

MARRIAGES OF SPOUSES WITH A MIGRATORY BACKGROUND: FOCUS ON "NEW ITALIANS"¹

Antonella Guarneri, Claudia Iaccarino, Maura Simone

Abstract. The advanced path of integration of migrants in Italy makes it increasingly difficult to measure family behaviours by type of couple. The aim of the following work is to analyse marriages with at least a spouse with migratory background by studying the type of couple in a "dynamic" way (considering the citizenship both at the time of birth and at the time of marriage). The data are from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) Survey on marriages, celebrated in Italy, validated also by using the integration with ISTAT estimates of citizenship acquisitions. Through descriptive analysis we compared the profiles of foreign citizens, new Italians and Italians by birth distinguished by gender. A particular focus is on the combination of the socio-demographic characteristics of the couple (e. g. age gap). Age-assortative mating patterns show clear differences by gender and citizenship. For intermarriages where the groom is Italian by birth, we observe the highest age gap (9 years, over 4 years more compared to the total of marriages); when the groom is a new Italian, on the contrary, the age gap drops to 6.2 years.

1. Introduction

The growing degree of "maturity" of immigration in Italy makes it increasingly difficult to measure family behaviours by type of couple. As we move forward in the integration process one of the most advanced steps is the acquisition of citizenship. In this way, however, it becomes more difficult to identify mixed couples considering only citizenship at the time of the event rather than at birth. Hence the classic Italian/foreigner dichotomy is fully joined by the "new" segment of Italian citizens of foreign origin.

After an increasing trend in acquisitions of citizenship, a small setback occurred in 2021: 121,457 citizenship acquisitions registered in Italy (about 8% less than in 2020) in part presumably attributable to the "long-term" effects of the pandemic by COVID-19. Today we are witnessing a progressive decrease in acquisitions by

¹ The article is exclusively expressing the authors' opinions. Although the paper is the result of joint work, sections are attributed as follows: paragraphs 1, 4 and 6 to Antonella Guarneri, paragraphs 3.2 and 5 to Claudia Iaccarino and paragraphs 2 and 3.1 to Maura Simone.

marriage (from almost 36% among those who became Italian citizens before 2011, to 12.0% in 2021) and indeed, more and more often, the acquisition of citizenship precedes marriage. In general, women represent 50.7% of those who have acquired Italian citizenship in 2021 but they reach over 82% among those who obtained it through marriage.

In this work we analysed the data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) Survey on marriages, an individual and exhaustive survey, which covers all marriages celebrated in Italy. For the first time in 2021 the information on Italian citizenship (from birth or by acquisition) was validated also by using the integration with ISTAT estimates of citizenship acquisitions.

The choice of partner is determined by both individual preferences and contextual factors (Kalmijn, 1998). But the marriage market also influences the choice which depends, in fact, on the availability of potential partners with similar socio-economic and cultural characteristics (De Rose and Fraboni, 2015; Kulu and Hannermann, 2016). Patterns of age-assortative mating that appears similar to those found in native-native marriages may reflect openness to foreign counterpart, whereas when they are more ascribable to status exchange theory, closely related to the notions of attractiveness in the marriage market, status considerations are important determinants of intermarriage in the native marriage market (Elwert, 2020).

Mixed marriage can be conceptualized as an indicator of integration (Tognetti Bordogna, 2019). Furthermore, getting married to a native and then acquiring the citizenship of the host country can certainly make easier entry into the labour market and into the host society. However, it is not always true that the wedding takes place after an integration process; it could rather signal a request for integration by attributing to marriage the specific role of sanctioning a formal type of integration (Azzolini and Guetto, 2017). This request for integration takes on an even different meaning if the mixed marriage concerns a foreign citizen and an Italian one by acquisition (Guarneri *et al.*, 2021).

The aim of the following work is to analyse marriages with at least a spouse with migratory background by studying the type of couple in a "dynamic" way; to this purpose we consider the spouses' citizenship at the time of birth and at the time of marriage according to some specific characteristics such as age differences between spouses and their places of residence.

