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Building boundaries in making policies. Exploring the local construction of migrants in multicultural Italy

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**Building boundaries in making policies. Exploring  
the local construction of migrants in multicultural  
Italy**

**Federica Tarabusi**

# Building boundaries in making policies. Exploring the local construction of migrants in multicultural Italy

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## ABSTRACT

The paper provides ethnographic insight into the social construction of migrants by examining the everyday working of the reception system in one of Italy's regions that is most advanced in terms of multicultural policies. Focusing on migrants' encounters with the professionals employed in two social services, the article sheds new light on the multi-layered forms of discrimination that take place in a controversial arena in which institutions and policies operate at different levels. On one hand, I argue that the prevailing essentialized or racialized categorisation of 'foreign users' framed in the ambiguous context of Italian bureaucracy conveys a form of inequality that reflects the broader asymmetries between the state, local institutions and migrant minorities. On other hand, I explore the discretionary power different categories of workers exercise in their treatment of migrants, highlighting the central role local agencies and their staff play in building symbolic boundaries in Italian society.

## Introduction

This article adopts an anthropological perspective to explore the social construction of migrants through the lens of local reception policies (generally referred to as *accoglienza* in Italy) implemented in the Emilia Romagna region (northern Italy).

Building on recent forays of anthropological inquiry into multiculturalism, this paper seeks to pave the way for a new understanding of the ways Italian society has positioned itself in relation to ethnic and cultural difference (Grillo and Pratt 2002), by investigating the everyday working of institutions and professionals engaged in migrant inclusion.

Against the grain of prevailing ideological-normative notions of multiculturalism, anthropological literature has long problematised this concept by pointing out its highly ambiguous and polysemic character (Wieviorka 1998; Prato 2009). In this regard, multiculturalism has been conceptualised as an analytical perspective for examining the everyday processes through which social boundaries are drawn and redrawn between individuals and groups in the specific local arena (Baumann 1999). Scholars have argued that we must engage with an empirical terrain in order to capture the lived experience of everyday multiculturalism (Amit-Talai 1995; Wise and Velayutham 2009), situated in specific local socio-cultural and historical contexts, and the practices through



which ethnic diversity is experienced, challenged and negotiated among various groups (Neal et al. 2013).

Furthermore, the analysis of multiculturalism has recently been enriched by ethnographic investigations of various 'policy worlds' (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011) aimed at uncovering the processes and devices through which international organisations and local governments formulate symbolic worlds, classify individuals as 'citizens', 'users', 'deviant' or 'sick' and define the norms and values that shape the various spheres of individual and collective life. This body of research takes on the challenges and opportunities of 'studying through'<sup>1</sup> (Wright and Reinhold 2011) to approach policies as a fruitful lens for observing discursive coalitions and articulations of power among different institutional actors. In so doing, scholars are able to gain insight into the ways 'taken-for-granted assumptions channel policy debates in certain directions, inform the dominant ways policy problems are identified, enable particular classifications of target groups, and legitimize certain policy solutions while marginalising others' (Wedel et al. 2005, 34).

Within this background, a vital area of investigation that integrates anthropological field research with policy interest and analysis has emerged in recent years (Baba 2013; Haines 2013). In addition to looking at the state as a central political actor, many empirical studies have been enriched by a focus on a larger 'policy nexus' (Baba 2013) including other non-state institutional actors that shape patterns of migrant inclusion/exclusion. The interconnected web of policies and services for migrants has thus increasingly become a flourishing area of anthropological investigation. In Italy, however, ethnographic works continue to focus more on the vulnerable subjectivities of migrants than on the mechanisms comprising the social life of the 'industry of multiculturalism' (Grillo 2002) and individuals' everyday encounters with social services in specific institutional settings.

Employing an ethnographic perspective, this article seeks to address this critical knowledge gap by exploring the daily working of the reception system in one of the Italian regions that is most advanced in terms of social policies. As an evolving and fractured society, Italy has been characterised by a fragmented policy framework. As I will show in the following section, group recognition has been understood and framed in different policymaking contexts (Caponio 2005), shaping discriminatory pattern of incorporation and exclusion of ethnic minorities within the broader reception system. In addition, over time the Italian way (*via Italiana*) of promoting a myriad of multicultural agenda have been shaped by historical differences between local contexts in terms of cultural, political and economic resources (Pratt 2002).

In conversation with international debate, this article builds on a body of studies highlighting the gap between official policies and their implementation and recognising the central role lower-level workers play in making policy. This literature is deeply indebted to authors such as Lipsky (1980) whose 1980s publications described how professionals selectively apply laws and translate formal objectives into context-dependent solutions. In the wake of landmark studies such as this, scholars have developed a line of inquiry examining official policies in terms of the concrete processes through which they are transformed into local-level practices.

