

# Mate Selection of Exogamous Unions: Does Exchange Theory Fit to the Italian case?

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## Introduction

The increase of immigration flows in Italy has produced a growing spread of exogamous couples in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Using census data, they passed from 65.1 thousand in 1991 to 320.2 thousand in 2011 (Istat, 2014). In the most recent period, they stabilized mostly because of the economic recession. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars that showed how the presence of exogamous unions is changing the patterns of assortative mating and has revealed interesting peculiarities in their demographic behaviours. Few analyses demonstrated that exogamous parental pairings present specific combinations of age and socioeconomic conditions, which provide *prima facie* suggestions about union market (Maffioli, Paterno and Gabrielli, 2014; Gabrielli and Paterno, 2015; Guetto and Azzolini, 2015; Azzolini and Guetto, 2017; Azzolini, Guetto and Madia, 2017). Other studies highlighted that unmarried cohabiting and casual relationships are definitely more frequent in Italy among exogamous unions than they are among endogamous unions, suggesting that greater relational difficulties, possibly due to cultural divergences and an unfriendly social environment, affect the demographic behaviours of exogamous couples in Italy and make the partners more reluctant to transform an informal relationship into a marriage, more unstable and prone to dissolution, with lower and more delayed fertility (Maffioli, Paterno and Gabrielli, 2012).

Within the exchange theory framework, this paper aims to analyse the patterns of mate selection among exogamous unions in Italy in a comparative perspective and focusing on the gender and the origin of the immigrant partner: unions formed by a foreign woman and an Italian man and unions formed by an Italian woman and a foreign man are compared to endogamous foreign couples. It aims to describe the criteria of mate selection in exogamous married and unmarried unions and to verify if and to what extent the exchange theory fit to the assortative mating in Italy. Following the approach used in previous studies (Maffioli, Paterno, Gabrielli, 2014; Paterno, Gabrielli, 2015), further evidences will be found of the balance between the “bargaining power” exercised by the Italian partner and the individual qualities of the foreigner partner.

## Theoretical background

International scholars paid attention to the assortative mating of exogamous couples. A considerable amount of work has been done on this issue in the USA, Canada, Australia (Pagnini and Morgan, 1990; Tzeng, 2000; Kalbach, 2002; Qian and Lichter, 2007) and in European and Asian immigration countries (Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2006; Jones, 2011; Lanzieri, 2011). These analyses showed the specific characteristics of exogamous unions compared to endogamous ones. Among them, there are the ways in which the exogamous couples are formed and the characteristics of the partners in the specific “marriage market” in which they move (Berry et al., 1992). Some studies have highlighted the degree of asymmetry between the characteristics of the partners in exogamous couples. Observing this asymmetry, various interpretative approaches have been produced: exchange, assimilation, social stratification and segmented assimilation theories (Dribe

and Lundt, 2008). The most influential one is the well-known exchange theory (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941; Rosenfeld, 2005; Kalmijn, 2010) that, referring to interracial marriage between blacks and whites in the United States, asserted that the black spouse's higher socio-economic status and other positive qualities (i.e., physical attractiveness) was usually exchanged for the white spouse's racial caste status (Kalmijn, 1998; Furtado, 2006; Qian and Lichter, 2007). Many authors have recently reinterpreted and supported this interpretative perspective, offering different explanations for their divergent findings and showing how gender and educational differences among couples were connected to specific patterns of exchange (Rosenfeld, 2005; Gullickson and Fu, 2009). In Italy, studies highlighted that the exchange theory does not apply in its original form of economic/ethnic status compensation, but made it clear that a form of bargaining takes place in which appreciated qualities, such as youth and high education of the foreign partner, are offered in exchange for economic security, upward socio-economic mobility and access to the social network of the native partner (Maffioli, Gabrielli, and Paterno, 2014; Guetto and Azzolini, 2015).

## Data and methods

This paper is based on statistical exploitation of the "Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens" (SCIF) Survey. It is the only and most recent sample survey in the Italian system of multipurpose household surveys designed to collect data on families with at least one foreign citizen and to provide original information on foreigners living in Italy. The SCIF survey, held in 2011-2012 by ISTAT, covers a random sample of about 12,000 households with at least one no-Italian citizen and aims at providing a framework on living conditions, behaviours, characteristics, attitudes and opinions of the foreigners, including family composition, education, migratory path, employment status and fertility behaviours.

Used dataset was built transposing and putting cohabitants (inhabitants in the same house) partners on the same row in the data-sheet; in this way it was possible to identify formal and informal couples using the gender, family nucleus, and kind of family relationship variables. This method of analysis permitted to consider the unions as our unit of analysis, observing the characteristics and behaviors of both partners together and within the couple. Both married and *de facto* unions are observed, while the non-cohabiting couples are excluded from the sample. The place of birth (not citizenship) is used to identify immigrants; in this way, those who acquired Italian citizenship are controlled. The unions formed by two Italian partners and the couples formed by two immigrant partners, but born in different countries are excluded due to scarcity of information.

