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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Change and stability of migration intentions. Evidence from Italy

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Abstract

Due to a lack of relevant data, very few empirical studies have examined the changes in and stability of secondary migration intentions. We aim to fill this gap by analysing return migration intentions among international migrants in Italy. Data are drawn from the cross-sectional SCIF survey conducted by ISTAT in 2011–2012. Our findings reveal that migration intentions at the beginning of the migratory experience tend to differ from those measured at more advanced migration stages (i.e. at the time of the survey). In particular, intentions to return seem less stable than intentions to stay. When confirming intentions to return or remain, critical factors include financial stability, family situation and ties with the country of origin and destination. Additionally, having an Italian partner, a partner living in Italy, and a positive self-assessed family financial condition are positively associated with transitioning from a temporary plan to a permanent settlement intention.

INTRODUCTION

The migration decision-making process is receiving increasing attention from scholars and policymakers. Researchers have proposed theoretical models for describing the characteristics and steps of the process, while many empirical studies have investigated its different aspects in specific geographical contexts

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(e.g. Carling, 2014; Carling & Schewel, 2018; De Jong, 2000; Kley, 2011, 2017). Theories have been conceptualized for international and internal migration (e.g. Clark & Lisowski, 2018; Coulter, 2013; Kern & Stein, 2018; Kley & Mulder, 2010). Regarding international migration, a growing corpus of literature has analysed return or (onward) migration intentions from the new country of residence and the associated factors (e.g. Caron, 2020; Caron & Ichou, 2020; Jeffrey & Murison, 2011; Monti, 2020; Monti & Mussino, 2021). In particular, many studies have based their analysis on the 'integration–transnationalism nexus', exploring how return intentions are linked to these two seemingly contrasting but interrelated processes (e.g. Anniste & Tammaru, 2014; Carling & Pettersen, 2014; de Haas et al., 2015; de Haas & Fokkema, 2011). Others have focused on individual factors, such as year of arrival, age at the time of migration, length of stay abroad, marital status, family members left behind, employment and properties, as well as abilities and skills, such as educational level and host language fluency, together with subjective well-being and social networks (e.g. Erdal, 2012; Güngör & Tansel, 2014; Massey & Akresh, 2006; Piotrowski & Tong, 2013). Finally, others have looked into the contextual and institutional factors in the countries of both residence and origin (e.g. Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Della Puppa & King, 2018; Model, 2016).

From one point of view, this strand of research can be seen as an extension of prior studies on return migration (Anwar, 1979; Bonifazi & Heins, 1996; Cerase, 1974; Gmelch, 1980; King, 1986; Massey et al., 1990; Rogers, 1983). From another point of view, this research aims to better understand the migration process, including factors possibly leading to return migration. By using intentions as a proxy for future behaviour, researchers hope to gain insights that can inform migration and integration policies.

Most studies have focused on migration intentions or behaviours at one point in time using a static approach. However, migration intentions vary according to the duration of stay, migrants' life cycle and family conditions (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2016; Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2019; Wanner, 2021). A limited number of studies have compared migrants' secondary migration with their previous intentions (e.g. Clark & Lisowski, 2018; de Groot et al., 2011; Dommermuth & Klüsener, 2018; Lu, 1999; Steiner & Wanner, 2019; Wanner, 2021). These have generally found that migrants tend to follow through on their intentions. However, it remains unclear to what extent individuals' initial migration intentions change over time (Clark & Lisowski, 2018). The complexity of analysing migration patterns is compounded by a shortage of data on migration intentions, a scarcity of panel surveys that comprehensively study migrant populations, and selection bias that can affect cross-sectional data. Moreover, nations lacking panel surveys must depend on cross-sectional survey data as their principal information source. In his recent paper on the return intentions of new Polish and Turkish arrivals in Germany, Steinmann (2019) identified a need to know what kinds of immigrants modify their migration plans at a later point in time and what mechanisms are responsible for this change. Analysing stability or change in migration intentions represents an essential element of innovation. Indeed, having information on migration intentions at two different points in time can shed light on the specific individual factors associated with the various stages of the migration process; these factors are closely linked to the stability or change of immigrants' intentions during migration.

Studies on return or onward migration intentions in Italy have proliferated in the last few years (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2016; Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2013; Boccagni, 2011; Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2019; Ortensi & Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2018; Paparusso & Ambrosetti, 2017; Premazzi et al., 2013). Recent studies have focused on specific immigrant communities or explanatory factors, enriching a previously unexplored research strand in Italy. However, these studies have only examined migration intentions at the time of the survey. Our paper aims to link to Steinmann's conclusions by retrospectively assessing the stability of immigrants' initial intentions upon entering Italy, specifically in terms of whether they plan to return to their home country or settle in Italy, as well as identifying the factors that may have influenced a change in their original migration plans.

