REFLECTIONS AFTER WORKING AT THE CENTER FOR REFUGEES OF CONETTA, ITALY: PRACTICE AND COMPETENCIES NEEDED

Mario Giampaolo, Ph.D.[1]
Antonella Pascali, M.A.[2]

ABSTRACT: During the 2014 and the 2015 the Mediterranean Sea continued to be the theater of a huge migratory flow. Only in these two years, more than 320,000 persons, especially from Nigeria, Gambia, Senegal, Mali and Bangladesh, left their countries for a long travel with the hope of finding a place where they could live with dignity. Once they arrive on the Italian costs of Sicily, Calabria, and Sardinia, immigrants are distributed throughout the different regions of Italy where they are hosted in centers for refugees' reception. In these centers they can stay until their request as political refugee is accepted. From November 2015 until April 2016, the first author worked in the refugee center of Conetta, a small village in the area of Venice in the north east of Italy. Established at the end of July 2016, the center is one of the biggest of the country and hosts more than 500 men hailing from the sub-Saharan countries of Africa, and the Asian countries of Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Starting from this experience the authors explain the different practices of the job as social worker in a reception center and identify the needed competences to carry out this work.

Keywords: Immigration, communities of practice, competencies, global issues, first welcoming system

The following paper is written with the hopes of starting a series of research works in the years to come. The willingness to develop them originates from a work experience that allowed the first author to live personally the phenomenon of immigrants' reception in Italy and this paper just aims to set a starting point in describing the experience. Through this account we will attempt to highlight the characteristics of the community of practice (Wenger, 2006; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2007) of the social workers who every day are committed in the management of a reception center for immigrants. The second part of this paper originates, likewise, from a problem found during this experience: the lack of training the workers suffer in challenging the difficulties of their work in their relations with the immigrants. Our aim, in this part, will be to identify in the literature competences models and using them to define the most important issues in designing training courses for this sector of emerging professionals.

The reception center where the first author worked as a social operator from November 2015 to April 2016, is situated in the Venice area, north east of Italy. Conetta, the name of this village, is part of the municipality of Cona and has a number of inhabitants of about 200 people. Here the Prefecture of Venice has identified a former Italian Air Force military base as a useful place for the reception of immigrants. During the period under review, the center was giving shelter to an average of 500 people, thus exceeding by far the number of inhabitants who lived in Conetta. The guests of the center were native above all of the Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Gambia, and Senegal) and Asia (Bangladesh, Pakistan), they were all men, with a mean age of 25, partly English-

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[1] Mario Giampaolo, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at University of Siena, mario.giampaolo@unisi.it
[2] Antonella Pascali, M.A., is Professor of English on contract at the Department of Education at University of Macerata, *antonella.pascali*@unimc.it

speaking and French-speaking, but with a high percentage of people only speaking their native language.

The military base housing these people was a large fenced area in the Venetian countryside. Inside there were some buildings used as dormitories, a secretary's office, warehouses, a laundry, a gym, a canteen, a kitchen and a waste collection center. There were also three large tents, two used as dormitories and one as a common area where the guests could eat, and where other activities, such as Italian language lessons, took place. There were also containers, most of which were destined for use as showers and toilets, while only two as infirmary. Inside the camp there was a football field and a vegetable garden, too.

The Community of Practice of Social Workers

This paper will try to highlight the practices the social workers of the reception center of Conetta adopted during our stay there. By practice we mean the explicit and implicit elements of their work that are the outcome of a negotiation between tangible and intangible aspects through which they tried to reach the results expected in their work (Fabbri, 2007). The theoretical framework used for this analysis considers the learning of these practices (by any learner, social workers or students, general workers, etc.) as involving the persons while they realize activities related to their own interests or work. Thus, the learners adopt general practices, beliefs, and values shared by the community itself. These communities, called "communities of practice," are groups of individuals who, carrying out activities, develop a shared repertoire of experiences, tools, and ways to solve common problems. The repertoire provides a patrimony for the people who become part of these communities and contributes to the pursuit of their objectives. The community shares a wide range of practices developed through the efforts in solving both ordinary and significant problems (Budwig, 2015). The narration and the reflections that follow are relative to the period between November 2015 and April 2016.

