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Author's Statement

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Abstract

Drawing on a support program for foreign women, this article discusses anthropological collaboration with local services for migrants in one of the Italian regions most advanced in terms of multicultural policies. Often treated as a pre-given good, collaborative work is here revealed as a site for exploring ways of practicing anthropology with professionals engaged in migrant reception services. On one hand, I examine the potential of collaborative anthropology to interrogate workers' taken-for-granted assumptions as well as the moral implications and institutional constraints that shape their ambiguous encounters with female "Others," perceived as both passive victims and manipulative users. On the other hand, I highlight the meaningful position the anthropologist gains to capture the multi-faceted worlds that social actors navigate in their efforts to negotiate blurred rights in a shifting, contested arena. Moving beyond a narrow conception of applied work, I conclude by casting collaborative anthropology as a call for renewed reflection on political engagement in social policies but also as a challenging opportunity for further investigations of local reception services.

Key words: collaborative anthropology, reception services, social workers, migrant women, reflexivity

Introduction

In the 1980s, Pelliccioni provided a general background of Italian applied anthropology to United States social scientists somewhat unfamiliar with the political and intellectual milieu of their European counterparts. In his view, the development of applied anthropology at the time was inhibited simultaneously by a lack of clients interested in the practical uses of anthropology, rational or visceral opposition posed by a segment of academic anthropology, and funding shortages (Pelliccioni 1980).

Although some critical issues that I will discuss shortly continue to hamper this field, Italian anthropology has undergone a series of significant shifts in recent years that have contributed to relaunching applied work.[1] Several factors, including a relative scarcity of available academic positions, have led applied anthropologists to turn instead to other arenas, forming professional organizations in an effort to bridge theory and practice[2] and engaging with various extra-academic research professionals, clients, and practitioners. Despite their varied locations, anthropologists' experiences of working with diverse organizations in the private or public sectors show that collaboration is gaining increasing currency throughout much of Italian applied research. Indeed, many anthropologists currently work in multidisciplinary teams and engage with a wide range of approaches, methods, and ethics in multi-professional fields (Bonetti 2018; Tarabusi 2019b).

In this shifting landscape, the term "collaboration" does not refer exclusively to deliberate, explicit collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005) aimed at resituating collaborative practice at every stage of the ethnographic process, from fieldwork to writing and back again. Alongside formalized partnerships with their interlocutors, Italian anthropologists mean a variety of things by "collaborative anthropology" (Hilton 2018) and have found multiple ways to bring

collaboration into anthropological practices. Some, for instance, are engaged in original attempts to combine the anthropological perspective with the approaches of other professionals, while these latter prioritize opportunities for making skilled use of ethnographic methods to render their practices more reflexive (Kedia and van Willigen 2005). Others interpret their role as that of a "trader," mediating between informants and clients within a wider research "industry" in which other disciplines or research users are often not familiar with anthropological concepts of contextualization, interpretation, and reflexivity. Some strive to rethink conventional forms of ethnographic recounting that tend to break fieldwork relations and erect boundaries between the social worlds, policy arenas, and professional communities of which anthropologists may also be members (Mosse 2006).

This fraught combination of opportunities and challenges found in collaborative work is not new to the anthropological discipline. Practices developed in other European countries have long revealed that anthropologists are "well placed" to understand the different world views of other disciplinary approaches (Pink 2006:15) but also susceptible to the unforeseen implications and dilemmas of applied research[3] that may even result in collaborative failure (Sillitoe 2018).

Moreover, in a country such as Italy characterized by marked internal differences and cleavages (Pratt 2002), opportunities for working collaboratively depend largely on the historical backgrounds of local contexts. Many factors, including welfare decentralization and immigration policy reforms, have given rise to widely varying possibilities for engaging anthropologically with different "policy worlds" (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011). At the fifth annual conference of the Italian Society for Applied Anthropology (SIAA), for instance, various panel participants[4] described how their experiences of collaborating with schools, hospitals, and asylum seeker reception centers were significantly influenced by local policy traditions. While in some regions

and cities anthropologists usually meet with a certain degree of interest on the part of managers, officials, health and social workers, in other places these counterparts are often suspicious and hesitant to collaborate. It is no coincidence that Emilia-Romagna (northern Italy), an Italian region that is particularly committed to social policies, has played host to anthropological collaboration with certain migrant services such as the one investigated in this article. Although institutions may be cautious to open their doors to some kind of "foreign gaze," I have often found service coordinators and local officials in Emilia Romagna are willing to involve anthropologists as consultants, researchers, and trainers. At the same time, many young anthropology graduates and Ph.D.s have been finding employment in certain private or public sectors of welfare services. These and other factors, such as ethnographers' increasing participation in the public sphere, have contributed to granting the figure of anthropologist a degree of *appeal* in much of the local service system. During an initiative organized by the municipality of Bologna, a woman who coordinates a refugee reception project addressed me during the break: "How nice to have an anthropologist among us…did you know we just hired one?[5] I think it's great and hope that in the future you anthropologists will proliferate like mushrooms in our services!"

