OCCUPATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAJECTORIES OF YOUNG IMMIGRANTS' DESCENDANTS IN ITALY[1]

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Abstract. Immediate immigrants' descendants represent a significant part of the Italian population with a migratory background at a young age, and they are increasingly entering the Italian labour market for the first time. We aim to test the downward path that can be framed in terms of the segmented assimilation theory, investigating the descendants' access to employment and their working characteristics. This is a first attempt at analysing these under-researched issues due to the still young average age of immigrants' descendants. Paying attention to youths aged 18–29 years, we use information from the ad hoc ISTAT labour force survey module of 2021 on the integration of migrants and their descendants into the labour market and perform descriptive analyses on employment/unemployment status and occupational characteristics. To touch upon compositional effects, multivariate analyses will deepen the study of factors linked to over-education by using the two-step Heckman procedure. Second generation immigrants have the highest probability of employment exclusion. This is not the same for the other migratory generations, who seem to have a similar path to the Italians. Among workers, second generation immigrants have a highly skilled position and an educationally relevant job more frequently than the other groups.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the number of first-generation foreigners residing in Italy has considerably increased. This is posing major challenges to their integration and social cohesion. However, their employment conditions are particularly unfavourable: they are often forced to accept any kind of job, even when it is well below their level of education (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011); they are penalised in terms of income and professionalism; they are unable to get out of those employment niches where they can find work because they are left vacant by Italians.

[1] This article is the result of a common reflection of the authors, whose names are placed in alphabetical order. Sections 1 and 2 are to be attributed to Rosa Gatti, section 3 to Salvatore Strozza, section 4 to Alessio Buonomo, and section 5 to Giuseppe Gabrielli.

In some ways, we are faced with what in other contexts has been called the ethnic penalty (Kalter and Kogan, 2006; Heath and Cheung, 2007).

In the last two decades, the immediate descendants of immigrants (henceforth DI) have become more and more numerous and are increasingly entering the Italian labour market for the first time. Most were born in Italy and have been socialised to the Italian language, culture, and society through school attendance. By investigating the DIs' access to employment and their working conditions, we aim to test the downward mobility tendency that can be framed in the terms of the segmented assimilation theory elaborated in the American context (Gordon, 1964; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes, 1995, 1996; Alba and Nee, 1997). To the best of our knowledge, the occupational characteristics and trajectories of DIs are under-researched in Italy due to their still young average age.

In this article, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1. What are the labour market outcomes for the DIs compared to their parents and their Italian counterparts?

RQ2. Can different kinds of career path be detected between the DI group and the other groups observed in the Italian context?

RQ3. Is it possible to identify whether some DIs constitute a group at risk of downward assimilation? Will the relative professional positions be reproduced across the generations?

To examine these questions, the strategy of this study is to use data from the ad hoc 'Labour force survey module of 2021 on the integration of migrants and their descendants into the labour market, which provides information on the employment status, job search, job type and characteristics, and attitudes towards the labour market of the young working-age population.

Since our main research interest is to investigate employment and occupational differences according to migratory generations, we pay particular attention to fractional generations that are close to Rumbaut's (2004) classification.[2]

2. Theoretical Background

The integration of immigrants and their descendants has been mainly studied in the United States through assimilation theories. According to classical assimilation theory (Alba and Nee, 2003), ethnic groups will progress towards assimilation following a single pattern, assuming that hostility towards immigrants tends to diminish gradually over time (with increasing residence time for the first generation

[2] The availability of information on the age at arrival for foreign-born people is useful to identify fractional generations of foreigners. This definition, however, only approximates Rumbaut's classification because it does not consider the parents' country of birth.

and the transition from the first to the second generation; for the latter, in fact, schooling is a powerful assimilation vector). Alongside the classical model of assimilation (Alba and Nee, 2003), studies developed since the 1960s have shown the presence of different modes of long-term incorporation for immigrants and their children. The distinction between the various forms of integration has revealed a persistent and differentiated ethnic segregation that penalises ethnic minorities, especially in the labour market. Referring to the black minority in the United States, Gordon (1964) identified several dimensions of integration, emphasising that cultural assimilation does not necessarily go hand in hand with greater socioeconomic success; nor does it imply a decrease in hostility towards a particular group. In some cases, socioeconomic success may coexist with a low level of cultural assimilation, whereas in an alternative model, lasting socioeconomic downgrading may go hand in hand with cultural assimilation. The latter model has been called downward or segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes, 1995, 1996; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). The term 'downward' or 'segmented' assimilation refers to a significant and persistent socioeconomic inferiorisation of certain groups, a situation that may be accompanied by strong linguistic and cultural assimilation. One of its main features is a lasting penalty in the labour market: second generations belonging to these groups seem to face more difficulties.