Extensively analysed in research on social services, more recently these ideas have been applied to the field of policies for integrating migrants as well, such as Phillimore (2012) did in reference to the UK. In this work, scholars have examined the processes that come

into play to exclude (illegal) immigrants from welfare provisions. Björngren-Cuadra and Staaf (2012), for example, explore the divergent encounters between public social service agencies and irregular migrants in Sweden, while Joanne Van der Leun's study (2003) highlights the controversial effects of policies for curbing illegal migration implemented in various welfare fields (health, housing, education) in the Netherlands. These papers highlight how, as a result of contradictory institutional demands and legal ambiguities, street-level workers face both professional dilemmas and discretionary autonomy, thereby leading to variation in the treatment of migrants. In so doing, they overcome the limits of literature examining the official side of politics from a top-down perspective, in which migration flows are conceptualised as the responsibility of the central state. By paying attention to the experiences of street-level workers, these recent studies instead engage in a bottom-up exploration of the contradictions that develop in the 'institutional complex' (Grillo 1985) of procedures, discourses and actors involved in concretely implementing policy in a given area.

Although they do reveal points of similarity at the international level, the empirical data presented in these studies must be understood in relation to specific national and local traditions, the contexts in which local social policies have developed over time in relation to migration flows. For example, Barberis and Boccagni (2014) have shown that in Italy, where once-recent migration has evolved to the point of becoming multi-layered and dynamic, the barriers undermining migrants' access to 'blurred rights' must be understood in relation to the specificity of the residual, provisional welfare system characterising the '*bel paese*'.

Moving beyond a formal view of policies, these studies contribute to an understanding of the making and unmaking of boundaries. The everyday life of policy is revealed as a productive terrain for exploring how symbolic boundaries – conceived as produced by the interpretative categories social actors implement to categorise objects, people, practices – articulate with social boundaries, understood as 'objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). For example, these studies highlight the ways in which specific worldviews, classification systems and institutional taxonomies may influence patterns of social exclusion or ethnic and racial discrimination; they examine the porous nature of the symbolic boundaries that social workers and migrants/asylum seekers construct in each case depending on the social situation; and they aid in understanding the factors driving actors to adopt certain strategies of ethnic and cultural boundary making (and unmaking) rather than others (Wimmer 2008).

In conversation with this burgeoning literature, the article explores the processes through which migrants' subjectivities are socially constructed and their rights denied, granted and negotiated in engagement with a set of social services considered pioneering in multicultural Italy. Focusing on foreign nationals' encounters with the staff employed in two social services, I argue that, against the background of inclusive agendas, multi-layered forms of discrimination end up being produced within a controversial arena made up of institutions and policies operating at different levels.

On one hand, I reveal the power institutional classifications exercise in delineating symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them' through moral categories that ethnicize and racialize foreign users, thereby helping to naturalise an unequal distribution of public

resources. On the other hand, I approach *accoglienza* as a fluctuating and ambivalent space in which institutions and their staff are powerful social actors with a great deal of influence over the making of policies. To this end I explore the repercussions of ambiguous political agendas, alternating between ethnocentric and paternalistic logics, on the discretionary autonomy of social workers. What I find is that different categories of workers, with different degrees of professionalisation, interact with migrants and include/exclude them on different grounds.

Even while emphasising the agency of all actors, the fieldwork shows that operators have trouble recognising differences within the unstable institutional contexts in which they operate, groaning under the weight of bureaucratic pressures. As a result, they risk rendering services complicit in reproducing a system that exacerbates the marginalisation of migrants in Italian society.

The article is organised as follows. The first section briefly describes the political, institutional and demographic context of Emilia-Romagna, while the second section is focused on framing the ethnographic research that produced the empirical material presented and discussed in the following sections. I conclude by considering this fieldwork as an opportunity to enrich our understanding of the hidden mechanisms through which migrants are incorporated into Italian society.

## Local reception policies in multicultural Emilia-Romagna

In the 1990s, Italy launched a process of administrative decentralisation that culminated in a nearly complete political devolution of power to the regions; with the 2001 reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution, regions were granted control over social policies including the integration of migrants (Campomori and Caponio 2017). While the first two Italian immigration laws, ratified in 1986 and 1990, delegated authority to sub-state levels of government, the 1998 law passed by a centre-right coalition clearly made regions responsible for managing migration phenomenon. They were allocated specific funds for immigrant integration measures (about EUR34 million annually) and asked to collaborate with civil society organisations in formulating and implementing programmes.

In the mid-2000s, however, the national government sought to recover some influence over immigrant integration, and these efforts led to conflicts between national and regional policies.

Emilia-Romagna is an illustrative example of these policy clashes. In 2004, the government called into question the constitutionality of regional law no. 5 of March 24, 'Rules for the social integration of foreign immigrant citizens' (*Norme per l'integrazione sociale dei cittadini stranieri immigrati*), the first of its kind to be developed in Italy following the Title V reform. Modelled specifically after European conventions, this regional law was designed to move beyond local policies of the past based on an 'emergency-response' logic that had framed migrants as nothing more than a workforce to be integrated into the labour market. At the same time, it also took a critical position against the multicultural rhetoric of the state according to which migrants are temporary guests rather than the bearers of rights. As such, this law became a battleground between the region and the state, with the struggle only coming to an end when the Constitutional Court handed down a judgement rejecting the appeal filed by the President of the Council of



Ministers. Disregarding the guidelines set out by the national government, regional policies endeavoured to implement this law over the following years. A series of initiatives were launched to expand citizenship rights, including activities of intercultural mediation, information desks and campaigns against ethnic discrimination. Moreover, following the Libyan political crisis the numbers of refugees arriving on the southern Italian coast by boat increased dramatically, and this also led Emilia-Romagna, together with other regions, to invest more heavily in implementing asylum policies as evidenced by the growth of the SPRAR (*Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati*, Protection system for asylum seekers and refugees) network.

