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Selection criteria of partner: comparison between transnational and homogamous couples in Italy

1. INTRODUCTION

Transnational couples have been defined as a “melting pot” of socio-cultural and behavioural diversities, as they show characteristics which clearly distinguish them from homogamous unions (Maffioli *et al.*, 2012). The peculiarities of these unions have been described and explained by many researchers that developed several theoretical approaches. The exchange theory (developed by Davis in 1941 and by Merton in 1941 and described in the next section) is the oldest, most well-known and influential of the interpretative paradigm on the subject.

In Italy, little research has been carried out on transnational unions, most of all because of the “novelty” of the increase of these couples, and of insufficient availability of suitable data. However, some pioneering works of the 1990s are a useful reference in order to judge the persistence over time of the observed specificities and trends (Barbagli, 1984; Maffioli and Sonnino, 1990; Sonnino, 1993; Maffioli and Ferruzza, 1994; Maffioli, 1996; Istat, 1998).

Bearing in mind the relevant literature and using the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey, we aim at analysing the patterns of mate selection of transnational unions in Italy, in a comparative perspective with all-Italian and all-foreigner homogamous couples. In this perspective, our purpose is also to follow up the results of a recent article (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014), that highlighted that the greater “bargaining power” in terms of socio-economic status, exercised by the Italian partner compared to the foreigner, is mostly “counterbalanced” by qualities which the latter offers. To this purpose, we compare some results of Maffioli’s article that refers to data coming from the 2005 Births and Mothers Sample Survey, with the updated data of 2012. Moreover, we aim to verify if and to what extent the exchange theory fit the recent assortative mating in the Italian context, considering some characteristics of the unions (differences in age and occupational status between partners) and examining the elements of gender heterogeneity. Lastly, we seek to identify who “gains” and who “loses” in the union, observing the mate matching patterns between partners, that contribute to define the distribution of “power” in the couple.

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2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The formation and spread of transnational couples has increasingly attracted over time the attention of researchers in the countries where the presence of ethnic groups characterized by different cultures, religions and/or social contexts highlights both the necessity and the difficulty of the integration process.

Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, many analyses have been produced to observe and evaluate levels, trends and determinants of this phenomenon in USA, Canada, Australia (Pagnini and Morgan, 1990; Kalmijn, 1993; Jones and Luijckx, 1996; Qian, 1999; Tzeng, 2000; Kalbach, 2002; Meng and Gregory, 2005) and, more rarely and recently, in European and Asian immigration countries (Girard, 1964; Collet, 1991; Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2006; Kim, 2007; Belanger and Wang, 2012; Esteve *et al.*, 2012; Jones, 2012; Kim, 2012; Koelet *et al.*, 2012; Lanzieri, 2012).

Generally speaking, scholars aimed to outline and explain the role played, in the integration process of immigrants, by transnational unions, that were been alternatively considered either as an effect or as a driving force of this process (for a review, see Dribe and Lundt, 2008). In this perspective, transnational unions are predominantly regarded as a consequence rather than a determinant of integration, since, in very brief terms, the integration which has already occurred (represented by a greater availability of socio-economic resources and/or by a higher level of insertion in the host context) makes marriage with a native more likely.

Several researchers developed various theoretical approaches on this topic: exchange, assimilation, social stratification and segmented assimilation theories.

The most influential of these ones is the exchange theory that referred to interracial marriage between blacks and whites in the United States (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941) focusing on the qualities and behaviours, which the individual possesses, that are available for exchange. The authors 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 status. Generally speaking, exchange theory predicts that in interracial marriages one partner's socio-economic status is exchanged for the other's racial caste status.

Many authors have recently reinterpreted and supported this theory, completely or partially with some adjustments, in the current contexts of immigration countries. In short, they argue that the immigrant who marries a member of the host community "barter" a high socio-economic status with the high "ethnic" status of the autochthonous partner (Kalmijn, 1998; Furtado, 2006; Qian and Lichter, 2007; Furtado and Theodoropoulos, 2008). On the other hand, some researchers criticized or questioned this theoretical approach specifically in relation to black-white intermarriage, offering different explanations for their divergent findings and showing how gender differences among couples were been mistaken for specific patterns of exchange (Rosenfeld, 2002; 2005; Gullickson and Fu, 2009; Kalmijn, 2010).