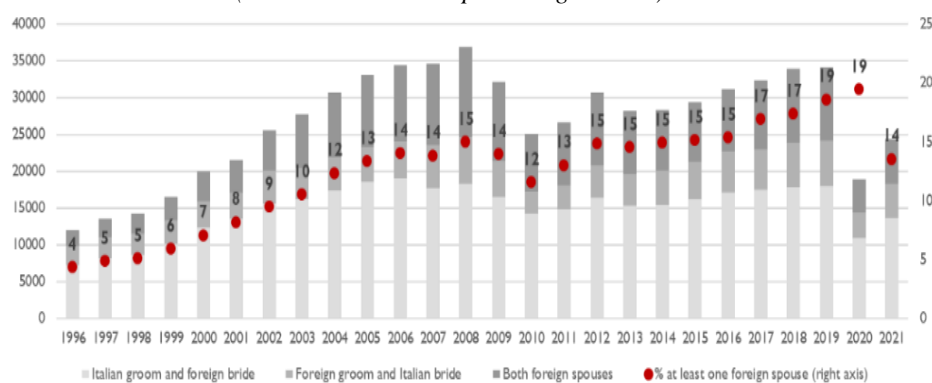
This analysis is a part of a more general research project that aims to study, in a longitudinal perspective, the paths for acquiring citizenship, focusing not only on marriages but also considering further events such as the birth of a child or the dissolution of the marriage. The idea is, therefore, to reconstruct and analyse, through the integration of archives, the sequence of stages of the main family and

reproductive behaviours of foreign-born citizens in Italy. This project belongs to the same line of analysis carried out by previous ISTAT projects².

2. The marriages with at least one foreign spouse in Italy

In the last decades, in Italy the phenomenon of marriages with spouses with foreign background has grown. From 1996 to the beginning of the new millennium, the percentage of marriages with at least one foreign spouse on the total of marriages is almost constantly increasing, from 4.3% to the peak observed in 2008 (15.0%). In the following two years (2009-2010) a particularly marked decrease was observed due to the collapse of foreign citizens' marriage, discouraged by legislative changes aimed at limiting marriages of convenience³. Overcome these negative effects, since 2011 the share of marriages between foreigners starts growing again (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Marriages with at least one foreign spouse, by spouses' citizenship. Italy, years 1996-2021 (absolute values and percentage values).



Source: Elaborations on ISTAT data

2 In the ISTAT project "Reception, integration and citizenship: new approaches for the analysis of migratory paths and models" marriages for type of couple were studied (considering not only the citizenship at the event but also that at birth); the results of this project were harmonized with those of the ISTAT project "A measure of Italian emigration through the integration and analysis of administrative data".

3 In order to prevent the celebration of marriages of convenience the article. 1 paragraph 15 of law no. 94 of July 2009 has modified the art. 116 of the Italian Civil Code having effects not only to mixed marriages but also to marriages with both foreign spouses. In July 2011, the Constitutional Court, with sentence n. 245/2011, considered constitutionally illegitimate this reformed article, limited to the words "as well as a document attesting the regularity of the stay in the Italian territory".

In 2021, 24,380 marriages were celebrated in Italy with at least one foreign spouse: of these, 24.9% are both foreigner, 56.2% with an Italian groom and a foreign bride, 18.8% with a foreign groom and an Italian bride (ISTAT, 2023). The number of these marriages is in clear recovery compared to 2020 (+29.5%), in which many couples had been forced to postpone their weddings, because of a period of suspension of civil and religious ceremonies, due to the pandemic by COVID-19.

A particular aspect that characterizes our country is the so-called “wedding tourism”. Italy exerts a strong attraction for many citizens from abroad, especially from most developed countries, who choose Italy as a place of celebration of their marriages. In 2020, because of restrictions on international movements due to the spread of COVID-19, marriages with both non-resident in Italy foreign spouses have fallen by 77.6%.

