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DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL WORKERS ON THEIR PRACTICES IN THE FIELD FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS IN ITALY

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The authors would like to thank four anonymous respondents and Lorenzo Cavina for their valuable comments.

1 The arrival of migrants has been a major challenge for Italian society; however, Italy has not adopted consistent asylum legislation or specific reception measures, for reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper. The result is that each seasonal migrant arrival has been approached as a new emergency, making organizational and institutional learning difficult, if not impossible. Consequently, different reception systems have been set up since 2002, following the various directions given by governments over time: apart from the hot spots and initial reception centers, SPRAR, CAS and SAI have been established over the years. SPRAR[1] (active from 2002 to 2018) and SAI[2] (active from 2020) involve integration programs in some way. CAS[3] were a temporary solution from 2015, following the North-Africa crisis and the Mare Nostrum operation, but in reality, they are still used when there are no places available elsewhere. Although the general policy guidelines are established by the State, the management of these centers for asylum seekers is delegated to local authorities. Consequently, the living and reception conditions of migrants may differ from one area to another, depending on the local socio-economic and political situation (Caponio, 2008), and on the directions of the existing NGOs entrusted with their practical management. NGOs are the ones who recruit workers for the centers. The selection

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criteria may therefore be different depending on the interpretation of a role that did not exist before: the "reception worker".

2 The fact that the reception system tends to be based on a practice of outsourcing, following a "neoliberal bureaucratization" (Alberti, 2019), has very concrete effects on the role of reception workers. They are employed on short-term contracts and the NGOs are generally not required to recruit them on the basis of a professional qualification. It is not by chance that everyday reception work is therefore entrusted to people whose training and profile may differ from one territory to another. Sometimes it is enough to have a high school diploma, elsewhere you need at least a bachelor's degree, everywhere knowledge of a foreign language and an aptitude for interpersonal relations are required. Today a few regions are starting to offer training to become a "reception worker". But it is only from the bottom up that local worker networks of many NGOs involved in local reception systems have been created, laying claim to professional knowledge learned through experience. However, despite this initial national effort, these networks are still rather weak or now limited to local contexts, mainly because of the "emergencies" that the refugee issue continues to raise politically and socially.

3 The inconsistent framework we have just described may raise several questions that we cannot examine here since we propose to look at one phenomenon strictly linked to one specific community of practice (Wenger, 1998) we have observed in relation to the CAS. The discourses of the reception workers that we have recorded can provide testimonies that are indeed worth exploring. From an interactionist perspective[4], we consider that they involve two diverse and interwoven aspects. On the one hand the capacity to show the street-level tactics (Lipsky, 1980; Dubois, 2012) that those involved on the ground employ to approach the *migration crisis* and more precisely the way in which they try to dissociate the migration from the emergency implied by its perception as a *crisis*. On the other hand, the requirement to legitimize a professional positioning of reception workers, based on "situated social relationships" (Le Naëlou, 2004), who operate in and between several spaces: the other professions in the institutions (e.g. social workers)[5], the administrative procedures, the migrants and the inhabitants of the different communities, as well as the values and meanings attributed to personal experiences and profiles, or the representation that the NGO that recruited them makes of its own task, etc. As we will see, our interviewees highlight a constant "in-between" with varying boundaries, revealing conflicts as well as possible new solutions, but which are still to be built in a clear and structured way. The arguments of the workers considered in this study therefore confirm in our opinion the usefulness of interactionist approaches and indicate a further line of thought on contradictions and "mediations to be invented" (Le Naëlou, 2004) in this mixed and precarious management of migration.

4 After presenting our approach, we will analyze two themes that have proved to be central in the discourses of the reception workers: the temporality of the reception and the definition of their mission, the two issues being, as we will see, inextricably linked.

