

Career aspirations, expectations, and perceived contextual barriers in native and foreign-born citizens: An Italian case study

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Abstract

The Italian labor market is recognized as disadvantaged for foreign-born citizens, with negative effects on their psychosocial wellbeing. In other countries, significant differences between career aspirations and expectations or perceived opportunities in native and foreign-born citizens has been well-documented, mainly due to the presence of perceived socio-economic barriers, while studies on this topic are lacking in Italy. Addressing this research gap, we investigated the relationship between career expectations and aspirations in native and foreign-born citizens and the role of the perceived contextual barriers within an Italian sample. 291 inhabitants of Pioltello, a multicultural municipality in the metropolitan area of Milan, were involved in our quantitative study. Results suggest that, in line with the latest research trends, the Italian context differences already emerge in the aspirational phase, as foreign-born citizens are more aligned than natives with the labor market demands. Differently, natives operate a stronger realignment in the transition from career aspirations to expectations. Moreover, foreign-born citizens also perceive a stronger influence of socio-economic barriers on their career opportunities. Policy implications of this findings in psycho-social and educational fields, aimed at promoting individual and social wellbeing, are finally discussed.

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Introduction

The Italian labor market presents significant disadvantages for foreign-born citizens, mainly belonging to ethnic and linguistic minority groups. Venturini & Villosio (2008) stated that citizens of foreign origin have a three times higher chance of getting unskilled job positions than natives, even in the presence of higher educational qualifications. More recently, the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (2020) argued in a similar way that families in which there are foreign citizens with regular employment are in a condition of absolute poverty in 12.9% of cases, against 3.1% of Italian citizens. Moreover, families made only by unemployed foreign members suffer from this poverty condition in 24.7% of cases, against 6.7% of native families having the same employment situation. The study suggests that this gap may be due to a differential access to skilled jobs, where foreigners are mainly employed in manual or nursing activities (77.1% of them have the qualification of “worker”), with little presence in managerial and intellectual roles (1.1% of employed against 7.6% of the natives). Also in the “white-collar” sector, a significant difference between natives and foreign-born citizens (36.2% vs. 8.3%) should be highlighted.

These general data are reflected in the subjective perception of job conditions as foreign-born workers perceive a differential treatment due both to their precarious socio-economic conditions and to the presence of ethnic stereotypes and discriminatory barriers (Salvatore, 2012). A negative effect of such perceived discriminations on foreign-born citizens’ mental health and psychological well-being was also found in the Italian (Di Napoli et al., 2021) and the European (Borrell et al., 2015) context. According to the international literature, such perceived discriminatory barriers are also among the main causes of the presence of ethnic-biased differences in career aspirations, expectations, and realistic perceived opportunities. The extent of this phenomenon, deeply debated in Anglo-Saxon countries (*see* Par. 2), has not yet been adequately investigated in the Italian context, although it could be a crucial factor in reducing differential access to the labor market if properly considered in educational and psycho-social policies.

The present study is aimed at reducing this knowledge gap, investigating the relationship between career expectations and aspirations in native and foreign-born citizens, the presence of perceived contextual barriers and the specific forms they assume in our Italian case

study. The category of “foreign-born citizens” was adopted because, in a country where immigration from abroad (mainly from the Global South) became massive only in the 1990s, social representations and policy approaches grounded on dualistic terms (Italians v. Immigrants/ Strangers) or on macro-geographical belonging (Africans, South Americans, East Europeans...) are still prevalent, when compared to ones anchored to the idea of ethnicity, as happens elsewhere. Nevertheless, the foreign-born citizens participating in our study can be considered as generally belonging to ethnic and/or linguistic minority groups (see Participants and Procedure Section). Other linguistic categories as “immigrants” or “foreigners”, being invested with stereotypical and discriminatory political and social connotations, were avoided by the authors’ choice.

The paper is organized as follows: in the next section the international literature on ethnic differences in work expectations/aspirations is presented. In the subsequent sections the study involving the citizens of Pioltello, a multi-ethnic municipality belonging to the metropolitan area of Milan, is introduced. Scientific and policy implications are discussed in the final paragraphs.

Literature review

Classic literature in vocational psychology stated a significant discrepancy between career aspirations and expectations in the general population (McNulty & Borgen, 1988; Armstrong & Crombie, 2000). As the former has been widely conceptualized as an expression of a more idealized dimension, then the latter include a realistic analysis of one’s situation with respect to one’s own environment of proximity, socio-economic conditions, the labor market and other factors (Metz et al., 2009) As summarized by Rojewski (2005), the inconsistencies in the transition from aspirations to expectations can be essentially motivated by two factors: self-evaluation in relation to the skills or qualifications required by the desired career and the presence of social barriers at the micro- (family and friends’ networks) or macro level (belonging to minority groups, characteristics of one’s community). Similarly, the Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2002), inspired by the more general framework from Bandura (1986), stressed that career development is influenced by the interaction between social-cognitive variables (self-efficacy, outcomes expectations, personal goals) and social characteristics of the person (gender, age, ethnicity, status) and of the context (community barriers or resources).