The regional legislation is an emblematic expression of the progressive approach that has historically characterised the social policies of Emilia Romagna, attracting migratory flows. Together with the employment opportunities due to a local labour market characterised by small and medium-sized businesses, the peculiar political culture has long made the region a particularly attractive destination for migrants from both southern Italy and abroad.

Although numbers have fallen slightly from previous years, Emilia Romagna is still the Italian region with the highest proportion of foreign residents out of the total resident population. According to Regional Observatory on Migration data (Osservatorio regionale sul fenomeno migratorio 2013), at present more than one resident out of 10 is a foreigner (as of 1 January 2017 there were 531,028 foreigners, amounting to 11.9 % of the total resident population, as compared to the national average of approximately 8.3%). Despite some differences between provinces, migrants are now found everywhere in the region and are distributed throughout the area (hill areas, mountains, lowlands, countryside, urban centres and rural areas). While it should be noted that over 170 countries are represented in the region, proof of the highly heterogeneous and varied origins of foreigners living here, the largest group is the Romanian community (16.7% of total foreign citizens), which grew considerably following Romania's entry into the European Union in 2007, followed by Moroccans (11.6%) and Albanians (11%).

At any rate, the socio-demographic profile of the population shows that migration has long represented not a temporary phenomenon but a structural part of the local landscape. Indeed, an increasing number of foreign citizens have acquired Italian citizenship in the last decade (from 1153 in 2002 to over 25,200 in 2016) and there are large numbers of non-citizen minors (comprising 16.1% of all minors in 2017), most of whom were born in Emilia Romagna (in 2016, almost one fifth of all births for the year were non-citizens).

As several studies have confirmed, inclusive regional policies were a decisive factor in generating the shift from migration by individuals to the presence of family units. Comparing some regions of northern Italy, Campomori and Caponio (2017) have highlighted that, unlike areas such as Lombardy with its hierarchical tradition of keeping the public and non-public sectors separate and long-standing anti-immigration party, Emilia-Romagna has built its local political culture on a 'participatory model' in which civil society actors not only implement public policy but engage as substantive stakeholders in formulating and implementing policies. A specific relationship has developed among the public sector, private social services sector and civil society over time and this relationship has had an enduring impact on the region. In Bologna, for example, a stronghold of the left, the government began to invest heavily in policies for inclusion as early as the 1960s and 70s. In that period, in fact, the Communist city administrations launched

programmes to build public housing (Però 2007) for immigrants from southern Italy and international migration appeared on the agenda of the municipal administration as early as the 1990s, long before other Italian cities. The city began to offer special services for migrant families and special centres for foreign women; the first migrant associations were established along with services providing information and legal advice, and agreements were signed between various public administration actors, trade unions, lay associations and Catholic institutions (Caponio 2005).

However, despite the efforts of local authorities to pursue integration policies, empirical studies have revealed a less rosy picture.

On one hand, for several years now the region's population has been declining and its economy shifting, giving rise to forms of marginalisation and structuring the labour market more and more along ethnic lines. As a result, migrants are increasingly employed in specific sectors (such as home care) and in flexible, underpaid positions. On the other hand, ethnographic works have emphasised a clear discrepancy between the region's progressive rhetoric of inclusion, supported by ideal assertions of justice and equity, and the multiple practices of exclusion arising from fields of migrant political participation (Però 2007) and social citizenship. Exploring Italian-style multiculturalism, for instance, studies have highlighted the fact that frameworks of inequality disadvantaging foreign residents end up being (re)produced even in the context of inclusive agendas (see Salih 2002; Tarabusi 2014).

Despite the region's considerable efforts in terms of social policies, the institutional range of organisations and agenda has also come under criticism.

As Riccio (2010) has rightly noted, the specific morphology of migration in Italy makes it difficult to construct overarching strategies of social intervention. First, in the context of post-industrial immigration, migratory flows are highly fragmented, with heterogeneous and relatively small ethnic groups trying to carve out spaces for themselves in a severely segmented labour market (Colombo and Giuseppe 2004). Moreover, multiple factors have affected the local dynamics of migration, including the country's unemployment crisis and contraction of the labour market, as well as the large numbers of asylum seekers and migrants entitled to humanitarian protection arriving unexpectedly in Italy. As of 1 January 2016, the number of work permits in the region was down from the previous year (compared to the last two years, a -31.4% decrease), while permits for asylum and humanitarian purposes increased dramatically (+46.2% compared to the previous year and +104.3 over the last three years). Nonetheless, although migration in Emilia-Romagna constitutes a structural phenomenon, there is an increasingly wide range of ways migrants arrive in Italy, weaving transnational ties between countries of origin and host societies that cut across national borders (Riccio 2002). The kind of stable migration and long-term settlement fostered by family reunification policies thus overlaps with a complex and heterogeneous range of experiences and migratory projects enacted by a high-turnover population of new arrivals.

## Fieldwork: studying through local policies

The empirical background of this paper derives from ethnographic research carried out from 2010 to 2013 with several social services designed to foster the inclusion of migrants in the Emilia-Romagna region.