Although our interlocutors may be intrigued by the anthropological approach, not many service workers or officials actually know what professional anthropologists do at work. Indeed, anthropologists tend to be perceived as colorful figures who know all about the "habits and customs" of exotic populations (Declich 2012:7). The kinds of requests institutions make of professional anthropological researchers thus often abound with pre-packaged culturalisms that clash with anthropologists' own emic/ethnographic vocation. It is frustratingly common to find questions about "the Chinese tradition," African migrants' "ethnicity," or the "cultural beliefs" of Nigerian mothers circulating among our clients.

Nevertheless, such stereotyped, "external" views of anthropology still coexist with a certain skepticism among academics regarding the discipline's practical uses (Colajanni 2014; Severi 2019). Applied practitioners in Italy, like in other European countries, have long come under considerable ideological criticism. Despite the many applied anthropologists working outside the university, these professional researchers are sometimes identified as less-theoretically-trained and less-empirically-committed, perceived as "clumsy and often disappointing provider[s] of advice that is only valid here and now"[6] (Remotti 1987:375).

As mentioned above, however, the recent revival of "public" anthropology has generated opportunities for challenging new discussions about anthropological applications[7] that invite a rethinking of the deep-rooted dichotomy between the pure and the impure, academic, and applied research (Pink 2006). In this article, I expand on these issues by calling for an encouraging discussion of Italian anthropology less animated by ideological positions and more engaged in understanding applied work as experienced in practice.

To contribute to this debate, I focus on collaborative anthropology and its implications in the field of Italian migrant reception services. Often treated as a pre-given good, collaborative work is here revealed as a site for exploring innovative ways of practicing anthropology *with* local services engaged in migrant inclusion. In this vein, I discuss how interactive work may encourage professionals to adopt "ways of thinking and doing anthropologically" (Cornwall 2018) while also offering a potentially fruitful opportunity to expand the anthropological effort itself.

Drawing on my own experience with a support program for migrant women, I first outline how a specific extra-academic request that was not originally part of a collaborative project design was reformulated to build a framework for anthropologist/local worker collaboration. Instead of simply providing anthropological content for professional training courses, I sought to build

reflexive moments into collaborative practices and negotiate opportunities for conducting ethnographic observation in the organizational settings where the workers were employed at the time. To this end, I held five focus group with local service workers to grasp their multiple worldviews and the contradictory circumstances that often shape their ambiguous encounters with migrant women (three months). Situating myself alongside the professionals, over the next seven months I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in their workplaces. The group discussions we then held about the data I had collected showed how collaborative practices can be used to co-create knowledge with our interlocutors rather than considering them as mere sources of raw data (three and one-half months). This process offered the workers a significant opportunity to discover, share, and negotiate critical sensibilities (Holmes and Marcus 2008) in rethinking migrant women's encounters with powerful institutions.

In light of this project, I discuss how collaborative work can encourage professionals to expand their repertoire of practices and unsettle their essentialist ways of conceptualizing cultural and gender difference. Simultaneously, the collaborative setting enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of what professionals were experiencing as they navigated bureaucratic pressures, institutional constraints, and moral implications in a shifting, contested arena.

I thus conclude by considering collaborative anthropology as a chance to engage policy and social service audiences and to encourage professionals to interrogate their taken-for-granted assumptions but also a meaningful opportunity to delve deeply into the everyday workings of local reception services.

Multicultural Policies in Emilia-Romagna

For some time now, Emilia-Romagna has hosted the country's highest percentage of resident foreign citizens. Recent data indicate that foreigners accounted for 12.1 percent of the

total regional population in 2018, as compared to 8.5 percent in the country as a whole (Osservatorio regionale sul fenomeno migratorio 2019). The region also reports the highest percentage of students with foreign origins out of total enrollees, and more and more of these young people were born in Italy. These data, as well as the growing number of individuals gaining Italian citizenship (almost 19,000 in 2017) reflect the profound social shifts that have rendered migration a structural phenomenon in this area. Since the late 1990s, this wealthy and developed region has become a particularly attractive destination for foreign citizens. In addition to the opportunities offered by the labor market, Emilia-Romagna's comprehensive welfare system seems to have favored settled family units as opposed to the individual immigration of the past.