Italy has witnessed a substantial increase in foreign residents, rising from 211,000 individuals in the 1981 census to 5.2 million at the beginning of 2022, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). The country must simultaneously cope with the structural process of population ageing. This paper makes two significant contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, while most studies on changing intentions focus only on one particular country of origin (e.g. Bettin et al., 2018; Mara & Landesmann, 2013), we examined all migrants residing

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in Italy, enabling us to conduct a more comprehensive analysis. Secondly, we also analysed the factors that led migrants without any predetermined migration intentions to settle in Italy.

For our analyses, we used the data from the survey 'Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens in Italy' (SCIF), conducted by ISTAT in 2011–2012.[1] The SCIF is the most up-to-date representative survey at the national level on migrants living in Italy.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To our knowledge, very few empirical studies have explored changing intentions during migration. We build on these studies, enriching our theoretical framework with results from analyses comparing migration intentions and behaviours. We first analyse the mechanism behind the decision-making process and the role of intentions, and then we analyse the determinants of intentions and eventual change.

The migration decision-making process: The role of intentions

Various theories have attempted to describe the decision-making process in international migration. The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1988) considers intentions a proximate determinant of migration behaviours and the result of an expectation that one will attain valued goals as a consequence of the migration (e.g. Card, 1982; De Jong, 2000; Van Dalen & Henkens, 2013). For instance, immigrants who develop return intentions are more likely to return than those who do not (Tezcan, 2018; Wanner, 2021). However, Kan (1999) theorises that migration behaviours are conditioned by the previous period's mobility expectation, which 'is determined by the difference in the expected lifetime utility of moving and staying in the current residence' (Kan, 1999: 75), including transitional costs. Similarly, Clark and Lisowski (2018) distinguish two phases: the formation of the intentions and the response to the intentions, which translates into the actual migration behaviour. Kley (2011, 2017) and Carling (2014) identify three phases in the decision-making process. In particular, Kley (2011, 2017) distinguishes a first pre-decisional phase, referring to the consideration to migrate, measured by the desire or wish to migrate; a second pre-actional phase that involves planning to migrate, determined by the decision to migrate and the formation of intentions measured by the intention or plan to relocate; and finally, the actional phase, which includes the actual migration behaviour. Intentions are more likely than desires and wishes to result in corresponding migration behaviours (Kley, 2017). Similarly, Carling (2014) identifies three steps: aspiration to migrate, intention to migrate and migration (or immobility). Unlike aspirations, 'intentions and plans reflect both the desire and the realism of migration' (Carling, 2014: 5), even when the plan is not implemented due to various constraints or postponements. Therefore, aspirations play a crucial role in migration but can change before realization.

Factors behind the intention to return migrate and the eventual change in intention

Immigrants can change their intentions: they can move unexpectedly, end up staying when their initial purpose was to move, or they can move earlier, later or elsewhere than planned (e.g. Gardner et al., 1985; Lu, 1999; Mara & Landesmann, 2013). These changes in intention can result from the emergence of or changes in contextual factors, such as economic changes and migration policies or individual factors, such as skills, abilities, family-related events, social networks and transnationalism (Carling, 2014; Geurts & Lubbers, 2017; González-Ferrer et al., 2014; Kley, 2011, 2017; Mara & Landesmann, 2013). These factors are generally labelled 'facilitators' and 'constraints' (Ajzen, 1988; Gardner, 1981).

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Previous studies have identified family ties, the presence of the migrant's family in the host country and family events (marriage, childbirth and divorce) as relevant in shaping migrants' return intentions (Dommermuth & Klüsener, 2018; Wanner, 2021). The presence of one's partner and children in the host country diminishes return intention, while the location of one's children and partner in the home country increases the intention of return migration (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2013; Bettin et al., 2018; Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2019; Steiner, 2019; Steinmann, 2019; Wanner, 2021). Marriage dissolution and childbirth are negatively associated with confirming return intentions, while marriage does not affect migrants' intentions (Bettin et al., 2018). Migration with a partner increases the likelihood of changing intentions, while migrating with children is positively associated with stability in migrants' intentions (Mara & Landesmann, 2013). Family events are crucial in shaping the decision to move. When analysing internal migrations, Clark and Lisowski (2018) found that marriage, divorce and childbirth are positively associated with the decision to move regardless of migrants' initial intent.

These considerations lead us to a first set of hypotheses related to the interaction between migration intentions and crucial life cycle events, such as starting a family or family reunion:

> **H1a.** Migrants who (partially or completely) reunified with their families are less likely to confirm their intention to return and are more likely to confirm an initial intention to settle in Italy or decide to settle there; conversely, migrants who did not reunify with their families are less likely to confirm a settlement intention or decide to settle and are more likely to confirm return intentions.

> **H1b.** Migrants who started a family in Italy after their arrival are likelier to change their intentions than migrants who already had a family before migration. In contrast, migrants who remain without a family are more likely to confirm their intention to return than others.