Objects and methods

5 We base the analysis presented in this paper on a larger sociological study in the Autonomous Province of Trento[6], Italy, where one of the authors[7] conducted an

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ethnographic observation for almost two years—2016-2017—in a temporary reception center (CAS). In Trentino, the fragmentation and specialization of tasks has led to a vital need for collaboration between the various workers to ensure the "success" of reception programs for asylum seekers. Most of the services offered to asylum seekers are provided by the province, which entrusts the management to local third sector agencies. The reception functions themselves are therefore supported by so-called transversal services: legal support, psychological support, social assistance and support for integration. These transversal services, entrusted to one or more NGO associations, are offered to all asylum seekers in the province. For this type of support, there are a few qualified professionals (such as social workers or psychologists), but mostly these new "reception workers" are emerging in the world of reception programs, where they train and multiply[8]. As mentioned above, the contracts issued in this context are for fixed-term, and therefore precarious, jobs. In the region of Trento, most of these workers are 25-35 years old and have completed university studies in humanities or social sciences. Sometimes they were unemployed young people looking for a job, sometimes people already engaged in solidarity or political commitment, although these commitments are not necessarily included in the recruitment criteria.

6 Our study adopted a qualitative approach, consisting of a journal of field notes, 56 in-depth interviews with social workers, asylum seekers and refugees: 25 men and 31 women[9]. From the 56 interviewed, 37 were defined as "*operatore di accoglienza*" ("reception workers"), as opposed to the 5 "integration workers" interviewed, 6 workers in charge of legal affairs, 4 coordinators of the NGOs involved, 2 psychologists and 2 professional social workers.

7 In this paper we introduce and comment mostly on the interviews with the reception workers, focusing on the two themes that emerged from a qualitative thematic analysis conducted on the discourses collected in the interviews: the representation of temporality and the representation of their own tasks and skills. We extract these themes to show how the discourse of these workers addresses the trials they experience in the reception system. Their reflective account of daily interactions and their professionalism gives us an interesting insight into public policy "at street-level", from experience in the field. While recalling the generic and precarious status of their mission, we try to underline how their discourses reveal their symbolic claim: it is a quest for meaning interspersed with daily tactical interaction between individuals obliged to negotiate with institutional obligations as well as with different interests and roles[10]. In particular, the qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews revealed a common claim regarding their professional identity.

8 The lack of a formally integrated reception system and the advanced situation in Trentino create opportunities for in-depth reflection on the objectives of the reception mission entrusted to the NGOs, showing the contradictions that arise from the requirement for a more global function of the long-term empowerment of migrants. This opens up room for negotiation inside and outside the organizations, in conflict or not with the formal framework of the official asylum application rules.

9 This is why our research focuses on what is revealed by the discourses of a community of practice that demonstrates high efficiency and good relations with local authorities and other partners. We interpret here both the sociological suggestion of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot (1991) to explore the "grammar of actions"—that is the type of rules by which social actors can justify and account for a socially acceptable meaning of

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their work—and the hypothesis of Michael Lipsky (1980) on the "street-level of bureaucracy", *i.e.* the discretionary power of civil servants—in this case precarious staff recruited by NGOs—responsible for applying the rules and implementing the procedures[11]. It is from this perspective that the accounts of a group of workers from Trentino's local reception system helped us identify the two thematic issues mentioned above (temporality and their perception of the skills required), both leading to a critical, empirical and *constructive* reflection on migration processes. As the so-called bureaucratic period of reception lengthens, they depict their practical efforts to overcome the contradictions of a fictitious emergency, while slipping more or less consciously into the role of "the moral entrepreneur" (Becker, 1963)[12], both to justify their discretionary power and to create a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) at the level of this outsourced bureaucracy.

10 It is as if, while the reception workers direct their tasks at migrant integration, their daily practices are completely ignored by public policies. In the meantime, a new professional community is emerging, laying claim to a "grammar" of skills built on the actions carried out in reception and integration programs and on the interactions between social workers, migrants, and local communities. In the following paragraphs, we will outline the process for creating a framework for the various professional skills, qualities and tasks required by this fragmented reception scenario.

