

Transnational families and educational outcomes: Evidence from immigrant children in Italy

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Extended abstract

1. Background and literature review

Transnational families are commonly associated with nuclear families composed by a couple, with or without young children, where at least one adult member is currently living abroad (Mazzucato, Schans, Caarls, & Beauchemin, 2015). Such families are often created by international migrants to maximize resources and opportunities in the global economy to be shared among the household members. However, little is known about the phenomenon, especially concerning the effects engendered by the interplay between migration and family relations at a distance on individual well-being of both migrant parents and their left-behind children.

Today, international migrants are estimated to be 258 million worldwide (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2017). That means that many families are split up at the global level and many of their members qualify today as left behinds, including the children growing up in condition of parental absence via migration (DeWaard et al., 2018). For them, transnational parents care from a distance, often practicing the parent-child relationship in conditions of prolonged physical separation.

How parental care across borders impacts children's social outcomes remains essentially understudied, although recent research has started to fill the gaps in this field. For instance, it is known that financial and material resources made available to children through remittances might be offset by increased distress induced by the loss of parental care (Dreby, 2006). Children's emotional distress in relation to parental migration, like loneliness, sadness, and frustration, are reported by children themselves, as well as by parents and caregivers (Zhao et al., 2018). Among other problems, the change in role models and nurturers can translate into feelings of abandonment, vulnerability, and loss of self-esteem (Kandel and Kao, 2001; Pribilsky, 2001). That becomes particularly evident when the absent parent is the mother (Parreñas, 2005).

In the context of second generation children, such evidence is even sparser. It is not uncommon for migrants who settled in a country with their family to leave their offspring in the care of others to continue seeking for new opportunities elsewhere. In such cases, a transnational parent-child relationship is (re-)established, but its consequences on left-behind children's social outcomes are hardly ever recorded. In particular, what misses from the literature is how transnational parental support affects their offspring's educational career, and therefore their social integration opportunities.

In all advanced societies, education plays a fundamental role in the process of placing individuals within the social place (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). The chances of gaining access to the middles and upper classes increase as the educational qualification is achieved, while the risks of occupying the most disadvantaged social positions decrease. Therefore, education is considered one of the most powerful tools for social mobility. For immigrant families, children's education takes on special value. In fact, the children of immigrants, through school participation, can acquire fundamental tools for their long-term integration not only because they acquire crucial competencies and credentials to be exploited in the labour market, but also because they are involved in social networks with natives and thus being more easily socialized to the norms of the host country.

However, despite the higher educational ambitions showed by immigrant families (Jonsson et al., 2014; Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Jackson 2012), descendants of immigrants suffer a number of negatives with respect to their autochthonous counterparts: more school dropouts, lower academic performances and higher concentrations in vocational secondary schools. (e.g. Alba, Sloan, & Sperling, 2011; Heath et al., 2008; Kaufman & White, 1997; Schnepf, 2007).

Different explanations have been proposed for the problematic integration of children of migrants in Europe. Socio-economic resources of youths and their origin family (Hartung, 2015; Heath et al., 2008; Schnepf, 2007), as well as ethnic-specific cultural traits, also including language proficiency (Schnepf, 2007), and possible discrimination (Heath & Cheung, 2012; Kogan, 2006), influence their life trajectories, particularly in terms of educational and occupational performances. As a result, the offspring of immigrants and natives are not equally able to develop their potential. Difficulties may be even increased when the children of immigrant is not supported by both parents in his(her educational career. In particular, living in a intact family tend to reinforce the parental control and then avoid patterns of downward assimilation (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2005).

Based on these premises, this paper intends to explore the links between transnational parental care and the educational performance and satisfaction of children of immigrants in Italy.

2. Data and methods

To fill this gap, we study the relationship between parental absence via migration and the educational outcomes of second generations in Italy. By exploiting the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) Survey on the Integration of Second Generation Immigrants in Italy 2015, we explore the linkages between children of immigrants' school achievements and parental care. The Survey contains information on a sample of 68127 students both with native and migration background. For our analysis, we selected a sub-sample of nearly 28900 students who have parents who were both born abroad.

As a first step, we evaluate if cohabitation with their parents (or with any of them) has an effect on their academic career, which is accounted for by three different kinds of outcomes:

- (i) Latest marks obtained in Italian and Mathematics;
- (ii) Self-assessed academic performance;
- (iii) Repetition of school years.