Coherently, studies on career aspirations and perceived opportunities focused on minorities and people with migration backgrounds highlighted significant differences with respect to dominant social groups, mainly attributable to the presence of deeper social barriers. Research from the 1990s focused on the contrast between career aspirations and perceived opportunities/barriers, stating that significant differences between ethnic groups were identifiable in the latter.

In their meta-analysis on 16 studies (1991-2004), Fouad & Byars-Winston (2005) found that racial/ethnic groups did not differ significantly in their career aspirations and decision-making attitudes. On the opposite side, they found differences in the perception of career opportunities and related barriers by ethnic minorities. Not surprisingly, ethnic minorities perceived they had fewer opportunities and greater barriers to accessing the desired career than white individuals. The authors argued that *“race and ethnicity do not appear to curtail the career dreams that people have, but clearly, something occurs between the time that those dreams and aspirations emerge and the time that individuals enter an occupation, because racial/ethnic minorities are not proportionately represented across career fields in the labor force”* (2005, p. 53).

Previously, Arbona & Novy (1991) found very similar results, also addressing possible gender effects. It was found that there are no significant differences in career aspirations between ethnic minorities (African and Mexican) and white participants in an American sample, in both males and females. Conversely, the differences in expectations were significant for both genders. Rojewski & Yang (1997) affirmed that, when controlled by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity has a minimal (not significant) direct influence on the existing differences in work aspirations between White and Non-white people. The race/ethnicity construct was here conceptualized by the authors through self-positioning in predeveloped categories (Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, Whites and Others).

More recently, this former clear-cut dichotomy has been overcome, as scholars highlighted ethnic-biased differences also on aspirational dimensions. Howard et al. (2011) found significant effects for race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status on career aspirations in a large sample of the juvenile population. Effects due to the combination of gender and ethnicity were also present. Brown & Segrist (2016) stated that lower career aspirations were related to a greater presence of internalized racism in a sample of African American citizens of different ages. Referring to Lent et al. (2002), the authors argued that this

internalization process could activate a stereotypical thinking about the “appropriate” career for one’s social/ethnic group, effectively limiting individual aspirations.

According to those findings, research on perceived contextual barriers also revealed significant differences grounded in ethnicity and migration background. Luzzo & Mc Whirter (2001) found that students belonging to ethnic minorities perceive greater career-related barriers than their Euro-American colleagues. Moreover, these students were found to be more likely to attribute their career barriers directly to their ethnicity, e.g., they expect more negative comments about their ethnicity. Cardoso & Marques (2008), addressing a Portuguese sample, concluded that participants with African descent showed a higher perception of career barriers, even those who were born and raised in Portugal. Xu Li et al. (2021) stated that students of color perceive higher barriers due to sexism and racism, and a significant correlation between perceived barriers and the likelihood of giving up the higher education levels that students wanted to achieve before college was detected. This longitudinal effect was not observed in White students.

Similar perceptions about the presence of career barriers for foreign-born citizens belonging to minority ethnic and linguistic groups have been highlighted from the few Italian research on this subject. Vianello & Toffanin (2021) reported a perception of structural work disadvantage in Moroccan young adults living in Italy because of their immigrant status and ethnicity. They also stated that Romanian-born migrants, despite recognizing the discrimination they suffer, perceive greater self-determination and satisfaction with their career development. Cela & Barbiano di Belgioioso (2021) found suffered discriminations as a causal factor for the increase in perceived loneliness in a sample of Italian immigrants. Addressing the Italian STEMM (Science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine) sector through a qualitative study, Bolzani et al. (2021) highlighted the presence of several perceived entry barriers for foreign-born women with a high qualification. The authors argued that, alongside structural barriers (e.g., racial / ethnic discrimination, lack of qualifications’ recognition), organizational (e.g., employers’ prejudice) and individual barriers (e.g., lack of host-country social capital, lack of psychological capital, language difficulties) are also active. To our best knowledge, only one study so far focused on analyzing the differences between career aspirations and expectations in natives and foreign-born Italian citizens (Mantovani, 2013). This study, conducted with high school students only and presenting an eminently descriptive approach, revealed a common downsizing in the transition from aspirations to expectations for young people with Italian parents

and the so-called G2, who have foreign-born parents. On the contrary, this phenomenon did not occur in foreign-born students, who showed a stronger confidence in the realization of their career aspirations. At the same time, the majority of the latter declared the realistic expectation of being employed in a job of not high social prestige, while the same did not happen for those with Italian parents or for the G2.