This suggests the existence of specific and enduring discrimination against immigrants and their immediate descendants (Silberman and Fournier 2008). Segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993) challenges traditional assimilation theory by stating that "the process [of integration of newcomers] is neither simple nor inevitable" (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, p. 45). According to the segmented assimilation theory, the majority of children of immigrants achieve either middle class or working-class status, but there are still others who are at risk of joining "those at the bottom of society, a new rainbow underclass" (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, p. 45). Indicators of this path towards downward assimilation include early school dropout, long-term unemployment, poverty, crime, and incarceration, among others. Difficulties in finding a way to integrate push the children of immigrants towards the formation of an oppositional culture (Zhou, 1997).

With regard to labour market inclusion, a common explanation of the labour market outcomes of children of immigrants refers to the ethnic penalty theory (Kalter and Kogan, 2006; Heath and Cheung, 2007). According to this hypothesis, ethnic minorities perform poorly in the labour market due to their ethnic/racial characteristics that impose social barriers to their integration into the labour market.

The persistent disadvantages based on racial/ethnic discriminatory practices may challenge the so-called meritocratic society, hinder social mobility, and strengthen the social reproduction of existing inequality structures (Gracia et al.,

2016). According to this hypothesis, DIs would fail to overcome barriers to their social economic success under equal conditions.

Later studies have highlighted the complexity of the processes and factors to be considered in order to explain the different paths followed by various populations of immigrant origin. The segmented assimilation theory, developed mainly by American scholars, has also been used by some researchers to investigate the integration of children of immigrants in Western European countries (Silberman, Alba, and Fournier, 2007; Vermeulen, 2010). The main focus of these studies has been on "the theory's two alternative 'modes of incorporation': downward assimilation, and upward mobility" (Thomson and Crul, 2007, p. 1032).

More precisely, the main question in the European context has not been how some children of immigrants are assimilated into the underclasses, but whether or not the process happens at all (Vermeulen, 2010, p. 1218). In the French case, Silberman and Fournier (2008) show a downgrading of children of immigrants at least in the medium term, with specific differences among DI groups depending on parental origin. The ethnic penalty observed in recruitment is milder for Turks than for African groups linked by colonial relations with France. Similar results are observed by Meurs et al. (2006), who highlight a higher exposure to unemployment for the second generations than the first, with considerable heterogeneity between the different ethnic groups. In the Swedish case analysed by Behtoui (2013), with the same education, gender and age, children of immigrants are not able to obtain a position in the labour market to the same extent as children of natives. In fact, young people with an immigrant background run a higher risk of falling into the inactive and unemployed (job-seeking) groups and earning lower wages than those with a native background. Analyses conducted by Gracia et al. (2016) showed that second-generation Moroccans and Turks are systematically disadvantaged in the Dutch labour market compared to their native counterparts, albeit with differences between males and females. The labour market disadvantage of the second generation is not related to educational attainment and job skills. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the intersection of ethnic and socioeconomic factors is particularly powerful in explaining this disadvantage. Schnell and Fibbi (2015) also demonstrated that the socioeconomic status of parents is crucial in determining the path of (un)success in the transition from education to employment of Turkish and Balkan DIs in Switzerland. They are less likely to follow a path of upward social mobility due to unfavourable structural conditions (the socioeconomic status of their parents). In light of the research conducted in other European countries, in the next sections we will consider the Italian case and check whether the results are in line with those shown above.

3. Data and Methods

The source of the data is the Labour Force Survey, conducted in Italy by ISTAT. In particular, we used the 2021 ad hoc module on the Labour market situation of migrants and their immediate descendants. The sample is weighted in order to make it representative of the observed universe. The overall unweighted sample amounted to 127,097 individuals; we selected only the 12,686 individuals aged between 18 and 29 years old, distinguished on the basis of the migratory generation.

The 2021 ad hoc module allows us to have additional information relating to the migration history and other specific aspects of international migrants and to identify the children of immigrants by migratory generation. The survey only considers legally resident foreign citizens, excluding irregulars or those who have a residency permit but do not have legal residency. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the Labour Force Survey remains one of the most reliable sources of information for foreign labour forces.