The Working Hours

The working day of the social workers in the reception center lasted seven hours and half; they began at nine in the morning and worked until seven in the evening. Everyone was entitled to one three quarters of an hour break during the morning, a one hour break at lunch time and one more three quarters break in the afternoon. This was the only information social workers knew when they were recruited. But the information was not completely true. The greatest difficulty in schedule compliance was due to the lack of a room where operators could relax undisturbed. Being always in contact with the guests inevitably led the workers to always interact with them. Without the possibility to take regular breaks, as assured in the employment contract, each operator reacted in a different way. Most of them did not have breaks, allowing themselves only several cigarettes in the day. Some, especially the new workers, stopped their activities walking away from the busiest areas of the camp; others used their cars to relax for few minutes. Nevertheless, the workers' break was highly respected by all the other workers and even those who, by choice, didn't have breaks, didn't criticize their colleagues. Therefore, without the

opportunity to take regular breaks, everyone was implicitly forced to work more than they should, and this was experienced by many social workers as an injustice and created discontent.

The Journey to Reach the Camp

As a matter of fact, the working day began much earlier than nine o'clock in the morning and exactly at eight, when the social workers coming from the same area or city met to reach the center, sharing their cars in turn and drove for about one hour. In the evening we drove back home for one more hour. While travelling together, social workers had the opportunity to exchange their points of view on their work. The two-hour journey together represented a real opportunity for socializing and exchanging working strategies and information to accomplish our activities during the day. We could talk about the guests, their character, whether they were friendly or not, if they had correct behavior and if they were respectful. Also, we could exchange information on how to perform a given task. For example, if you had to accompany guests to hospital, it could be important to ask other colleagues information about the shortest road to arrive there, the bureaucratic procedure and the documents required. Finally, this hour's trip was important above all for those who had recently started to work because they could learn from more experienced operators, ask for advices and generally understand how to work better.

The Administrative Office and Different Types of Activities

Heart of all the activities done in the camp was the administrative office. Every morning, the social workers, arrived at the center, met in the office to know the tasks that would be assigned to them. The types of activities within the camp were various. There were very simple activities such as, for example, the supervision of the attendance register, of the register where the guests could declare their health problems and the cafeteria register; the supervision of the queues during the distributions of goods and services as well as the supervision of the structures of the camp. Other kinds of activities were more manual such as cleaning the camp with the aid of the cleaning staff and those guests who voluntarily offered their help; giving the meals and managing the laundry service, loading and unloading the various goods coming from outer suppliers. Other duties include checking temperature of food and of the water in the hydraulic system, distributing money, documents, clothes or medicines. Finally, there were more complex tasks such as, for example, when the guests were accompanied to hospital or to the police headquarters for the interviews through which it was possible to know their life history and allow them to apply for political asylum, the management of the documents concerning the requests for asylum or the residence permit and the documents that allowed them to access the national health service of the area.

The Participation in the Community of Practice

The participation of the members in a community of practice not only concerns their involvement in some activities with some people, but also becomes a process of building the identity of this community (Budwig, 2015). In Conetta center the participation of the

newcomers in the center activities followed an order tacitly accepted even if never formally established.

Newcomer social workers were initially involved in supervision activities and in the distribution of the meals. They supervised, for example, the register that guests had to sign every day as a guarantee of their presence in the center and which is necessary to determine the economic contribution they should receive. In addition, newcomer operators had to ask about the guests' health status and note any problem in a different register. They had just to sit at a table and control if the guests signed next to their names only. Thus, they could establish a first contact with guests, which was very important because the essence of the operator work is precisely to have a good relationship with the guests and be recognized by them as authoritative persons.

The distribution of the meals was a moment of great tension among the guests as the quality and quantity of food were always a source of discontent. The newcomers had to learn how to be quick and careful in distributing the right and same quantity of food to everybody. Also, the guests had to follow long lines before receiving their meals and many of them did not respect their turn. It was therefore necessary to control that the positions in the line would be respected not to cause further tensions.
The cleaning and control of the center facilities, that is green areas, dormitories, bathrooms, were constantly supervised to detect malfunctions or damages that were promptly reported to plumbers and electricians.

This kind of activity allowed the newcomers to orient themselves in the camp and memorize the bed occupied by each guest. This could be very important when it was necessary to communicate with them, as the center was very wide. At the beginning, these first activities were also helpful to understand the newcomers' abilities and readiness in performing the tasks and assign them more complex ones.
With the increase of the social workers' experience, the responsibilities they might have and the activities they could manage proportionally grew. For example, the task of accompanying the guests outside the center was assigned to more experts workers. They had to know the documents necessary to access the public health service and the different steps the guests had to follow to receive assistance. In addition, guests were also accompanied to the police station to get the residence permit. Also in this case it was necessary to understand what kind of documents were important to be sure that everything was properly filled out and validated.