Net of this particular segment, marriages with both foreign spouses in 2021 were 4,508, on the increase compared to 2020 (+25.5%), but not sufficient to be back to pre-COVID levels (-23.9% to 2019). Mixed marriages or intermarriages (in which one spouse is Italian and the other one is a foreigner) amount to over 18 thousand and continue to represent the largest part of marriages with at least one foreign spouse (75.1%). In mixed couples, the most frequent type is that in which the groom is Italian, and the bride is from abroad; this type of marriage concerns 7.6% of the total number of celebrations at the national average level (13,703 weddings celebrated in 2021). The Italian women who chose a foreign partner were 4,595, 2.5% of the total brides. The cases with both foreign spouses were 6,082 (3.4% of total marriages).

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data sources

To show the first results of the new research project, the analysis is carried out using data collected from the Survey on marriages. The survey, conducted since 1926 by ISTAT, provides the official data of all marriages (religious and civil) celebrated in all Italian municipalities; these data are collected at the time of the formation of the Marriage Act (according to the provisions of the Civil Status regulation contained in the Presidential Decree of 3 November 2000, No. 396).

The availability of this database represents a great opportunity for many reasons. First, the characteristics of the data, individual and exhaustive, allow analysing the phenomenon of nuptiality, by marriage order, in relation to the main socio-demographic characteristics of the spouses. Second, the integration with other ISTAT sources (e.g. Estimates of Italian citizenship acquisitions) offers the

possibility of widening the information potential. Third, the availability of a historical data series allows analysis in a longitudinal perspective. Finally, a more disaggregated territorial classification if compared to sample surveys can be considered.

All these aspects have allowed us to analyse marriages with at least a spouse with migratory background by studying the combinations of citizenships in a "dynamic" way (for each spouse at the time of birth and at the time of marriage). Among intermarriages, over one in 10 involves an Italian spouse by acquisition; if we consider mixed marriages between Italian bride and foreign bridegroom, in one out four the Italian bride shows a foreign origin.

The significant increase in the presence of Italians by acquisition at the time of marriage is due to multiple factors. First, in recent years the acquisition has become more substantial, in line with a more advanced process of integration of foreign citizens, but, at the same time, there is a progressive decrease in the share of acquisitions by marriage. The type of mixed marriage, therefore, is changing over time, including a growing share of new Italian citizens who at birth had the same citizenship as the foreign partner.

3.2 Methods

The citizenship of the spouses, as mentioned, is one of the characteristics detected by the ISTAT Survey on marriages. It is possible to distinguish between Italian citizenship by birth and by acquisition. This information, nevertheless, in some cases is underestimated for lack in the data collection process. In order to overcome this underestimation, the estimates deriving from the elaboration ISTAT "Acquisitions of citizenship" have been used. These estimates came from a database built on the basis of the stock 2011 individual census data, the data on the type of acquisition from Ministry of Interior and the data of the new micro-demographic accounting information system. In a previous research (Strozza *et al.*, 2021), the analyses were conducted through data linkages between the 2012-2020 marriages' data with this database. This integration made it possible to identify the foreign resident citizens at birth and to observe, following a longitudinal approach, whether or not they have acquired Italian citizenship over time and more specifically got married after 2011.