In Italy, starting from the beginning of the 20th century, scholars conducted above all analyses on the field of homogamy (Gini, 1915; Savorgnan, 1923; Barbagli, 1984; Barbara, 1985). In this country, the increase of immigration flows, that started from the end of the 1970s, produced a growth in the number of transnational unions; nevertheless, also due to the relative scarcity of information, this topic have been analysed only recently based mainly on statistics on marriages and births.

Some authors showed the presence of different combinations of nationalities, with foreign partners from countries and cultures of even distant national contexts (Guarneri *et al.*, 2008; Maffioli and Paterno, 2008). On the other hand, many of the performed analyses on the patterns of mate selection indicated, among other characteristics, the persistence of high levels of social and cultural homogamy between the partners (Maffioli and Ferruzza, 1994; Maffioli, 1996; Maffioli *et al.*, 2012).

From the time of the first studies on the subject in Italy, some further analyses supported the hypothesis that transnational couples are particularly fragile (Maffioli and Sonnino, 1990; Maffioli, 1994; Maffioli *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, much theoretical reflection has been developed and many observations have been made of transnational couples in particular contexts (support to problematic families, legal disputes), but their limited empirical bases are insufficient grounds for general interpretations (Tognetti Bordogna, 1996).

A recent article (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014), utilizing individual data from the 2005 Births Sample Survey, highlighted that the greater “bargaining power” in terms of socio-economic status, exercised by the Italian partner compared to the foreigner, is mostly “counterbalanced” by qualities which the latter offers, such as a younger age and a higher educational level.

In this perspective, investigating the “market” of married and informal transnational unions, we aim to verify if the results of the previous relevant literature, and in particular of the last quoted article, fit the characteristics and the “functioning mechanism” of very recent assortative mating in the Italian context.

3. TRANSNATIONAL COUPLES IN ITALY: DYNAMICS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Official data produced by the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Istat) recorded the nationality of the respondents in the last three Population Censuses (1991, 2001, and 2011). Available Census data (Table 1) stress firstly the notable growth of transnational couples involving an Italian citizen, which passed from 65.1 thousand in 1991 to 320.2 thousand in 2011 and reached the notable quota of 9.6% on total couples in Italy and of the 31.9% of the couples with at least one foreign partner.

The union formed by an Italian man and a foreign woman are preponderant compared to those formed by an Italian women and a foreign man (respectively 82.0% and 18.0% in 2011). The first typology of couples increased

by 591.4% between 1991 and 2011, while the pairings formed by an Italian women and foreign man grew by 278.3% in the same period.

Regarding the countries of citizenship, the transnational unions with a partner from European and Northern American countries, although most numerous, are slightly declining (from 66.6% in 1991 to 64.8% in 2011). In particular, between 2001 and 2011, among couples with foreign women, the quota of European Union and Northern American countries increased, while the proportion of East European countries decreased; this is just a formal change, due to the admission of 12 countries in the European Union, which occurred during the decade, with the consequent “shift” in their classification (Istat, 2015a). The preference of Italian men for East European women (particularly Romanian, Polish, Ukrainian and Albanian) and for the South and Central Americans (mainly Brazilian) remains unchanged. The highest values of couples in which the foreign partner is the man correspond to some African nationalities (particularly Moroccan and Tunisian) (Istat, 2014).

Table 1 – *Transnational couples by typology (a) and areas of citizenship of the partners, 1991, 2001, and 2011 censuses, percentage values and number of couples*

Citizenship of the foreign partner	1991			2001			2011		
	FW/IM	IW/FM	Total	FW/IM	IW/FM	Total	FW/IM	IW/FM	Total
Europe/North. America	47.1	19.5	66.6	51.1	14.1	65.2	55.1	9.7	64.8
of which:									
E.U., North America	36.9	15.4	52.4	29.3	11.0	40.4	37.4	7.1	44.6
Eastern Europe	10.2	4.1	14.3	21.7	3.1	24.8	17.7	2.6	20.2
Other continents	21.1	12.3	33.4	25.0	9.8	34.8	26.9	8.3	35.2
of which:									
Northern Africa	3.0	4.8	7.8	2.8	4.5	7.3	5.2	3.6	8.8
Other Africa	2.1	1.2	3.3	2.7	0.9	3.6	2.7	1.2	3.9
Asia and Oceania	5.3	3.5	8.8	4.0	1.5	5.5	5.6	1.1	6.6
Centr. South. Amer.	10.7	2.9	13.6	15.6	2.8	18.4	13.5	2.4	15.8
Total	68.2	31.8	100.0	76.1	23.9	100.0	82.0	18.0	100.0
N. of couples (in thousands)	44.4	20.7	65.1	151.2	47.5	198.7	262.6	57.6	320.2

Note: (a) the acronyms describe the couple typology: Italian woman-foreign man (IW/FM), foreign woman-Italian man (FW/IM).

