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# Anthropology and Asylum procedures and policies in Italy

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## Abstract

Traditionally a phenomenon concentrated in the global South, asylum is increasingly becoming a political and social issue also in the North. In the late 1990s the EU started to set up a common European asylum system of rules on the recognition of refugees and the content of refugee status, a process which has been extensively analyzed from political and legal approaches. This chapter focuses on the ethnographic study of local institutions and association in charge with asylum procedures and with practices of asylum seekers' reception and status determination, in a north-eastern Italian region. Adopting a comparative perspective, it shows how an anthropological approach can differently contribute to an understanding of those issues, allowing to uncover crucial dimensions of the institutional relations between decision makers, social workers and asylum seekers, which eventually contribute to determine the outcome of the application.

## 1. The wider context

As in most countries in Europe, in Italy refugee status is primarily granted under the 1951 Refugee Convention, and increasingly under the new EU asylum legislation. The 1951 Geneva Convention Relating on the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (Article 1A[2]). Additionally Article 33(1) is

important, affirming the principle of non-refoulement: “No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

The Geneva Convention still forms the basis of international refugee law, governing a phenomenon traditionally concentrated in the global South where about 4/5 of over 15 million world refugees are located (Unhcr 2010). But in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of war in former Yugoslavia and later in Kosovo, large numbers of refugees started to seek asylum in other countries and metropolises in the North. In the same period, following the European Union objective to define a common policy on asylum, a European asylum system was initiated with the aim to ensure not only that member states apply common criteria for the identification of persons in need of international protection, but also that a minimum level of benefits would be made available to these persons in all member states. Two main steps in this process of harmonization of rules on the recognition of refugees and the content of refugee status, are Council Qualification Directive 2004/83/EC and Council Procedure Directive 2005/85/EC, which also complement the above rules with measures on subsidiary forms of protection. The two Council Directives were adopted in Italy in 2007 and 2008 respectively<sup>1</sup>.

In Europe, anthropological studies of refugees and asylum are quite recent and mainly linked to the founding of the Refugee Studies Centre (initially Refugee Studies Programme) at the University of Oxford in 1982<sup>2</sup>. These studies represent a minority in the vast field of refugee studies - which is

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<sup>1</sup> The 1948 Italian Constitution also mentions “the right of asylum in the territory of the Italian Republic” (Article 10(3)). But Constitutional asylum has rarely been applied, and it is commonly understood as a right to remain in the country while waiting for the claim to be processed according to more recent EU procedures.

<sup>2</sup> Harrell-Bond, Voutira 1992; Malkki 1995. See Whyte 2011 for a synthetic review of earlier ethnographic studies on refugees and forced migrations in Europe.

largely dominated by a law and policy approach – and are mostly focused on refugee camps in the South and on international humanitarian aid. Traditional ethnographic studies of refugee camps deal with large numbers of persons usually coming from the same country (or area, or even the same town or village), often sharing culture, language or beliefs, and residing in the same camp for a prolonged period of time. On the contrary, more recent ethnographic approaches to asylum-seekers and refugees in the North are confronted with a new and different phenomenon. Be it in large centres (for the reception, identification or administrative detention of migrants) or in small local projects for refugees' reception and integration, anthropologists doing their fieldwork in Europe meet with a radical heterogeneity of scattered individuals who barely know each other: single men and women who had to leave behind their children or spouses, their social and family ties shattered and severed. With this multitude of single individuals who do not have the same nationality, culture, religion or language and who are not linked by social or family ties, what they have in common is their shared experience of "learning to become refugees" through a complex and standardized bureaucratic procedure of uncertain duration.

The institutional dimension is therefore central to the study of asylum in the North, since it is through specific institutional practices that refugees are made or recognised: this is a process that Soguk (1999) has termed "refugeeing". As mentioned above, the asylum juridical and administrative procedure is undergoing a process of progressive homogenization across Europe; yet to become a refugee in Italy, France or Germany can entail completely different experiences and mean different things, and persons applying with a very similar persecution story can have totally divergent outcomes depending on the country processing their application. If norms and rules are being unified, institutional and administrative practices which translate abstract international rights into local procedures are, on the contrary, embedded in specific national and local contexts and fragmented across different state institutions and non-state or private organizations and associations. From their first arrival in a European country to the final outcome of their application, asylum seekers meet with police staff,

bureaucrats, translators, social workers, medical doctors, legal experts, lawyers and judges who, in various contexts and at different stages, have (or appear to have) the power to determine their future and manage their stay. It is during these numerous encounters that some migrants become refugees or are granted some type of international protection. The formal and informal practices that structure the relationships between applicants and asylum institutions and organizations (as well as among different institutional branches and organizations) are contingent and specific, even though inspired by similar transnational norms and procedures.

Drawing on recent ethnographic research I have both coordinated and carried out, in this chapter I focus on the asylum procedure in a Northeastern Italian region, in order to highlight important aspects of institutional processes and practices which eventually contribute to determine the applications' outcome. As I will try to show, such aspects can best be grasped adopting an ethnographic approach. At the same time, many segments of the long asylum procedure in Italy are not easily accessible to traditional ethnographic fieldwork, thus calling for the adoption of alternative methodologies.