Unlike other northern regions such as Veneto and Lombardy, where an anti-immigrant party has recently taken hold, this left-leaning region is distinguished by a historic governmental commitment to pursuing inclusive policies, culminating in Law no. 5 of March 24, 2004.[8] While past policies were based on an emergency-response logic, over time the region has shifted its focus to extending citizenship rights by supporting trans-local networks for asylum seekers, the fight against ethnic discrimination, leading roles for second-generation migrants, and political participation among foreign citizens.

As Campomori and Caponio (2017) have underlined, what seems to have made the difference in this setting are specific contextual and organizational factors in the regional administration, that is, social policy traditions and established relationships with public non-governmental organizations working in the field as well as the attitudes of individual civil servants. Therefore, migrants have relatively greater access to social rights in Emilia-Romagna due not only to the residual, provisional welfare system characterising the "bel paese," but also because of

specific regional traditions in which local social policies have developed over time in interaction with migration flows (Barberis and Boccagni 2014).

Nonetheless, ethnographic research has uncovered a less rosy picture than the local administration's inclusive emphasis would suggest. On one hand, the region has been undergoing a process of demographic decline and economic restructuring for more than a decade now. This process has affected the redistribution of resources, generating new forms of marginalization and progressively "ethnicizing" the market in ways that drive migrants into specific employment sectors (such as home care) and flexible and underpaid positions (Salih and Riccio 2011).

On the other hand, a burgeoning body of anthropological literature has found that there is a marked discrepancy between the region's progressive rhetoric of equity and the patterns of exclusion that migrants actually encounter when navigating Italy's ambiguous bureaucratic system. Against the grain of the ideological-normative notions of multiculturalism currently prevailing in public discourse, ethnographic investigations have brought to light opaque institutional procedures, for example in the field of asylum policies (Sorgoni 2015), and multi-layered forms of discrimination that are often embedded in the everyday relationship between workers and migrants in spite of the region's inclusive agendas (Tarabusi 2019a). As Tuckett (2018) notes, it is often the inconsistent character of bureaucratic processes that is ultimately responsible for the discriminatory treatment of migrants, as these processes give rise to uncertainty and indeterminacy among low-level bureaucrats and service users rather than engendering transparency and coherence.

Far from being passive recipients of policy measures, coordinators and operators seem to be well aware that their professional "tools" at their disposal are not effective for challenging the kinds of barriers that work to undermine migrants' access to "blurred rights" (Barberis and

Boccagni 2014). This is why such services often call on anthropologists, among other experts, to support their work and look with interest on the results of their research.

Practicing Anthropology Together with Social Services

In 2015, I was invited to take part in a local initiative organized by a municipal agency, specifically to present the results of ethnographic research about the trajectories of some migrant family users in local services. The audience included a number of managers such as Anita, the human resources manager of a hospital foundation. A few days after the conference, Anita contacted me to see if I would participate in a project supported by the local health authority that was designed (in her words) to "improve the quality of services offered to foreign users and the work of the service staff" such as counseling centers, hospital wards, and social cooperatives involved in multicultural work. The project's aims included improving the help desks for foreigners at hospitals (some of which had already been set up as part of the counseling center) and defining "good practices" for the local reception system with a special focus on foreign women. As Anita explained, these women had been targeted as the "most needy and vulnerable" population in terms of "access to services, due to their higher degree of isolation and social precariousness." Anita thus asked me to participate in several months of "anthropological training" for a group of professionals to help them—again, in her words—to "overcome the obvious linguistic and cultural barriers" entailed in their everyday work with clients.

This was followed by a long discussion about the timing and meaning of my intervention that also expanded in the ensuing weeks to involve the head of the social cooperative. First of all, this proposal struck me as not particularly collaborative and maybe even "anti-collaborative" in that it was already being designed by managers and officials rather than negotiated and shared with the social workers themselves. Similar to the way the classic fieldwork encounter had been

reimagined by anthropologists over time (Holmes and Marcus 2008), I felt that the intervention setting, and thus the relationship between me and the "natives," needed to be reframed. With this in mind, I first proposed deeply rethinking the anthropological work by privileging the workers' experiences with migrants and, second, extending the duration of my involvement to cover the entire project (about a year and one-half). I then negotiated with them to incorporate "ethnographic intrusions" in their work organizations, with the details to be defined together with the staff.