To verify whether there are differences in the risk of over-education between natives, immigrants and descendants of immigrants aged between 18 and 29, we decided to use the two-step Heckman procedure. This fits a maximum-likelihood probit model with sample selection (Heckman, 1976; Winship and Mare, 1992).

$$y_j^{select} = \left(z_j\gamma + u_{2j} > 0\right);\ y_j^{probit} = (x_j\beta + u_{1j} > 0)$$

The procedure estimates a selection equation (which should contain at least one variable that is not in the outcome equation) to analyse whether the subsample of employed people is selected and, if so, to compute an additional covariate to correct for the existing distortion of this selection.

In particular, the selection equation has a dummy dependent variable that assumes a value of 1 in the case of employed respondents and 0 otherwise (unemployed and inactive people). According to International Labour Organization guidelines, employed people conducted at least one hour of paid work in the week of the interview or had a job or business from which they were temporarily absent.

The outcome equation has over-education as a dependent dummy variable (over-educated vs. not over-educated). To determine over-education, it is necessary to measure differences between the profession and the educational level of workers. To this end, information on individual professional levels according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88) was compared to individual educational levels according to the International Standard Classification on Education (ISCED-97). The major groups 2 to 9 of the ISCO-88 classification are arranged with the ISCED-97 classifications. In particular, group 2 (intellectual, scientific and highly specialized professions) corresponds to a Bachelor's degree or

post-graduate education, while group 9 (unqualified occupations) corresponds to basic literacy (primary school). Ultimately, group 1 (legislators, executives, and entrepreneurs) and group 9 (military professions) are not associated with any level of education. For this reason, they are excluded from the analysis.

In both models, the main independent variable is the migratory generation. According to Rumbaut's (2004) classification, the following modalities have been defined: Italians (born in Italy with both parents born in the country, referent category); second generation (G2 = born in Italy with both parents born abroad); second mixed generation (G2mix = born in Italy with one parent born abroad); 1.75 generation (G1.75 = born abroad but arrived before the age of 6); 1.5 generation (G1.5 = born abroad but arrived between ages of 6 and 12); 1.25 generation (G1.25 = born abroad but arrived between ages of 13 and 17); and first generation (G1 = born abroad and arrived after age of 17).

Just two different predictors are included in the selection equation. First of all, educational level concerns three modalities—low (compulsory education or less), intermediate (high school degree), high (academic degree or higher educational level)—with the first as the referent category It has also been used to define the over-education of respondents, but there is no theoretical reason to include it in the outcome model. Secondly, marital status relates to three modalities—single, married, separated/divorced—with the first as the referent category. It acts above all on the decision/need to be employed, although the coefficients have also been verified that are not significant in the outcome model. Thus, the fundamental assumption of the Heckman procedure (having at least one variable in the selection model only) has been respected. The other independent variables considered in the selection equation are gender (woman vs. man as the referent category), age (discrete variable) and age squared, and Italian geographical area of residence (three modalities—North, Centre, South—with the first as the referent category). These last covariates are considered as independent variables in the outcome model, together with the distinction between full-time (referent category) and part-time work and between employed (referent category) and self-employed.

4. Results

Despite being an increasingly consolidated presence in Italy, the G2 still represent a very young component of the Italian population (Table 1). Their average age (21 years old) among youths (18–29 years) is clearly the youngest among the migratory generations considered. This information invites us to interpret the results of this group with caution, since many of them constitute an inactive population as, more frequently than the others, they have not yet finished their studies compared to other migratory generations. Specifically, Table 1 summarises the employment (and

unemployment) status of our sample. As traditionally observed in Italy, the highest employment rates are recorded among who were older upon arrival (G1.5, G1.25 and G1). Furthermore, these migratory generations are distinguished by the lowest unemployment rates. Considering professional skills and age upon arrival in Italy, the older the immigrant upon arrival, the lower the percentage of high-skilled jobs. Conversely, Italian-born DIs (both G2 and G2mix) have the highest percentages of people employed in highly skilled jobs compared to foreign-born respondents. However, as expected, Italians form the highest percentage of the whole sample (11%). A final characteristic considered in Table 1 is over-education. The lowest percentages of over-educated are recorded among DIs born in Italy (G2 and G2mix).[3] This interesting result prompted us to examine over-education more deeply and to consider it as a dependent variable in our analyses.