Here, I focus specifically on two organisations that provide information and guidance in Emilia.<sup>2</sup> The first is a municipal information desk for foreign residents<sup>3</sup> that provides assistance with filling out forms and navigating the wider network of social, educational and health services. The second is an office of the local health authority in charge of facilitating both migrants' and Italian citizens' access to health care.

Although the services have different characteristics, migrants living in the city pass through both spaces in a continuous stream. On one hand, they constitute points of reference that migrants use to navigate the local reception system, characterised by a complex range of heterogeneous services, organisations, public or not public institutions. On the other hand, they aid migrants in engaging with the procedures required to request/renew residence permits, bring family members into the country and acquire citizenship (in the first case) or request health care, for example by enrolling in the national health system (in the second case).

In addition to an analysis of official materials<sup>4</sup> in which I approached policy documents as 'significant cultural texts' (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011), I conducted ethnographic observations of the two services for 11 months, supplemented by conversations with coordinators and 14 professionals working there. By spending time in these offices over time, I was also able to build relationships with about 12 migrant users and map the trajectories through which they engaged with the network of local services.

Neither the social workers nor the migrants constitute monolithic categories. On one hand, the office staff represent a variety of professional profiles, experiences accumulated in the field of migration, and employment contracts that bind them to these services. As I will show, their backgrounds, and specifically different degrees of professionalisation, have a significant effect on the relationship between migrants and the local social services system. On the other hand, the profiles of foreign nationals vary in terms of national origin, age, gender and migratory experience. What they do have in common is a precarious legal status caused by Italy's current legislation (the *Bossi-Fini* 2002 law) that requires applicants to hold a regular employment contract in order to qualify for a residence permit. Indeed, all the migrants involved in the research were caught in a state of liminality in which they might at any moment slide from regular to irregular (the transition from irregular to regular is more difficult).

It is not my intention here to present the entirety of the empirical material gleaned from this research, or to lay out the research results in the forms typically used to present the 'detailed' ethnographic study of a specific context. Rather, I build on an analysis of institutional practices (studying-up) by also employing investigative strategies designed to cut across the daily experiences of professional social workers operating there (studying-across) in order to capture the ways in which diversity is thought, experienced and negotiated within the local political arena.

### *Navigating Italian bureaucracy: migrants' ambiguous encounters with social services*

Idris,<sup>5</sup> a Congolese man who had been living in Italy for seven years, came to the information desk one day to request information about a health problem. A few days earlier, a fellow countryman had told him that he could still access health care even though his residence permit was expired. The desk worker Mario gave Idris a hasty overview of

the STP (*Straniero Temporaneamente Presente*, Temporarily Present Foreigner) card that allows people living in Italy to enrol in the national health service. He explained that the card has a limited duration (six months), but can be renewed and is valid until the procedures for obtaining a residence permit have been completed.<sup>6</sup> Perceiving a measure of dismay in Idris' expression, Mario added, 'Unfortunately it's up to you to request a residence permit as soon as possible ... it's not something we do, you understand?'. Contrary to the worker's assumption, Idris had already initiated the procedure to renew his permit quite a while ago. Every week, during his lunch break, he went to the *Questura*, the police station-immigration office, to find out how he might accelerate the process. In response, he was told to be patient: 'What is with this pressure? Obviously, if you let your permit expire you have to wait', said an official. 'It is the bureaucracy that decides! It is not up to us'.

With the map of local health services that Mario had given him, Idris then went to the regional health appointments help desk<sup>7</sup> where he and his wife used to go to book doctor's visits. On arriving, however, he discovered that he was not in the 'right place': 'there are specific offices for foreigners with expired permits. Here are the addresses and contact details of the offices around here. You're not in the right place, I'm sorry', a staff member told him. From there Idris embarked on a lengthy excursion through three other offices in the city, where he encountered practices that differed from office to office. In the waiting rooms of these offices, migrants circulated information through 'word of mouth'. In one of these informal exchanges, in rather ostentatious Italian, a woman from Cameroon explained to Idris that the various offices had different requirements (while office A required a residence permit and not a residence certificate, office B instead demanded that applicants provide a residence certificate and would not allow them to self-certify their address, unlike office C). The woman's account was confirmed by Idris' cousin, who suggested that he go to office B, because it was the one that asked for the 'least documentation'.

As Tuckett has shown, learning to navigate the ambiguous Italian bureaucratic system 'is a defining feature of what it means to be a migrant in Italy' (2015, 113); it is a skill individuals must have if they are to succeed in the system of the country. Through my fieldwork, I was able to grasp the strategies users enact to convince operators to facilitate procedures, such as the process of securing a health system card or bringing a relative into Italy. Just as with Idris, navigating the system entails using the resources and informal networks they have constructed in the host society to identify the best way of approaching and engaging with services. During the research, for example, I observed how foreign users tended to concentrate on the same set of offices to carry out certain procedures while carefully avoiding others.