Source: for 1991 and 2001 data, Maffioli and Paterno, 2008; for 2011 data, Istat, 2014.

The gender heterogeneity, here represented by a greater tendency to exogamy of Italian men than women and by a differentiated systems of “geographical” preferences of the two genders, already very strong in 1991, has strengthened in the subsequent years. It is determined by a complex set of factors. Among these we quote: the composition by sex and marital status of migration flows to Italy (in which an increasing participation of single women was observed), the different strategies of integration of immigrants by gender, the characteristics of the “union market”, and the different exogamous/homogamous tendencies of the foreign communities (Rossi and Strozza,

2007; Impicciatore and Strozza, 2015). In particular, should be recalled that Islamic law prohibits heterogamous marriage to Muslim women. On the other hand, the low exogamy of autochthonous women may depend on the fact that immigrant men less often hold the characteristics that configure them as “candidates” for unions, since a satisfactory socio-economic situation is usually a more significant condition for men than it is for women (Saraceno, 2007).

4. DATA AND METHODS

In the absence of more exhaustive information, the main data used in the further analyses come from the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey that was periodically conducted by Istat at a national level. The survey concerned 17,603 mothers whose children were born in the period between July 2009 and June 2010 (Istat, 2015b). Our sample concerns only parental married and informal couples that recently had a child and that are on average, by definition, younger, more fecund and more recently formed compared with all unions. The couples that have previously completed family formation and those who cannot or do not have children are therefore excluded from the sample.

Notwithstanding, interesting elements emerge from comparisons of some couple-level characteristics with the corresponding group of homogamous parental couples (both Italians and foreigners), that throw light on the functioning of the “union market” and assortative mating in Italy. Moreover, the data used have the advantage that they do not consider marriages “of convenience”, whose purpose is to enable the immigrant spouse to obtain Italian citizenship (not a rare phenomenon among immigrant people, Istat, 2015a).

From an operative point of view, it has to be specified that we eliminated from the analyses unstable or occasional unions, since they can show particular characteristics affecting the patterns of mate matching. We excluded also the unions whose children were not recognized by the father, since the type of couple is defined with reference to the nationality of the parents of the child. We decided to use the criterion of citizenship at birth, instead of that of country of birth, because the latter can produce an over-estimation of the foreigners, due to the high number of Italians born abroad when Italy was a sending country of migratory flows.

Unfortunately, the available data did not allow us to build a classification of foreign partners by single citizenship, due to the absence of this information for the men, while for the women the only available data refers to the macro-area of origin. Another lack of the available data refers to the educational level of men that was not detected in the 2012 Survey.

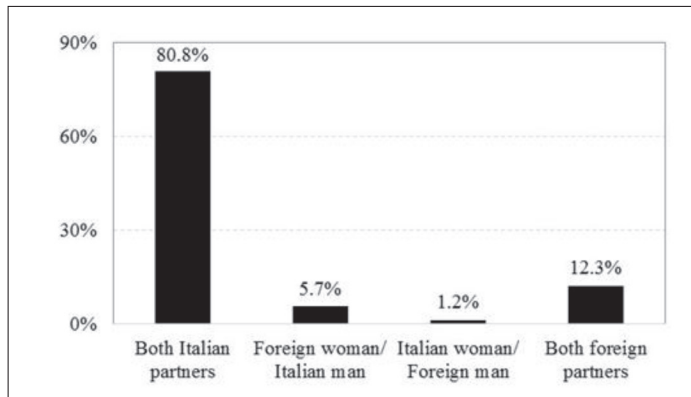
In our analysis, we highlighted the role of gender, distinguishing the transnational couples according to the sex of the foreign partner.

As our sample includes only parental couples, and unfit for assessing the degree and the determinants of exogamy, we have not applied the conventional and most used approach in the multivariate analyses. In particular, we do not analyse the determinants of an individual to form a transnational union. Conversely, we apply multinomial and logistic regressions to verify whether the combinations of partners' characteristics, which emerged among transnational couples from descriptive analyses, are really to be attributed to the transnational/homogamous couples' typology, controlling the influence of spurious factors.