In the next paragraph I sketch a quick history of the asylum system in Italy and briefly describe the institutional articulation of the asylum procedure, both at the national and local level. I then provide a short review of anthropological studies of institutions and organizations in order to highlight the discipline's contribution to the topic, especially in relation to asylum. The last paragraph focuses on two dimensions that cut across the different institutional spaces in which the asylum procedure is fragmented – namely, the moral and the pedagogical dimension. These dimensions can be better revealed when shifting from a law-and-policy approach to an anthropological analysis of the ways in which local practices differently employ national and international asylum norms and rules.

## 1.1 Seeking Asylum in Italy

In Italy, public concern about asylum-seekers and refugees emerged in the mid 1990s, when thousands of people seeking protection entered the country following the war in the former Yugoslavia and in Kosovo. Emergency aid, initially offered on a voluntary basis by local NGOs and civil or religious associations, was soon reshaped by the creation of a more structured national network, the first Identification Centres for migrants, and local reception projects financed by the EU Commission. From 2001, local asylum reception projects are directly coordinated and monitored by UNHCR and the Italian Home Office through the creation of the National Asylum Programme (PNA), which in 2002 turned into the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR).

SPRAR is a multilevel governance system: a web of projects of “assistance, protection and socio-economic integration promoted by local authorities through the activation of territorial networks engaging non-governmental organizations, agencies and institutions with experience and competence in social and productive matters” (IntegraRef 2008). Its activities, policies and practices which are implemented at the provincial and municipal level, are coordinated under the supervision of a Central Service (Servizio Centrale) based in Rome and managed by the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI). Local authorities’ participation in the SPRAR system works on a voluntary basis: municipalities applying to the national programme receive financial support to set up “Projects for the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees”<sup>3</sup>, which they implement in collaboration with local NGOs, voluntary associations, and civil society or religious organizations.

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<sup>3</sup> I translate with “reception” the Italian word *accoglienza* in order to emphasize the concept’s bureaucratic dimension, which I examine here. But the Italian word also entails a less “neutral” nuance and it could therefore be translated as “hospitality”, a word sporadically mentioned in Italian media and political discourse, while explicitly employed in the Greek asylum policy (see Rozakou 2012).

This “integrated” multi-level system is not the only one providing asylum seekers with first aid and basic services. After submitting their claim at any Police office or directly at the border, most asylum applicants in Italy (about 70%) are sent to large Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers (CARA); only a small number enters a SPRAR project while waiting for their cases to be examined. Created in 2008, the CARA are a strict-control type of centre usually located quite far from urban areas: since access to legal aid and information is severely constrained and little or no social, economic or linguistic service is provided, CARA are described as long-term parking-places for human beings. On the contrary, the SPRAR system is made of small local projects more often located inside (or close to) towns and villages; the projects usually host applicants in apartments rather than in semi-closed centres; they often provide Italian language and job re-training courses, as well as legal support. Yet, the criterion behind the decision as to who should be sent where appears confused and arbitrary (SPRAR 2010: 57). The situation became even more complicated after the so-called Arab spring and the war in Libya, when the arrival of hundreds from North Africa was dealt by the Italian government by setting up a third temporary system. These persons, now targeted with the new label ENA (Emergenza Nord Africa – North African Emergency), were the competence of the Civil Protection Corps, traditionally in charge of natural disasters<sup>4</sup>.

Once in Italy, the first asylum application step takes place at a Police office where applicants are required to fill-in a short screening Form (Modulo C/3) with standard questions in limited, closed fields. In this Form the flight story, its motives and the escape route are reduced to bare facts and simple linear trajectories. It is this simplified story – from which all “background noises”<sup>5</sup> are removed - that is later compared to the extended narrative recalled during the following step. It is often during this first appointment

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<sup>4</sup> Olivieri 2011. The process is quite recent and no extensive research is available (but see now Bracci 2012 on Tuscany). For this reason, and also given its peculiarity, I will not address procedures of international protection for persons coming from Tunisia or Libya, dealt by so-called ENA projects.

<sup>5</sup> On the bureaucratic simplification of complex stories, both in Southern refugee camps and in Northern asylum centers, see Malkki 1996, and Blommaert 2001 respectively.



that fingerprints and pictures of the applicant are taken and inserted in the Eurodac international police database. The second step is a key moment of the asylum procedure given its centrality for the status determination: the extended interview in front of the first instance Board (Commissione territoriale), which is composed of four members, one from each body involved (i.e. Prefecture, Police headquarters, Local authority, and UNHCR)<sup>6</sup>. As required by the EC Qualification Directive, the material elements produced by the claimant and the story of persecution recalled during the interview are examined, in order to assess the internal coherence of the narrative and that related events do not run counter to “generally known facts available on the case”. If the applicant is found generally credible, the Commission can grant the refugee status, a subsidiary (three-years) protection or a humanitarian (one-year) leave to remain, otherwise the claim is rejected. Rejection can lead to the final steps of the procedure, i.e. the two levels of appeal in front of a civil Tribunal and an Appeal court, where the claimant can be assisted by a lawyer. Rejected applicants have thirty days to appeal, reduced to fifteen for those inside CARA. If the response remains negative after a second appeal, they have to leave the country (see Fig. 1 for a schematic representation of the international protection iter).

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<sup>6</sup> At the claimant’s request, a translator and/or a social worker can be present.

