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Migrant and Satisfied? The Ethnic Gap in Job Satisfaction in the Italian Labor Market

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Abstract

Job satisfaction is a desirable outcome both at the organizational and at the individual level. Anyway, little is known about the gap between natives' and migrants' job satisfaction, which represents a critical issue in the light of the increasing presence of foreigner workers in the Western labor markets. In order to shed light on this issue, we estimate a number of OLS models to quantify sex-specific natives' and migrants' job satisfaction, by exploiting a particularly detailed Italian source of data (the Survey of Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens). We find that being a migrant is not associated per se with any premium or penalty in job satisfaction. When we control for the different socio-demographic features and job characteristics of natives and migrants, it turns out that migrants are more satisfied than natives. Hence, it emerges in Italy a job satisfaction paradox based on the worker's migratory status.

Keywords: Migration; job satisfaction; ethnic gap; labor market

Introduction

Understanding the concept of job satisfaction is important for several reasons. First of all, high job satisfaction positively affects the work performance, lowers the risk of absenteeism and job quitting and improves the organizational climate (Ostroff, 1992). Secondly, since work represents a meaningful source of self-recognition for people, job satisfaction is significantly associated with other dimensions of well-being like psychological and physical worker's health (Faragher et al., 2013), life satisfaction (Judge & Watanabe, 1993) and happiness (Weaver, 1978). Hence, it is not surprising that recently the importance of job satisfaction has been recognised also within the political debate (Brown et al., 2012).

In this perspective, comparing the job satisfaction of natives and migrants represents a particularly critical yet under-studied issue (Koh et al., 2016; Wang & Jing, 2018). Indeed, on the one side, since migrants represent an increasingly growing quota of the workforce in the most developed economies, analysing their subjective work-related experience is a strategic asset to improve the organizational functioning (De Haas, 2010). On the other side, while it exists an extensive literature on migrants' health (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021), life satisfaction (Trappolini & Giudici, 2021), happiness (Hendriks, 2015) and loneliness (Cela & Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2021), little is known on their job satisfaction.

Two perspectives may be used in studying ethnic gaps in job satisfaction. One is the objective approach, for which the worker's well-being arises from the presence of a given set of

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desirable job characteristics (Gallie, 2007); in other words, a *good* job increases job satisfaction, while a *bad* job lowers it (Green, 2006). Following this perspective, migrants would be expected to be less satisfied than natives: indeed, they suffer in general from an ethnic penalty in the labor market in terms of job quality, wage and other work-related factors (Avola & Piccitto, 2020; Cantalini et al., 2022; Heath & Cheung, 2007; Kogan, 2006; Panichella et al., 2021), and often they are subject to discrimination in the workplace (Magee & Umamaheswar, 2011). These negative objective conditions would make migrants scoring lower in job satisfaction than their native counterpart (Tuch & Martin, 1991).

But the ethnic gap in job satisfaction may also be explained by referring to the interactional perspective: this approach acknowledges that worker's subjectivity in terms of work orientations, preferences, values, cultural and personal traits moderates the association between objective job characteristics and job satisfaction (Kalleberg, 1977; Warr, 2007). The interactional perspective has been advocated to explain the so-called *job satisfaction paradox* (Saha et al., 2021), for which groups which are under-represented and typically disadvantaged in the labor market report higher job satisfaction than the majority group, due to their lower work-related expectations (Hodson, 1985). This paradox has been extensively demonstrated for women (Crosby, 1982; Piccitto, 2022), but such argument has been only marginally applied in the study of migrants' job satisfaction (O'Reilly & Roberts, 1973; Shapiro, 1977).

In this work, we use two pooled cross-sectional surveys on Italy, containing information on job satisfaction, socio-demographic variables and job characteristics. Italy represents a particularly suitable case study for two reasons. First, it is characterised by a dual labor market, strongly segmented in 'core' and 'peripheral' jobs, with foreign workers filling employment slots in the lowest areas of the occupational structure and having very limited chances of upward social mobility (Avola & Piccitto, 2020; Fullin & Reyneri 2011; Panichella et al., 2021). Secondly, Italy is a new migrant-receiving country, which only recently has attracted massive flows of foreigners if compared with US or other European countries. Thus, migrants are still a minor part of the workforce, and this condition may make them more willing to accept undesirable working conditions and at the same time to perceive themselves less deprived than natives (Rice et al., 1989).