5. TRANSNATIONAL AND HOMOGAMOUS COUPLES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The observed parental couples are classified by citizenship of the partners as follows (Figure 1): 80.8 % are formed by both Italians (IW/IM), 5.7% by a foreign woman and an Italian man (FW/IM), 1.2% by an Italian woman and a foreign man (IW/FM), and 12.3% by both foreigners (FW/FM). Among the latter group, the only exploitable information shows a very high homogamy: in 73.5% of the weddings celebrated in 2014, both spouses had the same nationality, especially for those partners coming from Asia and Africa (Istat, 2015c).

Figure 1 – *Percentage of cases by couple typology (weighted data), 2012*



Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.

As we consider the citizenship at birth, it emerges that, among women, 28.5% acquired Italian citizenship afterwards, and 18.6% of them through marriage; among men, these values are respectively 46.4% and only 8.5%. If we consider the acquisition of citizenship as a proxy of the achievement of a high level of integration, these data suggest that, among men, marriage can be seen as a result of integration while, among women, integration can be subsequent to marriage (Istat, 2015a).

Observing the variables available only for the female partner (Table 2), with reference to educational levels, we note that the percentage of women in FW/IM unions that achieved secondary and university degrees (70.1%) is higher than in other types of couples. This result is consistent with previous researches stressing that the elevated level of education of immigrants, although it does not automatically involve an improvement in socio-economic status, can often be connected with cultural and/or linguistic preparation, open-mindedness and social contacts, that can be seen as factors that favour exogamy (Kalmjin, 1998; Kalmjin and van Tubergen, 2006).

The quota of women who have had a previous marital experience is slightly higher than 7% in transnational couples and a little above 3% in homogamous unions. To our knowledge, this aspect has not been found for other countries, but has been underlined yet in a recent article on Italy (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014).

Table 2 – *Educational level of woman, previous marital and parenthood experiences of partners and partners' relationship at beginning of pregnancy, by couple typology(a), percentage values, 2012*

Variables	IW/IM	FW/IM	IW/FM	FW/FM
<i>Woman's level of education (%)</i>				
None or primary school	36.8	28.9	40.3	37.2
Secondary school	45.4	51.1	40.4	42.8
University	17.8	20.0	19.3	20.0
<i>Woman's previous marital experience (%)</i>				
Yes	3.6	7.1	7.3	3.9
No	96.4	92.9	92.7	96.1
<i>Partners' pre-union births (at least one) (%)</i>				
No births	96.9	88.3	94.7	96.9
Woman's births	2.8	10.0	5.1	1.5
Man's birth	0.3	1.7	0.2	1.6
Both partners' births	3.1	11.7	5.3	3.1
<i>Partners' relationship at beginning of pregnancy (%)</i>				
Marriage	85.2	71.0	69.9	91.5
Informal union	14.8	29.0	30.1	8.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: (a) the acronyms describe the couple typology: both Italians (IW/IM), foreign woman-Italian man (FW/IM), Italian woman-foreign man (IW/FM), both foreigners (FW/FM).

Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.

The available information about both the partners (Table 2) considers firstly the presence of at least one birth coming from previous experiences of couple and shows that the quota of women who were mothers before the current union reaches 10.0% in FW/IM couples and 5.1% in IW/FM unions, while it remains lower than 3% in homogamous pairings. This condition is

less widespread among men, where it reaches the highest values in FW/IM (1.7%) and in FW/FM (1.6%) unions. Such results suggest that the women who previously lived such an experience often benefit from the exogamous “union market”, where a foreign partner can embody a new “opportunity”.

Data about partners’ relationship at beginning of pregnancy highlight that informal unions are much more spread among FW/IM and IW/FM unions (about 30%) than in homogamous Italian (14.8%) and foreign ones (8.5%). Therefore, also the transnational pairings observed so far confirm, as emerged from previous studies, that they are “particularly hesitant to transform an informal relationship into a legally recognized one, because of communication and decisional difficulties originating in their different cultural backgrounds, or by unfriendly attitudes of their families and/or social environment” (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014, p. 164).

Estimating the mean ages of the women and of the men (Table 3), in a general context in which the former are on average younger than the latter, the obtained values are very dissimilar by type of couples. In fact, the relative youth of the women is the highest for the FW/IM ones (-8.9 years), and the lowest for the IW/FM unions (-2.1 years). These characteristics appear to be rather constant in time and there is evidence that they would be much more marked if all mixed couples were considered rather than parental couples alone (Maffioli and Paterno, 2008; Maffioli *et al.*, 2012).