The task of distributing documents, clothes, products for personal hygiene, and medicines was also assigned to the workers only when they had acquired some more experience. Crucial in the delivery of documents was to recognize the guests and know their position in the structures and tents. For the distribution of clothes and products for personal hygiene the operators had to know above all the booking process that allowed them to know who could receive the goods during that day and, in this way, prepare more easily the goods to distribute. They had also to know how to fill the forms used to record that received the goods and consequently who had not received them yet. A nurse distributed the medicines with the help of an expert social worker. In this case, the social

workers had to know the organization of the infirmary that is the disposition of the medicines and the documents, and how to use specific machinery as the nebulizer or fill out the forms to record the delivery of the therapies and the daily consumption of medicine.

In the administrative office the coordinators and the most experienced workers managed the center. The first task of the day was to print the updated attendance register, the register to monitor the health of the guests and the register the guests had to sign at lunch and dinner time. Later, the social workers and the coordinators prepared the agenda of the next day: that is, a list of activities to be carried out with the specification of the starting time and the social workers' name. The other activity managed by the administrative office concerned putting the guests in touch with the police headquarters and the national health centers of the territory. Every day, the social workers in the administrative office prepared the guests' documents necessary for their requests to the police, those required when the National Health Service called them for mandatory medical examinations or when they had to go back to hospital for a therapeutic follow up or to see a specialist. In addition, social workers in the administrative office also had the task of recording the goods of the warehouses and asking the employer the necessary supplies to prevent sudden run out.

The administrative office also included a front office to receive the guests' requests. The activities of the administrative office were very complex and to perform them, precise information was necessary about procedures and documents that had to be asked the central office. It was important to have basic knowledge of how the National Health Service and the police headquarters worked and it was necessary for the workers to ensure a continuous presence in the camp (a minimum of five days out of seven) in order to know what was going on and to have every situation under control.

There were two major obstacles in carrying out these activities: the lack of initial training and the difficulty in realizing coordination meetings. For this reason, often the information needed to perform the tasks was incomplete, unclear, incorrect or out of date. Moreover, as it was impossible to divide the back office from the front office section, this made it hard to concentrate and carry out what a social worker was doing due to the overcrowding of the guests.

The Meaning of Practices in the Social Workers' Community

The activities described above are only a small part of the many the social workers carry out during their working day. Furthermore, although they may seem very different, they had a common denominator. The social workers, while doing their work independently or using the advices of the most experienced operators, made the best of the continuous changes in the situations and, day after day, realized and shared practices that: (a) provided solutions to the conflicts generated by the contradiction between the needs of parties external to what happened in the center, such as the employer and the institutions, and the effective realization of the demands and the reality of the center itself; (b) promoted a common memory that allowed the individual operator to work even without

knowing all the information necessary to carry out the activities of the center; (c) helped the newcomers to become part of the community through their participation to its working practices; (d) allowed the creation of specific meanings and terms that distinguished the different procedures of the performed tasks; (e) created a working atmosphere in which automatic and repetitive tasks, sometimes considered unfair and meaningless, met with rituals, habits, stories, events, dramatic situations and rhythms of the community life (Wenger, 2006).

Competency Models for the Social Workers of the Reception Centers

The second part of this paper tries to identify, based on academic and institutional sources, the competences needed for the professionalism development of the operators engaged in the daily activities of the reception centers in Italy. The analysis of these competences might be useful to identify the most important issues and design possible training modules for these emerging professionals.

The first institutional source that outlines a competency model is the Operating Manual for the Activation and Management of the Reception and Integration Services for the Applicants and Beneficiaries of International Protection (Central Service of the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, 2015). This manual explains the importance of the relationship between social worker and guest, where the former plays a key role in the integration of the latter. The professionals assist the guests in solving any question of the everyday life and facilitate them in the knowledge of the territory. The manual recognizes, as written in the first part of this work, that the relationship between operator and guest is characterized by mutual trust, which is the starting point for an integration process necessary to strengthen the resources of the guests and apply them in a new social context. In order to help operators to develop their ability to manage effective interpersonal relationships, the manual contains some useful elements (p. 5):

- listen to the guests and help them in expressing their own needs;
- recognize the competences of their professional role, their duties and weaknesses;
- acquire the specific competences of the role and bring themselves up to date;
- be aware of their own personal weaknesses;
- make sure the guest is aware of how and when the social worker can intervene;
- know about the services and the resources of the territory;
- build relationships for information exchange and mutual cooperation with other institutions of the territory;
- orient and encourage the access of the guests to the services they need;
- build a reciprocity relationship with the guests, make them aware of their responsibility so that they will activate themselves independently according to their individual resources;
- relate with the guests based on their personal characteristics;

- share the intervention plan with other social workers, in order to realize complementary activities.