Far from 'passive recipients' of bureaucratic practices (Tuckett 2018) and policy measures (Van der Leun 2003), migrants develop a number of 'shortcuts' to meet their needs. Their practices highlight how they are able to fluidly navigate their own forms of ethnic and cultural belonging in everyday interactions in order to negotiate symbolic boundaries and material resources. In many cases, this also includes making contextual use of their own difference. To draw on Baumann's arguments (1999), they exercised 'dual discursive competence' by bringing into play essentialist rhetoric or a processual theory of culture more strongly the more they exposed themselves to everyday multicultural practices (92). For example, migrants self-represented in different ways depending on the contexts and workers they encountered. In particular, I observed that some users

tended to present themselves in line with prevailing stereotypes – such as those framing migrants as needy victims – in order to encourage workers motivated by a certain ‘compassionate ethos’ (Fassin 2005) to exert themselves more. This was in distinct contrast with the behaviour the same individuals displayed outside of institutional spaces, in everyday life, where they instead sought to assert their agency and deconstruct common-sense essentialized ideas. In other words, as has been found in the field of asylum procedures (Sbriccoli and Jacoviello 2011), migrants seemed to search for the ‘right’ narrative to fit the normative expectations of Italian social services.

These incidents show how aware migrants were of workers’ professional discretion; tellingly, many noted that their experiences with social services depended in large part on the specific circumstances and workers they encountered. This created mistrust and confusion among migrants, showing even more clearly the divergent treatment foreign users received as opposed to Italian ones. At times this difference was visible even in apparently banal ways. An Albanian man who had been living in Italy for more than 10 years repeatedly stated that the local health authority workers tended to address Italian users with the polite third person form (*Lei*) but used an informal and sometimes impolite manner with foreigners. Indeed, when I was together with this man at an office one day and the worker addressed him as ‘sir’, the man was visibly surprised.

In other cases, my informants experienced bureaucratic encounters as all-pervasive and intrusive, thus exacerbating their perception of state institutions as a site of surveillance rather than possible assistance. An emblematic example is the experience of an Algerian mother who went to a help desk to inquire about enrolling her daughter in kindergarten. Although the woman spoke Italian well, she pretended her language skills were lacking in order to avoid answering a series of questions about her housing conditions and ties with her country of origin, questions which she considered ‘inappropriate’. On leaving the office, she told me she had left out several important details of her private life for fear that social services might be brought in to assess her parenting skills: ‘The lady asks if I am going back to Algeria with my child ... but what does that have to do with enrolling? Just because you’re a foreigner. They do not ask Italians where they are going on holiday’, she told me. For her part, the worker said she suspected that the woman had omitted facts or misrepresented her situation, adding that ‘these moms need to understand that, to give place to one child, the city has to that place away from another one’.

As these episodes show, migrants’ encounters with services take place within relations of power which not only render users particularly vulnerable but also reinforce their ‘suspicious’ stance in relation to the state and public institutions. Even more significantly, the cases described here show how migrants’ pursuit of public rights and benefits often ends up being translated, however unexpectedly, into an experience that reinforces their societal marginalisation. In the case of Idris, for example, interacting with a complex local network of institutions to obtain the medical examination he needed led to the consolidation of multi-layered discriminatory practices. The uncooperative approach of police personnel, tortuous Italian bureaucratic requirements, hastily delivered and incomplete information provided by desk workers, practices that varied from office to office reveal how the Italian bureaucratic regime contributes to the symbolic production of boundaries which are materially inscribed on people’s lives and their own bodies (Fassin 2001, 2011; Giordano 2014). His experience of being ‘bounced’ from one office to another, caused in part by the difficulty involved in decoding the set of languages and implicit rules provided by staff,

had dramatic consequences for his health. When he finally made it to the emergency room, he discovered that a trivial case of appendicitis had turned into severe peritonitis. The divergent practices migrants often encounter in local offices are not, therefore, necessarily the result of inadequacy or incompetence on the part of workers with ‘bad intentions’; rather, they stem from the ambiguous nature of bureaucratic processes, which as Tuckett notes, give rise to ‘uncertainty and indeterminacy for low-level bureaucrats and users’ rather than engendering transparency and consistency (2015, 114). For example, the ministerial regulations for issuing health cards have been interpreted in multiple different ways, thus generating heterogeneous and conflicting guidelines in the different offices as well as confusion and guilt among workers. Burdened by increasingly complex tasks not easily covered by existing laws, many operators have faced the ethical dilemma of choosing between circumventing the rules imposed by their office, risking their own jobs in the process, or acting in a way that disadvantages users, hindering their enjoyment of a right as fundamental as the right to health care. In view of this situation, many staff members were critical of bureaucracy and sought to develop ‘survival’ strategies to cope with the frustration of a job that no longer met their expectations. Anna’s account shows how, within this institutional chaotic framework, many operators play off the ambiguity of the rules to interpret them in the way most advantageous to immigrants:

When I started I thought I was going to do a useful job ... then, gradually, it is as if you end up overwhelmed by a thousand procedures that do not make much sense but you have to deal with them anyway. [...] With the release of the cards everything blew up ... it was chaos, we did not have clear guidelines. There were some practices in our office ... I’ll admit that I do not agree with these differences, but how are you supposed to go against them? You certainly cannot go losing your job ... let’s say, however, that you often turn a blind eye once in a while ... because you know that this bureaucracy is rampant. (Anna, local health authority office worker)

The profound dilemmas facing staff such as Anna often lead them to look for shortcuts so that they might apply the rules in a selective way. There may be some similarities with other European countries (see Van der Leun 2003; Björngren-Cuadra and Staaf 2012), but in Italy, I found that efforts to navigate bureaucracy went far beyond an occasional strategy workers might enact under certain circumstances. Rather, such efforts appeared to represent a structural element of their work, a skillset that defines their belonging to a specific professional sphere within the country’s chaotic policy regime:

You can only do your job if you are capable of dealing with the confusing tangle that is Italian bureaucracy. Sure, skills are needed. But that [capacity] is the thing that really makes you a good [social] worker. (worker at a social services help desk)

### *The shifting boundaries of professional discretion in constructing cultural ‘otherness’*

In this section I describe how social service workers interpret and exercise their discretionary autonomy, showing that these practices are not in the least homogeneous or predictable; on the contrary, in the chaotic bureaucratic setting described above, the choices they make depend on multi-level factors influencing their professional trajectories in a context of ongoing institutional and political change.