Classifying the unions by the type of differences in the age of both partners, it is evident, on one hand, that in FW/IM unions, men are older than women in a greater quota of cases (85.6%) than the other typologies of pairings (with a value of only 50.3% for IW/FM unions); on the other hand, women are older than their partners among IW/FM couples in 23.3% of cases, against values under 9% in the other types of unions.

The conditions of both partners in the labour market (Table 3) refer to current situation that we used as a proxy of the unobserved one at the time of union. The quota of housewives is much more widespread among foreign women in transnational (47.4%) and homogamous (46.2%) pairings than among Italian women (around 30%). Moreover, foreign women are disadvantaged compared to autochthonous ones also considering the occupational levels, that is medium or high in a lower proportion for the former; this is particularly evident among FW/FM unions. The same disadvantaged positions emerge observing the occupational level of men: compared to the natives, the foreigners are more often employed in low qualified work, and have higher unemployment levels.

When both spouses are employed, we observe in all typologies of couples the spread of the unions in which the man performs more qualified activities than the woman did. With reference to the more rare cases of women performing “better” professional activities than men do, the highest percentage is reached within IW/FM unions (21.0%), while the lowest occurs within FW/

IM couples (10.2%). These results, that are undoubtedly related to the worse general conditions of immigrants in the Italian labour market (Strozza *et al.*, 2009; Paterno *et al.*, 2012), make it evident that the foreign partner, whether man or woman, in many cases takes advantage from the higher social and professional position of his/her autochthonous counterpart.

Table 3 – *Age and working differences between partners, by couple typology, percentages and mean values, 2012*

Variables	IW/IM	FW/IM	IW/FM	FW/FM
<i>Partners' mean age^(a)</i>				
Woman's mean age	34.1	32.1	32.3	30.9
Man's mean age	37.8	41.0	34.4	36.2
Woman's mean relative youth	-3.7	-8.9	-2.1	-5.3
<i>Age differences^(b) (%)</i>				
Woman older than man	8.6	6.4	23.3	7.9
Same age group	26.0	9.0	26.4	16.3
Man older than women	65.4	85.6	50.3	75.8
<i>Woman's working condition (%)</i>				
Not active, unemployed	11.8	16.5	18.3	20.1
Housewife	31.4	47.4	30.6	46.2
Low professional level	14.4	16.3	14.9	25.8
Medium professional level	35.4	17.0	30.5	7.2
High professional level	7.0	2.8	5.7	0.7
<i>Man's working condition (%)</i>				
Not active, unemployed	8.4	13.8	15.2	16.9
Low professional level	34.1	27.2	44.4	62.4
Medium professional level	38.8	42.0	24.1	17.1
High professional level	18.7	17.1	16.4	3.6
<i>Occupational differences^(c) (%)</i>				
Woman Higher	14.3	10.2	21.0	16.0
Same level	39.9	44.4	31.0	45.5
Woman Lower	45.8	45.4	48.0	38.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: (a) since the answers of the interviewed on age union contained too many missing, we had to use the information on age at the interview; this disadvantage obviously does not affect the calculation of the mean age differences; (b) man's age minus woman's age; (c) the working condition gap was constructed assigning a value to each activity - ordered according to increasing prestige levels as follows: unqualified worker (labourer, worker from home, apprentice or domestic worker); cooperative member or worker; employee or shopkeeper; professional or white collar; manager or entrepreneur - and then subtracting the woman's level from the man's level.

Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.

This outcome allows us to hypothesize that, in many cases, a younger age may be a desired characteristic that the foreign partners offer, "exchanging" it with appreciated characteristics of the native, such as a better condition in the labour market and, presumably, his/her "ethnic status". We do not have

information about the latter, but previously quoted researches (see section 2) highlighted that it can be represented by a plurality of aspects. Among them are the high social prestige, and/or the membership to the autochthonous group, that commonly guarantees the accessibility of social networks.

6. AT THE ROOTS OF THE DIFFERENCES

Descriptive analyses show specific partners' characteristics and mate selection patterns within transnational couples, but do not consider their reciprocal influences or distinguish between the various aspects separately examined. Therefore, we applied regression models to establish the independence and the strength of these relationships (Table 4). The choice of the issues to examine by multivariate analysis was influenced both by the quoted theoretical hypotheses, and by the availability of data.

