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An analysis of social relationships' quality associations with hope among young Italians: The role of NEET status

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Abstract

Hope is a personal trait stemming from both individual and social factors, including social relationships. Bearing that in mind, we tested how social support quality, described in terms of Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction (BPNS), is linked with hope dimensions of agency and pathways among young Italians in general and across those Neither in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET). These associations were examined controlling for several individual factors (e.g., educational level). A total of 3034 participants aged 20 to 35 years (M age = 27.80 years; SD = 4.70) were involved. We found that greater levels of BPNS were linked with stronger pathways and agency levels among the participants in general. Participants' lower educational and financial satisfaction and those fitting in the NEET category presented significantly worse agency levels. We discuss these results in the context of declining institutional support in the school to work transition and young people's growing reliance on informal support in Italy, as well as its specific meaning for Italian NEETs.

Keywords: Youth; NEET; Hope; Basic Psychological Needs; Italy.

Introduction

Hope entails reasoning about one's goals, along with the ability and motivation to achieve and the plans to fulfill them (Snyder 2000). Therefore, hope bridges present conditions and future prospects, by balancing current perceived skills and motivation with plans to be undertaken (Cook and Cuervo 2019). Social factors, such as social capital or relationships' quality, as well as individual factors, including age or educational level, must be considered when mapping future-oriented cognitions, such as hope (Hendry and Kloep 2010). The interplay between these factors in shaping their hope varies considerably among young people, with greater contrasts being evident when comparing young people overall with vulnerable groups such as those Neither in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET). Still, NEETs are far from being a homogeneous group (Furlong 2013). Those fitting this category face distinct adversities, such as long- and short-term unemployment spells, permanent caregiving responsibilities or physical and mental disabilities (Mascherini 2019), which can threat their hope prospects even more.

The need to understand young people's hope is significant in countries such as Italy. Young Italian adults struggle with shrinking institutional support for the school to work transition (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019), a high proportion of early school leaving, high unemployment rates (Alfieri et al. 2020; Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018) and, consequently, historically high NEET rates (ISTAT 2020). Altogether, these adversities lead younger generations in Italy to be more pessimistic about the full realization of their ambitions (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018). These severe structural challenges faced by young Italians prevent them from achieving an autonomous life. This group has also been endlessly portrayed according to negative stereotypes (e.g., *bamboccioni*), as if they were not willing to look for an independent and fulfilling life. These biased

narratives ultimately harm youth policy development and implementation (Leccardi et al. 2018).

Against this background, our study has two goals. Firstly, to examine how social factors, namely perceived social relationships quality are associated with hope dimensions of agency and future planning among young Italians, taking into account the influence of individual factors, such as educational level. Second, we explore how the connections between these variables may differ between NEETs and those who do not fit in this condition. Our article contributes to understanding how the intersection of social factors and hope for Italian youth and Italian NEETs can challenge pervasive negative stereotypes about these young people and their views of the future. Moreover, examining drivers of hope for young Italians can inform youth sector policy-making in Italy. Individuals with higher hope levels show a stronger task involvement capacity and are more determined to challenge or change demanding life circumstances (Hammarström et al. 2015), as well as ultimately being keener to be involved in job search efforts (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019).

This article continues with a discussion of hope's social and individual antecedents, with a particular focus on the role of social support. This will be followed by an examination of the conditions under which young Italians may rise, taking into account generalized institutional constraints. Finally, these lines of analysis will be streamed to the discussion of our results, including their implications and limitations.

Hope: Social and individual antecedents

As a combination of motivation and plans to achieve goals (Snyder 2000), hope is a socially-driven personal trait. It is, therefore, tailored by the interaction of individual characteristics with social factors, such as social support quality. Young people

acknowledge that their hope relies on significant others' support (Bishop and Willis 2014). More importantly, vulnerable young people who have often dealt with adversities have been found to rely more heavily on social support quality and quantity to fulfill their needs (te Riele 2010).

A neoliberal narrative of individualization and encapsulation of the future dominates contemporary societies and has denied the intersection of social and personal factors in tailoring hope. From this standpoint, the future is mostly a matter of personal achievement within one's life (Eurofound 2014; Harari 2018) detached from present conditions (Cook and Cuervo 2019). Consequently, biographies are seen as being pushed by personal choice and planning only, as if structural factors, including social support did not shape every individual's trajectory. A theoretical orthodoxy has trailed an opposite perspective, by resituating the future as a negative side-effect of the present progress. According to this view's inherent concerns, a brighter future for each human being relies on present collective action to challenge structural inequalities caused by capitalism (Bishop and Willis 2014).

