The Emergence of New Street-Level Bureaucracies in Italy's Asylum Reception System

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Abstract

In this research, the role and the framework with which the social workers work with asylum seekers and refugees are discussed. Their perspective of the situation and condition of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy and their role in fulfilling their duties.

The purpose of the research is to reflect on the role social workers have as street-level bureaucrats, considering their discretional margin of actions and their consequences. Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of the role of social workers as street-level bureaucrats, the article highlights the historical and political turning points of the Italian reception systems and clarifies in what sense the immigration issue has become a local matter. This study adopts a qualitative research design, comprising two years of immersive field research 55 interviews with social workers and two focus groups with holders of international protection, observing the construction of hidden grammars of street-level bureaucracy. The hypothesis is that while local authorities have the greater discretion in reception system choices, a new form of street-level bureaucracy is developing through the everyday practices of social workers.

Keywords

Social Workers, Asylum Seekers, Street-Level Bureaucrats, Grammars of Action,

Discretion, Social Work Practices.

Introduction

In the recent past Italian cities have been playing a key role to face the arrival of migrants on the national territory. In Italy, asylum seekers reception systems are subject to a complex set of politics of subsidiarity. The multi-level governance of migration and reception is responsibilizing municipalities for sub-contracting services and public-private collaboration. Despite central efforts to achieve harmonization on the national level, empirical studies

(Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Terlizzi 2020; Campomori 2016; Fontanari 2016) show how there are still many differences in the field. I situated my research in theories of hidden grammars of action (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999) and street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), which helps them reflect on the role of local social workers as street-level bureaucrats, including how they exercise their roles and their discretional margins of actions (Lemieux, 2009).

Italian registrars are increasingly limited to recognizing precarious working conditions and manipulations. Until recently, in Italy, most social workers found work in public order, making the most of their strength and general security. However, in the mid-2000s. The structure of the Italian government's aid system was radically reformed upwards through the distribution of tasks and funding at a territorial and civil level and the just return of administrations to the "third territory". Philanthropy ", according to the escort rule established by the Catholic. The" third part "of this field corresponds to the first and second market and public spaces and includes several NGOs such as cooperatives, NGOs and voluntary associations. The neoliberal models that influence Italian culture are generally presented in broad daylight as the "main punishment" needed for the current financial crisis, their foundations much deeper, while the third region of Italy inspires dreams. the Italian state quickly exits the government system, supported by financial demands for the unification of Europe, linked to money, so that a different workforce can be used in a friendly way. Help: Currently, more and more social workers are recruiting third-party actors to cause inefficiencies. An employee of the umpteenth area is usually worth 40%, not quite a local temporary employee working in a similar area. As in the previous paragraph, social professionals face the transition to uncontrolled working conditions with a range of emotions, from nervousness to frustration and anger. These disappointing working conditions appear to

have serious implications for the level of personality (the difficulty in shaping one's future) and the dynamics of the help they ultimately provide to asylum seekers.

While the limited status of asylum seekers revolves around registering with rich ethnographic organizations, it is less well known than the questionable state of vulnerability faced by highway officials concerned about the claim that the state has serious powers to waive its obligations regarding asylum rights.

However, asylum seekers must regularly recruit for execution and be limited to local and lower-level administrations (e.g. clearing roads, digging up snow, or providing recreational services) when neighbouring organizations have tried a tranche. Referring to new forms of asylum in the centre of gravity, this social activity plays into indisputable racial and postcolonial beliefs that demand a generous distinction between so-called initiatives and outbreaks, while at the same time a patronizing mission. How worthwhile social assistance is today. In this regard, it should not be forgotten that Italy's institutional efforts to track travellers today are accompanied by unstable research on Italy's past and the uncertain relationship between nationalization, south-south and north internal movements and imperialism. As some anthropologists have pointed out, the suffering of bigotry and narrow-mindedness - from Northern bias against Southern Italians to unrestricted alienation from "new foreigners" - is a core standard of Italian culture. Research shows that racial expansion of the workforce is necessary to address the problem of modern gravity, increase employee competition, and create moderate and redundant temporary workers. Abusive development of job destruction, usually accompanied by compensation, strengthens the delicate balance in the fragile labour market everywhere, breaking the dispute between bombed residents (Italians or distant travellers) and foreigners (seeking housing). In this context, an atmosphere of unstable and emotionally charged vulnerability and lack of

prospects goes through the institutional experience of asylum, in which assembly workers participate to prevent the appalling aspirations and demands of their families.

Law 113/2018, applied by "L 132/2018", fundamentally changed the plan of the Italian collection system, which, according to the decree of entry (DL 142/2015), explained the collection of asylum seekers in several stages:

• period of emergency care and assistance,

• the first stage of harvest after a long period;

• and second-line recovery phase.