In line with the aforementioned scientific debate and with what emerges from the few research conducted in Italy, our study is aimed to explore the relationship between career expectations, perceived opportunities and aspirations in native and foreign-born citizens through an Italian case study. Unlike other research, which mainly focused on the youth population, this study concerns the general population of the selected area (Pioltello), in order to have an overview for the purposes of the “Living Together” project (social integration and civic engagement). Regarding work in particular, the project aimed to propose innovative policies based on (re-)activation of context-based aspirations and skills, even in adult citizens. Perceived contextual barriers to the expression of individuals’ talent at work are also addressed. The emerging main trends concerning aspirations/expectations on professional fields, job positions and the perceived social and economic barriers to one’s talent at work have been analyzed for this purpose.

More generally, our inquiry is aimed to suggest new context-sensible policies in psycho-social, spatial, and educational fields, able to support the reduction of the expected aspirations-expectations gap in native and non-native citizens and the promotion of individual and social well-being (Prilleltensky, 2008; Rainisio et al., 2014).

Methodology

Case Study

The study was carried out in Pioltello, a municipality of 36,437 inhabitants in the metropolitan area of Milan, in Lombardy. It is located about 7 kilometers northeast from the chief town. Pioltello ranks second for incidence of foreign residents (24.8% of the general population) in the province of Milan, and second overall in Italy in cities with over thirty thousand inhabitants (UrbiStat, 2019, <https://ugeo.urbistat.com/adminstat/it/it/demografia/dati-sintesi/pioltello>). Foreign residents represent more than 100 different nationalities, mainly coming (53%) from five countries (belonging to four continents): Romania, Egypt, Pakistan, Ecuador, and Peru. Due to these peculiarities, in the last 20 years Pioltello has been affected by significant social conflicts and phenomena of spatial segregation, with consequent tendencies towards negative

social labeling of its citizens. On the opposite side, it has also been involved in massive environmental and community redevelopment projects, as an experimental laboratory for integration policies of foreign citizens into the local and Italian community.

Our study is part of a wider community research and transformation project, named “*Abitare Insieme*” (‘Living Together’), which involves public institutions, schools, and local NGOs, funded by the Italian Ministry of the Internal Affairs (Ministero dell’Interno).

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 291 participants, residing in Pioltello. It is composed as follow: 35.2% men and 64% women and age M = 41. 73,11% native (age M = 44, 68% female) and 27,2% foreign-born citizens (age M = 35, 55% female). The latter originate from 25 different countries. The most represented countries are Egypt (18%), Peru (15%), Pakistan (10%), Romania (5%), and Ecuador (5%). On average they arrived in Italy at the age of 20 and 20% of them hold Italian or dual citizenship. On contrary, 80% do not have Italian citizenship, and no data were collected on the possible presence/absence of residence permit, in order to avoid questions that might offend participants’ sensitivities. Sample data are in line with those of the general population as regards the average age (42,3 years; UrbiStat, 2019) and percentage of foreigners (24,8%, *ibidem*). The gender for natives is partially unbalanced (48% of women in the general population in 2019, *ibidem*).

Data were gathered via an online questionnaire, with a paper-pencil version in case of needs, in the period February-April 2021. Subjects were recruited applying a snowball sampling technique, by circulating the questionnaire through social networks and with the support of some local associations. Particular attention was paid to the involvement of local schools and the cooperation with local services such as the local library and the municipal offices for foreigners and housing issues. In some cases, a “guided” administration was preferred: a field-researcher was available (online or in presence) to facilitate the compilation simultaneously in group – in the case of schools – or one-to-one – in the case of the municipal services (Mussi & Chinazzi, 2022, *in press*).

Informed consent was acquired before each participant administered the questionnaire online, in compliance with current ethical research standards. Therefore, potential participants were introduced with the study purpose and contents before entering the study. After they were fully instructed and acknowledged the anonymity and de-linkage principle together with other ethical considerations, they carried on fulfilling the questions online based on their own willingness.

Measures

The complete survey was the output of a joined work between the three involved universities (*see* the Acknowledgement section), with the coordination of University of Milano-Bicocca. The survey consisted of four sections, designed *ad hoc*. The first collected demographic information; the second explored the relationship between the respondents and the city of Pioltello; the third focused on their community involvement, active citizenship, and sense of belonging; the last section was dedicated to investigating respondents' carrier aspirations/expectations and perceived contextual barriers. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on the latter, addressing the following areas of inquiry:

1. Aspirations-Expectations about job careers: Starting from a list of 21 types of jobs (see Tab. 1) covering all the main existing professional fields, participants were asked to select a maximum of 3 job careers in which, letting their imagination run free without any limitations, they would enjoy engaging in. Similarly, they were asked to select, from the same list, a maximum of 3 job careers in which realistically they think they can be engaged. This procedure was inspired by Mantovani (2013).
2. Aspirations-Expectations about job positions: Participants were asked to express which job position they would like to hold, selecting an option from the following: owner, executive/high-level manager, freelancer/consultant, employee. Similarly, they were asked to select the job position that they consider more realistic to hold.
3. Perceived contextual barriers: Respondents have been invited to express their level of agreement (on a Likert scale, from 1 to 5) with five items investigating their perceptions concerning community and economic barriers to a full expression of their own talent at work (i.e., "I believe that society does not allow me to fully express my talents", "I am (or will be) forced to do a job I don't like, for financial reasons").