Moderate approaches balancing the importance of social and individual factors in producing personal futures are seldom evident in social science literature. Still, the social boundaries of the individualization process, as well as the satisfaction of personal needs within a network of social relationships have become pivotal in sociological (Beck, 1992; Hendry and Kloep 2010) and social psychology literatures (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) respectively. As human progress increasingly turns into a cooperative and interdependent endeavor (Harari 2018), there have been claims for the need to understand hope as an individual feature determined by the quality of social resources (Cook and Cuervo 2019). We endorse this approach by offering two contributions to the discussion of hope antecedents among young Italians. First, a more

nuanced future conceptualization will help to improve the understanding of the school to work transition among young Italian adults. Our vision is coherent with the current one of how young people cross the bridge between education and employment. While scholars agree that this is a period propelled by the conclusion of full-time education or training, the entry into the labor force and the establishment of an independent life (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019), the pathways from school to work have also become increasingly heterogeneous (Bishop and Willis 2014), especially among NEETs (Mascherini 2019). In Italy, greater difficulty finding a job, widespread precariousness (Choi and Mattoni 2010) or more recurrent/longer unemployment spells (Alfieri et al. 2020; Caroleo et al. 2020), associated with a sub-protective welfare system that falls short on supporting school to work transition (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019) help to explain the diversity of possible transitional pathways at this stage. Thus, successful transitions are tailored by multilevel factors, including individual assets and contextual factors, such as social relationships' support (Hendry and Kloep 2010).

Second, our theoretical standing counters conceptual limitations raised both by neoliberal and orthodox perspectives on the hope of vulnerable young people, such as NEETs. By bringing forward an individualistic, aspirational discourse, the neoliberal vision proposes a stringent dichotomy between passive and active hope (Cook and Cuervo 2019). Moreover, it reduces the scope of personal hope to a narrow set of educational, employment or desired income options (Bishop and Willis 2014). Our position thus includes the consideration of structural life conditions, in terms of social relationships' quality to prevent a recurrent, moralistic depiction of vulnerable young people's lack of hope, as a consequence of their absence of will or of their non-normative interests. Moreover, our perspective is relevant considering the need to dispute distorted narratives describing young Italian adults as lazy or incapable of

having an independent life (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018). Our position also counteracts pessimistic orthodox views, by tapping both structural life conditions and individual characteristics that nurture vulnerable young people's hope. This kind of approach has revealed that young people generally show stronger hope in a context of economic growth and social peace (Eurofound, 2014) in countries that provide more consistent institutional support to school-work transitions and where adequate social support is available (Esteves et al., 2013; Simões et al. 2017).

In Italy, these conditions are far from being met. Institutional support is becoming less structured and recurrent, while informal support, especially that provided by families, is becoming disproportionately central in easing school-work transition (Alfieri and Sironi 2017; Cuzzocrea et al. 2020). This is troublesome, as informal ties' increasing relevance does not compensate for the lack of institutional support. Italian families' pivotal role in young adults' biographies may help to address these young people's immediate material needs or allow them to take on several social roles, such as caregivers (Caltabiano and Rosina 2018). However, this process also delays personal autonomy, encapsulates young people in narrower social networks and often fails to provide them with the necessary social capital (Alfieri et al. 2015). As a result, familism, in which loyalty to the group dominates over personal merit and community problem-solving, is on the rise in Italy (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018).

Hope and social relationships' support quality

The Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction (BPNS) mini-theory, described in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), is one of many possible theoretical avenues leading to the understanding of how social support can address individual requirements, such as hope. According to this theory, human beings' positive development, well-being and

motivation are driven by the satisfaction of three central needs. *Competence satisfaction* entails the provision of optimal challenges that meet individual ability perceptions. It relies on offering goal structure, focusing on effort instead of the result, helping to regulate expectations and evaluating the causes of success/failure. *Autonomy satisfaction* upholds one's personal initiative based on the provision of choices coherent with individual values, acknowledgment of opinions and feelings, and informative feedback. *Relatedness satisfaction* consists in fulfilling one's needs of establishing strong and long-lasting bonds, grounded on non-conditional regard, empathy, trust and authenticity (Deci and Ryan 2000; Vansteenkiste et al. 2020).