The 2018 change changed the second tier collection structure, known as the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Protection System, to a protection system for persons protected and a protection system for unaccompanied minors.

Currently, the law provides for a reasonable separation between the collection system for housing applicants and beneficiaries of the global guarantee. Two images were donated from the collection and almost two identical images were made. SIPROIMI is currently available to adults after obtaining comprehensive insurance. Only young people are admitted to SIPROIMI as soon as possible, without adult supervision. Local specialists may compel drug dealers to join SIPROIMI; domestic abuse and specific violence; people who gave a housing grant for treatment, or a common disaster in their home country, or for special demonstrations of respect in the community.

Housing applicants and utility status holders who previously received assistance under the previous SPRAR system on October 5, 2018, were allowed to remain in this convenience system until the end of their activities. A circular dated 27 December 2018 stated that asylum seekers must be returned later to the CAS or the first collection points.

Migrants undergo a basic eligibility check-in "areas of interest" where they define their physical appearance and receive details on registering asylum applications. At these base

stations, scabies treatment and emergency medical care are regulated before people are transferred to the centre, usually within a few days. Collection community managers are required to comply with conditions that are currently not applicable in priority areas.

Somewhere in southern Sicily, social workers who spoke about the state of secrecy told IRIN they recalled a hole in the new medical facilities soon after denying treatment to one of their residents in March. When asked how they managed to accommodate migrants without access to a government facility, the social worker pointed to an emergency box at her workplace and replied, "It's our facility now."

As the social workers talked, they passed clean fabrics and synthetic mascara cushions over her feet and seat. They said he had open wounds, several shallow rows, and many new crossings showed such wear after sitting on boats loaded with a mixture of saltwater, engine oil and gas during the lag periods.

In any case, when identity documents are finally released to temporary residents, there is a risk of another public health violation when those records become outdated after six months and need to be restored.

Social affairs experts say the facility creates exorbitant paperwork for concentration representatives who are in charge of dealing with recruits, just as they oversee asylum claims. Italy recorded 61,800 asylum requests in the first five months of the year, compared to about 40,000 in the same period in 2016, according to the UNHCR in exile.

"They are completely subordinate to our work with their relationships," one employee told IRIN. "I am a social specialist. I need to take care of their personal affairs, create social associations, get used to them ... but I hardly do, because I want to be always updated on their business, I try to follow the administrative work."

Furthermore, issues of congestion, work instructions and legal requirements start from one Italian territory and then from another, which means that the collection structure is certainly

not uniform. It can be expected that in one area the emphasis will be placed on Italian language lessons and work schedules, while in others it will not. City councils are setting quality guidelines, and social workers tell IRIN that they depend on how district specialists can solve a problem that is not usually addressed at the polling station.

According to Lucia Borghi, who reviews eastern Sicily for the Italian NGO Borderline Sicilia, the assessment of collection conditions will usually be limited to the main trust and baseline, such as whether or not they have beds, jobs and related laundries. With big plans for an effective mix, such as Italian lessons, not overlooked by experts in specific locations, countless tips present the smallest foundations each day.

Often starting from their personal and professional experiences in the field, several young Italian researchers have analyzed and taken into consideration the Italian reception system and its "grey areas" (Pendezzini 2013): from researches on experiences of asylum seekers within the system (Vacchiano 2011, Marchetti 2014a, Fontanari and Ambrosini 2018), up to investigation on narratives and imaginaries within daily practices (Beneduce 2008, Sorgono 2013, Mencacci 2013). Other research focuses on the intrinsic contradictions in reception and asylum policies (Sorgoni 2011a, Marchetti 2014b) and ambiguous practices between assistance and containment characterizing the reception system (Fabini et al. 2019). In the Italian literature, social work with foreign people (Barberis, Boccagni 2017) has often been examined in terms of power imbalances (Tarsia 2010, Salinaro 2018) or long-term integration results (Campomori 2018, Ambrosini 2017).

This research ties in with the reflections of these scholars and tries to analyze one of the least studied professional figures: the social workers for asylum seekers and refugees. They constitute a rising professional category in the Italian panorama and are both cause and consequence of the fragmented and incoherent Italian reception system. As I will explain through a brief historical excursus, social workers are mainly responsible for transforming the

long "limbo" of reception into an integration path, even without any specific indication on their final professional goals. The absence of established practices means social workers develop a new form of street-level bureaucracy. Street-level operators are crucial figures because they are responsible for managing that key moment in which rules are converted into concrete decisions to provide specific answers to individual cases. Here, we have an important nexus between a macro dimension related to the major changes affecting the welfare state, political decisions and regulatory policies and a micro dimension related to individual choices (Sarius, 2015).