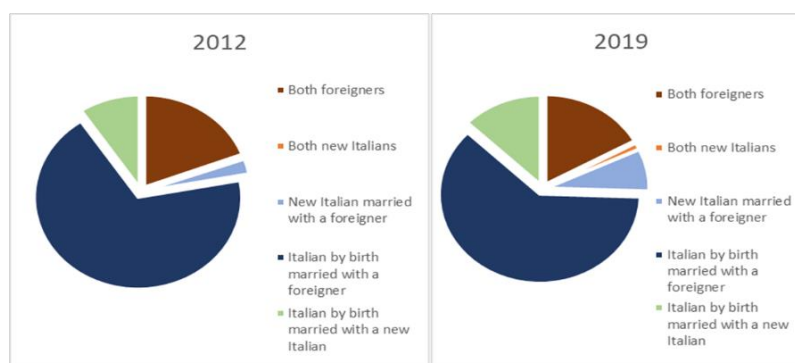
Going on this approach, the main analyses refer to the 2021 marriages' data collection, integrated with ISTAT estimates of citizenship acquisitions, updated to 1st January 2021. Through this integration it was possible either retrieving the information when it was missing or comparing the data and, possibly, correct them, when the information was present. In 2021 it was possible to correct more than 90% of cases where the data was not available, or it was incorrect.

Descriptive analyses have been performed to compare the profiles of foreign citizens and new Italians distinguished by different covariates as sex, age and residence. A particular focus has concerned the combination of the socio-demographic characteristics of the couple (e.g., age gap). A differential analysis allowed us to highlight the main peculiarities by type of couple (with the distinction also between Italian by birth and new Italian).

4. Considering citizenship in a dynamic way: first insights

The possibility of distinguishing the citizenship of Italian spouses, by birth or by acquisition, allows us to shed light on nuptial behaviour based on the migratory background (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Marriages with at least one foreign-born resident by type of couple. Italy, years 2012 and 2019 (percentage values).



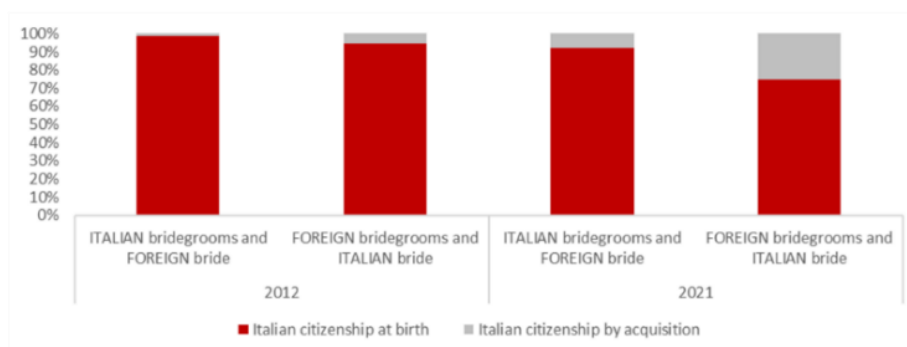
Source: Strozza, Conti and Tucci 2021; elaborations on ISTAT data.

As a previous result the great effort of combining the data updated to 1st January 2020 of the acquisitions of citizenship (in a longitudinal perspective) with the information provided by the marriage archives (from 2011 to 2019) was very fruitful.

Comparing the citizenships of the spouses who got married in 2012 with those of 2019, the first element to consider is, on one hand, the decrease in the share of both Italian spouses since birth, which goes from 85.6 to 80.6 %; as well as is decreasing also the share of marriages between both foreign spouses (from 19.2 to 17.0%) and that of marriages between an Italian spouse from birth and a foreigner (from 68.6 to 61.7%). On the other hand, couples with both Italians by acquisition are growing (from 0.3 to 1.0%), those with a new Italian and a foreigner (from 2.5 to 7.5%) and, finally, those with Italian from birth and Italian by acquisition (from 9.4 to 12.8%).

Continuing on this path with the most recent data, among mixed marriages over one in 10 involves an Italian spouse by acquisition in 2021 (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Mixed marriages by type of couple and citizenship. Italy, years 2012 and 2021 (percentage values).



Source: Elaborations on ISTAT data.

It is possible to refine the study by considering another aspect such as the gender dimension. As a matter of fact, if we consider mixed marriages between Italian and foreign bridegroom, in one out of four cases the Italian bride is foreign-born. This share was much lower, about 6%, in 2012.