We believe that using a BPNS approach is suitable for three reasons. First, this theoretical perspective can capture possible tensions between different personal needs (competence *vs* autonomy), which informal support sources may not be able to entirely fulfill in the Italian context. Second, mounting research evidence shows BPNS is a universal requirement, cutting across different cultures, whether they are more individualistic or more collectivistic-driven (Vansteenkiste et al. 2020). Third, prior results show that BPNS contributes to stronger hope estimates. For instance, BPNS has shown positive moderate correlations among university students. Specifically, stronger hope perceptions were associated with higher perceived satisfaction of each of these basic needs, among young adults (Cankaya and Denizli 2020). Whole BPNS measures have been associated with stronger psychological capital, an aggregated measure of positive personal traits that encompasses hope (Carmona-Halty et al. 2019). Conversely, in a study carried out with young people enrolled in vocational training, autonomy and relatedness satisfaction did not correlate with hope across time. However, competence and hope showed cross-lagged associations, meaning that stronger competence satisfaction perceptions lead to higher hope levels and vice-versa (Wandeler and Buick

2011). To date, specific associations between BPNS and hope among NEETs have not been reported.

Hope among young Italians: Social and individual determinants in the context of rising institutional constraints

In Italy, there has been a reduction of active labour market policies targeting young people (Cuzzocrea et al. 2020). Some programs have been implemented, under the Youth Guarantee umbrella, to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups, such as NEETs, with disputable results (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018). These trends are signs of an on-going *dejuvenation* process (Caltabiano and Rosina 2018). This term reflects a structural reduction of the proportion of new generations in the overall population, paralleled by growing social cost associated with them (high unemployment rates, economic dependence on families, civic and social disengagement) which are not met by enough or effective institutional support (Caltabiano and Rosina 2018; Maestripieri 2020).

The lack of adequate institutional channels has strengthened the use of informal networks to enter the labor market. This shift has become more evident among the most fragile groups, including NEETs (Bignardi et al. 2014; Cuzzocrea, et al. 2020). However, this only increases their vulnerability, namely when NEETs come mostly from families with lower educational levels and weaker social capital, further complicating the access to employment (Alfieri and Sironi 2017; Cuzzocrea 2014). Moreover, stronger family ties mean that a large share of young Italians, including NEETs, stay in their parents' home well into their thirties, preventing a fully autonomous life (Leccardi et al. 2018).

These overlapping conditions, further strengthened by ineffective or inexistent policies at the State level, increase the odds of negative outcomes at the individual level. Some of these negative effects may be more immediate. For instance, low parental support or guidance for educational development along academic pathways has been associated with an increase of the risk of educational underperformance or ineffective training choices (Alfieri et al. 2015). Furthermore, in the long-term, inadequate social support, namely insufficient fulfillment of competence and autonomy needs thwarts one's motivation and well-being, which are essential requirements when developing skills for planning and achieving goals (Deci and Ryan 2000; Vansteenkiste et al. 2020).

On-the-ground youth policies are not only being replaced by a rising importance of informal support. They have also fallen short in implementing person-centered approaches, those that place the individual characteristics, decisions and priorities at the heart of services deliverance (Mascherini 2019). This is particularly relevant in the case of NEETs. Policy measures inspired by Youth Guarantee tend to target vulnerable young people as if they were a uniform group (Shore and Tosun 2019). While the NEET acronym has brought into the spotlight a large group of young people who had been invisible for public policies, it is also a fact that the loose use of this term has neglected the within-group heterogeneity (Furlong 2013; Mascherini 2019).

NEETs' diversity, including how they develop hope prospects, is driven by individual features such as gender, age, educational attainment or geographic origin. In Italy, the influence of these factors becomes evident when these young people are depicted by general statistics. In 2018, of the 2,116,000 Italian NEETs, 47% were aged between 25-29, 38% between 20-24 and the remaining 15% between 15-19. The group encompassed a slightly higher proportion of females (52%). Most NEETs had obtained an upper secondary school diploma (49%), 40% had lower educational levels, and only

11% were graduates. NEETs' territorial distribution also reveals marked differences: in 2019, the largest NEETs' proportion was concentrated in Southern Italy (33%), followed by Central Italy (18.5%) and Northern Italy (14.1%). Moreover, 31.2% of young foreigners were NEETs, as opposed to 21.2% of young Italians (Sacco 2019).

