

*Mixed Marriages: The Italian Case Study*

Gabriella D'Ambrosio\* & Veronica Pastori\*\*

**How to cite**

D'Ambrosio, G. & Pastori, V. (2019). Mixed Marriages: The Italian Case Study. *Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge-JMK*, 4(1), 79-92. DOI: 10.26409/2019JMK4.1.05

Retrieved from

<http://www.mediterraneanknowledge.org/publications/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

**1. Authors' information**

\* Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

\*\* National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System (INVALSI)

**2. Authors' contact**

Gabriella D'Ambrosio: [gabriella.dambrosio@uniroma1.it](mailto:gabriella.dambrosio@uniroma1.it)

Veronica Pastori: [veronica.pastori\[at\]outlook.it](mailto:veronica.pastori[at]outlook.it)

**Article first published online:** June 2019



- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN  
**DOAJ**

Additional information about [Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge-JMK](#) can be found at: [About the Journal-Board-On line submission](#)



# *Mixed Marriages: The Italian Case Study*

GABRIELLA D'AMBROSIO\* & VERONICA PASTORI\*\*

\*Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

\*\*National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System (INVALSI), Italy

## **Abstract**

The research objective that we want to explore concerns the phenomenon of mixed marriages in Italy. Indeed, in the last years (especially from EU enlargement in 2007), Italian territory is characterized, for its geographical and cultural position, to be one of the European countries with the largest number of foreign residents: suffice it to say that from 2008 to 2016 the increase is equal to +46.4 percentage points. To this purpose, through secondary data analysis from National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) database, we examine the unions between couples formed by both foreign citizens or by a immigrant and an autochthonous in Italy from 2008 to 2016 focusing the attention on following four specific variables: area of origin, educational level, type of rite and type of marriage. In conclusion, this phenomenon is particularly relevant because it allows to look into the state of integration and inclusion of foreign presence in Italy.

**Keywords:** Secondary Data, Immigration, Integration, Marital Union, Mixed Marriage.

## *Introduction*

Among different social transformation affecting Italy (like, for example, the increase in the number of cohabitations or the increase in the divorce rate), mixed marriage is an event that, in recent years, has become very important. The concept of "mixed family", defined by Merton (1941) "as marriage of persons deriving from those different in-groups and out-groups other than the family which are culturally conceived as relevant to the choice of a spouse" (p. 362), indicates a membership of cultural and different racial groups that depends, undoubtedly, on the increase in the rate of immigration. As stated by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2014), "in the beginning of the 1970s, emigration flows fell considerably and the country progressively became a country of net immigration, as neighbouring countries imposed stricter limitations to employment-related immigration and because Italian industrial centres had higher needs for immigrant workforce" (p. 44). For this reason, it is

plausible the strong link between immigration and mixed couple: this latter represents, therefore, a valid statistical indicator that shows how, right now, the immigration is become a structural component that contributes to ethnical, cultural and religious change in the settings of Italian country (Ammendola, Forti, Pittau & Ricci, 2004).

Nevertheless, with the passing years, the phenomenon of immigration has evolved; for example, if in the 70's the motivations of the foreign presence in Italy were closely linked to the work purposes as indicated above, recently a foreign decides to remain in Italy also for other reasons like a romantic relationship with an autochthon.

So, the mixed marriage becomes not only an important moment of socialization but also a symbol of integration of foreigner within the host society.

### *1. Theoretical Framework*

As already mentioned in the introduction of this paper, mixed marriages (a term used to indicate all the unions between two individuals belonging to different social, religious and national contexts<sup>1</sup>) have increased accordingly to the immigration rate: indeed, according to OECD (2011), with rising migration, cultures and values have become more different, with some ethnic minorities evolving as parallel family cultures while others intermingle with mainstream cultures through multicultural marriages. Undoubtedly, however, both phenomena can be linked to a much more general and broad concept what is known as globalisation processes that, if on one hand, refer “both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (Robertson, 1992, p. 8), on the other hand, “involving increased movement across borders, have broadened the range of potential partners for many people, leading to close intimate relationship among persons who may be geographically distant and may never have met each other without these increased movements” (Singla, 2014, p. 3).