On the basis of these two peculiarities of the Italian socio-economic context we expect that, according to the objective approach to job satisfaction, foreigner workers in Italy would be less satisfied than natives due to their segregation in low-qualified jobs (*job satisfaction ethnic penalty hypothesis*). Nevertheless, in line with the interactional approach to job satisfaction, once accounting for their socio-demographic composition and position within the occupational structure, migrants would be more satisfied than natives, since they have lower expectations and different standards of comparison (*job satisfaction ethnic premium hypothesis*).

Additionally, thanks to the detail of our data, we explore to what extent migrants coming from different areas diverge in terms of job satisfaction. Indeed, different cultural backgrounds may lead to different patterns of socio-economic integration in the host country (Brown, 2002).

Data and methods

Data

Analyses are based on two sources of data: for migrants, we use the *Survey of Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens* (SCIF from now on), a survey conducted by the Italian National

Institute of Statistics (Istat) in 2011–2012. This survey is focused on households settled in Italy with at least one foreign-born individual. Only legal migrants are considered: the households are randomly taken from the Population Register and all their members are interviewed through the CAPI technique. For native individuals, we use the *Multipurpose Survey on Households* (MSH from now on) conducted by Istat in 2009. The two surveys share the same sample design and are based on the same set of questions, hence the full comparability of results is ensured.

We distinguish natives and migrants on the basis of their country of origin, not considering individuals coming from North America, Oceania and other developed countries (N=172, 0.85%) due to their similar patterns of socio-economic integration to those of natives (Avola & Piccitto, 2020). We select dependent workers aged 16-64 years old and we exclude self-employed, a group which is very peculiar in terms of work-related orientations and well-being (Warr & Inceoglu, 2018). Since migration is a gendered process, we run separate analysis for men and women (Ballarino & Panichella, 2018; Khoudja & Fleischmann, 2015). Additionally, to improve the comparability of natives and migrants, we focus on individuals with no more than 20 years of occupational career; this strategy allows us to increase the homogeneity of the two samples, since migration is a relatively new phenomenon in Italy and Italian workers have on average longer careers than foreigners. Hence, we include in two residual categories (whose results are not shown) migrants (N=664, 3.3%) and natives (N=5,387, 26.7%) with careers longer than 20 years. Also migrants of the 2nd and 1.5th generation (N=395, 1.9%) and those without information on the country of origin (N=325, 1.6%) are included in residual categories.

After a list-wise deletion of cases with missing values on the variables included in the models (see above), we define an analytical sample of 5,495 native and 7,736 migrant employees.

Variables and method

Our dependent variable is the self-reported individual job satisfaction, with responses ranging from 0 (at all satisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). This indicator represents a reliable measure of job satisfaction (Spector, 1997), not affected by the mode of survey administration (Piccitto et al., 2022). We estimate three OLS nested models: in the first model (M1) we control only for migration status, to estimate the gross effect of being a migrant on job satisfaction. In the second model (M2) we control for a number of socio-demographic characteristics: age (16-25; 26-35; 35-45; 46-55; 56-64), education (primary or less; secondary; tertiary or more); area of residence (North-West; North-East; Centre; South and Islands); familiar status (single; married with children; married without children; son\daughter living with parents; parent alone); number of children (0; 1; 2; 3; 4 or more). Finally, in the third model (M3) we control for job characteristics: contract duration (open ended; fixed terms); working time (full-time; part-time); occupation (measured with the Isco08 classification at 1 digit). With this last model, we estimate the effect of being migrant on job satisfaction net of individual and job characteristics. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by migration status and gender