Observed sample is formed by 5,630 couples. They were stratified, obtaining the following threefold typology: couples formed by a foreign woman and a Italian man (FW/IM) that are 31,2% of the total, couples formed by a Italian woman and a foreign man (IW/FM) that are 7,7%, and couples formed by a foreign woman and a foreign men (FW/FM), that are 67,5%. Such a classification allows the identification of the contrasting behaviours of the two types of exogamous couples, comparing them with those of the endogamous ones. Data were weighted in order to make them representative of the observed universe.

After performing descriptive analyses, multivariate regression techniques were applied to establish whether the observed combinations of partners' characteristics and their greater level of asymmetry in age and educational level are really produced by specific mechanisms of mate selection and are not a by-product of spurious factors. Moreover, multivariate analyses allowed to verify whether the mate matching patterns of the exogamous couples are really to be attributed to their condition of "mixity", paying attention also on the propensity to be in formal or informal unions.

## Preliminary results

Descriptive results showed firstly the great heterogeneity of the countries of origin of the foreign partners of the natives in exogamous couples, confirming the well-known preferences both of Italian men towards East-European and Latin-American women, and of Italian women towards partner coming from the more developed countries and from Northern-Africa.

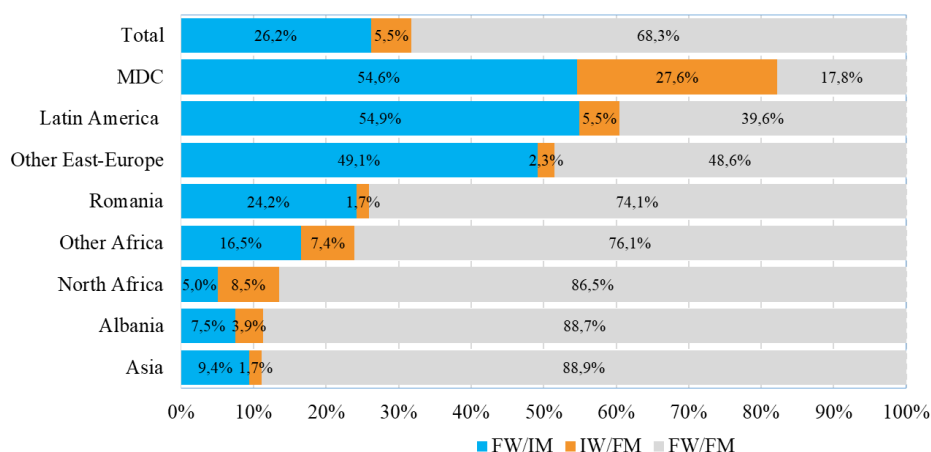
Bivariate tabulations show also that exogamous pairings present specific combinations of age: Italian men choose often a much younger foreign partner and Italian women a younger foreign partner. Results regarding the level of education of the two partners demonstrate that the percentages of the Italian partners in exogamous couples that is more educated than his/her counterpart is higher with respect to the average of endogamous unions and this let us to hypothesize a openness behaviors far from his/her cultural heritage.

In the observed exogamous couples, the non-married proportions are more than 30% in FW/IM unions and more than 20% in IW/FM pairings. The percentage of previous marital experience for at least one partner in exogamous unions is respectively more than five times higher for foreign women and three times higher for foreign men than it is in endogamous unions.

Multivariate analysis aimed at highlighting the factor associated with the formation of exogamous couples (FW/IM and FM/IW versus FW/FM) are performed by applying a multinomial logit model. The model includes, as independent variables, both couple characteristics (birth country of immigrant partner, Italian area of residence, union type - informal union vs. marriage -), and characteristics of the two partners (age at interview, educational level, occupational status - unemployed vs. employed - and previous marital status - in union vs. non in union -).

Results show that the propensity to form an exogamous couple are higher among women coming from Latin America, and some East European countries, among men coming from Africa and, for both genders, among people coming from the more developed countries (MDC). On the opposite, other origin countries (such as Romania and Albania) have a strong propensity to form homogamous unions (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - Predicted probabilities of forming exogamous/homogamous couples by country/area of origin. Multinomial logit model.



Note: couples formed by a foreign woman and a Italian man (FW/IM); couples formed by a Italian woman and a foreign man (IW/FM); couples formed by a foreign woman and a foreign men (FW/FM).

Control variables: age, educational level, union type, previous marital status, occupational status, residence area.

Source: our elaboration on SCIF data.

