Migration, culture contact and the complexity of coexistence: a systemic imagination

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Abstract

This paper zooms in on a part of a larger qualitative and participatory study on the integration of asylum seekers and refugees in a specific Italian territory, that focuses on the embodied experience of newcomers in relation to the physical and social space, in daily interactions with others, and with the public discourse. We use Bateson's systemic understanding of culture contact to illuminate the struggles, constraints and possibilities of coexistence and to challenge the narrow interpretation of integration as a one-sided effort of the individual. We think of culture contact as a complex, relational, and entangled process of interaction in the human and non-human world. So, our methodology in this part of the project, based on sensobiographic walks, is a way to perform and to search culture contact, by creating an unexpected narrative and dialogic encounter between newcomers, natives and researchers in the physical space, using senses to enhance a sense of connectedness and illuminate learning, hence opening possibilities not only for understanding, but for transformative experiences and unprecedented relationships.

Keywords: Coexistence; complexity; culture contact; embodiment; integration

The integration discourse and unexpected subjects

In Italy, 2018 was the year of a dramatic turn in the public discourse and reception system for refugees (Luraschi, Massena & Pitzalis, 2019). Humanitarian reasons for asylum were deleted from the state law and the diffused model of reception, that was starting to bear its fruits, was dismantled in favor of an emergency model based on massive segregation and control. State resources for refugees' education, job-related training and tutoring were

reduced, and local agencies providing intervention for groups of hosts in apartments and centers (SPRAR), dispersed across urban and rural territories, had to change their pedagogical orientation, dismiss many educators and social workers, and take a more bureaucratic role of controllers and administrators of objectified human lives and bodies.

This research had started a few weeks before this turn, as a qualitative, narrative, territory-based study funded by Fondazione ALSOS' call "Migration and Migrants in Italy: Places and practices of coexistence in the construction of new forms of social interaction". We wanted to document and analyze the diffused model of reception and its transformative effects in the Province of Lecco, Northern Italy, using the insiders' voices (Merrill & West, 2009) to chronicle informal and transformative learning of both newcomers and natives. We questioned linear and trivialized notions of integration informing EU's policies and practices and inspired by the neoliberal agenda more than human rights (Xanthaki, 2016). In the present global context of relentless migrations and growing diversity, integration is a problematic concept for many reasons: it entails the nation as a social homogenous whole and it reifies culture (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018; Schinkel, 2018); it fails in accounting for diversity, for the voices and aspirations of those to whom the integration policies are directed (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018); it is focused on migrants' features, needs, or skills, hence underestimating the role of relationships, interdependence, and circularity in building the concrete possibilities of 'integration'. Pushing migrants to mere adaption, the dominant model of integration enforces neo-colonial knowledge production (Schinkel, 2018) and reduces the learning potential of adult education to implementing 'normative assumptions concerning who the citizen should be – or rather become – in order to be included in and part of society (Fejes, 2019, p. 235)'.

Systemic imagination and curiosity for migrants' diversity, their lived embodied experience, and their relationships with the local community is a way to chronicle, in sensitive ways, the systemic process around subjects who bear different habits, look, and status. Migration is a complex systemic phenomenon, nowadays characterized by unprecedented speed, fueled by the escalating effects of wars and climate changes, and increasing inequalities on a global scale which pose new questions to adult education (Morrice, Shan & Sprung, 2017). The most recent features of global migrations, conceptualized as *transnationalism* (Morris, Hongxia & Sprung, 2017) and *superdiversity* (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015; Vertovec, 2007), still need to be fully understood in their long-term effects. The increased presence, at least in Europe, of more groups of different origins (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018), with different social backgrounds, life styles, and patterns of contact with their original country, or roots, as well as different accommodation strategies to the new environment, makes it impossible to talk of "belonging" or "cultural identity" in fixed ways. This situation could bring to new, more cosmopolitan and multiple identities, but what seems more likely is the refusal of the other (not least the "other" inside us), racism and fundamentalism. Superdiversity is a controversial, maybe Eurocentric concept (Czajka & de Haas, 2014), but it reminds us of the need to tackle the interplay of social configurations, reciprocal representations, and concrete encounters between diverse people. Facing this complexity, the neoliberal agenda, focused on economic reason, massive categorization, and forced adaptation, appears poor and creates disasters silencing the voices of both migrants and natives, and failing to recognize the reciprocity of their living conditions.

We focus 'Unexpected Subjects' (the title of our study): male[1] asylum seekers and refugees hosted in apartments and centers scattered in the Province of Lecco. They are *newcomers* (Wildemeersch, 2017), a word that bypasses normative categorizations and generalizations, and suggests a feature of experience, i.e. *action* in relation to a (new)

environment, not a *status*, as entailed by such terms as 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee', or a social generalized *identity*, as 'migrants'. We value the diversity and uniqueness of these young men, each bringing his origins, language, habits, expectations, and peculiar representations of the experience of migration. They are new in the place and they learn day by day what is possible and what is not, for them. If we want to know anything about them, we must talk and share a space of dialogue, which is problematic and not guaranteed. Literature on adult education demonstrates that being accepted, seen, talked to, considered, respected, recognized, are fundamental experiences for any newcomer to *find a place* – literal and symbolic - in the new society. Integration is not only about finding a job or speaking the language, or the outcome of an individual effort of adaptation: it is a relational process towards harmonic coexistence.