Firstly, we considered the age of the two partners and applied a multinomial regression model taking as reference the couples in which the women is younger than man, versus the two following categories: coetaneous partners, and women older than men. The control variables, in addition to the typology of couple and to the partners' relationship (marriage vs. informal union), refers to the woman (educational level, occupational level, and civil status at union) and to the man (occupational level).

The results obtained fully confirm the relationships that emerged from descriptive analysis. Compared with women in IW/IM unions, the foreign partners of Italian men have a lower probability of being coetaneous or older than their counterpart has. The opposite occurs in the case of Italian women joined to foreign men that are almost three times more likely to be older than their partners are. Women in FW/FM pairings have a lower probability of being coetaneous with their consort and a higher risk of being older than him.

With reference to other aspects, a greater risk of relative older age of the woman is related with informal unions, with the latter's having experience of previous unions and high level of education. A negative link is showed between the condition of the woman of being unemployed or employed in low-level activities, and the probability of the latter of being older than her partner has.

As we have already noted, an interesting aspect that distinguishes foreign women from Italian women relates to their occupational situation, and particularly to their very high tendency not to perform activities outside the home. In this perspective, excluding the persons who were unemployed or inactive for other reasons, a logistic model was developed, which opposes housewives to working women (considered as reference). The variables included in the model are the same as those used for the previous analyses, clearly excluding the woman's occupational level and including the age of both members of the unions.

Table 4 – *Determinants of partners' differences in age and occupation (a), 2012*

Variables	Age difference ref.: woman younger than man (multinomial model)				Housewives vs. employed women ^(b) (logistic model)		Occupational difference ref.: woman lower than man (multinomial model)			
	Same age		Woman older		exp(β)	Sig.	Same level		Woman higher	
	exp(β)	Sig.	exp(β)	Sig.			exp(β)	Sig.	exp(β)	Sig.
<i>Citizenship of partners (ref.: both Italians)</i>										
FW/IM	0.355 ***		0.639 ***		3.914 ***		1.029		0.705 *	
IW/FM	1.110		2.615 ***		0.854		0.882		1.622 **	
FW/FM	0.745 ***		1.178 *		1.678 ***		1.404 ***		1.385 ***	
<i>Partners' relationship (ref.: marital)</i>										
Informal	0.957		1.621 ***		0.399 ***		0.944		1.044	
<i>Woman age (ref.: <24)</i>										
25-29					0.783 ***		1.036		0.919	
30-34					0.456 ***		1.234 *		1.038	
35-39					0.375 ***		1.226		1.142	
40+					0.363 ***		1.289 **		1.257	
<i>Woman's educational level (ref.: low)</i>										
Middle	1.253 ***		1.145 *		0.378 ***		0.691 ***		0.877	
High	1.659 ***		1.364 ***		0.116 ***		0.605 ***		0.573 ***	
<i>Woman's occupational level (ref.: low)^(c)</i>										
Not employed	0.880 **		0.676 ***							
Middle	1.070		0.830 **							
High	1.001		0.916							
<i>Woman's civil status at union (ref.: unmarried)</i>										
Divorced or widow	1.122		3.875 ***		0.648 ***		1.161		1.530 ***	
<i>Man's age (ref.: <24)</i>										
25-29					0.921		1.152		0.901	
30-34					0.886		0.979		0.687	
35-39					0.981		0.917		0.652	
40+					1.155		0.831		0.595 **	
<i>Man's occupational level (ref.: low)</i>										
Not employed	0.876 *		0.935		1.023					
Middle	1.048		1.008		0.863 ***					
High	1.002		0.918		0.887 **					
Constant term	0.315 ***		0.118 ***		2.931 ***		1.102 ***		0.586 ***	

Notes: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01; (a) variables that in exploratory analyses proved to be not statistically significant were excluded from the models; (b) we do not consider in the model women who were unemployed or inactive for other reasons; (c) we joined the not employed women to the housewives because if we had divided these two categories, the variable would have lost significance, although maintaining the same direction with respect to the dependent ones.

Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.