During this process, I engaged with my interlocutors to develop collaborative approaches that made anthropological practices meaningful to their practice contexts while taking care not to sell something I would not be able to deliver (Sillitoe 2006). As I could not predict what form such work would take, I interpreted it as a sort of experimental collaborative venture (Boyer and Marcus 2021) aimed at practicing anthropology together with my interlocutors.

Women Constructing "Other Women"

A month or so later, twenty-four social service workers, all women, were waiting for me at a family center. Although the group was homogeneous in terms of gender, the women were quite different in terms of organizational, professional, and generational belonging. There were midwives and social workers from a hospital facility, some of which worked at a family counseling center; there were also educators, mediators, and social workers hired by a social cooperative and working in a facility for the families of female asylum seekers and migrants. As we discussed their professional experiences during the first meetings, the workers were quite concerned with practical issues:

I'm here to understand how we can operate in hospital wards…. I meet patients and

their families, I meet women with difficult situations of motherhood, immigrant fathers

and women, situations that are complicated because, in the case of foreigners, there is

this cultural divide […] With Chinese women, for example, there is a barrier while with others—I'm thinking of Africans—there is perhaps more openness, but the problem remains that we have to understand how we can help them to integrate. (Marina, health care worker)

As this short extract shows, essentialized assumptions about migrant women, mainly portrayed as repositories of "local traditions," tended to be arbitrarily evoked by workers to make sense of uncertain situations that were incomprehensible to them. After Marina, a midwife spoke up emphasizing the merits of Africans, defined as "instinctively" inclined to breastfeed, while a social worker disagreed because she considered families from Africa to be more "undisciplined" than other communities, such as Chinese patients. Drawing on gendered stereotypes attached to their countries of origin, immigrant women and their bodies were thus constructed by the female workers through ambivalent imagery that cast them alternately as disciplined or undeserving users. Social workers facing problematic familial situations perceived communities from Africa as "tribalized" (Grillo 2002) and saw these families as having a hard time adopting certain practices— in the workers' views, they tended to hold fast to their own forms of cultural rigidity. Attributing a primordial dimension to African motherhood, the midwife instead described African women as more "disciplined" than Italian mothers in that they were better at sticking to breastfeeding and other postpartum practices.

Over the course of these meetings, I then observed how female users became the targets of a "moral and emancipatory project" aimed at constructing their subjectivities (Pinelli 2015). These ideas seemed to be further amplified when referring to Muslim couples, as workers drew on ethnocentric views of Islam to cast the wives as silent victims (Abu-Lughod 2002) subjugated to the will of their husbands:

The main reason I'm here is to understand how to help them […] the problem we have

is the problem of Muslim men...mute women, who at most whisper in Arabic, afraid

of their overbearing husbands, how can we support them? It seems little, but this

problem that is cultural creates a lot of problems for us. (Francesca, midwife)

If I think of the women I have met, I think that what they need is above all to become

aware of the cultural cages that sometimes suffocate them, there are some of them who

have no independence at home, who are oppressed…I'm thinking especially of the

Muslim women. (Antonella, social worker)

On multiple occasions, the service workers' daily encounters with foreign women revealed

Western assumptions that tend to "ethnicize gender" (Wong 1992)—in the sense of a racializing

process whereby White ideology assigns selected gender characteristics to various ethnic Others—

as well as "genderizing ethnicity" (Ong 2003) through efforts to empower women, especially

Muslim and racialized Others.

Marginalizing their "patriarchal" husbands, Francesca and other workers perceived their

female Muslim users as cumbersome recipients of health services whose cultural traditions tended

to impede the therapeutic relationship. This image acted as a "counterweight" to the idea that the

male users avoided taking part in processes of familial care and management. Both the presence

and absence of such men were cited as clear evidence of the subaltern position Muslim women are

forced to occupy in Islamic countries (Salih 2002). Similar ideas were supported by older social

workers who had developed a certain critical consciousness through their involvement with

feminist movements. Antonella, who had also worked as a volunteer at a feminist association,

talked about her commitment to fostering autonomous pathways for women so as to lead them out

of domestic oppression. Similar "pedagogical intentions"[9] (Pinelli 2013) could also be seen in

reception center workers' attempts to regulate women's behavior in keeping with a host of Italian societal norms and values so as to make them into model responsible citizens (Ong 2003). For example, one initiative for female asylum seekers was focused on the clients' sexuality to help them—in Anna's words—"to get to know their bodies and sexual behavior better, in a sense, to liberate themselves."

