Spiritual kinship (*comparatico*) as social capital: a study of Calabrian–Australian families living in Adelaide, South Australia

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Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1997) has been one of the main contributors to the development of social capital theory. Through his typology of capitals (economic, social, cultural and symbolic), Bourdieu argues that social capital is deployed in the reproduction of social class privilege and inequalities. According to Reynolds (2010), his theory has been particularly instrumental in understanding how individuals belonging to subordinate groups might improve their socio-economic status by deploying and investing in a range of different capitals. This theory has prompted many scholars to explore the relationship between ethnicity and social capital (Cheong 2005; Dwyer 2006; Evergeti and Zontini 2006; Goulbourne and Solomos 2003; Portes 1998; Zontini 2007).

According to Coleman (1990), social relations produce social capital, firstly, by generating high levels of obligations and expectations, secondly, by providing what he calls information potential, and, thirdly, by generating norms and effective sanctions. He also stresses the importance of close social networks for the creation and maintenance of social capital which, in turn, allows the emergence of norms and increases the level of trust among the members of the network. Social capital can be generated through three types of networks: *bonding* capital refers to informal networks of families and friends (Gittell and Vidal 1998) generally considered as a means ‘to get by’ (Poortinga 2006); *bridging* capital refers to relations
between heterogeneous group (usually in terms of social identity, economic status); and linking capital which refers to relationships between people across formal or institutionalised power in society (Szreter 2002). Bridging and linking capital have been defined as ways to ‘get ahead’ (Poortinga 2006).

There is an emerging literature on transnational families which challenges the notion of social capital associated with more or less static, ethnically homogenous, cohesive communities based on face-to-face relations (Bryceson and Vourela 2002; Edwards, Franklin and Holland 2003; Molyneux 2001; Parreñas 2001). The field work carried out for the present study over an extended period has indicated, on the other hand, that the Calabrian community of Adelaide appears to bear all the hallmarks of just such a static community. It also appears that an important component of the maintenance and strengthening of social relationships was the bonding role of godparenthood (known as comparatico in Italian) in the network systems of the participating Calabrian families living in South Australia.

Spiritual kinship (comparatico) is a system composed of relationships established in critical life periods such as baptisms, confirmations and marriages (Signorini 1981; and Horstman and Kurtz 1979). Also known as fictive kinship, comparatico is a family-type relationship based not on blood or marriage, but is a tie consecrated by religion, involving a triadic network binding the child, his/her parents, and the godparents (Ebaugh and Curry 2000). In Italy, the godfather is generally called a padrino (compare, or cumpari in Calabrian) and the godmother madrina (comare or cummari in Calabrian). This person, during the Christening rite, promises to share the responsibility of the child’s education with the child’s parents. The godparents are said to be tied by the bond of San Giovanni (St. John, patron of godparents) for nine generations (Moss 1981; Palumbo 1997).
Patterns of spiritual kinship have been investigated by an extensive anthropological literature. Among the pioneering studies were those conducted in North, Meso and Latin America (Mintz and Wolf 1950; Foster 1953; Pitt-Rivers 1971, 1976; Deshon 1963; Middleton 1975; Ossio 1984; Horstmann and Kurtz 1979; Gudeman 1975; Gudeman and Schartz 1984; Nutini 1980; Nutini and Bell 1984; Frishkopf 2003), the Philippines (Hart 1979; Dizon 2011). Southern Italian godparenthood, in particular the exchange of material gifts and obligations, has also been reasonably well investigated (Gallatin-Anderson 1957; Moss and Cappannari 1960; Moss 1981; Miller and Miller 1978, 1987; and Gioielli 2002). Of relevance to the present study are the works of Teti (1978, 2004), Resta (1987), Palumbo (1987, 1991, 1997) and Piselli (1981, 1987) who described comparatico as a social, economic and political resource.

Relatively few studies in Australia have investigated kinship among Italian communities. Exceptions are Bertelli (1985) on Italian-Australian family patterns, Chiro and Smolicz (2002) on family values and Baldassar (2007) on the impact of transnationalism on the aged care needs of Veneto-Australian families. The only previous research which refers directly to spiritual kinship is Constance Cronin’s (1970) seminal, *The Sting of Change: Sicilians in Sicily and Australia* which examined Sicilian social organisation, both in its “native” surroundings and after transplantation to Australia. Cronin (1970: 49) claimed that in Southern Italy comparatico is not nearly so strong or so important as it is in Spain or in Spanish Latin America. She also reported that in Sicily when the baptismal godparents are not relatives they are rarely seen afterwards unless they already happen to be good friends with the child’s parents. Furthermore, she observed that none of her Australian participants had made a new compare through the bond of San Giovanni adding that this practice is never
used among the second-generation children. Cronin’s (1970) observations are supported by Mintz and Wolf (1950: 364) who suggest that spiritual kinship has disappeared almost completely from areas which have witnessed the development of industrial capitalism, the rise of a strong middle class, and the disappearance of feudal and neo-feudal tenures. In the present study, on the other hand, it appears that the role of spiritual kinship as social capital continues to play a significant role for the participants. One of the objectives of the present study will be to compare these results with those of the Calabrian-Australian participants.