Survey data were compiled by the independent web-based software and collected in a spreadsheet. Data were then extracted and analyzed using statistics software (IBM SPSS Statistics, V.22). Comparisons between aspiration and expectations about job careers and job positions have been performed using Fisher-Exact or the Chi-squared test where applicable ($N > 5$). Differences between perceived contextual barriers in

natives and in foreign-born citizens have been performed using Student's t-tests. The analysis was considered significant when the P-value was < 0.05 (Sirkin, 2006).

Results

Aspirations - Expectations about job careers

Concerning aspirations, 490 job careers were selected from native citizens and 171 from foreign-born citizens, corresponding respectively to an average of 2.3 and 2.1 responses per person. Some shared trends are observed. Social and Community Services (representing 9.6% of the answers given by the natives and 9.4% of the answers given by the foreign-born) and Health and Care (especially for the foreign-born: 12.3% compared with 8.6% of the answers given by the natives) are the most chosen job careers by both groups. Following are the Art, Music and Entertainment job career (representing 8.8% of the answers given by the natives and 6.4% of the answers given by the foreign-born) and the one in Public Services (especially for the foreign-born: 8.8% compared with 4.6% of the answers given by the natives). On the other hand, there are job careers that characterize more the natives' aspirations rather than foreign-born citizens' ones (see tab.1). We explored this topic through a measurement of the existing Delta (difference between %, D) between natives and foreigners' aspirations towards job careers. Natives have been found to aspire more than foreign-born to work in the fields of Environmental Protection (D + 182,6%; p. = 0,048) and Politics (D + 370%, p. = 0,005). On the other hand, in the aspirational world of foreign-born citizens, the field of Logistic and transport is more present (D + 291,7%, p. = 0,006). The least aspirational job career is, across the board, that of Religion and Faith.

Concerning expectations, 374 job careers were selected by native and 183 by foreign-born citizens, corresponding respectively to an average of 1.7 and 2.3 responses per respondent. Here, as in previous, several similarities could be detected: the job careers to which respondents crosswise consider they can have more realistic access are Public Services (particularly relevant in the vision of natives), Health and Care, Sport, and Social and Community Services: together these job careers represent 42% and 39% respectively of the total answers given by native and foreign-born citizens. On the other hand, there are fields that are considered more realistic for foreign than for natives. In particular, the sectors of Fashion and Aesthetics (D +245%, p. = 0,028) and Catering business (D +175%, p. = 0,015) are perceived as more realistic. The least selected area even in the world of expectations is Religion and Faith.

Tab. 1 – *Job Career's aspirations and expectations for native and foreign-born citizens*
P-values refer to chi-squared test (n > 5) and Fisher's exact test (n < 5)

Job Careers	ASPIRATIONS				EXPECTATIONS				NativesAspiration/ expectation		ForeignsAspiration/ expectation	
	Native	Foreign-born	D	p.	Native	Foreign-born	D	p.	D	p.	D	p.
Health and Care	8,6%	12,3%	43,0	.155	8,6%	10,9%	26,7	.365	0,2	,994	12,4	,691
Social and community services	9,6%	9,4%	2,1	.928	8,6%	8,2%	4,8	.886	12,1	,601	14,1	,700
Art, Music and Entertainment	8,8%	6,4%	37,5	.335	3,5%	2,7%	29,6	.641	152,5	,002	135,4	,125
Public services	4,9%	8,8%	79,6	.064	16,3%	10,9%	49,5	.090	233,0	,000	24,6	,497
Teaching and scientific research	6,9%	5,8%	18,9	.622	8,3%	4,4%	88,6	.088	19,5	,456	33,7	,527
Direct sale of goods	4,1%	8,2%	100	.059	5,6%	7,1%	26,8	.686	37,6	,294	15,2	,701
Communication	6,9%	4,7%	46,8	.296	5,3%	4,4%	20,4	.620	29,8	,338	7,0	,890
Sport	6,5%	4,7%	38,3	.382	9,4%	9,3%	1,1	.979	43,3	,124	98,6	,091
Manual work and crafts	4,1%	5,8%	41,5	.339	5,1%	5,5%	7,8	.847	24,5	,484	7,0	,876
Fashion and Aesthetics	3,1%	6,4%	106,5	.051	1,1%	3,8%	245,4	.028	186,2	,060	68,2	,264