Table 1 – Employment/unemployment status, professional skills, and overeducated job of foreign population by migratory generation and Italian population aged 18-29 years. Italy, 2021, weighted data (percentages, absolute values, and median ages)

Indicators	G2	G2mix	G1.75	G1.50	G1.25	G1	Italian
			Employment and unemployment indicators				
Unemployment rate	38.9	26.3	29.8	19.7	25.3	18.1	21.7
Employment rate	22.2	32.8	34.9	51.3	43.3	48.7	38.2
			Professional skill				
Low-skilled job	21.0	19.0	44.9	40.5	29.5	32.0	15.8
Middle-skilled-job	72.2	74.5	50.3	54.9	66.8	66.2	73.3
High-skilled-job	6.9	6.4	4.8	4.6	3.7	1.8	10.9
Total	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*
			Overeducation				
% of overeducated job	16.6	15.7	37.2	26.1	20.5	26.7	13.6
			Absolute values, and median ages				
Unweighted total count	344	731	331	526	395	335	10,024
Median age at interview	21	23	25	25	24	25	23

Source: our elaborations on LFS data, ad hoc module 2021.

The Heckman procedure shows that the specification Wald test results, at the bottom of Table 2,[4] indicate a good model fit, whereas the selection equation is

[3] Interestingly, the differences by migratory generation are reduced when perceived over-education is considered (this information is available in Labour Force Survey data, but not shown here for reasons of space). The mismatch between the perceived and actual situation should be further investigated in future analyses.

[4] For the robustness check, we also considered a Heckman model applied with weighted data. However, the results of the analyses (not included here but available on request) do not show relevant differences compared to the analysis with unweighted data.

(weakly) significant ($p<0.01$ both for ρ and for the LR test). In addition, ρ is negative, so the coefficients would be underestimated without the correction.

The multivariate results summarised in Table 2 partially confirm the descriptive analyses presented in Table 1. The differences between the two analyses can be explained by the association between the migratory generation variable and the socio-demographic and occupational characteristics of the sample. In other words, the effect of migratory generation is related to the other control variables included in the model.

Before considering the differences by migratory generation, let us examine the other control variables included in the Heckman model. In general, they are in line with the expected findings. However, it should be noted that the results in this case refer to the entire sample considered—i.e., both the migratory generations and the Italian population (as summarized in Table 1, Italians are clearly prevalent in our sample, accounting for around 80 per cent of the respondents). In the selection model, women have a lower propensity to be employed than men. The age at interview shows a bell shape in the propensity to be employed (age has a positive and age squared a negative significant coefficient). Respondents residing in Central and Southern Italian regions are less likely to be employed than those residing in Northern regions. As the level of education increases, the coefficients increase significantly, while being married, compared to being single, decreases the propensity to be employed.

The coefficients of the control variables in the model outcomes (over-educated occupational position) are less significant. In this case, the variables relating to sex and age at the interview are not statistically significant. The coefficients for the area of residence are opposite to the selection model just described, although they are significant. Therefore, as expected, the probability of being over-educated is higher for residents in Central and Southern Italy than their Northern counterpart. Finally, being employed with a full-time contract and being self-employed decrease the probability of being over-educated.

Moving on to our key variable (migratory generation), in the selection model relating to employment status compared to Italians only two of the migratory generations considered have significant coefficients. Firstly, G2 takes on a (strongly) significant negative coefficient—in other words, this cohort has the lowest probability of being employed in the sample. Secondly, G1.5 has a higher (weakly) significant probability of being employed compared to Italians. In the outcome model relating to the over-educated occupational position, all migratory generations have positive coefficients. In other words, the Heckman's model confirms what has already been observed in Table 1: the Italians have the lowest probability of being over-educated. However, multidimensional analysis indicates that the result is not statistically significant for G2 and G1.25.