Over time and due in part to the doubts surfacing in their stories, however, the workers also both constructed other representations of migrant women and dismantled the images they themselves were voicing. In certain contexts or in relation to certain issues, their victimizing ideas of foreign women gave way once again to narratives framing them as undisciplined, manipulative users. Speaking of an Algerian woman living in a facility, one participant specified:

> She told me that she'd lost those papers, that she didn't have them anymore. I didn't believe it at all, however, because just a week before she had told me that she was going to visit her cousin…then I found out that she didn't have any cousins in Italy. Honestly, I felt hurt, I felt betrayed. Because I want to establish authentic relationships with them and I'm sorry to admit that my experience led me to be a bit more suspicious…. (Romina, educator)

Similarly, some workers pointed out that many women and their families had learned to exploit Italian laws and government agencies to obtain benefits, while others described episodes in which asylum seekers tried to "trick" workers so as to obtain documents and redefine their unequal positions in the host Italian society.

Inside the Hidden Intricacies of Reception Services

Before starting my fieldwork, I negotiated how and where I would conduct ethnographic observation alongside the professionals, privileging the organizations where they worked.

Together, we decided I would carry out my observations in certain structured contexts (such as the "Mom Spaces" at the counseling centers or individual meetings with migrant women) but also in some intermediate institutional spaces (such as waiting rooms in hospital wards and team meetings at the cooperative) and more intimate situations (for example, by listening to informal conversations between workers or observing daily life at the reception center).

Doing this fieldwork,[10] I soon realized that my own assumptions needed to be interrogated. The image I had developed of relatively naïve workers sometimes harboring stereotyped narratives gradually faltered, making space for me to instead grasp their ambiguous encounters with migrant women users. Many workers, for example, were struggling against bureaucratic pressures in their efforts to deal with women's vulnerability and experiencing the multiple contradictions embedded in the everyday making of reception policies.

Irritated by inflexible institutional procedures, service workers often interpreted their task as a clumsy attempt to navigate among the "gears" of the Italian reception system, an opaque system deeply rooted in the ambivalent intersection of surveillance and care (Pinelli 2015; Sorgoni 2015).

On one hand, their work was conditioned by the institutional mandate that they take on a role of "disciplining" asylum seekers. Female users were "supervised" when moving around outside the centers to control that they followed the established procedures in organizing their daily lives, thus partially depriving them of their freedom and subjectivity (Pinelli 2015). On the other hand, workers' relationships with these female users were emotionally demanding, and their emotional involvement led them to personalize their bonds, sometimes going beyond the established boundaries of the asymmetrical worker/client relationship ("even though I am 'her' service worker, I privilege a human approach, almost [one of] friendship"). Deeply caught up in

emotional ties with asylum seekers, the workers often felt overly responsible for these women's fates. As Anna said one day, "We often find ourselves forced to communicate things that can profoundly change their lives, such as the decision of the commission, and to make decisions for them, often without any clues, evaluating based on our feelings and perceptions."

Nevertheless, relations between the workers and users were embroiled in secrets and suspicion (Vacchiano 2011) and unfolded within a flawed institutional system in which the migrants must formulate the "right" narrative to fit the performative categories of asylum procedures (Sbriccoli and Jacovello 2011). In this setting, certain situations sometimes amplified the workers' feelings of being exploited or deceived. My fieldnotes, for instance, show that workers sometimes felt betrayed when female asylum seekers broke certain rules or concealed intimate details of their lives. This led the workers to feel that they were supporting ambiguous asylum policies and moral economies that continuously oscillated between humanitarianism and surveillance (Fassin 2005), compassion and suspicion (Kobelinsky 2010).

Meanwhile, the workers employed in the hospital wards had to deal with organizational efficiency, highly hierarchical relationships, and professional role constraints that hindered their efforts to build intimate ties with foreign women. Health care budget cuts, increasing legal responsibilities assigned to service providers, and staff shortages due to continuous turnover shaped their workplace interactions (with users and among colleagues) in more bureaucratic settings. Identifying with institutional demands, these workers often tended to withdraw from responsibility in the face of the many everyday difficulties. This tendency often led them to assert, even in informal situations, that there was not enough time or money to do this or that, or that they had to consult with the doctors and, at any rate, it was in their best interests to proceed cautiously. As one social worker frankly observed: "Here you find yourself making choices to reduce the

amount of time you spend working...you have to follow the paths you know best, the ones you are familiar with, while also trying to get into as little trouble as possible with colleagues, bosses, and users."