Catering business	3,5%	5,8%	65,7	.176	2,4%	6,6%	175,0	.015	44,2	,365	12,1	,782
Environmental Protection	6,5%	2,3%	182,6	.048	2,1%	1,6%	31,2	1	205,3	,002	42,7	,715
International Cooperation Services	4,7%	2,3%	104,4	.260	1,3%	1,6%	23,1	.721	251,1	,005	42,7	,715
Armed Forces and Public Safety	4,1%	2,3%	78,3	.351	4,3%	2,7%	59,3	.368	4,8	,886	16,8	1
Architecture and Design	3,1%	2,9%	6,9	.928	1,6%	3,3%	106,2	.201	90,8	,168	12,1	1
Logistics and transport	1,2%	4,7%	291,7	.006	6,1%	6,0%	1,7	.948	402,2	,000	28,5	,578
Agriculture and Livestock	4,1%	1,2%	241,7	.082	1,9%	1,6%	18,7	1	118,1	,064	40,2	1
Factory and industry	1,8%	3,5%	94,4	.206	3,7%	6,0%	62,2	.224	103,8	,085	71,3	,271
Animal Care and Treatment	2,9%	1,8%	61,1	.579	0,8%	2,2%	175,0	.225	256,2	,045	24,6	1
Politics	3,7%	0,0%	370	.005	2,7%	1,1%	145,4	.353	37,4	,411	110	,499
Religion and faith	1,0%	0,6%	66,7	1	1,3%	0,0%	130,0	.177	31,0	,753	60	1

We also explored this topic through a measurement of the existing Delta between aspirations and expectations towards job careers. Data showed that, for natives, some job careers are significantly less present in expectations than aspirations. In particular, the sectors of Fashion and Aesthetics (D + 186%, p. 0,060), Music, Art and Entertainment (D + 152%, p. 0,002), Animal Care and Treatment (D + 256%, p. 0,045), Environmental Protection (D + 205%, p. 0,002) and International Cooperation Services (D + 251%, p. 0,005). On the opposite, Public Services (D + 233%, p. 0,000) and Logistics and Transport (D + 402%, p. 0,000) are considered by the natives as accessible job careers but they are significantly less present in their aspirational world. Amongst the foreign-born citizens, a better balance between expectations and aspirations could be noticed (see also fig.1).

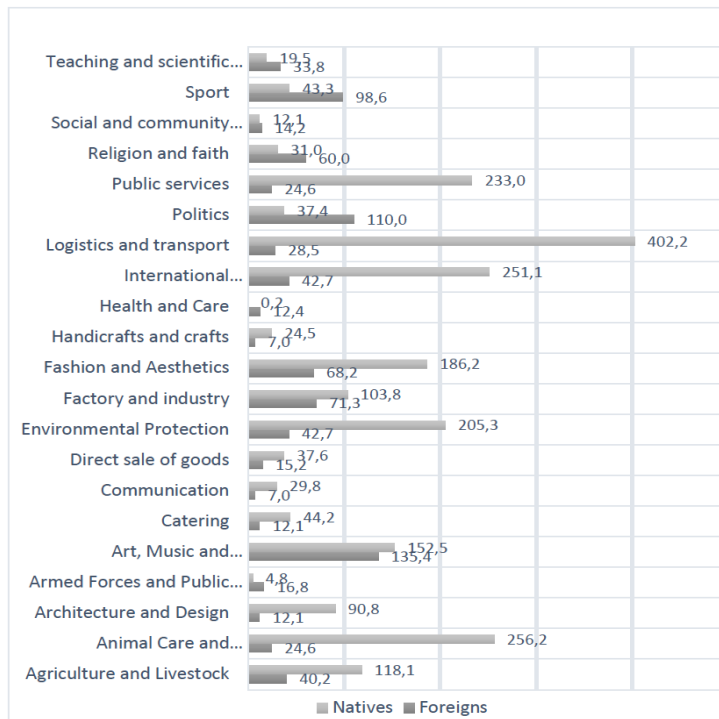


Fig. 1 – Delta (%) between job Career's aspirations and expectations in native and foreign-born citizens

Tab. 2 – *Job Career's aspirations and expectations for female native and foreign-born citizens*

Job Careers	ASPIRATIONS				EXPECTATIONS				Natives Aspiration/expectation		Foreigns Aspiration/expectation	
	Native	Foreign-born	D	p.	Native	Foreign-born	D	p.	D	p.	D	
Social and community services	12,3%	12,9%	5,0	.876	13,5%	10,9%	24,3	.532	9,9	.695	18,7	
Health and Care	12,0%	16,1%	34,9	.295	14,1%	15,2%	8,3	.795	17,5	.501	6,0	
Art, Music and Entertainment	9,6%	6,5%	49,3	.345	3,8%	2,2%	74,1	.476	154,6	.0167	196,8	
Communication	8,3%	3,2%	157,5	.095	7,0%	5,4%	29,3	.612	18,2	.610	68,5	
Direct sale of goods	5,6%	6,5%	14,2	.772	8,6%	8,7%	0,5	.989	53,1	.201	34,8	
International Cooperation Services	5,6%	4,3%	31,3	.613	1,6%	1,1%	49,2	1	248,3	.0300	295,7	
Environmental Protection	5,6%	4,3%	31,3	.613	1,1%	2,2%	101,1	0.60	422,4	.0116	97,8	
Public services	5,0%	5,4%	7,9	.880	7,6%	8,7%	14,9	.743	51,9	.242	61,7	
Fashion and Aesthetics	4,0%	11,8%	196,7	.004	1,6%	7,6%	369,2	.0118	145,8	.143	55,5	
Catering business	4,0%	5,4%	34,9	.564	2,7%	7,6%	181,5	.0588	47,5	.454	41,5	
Sport	3,7%	3,2%	13,3	.845	9,7%	4,3%	123,8	.118	166,2	.006	34,8	
Architecture and Design	3,7%	3,2%	13,3	.845	2,2%	4,3%	101,1	0.44	69,0	.355	34,8	
Animal Care and Treatment	3,7%	3,2%	13,3	.845	1,6%	3,3%	101,1	0.402	125,4	.193	1,1	
Agriculture and Livestock	3,3%	0,0%	332,0	.250	1,1%	0,0%	108,0	0.554	207,3	.122	0,0	
Teaching and scientific research	3,0%	6,5%	115,8	.127	3,8%	4,3%	14,9	.820	26,5	.633	48,4	