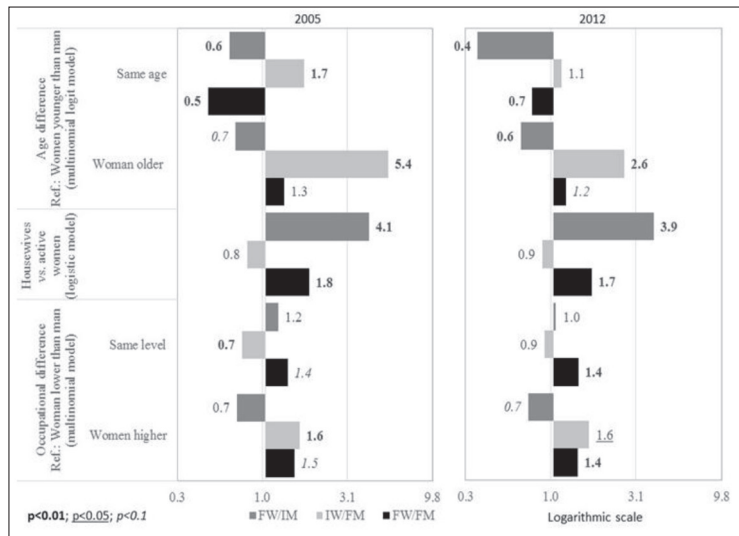
Performed elaborations show, above all, that the foreign women in transnational unions have almost four times the risk of not performing professional activities than those in IW/IM unions and that a similar relationship, but with lesser strength, occurs for the women in FW/FM unions. All the other characteristics are negatively related to the probability of being a housewife. In particular, the prolonging of studies is not recognized in the labour market, possibly because of the difficulties experienced by many foreigners, and

especially women, in finding work suitable for the educational level they have achieved (Paterno *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the risk of being a housewife is reasonably reduced for the women that are in informal unions, compared to those that are married.

Lastly, we observed exclusively the pairings in which both partners are employed. This group was analysed by applying a multinomial model that considers the following three situations concerning occupational levels: lower for the woman than the man (reference category), same for both partners, and higher for the woman than the man. Control variables are the same as in the previous model, with the obvious exclusion of the partners' occupational levels.

Obtained outcomes show firstly that, in comparison with IW/IM couples, foreign women in transnational unions risk to be relatively disadvantaged in their professional position with respect to their partners. On the contrary, women in IW/FM and FW/FM unions have greater probability of occupying professions of higher level than their counterpart. Other results indicate that the characteristics negatively related to the risk for the female partner to perform a lower level employment than the male are to be highly educated and to be older than 40, while an opposite effect is exercised if the woman has had previous marital experience.

Figure 2 – *Odd-ratios in age and occupation by the typology of couple, 2005 and 2012*



Note: The odds of the full models are in Table 4 for 2012 and Appendix table 1 for 2005.
Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.

In order to compare such results with those emerged from a recent article (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014) and to provide robust evidences of them, we conduct the same regression analysis using the previous Births and Mothers Sample Survey of 2005 and adopting the same methodological criteria, as well as the same sample characteristics and variables. The independent variable, whose explicative potentiality we intend to compare between 2005 and 2012, is the typology of couple by citizenship and gender of partners (Figure 2), while the other variables are introduced in the models to edge against compositional effects (see Appendix Table 1).

Generally speaking, the picture is almost the same comparing 2005 and 2012 data. Thus, the results referred to both Surveys confirm that the greater “bargaining power” in terms of socio-economic status, exercised by the Italian partner compared to the foreigner, is mostly “counterbalanced” by qualities, which the latter offers, such as a younger age. Moreover, the lower level of employment of foreign partner than the counterpart could affect the distribution of “power” within the transnational couple in leading him/her to a condition of at least economic dependency.

7. CONCLUSION

The descriptive and multivariate analyses performed allow us to formulate some concluding remarks with reference to the aims of this paper (see section 1).

Firstly, obtained results highlight the presence of distinctive mate selection patterns of transnational couples, compared to homogamous ones. In fact, with regard to the age of the partners, among FW/IM unions, women are much more likely to be younger than their partners are, while the opposite occurs in the case of women in IW/FM couples. Moreover, the tendency to be housewives is much more widespread among foreign women than among Italian ones. When the women perform work activities outside home, if they are joined with Italian men, they show higher risk to be disadvantaged in their professional level with respect to their partners, while if they are coupled with foreign men, they have higher likelihood of occupying positions of upper level than their counterparts have.

These results are completely in line with the ones emerged in the previous article we aimed to follow up (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014), and therefore we argue that our comparative analysis supports the described findings, giving them additional evidence and stressing the greater heterogeneity by gender of the transnational couples (and especially of FW/IM pairings) than homogamous ones.