When applying Mascherini's (2019) NEETs' typology within-group diversity becomes even more evident. In 2018 most of the Italian NEETs fitted the subgroup unemployed NEETs. 41% of them were looking for their first employment. This group was constituted mostly by young males aged 20 years old or more, unemployed for more than six months and who had completed secondary or tertiary education. A second group of unemployed NEETs was composed of those looking for opportunities (25%). Most of them were male, under 20 years old and had no work experience. In parallel, 19.5% were "unavailable". Three out of four of unavailable NEETs were women engaged in care/maternity activities, many of them were foreigners with the majority being over 25 years old. Unavailable NEETs depicted a low educational level, had previous work experience and lived with spouses or partners. Finally, there was still a considerable number of "disengaged" NEETs in Italy (14.5%). More than half of them were women, with a high proportion of them aged under 20 years old, showing a low educational level and no record of work experience (ANPAL, 2018). Hence, while a typology remains a limited frame to capture NEETs' diversity, it is still a step forward in informing institutions on how to better tailor policy packages and nurture individual characteristics and, consequently, their hope.

Present Study

In this study, we examine how the BPNS within social relationships is linked with hope dimensions of agency and future planning (also labeled as pathways) (Snyder 2000) among young Italians, above and beyond the influence of individual factors.

We tested two hypotheses across overall participants and groups of NEETs/non-NEETs using regression analyses. First, we hypothesized that competence needs satisfaction would lead to higher levels of agency and future planning (pathways), after accounting for individual factors. Second, we anticipated that NEETs denoting stronger competence support would show significantly higher rates of agency and pathways, compared with non-NEETs with identically low competence support rates. We used questionnaires, because they were coherent with our theoretical approach to test these hypotheses and had already been tested and validated among young Italians.

Method

Participants

This study involves the secondary analysis of data collected by the ©Youth Report-Osservatorio Giovani of the Istituto Toniolo di Studi Superiori (Milan, Italy). We involved 3034 respondents to achieve a representative sample of the young Italian adult population in terms of several socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age-range, educational level, occupation status and geographic area (ISTAT, 2017). The data we used was part of a major study that the authors helped to design, by defining the research goals and determining the instruments used.

The participants were aged between 20 and 35 years old ($M = 27.80$ years; $SD = 4.70$) and equally distributed regarding gender (49.70% female). Among them 29.10% were students, 43.40% were involved in work activities and 27.50% were NEETs.

Measures

Demographics

The questionnaire included demographic and family of origin background items.

We characterized gender (1 = *male*; 2 = *female*); age (year in which the participant

was born); educational level (1= *degree*; 2 = *High school diploma (4-5 years);* 3 =

Other level of education); work status (1 = working; 2 = not working); mother's

educational level (from 1 = *post graduate specialization* to 9 = *No title- can't read*

and/or write); housing satisfaction, satisfaction with financial status and satisfaction

with household situation (on a scale from 1 = *completely satisfied* to 4 = *completely*

unsatisfied); intention to live alone or with friends in 3 years' time (on a scale from 1 =

certainly no to 4 = *certainly yes*); and NEET status (0 = *non-NEET*; 1 = *NEET*).

Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS)

To assess BPNS, we used the Basic Psychological Needs Scale, a

21-item scale addressing the general need for satisfaction in one's life in informal

relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It consists of three subscales: Competence support

(six items), Autonomy support (seven items), and Relatedness support (eight items).

Items were rated using a ten-point Likert scale with values ranging from 1 ("Not at all

true") to 10 ("Very true"). Examples of items are: "People I know tell me I am good at

what I do" (Competence support); "I generally feel free to express my ideas and

opinions" (Autonomy support); "I really like the people I interact with" (Relatedness

support). All three subscales showed adequate reliability: Autonomy support (α = .79);

Competence support (α = .70); Relatedness support (α = .82).

Hope Scale

Hope was assessed using the Italian version of the Snyder Hope Scale (Alfieri et al., in press; Snyder et al., 1991). This scale consists of four items measuring agency (I energetically pursue my goals; My past experiences have prepared me well for my future; I've been pretty successful in life; I meet the goals that I set for myself), four items measuring pathways (I can think of many ways to get myself out of a jam; There are lots of ways around any problem; I can think about many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me; Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem), and four filler items (I feel tired most of the time; I am easily downed in an argument; I worry about my health; I usually find myself worrying about something). Items are classified from 1 (definitely false) to 8 (definitely true). Possible scores range from 4 to 32 in each subscale, with higher ratings indicating stronger perceptions of agency and plan-making ability. This scale exhibited adequate psychometric properties for both pathways (α=.82) and agency (α=.78) in this study.