We further consider how the strength of ties to Italy and the origin country affects migrants' intentions, although causality is often unclear. Research suggests that maintaining relations with one's home country through regular visits or remittances can significantly increase the likelihood of returning; in contrast, links to the destination country, such as owning property or a native partner, are negatively associated with the intention to re-emigrate (e.g. Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2016; Delpierre & Verheyden, 2014; Mara & Landesmann, 2013; Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2019; Steinmann, 2019; Wanner, 2021).

The second set of hypotheses, therefore, focuses on the relationship between the stability of initial migration intentions and the strength of ties to Italy and the origin country:

> **H2a.** Migrants with ties to their home country are more likely to confirm their intention to return home and less likely to decide to settle or confirm their settlement intention.

> **H2b.** Migrants with ties to Italy (the country of destination) are more likely to decide to settle or confirm settlement intention and less likely to confirm their intention to return home.

Another critical dimension that shapes migration intentions involves economic conditions. However, studies have found mixed results depending on the analysed context and migrants' country of origin. Some studies have suggested that unemployment can heighten the chances of emigrating (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2013; Steiner, 2019), while others have indicated that it has no effect (Wanner, 2021) or may even decrease the probability of returning to one's home country (Bettin et al., 2018; Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2019). Job satisfaction or economic situation may reduce return intentions (Mara & Landesmann, 2013). Clark and Lisowski (2018) found that job loss is positively associated with the decision to move regardless of migrants' initial intention. However, Caron and Ichou (2020) recently highlighted the effect of migrants' initial skill selection on return migration: highly selected migrants who lose their jobs are likelier to re-emigrate than less selected migrants.

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Our third hypothesis focuses on the relationship between economic conditions and the stability of initial migration intentions. In particular:

> **H3.** We expect migrants with satisfactory economic conditions to be more likely to confirm their intention to stay or decide to settle.

DATA, METHOD, VARIABLES

Data

The data were drawn from the cross-sectional SCIF survey conducted by ISTAT in 2011–2012. The survey collected information from a total sample of 25,326 individuals, including first- and second-generation immigrants. The survey did not target irregular migrants. However, for the specific purpose of this study, we initially reduced the data set to 9350 foreign-born residents with foreign citizenship aged 18 years and over upon arrival. We excluded foreigners born in Italy and minors from the analysis because many of the questions considered in our study were not appropriate for these two groups. We also excluded naturalized foreigners born abroad because of the small size of this group. The final subsample comprised 9246 individuals. The survey deals with the following topics: education, employment, civic and political participation, family reunification, long-term residence and citizenship, health, life satisfaction, discrimination, social networks and ties with the country of origin.

The SCIF survey allowed us to study migration intentions upon arrival in Italy (but declared at the time of the survey)[2] and at the time of the survey through two separate questions, as explained below.

Using migration intentions requires careful consideration of validity and selection issues. For instance, the study of return migration intentions through a cross-sectional survey conducted in a destination country restricts the analysis to immigrants still living there, disregarding those who have already left. Although the number of people intending to migrate is generally higher than those who actually migrate, migration intentions are considered valuable for analysing the migration process (Falco & Rotondi, 2016; Kley, 2017; Pesando et al., 2021). Retrospective information may be biased. Individuals who do not remember their intention on arrival may formulate a retrospective answer based on how they conceptualize their migration experience. If they assume their purpose has not changed, they will use their current intention to estimate their past intention (stability theory). If they feel they experienced a change during the migration experience, they may adjust their initial intention estimate to reflect the assumed change (theory of change) (Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001). Nonetheless, we rely on the fact that migration is a fundamental change in an individual's life, and intentions related to salient events are more likely to be remembered correctly (Loftus & Marburger, 1983). Although migrants' answers could be affected by recall bias or the migration experience (Vervliet et al., 2015), using retrospective information about migrants' intentions or aspirations in research without a panel design is not new (see Vervliet et al., 2015; Wissink et al., 2013).

The cross-sectional structure of the data from the SCIF survey prevented us from adopting a life-course approach to the study of the migration intentions of immigrants residing in Italy. Nevertheless, the data allowed us to evaluate the stability of respondents' migration intentions during their residence in Italy. Until longitudinal surveys become available, studying migration intentions at two points in time represents an acceptable, valuable and innovative approach.

Dependent variable and analytical strategy

Based on two questions, our dependent variables measured consistency between the initial and current migration intention. First, respondents were asked: 'When you arrived in Italy, were you thinking of 1 = Remaining

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in Italy permanently, 2 = Living in Italy for a period and then moving to your country of origin or your country of citizenship, 3 = Living in Italy for a period and then moving to another country or 4 = You had no definite plan to remain in Italy' Subsequently, the respondents were asked: 'At the present moment, do you think you will remain in Italy?' The options were: '1 = Yes, I think I will remain in Italy; 2 = No, I think I will return to my country of origin or my country of citizenship; 3 = No, I think I will go to live in another country'. Combining these two variables, we obtained a table with 12 possible options (see Table 1). Due to the sample size, we could not study combinations including migrants who expressed the intention of onward migration. We could not analyse the change in migration intentions among those declaring an initial onward migration intention (231 cases). Moreover, we could not include onward migration as one of the migrants' choices at the time of the interview in the model for two reasons. First, the number of migrants declaring this intention at the interview was too small to be one of the alternatives considered in our models (44 among those with an initial return plan, 20 among those intending to settle at their arrival and 85 among those undecided at their arrival). Second, we preferred not to group these respondents with those expressing the will to return or the intent to settle because the motives of onward migrants can differ from those of return migrants (Tezcan, 2018), and migrants intending to settle usually have different characteristics (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2016; Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2013). This reduced our analysis to the options 'stay' and 'return', the most frequent choices selected by migrants.