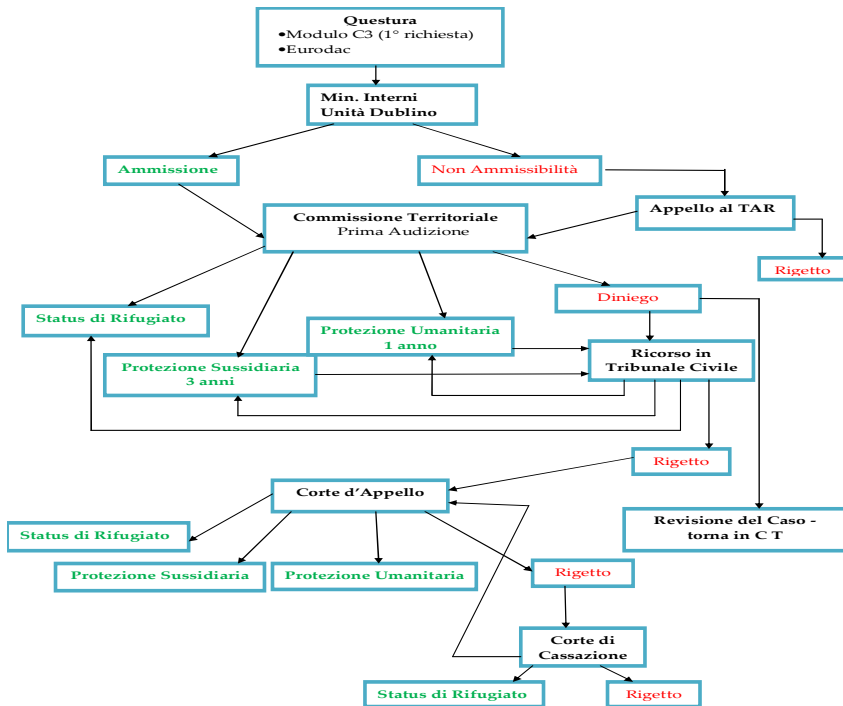


Fig. 1 – International protection's procedure in Italy

According to Eurostat (2012), in 2011 some 34,115 persons applied for asylum in Italy. So far 25,655 applications have been processed, of which 18,170 (70,8%) were rejected. Of the 7,485 positive results: 1,870 obtained refugee status; 2,265 the subsidiary protection; and 3,350 a one-year humanitarian leave to remain.

What I summarized above is the structure of the status determination procedure in Italy, which by and large parallels that of other EU countries. But from asylum seekers' point of view, the picture is less linear and more complicated, because each step of the procedure is made of simultaneous encounters with various social actors from many institutional branches and

levels, whose different roles and aims are often unclear to them. Social workers in reception centres often complain that asylum seekers usually held them responsible for any negative outcome – even for applications’ rejection, which they have no power to determine<sup>7</sup>. In 2009, while doing fieldwork in a SPRAR reception centre in Emilia-Romagna Region<sup>8</sup>, I attended a meeting between asylum seekers hosted by the project, volunteers serving as language teachers, and the project’s career advisor from the local Social Security office managing the project. The former wanted to ask the latter why none of them had been offered job-grants or re-training courses during that entire year. The career advisor explained that, in the past, the local market had offered employment opportunities for low and unqualified jobs “which are the types of jobs that better suit you all”, but the present economic crisis had dramatically reduced those opportunities. He explained:

The market is wild and the economic crisis is huge: millions of Italians find that doors are closed. Here we can only offer poor material: poor because you come from other countries, culturally poor because you do not speak the Italian language, you are fragile goods, with no experience of our country, you do not understand everything, you belong to that immense pool of workforce called low-profile [...] it is all the more difficult to convince employers to hire most fragile and needy persons like you to perform even low-profile jobs.[...] We did work in other sectors: with former convicts and drug addicts. It was five of us and now there is just me; we found solutions ... but for others (Sorgoni 2011a: 22-3).

This excerpt from a long and frustrating meeting is quite dense, as the career advisor adopts a disclaiming attitude and lists objective facts in order to justify what asylum seekers seem to perceive and present as his

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<sup>7</sup> For similar examples in different European countries or types of centres, see Griffiths 2011, Maryns 2006, and Whyte 2011; Kobelinsky (2011) shows how recent immigration laws in France reinforce such confusion, prescribing that social worker take part in the actual forced removal of migrants from the centres.

<sup>8</sup> Since I did my research in this Region, where CARA are not present, all my data refer to SPRAR projects.

responsibility. That the economic crisis is hitting everywhere in Europe is uncontested fact, and “even” Italian citizens (with their supposedly more valuable social and cultural capital) struggle to find a job. The crisis is clearly also responsible for the human resources cuts inside his office, which leaves him alone to do the job previously assigned to five workers. While showing that he is not the one to blame – both because he did his job, and because his tasks and duties are defined by the institution he works for (“we did work ... we found solutions”) - he simultaneously seems to suggest that the very essence of asylum seekers’ condition can best be exemplified by an even longer list of what they lack (they are defined as low-profile, fragile goods lacking experience and understanding abilities). It is therefore this supposedly inherent incompleteness of asylum seekers, coupled with the tremendous global economic crisis, that is to blame for the project’s failure. It seems reasonable to ask: What connects powerful national and international political and economic forces to asylum seekers’ individual lives? What stands “in the middle”?

I suggest that what is actually missing from the career advisor’s articulated picture is precisely his part in it, i.e. the ubiquitous role played by social workers from state institutions, non-state organizations or private associations, which manage asylum seekers through the whole process. Social workers are potentially present at each step of the long procedure, their competences spanning from assistance to control. Acting as intermediaries between transnational asylum rights and their national and local understandings, they translate norms and rules into everyday practices, affecting the lives and futures of asylum seekers and refugees. Despite their tasks being often clearly defined, the close and intimate nature of the relationship with asylum applicants (partly inbuilt in this type of assistance and care work), allows for important margins of discretionary power<sup>9</sup> that an anthropological approach permits us to articulate.