Not even the "culturally sensitive" measures introduced in some sectors (such as the counseling center) seemed to have benefited relations between service providers and migrant users. On the contrary, the help desk for migrants had, paradoxically, rendered users' behavior more defensive in that they perceived the desk as a channel of discrimination aimed at reproducing the distinction between foreign and native women. At the same time, the measures that had been adopted—such as the increased involvement of cultural mediators, the integration of medical records, and the production of multilingual leaflets—seemed to have more or less implicitly encouraged ethnicizing processes. One day, an obstetrician told her colleague that, by talking with a mediator, she had understood that "Pakistani culture" nurtured a certain distrust of health care facilities and personnel. On another occasion, when discussing how difficult it was for an Albanian patient to keep up with her scheduled appointments, two health workers ended up characterizing Albania as a backward and primordial context where people are not in the habit of conducting gynecological checkups. Although the aim of the help desk was to interrogate ethnocentric approaches to health, it instead ran the risk of reinforcing the very stigma it was designed to alleviate.

Co-navigating as Para-ethnographers

The following group discussions of the collected data were (re)framed along the lines of a relational process similar to what Ingold (2017) calls "correspondence." I built forms and spaces of participation encouraging professionals to disrupt their taken-for-granted assumptions, try out different interpretations, and collectively reprocess their usual practices with users.

In the meantime, the collaborative setting led me to listen more closely to what professionals were actually saying and to interrogate my own fixed and monolithic conception about their social worlds. In so doing, our fieldnotes went beyond merely recording ethnographic data to also help us to "move together in space and time," evolving from description to correspondence (Ingold and Gatt 2013).[11] Rather than passive recipients, the workers felt actively involved in a para-ethnographic process (Holmes and Marcus 2008) aimed at re-composing points of view and re-organizing processes through the active co-production of anthropological analysis. They went looking for details that may have initially appeared insignificant or marginal but actually proved useful for uncovering significant, buried processes.

By scrutinizing the normative expectations embedded in institutional procedures, the group discussed the difficulty of engaging with migrant women's histories shaped by inequalities operating at the intersection of race, gender, and legal and social precariousness.

Following a proposal by a couple of social workers, the group focused on the story of Samira, a 35-year-old woman from Morocco. When I started the fieldwork, Samira was living in a shelter for single women, while her four-year-old daughter had been placed in a group home. The multiple layers of suffering in this story had ended up slipping out of the control of everyone involved in the case. The family's precarious condition was exacerbated by the violence Samira had suffered, first as an immigrant then as a woman and wife who was wholly dependent on her husband's residence permit. Her husband had been caught one day during a burglary, and his severe depression gave the workers cause to suspect that he was violent at home; indeed, they had immediately encouraged Samira to leave him and press charges against him. The violence she suffered as a mother on being judged no longer capable of taking care of her daughter was then reproduced by Samira herself when she tried to run and take her daughter with her, sneaking her

out of the group home only to regret her actions and take refuge in total isolation. Various vicious circles had reinforced the reciprocal suspicion between Samira and the institutional actors in charge of her case. At the end of my fieldwork, she was no longer speaking to the social workers; she no longer trusted the professionals at the facility where she lived, and they, for their part, kept her under constant surveillance for fear that she might leave or reach out to her daughter.

By unpacking this story, the workers came to explore how, despite their benevolent intention of "saving" women from domestic violence, their practices risked exposing migrants to further experiences of suffering and institutional violence. For instance, the professionals working with asylum seekers pointed out the paradoxical character of the reception procedures that, while claiming to include asylum applicants, actually trap them in a state of endless waiting while their subjectivities are reconstructed under conditions of vulnerability (Pinelli 2013). Some of the social workers came to see their task as one of expanding their own reflexive awareness of these distorted institutional mechanisms that could end up (re)producing, however unconsciously, the very suffering they sought to mitigate.

Employing this lens, we tried to co-analyze the implications of such "added" violence, identifying it as the product of the intersecting institutionalized procedures, discourses, actions, and actors (judges, psycologists, social workers, physicians, etc.) that tend to covertly normalize social and political forces.

Although health workers' professional interactions were less permeated by violence, some of them likewise gradually began to criticize practices that were taken for granted in their services, thereby overturning the store of stereotypes that I had observed circulating at the beginning. They reshuffled excerpts from their field notebooks to highlight, for example, how foreign men (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) often represented resources that their wives drew on to avoid

misunderstandings with health personnel. Far from reproducing "traditional" gender disparities, foreign women's desire to have men accompany them to service appointments helped compensate for the power asymmetry they felt in relation to health care institutions. This insight led workers to reflect on migrants' vulnerability in accessing the health system, where the implicit norms and unfamiliar languages shared among professionals make it ever more complicated to negotiate their own subjective experiences.