5. Main Results

5.1 The age gap

Previous research analysed the age gap between spouses in mixed couples. These studies represent a situation where mixed marriages are usually more heterogamous relative to age (Elwert, 2020) and are often characterized by a larger age gap between partners (Stamper Balistreri *et al.*, 2017).

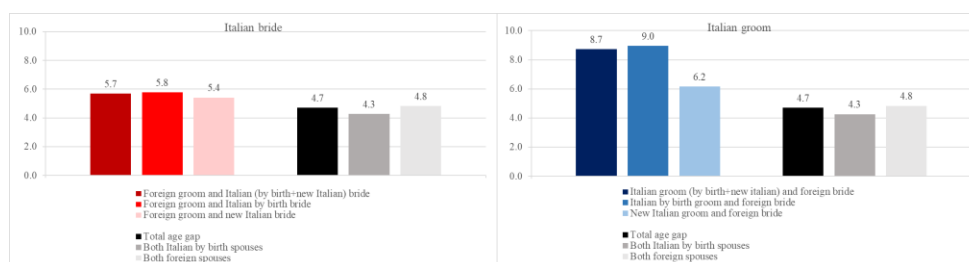
Different assortative mating patterns define a sort of “bargaining” between foreign and native partners: former’ relative youth in exchange presumably of latter’ social status and economic security (Gabrielli *et al.*, 2016).

One of the analyses that have been carried out concerns the age gap of the spouses, in relation to the type of couple. The goal was to analyse whether these same characteristics are also found in spouses who marry in Italy.

In a focus on the marriages with a foreign spouse, it is interesting to note that, in 2021, when the bride is Italian (by birth or new Italian), the age gap does not differ

much neither from the value calculated on the total of the spouses nor from the value calculated on couples with both foreign or both Italian spouses. In this case, in fact, the age gap is 5.7 years, not so far from 4.7 years, calculated on the total of marriages. The difference when the bride is Italian by birth and when the bride is a new Italian, moreover, is absolutely negligible (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – *Marriages with a foreign spouse. Italy, year 2021 (age gap in years).*



Source: Elaborations on ISTAT data

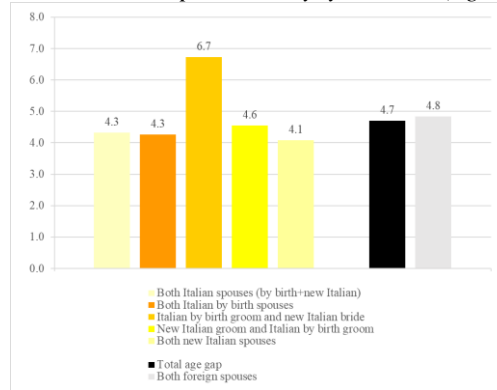
The situation, on the contrary, is very different if we focus on the couples in which it is the groom to be Italian. In this case the age gap is 8.7 years, about 4 years higher considering the age gap calculated both on the total of marriages and on the couples with both foreign spouses, 3.9 years if we consider the marriages with both Italian by birth spouses.

Focusing attention on Italian by birth grooms, the age gap reaches 9 years (over 4 years more compared to both the value calculated on the total of marriages and that of both foreign spouses). When the groom is a new Italian, on the contrary, the age gap drops to 6.2 years and the difference with the total number of marriages and with couples of both foreigners is reduced to just over a year.

A similar situation is found in couples with both Italian spouses: the age gap is below the value calculated on both all marriages and marriages with both foreign spouses. If, however, we also consider the migratory background, it is immediately evident that when the groom is Italian by birth and the bride is a new Italian, the situation changes. In this case, the age gap is about 2 years higher than the one calculated in the other types of couples (Figure 5).

It is therefore clear from this analysis how reductive it is to consider citizenship without taking into account the migratory history of individuals. It also seems to emerge that although the process of integration has reached an advanced step, as it is evident from having acquired Italian citizenship, behaviours, at least with regard to the phenomenon of marriage and particularly in the case of Italian men, are not yet fully in line with those of the host country.