11 Placed under the gaze of local authorities and at the heart of the conflicting reception systems, reception workers have to rely on a whole series of daily tactics to give a shared meaning to their work. As they have not been recruited on the basis of a clear set of professional competencies, nor for a long-term job, they have to learn within their team and in the field how to meet the challenges specific to their duties, in particular with regard to their interactions with migrants. They try to answer several fundamental questions, such as what "best practices" should be implemented regarding single asylum seekers, what demands need to be met and which institutional or social actors should be involved. Their agency space is characterized by the need to work with an order to conduct interactions with contexts that can suddenly change and require great professional flexibility, where they see a certain margin of discretion widening for them. Therefore, we could also consider the discourses of these front-line workers as making claims concerning migration in the broadest sense, as an issue of public debate.

The paradoxes of a long reception time: coming and going within the system

> On my first day at work, I remember asking a colleague, "So what do you do here?" and he replied, "Well, nothing, you're here and you do what needs to be done." (Interview n. 32, man, 30 years old, reception worker: 28/10/2017)

12 Between "nothing" and "what needs to be done" to meet the everyday needs (of migrants? of the program?), we have an initial indication of the tacit knowledge required of the reception workers when receiving asylum seekers. They have to develop the required skills starting from zero field-knowledge. As we observed in the introduction, they are not recruited on the basis of a clear set of skills and professional competencies; neither do they receive clear-cut rules formalized in an official document or discourse for their local work. They must therefore learn within their

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team, talking to each other and observing each other, in order to deal with the challenges they face, understand what makes their actions "good", determine which projects and requests have to be addressed, which institutional or social actors they should engage with, and so on. The way in which they present themselves and engage in interaction with migrants is an important element in shaping the migrants' expectations and attitudes (Marchetti, 2008). Indeed, the reception workers tell us that they are often the lens through which asylum seekers have a first glimpse of the local reality, new to them, and which they refer to in order to find their bearings.

13 Although there are numerous studies that analyze the issue of time in the reception system from the perspective of asylum seekers (Van Aken, 2005, 2008; Cabot, 2012; Pendezzini, 2013; Vianelli, 2014), less attention has been paid to the "rapid-slowness" of time experienced by the workers throughout the reception process. According to our interviews, the reception workers' *time* in Trentino appears to consist of a constant tension between everyday emergencies and the perpetual uncertainty, indeed the stalemate, of the asylum seekers, uncertainty which also affects the reception workers themselves. They therefore feel the weight of the contradictions in the reception system, but they try to counterbalance them because they challenge the meaning of their work. Although they claim the need to have a long-term vision, they are forced to become involved in more immediate issues and suffer daily disappointment:

> By getting closer and closer to the just-in-time, just-on-point management model of the logistics world, in which workforce requirements depend on the number of goods to be sorted, we have been absorbed, caged and encapsulated within the reception bubble, where the accelerated time of the emergency has heavily determined the working conditions, putting bodies and minds under great tension. [13]

14 In this sense, everyday life governed by the reception programs demonstrates the dual imperative deriving from procedural constraints and interactional requirements, such as we all may know in ordinary life, except that here the "tension" lies in the power of the procedures and their ignorance of the needs relating to interactions between people from very different socio-cultural backgrounds. Even knowing what is or is not an emergency can become a crucial issue in decision-making. It is no coincidence that, in interview accounts, this tension is sometimes expressed by the workers as "schizophrenic", as they feel stuck between deadlines renewed by the presumed emergency, procedural meetings or often useless reports, and the daily tasks they have scheduled according to strategies agreed with migrants. However, time to do one's job well is described as a scarce resource, especially when the workers describe themselves as overwhelmed by procedures rather than when they talk about their interactions with regional stakeholders and migrants for a concrete purpose. They feel that the time spent on bureaucratic tasks is wasted, as it encroaches on the time for relationships and actions.

