Mobility and Belonging: A Study of Italian Youth Diaspora in Australia

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This research report presents and discusses the preliminary findings of a mixed-methods research project examining Italian youth mobility to and formations of belonging in Australia. The project is an international collaboration between the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and the Department of Educational Science at the Universidad Tre di Roma, Italy. It aims to explore how new forms of belonging are constructed by Italian youth and young adults in their host country, Australia. The project examines the social and personal resources needed by recently arrived young Italians to succeed in developing relationships and spaces of belonging through, for example, their connections with other recent Italian migrants, the wider Italian community in Australia, and the Australian people and the local culture.

Our approach to belonging is underpinned by a theoretical frame that understands the notion through relationships to people, places and material objects (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). Our understanding of belonging is also informed by research that highlights the importance of cultural differences in the formation of a sense of connectedness to the demographically diverse host society (Wyn, Khan & Dadvand, 2019). The report is organised into four sections: 1) an overview of the recent Italian youth mobility to Australia, 2) a brief background to the conceptualisation of mobility and belonging in economically globalizing times, 3) research methods, and 4) the preliminary findings about the participants, and their experiences of living/working in Australia.
In the last decade, social and economic crises in Italy, including a weaker nexus between education and work, deepening of social stratifications, and high levels of youth unemployment, have affected young Italians’ certainty about their chances to build a future (Baldassar, Pyke & Ben-Moshe, 2012; Colombo, Leonini & Rebughini, 2018; ISTAT, 2016). Uncertainty about future labour and living prospects has the potential to increase the transnational migration of youth and young adults from Italy. According to the Registry Office of Italian Residents Abroad (AIRE), there has been an increase of 30% to 40% of new Italian immigrants in urban centres such as Sydney and Melbourne between 2005 and 2012 (Strangio & De Rose, 2014).

Some researchers argue that this is a complex phenomenon characterized by generational mobility among educated youth in search for employment and better life opportunities (Armilli-Mascitelli, 2016; Baldassar et al., 2012; Strangio & De Rose, 2014). Mobility has always been a significant material and symbolic resource for young people (Thomson & Taylor, 2005), and has become a contemporary maker and marker of youth transitions (Robertson et al., 2018). Being mobile has become central to youth ‘accounts of self as they make the transition to adulthood’ (Thomson & Taylor, 2005: 337). Thus, the social, economic and political crisis in Italy has only exacerbated the potential of transnational movement among Italian youth, particularly those with material and cultural resources.

Australia is among one of the popular destinations for skilled young Italians because it is viewed as a nation with significant social and economic opportunities (Armilli-Mascitelli, 2016) especially at a time when the Italian economy remains under stress (Strangio & De Rose, 2014). In 2015, more than twenty thousand (22,050) Italians were living in Australia with a temporary resident visa, an increase of 5.4% compared to 2014 (Fondazione Migrantes, 2016).

A significant proportion of these young Italians move to Australia using the migration program “working and holiday visa”. This program is generally viewed by migrants as a transition phase that allows them ‘an overseas work/life experience or a pathway to more permanent migration’ (Robertson 2014: 1915). For Australia, migrants under the ‘working and holiday visa’ constitute an important source of ‘temporary labour migration’ – a migrant force that has displaced ‘the long-standing program of permanent migration’ (Campbell et al., 2019: 98). Temporary labour migration, however, includes the ‘so-called undocumented workers’ and those on official visa programs such as ‘international students’, temporary skilled workers and working holiday-makers’ (p. 99). These forms of migration have contributed to an increase in youth migration to Australia.
Youth Mobility and Belonging in Globalizing Times

The recent political, social and economic crisis in Italy, including high levels of youth unemployment, increasing precarity in working conditions, and a mistrust in politics and public institutions, has led to an increase in youth emigration from Italy. Colombo and colleagues (2018) frame the experience of job uncertainty, labour precarisation and lack of economic autonomy as a ‘new generational location’ for Italian youth and young adults. Europe is the most common destination for Italian migrants (54.1%). Outside the European Union, Australia is among one of the most popular destinations for young Italians owing to its reputation as an open and meritocratic society that offers ample opportunities for migrants searching for education, work and better lifestyle.

Today, around 25,000 Italians live in Australia on temporary visas (Grigoletti and Olivetto, 2018). Yet, the migration of Italians to Australia is not new and it has been extensively studied with respect to the migratory waves of the nineteen century, 1950s-60s, and 1970s-80s (e.g. Grigoletti & Pianelli, 2016; Mascitelli & Armillei, 2018; Sanfilippo, 2017). Indeed, as Trimbolli (2018: 50) argues, the rich history of Italians in this country can mean that ‘the Italian diaspora has become more accepted in Australia, even considered a model minority’ with other ‘new migrant groups, such as Indo-Chinese, Arabs and Sudanese, subsequently (becoming) the target of racial vilification’.

