly uncertain
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and problematic; this depends essentially on their diversity in (at least some of) their basic assumptions, in (at least a few of) their central concepts, and in (at least a few of) their consequent methodological orientations in respect to those assumptions and those concepts. In particular, the areas in which such an encounter appears uncertain and problematic refer to (1) the different ways in which structure is conceived, (2) the conceptual ambiguities that refer to the pairing “social relation/interaction,” as well as to the total amnesia that has affected SNA over the role of the construction of meanings in interactions and processes of interpretation, and (3) the difficult reciprocal adoption of methods and techniques typical of the two traditions. In general, it seems to me that what most consistently differentiates the two perspectives relates to what I would call their vocational focus in the study of the social world.

One of the most noted and widespread criticisms of SI relates to what many consider is its astructural bias, which, they say, renders it incapable of considering the role of social structure as a dimension that constrains or promotes an individual action. Regarding this, it has been said that the convergence of SI and SNA could contribute to a sharper focus as well as a more adequate operationalization of the selfsame concept of structure. There exists, however, a consolidated body of literature in the area of SI that not only would lead us to consider as absolutely ungenerous—if not unfounded—this criticism of astructural bias but points toward the elaboration of an autonomous and relatively coherent line of thinking about the role of structure in the interactionist perspective (e.g., Blumer 1969; Maines 1977, 2001; Fine and Kleinman 1983; Fine 1991; Strauss 1978, 1993).

The social structure and the context in which the action takes place constitute elements that cannot be ignored in interactionist reflection, since this provides the boundaries of the action and produces symbols that the individuals themselves use to give sense to their own social worlds (Fine 1991); it must also be acknowledged that interactionist reflection on social structure and organization encompasses differentiated positions and accentuations—that in some measure reflects the heterogeneity of the “symbolic interactionist umbrella” (Snow 2001; Sjoberg, Gill, and Tan 2003).

As difficult as it is to find a systematic definition of social structure in interactionist thought, reference to Blumer (1969:16–17) constitutes an indispensable point of departure; for Blumer, the life of human groups “consists of, and exists in, the fitting of lines of action to each other by the members of the group. Such articulation of lines of action gives rise to and constitutes “joint action”—a societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants.”

A social structure, in its basic constitutive dimension, is made up of “joint actions,” which come into being and evolve via a process of formation: the participants are involved in reciprocally adapting their own lines of action, in a process of designation and interpretation. These joint actions frequently manifest themselves in repetitive and recurrent modalities and, because of their pervasiveness and extension, may be portrayed as networks of interdependent relationships between participants, although here the risk exists that the life of the human group be seen as taking on the
character of a system, appearing to manifest an autonomous life of its own in respect to the participants of the network itself. Blumer is quite clear on this point:

A network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act. . . . It is necessary to recognize that the sets of meanings that lead participants to act as they do at their stationed points in the network have their own setting in a localized process of social interpretation—and that these meanings are formed, sustained, weakened, strengthened, or transformed, as the case may be, through a socially defining process. (P. 19)

Social structures are networks of interdependence among actors that place conditions on the action of the actors, but do not determine this action: social organization is relevant in the measure to which the situations in which people act are shared and in the extent to which it produces symbols that people, in turn, use to interpret their own situations (Blumer 1969).

Denzin (1992:28) takes up and further specifies Blumer’s observations, underlining the interactional processuality of the structures:

Everyday and problematic interactions exhibit a situated, constraining structuredness based on ritual, routine, and taken-for-granted meanings. These constraining features are woven through the structures of the social relationships and ensembles of action (Sartre 1976) that connect individuals with one another in differentially coercive ways. As interactional structures, ensembles are reified, patterned regularities of thought, action, and interpretation. . . . A person’s location in the world of experience is organized into a body of localized, interactional practices which reify these relational-structural forms. . . . These practices are connected to the projects that persons pursue. Practices and projects personalize social structure. . . . If, as interactionists argue, societies exist only in the interactions between persons, then structures—linguistic, gender, kinship, political, economic, religious, cultural, scientific, moral—provide, as Simmel contended, the horizons of experience against which the actual contents of human experience are sketched and lived (Denzin 1983:136). In this sense all structures, if they are to affect the fate of individuals, even in unintended, unanticipated, or unconscious ways, must be realized interactionally.