Procedures

Sampling and data collection were conducted by Ipsos s.r.l. through a Web panel representative of the Italian young adult population in 2017. The survey was carried out by a CAWI methodology. More details are available at https://www.rapportogiovani.it/i-contenuti-del-nuovo-rapporto-giovani-2017/.

Data Analyses

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis with the Italian version of the BPNS scale, to validate the most appropriate measure structure to use (Appendix 1).

Afterwards, we performed descriptive and correlational analyses for all participants, as well as by NEET condition (non-NEET *vs* NEET) (Appendix 2). Correlations are associations between variables that are free from the influence of other factors. We tested for outliers and multicollinearity by regressing the outcome variables into factors. Outliers analysis was conducted using Cook's *D*: values below 1 indicated the absence of outliers, meaning that the results are not influenced by extreme results among the participants. Multicollinearity was also assessed to confirm that factors in the models did not overlap, using Variation Inflation Factors (VIF); values below 4 indicated non-overlap between factors (Argyrous, 2011).

Next, two linear regression models were examined. Regression analysis enables the investigation of the associations between a set of factors and an outcome variable. Each association reflects the connection between a given factor and an outcome variable that is above and beyond the effect of other factors. Model 1 tested the associations between competence, autonomy and relatedness support and relevant concurrent variables (e.g., educational level) with pathways. The model also included the interaction between each support type and the NEET status. Model 2 was identical to Model 1, except for age, which was included as a covariate, because correlational analysis showed a small association with agency. The result variable, in Model 2, was agency.[1]

The regression models were run using Z-scores of basic psychological needs, pathways and agency, in order to obtain standardized regression scores (ranging from 0 to 1) and 95% Confidence Intervals (CI). We ran all regression analyses using the

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[1] Both models were rerun to test the interactions between the different support types and the NEET status. This procedure involved a change of the support variables position in the model, but no changes occurred in the estimates.

PROCESS v3.3 macro for SPSS 25.00 with 5000 bootstrap samples (model 2) and 95% CI (Hayes, 2018). An exemplary model is presented in Figure 1.

[Figure 1]

Results and Discussion

After correlational and descriptive analysis, presented in Table 1, we verified the multivariate assumptions to implement linear regression analyses. Cook's D was below the cut-off criteria for both pathways ($< .04$) and agency ($< .03$) on each of the factors entering the models. VIF estimates were inferior to the cut-off criteria value of 4.

[Tables 1 and 2]

According to Table 2, Model 1 was significant, $F(13, 3020) = 151.34$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 39% of the variation in participants' reasoning about pathways to solve problems. Beyond what we expected, model estimates show that greater levels of perceived autonomy support ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$, S.E $= .05$, 95% C.I.: .18, .36), competence support, ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$, S.E $= .02$, 95% C.I.: .31, .40) and relatedness support ($\beta = .06$, $p < .001$, S.E $= .02$, 95% C.I.: .01, .11) are linked with a stronger perception of being able to generate pathways to solve problems.

Model 2 was also significant, $F(15, 3018) = 197.87$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 48% of the variation in participants' agency. The model estimates show that participants' greater educational level ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .001$, S.E $= .02$, 95% C.I.: -.12, -.04), lower satisfaction with financial situation ($\beta = -.07$, $p < .001$, S.E $= .02$, 95% C.I.: -.10, -.04) and NEET status (being NEET) ($\beta = - .13$, $p < .001$, S.E $= .04$, 95% C.I.: -.20, -.06) is detrimental to their agency levels. Expecting to live alone or with friends within 3 years is associated with a marginal increase of agency levels ($\beta = .03$, $p < .05$, S.E $= .05$, 95% C.I.: .01, .06). More importantly, greater levels of perceived autonomy support ($\beta = .22$,

$p < .001$, S.E $= .04$, 95% C.I.: .18, .36) and competence support, ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$, S.E $= .02$, 95% C.I.: .48, .56) are associated with stronger agency levels.