Before presenting the empirical material on the role of Italian social workers as street-level bureaucrats, I first present the methodological framework, I then highlight the historical development of the reception system and how that works out concretely for social workers in local contexts, and finally, I clarify in what sense the immigration phenomena has become a local matter. This brief historical excursus is necessary to understand the professionalism of the social worker dealing with asylum seekers and refugees and to contextualize their activity at the street level. In Italy, reception and integration are completely left to the organizational responsibility of sub-state units, such as Regions, Autonomous Provinces or Municipalities (Terlizzi, 2020). Local policies and practices of reception and integration are a playing field where different actors come together with different values, interests and frames (Campomori and Ambrosini, 2020). Hence, the Italian politics of subsidiarity prioritizes the reception governance at the local level by local governments, NGOs, INGOs and other local actors. Therefore, due to the essentiality to contextualize local practices, this research is focusing on a specific case study: The Autonomous Province of Trento, Italy.

Through a (re)politicization of their 'margins of action', the research recognizes the effects of the structural violence of the system through processes of depersonalization and

infantilization, ambiguous and containment practices but also highlights the possibility of effective forms of resistance (Strier and Breshtling 2016) and daily struggle through the street-level margins of action of social workers. Analyzing the concept of structural violence, Paul Farmer speaks of a "violence exercised systematically and indirectly by anyone belonging to a certain social order" (2006, p. 21) towards someone else, underlining how - from an analytical point of view - structural violence is alimented by social mechanisms of oppression. One of the most important aspects of Farmer's discussion concerns its being both "structured and structuring" (*ibid*, p. 39): not only is violence the product of structure but, in turn, its structures and produces 'subjected' subjects.

This research adopts an analytic perspective towards a reception system that Italian new laws seek to dismantle. In recent decades, Italian governments, from Gentiloni-Minniti to Conte-Salvini, have implemented restrictive border management and a shrinking reception system. Starting from participant observation of the construction of hidden grammars of street-level bureaucracy, I aim to develop a new concept of resistance, not as a vindication of the past, but as a need to imagine a different way of managing immigration and of acting within the reception system. It is an attempt to de-construct the complexity of the reception system, addressing both its grain lines and its deepest hubs, focusing on biographical experiences and subjectivities at the centre, especially the ones of social workers.

The Italian reception system for asylum seekers: an ordinary emergency

The arrival of migrants has confronted the Italian society with critical challenges, as Italy perceived itself and was considered by most migrants as a transit country, a land to cross to reach other European destinations located further north (Hein, 2010). Therefore, Italy did not prioritize consistent legislation on asylum or specific reception measures. The result is that

each arrival is addressed as a specific and new emergency, putting organizational and institutional learning in poor focus.

In 2002, Italy instated the ordinary national reception system, namely, the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR/SIPROIMI[1]). However, after the North-Africa crisis and the Mare-Nostrum operation[2], Italy was forced to adopt a new extraordinary reception system: the Temporary Reception Centers (CAS).

The North Africa Emergency dramatically unveiled the lack of preparation of the Italian refugee reception system, including professional figures involved and legal instruments implemented. An emergency approach was also carried out through the Civil Protection. Neither the Italian government nor the European Commission took this unexpected situation as an opportunity to bring out a vision of the wider phenomenon, despite the international scenario left foreshadowing that the 'emergency' was not meant to be isolated (Campomori, 2016). The refugee crisis is undeniably shocking for its global dimension and repercussions, but, sadly, it is on a deeper and local dimension that it turned out to have concrete and negative effects (Ambrosini, 2011).

In Italy, the ferocious separation between the perception of immigration and the reality represented by statistical data nourishes the public debate and the rhetoric of populist parties. Even though irregular migration constitutes a minor part of the total immigrant population, it is the one most regulated by politics and spectacularized by the media (Giacomelli, Musarò

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[1] The Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SPRAR) was established by Law 189/2002. This system is financed by the Ministry for the Interior through the National Fund for Asylum Policy and Services. Its aim is to support and protect asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants who fall under other forms of humanitarian protection. One of the main characteristics of its nature is the voluntary participation of local institutions in the network of reception projects. In 2018, SPRAR was renamed the Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (SIPROIMI).

[2] The Mare Nostrum Operation was launched by the Italian Government on 18 October 2013, as a humanitarian and military operation aimed at tackling the humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean Sea, both by safeguarding human life at sea, and by bringing to justice human traffickers and migrant smugglers. The Operation was launched after the October 2013 Lampedusa migrant shipwreck. The Operation ended on 31 October 2014, coinciding with the start of the new operation called Triton.

and Parmiggiani 2020). Maurizio Ambrosini (2011) underlines how this distance has favoured the passage of migration issues from 'low politics' to 'high politics', fueling such emergency and security management. The so-called "migration crisis" marks a crucial juncture also in Italian politics. It is not a surprise that the 52nd report by the social and economic research institute CENSIS published in 2018 depicts an Italy suffering from fear of the future and of migrants launching the term "psychic sovereignism", meaning a generalized and sorrowful sense of the loss of national sovereignty, accompanied by an upsurge of fear of "the other", beginning with immigrants. As well as the 53rd edition (2019) shows that almost 7 out of every 10 Italians believe that hate, intolerance, and racism towards minorities in the country has risen over the past year.