---

<sup>1</sup> At this regard, it's important to point out that Phoenix (2006) has used an intersectional approach to study mixed couples. In fact, he focused on categories of multiple belonging and saw how partners are related to. By way of example, his study included these categories: ethnicity, gender, class, career position, religious belonging and others.

In this sense, so, each person not only marries another person, deciding autonomously within an individualized society but, as underlined by Tognetti Bordogna (1996; 2001), for reasons of several kinds (i.e., mutual curiosity, strategy for inclusion in the new context, testing of cultural chance), marries another different culture (Karis & Killian, 2011). Therefore, from this point of view, the concept of mixedness, as partnering and parenting across different ethnic backgrounds, is of crucial importance (Edwards, Song, Caballero & Ali, 2012) since “allows us to signal the dynamic and relational processes in which all of a family's members are actively involved” (Meda & Crespi, 2018, p. 11). Not only that: in the words of Barbara (1989), “cross-cultural marriages have the advantage of giving advance warning of what every couple must eventually face - that they are different from each other” (p. 186).

The phenomenon of mixed marriages, that is to say “visibly ethnically different couples” (Phoenix, 2011), has been studied both from qualitative and quantitative point of view with different methods (Dumanescu, Marza & Eppel, 2014). In the first case (qualitative perspective), the methods mainly used are interviews, participant observations, focus groups and life stories as direct witness, but also analyzing secondary data<sup>3</sup> (as memoirs, articles in the press and others documents); in the second case, which is the quantitative perspective, the studies on mixed marriages have been conducted on the basis of different resources, for example from civil status records, censuses or various surveys. Some aspects investigated, through case studies or using a comparative approach<sup>4</sup>, are the percentage of mixed marriages in a particular society<sup>5</sup> and their composition by ethnicity, confession, age, education, economic level or area of residence.

---

<sup>2</sup> For all those couples whose spouses have different characteristics, the reference is the so-called theory of complementary needs developed in the Fifties (Winch, Ktsanes & Ktsanes, 1954): according to this theory, contrarily to what occurs for homogamous couples, people are more attracted to those who are dissimilar from them.

<sup>3</sup> These cases are characterized by a high degree of subjectivity, considering that the sources are already filtered through mentality and prejudices.

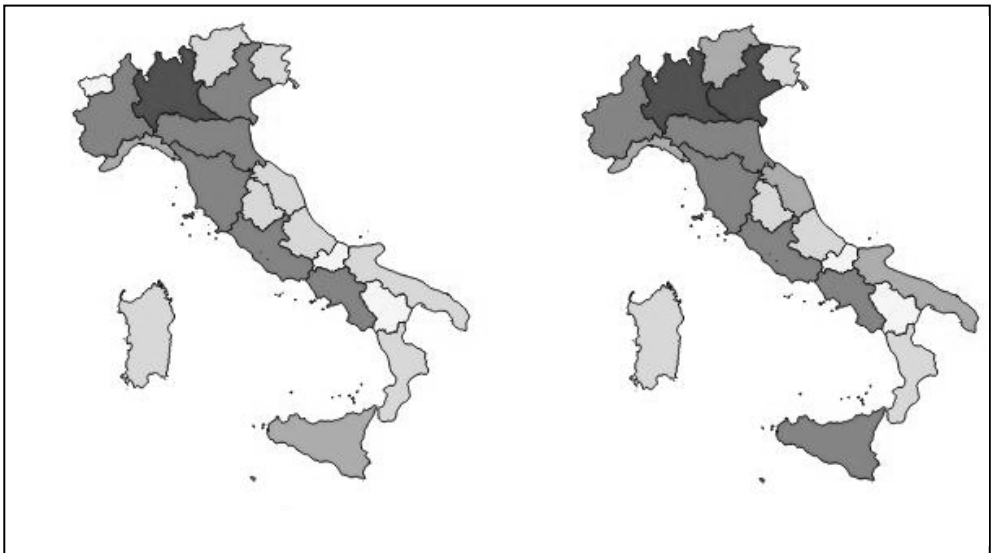
<sup>4</sup> In the first case the attention is focused on a country and in the second case on two or more countries (Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Some examples are collected in González-Ferrer et al. (2016) where the several authors study the mixed marriages, separately, in the United Kingdom, Spain, Estonia, Switzerland and Romania.