Based on our models, we have reached two central findings. First, our results show the relative weight of social and individual factors in each of the hope dimensions. Among social factors, greater BPNS is associated with improvements in both the ability to generate plans (pathways) and agency prospects among young Italians. This further substantiates prior findings showing that BPNS is relevant in increasing hope levels among young non-Italian people (Cankaya and Denizli 2020; Carmona-Halty et al. 2019). However, our findings expand these prior results and are above what we had hypothesized, as all these needs are implied in strengthening hope dimensions. In Italy, this result comes as no surprise, as informal social ties, especially family ties, are more central across life-span compared to other Western cultures. Moreover, a familism trait marked by a disproportionate relevance of family support in an individual's life choices, such as job search, has actually increased among young Italians over recent decades (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018). This has promoted greater dependence on parents for longer periods and often blocking independent life trajectories (Leccardi et al. 2018). Thus, the relevance of BPNS for young Italians' hope comes with costs attached that must be accounted for.

Regarding individual hope antecedents, our results show that low educational levels, scarce financial resources and being NEET are factors associated with lower agency prospects among the participants. Prior research shows that these factors reduce job finding efforts and job market inclusion odds among Italian NEETs (Alfieri et al. 2020; Bignardi et al. 2014). Our findings show that such individual factors are also decisive in the process leading to job market inclusion, namely by contributing to lowering vulnerable young Italians' agency. This finding is worrisome. At a time when

institutional support is not closing the gap between the younger generations' planned expectations and its fulfillment, for those with fewer educational and financial resources remaining hopeful is a much greater struggle. This is even more troublesome, because other research shows that lower agency levels are associated with lower determination to challenge demanding life circumstances (Hammarström et al. 2015) and less engagement in job search efforts (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019).

Second, we had anticipated that NEETs denoting stronger competence support would show significantly higher rates of agency and pathways, compared with non-NEETs with identically low competence support rates. Our results do not uphold this hypothesis, as BPNS affects hope outcomes across young Italians overall, whether they are NEETs or not. This is a pivotal result of our work. As mentioned above, active labor market policies in Italy are being dismantled. Even those policies targeting vulnerable young people seem ineffective. The lack of adequate on-the-ground policies to uphold youth labor market inclusion has strengthened the use of informal support for job search among young Italians, in general (Leccardi and Cuzzocrea 2018). While BPNS is associated with an improvement of hope outcomes among young Italians, above and beyond the influence of individual factors, this trend is more challenging among the most vulnerable groups (Bignardi et al. 2014). The support of family, friends and other social ties are certainly beneficial in inducing hope, as well as improving many other individual dimensions (e.g., wellbeing). However, relying above all on informal support to make life plans and achieve them will not affect NEETs equally, due to the heterogeneity of this group (Furlong 2013; Mascherini 2019). Greater informal support relevance in improving hope prospects will especially affect those NEETs coming from households with lower educational levels (Alfieri et al. 2015), with lower social capital (Alfieri and Sironi 2017; Cuzzocrea 2014), young women dedicated to care duties and

those who are socially disengaged (Mascherini 2019). In these cases, their social ties do not offer enough resources to replace formal support provided by the State in the process of developing reasonable and consistent life plans, as well as the behaviors to fulfill them. Moreover, this trend will contribute to further stretch territorial inequalities, given the considerable differences in NEET rates between North, Central and South Italy, with Southern regions performing worse (Sacco 2019). Thus, compared to non-NEETs, our results indicate that informal social support is not compensating for the lack of institutional support in helping Italian NEETs to develop future plans, a key component for searching for employment or more education or training.

Implications and Limitations

Empirical evidence underlines the need to revise public policy orientations in Italy, in order to properly address young people's hope. Decision-making must reinstall institutional support capacity to avoid low quality, informal support to become the driving force behind the younger Italian generation's hope and subsequent employment and education plans and decisions. This is particularly important for those coming from a more vulnerable background, as they cannot rely only on their social network resources to improve their planning and motivation levels to fulfill brighter futures.

Moreover, specific interventions are needed to balance young Italians' informal support that, of course, continues to be needed in many areas, with formal interventions and programs tailored to match the needs of those more exposed to structural risks. Such interventions might focus on expanding and improving NEETs' social networks. In previous research, Italian NEETs expressed their will to be more engaged in the National Civil Service (NCS), a sort of social action service driven by the need to improve social relationships and to make a difference in young people's own

communities (Marta et al. 2016). Other interventions might need to ease the emphasis on tangible results, such as job finding, by balancing that with the development of personal and social skills (Alfieri et al. 2020). These pathways convey collaboration among various actors and agencies that can offer (in)formal paths to stimulate and strengthen these life skills. Still, we should not ignore that this can probably happen more easily within informal contexts (associations, sports and volunteering), as NEETs do engage with interventions in these areas (European Commission 2018).

