

The effect of young migrants' ethnic and acculturation identity on educational trajectories of students with migratory background

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Introduction

According to the framework provided by Akerlof and Kranton (2000), ethnic identity is a self-concept defined as both the affiliation to the host country and to the background culture. The concept of ethnic identity is widely used in economic literature. However, to our knowledge, few studies consider the effect of ethnic identity on educational trajectories among immigrant descendants (for an exception see: Nekby, Rödin and Özcan 2009; Shuller 2015) and it still represents an under-researched topic. Even fewer studies use an intergenerational approach (for an exception see: Shuller 2015; Campbell et al. 2019).

We aim at investigating the relationship between maternal ethnic (and acculturation) identity and the educational trajectories of immigrant descendants in Italy. We do not look at individual (self-defined) ethnic identity mechanisms but, indeed, we look at a more specific topic related to the potential intergenerational transmissions of ethnic identity between mothers and their children.

Italy represents an important case of study because the increasing number of family reunifications produced a growing presence of young second-generation in the last decade and an increasing number of students with migratory background enrolled in the Italian school system (Buonomo, Strozza and Gabrielli 2018). Children of immigrants suffer from a number of negatives when compared to their native peers and experience difficult integration paths. At school, these signs include more frequent school dropouts, less effective performances, more frequent school retreats, and higher concentration in vocational and technical high schools, in order to achieve low-skilled jobs (Strozza 2015; Strozza et al. 2018; Gabrielli and Di Bartolomeo 2019).

Theoretical background

According to the general literature, “ethnic identity” is here considered a self-definition within the largest concept of “social identity” (Phinney and Ong 2007). According to it, each individual determines his own ethnic identity and can have more than one (self-determined) ethnic identity: migrants can strongly identify themselves with the destination country, the country of origin, or a combination of the two (Phinney et al., 2001).

The interest among scholars of different disciplines on ethnic identity and on its high explanatory potential is growing over time. For example, economic literature showed that ethnic identity plays an important role in economic outcomes. Immigrants who develop a strong ethnical identity towards the destination country have better economic outcomes, compared to those who have no ethnic identity, or have only a strong minority ethnic identity (Pendakur and Pendakur 2005; Constant and Zimmermann 2008; Nekby and Rodin 2010). Constant and Zimmermann (2009) observed that women who exhibit both host and minority identities are more likely to work than women who have only host identity. Pendakur and Pendakur (2005) affirmed that ethnic minority identity is positively associated with the propensity to use informal methods to find jobs and with lower occupational prestige.

Akerlof and Kranton (2000) provided a comprehensive theoretical framework to consider how self-determined ethnic identity affect individuals' human capital.

Also, economic literature considered this issue and the transgenerational aspect. Among the others, Chiswick (2009) found a possible parental adverse effect. If there is a cultural tension between minority and majority culture, parents who have a strong minority ethnic identity could have negative effects on the human capital of their children.

Zimmermann and co-authors (2008) proved that minority and host ethnic identity are not mutually exclusive. In other words, they are not competitive concept, so it is possible that both of them play a positive, or negative, role in individuals' human capital.

Focusing on the relation between ethnic identity and education trajectories, Nekby and co-authors (2009), found that men affiliated with both the host and minority culture have higher probabilities of completing tertiary education than men who identify only with one or neither of the two. Moreover, Shuller (2015), by using an intergenerational approach, proved that immigrant children in Germany are more likely to be placed in the middle or upper tier of secondary education if their father reports a strong minority identity, or if their mother reports a strong host country's identity. In the end, a recent study (Cambpell et al. 2019) found, by using cognitive test scores, a negative association between minority ethnic identity and academic performances. However, the authors themselves warned of being cautious in the interpretation of their results since their analysis is very explorative and need being deepened in terms of causal mechanisms.

Data and methods

We use data coming from the multipurpose survey on “Social Condition and Integration of Foreign citizens (SCIF)” conducted by Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2011-12. It collects nationally representative information on around 12,000 households with at least one foreign citizen. It provides information on behaviours, characteristics, attitudes and opinions of foreign residents in Italy including migratory background, family composition, education, migratory path, and employment status.

Moreover, it allows to capture school-aged foreigners not enrolled at school and to explore less studied research fields such as the probability of not being enrolled and future aspirations of individuals in secondary education. It represents an important advantage given that the large majority of datasets exploring educational trajectories of immigrants children are specifically collected at school, thus not considering studying a major phenomenon, that is why immigrants' children are more at risk of not continuing studying. Another important advantage of this source of data is that it contains many variables on migration background which are here used and that may allow for capturing some specificities linked to the process of migration itself, which are well known being important predictors of migrant behaviours. Moreover, the data set allows to merge information of mothers and their children (if they are co-residents). Apart from maternal ethnic identity, we included in our analyses a number of individuals and their mother characteristics as control variables.