It is important to state that the analysis of youth mobility and formations of belonging requires examining the nexus between the processes of qualification and professional disqualification, patterns of social mobility, the link between identity and new memberships, the production of social cohesion and social exclusion, the reformulation of the link with Italy (in social and professional terms), and the relationship with previous generations of emigrants. Transnational mobility can lead also to the re-production of socio-economic advantages for and by those from privileged backgrounds that can use their material and personal resources to move and enhance their cultural, economic and social capital (Robertson et al., 2018). As such, youth mobility can be ‘a short-term strategy that enables youth to stay ‘on-track’ for a conventional pathway to secure work or a career’ (p. 207).

While ‘freedom’ remains the central signifier and constitutive of the idea and practice of mobility (Cresswell, 2006), one needs to be wary of its limitations, especially with regards to who can, and cannot, move. Care should be taken not to accept the notion of world ‘on the move’ uncritically and instead we need to interrogate the pairing of mobility with freedom (see Cresswell, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2016). As Skeggs (2004: 49) maintains, ‘mobility and control over mobility reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship’. Thomson and Taylor (2005: 338) also reiterate that a focus on mobility, as well as ‘cosmopolitanism and localism’, renders ‘power visible’, highlighting the creation of material and affective spaces of inclusion and exclusion. Notwithstanding, as mentioned above, mobility is currently recognised as a significant component of youth and young adults’ pathways through life (Robertson et al., 2018).
Research Methods

This is a mixed-methods research project with Italian youth and young adults aged 18 to 35 who have arrived in Australia since the 2008 Great Financial Crisis (GFC). The choice of age group 18 to 35, rather than 18 to 24 years of age, is in line with the categorical notions of youth used by Italian researchers (see Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006; Giardiello, 2016). The sample consists of Italian youth who live in Australia as residents, citizens or on a working holiday visa and the Temporary Work (Skilled) visa.

Data were collected through an online survey and follow-up semi-structured interviews with a subset of 20 participants who completed the survey. The research project was designed to address two main research questions: 1) What are the motivations for Italian youth and young adults to migrate to Australia? And 2) What are the social and personal resources needed for Italian youth and young adults to experience a sense of belonging in Australia?

The survey was divided into three sections: 1) demographic data (gender, age, territorial origin, educational qualifications, family background, work experience in Italy and Australia, living conditions in Italy and Australia), 2) biographical-relational data (quality of relations with Italians and Australians, with institutions, communities, nature of belonging, residential status), and 3) attitudinal (attitudes towards others, attitudes of others towards themselves, expectations towards the future and general norms and values).

A non-probabilistic “avalanche” sampling technique was used. This involved promoting the survey on social media sites such as the “Italians in Melbourne”, “Nomit”, “Italians in Adelaide” Facebook pages. The researchers also liaised with the Italian committee NIMIT (The Italian Network in Melbourne) in Victoria to promote the online survey and, subsequently, adopted a snowball approach to expand the sample using the already recruited participants to promote the project among their social networks. Semi-structured phone interviews were also conducted with a subset of the survey participants. The phone interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis with the prior consent of the participants. The research had Ethics approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne.
Preliminary Findings of Mixed Methods Study

This section presents an overview of the participants and their profile. It also discusses the ways in which the participants constructed and expressed their sense of belonging.

**Participants’ Profile**

The survey was completed by 79 young people and young adults (51% identified as males and 49% identified as females). The average age is 32.08 years. Fifty-two per cent of the participants come from Northern Italy, and 23% from Central and Southern Italy respectively. Two per cent of respondents already lived in a foreign country.

Most of the participants who completed the survey arrived in Australia after 2012 with a significant number migrating through programs such as Work and Holiday, student or temporary skilled visas.

![Figure 1. In what year did you come to Australia? (%)](image)

In terms of educational credentials, 5% of the participants had a lower middle school diploma, 33% had a high school diploma and 62% had a university degree (half with bachelor’s degree, and the other half with a Master’s or PhD degree). These educational patterns resonate with Baldassar and colleagues’ (2012) analysis of recent Italian youth migration under working holiday and skilled migration visas. Unlike the Italian migrants of the pre or post-world war II, the current wave is ‘highly mobile and extremely technologically literate’, resonating with notions of contemporary transnational youth mobility seeking professional competitive labour advantage, developing intercultural skills, and acquiring a cosmopolitan outlook of work and lifestyle in their youth transitions (see Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Robertson et al., 2018; Thomson & Taylor, 2005).

