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EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN OF MIXED AND NON-MIXED PARENTAL COUPLES IN ITALY

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Short abstract

While literature on mixed couples and intermarriage has a long-standing tradition in migration and sociodemographic studies, there are still few studies going beyond the couple by looking at the children of mixed parental couples. An increase in mixed couples in contemporary societies is generating highly complex networks of family, relational and educational practices. From a theoretical point of view, growing up embedded in a mixed-origin family background may have positive consequences on children in terms of cultural richness and smoother integration, but can also be the source of tensions and conflicts stemming from socioeconomic and cultural differences and stigmatization. This article is aimed at comparing the children of mixed parental couples to children of non-mixed parental couples (second-generation immigrants and children of natives) not only to search for differences on their educational outcomes but also to explore whether and how their performance by type of parental couple changes when considering the characteristics of both parents (age, gender, level of education, working status, two-parents household). Results find support for the model of integration based on the additive effects of having a native parent given that the probabilities of failure of children of mixed couples is halfway those of children of native and immigrant parental couples.

Keywords: educational outcomes, mixed parental couples, non-mixed parental couples, Italy.

Extended abstract

Introduction

Italy is already facing important challenges related to the noteworthy waves of immigration that have taken place in the past few decades (Strozza et al. 2021), implying not negligible numbers of people with widely diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds arriving and settling in the country. One of the most salient aspects that can be directly related to increasing immigration has been (among others) the systematic growth of unions between immigrants and natives (the so-called mixed unions) which, over

time, has also led to increasing numbers of mixed births and, afterwards, to the increase of mixed families (Rodríguez-García 2006, Hill 2006, Kalmijn 2015). According to ISTAT data from Vital Statistics, in 1999, 4.7% of all marriages were mixed; by 2017, this share had increased to 12%. Not only, among all the births registered in Italy, the percentage of children born to Italian/foreigner couples increased from 2% in 1999 to 7% in 2017. Hence, the country is also encountering the expansion of a population subgroup, the children of parental mixed couples, that is growing and developing in the context of a multicultural family which is different from the one of immigrant and native families (with children from non-mixed parental unions with or without an immigrant background). Despite their growing importance both in quantitative and qualitative terms, little is still known about these newly mixed generations.

There is a large bulk of research worldwide that have been focused on intermarriage and/or mixed unions, but much less is known about the children of these mixed parental couples. Most research on the children of immigrants fails at distinguishing between children of mixed and non-mixed parental couples, despite knowing that it is likely that the children of mixed parental couples would differ from both immigrant and native children. This is so because their multicultural background might differ in terms of socialization within and outside the family and their relationships with the countries of origin of both parents. Studies on the subject have been mostly concerned with ethnic identification (Le Gall and Meintel 2015, Valenzuela and Unzueta 2015, Lichter and Qian 2018, Obućina and Saarela 2020). But a growing interest has been recently shown, even if still scarce, in the field of their educational outcomes (Kalmijn 2015, Tegunimataka 2020, Mateus 2022).

In Italy, intermarriage is more likely an exchange between a migrant woman and a native man, where she switches her higher level of education and young age for economic and legal certainties (Maffioli et al. 2014, Guetto and Azzolini 2015, Vitali and Fraboni 2020). For the Italian case, there is only one study on the educational outcomes (school dropout and enrollment) of children of mixed parental couples (Azzolini et al. 2017) attending upper secondary schools (15-19 years-old). One of our main contributions is to go beyond previous studies by using microdata from a survey (Integration of the Second Generation) that focuses on children with a migrant background attending lower and upper secondary schools, but that also includes non-migrant children as control group. We compare the children of mixed parental couples to children of non-mixed parental couples (second-generation immigrants and children of natives) to, first, search for differences on their educational outcomes and, second, explore whether and how this relationship changes when adding interactions with some characteristics of the parents (such as age, gender, level of education, working status). In a second step, according to sample availability, we further disaggregate mixed parental couples based on the gender and country of origin of the immigrant parent.

Brief theoretical background and hypotheses

From a theoretical point of view, growing up embedded in a mixed-origin family background may have positive consequences on children in terms of cultural richness and smother *integration*, but can also be the source tensions and conflicts stemming from socioeconomic and cultural differences and *discrimination*.

On one hand, intermarriage has been long interpreted as an important sign of integration. The native-born parent may provide a more direct and easy access to native social networks, having also a higher exposure to the language spoken in the host country (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005, Cebolla-Boado and Garrido Medina 2011, Rodríguez-García 2015).

On the other, children from mixed parental couples are developing in a more complex setting for socialization in which one of the parents gets to have a stronger influence. Moreover, given its multicultural nature, often mixed couples are more conflictive. At the eyes of the host society, they can be still considered as appertaining to a minority group and, if the influence of the immigrant parent is stronger, themselves can feel belonging to this group (Hill 2006, Rodríguez-García 2006, Singla 2015).