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<sup>9</sup> On “mapping the middle” and on intermediaries as translators between transnational and local policy levels, see Merry 2006; on bureaucratic arbitrariness see Lipsky’s pioneering work (1980).

Ethnographic studies of organizations and institutions propose to move away from “the modernist paradigm of organizations as rational and replete with objective facts which had dominated organizational studies” (Wright 1994: 3). Anthropology’s interpretative approach allows us to deconstruct the representation of institutions as closed sites with a coherent aim and a strong organizational culture reproducing itself through time – a view which has long dominated the social sciences and which reproduces management élites’ presentations of the organizations themselves (Abélès 2001). Assuming institutions instead to be porous sites for constructing meaning, anthropology focuses on the ways in which different actors within organizations understand, translate and put into practice norms and procedures, and formal and informal relations reshape tasks and objectives from the inside. Anthropologists Hirsch and Gellner thus define organizations: “they all have explicit rules, a division of labour, and aims that involve acting on or changing everyday life”, as well as a shared governing ethos “of some sort” (2001: 2-4). But in order to study them ethnographically, anthropologist should look at internal divergent interests of its constituent parts, and at the wider contexts within which they operate. They should be able to produce “details and conclusions that are unexpected” and reflect organizations’ internal polyphony - as Bate (1997) suggested; but they should also “pay attention to questions of power and inequality”, emphasize “both what people say and what they do” looking for “connections and disconnections between the two”, observe “what people do and say when they are ‘off-duty’”, and finally look “closely at how language is used” (Hirsch, Gellner 2001: 9)<sup>10</sup>. This approach can help uncover hidden or unintended dimensions inscribed in bureaucratic practices of institutions and organizations in charge of the asylum procedure.

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<sup>10</sup> For critical and detailed Italian reviews of anthropological studies of organizations, and of States institutions, see Zinn 2007 and Palumbo 2011 respectively. For methodological insights see also Schwartzman 1993.

## 2. Hidden dimensions of asylum procedure

Police officer: ((in Italian to the interpreter)) chiedigli il nome di sua madre  
[ask him his mother's name]  
Interpreter: what is the name of your mother ?  
Asylum seeker: Ef  
Interpreter: the name of your mother . your mother's name  
Asylum seeker: Ef  
Interpreter: EF ? JUST EF ?  
Asylum seeker: ((looks at the interpreter remaining silent))  
Interpreter: ((in Italian to the police officer)) dice Ef . Ef è effe in italiano . la lettera effe . sarà l'iniziale del nome . boh . forse non vuole dircelo . non credo che non conosca il nome di sua madre !  
[He says F . F is F in Italian . the letter F . it may be the name's initial . who knows . maybe he doesn't want to tell us . I cannot believe he doesn't know his mother's name !]

This is an excerpt of the first asylum application of a young Nigerian man, which I was allowed to attend. It took place at a Police office, where the applicant was accompanied by a social worker from the local association in charge, in order to fill-in the screening Form (Modulo C/3) in front of a police officer and with the aid of an Italian interpreter in English language. It took over two hours to complete the Form's standard questions: a process of reduction and simplification of a complex story into selected facts and punctual events to fit the closed fields of the short bureaucratic Form, replete with misunderstandings of the kind illustrated above. In that specific case, the interpreter took for granted that the noun pronounced by the applicant, which sounded like /ɛf/, could only correspond to the English spelling of the alphabet letter "F" - and thus to a name's initial. She therefore kept repeating

the same question raising her voice in frustration, at the same time ruling out any possible alternative meaning<sup>11</sup>. In various occasions during the long interrogation, the interpreter tried to make sense of what she could not grasp – and he could not (or did not know how to) better explain – by replacing his silence with her own interpretation, often based on what she assumed to be the appropriate or expected answers vis-à-vis common-sense knowledge and her personal beliefs on “Africa”. The interpreter played a strategic role also in light of the fact that the police officer affirmed from the start that she did not understand a single word of English, thus depending entirely on the opinion of the former. Coupled with the interpreter’s meta-pragmatic comments (“this part is not clear”, “he seems quite vague on this”, “he cannot explain well in English”), expressed only in Italian and directly addressed to the police officer, this interaction – an important step in the asylum procedure – left little room for an active role of the asylum seeker.

To observe such local level interactions among state branches, non-state organizations and asylum seekers allows us to see the final textual product (i.e. the short bureaucratic Form) as the co-constructed outcome of a complex interpretative effort on the part of different subjects with divergent aims and roles, cultural resources and skills, and power positions. Unlike with ordinary conversation, institutional interactions like asylum interviews are characterized by constraints and expectations related to the speakers’ different roles and positions within a space of interaction in which the interviewers detain institutional powers they do not share with the claimant/interviewee. As Serranò and Fasulo remark, the interviewers’ identity cannot be separated from the institution they work for, and in relation to which the interviewees mould their narratives, thus anticipating their potential interests and uses (2011: 32).