Two are the main limits of SCIF data in our study. On one hand, it provides few info on individuals who are not co-residents. The majority of questions are indeed directed to people who co-reside in the same house. As a matter of fact, our population of interest is a positively selected – more stable – population especially in terms of migration strategies and migration plans. On the other hand, this survey has a cross-sectional asset.

We included in our next analyses individuals aged 14-24 years old who co-reside with born abroad mothers, not naturalized. We had to exclude mothers with Italian citizenship as for them the survey do not provide information on ethnic identity (our key variable). We excluded also children of transnational couples (mixed couples) since it is well known that they are a specific category with peculiar characteristics that make this population largely different in terms of performances, outputs, aspirations and school dropout, from that of pure immigrants. Our final sample includes 1,898 unweighted cases of which 47% are women and 43% are individuals aged 14-17 (table 1).

Table 1 – Unweighted distribution of the sample by age groups and gender.

Age groups	Males	Females	Total
14-17	437	385	822
18-24	571	505	1,076
Total	1,008	890	1,898

Source: our calculations on SCIF data.

In order to estimate the role of maternal ethnic identity on immigrant children’s educational trajectories we applied a multivariate analysis that includes a set of logistic models in order to control for compositional effects and to analyse the main determinants of not leaving education and training. Specifically, the dependent variable is equal to 0 for individuals not attending education or training, or that have not completed secondary school (we borrowed Eurostat definition of Early leavers from education and training, but we extended it to individuals aged 14-24 instead of 18-24). It is equal to 1 for individuals enrolled at school or in training, or that have completed secondary school (they are defined as not-ELET).

Two target covariates refer to maternal ethnic identity. According to Akerlof and Kranton (2000), we consider a double perspective, the ethnic identity (of mothers) with respect to both their country of origin (minority ethnic identity) and the country of destination (Italian ethnic identity). Specifically, we constructed a dummy variable called “minority ethnic identity”. It is equal to “strong” if mothers are very proud of being foreigners and is “weak” in all other cases. Similarly, we defined another dummy variable called “Italian ethnic identity”. It is equal to “strong” if mothers fell right at home in Italy and is “weak” in all other cases. The main limitation of this approach is that our target variables have only two modalities. The use of two dummy variables could be a too stringent synthesis to grasp the complexity of the educational trajectories of immigrant descendants. Therefore, a second set (logistic) model have been performed, looking at mothers’ acculturation identity (Nekby et al. 2009). This variable is a combination of minority and Italian ethnic identity (Fig. 1). Mothers with strong Italian identity but weak minority ethnic identity are categorized as “assimilated”. At the other extreme, mothers with strong identification with the background culture but not with the majority culture are categorized as “separated”. Mothers that identify both with the Italian and the minority culture are categorized as “integrated”. Finally, mothers that do not identify with either culture are categorized as “marginalized”.

Figure 1 – Definition of acculturation identities

		Italian ethnic identity of mother	
		Strong	Weak
Minority ethnic identity of mother	Strong	Integrated	Separated
	Weak	Assimilated	Marginalized

Dyagram based on the paper by Nekby, L., Rödén, M. and Özcan, G. (2009), Acculturation identity and higher education: Is there a trade-off between ethnic identity and education?, *International Migration Review*, 43(4): 938- 973.

Preliminary results

Consistently with Shuller’s (2014) findings, our results show an intergenerational effect of maternal ethnic identity on educational trajectories of immigrant descendants. In particular, they support the view that both Italian and minority ethnic identity of mothers play a positive and significant role in educational trajectories of their children. We have not found any indication of a detrimental impact of immigrant mother preserving their original culture in educational trajectories of their children. Our results are also consistent with Zimmermann and co-authors (2008) because, both minority and

Italian identity of mothers are potentially beneficial for the school career of immigrant descendants, net of mother's and individual's characteristics: their effects do not compete but rather complement each other.

However, when the acculturation identity is included in the model, the results reveal some further evidences. Having mothers with integrated identity is positively associated with the probability of not being early school leaver in respect to individuals having mothers with assimilated or marginalized identity. Therefore, the use of acculturation identity index reveal that there is an advantage in having mothers with strong Italian ethnic identity in determining the educational trajectories of their children.

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