15 The contradiction that they want to overcome and that characterizes their role in the reception system highlights the paradox they feel as reception workers: hired to manage the *hic et nunc* of the everyday emergency identified by the political power, they train themselves during the reception time, acquiring skills and performing tasks that no longer have much to do with the emergency. They say they want to do "real" social work, which requires a medium- and long-term strategy, not manage the initial stage of the reception, which lasts too long to be considered a first step. However, their very status is not sustainable: they are precarious workers who work with people in an

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even more precarious legal, economical, and social situation than their own. From the interviewee's words that follow, we can understand how this contractual precariousness is represented both in a concrete effect on the work planning itself, and as an indication of the "true" purpose that this young worker assigns to his own mission:

> I have a contract that expires every six months. How can I think of developing a structured and long-term integration project with asylum seekers I work with? (Interview n. 42, man, 28 years old, reception worker: 10/10/2017)

16 In fact, one of the biggest conundrums that has emerged from the discourses of these reception workers lies in the confusion, which appears in the words themselves, between the social meaning of "emergency" in ordinary accidents and the "emergencies" posed by a political issue as complicated as that of migration. The needs of asylum seekers and the hopes of migrants are nothing like those—for example—of the victims of an accidental fire. From the interviews, the most disturbing aspect to counteract is the frequent feeling of remaining trapped in a *constant present*, trying to give rapid answers to immediate problems, thus absorbing the impact of emergencies, without however opening up avenues that would fall within the scope of the long-term future planning of the integration process. In the workers' words, the task of welcoming should not be just an ephemeral reception moment, but rather a crucial step in a longer process aimed at building strong social ties for and with migrants:

> We are the ones who welcome them. [...] The same people we welcome here in emergency reception, then go to first, then second-level reception. It has a domino effect. If we make a mistake in our work, and we do not communicate it to the first level and the first level does not communicate it to the second level, the system does not work. There should be more organicity. (Interview n. 30, man, 30 years old, reception worker: 27/10/2017)

17 Many interviewees underline the importance of their work as a gateway to the next steps. They want to feel that they are contributing to an integrated process to address the issue of migration and migrants in general, not just putting together asylum applications. The social justification they find and lay claim to in their "grammar of actions" (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) is inspiring: a skilled daily job that leads to a concrete integration project, challenging the precariousness on which the whole reception bureaucracy is based. They also know that the best strategy for dealing with the contradictions of the reception time lies in the ability to create strong skills and share a teamwork methodology that includes participatory meetings with asylum seekers:

> We were forced to learn because the situation required very rapid learning and above all a capacity for self-management that had to be acquired very quickly and through observation. (Interview n. 6, woman, 32 years old, reception worker: 12/10/2017)

18 Respondents point to another contradictory aspect: large centers tend to make "good social work" no longer possible: the lengthening of the period during which migrants remain in large centers increases the processes of depersonalization and infantilization which, in turn, amplify the difficulties asylum seekers have in achieving independence and socio-economic autonomy. The transfer to small houses in the region is represented as the expected and necessary "mirage" to start on the pathway to work placement and integration within the local community. In the accounts of the reception workers, the time spent in large reception centers often turns into a limbo of

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waiting that prevents both "true" social work and a "true" re-appropriation of one's own migratory pathway.

> The question of the autonomy of our residents is often taken for granted in large centers. We then wait for the "mirage" of the second reception, instead of seeking to rationalize the problems related to the length of the stay. That is why we need more clarity regarding this pathway because it drags on. Throughout it, you can, and should try to make residents autonomous in several ways: linguistically, personally, in office automation for documentation purposes. We require adequate training to be prepared to deal with and prevent these problems, on these issues, *we do not want our job to be reduced simply to damage limitation*. (Interview n. 6, woman, 32 years old, reception worker: 12/10/2017; we have added the italics)