## 2. Analysis of mixed marriages in Italy

Although the event of mixed marriages in Italy is characterized as an emerging phenomenon, however, analyzing the values provided by the National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) database, we note that, at national level, there has been a reduction of it from 2008 to 2016: in fact, in percentage terms, there has been a decrease of -30.6%. The data, anyway, should not astonish the reader since, in recent years, there has been a reduction in the rate of marriages also with regard to the autochthonous ones (just think that, in the space of the last ten years, the marriage rate in Italy has decreased from 4.2 marriages per thousand individuals in 2006 to 3.4 in 2016).

Fig. 1 – Mixed marriage in Italy by region - %



Source: elaboration on ISTAT, 2008 and 2016

Analyzing the territorial distribution of mixed marriages in Italy we note (Fig. 1), looking at the two cartographies for the first and the last year taken into consideration, how the majority of mixed marriages can be found in North Italy (53.7% in 2008 and 55.4% in 2016) while a lower percentage refers to the South and Islands (20.4% in 2008 and 21.4% in 2016). Instead,

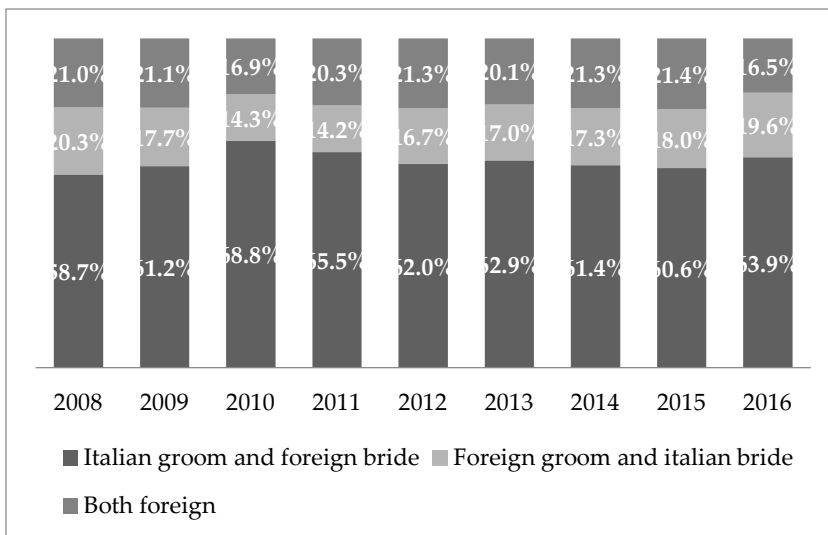
mixed marriages record an average percentage of around 24% in Central Italy.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to highlight how, from 2008 onwards, almost all Italian regions have seen their value increase even if some of them have showed a more substantial increase (for example: Vallée d'Aoste, Veneto, Marche, Apulia, Sicily). Thus, over the last ten years, the number of mixed marriages in Italy has spread more evenly throughout the national territory confirming, once again, the idea that it constitutes a factor of integration and stabilization of immigrants in our country.

### *Area of origin*

Previously, we talked about mixed marriages like a symbol of integration between cultures. In this regard, it's interesting to investigate the area of origin of foreigners that make up the mixed couples.

Fig. 2 – Mixed marriage by type of couple - %



Source: elaboration on ISTAT, 2008-2016

Before exploring the area of origin, we note that about 60% of mixed marriages in Italy are characterized by Italian groom and foreign bride (Fig. 2): more in detail, in 2010 the percentage points of this type of couple almost reach seventy points (68.8%).