In this conceptual framework, social structures and their dynamics of change cannot be conceived independently from interactional content and from the mediation of processes of interpretation performed by the social actors. The networks of interdependence among actors—joint actions—are not, therefore, endowed with an autonomy of their own but are emergent effects in which the routines and the practices of everyday life are clarified, transformed, and revitalized (Snow 2001). Moreover, their definition has to take into account the active role of the social actors in personalizing the social structures, through symbolization and interpretation. In contrast to the realist ontology assumed by SNA, as well as to the centrality assigned to relational structures in defining the effects for the participants, in SI this perspective is turned on its head: through their own situated action people produce and reproduce the structure in which they act. Furthermore, network analysts assume that the networks exist
in the same way that “things” exist, or better, constitute the organizational bone-
structure of social life, and not only just of social life; in this theoretical environment,
the role of the scholar, as much as efforts are made to adopt specific analytic strate-
gies based on relational data, remains that of defining–hypothesizing–measuring–
describing–explaining (Fuhse 2009).

Just like structures, relationships, too, are “reified” and fixed in a “taken-for-granted”
definition, which immediately becomes an “operative” definition: in fact, in the data-
gathering phase, a relationship between a pair of actors is relevant only in its essen-
tially binary character, in that it either exists (1) or it doesn’t exist (0). Because the
“name generators” and the “name interpreters” used to collect relational data rely
on the actor’s (ego) representation of the components of his or her own network
(alters), that is, they compose individual accounts of network ties, reconstructing
the network becomes objectified in its matrix and in the graph representation. The
dimension of interpersonal representations and of the meanings attributed to those
ties is neglected and sacrificed in favor of the relevance given to relational patterns
or to the structural characteristics of the ties. Turning once again to Blumer, he pro-
motes the practice of dereifying the social phenomena studied, of emphasizing the
processual dimensions, of centering the focus on people and their definitions of the
situation. In this framework there is no need to operationalize the concept of struc-
ture, because the measurement of its properties represents an irrelevant objective
for research, which instead focuses on the “work” that people do to give sense to
their own reality (Harris 2008).

In this perspective, network ties become the product of different processes of sym-
bolization and attribution of meaning: friendship, love, and other forms of interaction
often relevant in name generators, such as “talk about questions that are relevant to
you,” can mean very different things in different social-cultural contexts (Fuhse 2009).
Although recently there have been calls for greater attention to be given by SNA to
cultural mechanisms that are reproduced in relational structures (Emirbayer 1997;
Tilly 2005; White 1992), as well as to the production of meanings on the part of the
actors who make up the networks, the mainstream of SNA is proceeding, as I have
shown, in different directions. So, what a tie is from the viewpoint of the social actors,
what meanings are attached to its existence, to its evolution, and perhaps to its removal,
are aspects that are rarely considered in the investigations of network analysts. It is
therefore particularly relevant, from the viewpoint of SI, that an inquiry that takes into
account networks in examining any phenomenon centers interest less on the structure
as an autonomous entity, capable of exercising causal power independently of the ac-
tion of the individuals, than on the symbolic dimension contained in social interactions
that give relevance and meaning to network ties and to the intersubjective representa-
tion of the networks of relation of which the actors are active “nodes.”

Even strong ties (Granovetter 1973) within networks of circumscribed relations
and containing a high degree of density cannot be taken for granted:

Social institutions are created and maintained through the active participation
of individuals. To the extent that we are aware of our reasons for participating
in various cultural productions, we can be said to be mindfully engaged in the construction of reality. . . . Imagine [an attorney] explaining to her spouse and children that she does not have time to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries because she is busy fighting for an important social cause. She is often absent from family meals and other everyday rituals as well. One day she awakens to the discovery that she is no longer meaningfully engaged with her family—they seem to be living their lives without her. This example illustrates the simple but profound point that if we do not actively participate in the production of those realities that we wish to maintain . . . they will be eroded by the forces of entropy. (Harris 2008:236)

Within network studies, too, we have seen how the differential in terms of social outcomes produced by weak ties and by strong ties, as well as by the configurations of corresponding networks (closure–brokerage), must not be taken for granted (Burt 1998; Hennig 2007).