Hirsch and Gellner’s volume (2001) is a valuable collection of essays that deal with important theoretical, methodological and ethical issues related to

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<sup>11</sup> In Yoruba language, Èfê means small party; Àfê means Enjoyment; Ofê is Offer: I am grateful to Franck Viderot for this information.

ethnographic research inside various types of organizations. But taking asylum procedure as a lens through which to observe how state and non-state institutions contribute to the actual production of juridical and social categories of subjects (refugees, illegal migrants, citizens ...) obliges us to also look outside organizations or, more precisely, to face questions of scale and levels. In the field of forced migrations, different branches of bureaucracy interact at various administrative levels; at the local level, these branches also interact and coordinate with non-state organizations and associations. Subsequently, both types of institutions translate and transcribe asylum seekers' narratives, and put into practice (thus adapting to, but also reshaping) rules and norms forged elsewhere by several transnational bodies of governance (UNHCR, EU). In his latest study of bureaucracy and poverty as structural violence in India, Akhil Gupta clarifies these methodological issues: after remarking that "the translocal nature of the state makes it extremely difficult to decide on which level one should concentrate in doing fieldwork", he argues that "the answer depends on the question one wishes to ask about the state, but a large range of questions involve several levels at once". This is a difficult methodological condition which renders the study of the state "necessarily partial and incomplete" (2012: 63-4). He then specifies:

I chose to study the lowest levels of the administrative hierarchy because that is where I could observe poor rural people coming into contact with state officials. The higher one goes in the bureaucratic hierarchy, the less such interactions are likely to be found (Ibid.: 64).

I think that a similar consideration also applies to the study of asylum seekers in Italy (as probably in the rest of Europe)<sup>12</sup>; in any event, it is at this lower and local scale that most ethnographic studies on the refugee status determination procedure are located. As the above dialogue shows, an anthropological analysis of the ways in which "intermediaries" working in

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<sup>12</sup> But see Rabinow and Marcus 2008 on the relevance of ethnographic research with "truth-claimers" such as managers and intellectual élites.



local institutions and organizations variously understand and employ national and international asylum norms and rules in their everyday practices and contacts with asylum seekers can help uncover dimensions that cut across the different institutional spaces in which the asylum procedure is fragmented, and that remain opaque when adopting different approaches. As Heath Cabot noted, “practices of social assistance or support are important sites where the shifting boundaries between State and non-State are contested and negotiated through, often powerful, emotional engagements” (2013: 146). In this final section, I focus on two such dimensions which could be referred to as the moral and the pedagogical dimension.

## 2.1 The moral dimension

Credibility is a keyword in the asylum procedure in Europe. According to Council Qualification Directive 2004/83/EC (art. 4¶5), if the applicant cannot support the claim with documentary or other material evidence, decision makers should alternatively assess, among other things, whether or not the applicant's statements are coherent and plausible and establish his/her “general credibility”. But in many countries, credibility assessment has actually replaced the examination of documental evidence; as a consequence, applications are increasingly rejected on a “lack of credibility” ground. Clearly, it is extremely important that what applicants tell be taken into serious consideration, especially in light of the fact that those who leave their country because of (fear of) persecution may not be able to readily submit documentary evidence proving the persecution, or even their identity. Yet the Council Directive does not explain how to ascertain narratives’ coherence or claimants’ credibility, which makes space for arbitrary decisions and raises questions on the legal significance of this concept (Sweeney 2009). When identity documents or other types of material evidence are lacking, decision makers (first instance commission members, and tribunal or appeal judges) usually scrutinize the story of persecution and flight that asylum seekers recall during the extended interviews, and they compare it both to applicants’ written memory initially attached to the first screening Form and to “generally known facts” on the applicant’s

country of origin, in order to seek out inconsistencies. As mentioned above, however, the procedure is quite long, and it can take months before a final decision is reached. This means that asylum seekers are expected to recall (or write) their story more than once on various occasions to different subjects.

Social scientists working on issues such as memory and life stories have long discussed gaps, discrepancies and disjunctions between versions of the same story, which change when given at different times or in front of different audiences, and depending on the social context (Ochs, Capps 1996; Eastmond 2007). And research on traumatic memory shows that most painful events tend to be recalled in a fragmented and “interrupted” way, so that apparently un-coherent or discrepant versions may rather testify to painful experiences (Beneduce 2008)<sup>13</sup>. In addition, the stories asylum seekers tell in order to claim international protection are performed in highly controlled contexts where power relations are heavily asymmetrical; where the pace and rhythm of story-telling are dictated (and interrupted) by the bureaucratic procedure, and the expressive modalities are severely constrained by standard formats; and where those who tell and those who judge do not share the same cultural background, thus producing mistranslations and misunderstandings which are eventually used to cast doubts on the claimant’s credibility<sup>14</sup>. Yet, stories told during asylum interviews are believed, expected and presented as able to unfold smoothly, freely disclosing the claimant’s true story in front of the institutional audience. While from a Conversation Analysis perspective the interview interaction is long seen as an assembly process, “an organized social activity” (Kasper 2013: 3) which should be analyzed, approaches like Linguistic Ethnography also widen their empirical scope investigating communication as the interplay between persons, encounters and institutions that reach beyond the encounter-on-hand, simultaneously

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<sup>13</sup> A discussion of epistemological, methodological and ethical aspects engendered in ethnographic research on collective memory of violence in Italy is Clemente, Dei 2005.

<sup>14</sup> For critical anthropological discussions of asylum credibility in various Western countries, see Blommaert 2001; Bohmer and Shuman 2008; Cabot 2011; Good 2007; Maryns 2006; Sorgoni 2011b.

acknowledging the “efforts individuals make to get other people to recognize their feelings, perceptions, interests” (Rampton 2010: 235). When applied to the asylum procedure, these approaches allow us to challenge the widely spread belief that the interview serves as a window into the answerers’ inner world, their “true” experiences, memories and feelings, and to acknowledge the wider bureaucratic and legal asymmetrical context, including also “preceding events and texts” that frame and shape it<sup>15</sup>.

