

IN MEMORY OF A MENTOR

I met Simona Balbi for the first time in 1997 when she taught my Advanced Statistics course. Not yet forty years old, she had to explain to us how to design a questionnaire and carry out a statistical survey. Our paths crossed again in 2001 during the supervision of my final dissertation, and with my admission to the Statistics PhD programme, our scientific collaboration began.

Remembering these 20 years together in a few lines is not easy. Simona gave a lot to the Federico II University of Naples as both a brilliant researcher and a passionate educator. The feeling of emptiness left by her absence, both human and academic, is unbridgeable. I have had the great privilege of sharing many professional and private moments with her, and I am proud to count myself among her students. Her legacy goes far beyond what she taught me when I was taking my first steps in my academic career. She was honest and correct, dutiful and scrupulous. It was impossible to know her and not love her. Of course, it is easy to pay tribute to those who are no longer with us, but like everyone else we also had our share of misunderstandings and quarrels. Perhaps, though, these quarrels helped to strengthen our bond even more.

Working with Simona was not easy. It was necessary to adapt to her schedules and rhythms, which were more nocturnal than diurnal. Above all it was necessary to be ready to accept the occasional fierce criticism or earful. With her students she was always caring but could also be unexpectedly severe. As students, we always sought her approval. She was like a loving parent, speaking well about you only in your absence, while often sarcastically and pointedly dismantling your certainty in person. The day before her disappearance, when we told her that we had sent the corrections for an article submitted to an important journal, she sent us a short message congratulating for our work. Together with Germana Scepi, our co-author, we joked that she did not seem herself answering in this way. Simona always wanted to have the last word, and this was not only because of her higher academic position. She really could revolutionise and improve every single sentence and every single paragraph we wrote, thanks to her experience and her ability to see problems with clarity. Even when we worked laboriously to finish a paper, she was never fully satisfied. We will always live with the regret of not having been able to take advantage of many more opportunities to learn from her. However, this thought also comforts us because it will mean that her hand still guides us in our work.

Simona's most significant research interests were in textual data analysis. Her

research was among the first in Italy, in the manner of the French school of J-P. Benzecrì, L. Lebart and A. Salem, to investigate the statistical aspects involved in studying the collection of documents written in natural language. The paper *Textual data analysis for open-questions in repeated surveys*, published in the proceedings of the 6th IFCS Conference in Rome, dates from 1998 and strongly influenced her subsequent scientific production. There were many conferences and projects in which textual data was considered, often for the first time, thanks to her work. If today the analysis of such data is a popular issue in the field of Italian social statistics, this is undoubtedly due to Simona's contribution. She chaired two ministerial research projects, in 2002 and 2005, at the research unit in Naples, giving an original and innovative contribution to the analysis of textual data and always arousing curiosity and lively interest among scholars. In a 2006 study on the university educational offer commissioned by the National Evaluation Committee of the University System (currently ANVUR), her textual data analysis of the stated aims of the Italian academic courses produced results of such relevance that they formed the core of the conclusive research report. Unfortunately, she was unable to participate in the final conference in which the outcomes of another study on *omertà* were presented. She studied this phenomenon with an enthusiasm that went far beyond mere scientific interest. She was invested in this area of research both as a social scientist and as someone who relished the opportunity to work with young researchers.

Simona has been both a mentor and a friend to many of us. Carrying on her legacy will be an honour and a responsibility. We hope to live up to this task and to continue communicating the passion for the subject that she taught us.

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