**Methodology**

The present study is part of a larger research project the fieldwork for which was undertaken over a 14-month period, from September 2011 to November 2012. The study group comprised 14 families with a total of one hundred and fifty-one participants, seventy-eight males and seventy-three females, including twenty-eight first generation, sixty-eight second generation and fifty-five third generation participants (Table 1). The participating families are not consanguinely related to each other (their genealogy is illustrated in Figure 1). At the time of the study, the median age of the first generation was seventy-eight years. The median ages of the second and third generations were forty-four and twenty-one years respectively.

Participant observation was the key strategy used for gathering data. One of the researchers, who is also of Calabrian descent was able to participate in family and social gatherings, witnessing and sharing intimate details of informants’ family lives, such as their food preparation, conversations, gossiping, arguments and jokes. Research data, including genealogies, were assembled through questionnaires, structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted in the participants’ own homes. Formal and informal meetings and community social events, such as Calabrian festivals, religious feasts, and
community fund raisers were attended on a regular basis over the period of research. The researcher also accepted invitations for Christmas, Easter and other occasions, such as birthdays, engagements, weddings and funerals. Case studies, story histories and informants’ personal narratives were collected during follow-up visits.

**Background of participants**

The participants of the present study settled in Adelaide, South Australia in the period between 1950 and 1972, which marks the high point of post-war Italian migration to Australia. First generation members originate from two contiguous areas of Calabria: the Tyrrhenian side of the Calabrian peninsula, on the slopes of Mount Aspromonte, specifically the villages of Plati, Sinopoli, Taurianova, Sant’Eufemia, San Martino and Benestare) and the Ionian coastal side including the villages of Caulonia Marina, Palizzi Marina and Bianco (Figure 1). Participating families reside mainly in the northern suburb of Salisbury and in the Western suburbs of Adelaide (West Lakes, Royal Park, Flinders Park, Kidman Park, Seaton and Glenelg). The relatively high concentration of groups of Italian migrants in specific suburbs of Australian cities has been noted in previous studies (Hugo 1993; Cosmini-Rose and O’Connor 2008). In all, 85 per cent of the first generation, 80 per cent of the second and 65 per cent of the third reported living in these areas to the West and North of the Adelaide CBD.

Of the fourteen families who participated in the present study, eleven are tied by *Calabrian comparatico* (Figure 2). Participants reported a clear preference in having a Calabrian *compare*, with 76 per cent indicating they have chosen a Calabrian *compare* and the remaining 24 per cent having an Italian *compare* not of Calabrian background. The participants expressed a strong preference for intraregional *comparatico* ties which appears
to be associated with the Calabrian practice of the establishing enduring family alliances ("safe" links among "known families"). Specifically, there are 8 godparenthoods among people from the Aspromonte hinterland (Platì, Sinopoli, Taurianova, Sant'Eufemia, San Martino and Benestare) and 2 from the coastal areas (Caulonia Marina). Beyond local parochialisms expressing empathy or hostility towards nearby villages, there are also ethno-historic motivations that may have led participating families to establish community based comparatico bonds. The geographical isolation of the mountain villages in Calabria, together with their socio-historical background, may have influenced the participants in Adelaide to choose godparents from a small circle of non related families originating from contiguous areas, if not the very same village, in Italy.

In rural and isolated areas of Calabria, scepticism and resentment towards government institutions was common among villagers (Movilia 2011). Values of honour, respect, morality and loyalty, many, as claimed by Moss (1981), with a feudal origin, were widely observed to address life’s necessities. Peasants, in such areas, conceived and interpreted their lifeworld in opposition to the official culture expressed by the Italian hegemonic class, the dominant group that maintained institutional power (Thomas 2009). In meeting social needs through family alliances and other folkloric cultural strategies such as magic, music and poetry, many Calabrians applied their “view” of the world in opposition to the political and cultural power of the dominant society (Gramsci 1975). The quasi absence of State authorities in many aspects of life, including health and social welfare, increased the reliance on State-surrogates such as the Calabrian Mafia (‘Ndrangheta or onorata società). This criminal association, which originated largely from the same rural villages of the participants of the present study, draws much of its strength from the closed system of family alliances (Minuti and Nicaso 1994; Dondoni et al. 2006). In this context, spiritual kinship appeared to
be a key cultural mechanism which enabled families to establish new ties, gain protection, and to receive and reciprocate favours.

Spiritual kinship ties (comparatico) often played a strategic role in regulating the security and safety of rural communities by mediating hostilities among families. In an environment where jealousies and old resentments among families could last for generations, the institution of comparatico was considered an essential practice in avoiding feuds. The key factor of this family alliance is the irreversible amity among spiritual kinship allies (Miller and Miller 1987). Once the alliance is established, amity is “frozen in time”, regulating families’ conduct and proscribing all arguments or vendettas (Palumbo 1997; Lévi-Strauss 1948). Generally, this spiritual kinship involves not only the parents and godparents, but also other members of the families immediately concerned, leading to the creation of an extended fictive family or multiple family alliance.