When assessing the general plausibility of a story, especially if material evidence is lacking, decision makers should gather information also on the country of origin of the applicant. Yet, in Italy in particular (but not only), this preliminary investigation is very rarely performed and first instance commission members often base their credibility assessment on common sense and logic deductions of a normative kind. For instance, the story of a woman from Cameroon was not considered credible by the commission because she was not killed along with her father and brother, with whom she was kept segregated and tortured. “Why do you think you were left alive?” asked a member of the commission. In the Transcript of the decisions which denied her any international protection, subsequently endorsed by the first appeal judge, all decision makers find not plausible that paramilitary corps kept political opponents in prison when they could be eliminated on the spot, that they were all kept in the same cell, and finally that one of them was released, despite the sadly known common practice to leave a witness alive as public warning. They also believed documents certifying medical care provided by the perpetrators of the violence were a forgery, despite this practice being also widely documented as a public display of impunity.

According to Paul Ricoeur, in the modern judiciary system the trustworthy witness is he who can keep his statement unaltered across time, his credibility being strengthened by the reiteration/keeping of his word, which adds a moral dimension to the act of witnessing itself (2003: 231). In the

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<sup>15</sup> See Briggs 2007 for an assessment of different modes through which interviewing gets naturalized in the media, state bureaucracies and also in social sciences.

Italian asylum procedure, as elsewhere, credibility assessment is predicated upon the narrative consistency and coherence across time. Those who assess the credibility of asylum stories usually assume (or pretend) that applicants' accounts flow freely, voluntarily and uninterrupted during different types of interviews; that traumatic memory be preserved unchanged across time remaining "consistent" throughout different accounts; that it should come easy to tell intimate (sometime unspeakable) experiences of violence and persecution to complete strangers who are often of the opposite sex. Since none of the above assumptions applies to the practical conditions of the bureaucratic encounter during which asylum seekers are expected to produce a credible narrative, incoherences, gaps or "plot-holes" (Coutin 2001) are likely to be also the product of those conditions (rather than a decisive proof of the applicant's lack of credibility). That is, they may be generated *ex post* by the very process which is set out to detect their presence. Moreover, as Briggs noted, "power lies not just in controlling how discourse unfolds in the context of its production but gaining control over its recontextualization – shaping how it draws on other discourses and contexts and when, where, how, and by whom it will be subsequently used" (2007: 562). Once uttered, the words of asylum seekers enter a long process of complex intertextual relations upon which the claimants may retain little or no control.

Under such practical conditions, credibility during the interview has much to do with the ability to appear trustworthy: not only what is told, but also how it is told becomes crucial. In this light, credibility becomes an art. In part differing from other European countries, in Italy those procedural steps where the narrative is assessed are "black boxed" and *de facto* not accessible to researchers, who are not allowed to observe (let alone record) how decisions are taken at first instance commissions and in appeal tribunals. This means that an analysis of the communicative interaction during the procedure is at present virtually impossible in the Italian asylum system. Here, an alternative methodology to participant observation (or video/audio

recording for communicative interaction analysis) is the analysis of texts and documents produced by asylum bureaucracies<sup>16</sup>, as well as interviews with social workers (who can sporadically attend first commissions), lawyers, and asylum seekers and refugees. While it is difficult to trace signs of performances and other non-verbal significant interactions inside documents like the legal transcripts of asylum hearings, case workers, legal experts and refugees easily refer to non-verbal and performative aspects as crucial for the outcome. The display of “authentic”(i.e. not staged or excessive) suffering proves that the asylum seeker is telling the truth, as well as the applicant’s ability to conform to “institutionally inscribed codes, modes and views” which requires having access to specific communicative resources<sup>17</sup>. Here, differential social and cultural capital can play a crucial role, and those who learn how to master appropriate narrative codes, linguistically and stylistically, have a better chance to appear trustworthy. Performance and narrative abilities thus play an important role in the moral dimension of asylum procedure, as implicit criteria used to ascertain truth<sup>18</sup>. But performance can also be openly recognized as a crucial ingredient by case workers, as the following example from a SPRAR project shows. In order to help asylum seekers to write up a credible testimony, a legal advisor compared his role to that of an art director who literally helps an actor to stage the required performance. As he explained:

I work on the discourse construction, almost on a script, on the cut, in view of the

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<sup>16</sup> An updated review on anthropological research on documents is Hull 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Maryns 2006: 13; and also Blommaert 2001: 414.