The operating manual (2015) states that the social workers' role is not to take the guests upon themselves, but to make their own expertise available to facilitate a personalized reception process based on the services available in the territory and on the guests' personal characteristics, rights and responsibilities. For this purpose the social workers must develop an expertise based on (p. 5):

- the empathic listening which allows the understanding of the guest's perspective;
- the building of a relationship based on dialogue and negotiation;
- a communication that aims to structure and make the relationship transparent during the integration process;
- the knowledge of the guests and their life story.

In addition to the social workers' individual ability in establishing a relationship of trust in facilitating learning (Henschke, 2011), it is important to develop competences to work with colleagues. As a matter of fact, the necessity to work as a group was one of the most important problems in the Conetta reception center. In fact, the lack of organizational meetings did not allow professionals to receive more detailed and updated information and reflect as a group on the procedures to carry out the activities.

A training program for the social workers' professional development should also make competences for teamwork easier to achieve. The Central Service suggests, in its operating manual, the importance of developing intervention abilities and tools for social workers working as group and it reports what should be the skills of the coordinators (see Table 1).

An interesting study by Boccuzzo and Grassia (2008) carried out a statistical analysis that describes and quantifies the activities of the social workers providing services to immigrants.

Table 3
Competencies Needed for Social Workers and Coordinators Working in Team

Team			
Social workers			**Coordinators**
Competences	Skills in assistance programming and planning	Tools	Competences
Ability to share a group work;	Verify and share both the problems of the intervention and the resources of	Periodic meetings for planning and implementation;	Coordination of the social workers and management of human

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	the group;		resources;
Know the different spheres of the guests' life, even those not based on the social workers' specific skills	Assess the work done;	Share periodic reports about realized interventions and with whom, the outer contacts, etc.	Conduct periodic meetings;
Ability to listen (to the guests, colleagues and external actors);	Share any difficulties;	Share a telephone list of guests;	Management of the relations between the reception project and the team with the local authorities and other actors of the territory;
Knowledge of the specific kinds of guests (who the guests are, in terms of legal status and general psycho-social conditions);	Share the achieved results;	Opportunities for updating and training;	Promotion of agreements with the services of the area;
Ability to move within a local area.	Ensure a comprehensive approach in the project management and in taking charge of the guests	Supervision of the group that can support the single social workers' and/or the group work.	Promotion of training opportunities.

The study collected data through interviews and focus groups with social workers and coordinators on a national scale, to identify the competences considered necessary. The identified competencies are distinct in transversal, technical, specialist knowledge and personal characteristics.

Transversal competences concern interpersonal abilities, group works, work planning, decision-making, tracing and management of information and data, writing projects, organizing others' work, writing reports, public speaking, computer skills, and language skills.

The technical competences are motivating, developing and directing guests, negotiating conflicts, facilitating reconciliations, conducting interviews, listening to explicit or implicit needs, analyzing the behavior of a single person or a group, managing projects, adapting one's own actions to others', making of a cost-benefit analysis to determine the most effective solution, properly using equipment, tools and materials needed to perform a task, working in emergencies or in critical situations, explaining others how to do tasks, making communication and social marketing, managing other people's time, carrying out manual tasks and minor maintenance.

Specialist knowledge allows one to understand the regulations related to immigration, the procedures for the provision of services to persons, the cultures of multiethnic societies, the methods for needs assessment necessary for the design of social-educational interventions, the institutional system and the local welfare, the trends of the society, how the European Institutions, the national and the local authorities work, how to recognize the behavioral/affective disease, the leadership process, the social influence and the group dynamics, the individual differences in personality, how to design training programs and measure the effects, the social intervention techniques, the norms about health and hygiene, how the school system works, how to apply statistical techniques and social research, how to apply first aid techniques, how to recognize wounds, diseases, physical and psychic dysfunctions, the psychological development in childhood and adolescence.

Finally, the study of Boccuzzo and Grassia (2008) identified personal characteristics social workers and coordinators should have. These are values that integrate the technical, specialist and transversal competences. Personal characteristics relate to friendliness, mental elasticity, patience, interest towards diversity, detachment, self-control, deduction abilities, precision and accuracy, creativity, intuition, anthropological curiosity, persuasiveness, psychophysical endurance, courage, and willingness to play an affective role.

The ISFOL, agency of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is responsible for the systematization at a national level of the professions. During the years, the agency has carried out interesting researches designed to determine the necessary competences for those (social workers, coordinators, volunteers, etc.) working in the provision of services for immigrants. In research conducted for this agency, Gaudio and Caramelli (2009) identified data to select the competences considered important by coordinators and social workers of organizations that deal with international migration in Italy. Again, the data identified three types of competences: basic, specialist and technical, transversal (see Table 2).