Meso domain seems to be the preferred analytic dimension in which we can observe the processual and dialectical relationship between interactions and contexts:

Meso domain analysis is guided by the following assumptions: structure as process: structure as condition: structure as dialectical; detotalization and dereification; contingent/minded/emergence; essential temporality; comparative longitudinal observation and triangulation. A major analytic goal is to dissolve structure as a determining object apart from humans into constituting and consequential processes. However, the forms, arrangements, and distributions of “structures” provide the conditions and contexts which shape but do not determine the interactions. Meso domain analysis views structuring conditions and processes as not simply constraining but simultaneously facilitating. That dialectical relationship, however, varies across and within contexts and situations.

A detotalizing stance questions the stability and integration of social structures like society and institution. The degree of social organization is an empirical question. . . . Deconstructing structural contexts into problematic linkages between sites is a priority of the first order. Dereification means that while actors, including social scientists may attribute objectivity and causality to social entities, meso domain analysts view them as social constructions. Thus social conditions or structural contexts, are the complex intersection of varieties of specific practices, policies and actors that have consequences for social sites (Hindess 1986). Meso domain studies must also explore how actors apprehend and comprehend those social conditions as objects (as reified or constituted) and act upon those definitions. Indeed, a major line of inquiry of meso domain analysis should be whether, how, and with what results actors make sense of the larger structural and historical contexts that influence them. (Hall 1991:130–31)

TOWARD A CHANGE IN THE VOCATIONAL FOCUS

What Blumer calls the mediation of processes of interpretation carried out by the social actors is regularly either ignored or considered as being implicit in network studies—even in those that most attempt to directly link the two perspectives (De Nooy 2009). From this point of view, there is an aspect that, for however much it might appear to be secondary, represents an emblematic indicator of this amnesia
on the part of SNA and that hits at the role of interpretation in meaning creation and giving sense to social ties. This aspect is constituted by the irrelevance of the loop in squared matrix analyses; this irrelevance has obviously a certain logic from within the network perspective, since it’s a given to think that the social actor is in relation to himself or herself. However, what is central in Mead and Blumer, that is, individuals possess a self and this fact leads them to socially interact with themselves, is simply made implicit—if not altogether ignored—in SNA, which thereby deprives itself of the possibility of using one of the most fundamental dimensions of social life, that being the act of interpretation, which has great consequences for how the actors orient their own actions and construct their own interactions with others.7

From our discussion thus far we can derive an added corollary, which is more specifically situated on the methodological level; if, in fact, leaving aside the recognition of the reified character of social networks, from these is “subtracted” the causal power of independent variable, and we consider them as “emergent effects” of the complex interlinking of situated social interactions, never stable and definitive in their own configurations, they could be of use as a descriptive modality for partly reconstructing the contexts that those same interactions contribute to produce.

If a further change in focus were then introduced, and attention were to fall on

1. the processes by which the social actors become convinced, or not, of the existence of relational configurations which we term “networks”;  
2. the relevance and the representations that those configurations hold for the actors themselves;  
3. how the actors actively operate in the face of constraints or “use” the opportunities that those configurations present during the unfolding of daily life;  
4. the analysis of the interpretative modalities through which people indicate to themselves courses of action to activate in their interactions;  
5. how the social actors, in giving themselves indications, take into account the actions of others and adapt themselves to these, never in a definitive and reflexive way, thereby producing joint actions and processes of collective action;

then would the conditions for formalizing ties and their configurations disappear, and it would no longer be strictly necessary to proceed to the operativization of the networks following the technical-methodological apparatus of SNA. The universality of the language of graph theory and statistical modeling, which do not consider the substance of ties or the characteristics of nodes but especially can in no way take account of the interpretation and attribution of meaning performed by the nodes themselves, looks to adopting a series of premises incompatible with a specific interest in the study of interactions among concrete individuals in situated interactional contexts, if not at the cost of producing simplifications and reductions that impoverish the study of the social worlds of these same individuals. Because of this, using the techniques of SNA, and especially the logic underlying their use, must be performed with the requisite caution and prudence, understanding that implementing those techniques is not “neutral” on the theoretical and conceptual level. For those who
believe that careful attention to humanizing social examination is something not to be renounced (Plummer 2001), even if only with reference to the methodological need expressed by Blumer relative to the necessity of acquiring an intimate familiarity with the social reality with which one interacts in research—for example, the networks of individuals—the techniques and methods of SNA provide only one dimension of analysis, and perhaps not even the most relevant one. It appears entirely obvious that these observations make sense only if taken outside the conceptual boundaries of SNA and if a change in the theoretical-methodological focus of reference is postulated.