<sup>18</sup> These are probably not the only criteria affecting the application outcome, and influential variables are also related to personal characteristics of both the applicants (country of origin, age, sex), and the decision makers (institutional role, experience in the field, education, personal beliefs, and also age and sex). One day, during my fieldwork in a SPRAR office, a social worker introduced me to a young, shy and quite nervous asylum seeker who was soon to be interviewed by the Commission. When the lady left, the social worker commented “Did you see how beautiful she is? She is like a queen! She has a very weak story, but I believe she’ll have no problem...”. Noting my puzzled expression, she turned to the other social worker in the office, then they both laughed and added “she is going to be interviewed by X [a retired male officer from the Police] ... that’s why we believe she’ll get the status straight away!”. A month later I discovered that their guess was right. Although I don’t know if it did apply to this specific case, that physical aspect, age and sex can play a role in the decision is common belief among social workers.

interview [...] when their story is very weak I suggest they stress the dreadful condition of their country, thus aiming at least to get subsidiary protection" (Pozzi 2011: 46).<sup>19</sup>

Credibility and trust as crucial moral dimensions of the procedure are directly linked to merit, in that in the eyes of social workers trustworthy asylum seekers also deserve to be assisted by ad hoc projects and to receive social benefits. Thus the sequence credibility-trust-merit crosscuts different branches of the asylum structure, connecting the legal procedure's bureaucratic branch to that of social care and welfare benefits which takes place inside reception projects. At the level of social services and welfare assistance managed by local state institutions and non-state organizations, social workers and volunteers - who play no official role in the status determination's legal outcome - nonetheless usually try to informally ascertain the general credibility of projects' guests. In one of the projects observed, it was common practice among volunteers serving either as language teachers or as dormitory staff to encourage asylum seekers to disclose their story of persecution and flight. Such a display of trust in the social services on the part of asylum seekers was taken as a sign of the latter's good faith and honesty, which in turn merited to be compensated through benefits and welfare assistance. Quite interestingly, the sequence worked also in the opposite direction, and those who behaved in a wrong way (for instance showing up late at meetings or courses organized by the project, or failing to keep their lodgings clean to an appropriate standard) were considered as not deserving the assistance accorded them, which in turn shed doubts on their general trustworthiness (Starna 2011). This way, due rights and support services set up specifically for asylum seekers are treated as rare prizes discretionarily bestowed by social workers or volunteers, depending on their evaluation of asylum seekers' appropriate (i.e. deserving) behaviour<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> On asylum narratives and social or legal advisors' role, see Cabot 2011; Coutin 2001; D'Hallouin 2010; Kobelinsky 2010; McKinley 1997; Sbriccoli, Jacoviello 2001; Sbriccoli, Perugini 2012.

<sup>20</sup> As Zetter (2007) suggested, the refugee status - the realm of Rights *par excellence* - has increasingly become a restricted privilege for those who deserve it. More recently, Fassin elaborates on those

## 2.2 A Pedagogical project

To conclude, I wish to briefly address a second dimension of the asylum process directly connected to standards of proper behaviour, which becomes visible when adopting an ethnographic approach. The explicit objective of the SPRAR national system is to offer assistance to asylum seekers and “new” refugees in view of their future integration in the country, which itself can be obtained by reaching individual self-sufficiency (*autonomia*). SPRAR Report explains that the system offers not only first material aid but also a guided path towards self-sufficiency which includes integration, and actions of counseling and support to find employment and accommodation, as well as minors’ access to the schooling system (Sprar 2010: 23). From the same Report, we also learn that in 2009, only 42% of refugees assisted by the system left the programme having “achieved integration”. Along with the high percentage (30%) of those forced to exit the programme simply because their assistance period expired (thus having neither employment nor accommodation), it is important to stress the system’s narrow understanding of “integration”, reduced to a job and lodging (of whatever kind). With no reference to other socio-institutional issues such as social participation, access to and use of institutional services, citizenship and right to vote, family reunification, and higher education, the Italian asylum system seems to understand integration as synonymous with basic self-sufficiency.

When looking at specific asylum projects and centres, actions and practices adopted towards integration often take the form of pedagogical projects with a strong patronizing and paternalistic accent, aiming to teach foreign adults “how to live here”. In one local project I observed, a social worker repeatedly tried to convince a young Eritrean mother recently arrived in Italy to send her two-year-old daughter to a local nursery in order to be able to find herself a job. As the director of the project explained to me, the main reason behind the social worker’s insistence was not economic self-sufficiency, but

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informal divisions that shape social order whereby “du register juridique de distinction on était passé à un register moral de disqualification” (2010: 9).

to teach the young woman that “not accepting to separate from her child, she would harm both herself and the little girl, because here we do not live like that”. Such modernizing effort did not take into account the fact that the woman had crossed the desert and the Mediterranean sea on her own, delivering her baby in the way after having left two other children behind. At the other end of the national territory, in a Sicilian CARA, another Eritrean woman and mother of four children – who had likewise managed on her own to take them all to Italy through an extremely dangerous trip along the same route, protecting them all along – was encouraged to quit a few-hours-a-day cleaning job she found nearby, to stay with her children and thus become “a more responsible mother”. To persuade her, social workers also insistently stressed the value of the project assistance, which took care of her without pushing her towards self-sufficiency (Pinelli 2011). The two examples are interesting because they both incidentally deal with young single Eritrean mothers waiting for their status determination process to be completed, but they do so in seemingly opposite ways: the first project explicitly proposing a model of “modern” (i.e. working) mother, ready to place her infant in a nursery; the second teaching how to become a better (i.e. full-time) mother by dropping a few-hours job and remain economically dependent. On the one hand, this signals the wide internal difference among reception projects across the country, so much so that to be a single-mother asylum seeker can be a totally different experience depending on the reception project one is assigned to. But on the other hand, both examples share a similar strong pedagogical aim, a strive to teach how to become a “good mother”, be it of the modern/working type or, on the opposite, the more traditional full-time (and dependent) nurturer. In her essay Pinelli rightly stresses the gender bias at work in reception projects, whereby foreign women are often specific targets of modernization stances, simultaneously recognizing that a pedagogical drive also addresses male “guests”<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> In relation to a Turin-based project, Vacchiano 2011 refers to a “moral pedagogy”; in Ravenna, Vianelli (2011) detected a similar inclination among unpaid volunteers teaching Italian language.