Tab. 1 – Mixed marriage by type of couple and Area of origin - %

<i>Year/Type of couple/Area of origin</i>		Albania	France	Germany	Moldova	Poland	Romania	Ukraine	Morocco	Brazil
2008	Italian groom and foreign bride	4.0	1.2	1.9	4.7	6.7	13.7	10.6	4.5	9.6
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	9.0	2.8	2.9	0.3	0.6	2.2	0.4	22.2	4.6
	At least a foreign spouse	3.5	0.3	0.6	6.6	2.4	18.4	4.0	8.2	2.5
2009	Italian groom and foreign bride	3.6	1.4	2.1	5.3	7.2	15.5	10.2	4.2	9.0
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	8.2	3.8	4.0	0.4	0.4	2.8	0.4	20.2	3.6
	At least a foreign spouse	2.9	0.4	0.5	7.8	2.0	19.5	4.2	7.9	2.0
2010	Italian groom and foreign bride	3.6	1.7	2.1	4.6	7.3	17.9	9.5	2.7	8.0
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	7.3	5.9	5.7	0.3	1.1	4.6	0.3	8.1	3.1
	At least a foreign spouse	3.6	0.5	0.7	5.7	1.8	25.0	2.9	6.5	1.4
2011	Italian groom and foreign bride	4.2	1.4	1.8	4.7	6.4	17.7	9.9	2.4	7.6
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	8.1	4.7	4.7	0.2	0.8	4.4	0.3	10.0	3.1
	At least a foreign spouse	3.9	0.7	0.9	5.5	1.6	18.8	4.6	4.2	1.1
2012	Italian groom and foreign bride	4.7	1.2	1.7	4.6	5.3	17.4	10.9	3.3	7.2
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	7.8	3.7	3.8	0.4	0.5	3.9	0.4	15.0	2.4
	At least a foreign spouse	4.9	0.3	0.5	6.7	1.4	18.4	5.5	4.4	1.2
2013	Italian groom and foreign bride	5.0	1.1	1.7	5.2	5.4	19.2	11.0	2.8	6.2
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	9.2	3.7	4.5	0.5	1.0	4.1	0.7	13.7	2.3
	At least a foreign spouse	5.9	0.5	1.3	7.7	1.5	20.8	4.5	5.1	0.8
2014	Italian groom and foreign bride	5.3	1.1	1.6	5.3	5.1	19.6	10.7	3.3	5.4
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	8.2	3.1	3.5	1.0	0.6	5.3	1.0	13.5	1.9
	At least a foreign spouse	5.4	0.4	2.8	5.8	1.7	19.9	4.8	4.8	0.7
2015	Italian groom and foreign bride	5.4	1.0	1.5	5.5	4.3	20.0	12.0	3.4	5.1
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	11.1	2.7	3.3	0.8	0.6	6.1	1.8	13.1	2.4
	At least a foreign spouse	6.3	0.4	3.5	6.0	1.3	19.2	6.5	4.6	0.7
2016	Italian groom and foreign bride	5.2	0.9	1.6	5.2	4.4	20.5	12.1	3.8	5.2
	Foreign groom and Italian bride	9.8	2.5	3.1	1.2	0.7	6.0	1.5	13.8	2.4
	At least a foreign spouse	6.6	0.2	0.4	8.5	1.0	25.6	8.7	4.9	1.1

Source: elaboration on ISTAT, 2008-2016

Considering the trend, it is interesting that there has been an increase (+5.2%) of mixed marriages especially in the case whereas an Italian man marries an immigrant woman (from 58.7% in 2008 to 63.9% in 2016). In contrast, the percentage of couples characterized by Italian bride and foreign spouse is decreased by 0.7 points while the percentage relative to



the couples formed by both foreign citizens<sup>6</sup> is decreased by 4.5% (from 21% in 2008 to 16.5% in 2016).

With regard to the spouses's area of origin, in general, the most common nationalities are Romanian, Ukrainian and Maghreb but there are differences depending on whether it is foreign bride or foreign groom.

Considering Romanian nationality, we note that there are two types of prevailing couples: the first, couples formed by Italian groom and foreign bride – that in time passed from 13.7% to 20.5% - and the second, couples with at least a foreign spouse, with an increment equal to 7.2 percentage points from 2008 to 2016 (18.4% versus 25.6%).

Also the Ukrainian nationality records the highest percentage at the first type of mixed marriage (Italian groom and foreign bride), but these values are lower (around 10/12%) than those discussed above.

