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What role does timing play in migrants’ transition to marriage? A comparison between endogamous and exogamous marriages

Abstract:
Couple formation and migration are the result of interrelated decision-making processes in the life cycle. Using data from the “Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens (SCIF)” survey, conducted in Italy in 2011-2012 by Istat, we aim to investigate how the timing of migration events affects the type and timing of marriages in the destination country. Time-related models investigate the competing-risk transitions to endogamous and exogamous marriages with Italian spouses. Obtained results provide evidence of the complexity of today’s migrations, and they indicate the coexistence of various patterns among first-generation migrants in Italy, characterised by a plurality of origins, with different projects and behavioural models. The “interrelation of events” hypothesis explains the transitions to both endogamous and exogamous marriages among women, while men usually spend more time finding a partner and achieving economic stability. Despite this general picture, our analysis shows different and original pathways shaping transitions to marriage by reason of migration and considering a number of demographic and migratory characteristics.

Key words: migration, family formation, Italy, event history analysis, interrelation of events

Introduction
In Italy, immigration is a more recent phenomenon than in northern European countries, but nevertheless, the first generation of migrants has settled, as highlighted by official sources and literature (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al. 2008; Ambrosini et al. 2014; Perez 2018). One expression of this change is the increased number of marriages with at least one foreign-born partner, which now constitute a significant percentage of stock data: as of 2017, 14.5% of marriages consisted of couples with at least one foreign-born partner. In particular, before the economic crisis, register data (Gabrielli/Paterno 2016; Terzera/Barbiano di Belgiojoso 2018) showed notable growth of marriages performed in Italy between an Italian-born partner and a foreign-born partner (hereinafter defined as exogamous WIT – with an Italian – marriage): exogamous WIT marriages of immigrants increased from 9,900 in 1996 to 24,600 in 2008. They subsequently reduced to less than 18,000 per year during the economic crisis (2008-2015) and then increased again in the
next two observed years (reaching 20,000 in 2017). In 2017, they represented 10.5% of total marriages and 72.1% of marriages with at least one foreign-born partner.

In particular, referring to marriages performed in Italy, official data shows that those between an Italian man and a foreign woman are more predominant than those between an Italian woman and a foreign man (77.2% and 22.8% of total exogamous WIT marriages, respectively). The 2017 ranking of exogamous WIT marriages by area of birth of the foreign partner places marriages with partners from the EU in first place (more than 6,000), followed by marriages with partners from Central and Eastern non-EU Europe (5,700), and those with partners from Central and South America (3,700).

As highlighted at the international level (e.g., Kofman 2004), the combination of origin and gender results is crucial to understand family dynamics, and this is also confirmed for Italy. The composition of exogamous WIT marriages in Italy by gender and country of origin of the migrant partner is determined by a complex set of factors, such as: different origins, recent feminisation of the inflows (Impicciatore/Strozza 2015), strategies of integration by gender, characteristics of the “marriage market”, and exogamous/endogamous attitudes of immigrant communities (Rossi/Strozza 2007).

In Italy, despite the significant growth of partnerships and marriages with at least one foreign partner, it was only 10 years ago that quantitative research began to focus on this topic (Dalla Zuanna et al. 2009; Conti et al. 2013), with the cross-sectional approach being predominant. Using information obtained from ad hoc surveys (often at regional or local level), scholars have described the different typologies of families and households and their characteristics (Terzera 2006; Simoni/Zucca 2007; Tognetti Bordogna 2011), focusing mainly on partner choice rather than union timing (Lagomarsino 2006; Bonizzoni 2007, 2015; Ambrosini 2008). In particular, following the “status exchange theory”, numerous studies looked at the matching of partners in couples formed between Italians and foreigners, identifying exchange forms between partners (Maffioli et al. 2012, 2014; Guetto/Azzolini 2015; Gabrielli/Paterno 2016; Azzolini/Guetto 2015, 2017).

Focusing on individuals rather than on the couple dynamics and mate-matching choices, our paper aims at providing original results to the existing literature by analysing the role of the timing of the competing transitions to first exogamous WIT marriage and to first endogamous marriage of migrants who arrived to Italy unmarried. As far as we know, it is still a neglected topic in Italy, because the transition to marriage has been studied predominantly at the local level and/or considering marriages between migrant partners with the same origins: endogamous marriages (Bonomi/Terzera 2003; Terzera 2006; Gabrielli et al. 2019).

In particular, we focus on migrants who were aged 16 over and were unmarried on arrival in Italy, and we analyse the timing of their marriage in Italy by adopting an event history approach. We use data from the multipurpose household sample survey on “Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens (SCIF)”, which at the time of writing represents a unique source of data representative at the national level with retrospective in-depth information about migrants and their subsequent transition to first marriage (Perez 2018).

This article is structured as follows. The next section contains the theoretical framework and our research hypotheses. The third section introduces the survey data, the sample characteristics, the method of analysis, and the variables. Subsequent sections present the results of the descriptive and multivariate analyses. The final section discusses the main results.