Such instances are probably structurally inbuilt in the professional figure as it is ambiguously defined by the SPRAR Manual, which requires social workers to set up a relationship of “reciprocal trust” with asylum seekers, taking care of their most intimate daily needs while keeping on a “professional, not personal” level. What we find when we move from the ideology of social support to its embodiment in daily practices of help and humanitarian assistance, is rather a non-reciprocal compulsory trust which always matches care to control.<sup>22</sup> A regular consuetudinary practice spread across most reception projects of the country are the usually weekly “lodging meetings” that social workers organize to allow hosted asylum seekers (who are compelled to share a flat), to discuss problems and needs or solve misunderstandings and quarrels. Many projects also offer psychological consultancy to asylum seekers who explicitly require it or who are labeled as “vulnerable” subjects. One of the projects I studied conflated the two services by employing a psychologist to run the meetings in flats shared by women asylum seekers. The psychologist rightly acknowledged that, as non-dangerous adults, those women could not be forced to undertake a psychological therapy, but she also explained that the project management “considered the group therapy as compulsory”. By conflating the two support services, the hosted women were summoned weekly to discuss problems that could arise from a condition of forced co-residence with other strangers, at the same time being encouraged and advised to reflect upon, and share, their past history under the supervision of a psychologist. The latter added:

people forced to co-habit will necessarily have problems. This is why [the psychological therapy] was compulsory. It was a top-down injunction [...] the project management also decided to sanction those who did not show up, to withdraw their pocket-money. But I do not think this actually happened (Starna 2011: 130).

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<sup>22</sup> On the Italian region we studied, see Urru 2011 for such structural ambiguity; and Gianfagna 2011 for a hidden form of strict control on asylum seekers’ attitudes.

According to the project's regulation, the function of regular flats-meetings was to teach hosts "how to live here" by teaching them to respect both project schedules and timetables, and the premises where they were hosted, taking care of the furniture and keeping the lodgings clean respecting assigned cleaning turns; and to periodically check that all the above run smoothly. Sanctions including the withdrawal of pocket money were indeed adopted when such regulations were not fully respected, and a moral judgment of each asylum seeker based on appropriate behavior was accordingly formulated by the social workers and the psychologist. But by conflating the residential meetings with group-therapy sessions, a moral judgment was also directly linked to each individual's readiness to accept a purportedly free psychological support. Those women who hardly showed up at meetings were labeled as un-cooperative and un-trustful – and therefore un-worthy – despite the fact that they could be absent for many different reasons (including contingent impediments, unfamiliarity with psychological therapy, and a reasonable skepticism to fully trust a psychologist hired by the same project that controls the whole reception process and could jeopardize the very determination procedure). Others did show up on a more regular basis although, as the therapist specified, those who did recall a traumatic past story during a meeting never showed up again afterwards.

In her seminal work on humanitarian aid and refugees in the global South, Barbara Harrell-Bond (1999) traced a shift in the humanitarian paradigm, from aid policies that treated refugees "as persons" to a more recent (post cold war) production of helpless victims who need to be educated. She thus argued that it is not the need for help which is in question, but rather the type of help provided. Anthropological literature on humanitarian aid and social support has subsequently acknowledged the "endemic ethical dilemmas" of humanitarianism (Feldman 2007: 692), its inherently asymmetrical and hierarchical nature, the inextricable nexus between assisting and monitoring or controlling, as well as the effects of humanitarian practice on both providers and recipients (Redfield 2006). Ethnographic studies have thus challenged abstract generalizations,

exploring the historical, cultural and political nature of humanitarian aid and social support. As Rozakou recently noted, such comparative perspectives demonstrated that the primary intention of social workers and volunteers to assist refugees and asylum seekers should not be overlooked; at the same time, we should also be aware that “they strive to help the people they meet ... and improve their living conditions in ways that seem to be universal and natural but are, in fact, profoundly cultural” (2012: 574)<sup>23</sup>. On a broader, more general and theoretical scale, this issue touches upon the thin line between “routine practices that proceed with little reflection and planning, and agentic acts that intervene in the world with something in mind (or in the heart)” (Ortner 2006: 136).

Within the projects I examined, in a somehow circular way, the profoundly cultural pedagogical programme connected with the moral dimension discussed before. Projects proposed to asylum seekers specific paths of help and assistance with standardized steps (from first material aid, to Italian language courses, psychological consultancies, and in some cases re-training courses), and they informally set norms of conduct and prescribed appropriate “natural” behaviour, all of which was (presented as if it were) aimed at their future integration and self-sufficiency. Ethnographic findings show that asylum seekers who comply better to the projects’ expectations, following all the required steps and behaving accordingly, were likely to benefit more from actions of counseling and support which were designed and presented as equally directed to all “guests”. Yet, the official numbers and figures about “integration” mentioned above also show that compliance to projects requirements, duties and regulations has no direct consequence for asylum seekers, neither automatically leading to a positive outcome of their determination procedure, nor to a dignified regular life beyond mere survival.

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<sup>23</sup> For a critical analysis of humanitarian work see, among others: Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Feldman and Tickin 2010; Hyndman 2000. See Robins 2009 for an interesting case of creative uses of humanitarian technologies in support of new forms of political agency among refugees.

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