19 "That is why we need more clarity [...] because it drags on": the arguments and the words of this interviewee are a good description of the claims process according to which the center workers express their needs in terms of professional qualifications and their mission objectives, calling into question the contradictory context of the emergency coexisting with the long waiting time. The reception workers point out the paradox of an action seen as part of a constant present where they are expected "to limit damage", while the frenzy to conquer this present overwhelms daily work and prevents the social workers from doing their "real" job. A confirmation of this is also found in the analysis of Lorenzo Vianelli (2014), a former social worker, and in his praise of "working slowly", arguing that in the frenzy it is indeed difficult to transform daily activities into future-oriented communities of practice. In this sense, the frenzy does not help reflexivity or the creation of spaces for interaction within the work team and with the migrants, which would nevertheless make it possible to (re)think practices and professionalize them. These words of another interviewee make even more explicit the need for clear objectives and the contradiction that the workers perceive in the system of centers, based once again on the fictitious present of the time of the emergency:

> Our work should not be an emergency, but rather involve rare and unpredictable moments of emergency. That is, I cannot predict when a user breaks a leg, so yes that is an emergency, but most of the time it should be a long-term endeavor (Interview n. 27, woman, 31 years old, reception worker: 26/10/2017).

Tasks and skills: overcoming the emergency

20 The second issue that emerges very clearly in the interviews is intertwined with the contradiction the respondents pointed out about the existence of a supposed emergency. There is a feeling that oscillates between self-delusion and recognition of professional knowledge.

21 In the interviews, overcoming the emergency, overcoming disappointment and the feeling of personal failure require the demand for a social mandate allowing the recognition of a professional identity through the acquisition of interdisciplinary skills. The reception workers' everyday tasks are not clearly defined and seem to them to be under continuous construction and expansion and requiring daily interaction as part of real teamwork. However, sometimes this teamwork seems impossible when working conditions do not allow it, frustrating the expectations of reception workers as well as those of migrants:

> Sometimes the reception worker is perceived [by migrants] as someone who must ensure a migration pathway is successfully completed. The people around you have

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> a lot of expectations. [...] But I often find myself having to disappoint people. Being in such close contact with the disappointment of a migrant is quite complicated for me. (Interview n. 46, man, 31 years old, reception worker: 13/11/2017)
> At first, it was very hard. I did not imagine that this job would be so difficult and complex [...]. I am the only reception worker here, I have no colleagues, so there was no real supervision. [...] Being in a very isolated valley, I am on my own and therefore I do not do weekly team reviews. I go down to Trento for monthly supervision with colleagues from my NGO. I have never met reception workers from other associations. (Interview n. 29, woman, 38 years old, reception worker: 27/10/2017)

22 The interviewees give an account of how these challenges have led to the emergence of an advocacy body, at least in the Trentino experience: they show how the profession is invented on the job and through the construction of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), even though many difficulties arise. The territory of Trentino consists of isolated valleys. As a result, sharing practices is difficult for some reception workers, although over the years they have developed field skills and, slowly but steadily, have been looking for ways to interact with each other and overcome the isolation of their daily work.

23 Despite the growth of their professional capacity within the system, they struggle to gain legitimacy externally, because the bureaucratic framework forces them to perform a short-term assistance task. Yet, they describe their work as a step-by-step process, a job whose tasks change and evolve over time, and which requires them to continuously learn new skills. They are proud of the practices they develop that strategically integrate the different stages of reception, namely a close link between the first phase of interaction with migrants with very different migration pathways and the second phase of empowerment. This means, in the "grammar of actions" of the reception workers we interviewed, that their role is justified in their ability to build an individualized integration pathway with a view to leaving the reception program. To do their job well, they develop project management skills through networking activities with migrants, residents, local actors, local authorities, and their team with whom they share a community of practice. The work with asylum seekers and refugees should be put into perspective, oriented towards the end of the pathway: the first phase is thus seen only as a gateway to the next stages. This is especially the case today, when the waiting period in the centers is tending to become longer.