This form of migration governance sees the 'Salvini decree'[3] of 2018 on security and immigration as the last piece of a longer historical-regulatory development marked by an emergency. The 'Salvini decree' renamed the SPRAR system into the Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (SIPROIMI). For this research, I am going to keep the acronyms SPRAR as it was the one applied during participant observation research at the field site.

In Italy, there is still no uniform reception system. The SPRAR (now SIPROIMI) and CAS systems do not coexist coherently. According to law no.142/2015 SPRAR was intended to become the only system for all asylum-seekers. In collaboration with NGOs and associations, local authorities, voluntarily, play a crucial role in the institution of a SPRAR project. The Italian Home Affairs Ministry encouraged the implementation of SPRAR, described "as a structured form to achieve a widespread reception, overcoming extraordinary solutions, and taking into account, at the same time, variegated local situations, avoiding imbalances and

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[3] Decree-Law no. 113 of 4 October 2018, enacted as Law no. 132 of 1 December 2018.

non-homogeneous distributions" (Ambrosini 2018, 116-117), but the lack of participation of local authorities led to a lack of reception facilities. The central government responded by creating a parallel system, the Centres of Extraordinary Reception [CAS], yet another emergency answer to a persistent and systematic structural phenomenon (Campomori and Ambrosini, 2020).

Due to a lack of cooperation and conflicts between national and local tiers, the actual implementation of the reception system revealed some crucial fragmentations and deficits. The participant observation also revealed the importance of activism of non-state actors, who can change the expected policy outcomes (Ambrosini, 2020), which in the implementation phase is crucial to keep in mind for the analytical framing of this research.

In this confusing scenario, where responsibilities are distributed across different levels from the European Union to municipalities, the possibility of adopting alternative if not contradictory strategies is high. The general lines of intervention in this field are established at the national level, while, due to decentralization, the effective management of social policies for immigrants is delegated to local authorities. Theoretically, reception centres should reinforce local services, to operate profit within the entire community. However, in reality, reception centres and local services are two lines of intervention that do not intertwine (Boccagni, 2017b).

Consequently, the living conditions of immigrants can change from one area to another, depending on the local socio-economic situation and the importance attributed to immigration issues by each local administration (Fiorucci, 2000; Caponio & Pavolini 2007). In this sense, it is useful to refer to what Zincone calls "localism of rights" (1994, p.15) meaning the Italian predisposition to a fragmented and jeopardized territorial system of rights. The 'local

variations' of the reception systems, in a country marked by historical, political and socio-economic differences (Pratt, 2006), have their implications in different aspects: firstly, the participation at the SPRAR system by local institutions in the network of reception projects is purely voluntary. Indeed, the insufficient expansion of SPRAR has been the origin of the chronic state of emergency and the proliferation of CAS, with low-quality integration programs.

Secondly, local authorities have the power to select third sector organizations to be involved within the reception system. They can choose the parameters, the training backgrounds, the professional experiences of social workers needed for NGOs to be involved in the reception system. Campomori (2007) underlines the importance of the process of *naming* and *framing* by local authorities. By selecting, attributing or removing a characteristic element of the phenomenon to be managed, they shape an interpretation of reality, which prepares the ground for street-level bureaucracy (Ambrosini, 2011).

Thirdly, street-level bureaucracy has a powerful role in the visibility/invisibility of immigration-related issues, therefore in the possibility to exclude/include it within the public discourse, to render secure/insecure a specific service, to create a positive/negative narrative about migration and reception systems. I further adopt a notion proposed by Zachary Whyte (2011). In evaluating the Dutch asylum system, he describes it through the concept of my option derived from Foucault's well-known panopticon (1977), which is a form of power based on uncertainty. The optical power of the reception system fuels the structural violence described above.

The role of 'street-level practices' emerges here, through social workers who interact with asylum seekers and have margins of discretion, in considering a request to be admissible or not, is helping or not filling out an application, in facilitating or not access to a service.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, comprising two years of immersive field research, with diary field notes and 55 semi-structured interviews with social workers, and two focus groups with asylum seekers and holders of international protection.

I started working at the reception centre for asylum seekers and refugees during summer 2016. This research project began months after the beginning of my work experience as a social worker. The research questions developed directly in the field through participant observation. Inside the Association Centro Astalli Trento, I worked as a social worker, specifically in the Valsugana area. I was actively employed within a team of four social workers and we met every week, on Monday mornings. I mainly worked with vulnerable groups, such as women travelling alone, mono-parental families and young adults (18-25 years old).