Over the course of the research, I observed a distinct difference between the practices of regularly employed public servants and precarious workers coming from the third sector, voluntary sector or trade unions who had been hired on a temporary basis by social cooperatives. Although both populations operate in the same professional context, they tend to display contrasting attitudes, with public employees identifying more closely with the demands of the institutions and precarious workers tending to identify more closely with user's needs.

In contrast to other studies,<sup>8</sup> my purpose in describing the differing attitudes of operators from the public and private sectors is not to analyse the strengths and weakness of different service providers, much less to reify them as examples of 'good' or 'bad' practices. Rather, I regard them as a productive terrain for grasping the ambivalent effects that apparently coherent local multicultural agendas actually exert on the professional activities of social workers and the exclusion/inclusion of migrants.

Indeed, these dynamics must be situated within the framework of the specific measures laid out by regional agendas. As mentioned earlier, over time the region has sought to overcome the idea of migrants as 'special' users in need of special initiatives and targeted services. At the time I carried out the research, this trend had influenced the way services were organised and what kind of professional profiles were prioritised in hiring workers for the municipal information desks where I did my fieldwork. It was decided to staff these desks with 'administrative staff' relocated from other local services (especially municipal offices such as the registry office) who had limited experience interacting with foreign nationals. Analysing the region's official documents, I found that this choice was driven by both economic considerations, namely cost-cutting and service productivity, as well as social representations according to which the most important expertise for personnel to have when working with migrants is a background in providing information and working with documents.

As a result of this choice, administrative professionals and third sector workers ended up playing the same role in the same service; in the period of my research, however, there were a number of pressing issues that had yet to be resolved.

First of all, both categories of workers expressed criticism of this change. On one hand, people from the volunteer and civic associationism sector complained that the city administrative workers had not received sufficient professional training or experience in the field of immigration; the latter, in turn, often perceived themselves as victims of a system that had 'offloaded' on them the burdensome responsibility of managing the multilayered needs of their clients.

Moreover, although there were social relations spanning this divide, it was clear that this top-down decision had generated defensive, if not outwardly conflicting, dynamics among co-workers. During the course of the research I often saw tensions arise between the different categories of workers, each with divergent visions of what their role should be. In particular, public employees were critical of what they saw as the ideological stance taken by some of their colleagues employed through social cooperatives, preferring instead a more 'neutral' view of their role:

Some time ago they got me to participate in an intercultural training, but I went against my will ... I understand that we are dealing with migrants and I do not deny that there are problems ... but it doesn't matter if the user in front of you is Egyptian, Chinese or Italian ... at a

certain point we only apply regulations ... our task is to interpret them, put them into practice ... and to do this we have to remain distant, to not get involved in a relationship with the user ... I mean, taking one side or the other – and just between us, many workers here do that

– does not seem to be professional, in my opinion. (Marco, city worker)

Even while recognising the ambiguity of regulations, municipal employees considered personal entanglements with users as indicating a lack of professionalism. They criticised the idea of workers ‘personalizing’ their relationships with users without adopting due professional distance from their problems and saw such an approach as clashing with the principle of formal equality implicit in the welfare system.

At the same time, however, my ethnographic observation did not find that city employees had less room to maneuver. Rather, it appeared that they tended to take shelter behind the letter of the law as an expedient for dealing with the difficulties and frustrations they experienced in interacting with cultural diversity. This abstract conception of their role effectively concealed arbitrary practices based on the construction of oppositions and hierarchical categorizations differentiating between Italian and migrant users and among different foreign nationals. Referring to a young Moroccan man with whom he had just interacted, Luciano, an employee at an information desk, explained to me at length how difficult it is to interact with ‘North African’ users:

You see how it is? There’s no point giving him this form ... because you already know that a subject like that will not bring it back ... They’re just here looking for money ... Yesterday a friend of his [meaning, a fellow countryman] came in saying he had accidentally left his permit at home and I thought: ‘Here is another one who pretends not to know that you have to be up to date with your documents to get a waiver’... [...] I’m not racist but, look, I have to do my job, and with these people [North Africans] it becomes an impossible task. (Luciano, information desk worker)

In this crowded office, the staff was called on to manage interactions with users in a climate of tension and irritability. This climate was clearly perceptible when you cross the threshold into the office waiting room: here, men and women of various nationalities (often with children in tow) were waiting their turn frustrated by the hour-long wait times and worker attitudes one Nigerian woman described as ‘not very helpful’. On the other side of the desk are the social service operators, wading through stacks of papers and trying to address the problems of subjects they often perceive as ‘unruly’ and manipulative.