24 The interviewees describe their work through a list of tasks derived from ongoing experience, which can be enriched every day: checking facilities, checking attendance at Italian courses, issuing pocket money and food vouchers, supporting registration for residence, health care and with the employment agency, recognizing vulnerabilities, attending to different specific needs according to migration pathways or gender-related requirements, workshops and interactions with migrants, planning individual integration projects, setting up meetings in the different territories between asylum seekers and potential employers, finding voluntary activities, and so on. Most of the interviewees lay claim to a social justification of their skills describing themselves as having an unexpected bridging role: they become intermediaries, if not protagonists of a multi-disciplinary action, which should be performed by well-integrated welfare services. During the long reception time, it turns out that their work becomes closer to social assistance, job placement, setting up projects, searching for the appropriate solution to particular situations, considering the various origins of migrants, the acceptance capacities of local communities as well as the constraints coming from

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institutional services. It is a competence operating in the "in-between", in the gaping space between the fluctuating policies on migration and the actions demanded by asylum seekers' practical needs (Fontanari and Ambrosini, 2018). The reception worker tells us that they always operate "*in-between*": *between* asylum seekers and the public services—employment agencies, hospitals, schools or universities; *between* asylum seekers and political bodies; *between* their own activity and that of other professionals—lawyers, psychologists, doctors, social workers; *between* asylum seekers and local communities; *between* the "nothing" evoked by our interviewee, linked to the imaginary emergency, and "what needs to be done" for the daily life of migrants and their integration and empowerment. Even though, it should perhaps be recalled, nothing is defined in the recruitment of this role: the tasks and skills they require are therefore built up in the ongoing interaction with the above-mentioned actors and policies.

25 Finally, the reception worker as a moral entrepreneur can represent either a *gateway* or a *wall* for the migrants they are working with, since it is true that their position leads to them playing with the bureaucratic rules. In the case we analyzed, reception workers turn out to be the qualified interpreters of street-level bureaucracy, which can be seen as a moral undertaking, and which is well aware that it may or may not lead migrants to empowerment and integration:

> Integration means learning to fight well. Here, therefore, the reception worker must be a cultivator of lifesaving conflicts. (Interview n. 24, man, 30 years old, reception worker: 25/10/2017)
>
> The reception worker must support a pathway to "building a home", which means many things, whether understood as a physical place, four walls or as a mental space. (Interview n. 46, man, 31 years old, reception worker: 13/11/2017)
>
> What is our mission? I have asked myself this question many times. I realized that [at the beginning] there was [...] a much more refugee-camp approach, and in my opinion, it can go well in the first stages, as soon as you arrive, but not when people stay in the structures for a year, a year and a half. [...]. We run a community [...]. We manage people in transit, we have to make them ready, and in my opinion, this is the main mission, we have to prepare people so that they can take advantage of all the opportunities [...] in an appropriate manner. (Interview n. 50, woman, 34 years old, reception worker: 16/11/2017)

Conclusion

26 These "new" social workers have therefore told us a story with several implications. a) The reception of migrants or asylum-seekers cannot be reduced to emergency management or a purely humanitarian assistance task. It is, in fact, an important social process that can lead to different outcomes: enhanced integration, infantilization, exclusion or conflict. b) The reception workers need specific professional training and skills within a uniform reception system, capable of overcoming the hypocrisy of the emergency-related frenzy; they are waiting for a mandate that specifies "what their mission is". c) Meeting this requirement is essential for them to respond to the challenges they face and to build integrated communities, capable of negotiating the rules with institutional actors, according to the socio-cultural origins of migrants, so as to overcome mutual fears. As Damamme and Paperman (2009) observe, care work helps us to redefine the *vulnerable* category itself. The practical experience of caregivers in

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their daily interactions with the supposed "dependent people" gives a useful insight, which makes it possible to discard the idea of the "exceptional scope" of public policies.

27 Although it should be remembered that the case dealt with in this article comes from a very particular region of Italy, further research could provide useful comparative data to better understand the overall trends specific to the Italian reception system.