Politics	3,0%	0,0%	299,0	0.123	2,7%	0,0%	270,0	0.173	10,6	.854	0,0
Armed Forces and Public Safety	2,7%	0,0%	266,0	0.206	2,2%	2,2%	0,5	1	22,9	.732	0,0
Manual work and crafts	2,7%	3,2%	21,4	.771	3,8%	3,3%	16,0	.826	42,4	.485	1,1
Logistics and transport	1,3%	3,2%	142,7	0.363	5,9%	4,3%	36,8	.579	347,4	.004	34,8
Factory and industry	0,7%	1,1%	61,8	0.555	3,8%	4,3%	14,9	.820	469,5	.0132	304,3
Religion and faith	0,3%	0,0%	33,0	1	1,6%	0,0%	162,0	0.553	388,1	0.156	0,0

P-values refer to chi-squared test (n > 5) and Fisher's exact test (n < 5)

Regarding this relevant data, the presence of possible gender effects was also tested, analyzing in particular the female gender, indicated by the literature as being heavily disadvantaged in terms of work positions and salaries. The analyzes showed the persistence of the difference found in the general sample even considering only the native and foreign-born women, as foreign-born didn't show significant variations between aspirations and expectations, while the natives have a similar trend to that described for the overall sample (see tab. 2).

Aspirations - Expectations about job positions

As regards the aspirations connected with the job position, in both groups the most desirable position was that of employee (*see* tab. 2), for foreign-born citizens in particular (40.5% of them, compared with 32.6% of natives). This was followed by the position of freelance worker or consultant, which resulted particularly attractive for native citizens (31.6% of them, compared with 19% of foreign-born citizens; $D + 66.3\%$, $p = 0.44$). As far as expectations are concerned, the highest shared expectation was about a position as employee (more than 40% of respondents in both cases). The role as freelancers/consultants followed, but lower scores compared to aspirations should be highlighted, especially as regards natives. Interestingly, the job position as owner (in case of company/commercial activity) represented a much more realistic expectation for foreign-born than for native citizens (11.3% compared with 4.3% of natives; $D + 162.79\%$, $p = 0.42$).

The relationship between aspirations and expectations within each group was also explored. For natives, the job positions as freelancers/consultants ($D + 68\%$, $p = 0.020$), and owners ($D + 44\%$, $p = 0.000$) were found to be significantly more present in aspirations than in expectations. On the other side, the job positions as employees were considered by the natives to be, at the same time, the most expected and the least wanted (aspirations, $D + 202\%$, $p = 0.006$). A greater overall balance between aspirations and expectations is present in the case of foreign-born citizens.

Tab. 3 – *Job Position's aspirations and expectations for native and foreign-born citizens*

Job position	ASPIRATIONS		EXPECTATIONS		Aspiration/expectation Natives				Aspiration/expectation Foreigns			
	Native	Foreign-born	D	p.	Native	Foreign-born	D	p.	D	p.	D	p.
Freelancer, consultant	31,6%	19,0%	$\frac{6}{6}$	.044	18,8%	17,5%	7,4	.63	68,1	.020	8,6	.839
Executive, senior manager	15,5%	19,0%	$\frac{2}{2}$	.42	12,0%	15,0%	25,0	.62	29,2	.582	26,7	.541
Employee	32,6%	40,5%	$\frac{2}{4}$	.15	47,1%	43,8%	7,5	.30	44,5	.000	8,1	.551
Owner (in case of company/commercial activity)	13,0%	11,4%	$\frac{1}{4}$	.79	4,3%	11,3%	162,8	.042	202,3	.006	0,8	.902
Other/not applicable	7,3%	10,1%			17,8%	12,5%						

P-values refer to chi-squared test (n >5) and Fisher's exact test (n < 5)

Perceived contextual barriers

Regarding perceptions of community and economic barriers to the expression of one’s talent (Tab. 3), both groups shared the idea that their own neighborhood/city offers few job opportunities (natives $m.=3.43$; foreign-born $m.= 3.50$)and weakly agree that society can limit the talent’s expression($m.= 2.60$ vs. $m.= 2,59$), with no significant differences within them ($p. = 0.705$ and $p. = 0.928$ respectively).Foreign-born citizens showed even the expectation, significantly higher than in natives, that they will not be recognized as talented by others ($p. = 0.007$), that their talent will not be expressed at work for economic reasons ($p. = 0.002$) and that their work will always be precarious ($p. = 0.000$).