As our purpose was also to verify if and to what extent the exchange

theory fit the recent assortative mating in the Italian context, our outcomes confirm that a “variant” of this theoretical approach can be considered as suitable to portray the mate selection patterns of transnational unions in Italy. Indeed, a “bargain” does occur, but it involves different aspects with respect to the ones quoted in the “classical” hypotheses. In fact, mainly due to the disadvantage suffered by immigrants in the Italian labor market, the foreign partner “offers” his/her relative youth and presumably his/her high level of education (Maffioli *et al.*, 2014), as to say characteristics other than the economic ones. On the other hand, the Italian partner “counterbalances” not only with his/her “ethnic status” with the potentialities that this brings (access to kin and/or to other social networks and resources), but also with better occupational characteristics than those of the counterpart.

The aim to identify who “gains” and who “loses” in the union is strongly linked with the description we made of the peculiarities of the mate matching, of the gender heterogeneity and of their possible consequences on the definition of the roles within the transnational couple. Obtained results let us to guess that the assortative behaviours and a higher level of asymmetry in age and working condition between partners in transnational couples, particularly in FW/IM pairings, can contribute to produce, in some cases, a state of inferiority of the foreign partner. At the same time, there is a risk that the foreign component has been adapted to solutions of convenience. Therefore, we can hypothesize that, in some instances, transnational couples are more fragile in respect to the homogamous ones, as was assumed in previously quoted analyses (Maffioli and Sonnino, 1990; Maffioli, 1994; Maffioli *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, the presence of an “exchange” does not exclude both that the persons who form a transnational couple could demonstrate more open minded attitudes, and that a mate choice, based on attraction and affinity, in many cases occurs (Kalmjin, 1998; Kalmjin and van Tubergen, 2006).

A last result refers to the role played by transnational unions in the integration process of immigrants, and in particular the question if this role can be regarded as a determinant or as an effect of integration. Performed elaboration let us to hypothesize that transnational unions and integration process are linked by a relationship of interdependence. Nevertheless, in several cases and especially for the foreign women, the younger age and the occupational disadvantage of foreign partner suggest that transnational unions can be considered mostly as a factor of integration. In such perspective, the native partner can play a mediating role between the foreign counterparts and the host context, promoting a harmonization process that could represent a way to multiculturalism and integration.

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Appendix

Table A1 - Determinants of partners' differences in age and occupation, 2005

Variables	Age difference ref.: woman younger than man (multinomial model)		Housewives vs. active women (logistic model)	Occupational difference ref.: woman lower than man (multinomial model)				
	Same age	Woman older		Same level	Woman higher			
	exp(β)	Sig.	exp(β)	Sig.	exp(β)	Sig.	exp(β)	Sig.
<i>Citizenship of partners (ref.: both Italians)</i>								
FW/IM	0.615 ***	0.663 *	4.123 ***		1.189		0.679	
IW/FM	1.698 ***	5.366 ***	0.780		0.725 ***		1.598 ***	
FW/FM	0.456 ***	1.290	1.829 ***		1.360 *		1.497 *	
<i>Partners' relationship (ref.: marital)</i>								
Informal	1.273 ***	2.569 ***	0.527 ***		1.003		1.060	
<i>Woman age (ref.: <24)</i>								
25-29			0.615 ***		1.364 ***		1.390 ***	
30-34			0.440 ***		1.560 ***		1.460 ***	
35-39			0.400 ***		1.676 ***		1.609 ***	
40+			0.379 ***		1.855 ***		1.579 ***	
<i>Woman's educational level (ref.: low)</i>								
Middle	0.940	0.922	0.332 ***		1.212 ***		1.825 ***	
High	1.266 ***	1.219 **	0.099 ***		1.011		1.480 ***	
<i>Woman's occupational level (ref.: low)^(b)</i>								
Not employed	0.963	0.867						
Middle	1.314 ***	1.358 ***						
High	1.411 ***	1.328 **						
<i>Woman's civil status at union (ref.: unmarried)</i>								
Divorced or widow	2.098 ***	5.385 ***	0.838 **		1.088		1.149	
<i>Man's age (ref.: <24)</i>								
25-29			0.761 ***		0.684 **		0.382 ***	
30-34			0.741 ***		0.697 **		0.352 ***	
35-39			0.822 **		0.597 ***		0.287 ***	
40+			1.011		0.550 ***		0.255 ***	
<i>Man's occupational level (ref.: low)</i>								
Not employed	1.100	1.921 ***	1.452 ***					
Middle	0.904 ***	0.943	1.276 ***					
High	0.993	0.886	1.145 ***					
Constant term	0.314 ***	0.025 ***	3.604 ***		1.102 ***		1.102 ***	

Note: . *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01 .

Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.