Variables	Natives		Migrants	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Age classes:</i>				
16-25	14.2	12.3	9.9	6.5
26-35	47.7	44.2	38.0	28.5
36-45	32.9	36.2	36.6	33.3
46-55	4.9	6.5	13.5	23.3
56-64	0.3	0.7	2.1	8.39
<i>Education:</i>				
Primary or less	27.5	18.0	44.7	30.1
Secondary	55.2	55.6	46.9	55.0
Tertiary or more	17.4	26.4	8.3	14.9
<i>Area of residence:</i>				
North-West	27.4	30.4	34.0	31.4
North-East	19.5	21.9	27.1	26.1
Centre	21.4	21.4	25.3	26.9
South and Islands	31.7	26.3	13.5	15.6
<i>Familiar status:</i>				
Single	14.7	13.2	35.9	39.0
Married with children	35.1	38.6	45.7	32.7
Married without children	12.8	14.9	12.2	14.8
Son\daughter living with parents	36.9	25.8	5.0	2.7
Parent alone	0.5	7.5	1.2	10.8
<i>Number of children:</i>				
0	60.7	51.2	41.5	33.68
1	18.3	22.8	21.0	25.5
2	16.8	21.7	24.3	29.2
3	3.6	3.8	9.8	7.5
4 or + more	0.5	0.7	3.4	4.0
<i>Contract duration:</i>				
Open-ended	84.7	80.6	80.8	83.4
<i>Working time</i>				
Part-time	7.5	27.2	9.5	35.3
<i>Area of origin:</i>				
East Europe	-	-	51.5	69.3
North Africa	-	-	12.8	4.2
MENA	-	-	4.4	0.9
Other Africa	-	-	7.1	4.5
Asia	-	-	17.2	8.9
Latin America	-	-	6.9	12.2

Source: own elaboration on SCIF and MSH survey. Weights applied

Results

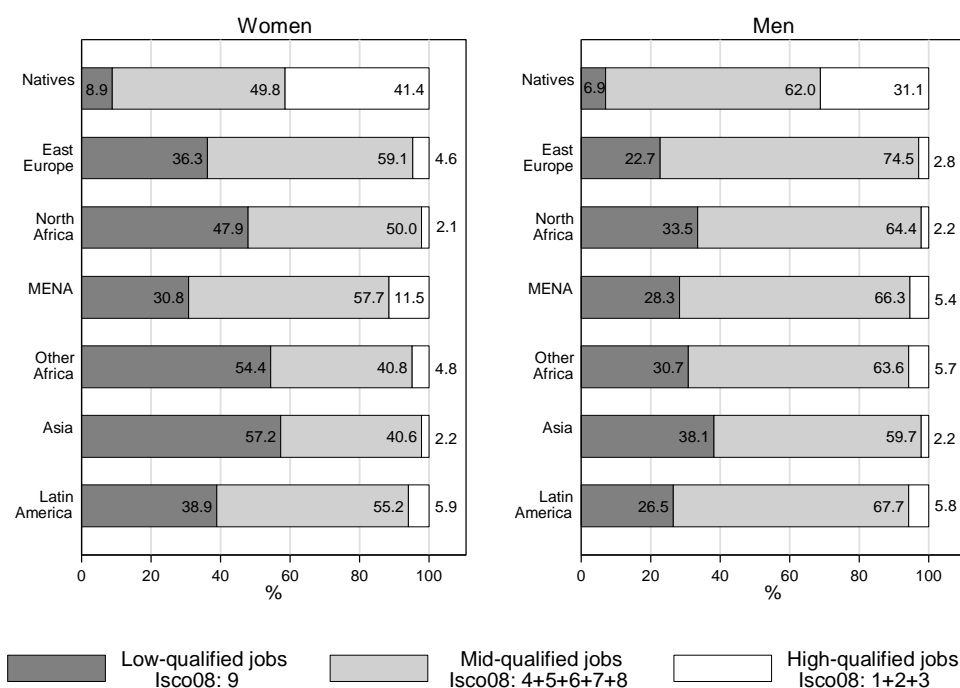
Distribution of natives and migrants in good and bad jobs

In figure 1, we show the natives' and migrants' (distinguishing by their area of origin) distribution of female and male workers in three occupational groups, aggregated to combine occupations that share the same skill levels (Istat, 2013). Hence, we define three occupational groups on the basis of their job quality: high-qualified (Isco08: 1+2+3); mid-qualified (Isco08: 4+5+6+7+8); low-qualified (Isco08: 9).