Tab. 4 – Barriers’ perception in native and foreign-born citizens

BARRIERS PERCEPTION	Natives		Foreigns		Two-tailed sign.
	M	DS	M	DS	
I believe that my talent is not recognized by others	2,43	1,21	2,89	1,33	,007
I believe that society does not allow me to fully express my talents	2,60	1,27	2,59	1,37	,928
I believe that work for me will always be precarious	2,05	1,30	2,80	1,23	,000
I believe that in my neighborhood and in my city there are few job opportunities	3,43	1,31	3,50	1,43	,705
I am (or will be) forced to do a job I don’t like, for financial reasons	2,28	1,36	2,89	1,40	,002

P-values refer to Student t-test

Discussion

The results of our study show a substantial alignment with more recent literature trends, mainly referred to US research, which emphasized aspirational discrepancies between majority and minority groups because of their migratory background or ethnicity. Differences in aspirational tendencies between natives and foreign-born citizens emerged, concerning the environmental/ naturalistic and political dimensions, in favor of the natives. More precisely, natives aspire significantly more to careers in the fields of Environmental Protection and Politics than foreign-born citizens. On the other hand, the aspirations of foreign-born citizens are more oriented towards jobs in logistics and transport, direct sales of goods, health and care, fashion, and aesthetics. Some of these discrepancies can be interpreted according to the selected professional fields. Firstly, it

could be argued that the sense of belonging and identification with the national community, traditionally lower in foreign-borns (Rainisio & Inghilleri, 2006; Rapp, 2020) than in natives, should have played a relevant role in aspirational discrepancies to work in the political field. Regarding aspirations for environmental/naturalistic jobs, it can instead be considered that some scholars found a lower engagement in environmental sustainability issues for foreign-born citizens, depending on their cultures of origin and their education level (Franzen & Meyer, 2010; Rainisio et al., 2022). As regards the jobs to which foreign-born citizens aspire most, it can be argued that they are mostly aligned with what the Italian labor market requires to foreign citizens (Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, 2020), who are generally employed in the care sector, with predominance of women, and in the industrial and logistic professions (males). This explanation is even more suitable for the Pioltello area, where a logistics hub for large-scale food distribution is located. Consistently, the aspiration to the direct sale of goods can be linked to the fact that the management of small local shops represents the main entrepreneurial activity of immigrants in Italy and in the territory of the municipality. These latter considerations highlight a more general trend in the relationship between aspirations and expectations, which partially diverges from what was previously suggested by the literature. If elsewhere the differences between natives and foreign-born citizens have been found mostly at the expectations' level, while aspirations appear to be aligned, in our case study two different processes are highlighted. On one hand, the foreign-born citizens showed a more "expectations-oriented" approach also in their aspirations, aligning their desires with the main demands of the local and national labor market and with the main opportunities offered by their own community context. In support of this, we found a very low Delta between aspiration and expectations on professional fields. Moreover, the same trend is visible when job positions are considered, as minimal variations between foreign-born citizens' aspirations and expectations are observed. The natives, on the other hand, seem to make a substantial realignment in the transition from aspirations to expectations, in line with what is stated in the literature about the general population. This crucial "inequality" is not significantly influenced by gender differences, as similar trends have also been highlighted considering only female participants. Consistently, significant discrepancies between expectations and aspirations regarding job positions were found in the natives, as they strongly aspire to self-employment (freelance/consultant, owner) but realistically expect to have more traditional job roles (employee). In the case of foreign-born citizens, we can therefore hypothesize a tendency towards aspirational self-

limitation that can give rise to self-fulfilling prophecies, in which the vocational dimension is limited from the very beginning by the perception of significant contextual barriers. In line with this hypothesis, they were found to be significantly more oriented to perceive social/community and economic barriers than natives, as foreign-born citizens are more concerned with having to face precarious jobs and make career choices based on economic needs, and with the community's failure to recognize their talent. As regards the natives, on the other hand, contextual barriers and the realistic examination of opportunities seem to mediate the transition from aspirations to expectations, favoring both a realignment to the market (logistics, public services) and a downsizing, renouncing the job shaving a stronger link with an idealistic and creative dimension (arts, environmental/naturalistic jobs, animal care, international cooperation). This transition is also evident in the average number of selected professional fields, which in natives decreases from 2.3 (aspirations) to 1.7 (expectations), while it remains rather stable in foreign-born citizens (2,1 vs. 2,3). Synthetically, it could be argued that the contextual barriers and opportunities could influence foreign-born citizens already in the aspirational phase, while in the natives they are mostly relevant in defining expectations. It could imply that, in the case of foreign-born citizens, the imaginative activities underlying the self-actualization processes undergoes significant *a priori* limitations due to the obstacles present in the social field. Adopting the Higgins' framework (1987), a substantial "downward" overlap between the Ideal Self and the Actual Self could be hypothesized, with possible side effects of reduced agency in the socio-political sphere and spread helplessness feelings.