**Comparatico as social capital**

One of the key results of the present study was the unexpected levels of godparenthood among the participants which strengthened the social and economic bonds between families. Participants reported to be tied in a number of business relations with their compari. For example, the first generation compare of Family 1 employed his godchild (cumparuzzu) of Family 2 in his firm of accountants. Similarly, the first generation male of Family 6 is the president of one of a notable Calabrian religious festival committee of Adelaide This participant involved his cumparuzzu and other members of Family 10 in the festival organising committee. When the festival itself is held, many other family members of Family 6 and Family 10 are involved and the wine produced by Family 10 is sold. Family 5 and Family 4 are compari and business partners in an import-export activity. The spouses of
Family 14 hired their godson *cumparuzzu* of Family 12 to work in their restaurant. Moreover, the first generation couple of Family 9 often attend Family 14’s restaurant since they have a spiritual kinship with the second generation female of Family 12. As such, the “bonding capital” (Gittel and Vidal 1998) evident in the spiritual kinship networks of the participating families provide their members with an additional reliable resource. The family alliances achieved through spiritual kinship can be seen as a powerful strategy able to achieve benefits for the family members involved across many social and economic domains.

However, *comparatico* among the participating Calabrian–Australian families cannot be reduced only to the socio-economic aspect in an updated form of the traditional patron–client relationship. There are many personal every day interactions (relations/favours, etc.) concomitant with the pattern of “respect” among *compari* and their families. The Calabrian *comparatico* may be seen to bind participants in bonds of trust, linking families in what many participants believe to be an irreversible alliance. This family alliance or *spiritual kinship network* involves clear values norms and social roles which are being passed on to and incorporated by members of the second and later generations who in the main accept and perpetuate them. Indeed, the level of acceptance of the obligations associated with *comparatico* and the degree of respect demonstrated by the third, and some younger fourth, generation members of the participating families towards their *cumpari* was considered exceptional in comparison to the general Italian-Australian community expectations of godparenthood. Such networks therefore appear to play a dual role in, firstly, strengthening the bonding capital and, secondly underpinning the socioeconomic capital of the ramified social networks of the participating Calabrian families. As a result, it appears many of the cultural practices, , associated with the families’ links with their Calabrian homeland,
including the use of Calabrian dialects in family and community domains, have not only survived the quinquagesimal diaspora but have been relatively well preserved in comparison with the wider Italian-Australian community (Chiro 2008).

**Conclusions**

The purpose of the present paper was firstly to investigate the role of godparenthood (comparatico) in the network systems of a group of Calabrian families living in South Australia in terms of Coleman’s (1990) conceptualisation of social capital. The second related purpose was to compare the present group of participants with earlier studies of comparatico among Italian-Australian families. With respect to the first objective, the study found that the practice of comparatico remains an important cultural resource that is used as bonding capital between relatively small groups of participating families and to extend and strengthen family alliances with other trusted families. Such spiritual kinship networks appear to have a key role in reinforcing the Calabrian identity and language maintenance efforts of the participants. This as Coleman (1990) argues is achieved by the high levels of obligations and expectations, and the high levels of trust generated among members of the network. As such, and with respect to the second objective of the study, the results appear to contradict those of Cronin (1970) and Mintz and Wolf (1967) who predicted the demise of spiritual kinship with the spread of developed capitalism.

Such results appear to fly in the face of the globalising tendencies of the present era which have produced conditions of super diversity (Vertovec 2007). Notwithstanding the fact that the participants of the present study are as connected globally as other diasporic communities (through frequent visits back home and regular communication with friends and relatives in Italy and in other centres of the Calabrian diaspora, the results show that the second, third and
fourth generation descendants of the Calabrian migrants of the present study continue to observe the rules and obligations of *comparatico* typical of the impoverished rural communities of Calabria of the 1950s and 60s. The authors suggest that the position of subalternity experienced by first generation immigrants in the host Anglo-Australian society, may have influenced participants to cluster together in “cohesive” social networks, reinforcing and extending existing ties with non-kin people originating from the same village, the *paisani*, as a bulwark against the dominant culture and as a means of defending their cultural identities. Why this should continue to be the case after 50 years of settlement and the apparent social incorporation into the host community of the second and succeeding generation is beyond the scope of the present paper and deserves to be fully investigated.
APPENDICES

Table 1—Generation, gender and median age of participants

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Figure 1—Localities of origin of the participating families

**Tyrrhenian Sea**
Platì, Sinopoli, Taurianova, Sant’Eufemia, San Martino and Benestare

**Ionian Sea**
Caulonia Marina, Palizzi Marina and Bianco
Figure 2—Genealogies and spiritual kinships among participating families
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