In terms of living conditions in Italy, as Figure 2 shows, before migrating to Australia, over half of the survey participants (53%) were living with their parents followed by those living with their partners (23%). Nineteen per cent were sharing a house, while almost one in ten were living on their own. These patterns of living arrangements are not uncommon with contemporary Italian youth, and are supported by the findings of other studies (see Colombo et al., 2018; Leccardi, 2010; Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006).
In terms of main occupation before migrating to Australia, almost three quarters (73%) were in employment, either in a full-time or part-time job, or as self-employed, working a series of jobs and/or in casual irregular paid work. At least two out of ten (22%) of participants were studying full-time before migrating to Australia and the remaining 13% were unemployed and looking for work (see Figure 3).

Three quarters of participants mentioned that they migrated to Australia ‘to live new experiences and possibly a professional growth’. Only 14% mentioned they migrated due to ‘necessity and not for choice’, while 11% of participants did it for a romantic relationship, for a job offer or just because ‘they are used to travel’.

Those from high and mid socio-economic backgrounds were more likely than their low socio-economic counterparts to assert that they moved as part of an experience of personal and professional growth; while the latter were more likely to affirm that they migrated for work or family reasons. Some participants mentioned they migrated to have ‘a brand-new start’, ‘experience a new country and a new culture’, or for work and/or romantic reasons.
Yet, other participants mentioned lack of opportunities in their home country. For example, this 26-year-old male participant, employed full-time and living in an urban centre before migrating to Australia, commented:

_The lack of future career openings in Italy has been the main reason for my move. I had a very strong feeling that I could invest everything in myself (studying, working, etc.) without a real possibility of success and stability. Currently, the majority of my friends that went to university, or not, are still unemployed, in casual jobs and most likely at home with their parents._

Most participants (56%) migrated to Australia through the Work and Holiday Visa program, 8% did it through a ‘temporary skilled’ and 11% with a ‘student’ visa, while the other 26% stated migrating with another type of visa or didn’t record an answer to this question. Fifty-six per cent of the participants were in Australia as temporary residents or under working and holiday visas. Almost nine out of ten participants were living in metropolitan centres.

Forty-five per cent of our participants were studying (of which 73% were doing it part-time), while 67% were working full-time. Almost 18% were working part-time and 6% stated they were in casual employment or had irregular jobs. A third stated that they were working night shifts and 46% worked on public holidays and during the weekends, which reflects not only the nature of the industries in which they were employed, but also the erosion of the previous generation’s 9 to 5 weekdays patterns of work (see Cuervo, Crofts & Wyn, 2013).

A third of participants were working in hospitality or retail, 21% were employed as professionals (marketing, journalism, accounting), 18% were in education services (university lecturer and/or tutor, and school teacher), and 8% were in manual skill occupations (driver, construction). Approximately three quarters (78%) of participants that completed the survey felt their ‘job enhanced their skills’ and 63% stated that it ‘corresponds to their level of education’. At least a quarter felt their occupations did not help them to grow professionally and 56% felt it was a work experience that would not help them gain a job in Italy. In terms of effectiveness of job search, the participants reported finding work through advertisement in newspapers or on the Internet and ‘going directly to an employer’. Securing a job through the ‘Italian community’ (11%) ranked the lowest (see Figure 4).

_Figure 4. In looking for jobs, how would you rate the effectiveness of the following? (By ‘high’, in %)_

- Hearing about it from friends
- Going directly to an employer
- Ads in newspaper/internet
- Italian community
- Family connections
These labour experiences are likely to be shaped by the priori experiences and expectations of the participants. However, they also mirror the labour situation experienced by young adults living and working in Australia, an increasingly precarious labour market where the nexus between education and work is debilitating and in which part-time jobs and work outside regular hours is the new norm (Cuervo, Crofts Wyn, 2013; Cuervo & Wyn 2016).

Youth migration emerges from within this global framework of a precarious and uncertain labor market (Marchese, 2018). Youth mobility is often presented as a strategy to resolve the issue of job insecurity, to improve one’s skills and have greater career or life prospects. The research on post-crisis youth emigration, however, has not dwelled sufficiently on the influence of structural factors (economic, cultural, social capital, family origin) on the trajectories of young migrants and in particular on how inequalities are reproduced through mobility (Bonizzoni, 2017; Giardiello & Capobianco, 2018; Varriale, 2019).