Most previous studies comparing children of mixed parental couples to children with two immigrant parents and/or children with two native-born parents in other contexts have generally found that having

a native parent is beneficial for children's educational outcomes (Kalmijn 2015, Tegunimataka 2020, Matteus 2022). But there is -at least- one exception, in France Unterreiner (2011), found that children of mixed couples are less likely to pursue higher education than immigrants' children and children of the French. These results need to be interpreted with caution given that are all highly heterogeneous in terms of the national context, the school population considered and how they measure educational outcomes. One of the most important contributions comes from the work of Kalmijn (2015) studying three dimensions of integration (contacts with natives, religiosity and family values, and school achievement tests) using secondary school-based questionnaire data from England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Regarding the last, results pointed out that children of intermarried parents clearly differ from both children of immigrant parents and children of natives. When the author considers language achievement, mixed children are halfway between immigrant and native children, independently of the country under examination. In Denmark Tegunimataka (2020) using data from administrative registers found that the final grades in mathematics and Danish language of children of mixed parents is more similar to that of the children of native Danes parents, while children of immigrant parents are behind these two groups. Matteus (2022) analyzing survey data on 9th-grade students (aged 14-19) in Lisbon, Setubal, and Faro shown that students of mixed native-immigrant families perform better academically than native students and other students with migrant background.

In Italy, Azzolini and Barone (2013) and Azzolini et al. (2017), using data coming from the Labor Force Survey to analyze school dropout and enrollment in upper secondary education, have stressed that the educational disadvantage only influenced children of foreign parents, while children of mixed parents performed as well as natives. However, authors have also identified highly heterogeneous dropout rates among children of mixed parents according to the gender and origin of their foreign-born parent.

Regarding educational outcomes of children, our hypotheses building follows the theoretical framework described by Kalminj (2015):

Research Hypothesis 1 (Integration by additive effects): if the performances of children of mixed parental couples are in between (halfway) those of the children of non-mixed parental couples (immigrants and natives) or closer to those of children from native parental couples, we find support for the model of integration based on the additive effects of parental origins.

Research Hypothesis 2 (Discrimination): if the performances of children of mixed parental couples are closer to those of the children of non-mixed immigrant parental couples than to those of children from native parental couples, we find support for the model of discrimination.

Based on the state of the art, we also expect some find differences on the support for these hypotheses (a gradient on their explanatory power) based on the gender and the socioeconomic background of the parental couple, independently of the mixed or non-mixed origin.

Data and methods

Data were drawn data from the Survey on the Integration of the Second Generation, carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2015. This survey interviewed 68,127 children attending lower and upper level of the secondary school in Italy, having included in the sample 1,400 secondary schools attended by at least 5 non-Italian children and located in 821 municipalities. The sampling was developed focusing on non-Italian children, while Italian children were sampled as control group. This survey collected information on students' migration history, knowledge and use of the Italian language, their school, teachers and classmates, leisure time and friends, their family and household.

Our dependent variables is binary and measures if the student has failed at least once, and the main explanatory variable of interest is the background of students based on the combination of the country of origin of both parents (those having valid information). Thus, students are divided into three categories: children of native parental couples (both born in Italy), children of immigrant parental couples (both born in abroad) and children of mixed parental couples (one parent born in Italy, the other born abroad). We control for other variables that literature on educational outcomes has proven to be important and are available in the dataset (sex, age, school grade level, number of siblings, macro-area of the school, students'

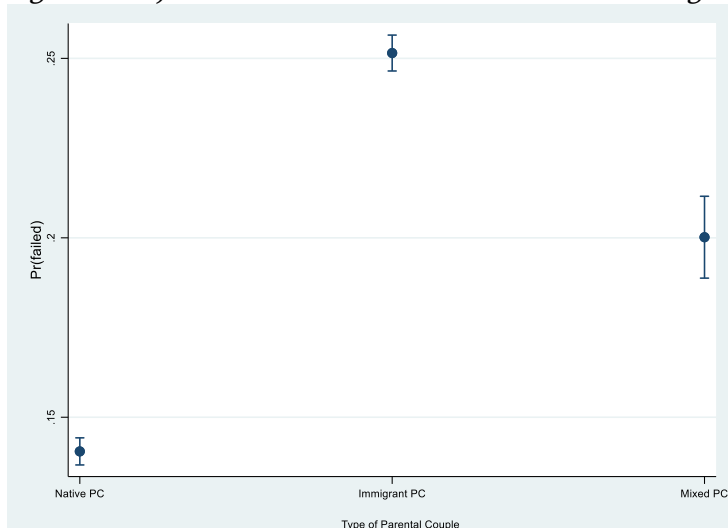
macro-area of origin, citizenship). We paid special attention to the family background also including mother's and father's age, working status and educational attainment, two parents household, self-perceived family's economic condition.

Binary logistic regressions are performed in a step-wise manner to look at the association between school failures and the type of parental couple of students. In a second step control variables are added, and changes following these additions are observed. In the third, variables on parental background are included one-at-the-time and then interacted with the main independent variable of interest to search for hidden sources of heterogeneity¹. A future step will also search for differences by further differentiating mixed parental couples according to the gender and origin of the immigrant parent.

Selected results on school failures of children of mixed and non-mixed parental couples

In this section we show the results of the binary logistic regression on school failures in terms of Adjusted Predictions by the type of parental couple (Figure 1). Focusing on our hypotheses testing, the figure is aimed at failure likelihoods across groups. As shown, there is a clear rank on students' probability of having failed: the lowest value is registered for children of native parental couples (Native PC = 14%), followed by children of mixed parental couples (Mixed PC = 20%), while the highest recorded is for children of immigrant parental couples (Immigrant PC= 25.2%). As the probabilities of failure of children of mixed couples is in between those of children of native and immigrant parental couples, preliminary analyses find support for the model of integration based on the additive effects of having a native parent.

Figure 1. Adjusted Predictions for school failures coming from BLR by type of parental couple (95% CIs).



Source: own elaboration, SIG ISTAT data.

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¹ These results are not shown here for the sake of brevity.

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