The first and most urgent issue with which I had to confront was my multiple positionalities in the research field, both as a social worker and as a researcher. Direct involvement with the studied community helped me in many aspects of the research. First of all, my active employment as a social worker facilitated the selection of interviewees. The participation in semi-structured interviews was voluntary. The interviews were conducted between September and December 2017, in the final phase of my access to the field of research as a social worker. Table 1 shows the list of participants divided by duties they had within the reception system in the Autonomous Province of Trento. The number was quantitatively and qualitatively relevant: 55 people decided to participate.

Tab.1 Interviewees

Social workers	37
Legal operators	5
Integration and Education workers	5
Coordinators	4
Psychologists	3
Others	1
Total:	55
	Source: Personal elaboration

To maintain analytical distance and to "suspend values" (Weber, 2001) from the subject of the research field, I adopted different strategies: firstly, I kept a daily field diary; secondly, I conducted interviews in non-working spaces; thirdly, I used different emails address, one for work matter and one from research purposes; fourthly, I left the field immediately after I collected the research material; lastly, during the duration of my fieldwork, I kept a careful analysis of the macro context so as not to be overwhelmed by everyday life and to then be able to consciously and without value analyze the daily micro-activities. Having no evaluative optics, the participant observation undertaken is linked to the sequential and learning structure of the practices of the actors involved. I used semi-structured interviews to collect demographic and socioeconomic information of interviewees as well as reflections of their everyday actions, perceptions and decisions. The interviews were enriched with two focus groups with holders of international protection of eight participants each from Western African countries. These participants have left the reception centres and therefore they are supposedly free from power relations between social workers and asylum seekers within the

system. Focus groups have been a useful tool to understand the motivations, which underlie perceptions and opinions regarding social workers working with them, as well as to identify, through comparison and discussion, the everyday actions and work. Thanks to focusing group discussions, participants were able to open up more, as the group touched on general and non-personal issues. These discussions mainly identified ideas, perceptions, discrepancies, and general possibilities offered by social workers to asylum seekers within the reception system.

The participation, both in semi-structured interviews and in focus groups, was voluntary, their identity has been protected, and they could withdraw at any time. The participants were informed through an information sheet, which explained the project, what their participation might involve, and how it might contribute to the research. Being actively involved during my field research, the purpose was to work 'with' the community of social workers with asylum seekers and refugees and not 'on' them (Johnston 2010: 235). As mentioned above, the Italian reception system is characterized by distances and leaps between 'law in the book' and 'law in action (Fabini, Tabar & Vianello, 2019). Hence, participant observation in this field tries to bridge the gap between real policies and written policies.

Who are the social workers for asylum seekers and refugees?

The social worker for asylum seekers is a new professional figure in the Italian panorama, who is asked to develop the required skills starting from field knowledge. Although more and more professional roles are needed to cope with the demands, specific details and characteristics of each profile are still blurred (Campomori, 2018). The participant observation confirmed that neither are they recruited based on a clear set of skills and professional competencies nor did they receive clear-cut rules for their local work. Instead, they have to learn within their team how to challenge the relational tasks they often meet,

what makes their action "good", which project and requests have to be addressed, which institutional or social actors they should engage with, and so on.

In the Autonomous Province of Trento, the average age of the social workers interviewed is 30 years old. Most of the interviewees have a degree in humanities, with a few exceptions with paths within economic or artistic subjects. Hence, interviewees appeared as culturally "equipped", with a little knowledge on social and multicultural approaches, useful for the professionalism undertaken.

Due to the different layers of fragmentation, local networks, professional, economic and structural available resources, welfare tools and social policy strategies, social workers significantly influence the experience of being an asylum seeker in Italy. Participants in the focus groups confirmed how the presence and perceptions of social workers are a fundamental element in formatting the expectations and attitudes of migrants.

Indeed, as came out from focus groups, social workers are often the lens asylum seekers use to have the first understanding and orient themselves into the new local reality. As defined by social workers themself during the interviews, they operate in the interstice, considering themselves as an "'in-between' professional"[4]: 'in-between' the political mandate and his/her daily actions: 'in-between' asylum seekers and public services (employment agencies, hospitals, schools or universities); 'in-between' asylum seekers and political bodies; 'in-between' asylum seekers and other professionals (legal operators, psychologists, doctors); 'in-between' asylum seekers and other asylum seekers; and 'in-between' asylum seekers and local communities. In line with this, participants in the focus groups defined social workers as either a 'bridge' or a 'wall' for their integration path in the welcoming community.

To minimize the power imbalance that marks the relationship between social workers and asylum seekers, social workers need to realize their role and professional *habitus* (Bourdieu,

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[4] Interview with a CAS social worker. Date: 14th Oct. 2017, Trento, Italy.