Figure 5 – Marriages with both Italian spouses. Italy, year 2021 (age gap in years).



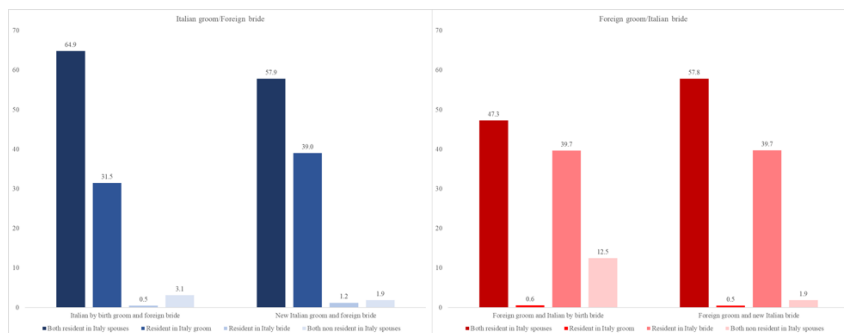
Source: Elaborations on ISTAT data

Age-assortative mating patterns here observed seem to confirm once more that a “variant” of the exchange theory can fit the Italian case (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014).

5.2 The residence in Italy

The residence in Italy was another relevant aspect to consider in this most general framework thinking particularly about transnational couples. When the spouses are both Italian, the residence in Italy does not seem to be affected by the Italian citizenship (by birth or by acquisition). On the contrary having a foreign citizenship seems to make the difference when there is at least a foreign spouse, the percentage reaches at most 65% (about 47.5% when the spouses are both foreigners) (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – Mixed marriages by citizenship and residence. Italy, year 2021 (percentage values).



Source: Elaborations on ISTAT data

Differently from the age gap, there are no substantial differences in the distinction between being Italian by birth or a new Italian. Focusing attention on couples with at least one foreign spouse and those in which both spouses are resident in Italy, it is possible to notice that when the groom is Italian, in most cases the couple resides in Italy, although with a decrease from 64.7 to 57.9 when you move from Italian citizenship by birth to Italian citizenship by acquisition.

The case in which the bride is Italian is different. In this case, only 47.3% of couples choose to live in Italy; a percentage that rises to 57.8% when the bride is a new Italian. In both types of couple, it seems that for women the marriage with a foreign groom often means to marry also his country of origin. For women, moreover, being a new Italian citizen has more weight, in choosing to stay in Italy, than being an Italian from birth.

6. Conclusions and further steps

By overcoming the Italian/foreigner dichotomous vision, the opportunity is offered to focus attention on the "new citizens" who represent a little-known portion of the population that bears characteristics and needs potentially different from those of both natives and foreign citizens (Strozza *et al.*, 2021). To achieve this goal the general idea is rebuilding in a longitudinal perspective, through the integration of archives, the family and reproductive behaviours of foreign-born citizens in Italy in the last decade, focusing attention on the sequence of steps that have characterized the path of integration of new citizens.

Another relevant point to think about concerns the indirect effects of the COVID-19 epidemic that are visible, with different times and intensities, on family and reproductive behaviours in the various European countries with differences and different intensity on the various segments of the population (ISTAT, 2021; Castagnaro and Prati, 2022); last but not least, the pandemic has also had repercussions on the process of acquiring citizenship itself, highlighting a slowdown (ISTAT, 2022). As further step the idea is monitoring on which type of couple the repercussions of the pandemic are more evident and with which potential repercussions (in terms of family behaviour and inclusion paths).

Lastly, always adopting a longitudinal perspective, it is possible to analyse how many foreign citizens acquire citizenship in the years following marriage updating previous analyses' results. Strong differences can be observed by type of couple, as well as by gender. The analysis by marriage cohort allows observing what happens in the following years in terms of citizenship acquisition (Guarneri *et al.*, 2021).