Therefore, we constructed three dependent variables: (1) confirmation of the initial intention to return (yes = migrants who declared their return intention on arrival and at the interview, no = migrants who initially planned to return but decided to settle – reference category); (2) confirmation of the initial intention to remain (yes = migrants who declared their intent to stay in Italy upon arrival and at the interview, no = migrants who initially planned to stay but decided to return to their original country – reference category); and (3) decision to remain in Italy by migrants whose plans were undefined at the time of arrival (yes = decision to stay, no = decision to return home – reference category). These variables helped us identify three models through which to study the main associated individual factors: an enduring 'temporary migration model' (Model 1), a 'permanent migration model' (Model 2) and a 'settlement model regarding initially undecided migrants' (Model 3). In this way, we considered the three prominent cases, representing 97 per cent of the total subsample.

Independent variables

Considering the importance of family ties in the migration process, we measured the *family situation/structure* at the time of migration and at the time of the interview. In particular, we focused on three aspects: (1) whether the migrant had their own family at the time of migration, adding two dummy variables: *married at time of migration* (yes, no (reference category)) and *children at time of migration* (yes, no (reference category)); (2) whether the migrant acquired a family, using the variable *marriage after migration* (yes, no (reference category)); and (3) whether the migrant's spouse and children lived in Italy at the time of the interview, measured using two dummy variables: *spouse living in Italy* (yes, no (reference category)) and *children living in Italy* (yes, no (reference category)).

According to the theoretical background and previous findings, we selected the following additional independent variables: *self-assessment of the family's financial condition* (very good or sufficient and bad or very bad (reference category)), *living in a mixed couple* (yes, no (reference category)) and *frequent visits to the country of origin* (yes, no (reference category)).

Living in a mixed couple indicated that the migrant has an Italian partner. The variable *frequent visits to the country of origin* was measured by the question 'How frequently do you return to your country of origin?' with the following possible answers: 'several times a year', 'once a year', 'every 2–3 years', 'every 4–5 years', 'less frequently' and 'do not know'. We grouped the first two options together to create the category 'frequent visits to the country'.

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TABLE 1 Construction of the dependent variables.

Model	Intention on arrival	Migration intention at the interview			
		Return	Settle permanently	Onward	Total
Model 1	Return	Confirm intention to return (1917)	Change initial intention to return (1322) *Reference category*	Excluded (44)	3283
Model 2	Settle permanently	Change initial intention to remain (182) *Reference category*	Confirm intention to remain (2742)	Excluded (20)	2944
Excluded	Onward	Excluded (119)	Excluded (38)	Excluded (61)	218
Model 3	No definite project to remain in Italy	Decision to return (779) *Reference category*	Decision to stay (1683)	Excluded (85)	2547
	Total	2997	5785	210	8992

Note: Grey cells are the cases included in the models.

Source: Own elaborations on SCIF data.

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Finally, we controlled for

1. *Gender* (male (reference category) and female);
2. *Age upon arrival* (14–24 (reference category), 25–34, 35–49, 50+);
3. *Period of arrival* (before 1995 (reference category), 1995–1999, 2000–2004, 2005–2012);
4. *Occupational condition* (employed (reference category), looking for a job, inactive);
5. *Educational attainment* (primary education or lower (reference category), secondary and tertiary); and
6. *Country or area of origin* (Romania, Ukraine and Moldova, Albania, other Eastern European countries, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, other Asian countries, Morocco, other North African countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, other developed countries[3] (reference category)).

Method

We performed three logistic regression models separately; the first and second models tested the stability of the initial intention:

1. Model 1, 'confirmation of the initial return intention', aimed at understanding the factors associated with the persistence of a temporary migration model;
2. Model 2, 'confirmation of initial settlement intention', aimed at understanding the factors associated with the persistence of a permanent settlement model and
3. Model 3 focused on the 'transition to the decision to settle among initially undecided immigrants'.

Model 3 did not test the stability of the intention on arrival (i.e. being undecided on arrival) because the questionnaire did not allow respondents to re-express indecision regarding their migration intentions at the time of the interview. We therefore focused on the decision to stay, which was the most frequent intention among migrants without a decisive intention (67.2%).

All the logistic regressions applied the Huber and White – or sandwich – estimator of variance to allow for intragroup correlation among individuals sharing the same family, relaxing the usual requirement that the observations be independent (Rogers, 1993).