Finally, for the third most common nationality, emerges that the percentage of at least a Maghreb spouse decreases about ten points from 2008 to 2016: respectively, from 22.2% to 13.8%.

#### *Educational level*

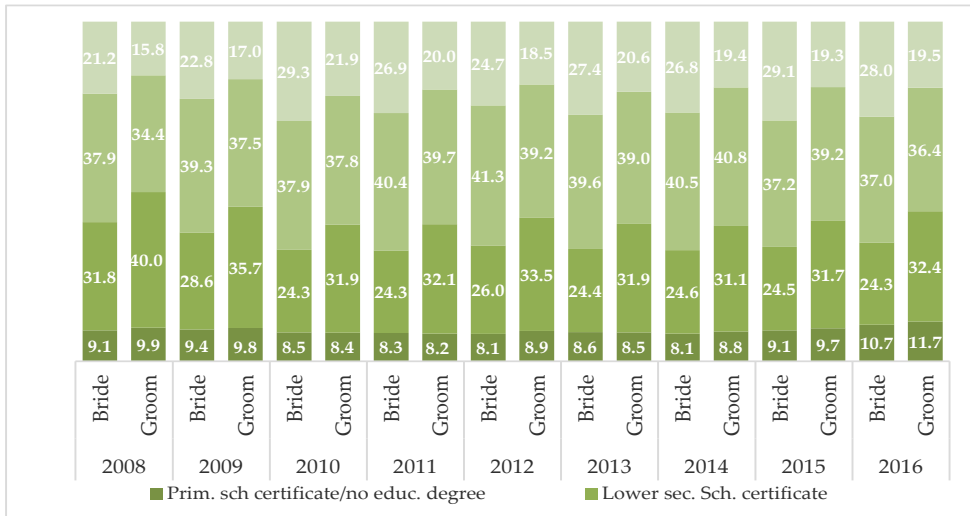
Considering the educational level of spouses (Fig. 3), we observe that if we focus attention on the two highest levels ('Upper and post secondary' and 'Tertiary'), for every year analyzed (except for 2014 and 2015 for first level), these characterized especially bride's population. In particular, the biggest differences regard the tertiary qualification, for which there is almost a difference of ten percentage points in 2015 (29.1% versus 19.3%).

In the previous figure we analyzed the educational level of women and men separately. At this point it is interesting to consider the couples as a whole (Fig. 4). The majority of mixed marriages are characterized by homogamy from the educational point of view: over 60%, even if observing the percentages of 2008 and 2016 we note a decrease of about 2% (from 61.7% to 59.9%). 2013 is the year with the highest percentage of homogamy (64.5%).

---

<sup>6</sup> In this case, at least one of the two spouses must be resident in Italy.

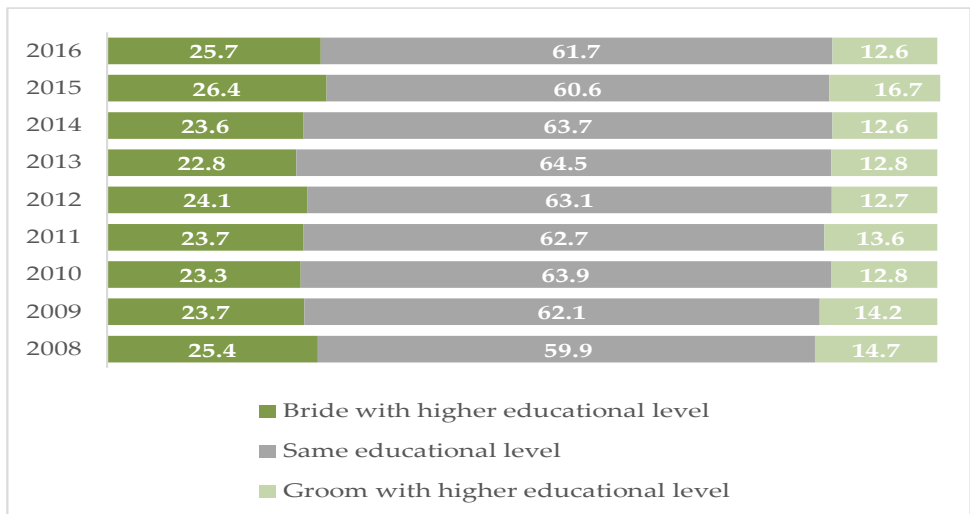
Fig. 3 - Bride's and Groom's educational level - %