From this descriptive it emerges the strong penalisation of foreign workers in the Italian labor market: both men and (especially) women are indeed over-represented in the low-qualified

area of the occupational structure (Isco08: 9). For men, this is true somewhat regardless for the area of origin, with less marked within-migrant differences; conversely, women show some peculiarities by area of origin: low-qualified female migrants are more present among Asian and other African individuals, while the distribution of MENA women is more skewed toward the upper pole of the occupational structure. Men are in general more represented than women in the mid-qualified jobs, especially in Isco08: 7 (craft and related trade workers) and Isco08: 8 (plant and machine operators and assemblers), while women are crowded in Isco08: 5 (services and sales workers). Thus, it emerges a strong ethnic penalty in the Italian labor market, which is particularly pronounced for female workers: this finding corroborates our choice to analyse separately men and women (Piccitto, 2022). It is not surprising that Italian women are more present than men in the higher strata of the occupational structure, since working women in Italy are likely to be a selected group: indeed, in this country it is still strong the persistence of the male-breadwinner model, and women may decide to work only in case of a *good* job that allows them to smoothly deal with the “double burden” and to face both paid work and domestic chores (Becker, 1991; Piccitto, 2018).

Figure 1. Distribution of occupational groups by gender and migration status



The ethnic gap in job satisfaction

Table 2 shows the results of the OLS Models 1-3 for women and men. The regression coefficients are linear; i.e., they indicate to what extent the reported job satisfaction changes for a one-point increase in the covariate.

Table 2. OLS regressions coefficients of job satisfaction by gender.

	Women			Men		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Migrant [Ref.: Native]	-0.07 (-0.17 - 0.02)	-0.01 (-0.12 - 0.09)	0.33*** (0.22 - 0.44)	0.02 (-0.07 - 0.10)	0.12** (0.02 - 0.22)	0.32*** (0.22 - 0.42)
<i>Age</i> [Ref.: 16-25]						
26-35	-	-0.05 (-0.22 - 0.12)	-0.10 (-0.27 - 0.07)	-	-0.05 (-0.19 - 0.10)	-0.12* (-0.27 - 0.02)
36-45	-	-0.03 (-0.21 - 0.15)	-0.11 (-0.29 - 0.07)	-	-0.04 (-0.20 - 0.12)	-0.14* (-0.29 - 0.02)
46-55	-	-0.02 (-0.22 - 0.17)	-0.15 (-0.35 - 0.04)	-	-0.07 (-0.25 - 0.10)	-0.18** (-0.36 - -0.01)
56-64	-	0.06 (-0.17 - 0.30)	-0.09 (-0.32 - 0.14)	-	-0.03 (-0.24 - 0.18)	-0.14 (-0.35 - 0.07)
<i>Education</i> [Ref.: Primary or less]						
Secondary	-	0.18*** (0.09 - 0.27)	0.01 (-0.08 - 0.10)	-	0.12*** (0.04 - 0.19)	-0.00 (-0.08 - 0.07)
Tertiary or more	-	0.29*** (0.17 - 0.41)	-0.15** (-0.27 - -0.02)	-	0.36*** (0.24 - 0.48)	0.08 (-0.06 - 0.21)
<i>Area of residence:</i> [Ref.: North-West]						
North-East	-	0.17*** (0.06 - 0.29)	0.19*** (0.07 - 0.30)	-	0.22*** (0.11 - 0.32)	0.21*** (0.11 - 0.31)
Centre	-	0.14** (0.02 - 0.26)	0.14** (0.02 - 0.26)	-	0.15*** (0.04 - 0.26)	0.17*** (0.06 - 0.27)
South and Islands	-	-0.19*** (-0.29 - -0.08)	-0.19*** (-0.29 - -0.08)	-	-0.10** (-0.19 - -0.01)	0.01 (-0.09 - 0.10)
<i>Familiar status:</i> [Ref.: Single]						
Married with children	-	-0.17** (-0.32 - -0.03)	-0.20*** (-0.34 - -0.05)	-	-0.02 (-0.15 - 0.12)	-0.10 (-0.23 - 0.04)
Married without children	-	-0.00 (-0.13 - 0.13)	0.03 (-0.09 - 0.16)	-	-0.01 (-0.13 - 0.12)	-0.01 (-0.13 - 0.11)
Son\daughter living with parents	-	0.18** (0.01 - 0.35)	0.23*** (0.06 - 0.40)	-	0.22*** (0.09 - 0.36)	0.25*** (0.12 - 0.38)
Parent alone	-	-0.30*** (-0.47 - -0.13)	-0.32*** (-0.49 - -0.15)	-	0.04 (-0.29 - 0.36)	-0.04 (-0.36 - 0.28)
<i>Number of children:</i> [Ref.: 1]						
2	-	0.28*** (0.13 - 0.42)	0.38*** (0.23 - 0.52)	-	0.07 (-0.08 - 0.21)	0.11 (-0.03 - 0.25)
3	-	0.39*** (0.24 - 0.54)	0.49*** (0.34 - 0.64)	-	0.27*** (0.12 - 0.41)	0.30*** (0.16 - 0.44)
4 or +	-	0.46*** (0.26 - 0.66)	0.60*** (0.41 - 0.80)	-	0.22** (0.04 - 0.39)	0.28*** (0.11 - 0.46)
<i>Contract duration:</i> [Ref: Fixed-terms]						
Open-ended	-	-	0.28*** (0.18 - 0.38)	-	-	0.42*** (0.32 - 0.51)
<i>Working time:</i> [Ref: Full-time]						
Part-time	-	-	-0.29*** (-0.37 - -0.20)	-	-	-0.66*** (-0.79 - -0.53)
<i>Job quality:</i> [Ref.: High]						
Middle	-	-	-0.65*** (-0.76 - -0.53)	-	-	-0.39*** (-0.49 - -0.28)
Low	-	-	-1.06*** (-1.20 - -0.93)	-	-	-0.81*** (-0.95 - -0.67)
Constant	7.61*** (7.54 - 7.68)	7.33*** (7.11 - 7.54)	7.81*** (7.57 - 8.05)	7.58*** (7.52 - 7.65)	7.31*** (7.13 - 7.50)	7.45*** (7.24 - 7.67)
Observations	9,309	9,309	9,309	10,865	10,865	10,865
R-squared	0.00	0.02	0.05	0.00	0.01	0.05

* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

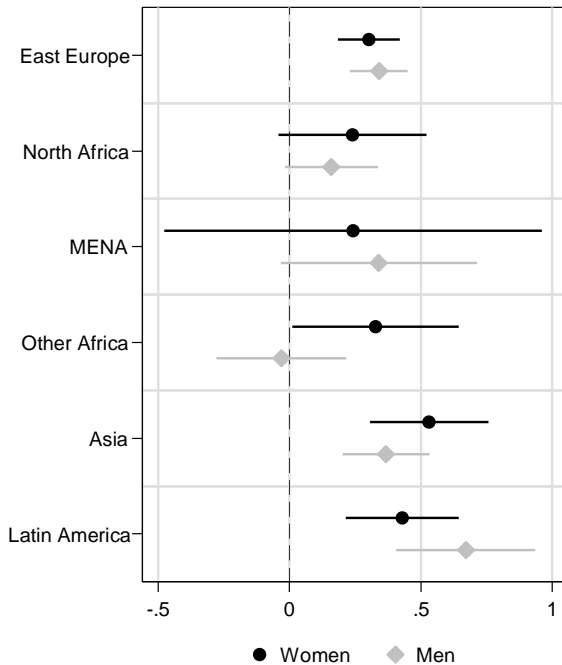
In the first model, since we control only for the migration status, we estimate the gross ethnic gap in job satisfaction, without accounting for the different composition in terms of socio-demographic and job characteristics of the two groups. Here, both for women and for men, the coefficients are low and not statistically significant. Hence, at this stage it does not emerge any difference in job satisfaction based on the worker's migration status.