Table 4

Competencies identified in the Work of Gaudio and Caramelli (2009)

Basic	Specialist and technical	Transversal
Management / organizational	Relational	Inter-cultural communication
Linguistic	Networking	Ability to handle stress

Technological	Problems of immigration	Conflict management
Job security	Policies of the labor market	Ability to establish helping relationships
	Design and management of social interventions	Team work
	Regulations of the welfare system	Problem solving
	Public events, communication, etc.	
	Design and management of research	
	Knowledge of local services	
	Analysis of capabilities and user needs	
	Monitoring and evaluation	

The competency models identified in this initial analysis of institutional and academic sources can be considered as the expression of the training needs that characterize the work of social operators and coordinators of the reception centers for immigrants in Italy. It is crucial to note that these models, based on the employees' opinions, give a strong emphasis to the relational component. The personal characteristics of the social workers identified by the second model can explain the nature of this professional role that, besides possessing technical and specialist competences, must be devoted to the aid of people in difficulty. The listed specialist and technical competences include a wide range of skills and knowledge that could justify the need to differentiate and categorize the specialties of individual social workers. They might specialize in health issues, legal issues, labor market, educational project, and so on. According to our experience as social workers, moreover, there is a strong need for expertise in specific roles in the management of reception centers such as: kitchen and cafeteria management, logistics, facilities management, as well as a coordinator role that require digital skills, ability in research and evaluation, communication skills, and ability in the management of human resources.

Transversal competences, other important components of these models, allow social workers to meet the challenges of a work where the situation is never well defined and is always subject to sudden changes in established procedures. Skills such as problem solving, stress management and decision-making are key features for this professional figure.

That is why, we reassert, this analysis of the competency models, although limited, can be considered a starting point to propose teaching modules, themes and methodologies for the realization of specific training courses.

Considerations for Facilitating Social Workers' Training in the Reception Centers

Knowing the learning needs of professionals working in this area of intervention leads one to reflect about the possibility of designing specific training courses. As claimed by Gaudio and Caramelli (2009), "an effective training program should start from what social workers experience through a process of reflexive rationality" (p. 474). This reflexive rationality could be based on the theoretical and practical frameworks of andragogy (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2009), organizational learning (Argyris, & Schon, 1998), and action learning (O'Neil, & Marsick, 2007).

Starting from the identified competencies, it is possible to highlight the core themes of the course to develop teaching modules. These core themes could include:

- the relationship between social workers and guests;
- the teamwork with other social workers;
- the coordination of the team;
- the communication among social workers;
- the stress management;
- the provided services in the reception centers;
- the different activities in the reception centers;
- the evaluation of the effectiveness of the provided services;
- the social, political and cultural contexts of the countries of origin and of the guest countries;
- the types and characteristics of migrants;
- national and international standards on the right of asylum and on the request of a residence permit;
- the National Health Service;
- hygiene and first aid procedures;
- safety in the workplace.

Of course, most of these themes need to be taught through traditional methodologies as lectures, but to realize effective training, facilitators and trainers should consider active learning methodologies, too. In particular, it could be interesting to propose living lectures to foster discussions, roleplaying and simulations, focus groups and brainstorming among participants, action learning conversations, personalized learning through learning contracts, case studies and visits to reception centers.

Conclusions

The first part of this paper presented the experience of the authors as participants of the community of the social workers in the reception center for asylum seekers of the province of Venice. This narration can be useful to understand what activities and tools helped the operators in building the identity and meanings of the community of practice (Wenger, 2006; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2007). Although it is not possible to mention all the activities carried out at the center, the ones mentioned above in this paper

were presented in an attempt to highlight an implicit training performed by the social workers in the transition from a peripheral involvement to a greater participation in the community.

The second part presented three different competency models for the professionals who realize interventions with immigrants. They are interesting because they were realized through interviews with real social workers and coordinators in reception centers. Future developments in this direction could be made in collecting other competency models to achieve a comprehensive systematization by which to design training courses for those working in this area of intervention.

For sure, designing training courses for professionals in this field cannot be realized without thinking of personalized, experiential and reflective components facilitating authentic learning. A training course based only on the simple transmission of knowledge, although necessary due to the nature of certain themes, would limit the effectiveness of training. A training program to develop competencies for this kind of work should not be aimed exclusively to provide and manage services, but to work in highly complex situations with people who need to be accompanied to play a functional role in a new society.

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