The analysis of nuptial behaviours (and more in general of demographic and family attitudes) in connection with the acquisition of citizenship underlines the

importance of having statistics that adapt to the new social complexity and provide details that can contribute to the correct interpretation of the phenomena.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge support from ISTAT Thematic project Lab 2 ID 260 “Percorsi di stabilizzazione dei cittadini stranieri e di origine straniera: analisi dei comportamenti familiari attraverso l’integrazione tra fonti” (Call for projects 2022). This project ideally continues the activities of ISTAT Project 118 “Accoglienza, integrazione e cittadinanza: nuovi approcci per l’analisi dei percorsi e dei modelli migratori” and ISTAT Project 138 “Una misura delle emigrazioni italiane attraverso l’integrazione e l’analisi di dati amministrativi” (Call for projects 2017).

References

- AZZOLINI D., GUETTO R. 2017. La crescita delle unioni miste in Italia: un indicatore di accresciuta integrazione degli immigrati e maggiore apertura della società?, *Mondi Migranti*, Vol. 2/2017, pp. 33-55.
- CASTAGNARO C., PRATI S. 2022. Effetto della prima e seconda ondata dell'epidemia da Covid-19 sulle nascite in Italia. In DIPARTIMENTO PER LE POLITICHE DELLA FAMIGLIA *L'impatto della pandemia di Covid-19 su natalità e condizione delle nuove generazioni, Secondo rapporto del Gruppo di esperti “Demografia e Covid-19”*, Firenze: Istituto degli Innocenti, pp. 12-21.
- DE ROSE A., FRABONI R. 2015. Educational assortative mating in Italy: what can Gini’s homogamy index still say?, *Genus*, Vol. LXXI, No. 2-3, pp. 53-71.
- ELWERT A. 2020. Opposites attract: Assortative mating and immigrant–native intermarriage in contemporary Sweden, *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 675-709.
- GABRIELLI, G., PATERNO, A. 2016. Selection criteria of partner: comparison between transnational and homogamous couples in Italy, *Genus*, Vol. LXXI, No. 2-3, pp. 137-155.
- GUARNERI A., STROZZA S., TUCCI E. 2021. Acquisizione della cittadinanza e comportamenti demografici. Il caso dei matrimoni e delle emigrazioni. In STROZZA S., CONTI C. and TUCCI E. (Eds.) *Nuovi cittadini. Diventare Italiani nell’era della globalizzazione*, Bologna: Il Mulino, pp. 99-131.
- ISTAT 2021. *Rapporto annuale 2021. La situazione del paese*, <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/259060>.

- ISTAT 2022. Cittadini non comunitari in Italia. Anni 2021-2022, *Statistiche Report*, <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/276508>.
- ISTAT 2023. Matrimoni, unioni civili, separazioni e divorzi. Anno 2021, *Statistiche Report*, <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/281565>.
- KALMIJN M. 1998. Intermarriage and Homogamy: Causes, Patterns, Trends, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 4, pp. 395-421.
- KULU H., HANNEMANN T. 2016. Mixed Marriages Among Immigrants and Their Descendants in the United Kingdom, *Report: Country-specific case studies on mixed marriages, Working Paper Series, Families and Societies*, Vol. 57, pp. 3-34.
- MAFFIOLI D., PATERNO A., GABRIELLI G. 2014. International married and unmarried unions in Italy: Criteria of mate selection, *International Migration*, Vol 52, No. 3, pp. 160-176.
- STAMPER BALISTRERI K., JOYNER K., KAO G. 2017. Trading Youth for Citizenship? The Spousal Age Gap in Cross-Border Marriages, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 43, Issue 3, pp. 399-591.
- STROZZA S., CONTI C., TUCCI E. 2021. *Nuovi cittadini. Diventare Italiani nell'era della globalizzazione*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- TOGNETTI BORDOGNA M. 2019. *I matrimoni misti nel nuovo millennio. Legami familiari tra costruzione sociale e regolamentazione amministrativa*. Milano: Franco Angeli.