The main explanatory variable of interest describes who is the main caregiver cohabiting with the child (Both parents, Mother only, Father only, Other). Usual controls are also applied, including migration background (second versus 1.5 generation migrants), the type of school attended (lower vs. upper secondary), the region of school attendance and the dimension of the municipality of residence, citizenship and parental country of origin. Concerning the models, we perform a regression analysis with different estimators according to the type of dependent variable (see Table 1).

Table 1 Estimation strategy

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Estimation method</i>
School marks (Italian, Mathematics)	Ordinary Least Squares (with robust SE)
Self-assessed academic performance	Multinomial logit
Repetition of school years	Logit

As a second step, we take into consideration also how children's educational career is affected by different parenting styles, that is the quality and quantity of contacts between the parents and the child, and the degree of psychological and practical parental support to their educational career. For those children who do not cohabit with both or any of their parents, that means taking into account the transnational relationship established between family members, including the possible intermediation of other caregivers.

3. Preliminary results

In this short paper, we present preliminary results of the empirical analysis drawing on the model estimates accounting for the role of cohabitation (the first step described in Section 2).

Table 2 shows OLS estimates for the latest marks obtained by the children of immigrants in both Italian and Mathematics. At both lower and upper secondary Italian school levels, marks range from 0 to 10. Because teachers seldom assign extreme values on that scale and because in our sample 95% of all marks assigned fall in the 5–8 interval, the "Latest marks obtained" variable has been replaced by its standardized mean. Also, it is worth noticing that, in this specific case, the estimation relies on a slightly smaller sample of students because it does not include those who had just enrolled at school and had not yet received their first grades at the time of the interview.

Estimates indicate that in both Italian and Mathematics, second generation immigrant students cohabiting with their father only perform worse on average with respect to students who cohabit with both their parents. In the case of Mathematics marks, also cohabiting with the mother only is associated to a slightly weaker performance than students with both parents at home.

Table 2 OLS estimates for latest marks obtained (standardized mean) in Italian and Mathematics

Variable	Italian		Mathematics	
	Coefficient	Std Error	Coefficient	Std Error
<i>Main caregiver (Base: Both parents)</i>				
Madre	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.08***	(0.02)
Padre	-0.09*	(0.05)	-0.11*	(0.05)
Altro	0.08	(0.04)	0.11*	(0.04)

<i>Generation (Base: Born in Italy)</i>				
In Italy since 0-5 years	-0.26***	(0.02)	-0.05**	(0.02)
In Italy since 6+ years	-0.03	(0.01)	-0.05***	(0.01)
<i>Female (Base: No)</i>				
Yes	0.31***	(0.01)	0.15***	(0.01)
<i>Type of school (Base: Upper secondary)</i>				
Yes	0.14***	(0.01)	0.17***	(0.01)
<i>Region of the school (Base: Emilia-Romagna)</i>				
Piemonte	0.07*	(0.03)	0.11***	(0.03)
Valle d'Aosta	-0.04	(0.06)	0.13*	(0.05)
Lombardia	0.02	(0.03)	0.09**	(0.03)
Veneto	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.03)
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	-0.06	(0.03)	-0.04	(0.03)
Liguria	0.01	(0.03)	0.07*	(0.03)
Toscana	-0.09**	(0.03)	-0.04	(0.03)
Umbria	0.08*	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)
Marche	-0.00	(0.03)	-0.06	(0.04)
Lazio	-0.10***	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.03)
Abruzzo	-0.07*	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)
Molise	-0.13*	(0.07)	-0.09	(0.07)
Campania	-0.31***	(0.03)	-0.20***	(0.03)
Puglia	-0.03	(0.04)	-0.07	(0.04)
Basilicata	-0.24***	(0.06)	-0.19**	(0.06)
Calabria	-0.21***	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)
Sicilia	-0.10**	(0.03)	-0.07	(0.03)
Sardegna	0.06	(0.06)	0.23***	(0.06)
PA Bolzano	0.52***	(0.04)	0.31***	(0.04)
PA Trento	0.25***	(0.03)	0.17***	(0.04)
<i>Citizenship (Base: Foreigner)</i>				
Italian	0.10***	(0.03)	0.04	(0.03)
<i>Dimension of the municipality (Base: Small)</i>				
Big	-0.02	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
<i>Parental country of birth (Base: Romania)</i>				
Albania	-0.07***	(0.02)	-0.06**	(0.02)
Morocco	-0.27***	(0.02)	-0.21***	(0.02)
China	-0.36***	(0.03)	0.43***	(0.03)
Moldova	0.09**	(0.03)	0.13***	(0.03)
EU	-0.04	(0.05)	-0.03	(0.05)
Eastern	-0.07***	(0.02)	-0.04*	(0.02)
Sub-Saharan	-0.25***	(0.03)	-0.34***	(0.03)
MENA	-0.18***	(0.03)	-0.12***	(0.03)
Asia	-0.23***	(0.02)	-0.06**	(0.02)
LAC	-0.31***	(0.02)	-0.19***	(0.03)
Constant	-0.20***	(0.03)	-0.20***	(0.03)
F	59.01		35.85	
R2	0.08		0.05	
Observations	27089		27087	