In this change of focus, social networks are “phenomenological realities” (White 1992), combinations of meanings that are formed in the interactions among individuals, and that, in their turn, orient and contribute to giving sense to those same interactions. Individuals, in this way, define and then constantly redefine their own social world—also constituted by networks of meanings—as well as their own position in it; in this process of redefinition, the networks (or better, concrete nodes in interaction) retroact on the “positioning” of individuals, producing meanings that are used in the dynamics of interpretation and are channeled into the flows of interpersonal communication. It is possible now to prefigure some of the conditions that would make a convergence of the two perspectives feasible, and with specific reference to what the empirical translations of such a convergence might potentially be; what we are undertaking here is an attempt at taxonomy of a completely abstract and provisional sort, given the circumstance that examples of empirical investigations that tend to combine network analysis through SNA and the suggestions of SI, or even only boast the use of qualitative methods, are truly rare in the literature:

1. **“Integrative” approach.** In this area of possibility, the scholar is convinced that a study that contemplates the importance of social networks in comprehending social phenomena must necessarily adopt the theoretical-methodological apparatus of SNA, attempting to explain in what way relational patterns influence and determine outcomes at various levels of social reality. SI is “integrated” in this strategy especially in relation to its sensitivity regarding the adoption of qualitative methods, through which it is possible to “probe” some specific, or local, dimensions, relative to the unfolding of social interactions. For example, we might be interested in understanding, by analyzing a few “case studies,” what the presiding mechanisms are in the birth, conservation, and breaking of certain relationships, as confirmation of the hypotheses linked to the role of weak ties, of “structural holes,” of the competitive advantages of holding a certain position in the network. Within the interactionist perspective, besides the qualitative methods, we find a general sensitivity to the importance of interactions and to the point of view of the actors, a sensitivity that is used, however, in a complementary and confirmative function (therefore in a function of support) in respect to the findings of the inferential procedures adopted in SNA. A reflection on the combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments in the analysis of social networks can be found in the literature (Doreian and Albert 1989; Coviello 2005). Naturally, the integrative approach also contemplates the
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hypothesis in which a part of SNA is integrated in a context of investigation of an interactionist type; this happens when some procedures of a descriptive and inferential type are used in function of a generalization of what has been individuated on the field work level through ethnographic and biographic methods in circumscribed contexts.

2. Pragmatic approach. On this level, the researcher pushes into the background the coherence between theoretical constructs and methodological procedures, adopting a perspective of mixed-methods based on evaluating the utility of gathering-and-analysis strategies in respect to his or her own area of study and to circumscribed objectives that are well defined. From time to time, in relation to accentuating certain dimensions rather than others, instruments of analysis are adopted from the one perspective as well as from the other; descriptive finality prevails over the inferential, making possible some greater degree of compatibility between the different strategies adopted (as in the mixing of qualitative and quantitative tools). For example, a study on the integration of the children of immigrants in schoolrooms can foresee both the use of the most well-known structural variables (density, centrality) and the acquisition of the point of view of the children with reference to their own interactions and perceptions in the context of the class. In what way, then, would it be possible to “integrate” the findings of the two procedures is a question which has yet to be confronted—especially where there exists conflict and divergences among the data collected. In any case, applying this approach can without doubt produce optimal results on the empirical level, as in, for example, Bidart and Lavenu 2005; Bellotti 2008.