To further reflect on the role of the family in a migrant's decision to change or confirm their initial intention and to test H1a and H1b, we estimated the predicted probabilities for some migrant typologies. This paper uses predicted probabilities to show the interaction between variables indicating the family situation before migration and at the time of the survey, thus showing the occurrence of life cycle events where relevant. We used the five dummy variables concerning the occurrence of family events since migration and the current situation described above to define eight profiles describing life cycle events based on the combination of these variables, keeping the other variables at the mean (William, 2012):

1. No family: no family at migration, or family acquisition or reunification.
2. Marriage, family abroad: no family at migration, marriage after migration, the family lives abroad.
3. Marriage, spouse in Italy: no family at migration, marriage after migration, spouse lives in Italy, any eventual children live abroad.
4. Marriage, spouse and children in Italy: no family at migration, marriage after migration, spouse and children live in Italy.
5. Married, family abroad: married before migration without children, spouse and eventual children live abroad.
6. Married, spouse in Italy: married before migration without children, spouse lives in Italy, eventual children live abroad.

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7. Married with children, spouse in Italy: married before migration with children, spouse lives in Italy, eventual children live abroad.
8. Married with children, spouse and children in Italy: married before migration with children, spouse and children live in Italy.

For each model, we estimated the probabilities of each profile; we then tested the significance of the comparisons between profiles. In this way, we assessed H1a and H1b. We relied on the odds ratios to evaluate H2a, H2b and H3.

Finally, to assess the soundness of our results, we estimated the models without the three main groups (Albanians, Romanians and Moroccans) to evaluate whether the results were driven by one of these groups (Tables S1–S3).

RESULTS

Descriptive results

Despite the potential over-representation of immigrants whose reported intention at the time of their arrival was to remain in Italy due to the selection bias, as evidenced by Table 2, a slight majority of immigrants in the sample reported an intention to return home after a period in Italy at the time of their arrival (35.3%). Meanwhile, 30.2% planned to settle permanently in Italy, 31.6% were undecided and only 2.9% intended to move to a third country after a period in Italy.

Of those who intended to settle in Italy permanently on arrival, 92.2% confirmed their initial plan at the time of the survey. By contrast, 57.9% of the immigrants who intended to return to their country of origin after a period in Italy upon arriving confirmed this plan at the time of the survey, and the remaining 42.1% in this group had changed their minds during their stay in Italy.

Table 3 shows some differences in the composition of the subgroups depending on their intention at arrival. Initial return intention is more frequent among women (51.4% compared to 48.6% of men) and immigrants with children at the time of migration (42.2%), those coming from Eastern Europe – in particular Romania (25.4%) and Ukraine and Moldova (13.8%) – and those who were older on arrival (26.3% of those aged 35–49 upon arrival). Indecision is more frequent among men (57.0% compared to 43.0% of women). This seems to reflect the strategy of individuals who migrate temporarily to cope with financial difficulties and support their families. However, considering other socio-demographic characteristics, the undecided immigrants are very similar to the overall sample and the subgroup of those who declared their intent to 'settle permanently' in Italy.

TABLE 2 Comparison between immigrants' intention on arrival and at the interview.

	Intention at the interview			
Intention on arrival	Settle permanently	Return	Onward	Total
Settle permanently	92.2	6.9	0.9	100.0 (30.2)
Return	40.9	57.9	1.2	100.0 (35.3)
Onward	45.0	20.6	34.4	100.0 (2.9)
No definite project to remain in Italy	67.2	28.9	3.9	100.0 (31.6)

Note: Row percentages. In parenthesis column percentages.
Source: Own elaborations on SCIF data.

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TABLE 3 Main characteristics on migration by initial intention.

	Intention on arrival			
	Settle permanently	Return	No definite project to remain in Italy	Total sample
Gender				
Male	51.3	48.6	57.0	52.1
Female	48.7	51.4	43.0	47.9
Age on arrival				
18–24	34.7	28.7	33.6	32.1
25–34	38.5	38.0	38.0	38.2
35–49	19.9	26.3	22.7	23.1
50+	6.9	7.0	5.8	6.6
Educational level				
Primary education or lower	16.6	11.4	14.8	14.1
Lower secondary education	69.0	72.5	71.0	70.9
Upper secondary or higher	14.2	16.1	14.2	14.9
Married at the migration	27.1	28.7	22.7	26.2
Children at the migration	32.9	42.2	34.7	36.9
Married after migration	38.5	29.4	34.0	33.7
The spouse is living in Italy	59.1	40.8	47.9	48.8
Cohabitant children	77.7	64.6	75.2	72.1
Area of origin				
Romania	18.2	25.4	21.0	21.9
Ukraine and Moldova	6.0	13.8	9.0	9.8
Albania	10.3	6.5	8.8	8.4
Other Eastern Europe	8.6	9.0	9.8	9.1
India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka	7.4	6.2	7.0	6.8
Other Asian countries	9.0	6.9	7.5	7.7
Morocco	11.0	6.5	10.3	9.1
Other North African countries	5.5	4.0	5.0	4.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	5.8	6.0	6.4	6.1
Latin America	8.5	10.1	8.0	8.9
Other developed countries	9.2	5.6	7.4	7.3
N (unweighted)	2924	3239	2462	8625

Source: Own elaborations on SCIF data.