Source: elaboration on ISTAT, 2008-2016

For every year investigated, in heterogamy cases over 20% of couples are formed by a bride with an higher educational level than groom, vice versa the maximum percentage of couples in which the groom has an higher educational level is registered in 2015 with 16.7%.

Fig. 4 - Educational homogamy/heterogamy of married couples - %

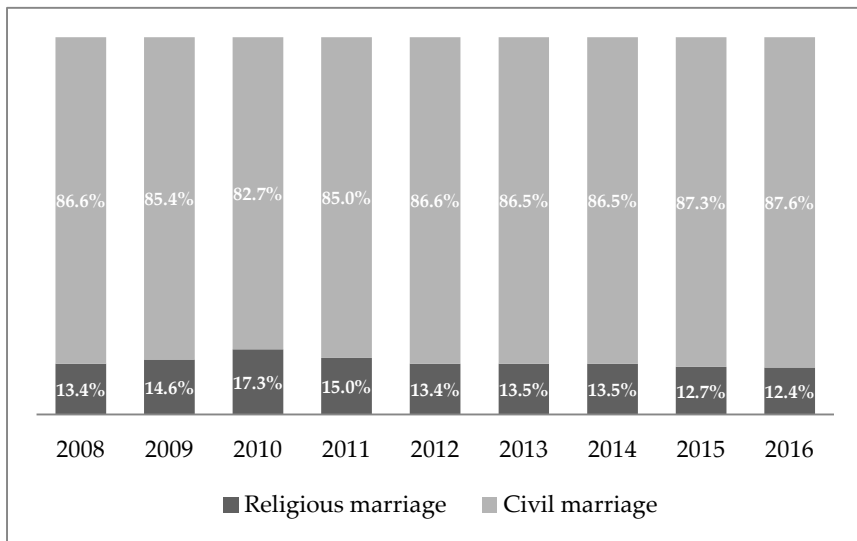


Source: elaboration on ISTAT, 2008-2016

*Type of wedding ceremony*

Examining the type of mixed marriages, we can note that most of these are celebrated according to a civil ceremony rather than religious (however, especially with regard to the latter, it is necessary to specify that ISTAT collects the data which refer to marriages celebrated according to a Catholic rite or one of the other religious cults accepted by the State). From the figure below it is possible to observe that from 2008 to 2016 civil marriages accounted for nearly 86% of the unions while the remaining 14% refers to ties sanctioned by religious rite.