Our study has limitations. Our research design is cross-sectional, meaning that causality inferences based on this study cannot be made. Although sampling procedures considered representativeness requirements and a large number of participants, generalization to other countries is limited, especially given the singularities of NEETs worldwide. Our study was based on the participants' perspectives. The reliance on a unique source may be a significant cause of bias. Finally, we relied on a theoretical approach that has been repeatedly validated across cultures, showing that BPNS are intrinsic human requirements that need to be nurtured through social relationships' quality. Still, the definitions of competence, autonomy and relatedness that we use are limited by our theoretical standpoint.

Conclusion

Our results show that social support quality in the form of BPNS is generally associated with the improvement of young Italians' hope, in terms of planning and agency perceptions. This finding must, however, be contextualized in a rising familism trend sided by a shrinking institutional support to the school to work transition.

Moreover, lower agency among the most vulnerable young people, including NEETs, must be a source of concern for public policy. Person-centered policies, involving these

young people and their communities' resources, which are specifically tailored to boost

and fulfill their expectations are required to counteract unconvincing initiatives

stemming from broadband policy packages, such as the Youth Guarantee. When these

conditions are not met, young Italians' dreams are at risk. If society does not provide

younger generations with the means and the power to dream, what's left?

Conflict of Interests

On behalf of all the authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of

interest.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlation for all participants

| Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1.Sex	---	-														
2. Age	---	-.05**	-													
3. Educational level	---	-.11**	.30**	-												
4. Work status	---	.08**	.43**	.16**	-											
5. Mother educational level	---	.04-	-.17**	.14**	-.05**	-										
6. Mother work status	---	-.01	.11**	-.08**	-.01	-.42**	-									
7. Housing satisfaction	2.12 (.75)	-.01	-.06**	.01	.04*	.03	-.04*	-								
8. Satisfaction with financial situation	2.68 (.80)	.07**	.01	.06**	.28**	.10**	-.07**	.26**	-							
9. Satisfaction with household situation	2.07 (.77)	-01	-.10**	-.03	-.03	.08**	-.04**	.48**	.30**	-						
10. Intention to live alone or with friends in 3 years	2.16 (.95)	.14**	-.24**	-.17**	-.18**	.05**	-.01	-.03	-.07**	-.01	-					
11. Autonomy support	13.76 (3.38)	-.01	.03	-.03	-.04*	-.05**	.03	-.20**	-.10**	-.15**	.06**	-				
12. Competence support	13.24 (3.11)	-.02	.05**	-.07**	-.07**	-.09**	-.07**	-.21**	-.16**	-.17**	.06**	.70**	-			
13. Relatedness support	22.89 (4.84)	.03	.05**	-.04*	-.01	-.08**	.04*	-.20**	-.09**	-.16**	.06**	.76**	.73**	-		
14. Hope – pathways	13.22 (2.58)	-.02	-.01	-.07**	-.04*	-.08**	-.04	-.13**	-.09**	-.12**	.06**	.56**	.59**	.53**	-	
15. Hope - agency	12.70 (2.64)	-.03	.05*	-.10**	-.07**	-.09**	.05**	-.20**	-.20**	-.17**	.08**	.56**	.67**	.52**	.73**	-

*p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 2. Linear regression standardized estimates, standard errors and standardized 95% CI