Table 2 - Heckman procedure: probability of being employed (selection equation) and probability of having an overeducated job (outcome equation). Italy, 2021 (coefficients, standard errors, and p-values)

Variables	Selection model (employment)			Outcome model (overeducation)		
	Coef.	Std. Err.	p-val	Coef.	Std. Err.	p-val
Migratory generation (Ref. Italians)						
G2mix	-0.090	0.055		0.219	0.093	**
G2	-0.251	0.085	***	0.103	0.186	
G1.75	-0.081	0.080		0.659	0.120	***
G1.5	0.123	0.063	*	0.399	0.101	***
G1.25	0.083	0.071		0.141	0.110	
G1	-0.019	0.074		0.333	0.111	***
Sex (Ref. Man)						
Woman	-0.361	0.025	***	0.001	0.096	
Age at interview	0.713	0.062	***	-0.162	0.235	
Age squared	-0.011	0.001	***	0.002	0.004	
Area of residence (Ref. North)						
Centre	-0.221	0.034	***	0.180	0.063	***
South	-0.630	0.028	***	0.372	0.120	***
Educational level (Ref. Low)						
Intermediate	0.098	0.036	***			
High	0.225	0.054	***			
Marital status (Ref. Single)						
Married	-0.233	0.055	***			
Separated/ Divorced	0.125	0.263				
Employment type (Ref. Full-time)						
Part-time				0.350	0.066	***
Employment status (Ref. Employee)						
Self-employed				-0.212	0.072	***
Constant	-10.299	0.726	***	1.804	3.444	
Athrho				-0.618	0.364	*
Rho				-0.550	0.254	***
N	12,686			4,567		

LR test of independent equations. (rho = 0): chi2(1) = 2.87 Prob > chi2 = 0.0900. Wald chi2(13) = 205.6 pval = 0.0000.

Note: Statistical significance of the relationship is marked by * if p<0.1, ** if p<0.05, *** if p<0.01.
Source: our elaborations on LFS data, ad hoc module 2021.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This is one of the first attempts to investigate the employment status and occupational characteristics of DIs in Italy by using recently released data. The analyses compare native-born adults with a migratory background (second generation), adults

born abroad arriving at different young ages (middle generations: 1.25, 1.5, and 1.75), adults born abroad who arrived at adult ages (the first generation), and Italians (born in Italy with both parents born in the country).

This distinction allowed us to have a comparative approach among groups and to verify whether disadvantages across generations persist, hindering social mobility and supporting a downward assimilation process in the labour market. However, due to the still young ages of DIs, our analyses are confined to young adults where we observe a cross-cutting picture that might change in the future. Moreover, different results may emerge when considering other occupational characteristics and distinguishing by country of origin. Considering employment status (RQ1), the second generation has the highest probability of employment exclusion (Meurs et al., 2006). However, while in the international literature foreign-born and young immigrants (the middle or 1.5 generation) tend to be more at risk of economic exclusion than the second generation (Thomson and Crul, 2007), this is not observed in our analyses, where fractional generations seem to have a similar path to the Italians. This is likely due to the young age observed and will need to be investigated further in the future. As far as career paths are concerned (RQ2), G2 and G2mix in Italy, at least at a young age, show highly skilled positions and an educationally relevant job position more frequently than the other DIs. It is therefore observed that the ethnic penalty among employed young adults (Heath and Cheung, 2007) diminishes across migratory generations, moving from G1.25 to G2 (RQ3). According to other results (Behtoui, 2013), young people who arrived at an older age (G1.5 and G1.25) suffer more than other groups from unfavourable ethnic characteristics which limit the possibility of enhancing their professional skills.

Two main concluding remarks seem to emerge from our analyses. Firstly, the second generation runs a higher risk of falling into the category of inactive and unemployed people (Behtoui, 2013). Future analyses will determine whether they are able to reduce this gap when older. Secondly, the outcomes of middle generations seem to reinforce the social reproduction of the existing inequality structures of the first generation (Gracia et al., 2016). Our findings stimulate policy recommendations to counteract and prevent racial-ethnic discriminatory practices, to remove social barriers to labour market inclusion and social mobility of immigrant descendants, and to promote equal opportunities for them in accessing the labour market. These recommendations go in the direction of creating a more equitable society.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge co-funding from Next Generation EU in the context of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Investment PE8, Project Age-It: 'Ageing well in an ageing society'. This resource was co-financed by Next Generation EU

[DM 1557 11.10.2022]. Additional co-funding was secured by MIUR in the context of a project titled 'Immigration, integration, settlement. Italian-style' [PRIN 2017, Grant No. 2017N9LCSC_004] and by the University of Naples Federico II, PON 'Research and Innovation' 2014–2020 (PON R&I) ACTION 4 titled 'Digital literacy as a determinant of the social inclusion of migrants and their children' [CUP E65F21003040003]. The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.

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