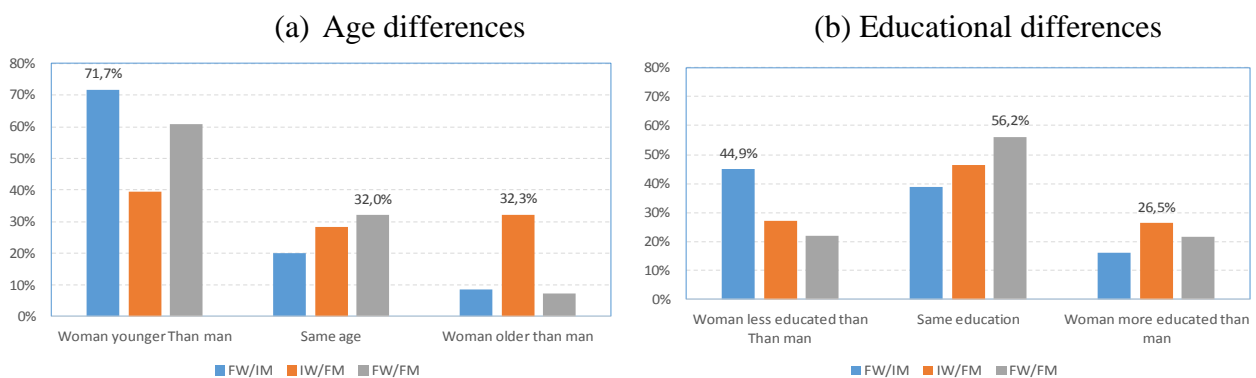
In a second step of elaborations, adopting a non-conventional approach, we verify whether the combinations of partners' characteristics and of couples' behaviors are really connected to the couples' typology (FW/IM, IW/FM, FW/FM), and are not a by-product of spurious factors. The independent variables included in the models are the same of the previous model. Age, education,

union type, previous marital status has been alternatively dropped from independent variables ones they were considered as dependent.

A first multinomial logit model was aimed to verify if and how the couples' typology influences the age differences between the two partners (woman younger, same age versus woman older), controlling the other determinants (Fig. 2a). Obtained outcomes reveal more clearly the relative youth of the foreign female partner: immigrant woman spouses have more than 70% the probability of being younger than their Italian partners. The opposite is true for Italian women in exogamous couple, whose probability of having an older partner is more than 30%.

A second multinomial logit model considers the educational differences (woman less educated than man, same educational level versus woman more educated than man) and shows that existing differences are more complex and multifaceted than those pertaining to age differences. They support the conclusion that it is evident also an element of "compensation" between the two partners, and they indirectly illuminate a more marked propensity of the more educated Italian men/women partner to form a exogamous union (Fig. 2b).

Fig. 2 – Predicted probabilities on age differences (a) and on educational differences (b) of partners, by type of couples. Multinomial logit model.



Note: couples formed by a foreign woman and a Italian man (FW/IM); couples formed by a Italian woman and a foreign man (IW/FM); couples formed by a foreign woman and a foreign men (FW/FM).

Control variables: age\*, education\*, union type, pre-union, employment status, country/area of birth, residence area

(\*) dropped as independent variables when considered as dependent ones.

Source: our elaboration on SCIF data.

The determinants of the type of link between the partners were analyzed applying a logistic model that opposes the informal couples to the married ones (Fig.3a). The outcomes show that being a exogamous couple remains a very important factor in heightening the propensity towards informal pairings.

Lastly, a logistic model defines the association between the probability to form an exogamous couple and the previous marital status (Fig. 3b). The result shows a evident higher propensity of men and particularly women that have experimented a previous formal union to form an exogamous pairing.

In conclusion, our results highlight that distinctive mate selection patterns of exogamous couples (compared to endogamous one) occur and a "variant" of the exchange theory can fit to the Italian case. In fact, the exchange theory does indeed occur, but it involves different aspects with respect to those which emerged from "classical" hypotheses: the immigrant partner "offers" his/her relative youth, for the access to the social "ethnic status" of the autochthonous partner. At the same time, it is confirmed that, as many international studies have observed, higher education is an important factor of marital exogamy because it is connected to cultural and/or linguistic preparation, increases social contacts and relaxes traditional links. We have been not able to compare the occupational levels of the two partners. However, previous results showed that the better occupational level of

the Italian partner provide an economic security within the couple (Maffioli, Paterno, Gabrielli, 2014; Paterno, Gabrielli, 2015).

Fig. 3 – Logistic models on union type (formal versus informal - a) and premarital status (married versus unmarried - b) by type of exogamous couples (reference: FW/FM couples), predicted probabilities.



Note: couples formed by a foreign woman and a Italian man (FW/IM); couples formed by a Italian woman and a foreign man (IW/FM); couples formed by a foreign woman and a foreign men (FW/FM).

Control variables: age, education, union type\*, pre-union\*, employment status, country/area of birth, residence area (\*dropped as independent variables when considered as dependent ones).

Source: our elaboration on SCIF data.

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