Factors and interaction terms	Model 1 – Pathways			Model 2 - Agency		
	β	S.E	Standardized 95% CI	β	S.E.	Standardized 95% CI
1.Age	---	---	---	.01	.01	[-.01, 01]
2. Educational level	-.04	.04	[-.09, .02]	-.08***	.02	[-.12, -.04]
3. Work status (occupied/not-occupied)	.02	.03	[-.05, .08]	.04	.04	[-.03, .11]
4. Mother educational level	-.02	.01	[-.04, .01]	-.01	.01	[-.03, .01]
5. Mother work status (occupied/not-occupied)	-.01	.01	[-.02, .01]	-.01	.01	[-.01, .01]
6. Housing satisfaction	.01	.02	[-.02, .05]	-.02	.02	[-.05, .01]
7. Satisfaction with financial situation	.01	.02	[-.02, .04]	-.07***	.02	[-.10, -.04]
8. Satisfaction with household	-.01	.02	[-.04, .02]	-.02	.02	[-.05, .02]
9. Living alone or with friends in 3 year time	.02	.01	[-.01, .05]	.03*	.01	[.01, .06]
10. Autonomy support	.27***	.05	[.18, .36]	.22***	.04	[.13, .30]
11. Competence support	.35***	.02	[.31, .40]	.52***	.02	[.48, .56]
12. Relatedness support	.06**	.02	[.01, .11]	-.03	.02	[-.08, .01]
13. NEET condition (non-NEET/NEET)	-.07	.04	[-.14, .01]	-.13***	.04	[-.20, -.06]
14. Autonomy support*NEET condition	-.01	.03	[-.07, .05]	-.01	.03	[-.07, .04]
15. competence support*NEET condition	.01	.03	[-.05, .07]	.05	.03	[-.01, .10]
16. relatedness support*NEET condition	-.07	.04	[-.14, .01]	-.01	.03	[-.06, -.06]

*p < .05; ** p <. 01; *** p <.001

Figure 1. Models graphic display example: Model 1
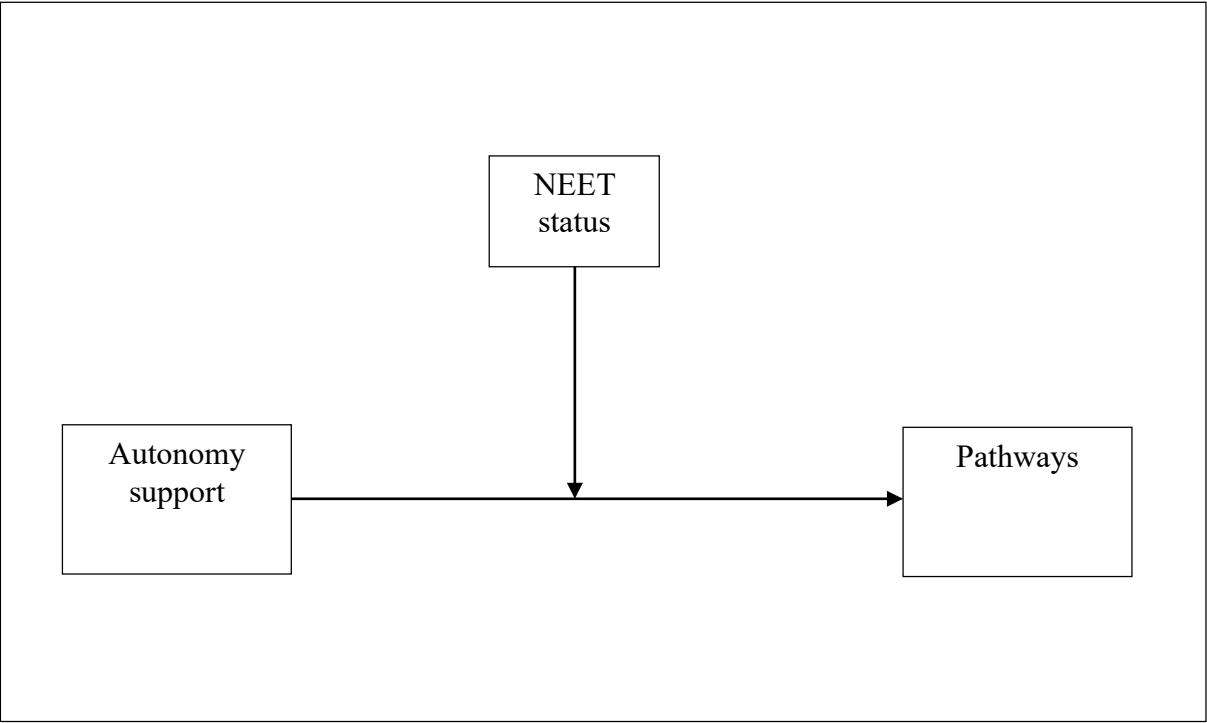
Note: When rerunning the model to test interactions between support factors and NEET status, autonomy

support is replaced by competence support and relatedness support.

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Supplementary Material
Appendix.docx