These contradictions are manifest in new generations because the diffusion of a broader political and social discourse, which emphasises individual choice, constrains awareness in young people about how social structures operate in their lives (Giardiello & Capobianco, 2019). More specifically, on the subjective level, mobility could be seen as an opportunity to feel accomplished, both on the professionally and personally. On the objective level, structural factors condition the personal and professional experiences of young people.

**Belonging in and despite difference**

At the time of the survey, more than half of the participants (56%) were living with their partners, 16% were living on their own, almost two out of ten (19%) were sharing a house, while the rest were living in a different kind of accommodation setting or did not disclose their living arrangements. At least seven out of ten participants were married, or were in an on-going or de facto relationship, while a quarter were single and not in a relationship.

As Figure 5 shows, social networks (‘through other friends’) and social spaces (‘sporting groups’ and ‘Italian community’) were identified as the most common ways for making friendships. Approximately a third of the participants stated that they made friends in workplace (37%) and educational settings (33%).

**Figure 5. How have you made your friends in Australia? (Mark ALL that apply, in %)**

![Figure 5](image-url)
Findings from the semi-structured interviews reveal that the majority established relationships and networks with other Italian migrants of similar age. Fifty-five per cent agreed with the statement ‘most of my friends in Australia come from similar cultural background’. Participants did not, however, construct ties to the previous generation of Italian migrants that came to Australia between 1950s and 1970s, something that was attributed to being involved in different work or leisure activities, as well as living in different geographical locations within cities or regional areas.

In the semi-structured interviews, participants also mentioned differences in values and ‘life-outlook’ to justify a lack of connection to previous migratory waves of Italians in Australia.

Almost four out of ten participants stated that the workplace was a site for making friends and socialising. In their comments, these participants viewed the workplace as: ‘a place where I can meet new people and make new friends from all over the world’, ‘met all the friends I now consider my family at my work’, and a place that ‘helps me to expand my network and build and reinforce acquaintances’.

Yet, other participants viewed work as an obstacle from building social networks outside work because it ‘takes time from socialising’. A few participants commented that cultural barriers got in the way of building social networks and friendships. The following female participant, who was aged 24 and lived in a regional coastal tourist town since she arrived in Australia in 2013, commented on her full-time in retail work along the following lines:

> Working 9am to 6pm makes it hard, however, after nearly 5 years of living in Australia, I got used to not socialise as it isn’t part of the culture. I have a few Italian friends as we share the same cultural thoughts and socialise a bit when I go to the gym. Other than that, my Italian partner is my family!

Despite finding it difficult to socialise in her new place of residence, the participant stated that she did feel that she does not belong to Italy anymore:

> Work, home, my whole life is now in Australia. I no longer belong to Italy and I don’t see Italy as my home. I do not own or feel like Italy is home to me! I moved here right after I turned 20 years old, therefore I’ve built my whole life, work experience, belongings, family here.

Other participants mentioned different reasons about their sense of belonging to Australia. A common response among a third of participants was ‘lifestyle’. This was generally expressed as spending time doing ‘outdoor’ activities. Comments range from: ‘when I spend some time in parks or I have a BBQ’, and ‘Nature, people’s love and commitment to nature and everything related’. This is also reflected in the participants’ response to the survey questions about places where they most socialised. Figure 6 shows some of these trends.

![Figure 6. Where do you go to relax or socialise? (Mark all that apply, in %)](image-url)
A quarter of participants attributed a sense of belonging to living in a multicultural society. The interview participants appreciated the diversity in big urban centres (particularly in Melbourne), which helped them feel comfortable and part of a culturally diverse cosmopolitan city space. In the survey, for example, some participants stated:

*The diversity in the city of Melbourne make me feel like everyone can belong here.*

*I feel that I belong to a multicultural nation called Australia, where I can be proud to be Italian and at the same time, I feel respected as a recent immigrant. I highly appreciate the freedom I have gained in Australia since I became a citizen and the opportunities to live a decent life.*

Further, other participants attributed their sense of belonging to their daily routines at work, university studies, and volunteering or community work.

A recent national study of youth and multiculturalism in Australia reveals that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds feel they belong to Australia, yet they also experience daily discrimination (see Wyn, Khan & Dadvand, 2019). Similarly in our survey, over half of the participants (52%) stated that they experienced discrimination since arriving in Australia. The following participants offer reflections shared by many other about being constructed as the Other or ‘an outsider’ in everyday life:

*The fact that I don’t have many friends here, actually after 6 years I still don’t feel accepted from many. Still people are joking about my accent or heritage.*

*I realise Melbourne is a bit of a bubble, there are contexts where because of your accent you are still treated as an outsider. To be fair, that happens even in big cities. You end up realising that even after a decade to some locals you remain a bit of an outsider.*

The participants’ experiences shared in the semi-structured interviews also point to a feeling of being othered through being constructed as ‘exotic’ – as one female participant put it – by their Anglo Australians acquaintances and colleagues. The participants’ comments resonate with a paradoxical status described in multicultural youth research as ‘membership in difference’ (Wyn, Khan & Dadvand, 2019). That is, a status of intercultural provisions that allows young people to recognize one’s own cultural identity but within a social framework constituted by cultural, normative and value of difference and diversity in which a multiplicity of belonging is constituted.