1977:175) within the reception system. Such awareness can be induced by many factors, such as the social worker's personal history or personality or the mission and purposes of the local governments, NGOs, INGOs and other local actors.

In the interviews, the recurring trope that has emerged most distinctly is the perceived tension between the institutional mandate and the socio-contextual one. The main discrepancy refers to the institutional mandate assigned by the public body, centred on the accomplishment of technical-bureaucratic tasks, and the socio-educational project to which the single social worker is called to answer in the reception facilities. As pointed out before, the Italian political interpretation of migration as a 'public-security problem' helps to frame the institutional mandate of this new profession. In many interviews, terms such as 'controller', 'supervisor', and 'policeman' were associated with the institutional mandate. Social workers often find themselves in a position of performing public security roles, concerning the control of movements of migrants on the territory, the monitoring of their activities or the supervision of their houses.

On the other hand, the socio-contextual mandate refers to a more individual and subjective feature of the work itself. It can be linked to a fiduciary dimension, which comes into play especially in conditions of poorly structured professionalism. Carole Smith's claims that in social works trust in the impersonal efficiency of the service system currently prevails (Smith, 2002). In the case of social workers for asylum seekers, we can affirm the exact opposite: due to the inefficiency, fragmentation and poor structuring of the reception system, direct interpersonal trust between the actors (social workers, migrants, indigenous communities, local services) not only prevail but also can be considered as indispensable.

The analysis of interviews confirmed and followed the work of Saruis (2013), who divided discretion into three categories:s: firstly, as in the exercise of responsibility provided by the

legislation itself to allow its adaptation to particular cases, selecting the most appropriate option from the ones provided; secondly as interpretation and construction of legislation to fill gaps, inaccuracies and inconsistencies; and thirdly as a violation of the legislation, which derives from the impossibility of total control of the implementation phase.

In the Italian reception system, where the disconnection between 'declared policies' (law in books) and 'practised ones' (law in action) is, at times, excessive, discretionally stands on a fundamental characteristic for social workers. As pointed out by an interviewee: "There are some common denominators, but there is still a lot of room for improvisation". The interview points out how the key concepts of discretion are still lacking a general interpretation. As underlined by a social worker during the interview:

"[...] We were forced to learn from the field, because the situation requires much rapid everyday learning and needs, above all, a capacity for self-management in a very fast way and to learn by watching"[5].

The respondent explicitly reports the effects of the "emergency management" of migration into their daily practices as cause and consequences of their overload of work (much rapid everyday learning) and their great directionality (self-management).

The sharp contrast between the demands for efficiency of street-level procedures and the discretionary practices developed in the concrete interactions between social workers and asylum seekers and refugees, reveals that new forms of street-level bureaucracy are being defined. Discretionary is a key factor of their everyday actions, as social workers are not only required to apply an established framework and body of knowledge but also to provide individualised services (van der Aa and van Berkel, 2015). The discretionary power is produced both by macro/national factors, such as the emergency management of

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[5] Interview with a CAS social worker. Date: 11th Nov. 2017, Trento, Italy.

immigration, the fragmented and unsure reception system, the little exchange of knowledge between association, and micro/local factors, such as the heterogeneity of associations within the local reception systems, the education and formation of the single social workers and the local administration.

The social workers as street-level bureaucrats and *de facto* policymakers

The local-level bureaucracy acts as a container of micro-interactions between subjects with different interests and roles (Hill & Varone, 2017). Placed inside the official boundaries of the local authorities and the intrinsic distortions of the reception systems (Riccio, 2016), the social worker has to leverage daily strategies to give a shared meaning to his/her work. Social workers, as subjects capable of 'agency' (Folgheraiter, 2011), invest time and intentionality in actions of *sense-making* and *enactment* (Weick, 1993; 1997) in their position 'in-between', as described above.

Codes of the condition within social services are often not clear on how to put them into practice.

As mentioned above, social workers with asylum seekers and refugees are invested in the "moral entrepreneur" role (Becher, 1963). From the analysis of notes in the field diary, moments of "moral distress", when social workers are unable to work following their personal and/or professional values and ethics, happen when the gap between what is possible and what is ideal becomes unsustainable.

In some cases, discretion prevails as a way to build clients' trust by acting in their interest. In other cases, the propensity of social workers to re-elaborate their prejudices takes on particular significance. In Trentino, social workers themselves play a role with regards to building "moral careers" and reproducing the social stigmas of their clients. Bearing in mind their professional *habitus*, it is necessary that social workers have the time and the possibility

to re-work on their - often - unrecognized prejudices, to be able to free their daily practices through their deconstruction.

Once again, the social worker becomes a profession in the middle, a frontier between prejudices of migrants towards the host country and, vice versa, of society towards new arrivals.