Regression results

Table 4 shows the odds ratios of the three logistic regression models. Regarding the relationship with crucial life-cycle events (**H1a**–**H1b**), Model 1 shows that immigrants who were married before migration are more likely to confirm their initial plan to return home. In contrast, those with children born before migration who have a spouse or children living in Italy at the time of the survey (as the result of starting a new family or family

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TABLE 4 Odds ratio and significance of the logistic models.

	Model 1: Confirm return intention		Model 2: Confirm settlement intention		Model 3: Decision of settlement among migrants without definite project to remain in Italy	
	OR	Sign.	OR	Sign.	OR	Sign.
Female (ref. Male)	0.704	*	0.985		1.367	*
Age at the arrival (ref. 18–24)						
25–34	1.101		1.407		1.059	
35–49	1.443	*	1.151		0.739	
50+	2.617	**	1.265		0.657	
Education (ref. primary or lower)						
Lower secondary	0.845		0.323	*	0.813	
Upper secondary or higher	0.950		0.206	**	0.904	
Married at the migration (ref. No)	1.773	**	0.602		0.537	**
Children at the migration (ref. No)	0.685	*	1.529		1.508	*
Married after migration (ref. No)	1.043		0.602		1.010	
The spouse is living in Italy (ref. No)	0.615	*	0.956		2.196	**
Cohabitant children (ref. No)	0.558	**	2.239	*	1.576	*
Arrival period (ref. 2000–2004)						
Before 1995	0.660	*	1.480		1.172	
1995–1999	0.821		2.091	*	1.214	
2005–2012	2.053	***	2.077	*	0.746	
Area of origin (ref. Other developed countries)						
Romania	0.451	**	1.342		0.577	
Ukraine and Moldova	0.478	*	0.658		0.317	**
Albania	0.376	**	1.172		0.746	
Other East Europe	0.520	*	1.021		0.733	
India Pakistan Bangladesh and Sri Lanka	0.662		1.296		0.528	
Other Asia	1.447		0.611		0.384	*
Morocco	0.787		0.946		0.694	
Other North Africa	0.524		0.566		0.860	
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.759		1.074		0.386	*
Latin America	0.697		0.947		0.644	
Occupational status (ref. Employed)						
Unemployed	0.616	*	0.767		1.146	
Inactive	0.859		1.246		0.692	

(Continues)

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TABLE 4 (Continued)

	Model 1: Confirm return intention		Model 2: Confirm settlement intention		Model 3: Decision of settlement among migrants without definite project to remain in Italy	
	OR	Sign.	OR	Sign.	OR	Sign.
Very good or sufficient self-assessed family financial condition (ref. Bad or very bad)	0.836		2.454	***	1.524	**
Home ownership (ref. No)	0.628	**	1.846	*	1.228	
Mixed couple (ref. No)	0.371	***	2.553	*	2.593	**
Frequent visits to the country of origin (ref. No)	1.285		0.854		0.842	
Constant	YES	***	YES	*	YES	
N	3239		2924		2423	

Source: Own elaborations on SCIF data.

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

reunification) are less likely to confirm their initial intention to return home, as also found by previous studies (e.g. Bettin et al., 2018). A pairwise comparison of the predicted probabilities of confirming the initial return intention based on the occurrence of family events since migration and the current family situation (Table 5) suggests that the presence of nuclear family members (spouse or children) living abroad is correlated with a higher probability of confirming the initial return intention, supporting **H1a**. In fact, the coefficients of the columns corresponding to migrants with a spouse and/or children living in Italy are positive, meaning that individuals with these profiles are less likely to confirm their intention to return. In contrast, the coefficients of the profiles of the columns corresponding to migrants with family abroad are negative. Compared to individuals with different profiles, those with no family are also the most likely to confirm their intention to return, supporting **H1b**. The coefficients in the first row are all positive, except for the comparison with 'married family abroad', which confirms that non-reunification is associated with confirming the intention to return.

These results are complemented by Model 2. The family situation seems less influential in shaping migration intentions in this case. Only for migrants with cohabitant children, the probability of confirming the intent to settle is significant and shows a large increase in the propensity of remaining in Italy. Pairwise comparisons of predicted probabilities to confirm initial settlement intention based on the occurrence of family events since migration and current family situation were never significant and are therefore not shown in the text.