28 The reflection on the accounts of the reception workers we interviewed shows the two sides of the practices that, with greater or lesser awareness, they carry out every day between compassion and repression (Fassin, 2005), between care and control (Pizza and Johannessen, 2009), between the imposed fictitious time of a present emergency and the long-term reality of migration. From the perspective of the street-level bureaucratic practices we have analyzed, the ambivalence between control and disciplinary practices on the one hand, and welfare and the dimension of care on the other, could be considered not as polarizing mutually exclusive dimensions, but as concomitant parts that can fit together differently. Agier (2003) considers that their work is positioned in the triangle of care, cure and control: the hierarchical value attributed to the different tasks within this triangle greatly influences the daily practices and sometimes even the pathways of the beneficiaries of the reception program. Our interviewees know the weight as well as the paradox of control, and demand more recognition of their care missions, which they describe as essential tasks in their work. Just as they suffer from and denounce the fictional representation of migration as an "emergency". Even the words "asylum seekers" and "refugees", labeling the centers where they work, end up masking a broader social issue. The precarious state of their working conditions, and on a broader level of reception in the country—even in the region with the best practices in this respect—does not, on the contrary, prevent the need for the qualification and professionalization of the workers involved.

29 Nevertheless, our respondents provide an interesting insight into the moral entrepreneur role that reception workers can assume, even at street-level: by claiming that reception and integration have to go hand in hand and developing daily tactics to counterbalance the fictionality of the emergency with local interaction networks, they try to play with the ambiguities of the bureaucratic framework while continuing their quest for recognition.

30 We have observed the very concrete ways in which they are dealing with the challenges they face. They show the social construction of a complex capital of skills which the reception workers have acquired by working together with each other, and with migrants and stakeholders, mixing, in the fieldwork, emotions, ideals, individual or collective needs, procedural requirements, interaction frameworks, reflexivity on their own actions, and above all the capacity to manage the tension between their role formally reduced to generic support in emergency situations, and their real role as a guide towards the empowerment of migrants in a specific territory. They know how important it is for their work: a) to ensure continuity, b) to combat the frenzy that would absorb them in the present by hindering any long-term process, and c) to be aware of the essential nature of the early stages of the reception system. They work on the front lines of this reception system, which they designate as crucial thresholds promoting or hindering integration. Thus, their professional expectations are an important testimony to the need for better, or at least more explicit, social policies on migration.

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31 The sharp contrast between the constraints of the local-level procedures and the discretionary practices developed in the concrete interactions between reception workers, territorial stakeholders and asylum seekers, produces discourses that in turn contribute to new definitions of tasks, in a search for meaning that focuses on their own role. Our results show that reception workers are trying to clarify for themselves and for all other actors involved in their practice "what is [the] mission" of social work with migrants. By claiming recognition of their profession, they have to think about the issue of migration in general, which is why we are leaving the last word to one of the young women we interviewed:

> If I could offer pre-employment training, I would do a course based first of all on the knowledge of the phenomenon of asylum seekers and forced migration in general. (Interview n. 17, woman, 27 years old, reception worker: 20/10/2017)

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NOTES

1. Sistema per la protezione dei richiedenti asilo e rifugiati – System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

2. Sistema di accoglienza e integrazione – System for Reception and Integration.

3. Centri di accoglienza straordinaria – Temporary Reception Centers.

4. The interactionist perspective –inaugurated in the sociological analysis of the professions by Hughes (1958)– escapes the functionalist vision that focuses on the professional systems as such, since it instead devotes attention to the processes of interaction from which professions can derive, compete, mix and so on. Interactionism looks at the course of practices rather than at the established rules. This perspective has proved crucial for studying the history and fields of the care professions above all (see for example Benoit, 1994).

5. We cannot get into the complex issue here of the different profiles that exist in the social services sector. Suffice it to say that while the social worker, the socio-educational educator, the socio-health educator and the psychologist have obtained a

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status regulated by law and often by a professional register and a state exam, the reception workers recruited in the NGOs during the migration "crisis" have no status. One could say that they have in fact been "invented" as the migratory phenomenon demanded policies but only triggered contingency-based actions.