Note: Significance at 0.1% (***), 1% (**), and 5% (*). Source: Istat survey on the Integration of Second Generation Immigrants in Italy 2015

The second set of preliminary results draws from multinomial logit estimates of the self-assessed academic performance (Table 3). To the question “How are you getting on at school?”, students could answer qualitatively, choosing among “I am not very good”, “So and so”, “I am good”, and “I am very good”.

Compared to the reference outcome “So and so”, students who classified themselves as not very good at school are 30% more likely to cohabit only with their mother than with both their parents, and 78% more likely to cohabit only with their father. Conversely, for those who answered “Good” or “Very good”, the probability of cohabiting with their mother is 24% lower than to have both parents at home.

Table 3 Multinomial logit estimates for self-assessed academic performance (relative risk ratios, base outcome: “So and so”)

Variable	Not very good		Good / Very good	
	RRR	Std Error	RRR	Std Error
<i>Main caregiver (Base: Both parents)</i>				
Mother only	1.30***	(0.08)	0.86***	(0.03)
Father only	1.78***	(0.27)	1.06	(0.11)
Other person(s)	1.13	(0.20)	1.12	(0.11)
<i>Generation (Base: Born in Italy)</i>				
In Italy since 0-5 years	1.29***	(0.09)	0.99	(0.04)
In Italy since 6+ years	0.94	(0.06)	0.96	(0.03)
<i>Female (Base: No)</i>				
Yes	0.77***	(0.04)	1.49***	(0.04)
<i>Type of school (Base: Upper secondary)</i>				
Lower secondary	1.29***	(0.07)	1.17***	(0.03)
<i>Region of the school (Base: Emilia-Romagna)</i>				
Piemonte	0.67***	(0.08)	0.99	(0.06)
Valle d'Aosta	0.80	(0.18)	0.85	(0.11)
Lombardia	0.72**	(0.08)	1.05	(0.06)
Veneto	0.86	(0.09)	0.98	(0.06)
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	0.96	(0.12)	0.94	(0.07)
Liguria	1.12	(0.13)	1.15*	(0.08)
Toscana	0.77*	(0.09)	0.91	(0.06)
Umbria	0.59***	(0.09)	0.98	(0.08)
Marche	0.83	(0.11)	0.93	(0.07)
Lazio	0.63**	(0.09)	1.13	(0.08)
Abruzzo	0.70*	(0.11)	1.15	(0.09)
Molise	0.86	(0.23)	0.97	(0.15)
Campania	0.92	(0.12)	1.18*	(0.09)
Puglia	0.67**	(0.10)	0.90	(0.08)
Basilicata	1.25	(0.29)	1.08	(0.16)
Calabria	0.80	(0.12)	1.05	(0.09)
Sicilia	0.69**	(0.10)	0.90	(0.07)
Sardegna	0.96	(0.20)	1.20	(0.15)
PA Bolzano	0.66*	(0.12)	1.07	(0.10)
PA Trento	0.82	(0.12)	1.06	(0.09)
<i>Citizenship (Base: Foreigner)</i>				
Italian	0.89	(0.12)	1.00	(0.07)
<i>Dimension of the municipality (Base: Small)</i>				
Big	0.91	(0.06)	0.92*	(0.03)
<i>Parental country of birth (Base: Romania)</i>				
Albania	1.25*	(0.11)	0.88**	(0.04)
Morocco	1.31**	(0.13)	0.87*	(0.05)
China	1.45***	(0.16)	0.59***	(0.04)
Moldova	0.67*	(0.11)	1.05	(0.08)
EU & N-America / Pacific	1.49*	(0.30)	1.00	(0.12)
Eastern Europe & the Balkans (other)	1.18	(0.11)	0.96	(0.05)
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.25	(0.15)	0.92	(0.06)
Middle East & North Africa	1.19	(0.16)	0.96	(0.07)
Asia	1.23*	(0.12)	0.93	(0.05)
Latin America & the Caribbean	1.15	(0.11)	0.57***	(0.03)
Constant	0.24***	(0.03)	1.75***	(0.12)
Observations	27958		27958	