A sense of ‘membership in difference’ is reflected in the analysis of multiple correspondences, a statistical analysis that allows to reconstruct semantic areas in which the common answers are placed. Multiple correspondence analysis is a multivariate statistical technique that investigates the associations between the modalities of qualitative variables. Figure 7 highlights the presence of a strong nucleus, in the II and III quadrant, consisting of items 7 and 8 (“I feel I belong to more than one culture” and “it is important to preserve the cultural heritage”) that have obtained the maximum agreement, and items 1 and 3 (“I feel I belong to Italy” and “I feel I belong to Italy and Australia”) that have registered a positive agreement. In the I and IV quadrant are the items for which the respondents expressed their disagreement or did not express any opinion. Figure 7 shows that they do not feel that they “belong to Australia” (item 2), “At the workplace” (item 5) and “at the place where they live” (item 6) and “at the Italian community in Australia” (item 9). No opinion was expressed with respect to item 4 “I belong to my university”.

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The analysis shows two opposite profiles with respect to the sense of belonging. The first (II and III quadrants) demonstrate aspects of what Harris (2013) calls hybrid identity through which young Italian immigrants construct their identity by feeling a member of the host society without abandoning their own connections to their home country. The multicultural context rather than weakening a sense of belonging to the home country generates an appreciation about their own cultural heritage. This does not determine an identity closure but a construction of double or hybrid belonging.

The second profile (I and IV quadrants) shows that not all participants were able to develop either a double membership or a significant sense of belonging to the host country. These results point to social isolation from the host society. While this does not necessarily imply an uprooting from the country of origin, it is likely to be symptomatic of difficulty in establishing significant relationships in the host society.
Conclusion and Further Directions

The Italian youth and young adults that participated in this research were from different socio-economic backgrounds and diverse geographical locations in Italy. Their reasons for migrating to Australia resonated with the literature on transnational youth mobility and Italian youth research that has highlighted limited opportunities for education and employment as a key incentive for mobility (see Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016; Dolby & Rizvi, 2008; Robertson et al., 2018).

In terms of formations of belonging, participants expressed a strong sense of their own cultural identity and distinctiveness, while at the same time seeking to interact ‘between and across different cultural groups’ (see also Harris, 2013). While the participants sought to construct a sense of belonging with peers from Italian and other cultural backgrounds, there was limited interactions with the older generations of Italian migrants in Australia.

Young Italians have a different profile than the earlier migrants of the 1950s-60s, not only from the point of view of higher levels of education but also in terms of having a transnational outlook. Despite the differences, researchers argue that there is a relationship between these generations due to the migratory linkages that ‘created a corridor that has been activated several generations later by temporary skilled migrants’ (Strangio & De Rose, 2014: 207). Thus, as Baldassar and Pyke (2013: 128) affirm, this new wave of Italian migrants is a ‘new form of “elite” skilled migration compromised of people who are independent of, yet reliant on, the community infrastructure and social standing that previous waves of Italian migrants have established’ in urban and regional Australia.

Our preliminary findings also show that workplace still has a place in the formation of belonging for young Italians in Australia. While a third of participants commented that their workplace was a site for socialisation and making friends, it as also a site where they felt discriminated. That is, 13% of participants reported being discriminated due to their cultural background.

Our study, however, does not render itself for comparison with other studies, but offers new insights into the long tradition of Italian migration to Australia (see Baldassar et al., 2012). This report showcases some of our preliminary findings on the experiences of belonging, and beyond, among a new cohort of Italian migrants in Australia. It also offers insights into the inequities experienced by the new cohort of Italian migrants.

Transnational youth mobility is commonly presented as an exit strategy from the Italian system, a system often evaluated by youth as offering limited pathways for transitions and where young people remain sceptical about meritocracy. However, there has been little attention to the conditions experienced by Italian diaspora abroad. Therefore, there remains a gap in our understanding of the everyday experiences and practices of belonging by young Italian migrants in countries like Australia and the consequences of mobility in a world characterized by political and social uncertainty and precarious labour market.
References


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