There is, however, a third possibility, one that does not head toward evaluating the conditions that would make possible an encounter but that postulates the necessity that scholars respect the vocational focus of the two perspectives and renounce any notion of their being combined. This renunciation is based on the consideration that, although it’s true that a plurality of theoretical perspectives can be a cause of disorientation for academics and researchers in the social sciences, as maintained by Ritzer (1981), it’s also the case that an even greater sense of disorientation would be brought about by a theoretical-methodological hybridization that ignores the historical roots and the intellectual paths that motivated and continue to legitimize the birth and existence of each of these perspectives; I would call this attitude the “vocational” approach. The adoption of such an approach is not exclusive and definitive but transitory and contingent, at least in the extent to which within the debate in the social sciences, and in particular in that concerning the verification of the compatibility between the two perspectives, effective modalities aren’t found for overcoming the difficulties indicated in the summary description I have given of the two approaches, and those are (1) the risk of falling into methodological opportunism, and (2) the risk that one perspective takes on a secondary and dependent role in relationship to the other, considered more “central.” The vocational approach suggests that the investigator, whenever he recognizes the necessity of using the idea of network in his empirical investigation, must decide whether (1) to employ this idea as a sensitizing concept and proceed toward a progressive acquisition of intimate
knowledge of the phenomena studied, emphasizing the actor’s viewpoint, under-
scoring what individuals do to give sense to their own social interactions and to the
complexity connected with the perceived interlinking of those interactions through
interpretative mediation that leads to ongoing redefinitions of one’s own acting and
position in respect to others, or alternatively (2) to employ that idea according to the
standard of SNA and carry out the empirical investigation following the most well-
established procedures of network analysis (Wasserman and Faust 1994; Kolaczyk
2009), which I have already discussed above. The choice, obviously, depends not so
much (or not only) on the characteristics of what will be studied but especially on
an evaluation by the investigator about what he or she considers most coherent with
his or her own objectives and with his or her own personal subjectivities in terms of
his or her professional formation and theoretical frame of reference. Finally, there is
a need for greater coherence and clarity in the process that someone has defined as
“thinking through research”—that is, conducting the research in a way closely con-
nected with ongoing theoretical reflection.¹⁰

DIRECTIONS FOR SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST EXPLORATION
OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

At the end of my reflection, it would appear clear that the concept of social network
is not at all extraneous to SI, nor does it need to import it from other sociologi-
cal perspectives: it is naturally included within the conceptual tradition of interac-
tionism and therefore is not new to interactionist scholars. It can probably be said,
however, that it hasn’t received the attention that it deserves in the experience of
empirical exploration. Consequently, it isn’t a question of developing a version of
“network theory”—for example, a “symbolic interactionist network theory”—but
of favoring a more widespread and knowledgeable use of the sensitizing concept of
network. In effect, Segre (2007) has pointed out how such a use is not to be found
in empirical experience, in the presence of a declared and renewed interest on the
part of interactionist scholars in respect to questions about social structure; the Ital-
ian scholar has observed that, as much as, from a substantive point of view, SI can
express in an authoritative manner its own viewpoint on those applicative aspects
that call social networks into the picture, the number of empirical investigations that
explicitly adopt this idea is truly minuscule. A first, possible, reason for this situation
may lie in the fact that reference to relational contexts constitutes an implicit aspect
in interactionist theorization, for which there is a tendency to underestimate (or to
not make explicit) the social context of interactions as networks. A second factor
(but this list pretends to be neither complete nor exhaustive) may have to do with
the circumstance that the concept of network, in recent years, has been resolutely
appropriated by sociological perspectives (and not only sociological; physics, biol-
ogy, etc.) such as SNA, the theoretical and methodological premises of which (as I
have largely tried to show in the preceding pages) are very distant from the interac-
tionist tradition, as variegated as this latter is.
However, beyond the reasons that would dictate this sort of “amnesia,” it’s important to articulate directions for our work that could lead to accentuating the role of social networks in interactionist discourse—on the condition that this accentuation be effectively useful. Consequently, I propose the individuation of three directions for our work, as paths, all interconnected with one another, for exploration, with the aim both to employ the vast wealth of knowledge that has been accumulated in the interactionist tradition and to exercise the necessary creativity for producing innovations, especially on the methodological and technical level. These three directions regard (1) the theoretical dimension, with reference to the necessity of increasing the degree of coherence between the concept of network and other more consolidated concepts; (2) the substantive dimension, with reference to the individuation of applied areas in which accentuating the network dimension in empirical examination is particularly relevant; and (3) the technical-methodological dimension, with reference to the implications of that accentuation on the level of technical tools for data gathering and data analysis. The individuation of these three directions represents a first rough draft and in no way aspires to be exhaustive, but it is hoped, nonetheless, that it might stir discussion and debate toward further specification.