Moreover, they can elaborate strategies to face work stress and avoid burn-out, especially when they have to identify what is the 'best choice along with a temporality that they can neither measure nor foresee, due to the many exceptions or possible paths (legal, housing, training, work) of asylum seekers. Their agency space is characterized by 'playing' with an interaction order whose frames can suddenly change, demanding both professional flexibility and discretionary power to elaborate new rules.

The social worker as 'node' of the network, with his/her actions, can succeed in giving new impetus to the resilience of individuals and the community, as well as to the renewal of the social capital. As underlined in an interview:

> "The beauty and difficulty of this work are that we are sensitizing and bridging newcomers and local communities in our everyday life. Ours is a remarkable awareness-raising daily-job because we have to deal with neighbourhoods, hospitals, employment agencies and so on."[6]

Social workers have a political weight as each of them is a social actor, and as such are bearers of values and meanings: they are today, 'leaders of processes of social changes'. Their position 'in-between' gives them a wide margin of action both in accompanying local communities towards a conscious and responsible transition to a multicultural and respectful

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[6] Interview with a CAS social worker. Date: 10th Oct. 2017, Trento, Italy.

community and in helping asylum seekers towards within their paths of empowerment and autonomy in the welcoming territory.

Despite their everyday practice and their margins of action, this new professional figure is developing an intrinsic political weight, adjusting some social inequalities and some distortions of the reception system itself. From an interview with a social worker of the Association Centro Astrally Trento:

> "Discourses of racism, xenophobia and hate speech have been on the rise, in Italy, leading to an anthropological change of our daily lives. I believe that we need fresh and different ways to narrate about migration, to deepen into the complexity and the beauty of this phenomenon. As social workers working with and within this complexity, it is important to 'take a stand', in order not to remain neutral observers of a collective involutional change"[7].

In this sense, a 'politically neutral' social worker is unthinkable and unimaginable. The respondents themselves underline how being part of the complexity of the reception system does not allow for a neutral position within the migration debate. They promote political awareness for communities, to practice resistance on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees by managing their discretion to push for individual services or to influence and change political decision-makers rather than blindly following procedure and policy.

In many interviews, social workers perceive themselves as promoters of awareness, knowledge and resistance 'against', but also form the 'inside' of a system within which they do not feel represented. As pointed out by an interviewee, "we need to actively engage people from outside the system of reception. We need to exit this "bubble"[8] around services for asylum seekers and refugees".

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[7] Interview with a CAS social worker. Date: 13th Nov. 2017, Trento, Italy.
[8] Interview with a CAS social worker. Date: 10th Oct. 2017, Trento, Italy.

"Grammars of action" within the Italian reception system

The research draws from the study of Cyril Lemieux on journalists' practices in respect (or not) of their professional ethics. Lemieux identifies three 'grammars of action', understood as 'sets of practical rules' that professionals feel internally obliged to respect according differently to specific situations (Lemieux, 2009, pp. 193-194). Within these interstices of discretion, we can observe how social workers still reproduced interior politically oriented 'grammars of action'. In this sense, the margins of action offered by the reception system become spaces in which social workers can reproduce their politically oriented 'grammars of action', becoming not only street-level bureaucrats but also *de facto* policymakers. Social workers turn into subjects able to implement and renovate social policies less (or more) conservative from the status quo. The situated nature of the case studies concedes the possibility to examine the interaction of multiple factors. As already mentioned, these discretionary decisions, as for other street-level bureaucrats, are possible as a result of their substantial margins of action.

The case analyzed during the fieldwork concerns asylum seekers' absences from mandatory Italian classes. This case shows the sets of practical rules that social workers for asylum seekers and refugees feel interiorly obliged to apply.

The Italian regulations provide for an economic sanction if the absence of the asylum seekers from Italian lessons is not justified for health or work reasons. If the social workers were to strictly apply the rules, the number of daily penalties would be very high. However, many are cases of unjustified absences to which social workers arbitrarily decide not to apply a penalty. In these cases, more than a sanctioning role, social workers decide to assign themselves a 'comprehensive grammar of action', as an understanding concerning subjectivity or a

'subversive grammar of action' as a resilient action against the European immigration system.

I have identified two 'grammars of actions' which social workers have been implicitly following, explained by two examples. The first one, connected with the 'comprehensive grammar of action', is based on my participant observation. The territorial morphology of the Province of Trento is composed of mountains and isolated valleys (Battisti, 2005). As the Italian classes for asylum seekers are conducted daily in the city centre of Trento, asylum seekers living in the valleys would spend from two to four hours a day in public transportation. In these cases, social workers prefer to find volunteers in the valleys available to give Italian lessons to asylum seekers twice a week. They find it more useful to let the asylum seekers learn Italian within their local community. With this discretionary decision, they implicitly value the importance of waving bonds and forging links in the local valley between migrants and natives and the need to prioritize the individual requests of asylum seekers over the strict administrative rules and laws. They decided to adopt an empathic and non-judgmental stance in contrast to the punitive system in which their work is situated.