As illustrated by this brief account, workers’ encounters with users seem to be shaped by discursive strategies that tend to ethnicize and racialize foreign users’ behaviour, casting them as culturally distant subjects who do not follow the rules or respect public resources (Ricci 2002). My empirical observations revealed how moral worldviews and languages are used contextually by the staff to draw social boundaries between ‘disciplined-deserving’ users and ‘undisciplined-undeserving’ ones. In settings plagued by mutual distrust, these discourses prevailed most often among workers who felt less equal to the task of meeting both the needs of migrants and institutional requirements. This sense of inability provided fertile ground for prevailing assumptions which cast migrants and asylum seekers as a threat to national and supranational identities in the Italian (Ambrosini 2013) and, more broadly, European imaginary (Grillo 2005; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; Giordano 2014).



Moving in the opposite direction, low-level workers from the third sector, voluntary sector or trade unions enacted strategies designed to identify ways to help migrants, interpreting opportunities for circumventing institutional constraints in providing services in a positive light. Franca, precariously employed with a social cooperative, looked at me with an air of complicity after a Moldovan woman returned to the counter with her husband's signature on a form. A few minutes earlier, Franca had asked the user to resubmit the form with the required signatures: 'Irina, it is missing your husband's signature ... see here? It is necessary for this procedure'. Franca already knew Irina. In the past, she had managed the process of family reunification to bring Irina's 9-year-old daughter into the country, although in the end Franca found out that something had gone wrong and the child had remained in Moldova. Shortly thereafter, Irina returned to the help desk because she had a problem with her employer who had promised to set her up with a regular employment contract but then gone back on his promises (which prevented her from obtaining a visa to return to Moldova). Franca told me that Irina had confided in her on several occasions and even broken down in tears, expressing the unbearable pain she felt on being so far from her daughter, left with grandparents back home. This feeling of loneliness was exacerbated when her husband had been forced to move to Como to avoid losing his job. Franca knew that Irina's husband was forced to reside outside Bologna for many months out of the year. Nonetheless, the fact that she identified emotionally with Irina's story led her to look the other way, pretending she did not know that Irina had faked her husband's signature on the document in his absence.

As this brief episode illustrates, workers' practices were often based on visions of their professional roles, sometimes idealised, which drove them to make a special effort to facilitate migrants' access to certain benefits, especially when they perceived users as facing particular hardships. In addition, the precarious employment conditions and job insecurity of workers from the third sector often meant they had more affinity with the precarious biographies of 'their' users. The fragile careers of staff and the fate of this workforce are caught up as it is with policy projects that are often funded (or not) on an annual basis. This employment insecurity reflects not only the persistence of an emergency-oriented approach to migration, despite its having been emphasised by regional actors as a cross-cutting issue for social policies, but also a paradoxical state of affairs in which 'precarious workers serve provisional users' (Ferrari and Rosso 2008).

In many cases their actions appear to be informed by intense emotional involvement, driving them to even step beyond the restrictive boundaries of their professional mandates and carry out 'additional jobs' to help their clients. Paolo, assigned to a neighbourhood help desk, was particularly active in providing support to a Pakistani woman and her young children, aged three and six. Although initially the woman was only looking for help with housing, Paolo saw this family unit as particularly fragile and over time he became a source of help and support for her in resolving legal problems and other issues having to do with the family's integration into the host society.

Despite their intentions to challenge the institutional categorisation, however, workers from the third sector sometimes seemed to be engaged in multicultural practices that conceal forms of culturalism quite similar to those evoked by public employees. For example, in providing support to some Muslim woman, the workers often implicitly assume their biographical trajectories by reproducing reified images of immigrant

women as passive victims 'in need of being saved' (Abu-Lughod 2002). Incorporating ethnocentric visions of Islam as a monolithic entity characterised by gender asymmetries, workers perceived the independent choices of Muslim women (such as separating from their husbands, for example) as acts of emancipation from a position of 'natural' subalternity. Furthermore, at times a measure of 'paternalism' risked generating mechanisms through which users became dependant on the resources deployed by the service or the helpfulness of individual workers. After having done everything he possibly could, using his own network of informal contacts to help the Pakistani woman find a place to live, Paolo realised that she subsequently felt 'betrayed' when he refused to support her choice to send her eldest son back to Pakistan.

Although developed in an effort to help their clients, these attitudes may therefore conceal paradoxical mechanisms that actually reinforce migrants' exclusion from Italian society, leading them to view their securing public benefits as an act of humanitarian charity on the part of workers rather than a legitimate exercise of their own rights.

## Conclusion

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in two social services in an Italian region with an 'open' approach to immigration, the article highlights the gaps between the region's inclusive multicultural agenda and the inequalities engendered in the everyday functioning of social services and their staff.

This ethnographic case aids in identifying the processes, more or less silent, through which even pioneering services can (re)produce stratified forms of institutional discrimination towards migrants which end up naturalising unequal access to social rights and public benefits. In conversation with the international debate on the gap between official policies and street-level bureaucrats' practices, the article shows how changing boundaries of discretionary power among different categories of workers, with different degrees of professionalisation, affect the way 'their' clients end up being treated and serve to include/exclude migrants on different grounds.