As concerns the theoretical dimension, it has already been mentioned how SI has produced significant contributions to the concept of social structure and social organization. These have an interactional content and are conceived as processes that oscillate between stability and fluidity, with the reticular dimension being sometimes perceived (Fine and Kleinman 1983; Hall 1987). Blumer (1969:19) himself, when probing the implications of joint action, explicitly cites “extended connection of actions that make up so much of human group life,” that is, the social network. Blumer surely represents a point of departure for legitimizing the relevance of network: he offers a sensitizing definition of the concept when he asserts that every one of us has familiarity with these “large complex networks of action involving an interlinkage and interdependency of diverse action of diverse people” (ibid.); although they exist as combinations of different actions in operations that become regular—something that guarantees a certain stability of the networks—they neither possess autonomy of their own nor constitute independent entities but are dependent on the things that people do, in different locations of the network, according to the use of given sets of meanings, which are interpreted through a process of definition of the situation—here Blumer foreshadows the idea of the network as a “network of meanings.” The social network therefore is a processual composition of interaction—symbolization—interpretation on the part of individuals on whom depends “its destiny,” in the sense of spatiotemporal continuity/discontinuity; Plummer (1996:195) gives a further, well-synthesized specification of these processes:

All of these themes mesh together. Meaning itself is an interactive process: it emerges out of interactions. The self is a process built out of encounters and endowed with shifting meaning. Social objects assume their meaning according to how they are handled in joint actions. Social groups are ceaselessly involved in negotiating meaning. Societies are a vast matrix of “social worlds” constituted
through the symbolic interactions of “self” and “others.” Only in the grounded empirical world open to observation can self, encounter, social object, meaning, be investigated. There is, then, behind symbolic interactionist sociologies, a pervasive imagery of symbol, process, interaction, and intimate familiarity. All of this helps to shape its theoretical work.

Plummer calls on the concept of “social worlds,” coined by Strauss, from whom we may also quote the expression “processual ordering” (an evolution of the concept of negotiated order, elaborated by Strauss himself) to indicate, on the one hand, the multiplicity and the complexity of the settings in which individuals act in the modern world and, on the other, the processual dimension of interaction, its tendency to confront contingencies—big or small as they may be—in a constructive or creative way (Strauss 1993). The example just cited serves here to exemplify how it’s possible to find traits that are similar and coherent between Blumer’s idea of network and concepts successively elaborated following in the tracks of the interactionist tradition; research that is theoretically founded on these aspects has yet to be carried out systemically and would certainly constitute a significant and useful direction for reflection. It’s important to understand, however, that in the interactionist view social contexts (and the networks) are the products of meaningful human activity:

Although it is essential to recognize that all meaningful human behavior is to be located within the broader intersubjective contexts of human group life, it is particularly important to attend to the ways in which people fit their lines of activity into those of others, even as these “joint activities” (Blumer, 1969) are being developed. Indeed, this is the key to understanding organizational life—to examine human interchange as it is built up and adjusted to by the people involved in both more immediately situated and historically developed terms. (Prus 2008:23)

As concerns the substantive dimension, the possible thematic applications are potentially limitless. Every issue with which symbolic interactionists occupy themselves can be explored by accentuating the analytic and conceptual dimensions mentioned above. I carefully avoid, therefore, the drawing up of any lists or hierarchies, but simply limit myself to suggesting two areas in which, for different reasons, it might prove fruitful to concentrate efforts. The first seems to me that of the study of the processes of social inclusion and exclusion; the interactionist tradition, its vocation of being near the everyday life of individuals and of endowing social investigation with a particular human quality, has a wealth of reflections and experiences in this sense. But the spread of increasingly pervasive dynamics of fragilization of the life trajectories of people, the entrance, even if only transitory, into situations of social suffering, if not of poverty, of wide segments of the population, demands a more careful consideration of the dynamics of social construction of well-being and social integration, taking into account the complexity of social interactions. New forms of marginalization are now marking different social worlds, cutting across the “usual” divisions and demanding particular attention in respect to how they are lived, defined, and recounted by individuals. In this sense, it would be worth lending more attention not only to investigation from the interactionist viewpoint of community life and of the transformations that involve local communities, in order to propose
a concept of social cohesion anchored to the experience of individuals, but also to organized forms of social participation oriented to intervention and transformation, where the reference to sociality, to symbolization, and to social interaction is particularly important, as, for example, in volunteerism (Salvini forthcoming).

A second area of relevance in the economy of our discussion is represented by the new forms of sociality induced or favored by the pervasive presence of the Internet and computer networks; in the way in which they modify the construction of identity of individuals, they contribute to defining social worlds characterized by a lack of physical interaction while offering new expressive and communicative modalities of interaction, and constitute, at the same time, a challenge for the interactionist conceptual tradition (Robinson 2007; Zhao 2005).