Fig. 5 – Mixed marriage by rite - %



Source: elaboration on ISTAT, 2008-2016

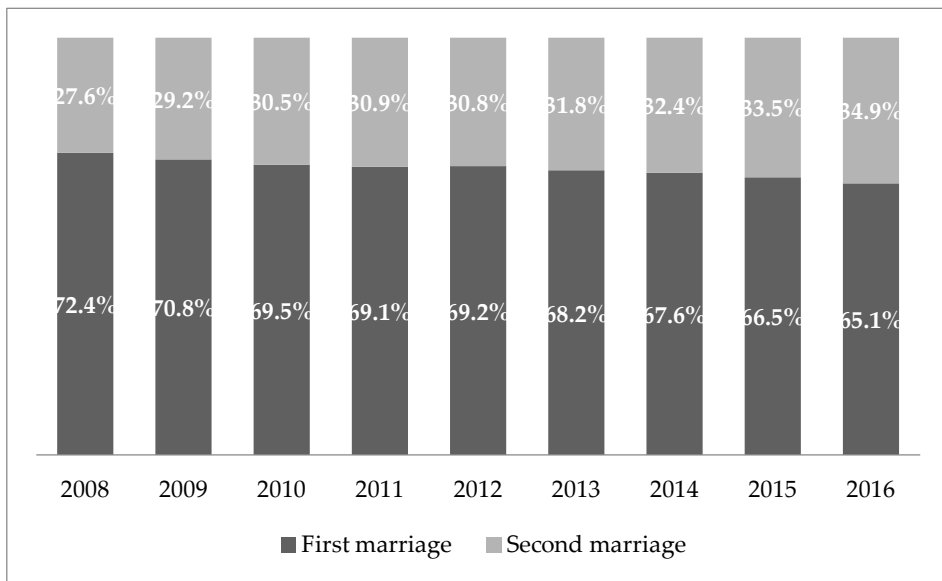
Again, the high percentage of civil marriages should not surprise the reader: it is, indeed, a trend that is increasingly affirming even in the case of marriage of Italian couples (at the national level, the average is increased from 36.7% in 2008 to 46.9% in 2016). Therefore, the phenomenon represents, under a sociological point of view, an indicator of the spread of family behavior more and more secularized since religion has dropped its relevance both social and individual (Impicciatore & Billari, 2012; Vezzoni & Biolcati-Rinaldi, 2015) and, more generally, we are facing to “fall of the religious practice, attenuation of the religious sense, the loss of influence of religion in the choices or in the orientation of living of the population”

(Crespi, 2014, p. 108). Going down to the Italian context, according to this principle, “even in Italy, religion has lost the bond of observance to become object of preference. The individualism of belief is a widespread cultural trait that can generate autonomous religious paths. Also in our country we feel the fascination of a spiritual search valid for itself, regardless of the relationship with churches and religious groups” (Garelli, 2011, p. 10).

*Type of marriage*

Analyzing the data related to the type of marriage between two spouses of different nationalities, we note that most of them refer to the first marriages while the remaining percentage refers to second marriages: in fact, observing the trend that emerges from Fig. 6, it is possible to emphasize how the average percentage is greater for the first marriages (68.7% against 31.3%) even if these have suffered a decrease of 7.3 points from 2008 to 2016.

Fig. 6 – Mixed marriage by first and second marriage - %



Source: elaboration on ISTAT, 2008-2016

The first marriage is, certainly, a salient indicator for the study of the family formation behaviors and its decrease is, as for the other evidences analyzed, a phenomenon that also concerns the Italian couples. More

specifically, its acceleration is caused, in the most recent years, to the so-called "structure effect" connected to the change in the composition of the population by age: indeed, the prolonged decrease in births in the last 30 years in Italy has determined a reduction of the population in the age in which the first marriages are more frequent (from 16 to 34 years).

### *Conclusions*

The analysis described in this paper exposes an element of social vitality and integration as the mixed marriages in Italy. Indeed, it's possible to talk about mixedness as an indicator of vitality and integration (see Song, 2009; Gordon, 1964; Warner & Srole, 1945) because the couples formed by spouses belonging to different cultures contribute to the building of both multicultural societies and multiethnic families. In fact, according to Alba & Nee (2003), not only "high rate of intermarriage signals that the social distance between the groups involved is small and that individuals of putatively different ethnic backgrounds no longer perceive social and cultural differences significant enough to create a barrier to long-term union" (p. 90), but also "the family has the function to hand down to the next generations specific sets of values that are closely linked to ethnic and/or confessional identity [...]. In the long run, a large number of mixed marriages may unquestionably bring about significant demographic changes" (Dumanescu et al., 2014, p. 5). So, in this perspective, paraphrasing again Dumanescu and colleagues, the mixed families are prominent also from the point of view of the education and the socialisation of children because, in contrast with the children coming from homogeneous marriages, these grow up with the values of the groups where their parents belonging and are predicted to be less likely to identify themselves with a single ethnic or racial group (Harris & Sim, 2002). Undoubtedly, these conditions show that racial boundaries are weakening and facilitate the process of integration within our globalized society.