Moreover, although workers often had "salvific" expectations for the work of cultural mediation, they also came to view this service as highly ambiguous. Some obstetricians had witnessed unexpected situations in which mediators and users did not understand each other or pretended not to understand each other, or even entered into overt conflict. Rabha, an Arabic-speaking mediator, complained of resistance from some of her fellow countrymen. She pointed out, for example, that a mediator barging in on an intimate scene, such as a woman discussing her reproductive health, might be taken as intrusive because the user feared moral judgment on the part of her ethnic group. A Congolese woman working as a cultural mediator noted that many users viewed her and her colleagues with suspicion for pursuing "careers" in the receiving society, often grouping them together with Italian women. Against the grain of normative visions, the group began to talk about mediation as a controversial practice that exposed mediators to frequently frustrating experiences and migrants to processes in which their cultural differences were banalized (Sayad 1999).

A Collaborative Epilogue

While the workers' narrative were initially informed by prevailing culturalism, over time they seemed to approach certain problematic situations as less self-evident. Although in varying ways, most of them began to unsettle their own professional practices rather than focusing on

migrants' apparently incomprehensible behavior. As part of this process, the workers came to view this incipient critical approach as a way of expanding their professional agency.

Nevertheless, collaborative work is not a utopian solution; such work entails facing multiple dilemmas and discrepancies in the field. In forging collective processes, some workers were often reluctant to change their practices or doubtful or suspicious about the chance to influence established institutional settings; others felt frustrated and complained about organizational constraints and oppressive working conditions. However, none of the workers remined wholly fixed in her (previous) thinking. Even those who were skeptical also felt motivated to interrogate and process their experiences over time.

Our final meetings were thus dedicated to drawing up concrete proposals for the professionals to launch in their own workplaces. Drafting hypotheses in small groups, the workers reimagined the help desk as an opportunity to "extend" the often rushed timing of health services and facilitate users' encounters with the taken-for-granted norms, languages, and expectations of health care organizations. Mediators were then envisioned as figures who were there to facilitate the negotiation of cultural meanings in this newly reconsidered space, but in a way that was to be contextually negotiated with the users. To respond to migrant women's needs, workers decided to make it easier for relatives, co-nationals, and friends to take part in individual meetings with users. Other components of the service, such as the Mom Spaces, were conceived as transversal sites for reducing the power asymmetries between foreign women and health care professionals.

A second group focused on devising new tools to introduce more self-critical awareness into their practices. In the wake of their fieldnotes, one such tool the workers proposed was a professional diary conceived as an opportunity to exercise critical scrutiny over the subterranean details of their everyday work (someone described it as "data collection.") Reflexive writing was

also seen as a way of more effectively dealing with the contradictions of their professional mandate, oscillating between emotional identification with users and the intense depersonalization of bureaucratic procedures. This step also led them to rethink some institutional settings, such as pre-packaged conversations with users and the work of multi-professional teams. In this vein, they explored operational avenues for incorporating the subjective experiences of beneficiaries into their professional practices, but also better integrating a range of professional devices, approaches, and methods in the field. Furthermore, workers proposed other tools, such as in-depth conversations, as a way to intersectionally approach the multiple aspects of migrants' life trajectories and to partially disrupt the hidden institutional violence (re)produced in the making of reception policies. More generally, the professionals interpreted institutionalized forms and methods of participation as a challenging but productive opportunity to enhance migrant women's agency in navigating the hierarchical structures of powerful institutions.

Conclusion

While much of the literature has been dedicated to critically assessing what constitutes collaboration, engagement, activism, advocacy, and a host of similarly politicized but ambiguous terms (Mullins 2011), collaborative research has become a significant and appealing issue in anthropology. Scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the co-produced nature of research, investigating questions of onto/epistemologies in collaborations (Gatt 2017) and how researcher-subject cooperation in producing ethnographic texts can represent a powerful means of engaging the public with anthropology (Lassiter 2005). With the collaborative turn arguably recognized as "the next phase in anthropology's history" (Sillitoe 2018:31), anthropologists are being exhorted to engage in experimental ventures through collaborative practices (Boyer and Marcus 2021).

In an attempt to engage with this debate, I have discussed collaboration as a site for exploring innovative ways of practicing anthropology with professionals in the field of migrant reception policies. Rather than a pre-designed institutionalized partnership, I have treated collaboration as a situationally embedded practice aimed at developing relational processes of "human correspondence" (Ingold 2017) understood as learning and moving in time and space together with one's interlocutors.