Whatever the area of thematic application, we should not forget Blumer’s indication regarding the importance of intimate familiarity with the phenomenon under scrutiny. This is, as underscored by Charmaz (2008:53–54), not a mere methodological warning but also holds theoretical implications:

Gaining intimate familiarity means looking, listening, and learning about studied life. It means sustained interactions with people and with written data. It means experiencing wonder about their world, being willing to plunge into it, opening oneself to the unforeseen, and grappling with uncertainty. Gaining intimate familiarity has been called getting an insider view. Now we realize that an insider view always reflects conditions of the particular situation, including the extent to which the researcher shares this situation.

This means, first, placing oneself in the methodological and technical dimension, adopting those methods most capable of respecting the theoretical and substantive traits mentioned above. The preference, obviously, is for using qualitative methods in research, rather than the quantitative methods typical of, for example, SNA (Grills and Prus 2008). This, moreover, means initiating serious reflection on how qualitative methods can contribute to a more coherent process of data acquisition, for example, in eliciting the names of the participants in the network that were individuated and defined by the actors (avoiding the limits of the name generators, for example), to allow flexibility and openness in recounting the nature of ties (overcoming the limits of the name interpreter) and of the range of meanings assigned to them.11

SNA and SI constitute two high-profile perspectives of great importance within the panorama of contemporary social sciences, capable of providing particularly significant and deep insights into the complexity of our contemporary social world. These are perspectives that are rooted in the classical sociological tradition, consolidating and evolving through specific processes of conceptual and methodological development, and that place themselves in that panorama with differentiated identities as well as conceptual and methodological accentuations: in other words, each expresses a different vocational focus, of which has to be appreciated the richness in terms of what they can provide the scholar regarding advances in knowledge about the social world.

However, empirical investigation of joint action and interconnections, drawing from the meanings and the interpretations of the social actors, can reveal
the processes through which changes in the networks themselves are effected, and in what way meaning is assigned to ties that are elicited from individuals, as they reconstruct, together with the researcher, their own networks, as well as probe the motives in base of which some people are included while others are excluded. Focusing on the everyday life of individuals allows the obtaining of more fine-grained accounts of meanings relative to the comprehensive grouping of networks of interaction perceived by the subjects, of the modalities by which individuals are involved in forming, in “cultivating,” their own interconnections, or in eliminating them and subsequently rebuilding them, making the definition of network boundaries dependent on the definition that individuals give to it rather than on an arbitrary decision on the part of the researcher (Fine and Kleinman 1983). It further allows the understanding of the dynamics of transformation of interdependencies in relation to changes that occur in the life-cycle or arise from particular life events. The interactionist viewpoint on social networks demands merging with the level of human group life, within the complexity in which individuals adapt their own courses of action in respect to those of others, to lend the analysis a humanistic quality that SNA seems to have forgotten.

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NOTES

1. The question of the success and the decline of SI was already discussed some time back (Maines 2001; Fine 1993), and, basically, the oscillatory dynamic between the two polarities (success vs. decline) is connected to incorporation of the conceptual body of SI into the more general area of sociological knowledge. The question about the identity of SI has been seen to strongly re-emerge in recent times (Charmaz 2008; Prus 2008; Vannini 2008).

2. At this level, we must instead take for granted that the basic traits that characterize the interactionist perspective are known; here I refer to what is contained in Blumer 1969, Snow 2001, and Reynolds and Herman-Kinney 2003.

3. The community of network analysts in the world is particularly extensive numerically, as well as heterogeneous as to disciplinary affiliation. From a formal point of view, this community is established institutionally in the International Network for Social Network Analysis, to which around 1,500 researchers belong (www.insna.org); there has been an exponential growth in the last twenty years in the number of scientific essays and articles that use SNA as a theoretical-methodological frame of reference.