To complete the analysis of the stability and change of migration intentions in Italy, we considered the factors driving the transition to a settlement intention among immigrants without a definite plan upon arrival (Model 3). In this case, having children at the time of migration and having a spouse or children in Italy increases the propensity to settle, while being married before migration weakens the decision to stay in Italy. Likewise, pairwise comparisons of predicted probabilities of intending to settle for an individual without plans upon arrival based on family events occurring since migration and current family situation (Table 6) are consistent with the results from Model 1. In fact, the presence of members of the nuclear family (spouse or children) living abroad correlates with a lower intention to stay in Italy, and migrants without a family are more likely to confirm their initial intention of returning home, supporting our H1a and H1b. Finally, the coefficients in the first row are all negative, except for the comparison with 'married family abroad'. We can explain these results in terms of a 'geography of life course events',

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TABLE 5 Occurrence of family events since migration and current situation: difference between the probability of confirming return intention of the row profile and probability of confirming return intention of the column profile estimated from model 1.

	No family	Marriage family abroad	Marriage spouse in Italy	Marriage spouse and children in Italy	Married family abroad	Married spouse in Italy	Married with children spouse in Italy	Married with children spouse and children in Italy
No family		ns	0.098	0.242	−0.101	ns	ns	0.204
Marriage, family abroad			0.107	0.25	−0.093	ns	ns	0.212
Marriage, spouse in Italy				0.143	−0.199	−0.115	ns	ns
Marriage, spouse and children in Italy					−0.343	−0.259	−0,179	ns
Married, family abroad						0.084	0.164	0.305
Married spouse in Italy							0.08	0.221
Married with children, spouse in Italy								0.141
Married with children, spouse and children in Italy								

Note: No family: No family at migration, or family acquisition or reunification. Marriage family abroad: No family at migration, marriage after migration the family lives abroad. Marriage, spouse in Italy: no family at migration, marriage after migration, spouse lives in Italy the eventual children live abroad. Marriage, spouse and children in Italy: no family at migration, marriage after migration, spouse and children live in Italy. Married, family abroad: married before migration without children, spouse and eventual children live abroad. Married, spouse in Italy: married before migration without children, spouse lives in Italy and eventual children live abroad. Married with children, spouse in Italy: married before migration with children, spouse lives in Italy and eventual children live abroad. Married with children, spouse and children in Italy: married before migration with children, spouse and children live in Italy. ns, not significant at level 0.05.

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TABLE 6 Occurrence of family events since migration and current situation: difference between the probability of decide to settle of the row profile and probability of decide to settle of the column profile estimated from model 3.

	No family	Marriage family abroad	Marriage spouse in Italy	Marriage spouse and children in Italy	Married family abroad	Married spouse in Italy	Married with children spouse in Italy	Married with children spouse and children in Italy
No family		ns	−0.174	−0.249	0.154	ns	−0.131	−0.215
Marriage, family abroad			−0.172	−0.246	0.157	ns	ns	−0.213
Marriage, spouse in Italy				−0.075	0.328	0.135	ns	ns
Marriage, spouse and children in Italy					0.403	0.209	0.118	ns
Married, family abroad						−0.194	−0.285	−0.369
Married spouse in Italy							ns	−0.176
Married with children, spouse in Italy								−0.084
Married with children, spouse and children in Italy								

Note: No family: No family at migration, or family acquisition or reunification. Marriage family abroad: No family at migration, marriage after migration the family lives abroad. Marriage, spouse in Italy: no family at migration, marriage after migration, spouse lives in Italy the eventual children live abroad. Marriage, spouse and children in Italy: no family at migration, marriage after migration, spouse and children live in Italy. Married, family abroad: married before migration without children, spouse and eventual children live abroad. Married spouse in Italy: married before migration without children, spouse lives in Italy and eventual children live abroad. Married with children, spouse lives in Italy: married before migration with children, spouse lives in Italy and eventual children live abroad. Married with children, spouse and children in Italy: married before migration with children, spouse and children live in Italy. ns: not significant at level 0.05.

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which tends to shape intentions in terms of settlement in the country where the migrant's family members live at the moment when migration intentions are re-evaluated (Agadjanian et al., 2014; Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2016; Wanner, 2021).

Regarding the two research hypotheses on ties with the country of origin and the country of destination (**H2a** and **H2b**), we considered three different aspects: visits to the country of origin, home ownership and living in a mixed couple. In the case of ties with the country of origin, the variable used (frequent visits to the country of origin) is never significant. Consequently, we cannot make any consideration, even if the odds ratio values go in the expected direction. On the contrary, the two variables referring to ties with Italy show significant coefficients. Homeownership, an indicator of immigrant integration (OECD, 2018), is negatively associated with confirmation of the intention to return and positively related to the confirmation of settlement intentions. However, it is impossible to establish the direction of the relationship between the two variables: in fact, the immigrants might have changed their minds and consequently bought a home; conversely, the immigrants may have decided to settle in Italy because they had purchased a home for a particular reason (e.g. to avoid discrimination in the real estate rental market or as an investment). In other words, reverse causality cannot be proved, given the cross-sectional structure of the data. Using longitudinal data could shed light on the causality between variables. Living in a mixed couple may indicate successful integration and, therefore, is correlated to confirming the initial declaration of permanent settlement intentions in Italy, as a previous study also found (Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2019). Living in a mixed couple is another variable strongly associated with confirming the settlement intention and the intention of permanent settlement among migrants without a definite plan upon their arrival.