The second example concerns the 'subversive grammar of action'. The interviewee pointed out how, although the asylum seeker was skipping Italian lessons daily, he decided not to economically punish him. This decision, he explained, was made after a long and profound discussion between the two, in which the asylum seeker confided to him that his migratory project was not to remain in Italy but to be reunited with his brother in France. The young man, therefore, found it useless to learn Italian as he knew that one day, in one way or another, he would succeed in crossing into France from the Italian border town of Ventimiglia. In this context and with the full awareness of the structural constraints of this type of a decision, the social worker has discretionarily decided not to declare the young man's plans or school absences. Both social workers and migrants have been going against

the 'containment through mobility' (Tazziano, 2018) strategy the European countries are applying.

When social workers exercise discretion, 'their resulting actions and decisions may be contradictory to the original policy aims' (Kriz and Skivenes, 2014: 71). Therefore, as they found it implicitly unfair that migration movements are obstructed in their autonomy not only through constant surveillance, nor by generating immobility and conditions of 'limbos' within the reception programs, but also through administrative, political and legal measures that prevent second migration movement within the European countries. The porosity of European internal borders is both a cause and a consequence of these forms of resistance and political claims of both social workers and asylum seekers, although with differences in modality and intensity.

These two examples highlight forms of resilient cooperation and political struggles by both single individuals and collectives, against oppressive strategies of regulation and control inside the reception system. In Italy, social workers play a major subversive role with repercussions on the daily lives of asylum seekers and refugees and the host community. These disobedient forms of resistance have become intrinsic grammars of action of the everyday routine of social workers.

Both 'comprehensive' and 'subversive' grammars of action give asylum seekers the chance to become "active subjects" and not only "passive objects" of their migratory projects (Ambrosini, 2011). They can be applied to many other situations, such as the evaluation of the destitution from the reception programs; the discretionary decision on reporting inconsistencies with the rules; the integration initiatives often undertaken in extra-working hours. These examples give an insight into complex socio-political processes, in which social workers are participating as facilitators of daily subversive struggles of migrants against a

repressive and coercive system. The implicit grammars of action lie in the feeling of considering the system as illegitimate.

In this sense, social workers can be considered as 'facilitators of socio-political processes' not only in regards to their position 'in-between' but also thanks to their discretional grammars of action in their everyday decisions, which help and promote a subversion from the 'inside' of the reception system. Informal exchange among the local community of practices can occur especially in informal spaces such as lunch break, meeting of socio-political movements, hallways, extra-work time and so on. It is in these places where the process of learning the interior grammars of action occurs. Broad discretionary powers of social workers challenge the national and local paths of administrative and organizational actions, triggering policies change from below.

Conclusion

During two years working in a Temporary Reception Center (CAS), run by the Association Centro Astalli in the Autonomous Province of Trento, I was able to observe how the different practices, actions, ideas and roles of various social workers significantly influenced and shaped the experiences and paths of the asylum seekers benefiting from the reception program.

The professional dilemmas presented above are typical of the everyday life and practice of social workers. In these cases, they reject the range of options institutionally offered to them, seeking alternatives, on behalf of their clients, of the systems in which they work. Bearing in mind the analytical category of 'grammars of actions', the research provides an example of the specific role of social workers as *de facto* policymakers. They become street-level bureaucrats and *de facto* policy-makers to push back against a system they consider unjust.

The politics of subsidiarity allows social workers to apply various mechanisms of resilience ranging from creative and subversive behaviour.

Aware of the uniqueness of stories and needs of their clients, well-informed social workers identify what is wrong in the reception system and what is missing in their range of practices, and invent and create possible alternatives, sometimes against the system itself. In this context, the moral entrepreneurship of social workers constitutes an element of policy provision and "a space for creating social change" (Shdaimah & McGarry 2018).

Recognising the (in)justice of reception and integration policies, that might harm people and conduct to the opposite of their inner purposes, social workers try to correct them with their everyday practices. The importance of maintaining political awareness helps the "reflective" social workers to correctly navigate within their margin of actions and to influence with a bottom-up approach the political decision-makers (Fook, 1996).

Through the (re)politicization of their margins of action, social workers use moral entrepreneurship to engage in micro-actions of resistance. Their everyday work is translated following their social values that might not be clear-cut into their institutional mandate, methods and practices. These actions also highlight the willingness to adjust from "inside" unfairness and contradictions of the reception system and policies. The moral and professional engagement of social workers comes from the recognition of gaps within the system, which can be "filled in" with street-level practices in favour of asylum seekers and refugees.

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