4. It’s difficult to imagine studying social phenomena using the network approach without calling on the most elementary and consolidated concepts, such as “strength of ties” (“weak” and “strong”), multiplexity on the level of relations, the centrality of nodes (degree, closeness, betweenness) on the level of the social actors, density and cohesion on the level of reticular structures—just to give a simple example of the technical apparatus of SNA. Specialized manuals are as widespread as is necessary to access with some degree of knowledge this lexicon (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Carrington, Scott, and Wasserman 2005). For example, it’s possible to calculate the size of the network, its level of centralization or connectivity; it’s possible to
individualize potential “structural holes,” subgraphs, or communities, or to detect positions between equivalent nodes, or to establish the level of reciprocity in dyads or of the transitivity in triads.

5. Consider, for example, the stochastic actor-based models used by Snijders and colleagues (2010) for the study of network dynamics, or the basic assumptions that preside over developing the exponential random graph class of models, better known among insiders as p* models.

6. However, in comparison with the physical and biological sciences, with which SNA shares the basic vocabulary of graph theory, evident differences are also manifested (Borgatti et al. 2009).

7. There is one final aspect that must be considered when SNA and SI are compared, with the intention of giving rise to investigations that combine conceptual and methodological elements of the two. Beginning with the assumption that applying SNA needs some form of standardization of the data, De Nooy (2009), in a recent article on the “formalization” of SI through the use of SNA, correctly observes that such a standardization is possible if it is assumed that a tie between actors A and B is similar or comparable to a tie between actors C and D in a particular type of relationship (e.g., friendship, love, social support, categorization). In the perspective of SNA, as I have shown, this assumption is completely legitimate; according to the author, this assumption, similarly, violates none of Blumer’s proposed fundamental principles of SI. In fact, if we accept or if we verify that two ties (interactions or interpretations) can be similar, we are able to accept their comparability and, consequently, to codify and standardize those ties. The point is precisely this: the assumption relative to the similarity of a tie between different sets of actors, but found within a particular type of relationship, presupposes, in turn, that any single aspect of social reality that we examine possesses a relatively invariant “essence” that allows the insertion of that same aspect of reality into some type of category—without any sense of doubt or ambiguity (Harris 2008). From the viewpoint of SI, meanings are never absolute but are socially constructed: in consequence, what is seen to be problematic is precisely the fact that different actors (A, B, C, and D) can assign similar meanings to different ties: the tie of friendship between A and B cannot be assumed to be similar to the tie of friendship between C and D, not only because of the fact that each actor has formed a concept of friendship that is relatively dissimilar to that of the others in virtue of his or her own previous life experiences, but especially because this reference to friendship can change and be redefined even during, and in virtue of, the interaction. The hypothesis of the similarity between ties constitutes, in reality, an arbitrary simplification that renders relatively static and invariant what in reality is fluid and variable, namely, social interaction; consequently, the essentialism implicit in this hypothesis renders quite precarious and weak any attempt toward standardization and measurement.

An evaluation of the effects of interpretation in individuals interviewed in relation to the name generator formulation can be found in Bailey and Marsden 1999. In effect, variations in interpreting the items proposed are seen to be significant, even if the authors conclude that these variations in individual definitions in no way limit the capacity of the name generator to elicit the core network of the individuals. Here it is worth remembering the warning sounded by Becker about the importance of not neglecting what in an investigation might seem to represent an anomaly, however statistically irrelevant it may appear, or a particular situation that may seem deviant or embarrassing (Becker 1998).

8. It’s not by chance that a considerable number of network researchers adhere, more or less explicitly and intensely, to the rational choice theory and to “soft” versions of methodological individualism (Udhen 2001).

9. Emblematic in this sense is the position of Goldthorpe (2000) on ethnographic research, which he considers complementary to survey research, but only if it continues to avoid not responding to the methodological questions that survey research has, instead, been grappling with for quite some time (and to which it has provided, in the author’s opinion, satisfactory answers). This means, substantially, evaluating a theoretical-methodological proposal (as truly heterogeneous as it may be) like ethnography in virtue of a greater or lesser degree of coherence with the criteria on which another proposal is founded (that of the survey). We should not be surprised to read Goldthorpe’s biting criticism of how ethnographic research is practiced today.
10. “Thinking through research, we would argue, can make a difference to how you set about the task of doing research: how you recognize the implicit assumptions in your research, the consequences of following one line of inquiry and the implications of choosing between different approaches and theoretical positions” ( Prike, Rose, and Whatmore 2003).

11. “Name generators” and “Name interpreters” are protocols that are generally used in SNA for collecting relational data, with reference both to the ego-centered networks and to the complete networks.

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