The presented findings are subject to some limitations. Although balanced by age and presence of foreign-born citizens, our sample is slightly biased towards the female gender. Even the data collection process through online questionnaires, albeit preferable in the current pandemic context, is subject to inherent self-selection biases. Moreover, the sample referred to a specific geographical area located in Northern Italy, so the results should not be generalized to the entire Italian population. Further research would consider populations residing in Italian areas, deepening any context-related variability. Lastly, given the focus of our study on the general differences between native and foreign-born citizens, possible differences between ethnic or age groups should also be further investigated, as well as other types of perceived barriers.

Conclusions and policy implications

Our study, aimed to explore the relationship between career expectations, perceived opportunities, and aspirations in native and foreign-born citizens, has identified some trends in line with the latest international literature. A marked alignment between aspirations and expectations was found in foreign-born citizens, supposedly driven by the labor market demands, while a significant difference between expectations and aspirations prevails in natives. Furthermore, foreign-born citizens tend to perceive a more intense presence of socio-economic barriers to the expression of their talent at work. These results offer crucial suggestions for planning policies in the psychosocial, spatial, and educational fields. It would be useful to focus on reducing the socio-economic barriers that seem to underlie the aspirational self-limitations of foreign-born citizens, avoiding generating negative self-fulfilling prophecies. This can be encouraged not only with far-reaching economic and social policies, but also with specific context-sensitive interventions on an individual level (Riva et al., 2015), a decoupling of aspirations from the labor market and perceived barriers can be promoted in foreign-born citizens through a focus on creativity and the promotion of optimal experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Boffi et al., 2016). Future methods of career counseling should take a dynamic approach that encourages individuals' imaginative thinking and the exploration of possible selves (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Correspondingly, social policies based on the emergence and enhancement of the talent and entrepreneurial ideas of foreign-born citizens can be launched, as well as more supportive urban environments can be designed (Boffi & Rainisio, 2017) to create a milieu more suitable for welcoming individual talents and their organization into social groups. For this purpose, it is crucial to promote the social protagonism of citizens through participation and co-design processes when developing urban transformations and local services ((Boffi et al., 2021; Fumagalli et al., 2020), as this type of direct involvement can exert positive effects also on foreign-born population increasing their sense of socio-political control on the environment (Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2011; Prilleltensky, 2008). This assumption of protagonism cannot be separated from a full recognition of citizenship rights, which, although not the subject of this study, should be highlighted as a systemic precondition for promoting agency and participation in foreign-born citizens. As regards the natives, it seems useful to propose slightly different policies, which support the already existing aspirations to carry out idealistic and creative works, even in an autonomous form. Moreover, to engage citizens with migrant background as protagonists,

responsible for taking care and changing the urban environment within which they live, the implementation of wider educational processes is needed, aimed to actively involve them starting from school and dialoguing with the territory (Portera, Dusi, Guidetti, 2015). In this sense, it is crucial to work with teachers and social workers to innovate the methods to engage the citizens – in particular the young and the foreign-born ones – as active participants in their community (Mussi, Bove, Basaglia, 2021).

This study is part of the project “Abitare Insieme” (Living Together). The overall goal of the project is to strengthen, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, the system of public services aimed at foreign-born citizens through the “capacitation” of three main areas: home and living, development of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, and active citizenship. To pursue this goal, tools aimed at strengthening knowledge and skills of key operators in public and territorial services have been designed. Specifically, the study results have been used to inform local public institutions and local NGOs and to provide insights that could foster experimentation of new paths of involvement in the area of active labour policies. The results of the present study have already stimulated the activation of experimental actions in this direction, as the “Abitare Insieme” (‘Living Together’) project launched a Call for Ideas dedicated to foreign-born citizens aimed to promote their creativity/talent, and triggered some co-designed actions aimed at transforming the public space in Pioltello. In fact our study suggests that an emerging possible path might be based on facilitating the creation of educational contexts where they can feel free to express their “talent” (Capobianco, 2018) and to see it recognized and enhanced. Talent should be seen in a polysemic perspective: skills, motivation, creativity but also study, knowledge, and exercise, so it can be relevant in connection with the work field as well as in terms of active citizenship. These observations are in line with the Life Design Paradigm for career interventions (Savickas, 2012), which highlights the importance of promoting flexibility, commitment, emotional intelligence, and lifelong learning in career’s services. This approach has been developed and applied in different contexts with interesting results (Nota, Santilli, & Soresi, 2016; Santilli, Nota, & Hartung, 2019; Maree et al., 2019) and it could be a good frame to imagine new and different local intervention on this subject.

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