In Model 2, we introduce the controls referring to the socio-demographic characteristics of the two groups; by doing so, we distinguish the effect of migration status on job satisfaction from that of other individual characteristics. While for women the coefficient of being migrant remains not statistically significant, that of men emerges as positive and statistically different from zero at $\alpha=5\%$. Thus, net of the socio-demographic characteristics, foreign male workers are more satisfied than native ones. Clearly, at this stage we still do not account for the peripheral position of migrants in the occupational structure, since we do not introduce any control referring to the quality of the job performed. Regarding the effect of the individual characteristics, it is interesting to notice that for women it does not emerge any association between age and job satisfaction while men exhibit a U-shaped pattern, a trend which has been already highlighted in literature (Clark et al., 1996). A higher educational title improves job satisfaction across genders, but as soon as we introduce the covariates referring to the job characteristics (Model 3, see above) the effect of education ceases to be statistically significant for men and becomes negative for women (Clark, 1997). Hence, a higher human capital improves only indirectly job satisfaction, by providing more chances of obtaining a *good* job. Interestingly, the civil status seems to matter more for women than for men, while the pattern of the number of children is similar across genders.

In Model 3, finally, we include controls referring to the job characteristics; here, we single out the net ethnic gap in job satisfaction. The coefficient associated with the condition of being a migrant turns to be positive and statistically significant both for women and for men. In other words, keeping constant socio-demographic features and job characteristics, migrant workers experience a higher job satisfaction than natives. As expected, the non-standard employment relationships (fixed-term and part-time contract) are negatively associated with job satisfaction; in both cases, the magnitude of this association is stronger among men than women.

Figure 2 shows the results referring to the second step of the analysis. Here we unpack the ethnic premium in job satisfaction, to underlined to what extent the gap holds true regardless for migrants' territorial area of origin. The coefficients represent the differences in job satisfaction between natives (the reference category) and migrants from different areas. It emerges that foreign workers who most enjoy the ethnic premium are those from Asia and Latin America, followed by the East Europeans. Vice versa, migrants from Africa (especially men) seem to not experience any premium in terms of job satisfaction with respect to natives. The same appears to be true for MENA migrants, even if they are a group particularly low in size and then the estimations are highly uncertain.

Figure 2. Job satisfaction by area of origin among women and men in Italy. OLS regression coefficients. Ref. category: Native



Discussion

The debate on natives' and migrant's job satisfaction is an important but under-explored issue. Indeed, on the one side the ethnic gap on job satisfaction represents a critical outcome for the human resource management, in the light of the increasing number of migrant workers in the Italian labor market. On the other side, analysing the gap in job satisfaction may provide fresh evidence on an important subjective dimension of inequality in the labor market, far less considered than the objective ethnic penalty in occupational attainment.

The empirical results described in this work show that the condition of being migrant is not associated per se with any difference in job satisfaction with respect to natives (*job satisfaction ethnic penalty hypothesis* not confirmed). But once we take into account the different socio-demographic composition and position within the occupational structure of the two groups of workers, it turns out that migrants are more satisfied than natives (*job satisfaction ethnic premium hypothesis* confirmed). In particular, migrant women (men) exhibit a job satisfaction higher of 3.3% (3.2%) than that of native ones. This premium, anyway, emerges only for some groups of migrants, namely those coming from Asia, Latin America and East Europe. Workers from Africa and MENA, conversely, do not show any statistically significant difference in job satisfaction with respect to natives.

Hence, our results join the job satisfaction paradox argument, for which under-represented and traditionally marginalized workers (like migrants in the Italian labor market) tend to score higher in job satisfaction. There are two possible explanations for this finding: the first is that

migrants, in the light of their segregation in the less-qualified areas of the labor market, have lower expectations than their native counterpart, and then they tend to report higher job satisfaction irrespective of their actual working conditions (Perugini & Vladislavljević, 2019). Also, migrants may be characterised by different work values, and on this ground they could obtain higher rewards from their job (Kashefi, 2011).

As for the results of the analysis which separates migrants on the basis of their territorial area of origin, our findings suggest that the job satisfaction ethnic premium is experienced in general regardless for the migrants' origin, with the only exception being African and MENA workers.

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