6. An Alpine region in Northern Italy (an autonomous department which acts as an administrative region), near the border with Austria and Switzerland. It is considered to be the Italian region where the reception system works the best (ISMU, 2018).

7. Elena Giacomelli.

8. We get a glimpse of these differences in Trentino's reception system when our interviewees refer to the "emergency", "first" and "second" reception levels, *i.e.* tasks from reception itself to the next stages where they are supposed to "create" an integration activity, but without a specific timetable.

9. During her participant observation, the researcher did not "select" key informants to be interviewed, but asked all the workers who wished to do so to talk about their experience. They mostly come from the "Centro Astalli" NGO, which is the largest association involved in Trentino's reception system. Overall, the respondents represent more than a third of the reception workers in the Autonomous Province of Trento.

10. This perspective is consistent with the suggestions we can find in the great essay of Michel de Certeau (1980) on the tactics of everyday life based on "tricks", as opposed to the strategies of institutional power. A less optimistic perspective is put forward by Vincent Dubois (2012), who considers the street-level "implementation ruse" as the insidious but possible instrument for tightening public policies, justified by inefficiency.

11. In this regard, our analysis takes a positive turn and perhaps differs from the interpretation that V. Dubois (2012) makes of Lipsky (1980), pointing out that the ruse of inefficiency in implementation may prove to be a deliberate instrument for further tightening of public policies on migration. But the discourses of our respondents are not limited to pointing out what is not working, because they show both the search for practical implementation of effective street-level solutions and the demand for another possible policy. That is why we emphasize the constructive dimension of a community of practice expressing a political voice, alongside feelings of frustration, of course.

12. Here too, we interpret positively what Howard Becker, in the context of deviance, indicated as a "moral entrepreneur", namely someone who helps build a socially shared definition of deviant behavior as opposed to normal behavior. We refer here to the workers' demand for defining and legitimizing their actions on a social level as "naturally" oriented towards migrant integration, not limiting them to the fictitious contingency of subsistence reception. Of course, this distinctive role, with its "implementation ruse", could also become, in other cases, the instrument for tightening migration policies, when it shows only the damage of the reception. Indeed, as we will see, the reception workers portray themselves as a bridge or as a wall with regard to integration.

13. This is a statement written by Savino Reggente (2019), a SPRAR reception worker in his article for the magazine *Gli Asini*.

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ABSTRACTS

The arrival of migrants has been a major challenge for Italian society; however, a uniform reception system has yet to be created in the country. Based on interviews conducted in one of the best local reception systems (located in Trentino, in Northern Italy), we analyze two central themes raised in the discourses of this community of practice that bring out the more or less recognized role of "moral entrepreneur" at street level.

L'arrivée des migrants a représenté un gros défi pour la société italienne, qui n'a pourtant pas créé un système d'accueil homogène sur le territoire national. À partir d'entretiens réalisés dans l'un des meilleurs systèmes d'accueil local (dans le Trentin, au nord de l'Italie), nous proposons d'analyser deux thématiques centrales des discours de cette communauté de pratiques, qui font émerger le rôle plus ou moins reconnu de l'« entrepreneur moral » au niveau du guichet.

La llegada de inmigrantes ha presentado un gran reto para la sociedad italiana, sin que por ello se haya creado un sistema de acogida homogéneo en el territorio nacional. A partir de las entrevistas realizadas en Trentino (norte de Italia), que dispone de uno de los mejores sistemas locales de acogida, este artículo analiza dos temas centrales en los discursos de esta comunidad de práctica, que ponen de manifiesto el papel más o menos reconocido del «empresario moral» en la «burocracia de terreno».

INDEX

Mots-clés: migrants, moniteurs sociaux, système d'accueil, communauté de pratiques
Keywords: migrants, social workers, reception system, community of practice
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