To begin, I described how both social service workers and users develop micro-strategies for navigating a system in which political ambiguity and bureaucratic practice come to constitute a form of Italian 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997). 'Studying through' (Wright and Reinhold 2011) interconnected policies and institutions operating at multiple levels, I then examined divergent practices among public servants and precarious workers from the third sector as controversial effects of changing regional agendas. In so doing, the fieldwork reveals how interactions with cultural diversity can take on an ambivalent form in a shifting and controversial arena. More specifically, the ambiguous attempts of municipal employees to navigate an uncertain institutional environment bring to light those moral and ethnicizing discourses which contribute to drawing social boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' users. Similar forms of culturalism also shapes the practices of social workers from the third sector who, while acting to help users considered most 'in need', develop compassionate approaches (Fassin 2005) that end up reinforcing migrants' dependence (or their exclusion) from public resources. Within this framework, I looked at both the strategies developed by professionals to navigate the bureaucratic system and the ways in which migrants, far from being 'passive recipients' of policy measures (Van der Leun 2003), actively seek out shortcuts to access public

benefits and search for the 'right' narrative to fit the normative expectations of Italian social services (Sbriccoli and Jacoviello 2011).

From this perspective, the article seeks to address the critical gap in migrant policy analysis that seem to have dealt separately with the discretionary practices of low-level workers, on one hand, and the barriers migrants face and the strategies they develop to navigate policy, on the other. The fieldwork adopts an analytical 'bifocal' approach, according to which the ethnographer simultaneously takes into account the institutional hierarchical categorizations engendered by bureaucratic procedures and the lived experiences of both migrants and workers in such a system.

Bringing together actors and institutions across different sites (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011), I approach the social construction of cultural difference as a shifting and contested arena that reflects the broader asymmetries between the bureaucratic state, local institutions and ethnic minorities. At the same time, this inter-relational approach also helps to capture the dynamic character aspects of social policies. The ethnographic observations show how symbolic boundaries are contextually produced by classificatory struggles and negotiations between individuals and groups positioned in a hierarchical social field. They thus highlight actors' ability to make and unmake symbolic boundaries in a fluid way, reinforcing and challenging institutional categories to negotiate access to material and immaterial resources. Such processes include not only ambiguous encounters between migrant users and social service workers, but also struggles among workers over divergent ideas of what their work means. Different categories of employees delineate 'professional boundaries' (Lamont and Molnár 2002) as they compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalisation of alternative systems and principles of classifications within a multicultural reception system.

By examining the everyday side of *policies*, therefore, we can uncover the conflicting discourses and ambivalent ideas through which migrants are incorporated into Italian society. Indeed, such dynamics often shed light on the domain of *politics* as well. In a certain way, the shifting boundaries of professional discretion tend to evoke the processes through which grassroots official discourses, ambivalent populist claims and prevailing exclusionary rhetoric contend for influence in determining the treatment of migrants and articulate relations of power which render certain ideas, interests and strategies of action authoritative in the political arena. As I have shown, while workers' divergent strategies alternating between humanitarian and suspicious stances run the risk of failing to recognise difference, forms of inequality are not necessarily engendered in 'racist' behaviours; rather, they stem from the day-to-day functioning of policy making. Indeed, the contradictory mandate and bureaucratic pressures social actors experience in the country's fragmented policy framework end up driving social service to develop a range of ideological solutions and/or hostile behaviours in relation to migrants that tend to draw symbolic boundaries across and through broader Italian society.

The Italian political landscape has changed quite a bit since this research was conducted. This year, the growing success of the xenophobic Lega Nord party under Salvini's leadership has brought this far-right party into the governing coalition. Multicultural political agendas now occupy an uncertain and vexing position, a fact which compromises the future of agencies designed to serve migrants and undermines the legitimacy of the professionals who work there. In light of these shifts, the empirical data presented here may therefore appear somewhat dated. I do find, however, that exploring the daily work of the

institutions charged with safeguarding social rights can help us to grasp the different ways in which the increasing politicisation of migration and racialisation of ethnic minorities are shaping the contemporary Italian social arena, making a critical stance on the hidden spaces of policymaking more pressing than ever.

## Notes

1. As Shore and Wright explain, the approach of ‘studying through’ seeks to trace ‘the ways in which power creates webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space’ (1997, 11).
2. To protect my informants’ anonymity, I have chosen not to specify the name of the city.
3. There is a network of over 140 information desks for foreigners in Emilia-Romagna, set up by local authorities (on their own or through partnerships) in the various provinces.
4. These included official regional documents (e.g. strategy and action plans), laws and other regulatory documents, reports on policy implementation and policy-related data, which I examined in an attempt to understand how policy domains and topics were constructed discursively (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011).
5. To protect my informants’ anonymity and confidentiality, all the names have been replaced with pseudonyms.
6. In Emilia-Romagna, the regional health service guarantees health care to foreign nationals enrolled in the national health service but also guarantees certain health services to immigrants without residence permits. Current Italian legislation prohibits health personnel from reporting undocumented foreign residents to the judicial authorities.
7. This office provides access to health care services, booking doctors’ visits and allowing patients to pay the reduced-fare co-pay for examinations; it aids people with enrolling in the national health system and provides other services such as registering patients’ choice of general practitioner and pediatrician, issuing exemption certificates, and providing support for supplementary assistance to those entitled to it.
8. There is an extensive body of literature in Italy on the division of labour between public and private sectors, but space limitations prevent me from addressing it in detail.


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