## References

- Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2003). *Remaking the American Mainstream*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ammendola, C.F., Forti, O., Pittau, F., & Ricci, A. (2004). *The Impact of Immigration on Italy's society*. Rome: Nuova Anterem.
- Barbara, A. (1989). *Marriage Across Frontiers*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters Limited.
- Blanche, M. T., Durrheim, K., & Painter, D. (2006). *Research in Practice. Applied methods for the social sciences*. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Crespi, I. (2014). Religiosità e differenze di genere in Italia: credenze, pratiche e cambiamenti generazionali. In Crespi, I., Ruspini, E. *Genere e religioni in Italia. Voci a confronto*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Cullingford, C., & Gunn, S. (2005). *Globalisation, Education and Culture Shock*. New York: Routledge.
- Dumanescu, L., Marza, D., & Eppel, M. (2014). Introduction. In Dumanescu, L., Marza, D., & Eppel M. *Intermarriage throughout History*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Edwards, R., Song, M., Caballero, C., & Ali, S. (2012). Introduction. In Edwards, R., Song, M., Caballero, C., Ali, S. *International Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Mixedness and Mixing*. New York: Routledge.
- Garelli, F. (2011). *Religione all'italiana. L'anima del paese messa a nudo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- González-Ferrer, A., Kulu, H., Hannemann, T., Obucina, O., Cortina, C., Castro, T., et al. (2016). *Report: Country-Specific Case Studies on Mixed Marriages*. Retrieved June 26, 2018 from site: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu>.
- Gordon, M. (1964). *Assimilation in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, D., & Sim, J. (2002). Who is multiracial? Assessing the complexity of lived race. *American Sociological Review*, 67(4), 614-27.
- Impicciatore, R., & Billari, F.C. (2012). Secularization, Union Formation Practices, and Marital Stability: Evidence from Italy. *European Journal of Population*, 28(2), 119-138.
- Kalmijn, M., & van Tubergen, F. (2006). Ethnic Intermarriage in the Netherlands: Confirmations and Refutations of Accepted Insights. *European Journal of Population*, 22(4), 371-397.
- Karis, T.A., & Killian, K.D. (2011). *Intercultural Couples. Exploring Diversity in Intimate Relationship*. New York: Routledge.
- Meda, S.G., & Crespi, I. (2018). Transnational and Mixed Families: Key Issues and Emerging Trends. In Crespi, I., Meda, S.G., & Merla, L. *Making Multicultural Families in Europe. Gender and Intergenerational Relations*. Basingtoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Merton, R.K. (1941). Intermarriage and the social structure: fact and theory. *Psychiatry*, 4(3), 361-374.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2011). *The Future of Families to 2030*. OECD Publishing.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2014). *Jobs for Immigrants (Vol. 4): Labour Market Integration in Italy*. OECD Publishing.
- Phoenix, A. (2006). Interrogating intersectionality. Productive ways of theorising multiple positioning. *Kvinder, Køn og Forskning*, 2(3), 21-30.

## Mixed Marriage: The Italian Case Study

- Phoenix, A. (2011). Psychosocial Intersections: Contextualizing the accounts of adults who grew up in visibly ethnically different households. In Lutz, H., Vivar, M., Supik, L. *Framing intersectionality. Debates on a multi-faceted concept in gender studies*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Robertson, R. (1992). *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage Publications.
- Singla, R. (2014). *Intermarriage and Mixed Parenting, Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing*. United Kingdom: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Somekh, B., & Lewin, C. (2005). *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Song, M. (2009). Is Intermarriage a Good Indicator of Integration?. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(2), 331-348.
- Tognetti Bordogna, M. (1996). *Legami familiari e immigrazione: i matrimoni misti*. Torino: L'Harmattan Italia.
- Tognetti Bordogna, M. (2001). I ricongiungimenti familiari e la famiglia. In Zincone, G. *Secondo rapporto sull'integrazione degli immigrati in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Vezzoni, C., & Biolcati-Rinaldi, F. (2015). Church Attendance and Religious Change in Italy, 1968-2010: A Multilevel Analysis of Pooled Datasets. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 54(1), 100-118.
- Warner, S., & Srole, L. (1945). *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.
- Winch, R.F., Ktsanes, T., & Ktsanes, V. (1954). The Theory of Complementary Needs in Mate-Selection: an Analytic and Descriptive Study. *American Sociological Review*. 19, 241-249.