The last research hypothesis (**H3**) aimed to investigate the role of economic conditions in shaping migration intentions. The family's financial resources are closely associated with adherence to the initial plans of settlement and with a change from uncertain plans to a decision to settle permanently in Italy. By and large, immigrants with a very good or sufficient self-assessed family financial condition are more likely to confirm their intention to stay or to move from uncertainty to a stable decision. Therefore, based on a 'failure–success' interpretation (e.g. Caron, 2020; Caron & Ichou, 2020; Cassarino, 2004), economic success seems essential in orientating immigrants towards permanent settlement in Italy. These results support our H3.

As a robustness check to verify whether particular migrant groups skewed our results (namely Albanians, Romanians and Moroccans), we performed a sensitivity analysis of the results. It showed that the Romanians and the Moroccans drove the findings regarding women being less likely to confirm their intent to return. Indeed, when we ran a model without this subpopulation, we found no statistical evidence of this effect (see Tables S1–S3). Moreover, having children at the moment of migration and looking for a job in Italy, which decreased the probability of confirming the intention to return, were not statistically significant for the model without Romanians. Overall, however, these robustness checks confirmed the stability of our results.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to investigate the dynamics of change and stability in migration models by analysing the stability of migration intentions – that is, the intent to return or settle permanently – of first-generation migrants living in Italy, using data from the SCIF survey conducted by ISTAT in 2011–2012. Despite limitations due to its cross-sectional design (e.g. the issue of reverse causality between the variables studied that cannot be proved), this is the first study to evaluate the constancy of migration intentions.

The data suggest that migration intentions are not stable between the two considered points in time (at the time of arrival and at the time of the survey), confirming previous results (Bettin et al., 2018; Mara & Landesmann, 2013). In particular, intentions to return to the home country – prevalent on arrival in Italy – appear less stable than intentions to stay. While a retrospective study may partially overemphasize the occurrence of this result, an overall transition to the intent to settle permanently closely aligns with Italian immigration history.

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Especially, in the early phases of this history, immigrants saw Italy as a second-best choice or a temporary destination (Colucci, 2018). Over time, however, the country became one of the most relevant countries for immigrants in Europe, with a stable immigrant population (Bonifazi, 2013). This process also resulted from many migrants changing their initial plans and deciding to settle permanently, forming new families or being re-joined by family members initially left behind (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2019; Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Terzera, 2018; Paparusso et al., 2017).

Our study shows that where a family resides is where people prefer to remain or return to. This finding aligns with previous research, such as the study conducted by Toruńczyk-Ruiz and Brunarska (2020), which supports our hypothesis H1a. Individuals without a partner or children are more likely to confirm their intention to return than those with other profiles. On the contrary, migrants who started a family after migrating are less likely to confirm their initial return intention and more likely to decide to settle in Italy, in contrast to migrants who already had a family when they arrived. This finding supports our hypothesis H1b.

The effect of ties to Italy is also essential. Migrants having strong ties to Italy (e.g. homeowners and mixed couples) are more likely to settle, whether they intended to return upon arrival or initially intended to settle. They are also less likely to confirm their intention to return home, supporting our H2b. On the contrary, having ties with the home country, proxied by frequent visits, is non-significant, thus failing to support H2a.

Financial stability is a crucial aspect that may be correlated to disrupting the original migratory plan. Immigrants whose families have very good or sufficient financial resources have a high probability of confirming their intention to settle in Italy or change their plans towards a long-term stay. The data thus support our H3.

Our study suggests that starting a family or family reunion and good economic conditions are crucial in determining a transition to permanent settlement, as measured by confirming the initial intention to settle permanently in Italy. Therefore, supporting migrant families, such as through the facilitation of family reunions or active policies to combat poverty, may be crucial for enhancing stability.

To conclude, assessing the change and stability of first-generation immigrants' future intentions and understanding the main factors associated with these dynamics is particularly useful for implementing effective immigration and integration policies. Immigration is a stable component of Italian society; it contributes to the labour market and slows down population ageing and the decline in fertility.

Studying migration intentions during the migration experience could prove particularly helpful in orienting policies that influence the factors affecting immigrants' plans and the host society's future economic and demographic dynamics.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This survey has recently been included in a systematic compilation of 212 surveys that have collected data on migration aspirations, prepared by Carling and Mjelva (2021) for the EU-funded Project QuantMig: Quantifying Migration Scenarios for Better Policy, and in the EthMigSurveyDataHub, a database resulting from the COST action CA16111 International Ethnic and Immigrant Minorities' Survey Data Network.

[2] Hereinafter 'intention on arrival'.

[3] Former EU-15 countries, Malta, Cyprus, United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, EFTA countries.

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