Note: Significance at 0.1% (***), 1% (**), and 5% (*). Source: Istat survey on the Integration of Second Generation Immigrants in Italy 2015

Finally, Table 4 shows logit estimates of repetition of school years. The outcome variable is binary, implying a Yes/No answer.

Again, the probability of repeating at least one school year is, *ceteris paribus*, higher for the students who live with their father only (28% higher), followed by those who live only with their mother (23% higher), compared to children cohabiting with both their parents.

Table 4 Logit estimates for repetition of school years (odds ratios)

Variable	Repetition of school years	
	Odds ratio	Std Error
<i>Main caregiver (Base: Both parents)</i>		
Mother only	1.23***	(0.05)
Father only	1.28*	(0.13)
Other person(s)	1.14	(0.11)
<i>Generation (Base: Born in Italy)</i>		
In Italy since 0-5 years	2.08***	(0.10)
In Italy since 6+ years	2.12***	(0.08)
<i>Female (Base: No)</i>		
Yes	0.54***	(0.02)
<i>Type of school (Base: Upper secondary)</i>		
Lower secondary	0.53***	(0.02)
<i>Region of the school (Base: Emilia-Romagna)</i>		
Piemonte	0.92	(0.07)
Valle d'Aosta	1.79***	(0.24)
Lombardia	0.93	(0.06)
Veneto	1.36***	(0.09)
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	1.30***	(0.10)
Liguria	1.07	(0.08)
Toscana	1.15*	(0.08)
Umbria	0.82*	(0.07)
Marche	1.01	(0.08)
Lazio	0.85*	(0.07)
Abruzzo	1.03	(0.09)
Molise	0.78	(0.14)
Campania	0.81**	(0.07)
Puglia	0.69***	(0.07)
Basilicata	0.94	(0.15)
Calabria	0.65***	(0.06)
Sicilia	0.69***	(0.06)
Sardegna	0.96	(0.12)
PA Bolzano	0.88	(0.09)
PA Trento	0.75**	(0.07)
<i>Citizenship (Base: Foreigner)</i>		
Italian	1.28**	(0.10)
<i>Dimension of the municipality (Base: Small)</i>		
Big	0.82***	(0.03)
<i>Parental country of birth (Base: Romania)</i>		
Albania	1.72***	(0.09)
Morocco	3.18***	(0.18)
China	2.35***	(0.17)
Moldova	0.92	(0.08)
EU & N-America / Pacific	1.79***	(0.22)
Eastern Europe & the Balkans (other)	1.54***	(0.08)
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.68***	(0.19)
Middle East & North Africa	2.22***	(0.17)
Asia	2.03***	(0.12)
Latin America & the Caribbean	2.73***	(0.17)
Constant	0.49***	(0.01)
Observations	27958	

Note: Significance at 0.1% (***), 1% (**), and 5% (*). Source: Istat survey on the Integration of Second Generation Immigrants in Italy 2015

4. Further research steps

The role of cohabitation with one or both parents seems to play a role in determining how children of immigrants living in Italy perform at school. However, a crucial development for the present research consists in shedding light on the social integration of the children of immigrants who maintain transnational relationships with their parents. To that aim, we will exploit the information on the quality and quantity of

contacts between the children and their parents living abroad to refine the results generated by means of the regression models just presented. Moreover, multivariate techniques can be exploited to classify parenting styles and to interact them with other relevant characteristics of the children, so as to better inform the analysis.

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