Based on my experience with a support program for migrant women, I have explored how an extra-academic request was redrawn to build a framework for collaboration between anthropologists and professionals. All of the participants in this process co-navigated the system and cooperated—the social workers by collectively developing their critical awareness, the anthropologist by listening more closely to local perspectives—in unseating orthodoxies and encouraging "ways of thinking and acting anthropologically" (Cornwall 2018) in the local reception system.

On one hand, the staff interrogated their assumptions and organizational practices, searching for alternative roadmaps to challenge essentialist categorizations of cultural and gender difference. Encouraging a para-ethnographic approach (Holmes and Marcus 2008), the practitioners gradually explored more reflexive and intersectional ways of approaching migrant women's subjectivities (see Della Rocca and Zinn 2019), variously informed by multiple race, gender, legal, and social inequalities.

On the other hand, by taking part in what Ingold (2017) calls learning *with* people, the anthropologist discovered unforeseen ways of making use of her classical tools of investigation (such as fieldnotes) and gained a renewed awareness of the politics of professional identities, "the

extent to which one's whole person is exposed and subjected to the judgments and corrections of others in the process" (Carrithers 2005:437).

A great deal of attention has been focused on the uses of anthropology in policy research and implementation. Here, I instead suggest that applied work can open up potential new sites of anthropological inquiry useful for capturing the social lives of institutions and policies as processes that are continuously "in the works" (Bernestein and Razon 2019). Working alongside professionals, anthropologists find themselves navigating a shifting arena in which policies are dynamically practiced, used, or contested by both social workers and migrants. While encouraging workers to engage powerfully with anthropology, collaborative work also paves the way for unpacking the everyday work of reception services by taking more seriously the multi-faceted voices of the professional worlds involved in this field.

In an attempt to challenge a narrow conception of applied anthropology, in Italy and elsewhere, this article therefore encourages further investigations into experimental collaborative practices as a fruitful opportunity to develop engaged learning experiences for institutional professionals and anthropologists alike.

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Notes

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[1] For a brief overview of the development of applied anthropology in Italy, see, among others: Colajanni (2014); Palmisano (2014); Riccio (2016); Severi (2019); Benadusi (2020a, 2020b); Piasere (2020).

[2] Such as the recently founded Italian Society for Applied Anthropology (Società Italiana di Antropologia Applicata, SIAA) and the Italian National Professional Association of Anthropology (Associazione Nazionale Professionale Italiana di Antropologia, ANPIA).

[3] See, among others: Elliott and Thomas (2017), Kilian (2017).

[4] The panel in question was "Senso condiviso: sapere antropologico e altre expertise professionali" (Shared Meaning: Anthropological Knowledge and Other Forms of Professional Expertise), which I coordinated at the University of Catania (December 14-17, 2017). See Tarabusi (2019b) for a discussion of this issue.

[5] Since professional anthropology, in Italy as elsewhere, is not yet fully institutionalized, this issue is currently being addressed by the above-mentioned ANPIA.

[6] Translation mine.

[7] Such as the launch of the journal *Anthropologia Pubblica* (Public Anthropology) and the proliferation of publications, seminars, and conferences dedicated to this topic.

[8] Regional Law March 24, 2004, n. 5 "Regulations for the social integration of foreign immigrant citizens. Amendments to Regional Laws 21 February 1990, n. 14 and 12 March 2003, n. 2"—art. 17

[9] See specifically, Pinelli's work (2013, 2015) for a more detailed discussion of the educational/pedagogical approach prevailing in Italian reception centers and the way this approach impacts the subjectivity of female asylum seekers.

[10] During the slightly more than seven months of research, I conducted ethnographic observation by shadowing four social workers who then facilitated my interactions with other interlocutors (coordinators, colleagues, and users). My data collection was aimed at exploring the social workers' practices, focusing on institutional/organizational constraints as well as the elements, often hidden, that impacted their encounters with users. At the same time, I analyzed the stories of some of the migrant women who had been admitted into the care system while the investigation was taking place. I often shared my fieldnotes with workers, thus facilitating a subsequent discussion of certain observations I had made (see the next section).

[11] As mentioned above, involving some of the service workers in the fieldwork and note taking facilitated this process of collective data processing. In fact, thanks to this approach, privileged informants were able to take a leading role in the discussions and act as bridges with the group as a whole, often leaving the anthropologist to play a more secondary, background role.