Integration can be re-imagined by drawing attention to real lives, namely to the daily effects of informal embodied learning hidden in the relationship with space, with others, and with the public discourse itself. Newcomers' movements in the physical space are revealing of their relation to the territory; the spatial turn has challenged the idea of space as a mere container, characterizing it, instead, as 'the ongoing construction of human activity and practices' (Higgins, 2017, p. 102). The enactment of spaces through movement nurtures our imagination, memory and identity, shaped by our biography, ethnicity, religion, gender, and language (Higgins, 2017).

This paper covers a part of the larger study to address the topic of coexistence, its struggles, limits, and possibilities, using Bateson's seminal work on culture contact (1935) to develop reflexivity and relational sensitivity. In the following, we present our theoretical framework and the context of our research. Then, we describe the layered design and methodology of the project before offering some significant stories from the field. In the end, we discuss our examples in the light of the concept of culture contact.

Complexity theory: re-imagining migration in a new frame

Migration and coexistence are constitutive of the human condition: as soon as the human species made its appearance on Earth, groups started moving in search for resources; so, they had to negotiate with natives the possibility to live in the same space. Bateson (1935) describes three different outcomes, or states of equilibrium, as a result of this:

a) The complete fusion of the originally different groups
b) The elimination of one or both groups
c) The persistence of both groups in dynamic equilibrium within one major community (Bateson, 1935, p. 65).

He warned decision makers to thoroughly consider factors at work in the cycle of disequilibrium/equilibrium that always characterizes culture contact (and all human relationships), and to take responsibility for it: the settlement of newcomers in a new place brings disequilibrium and pushes the whole system towards one of these ends. We call them (a) inclusion, (b) integration, and (c) participation, warning the reader, however, of their ambiguous and different meanings. Each of these outcomes, desirable from a certain perspective, entails a different treatment of human differences. What is desirable? What is the political agenda about the management of difference, and what are its consequences for (adult) education?

By centering our research on culture contact, we try to re-imagine migration in a different, if not new, frame. Historically, several cycles of disequilibrium/equilibrium

have been structural for Europe, and more generally for the evolution and differentiation of human life on Earth, bringing by turns to the assimilation, destruction, or contamination of life worlds, connecting and/or separating people bearing different languages, art, bureaucracy, laws, as well as illnesses, weapons, and technologies (Diamonds, 1997). So, when we think about 'the long summer of migration', the 'refugee crisis', or any other recent phenomena, it can be refreshing to remember that we are focusing but a small arc of a larger ecological and historical pattern (Bateson, 1972). Bateson framed it with a question: "what do we do with differences?". A crucial question, and the basis of present and future politics and practices, not least educational.

In fact, any research on migration, nowadays, has to face superdiversity and the unprecedented need to understand how cultural worlds meet (Blommaert, Spotti & Van der Aa, 2017). In the global North, populations are growing diverse, bringing at the forefront matters of social inclusion, integration and/or participation, not only in the political discourse, but in daily lives. If the political agenda is only able to imagine migrants as marginalized adult learners, the circular pattern of culture contact and the question of how to manage differences remains unthought. Research should investigate the conditions that foster the harmonic coexistence of diverse people, and what kind of learning they need. There are many reasons to believe that we are failing at that.

The task demands a circular imagination, i.e. shifting attention from the individual to the system, as a complex situation where everybody is pushed to learn, reciprocally. As said, the integration discourse is one-way: newcomers are expected to comply with educational programs shaped for them to meet neoliberal goals and achieve 'full citizenship' in the long run (Fejes, 2019; Guo, 2015). There are apparently no goals of integration for natives, giving for granted that they already are integrated. What can be done to enhance, in the whole system, the kind of transformative learning that can ensure livable ways of coexistence?

The systemic perspective suggests that categorizing the other is the wrong answer to the issues of culture contact. The 'other' and 'us' are the product of interaction. Coexistence is a circular pattern of multiple, interdependent, and entangled levels of interaction. The idea of 'multiple embeddedness of migrants who form networks of bonding and bridging social relations across multiple social fields' (Blommaert, Spotti & Van der Aa, 2017, p. 350) is also true for the ones we call 'natives', who may have been, or will soon become, migrants themselves. In our society, an individual is the product of multiple cultural realities, not fixed entities, but holistic contexts and systems of co-evolving values (Jurkova & Guo, 2018). This also includes the crucial relationship with space, objects, and a whole territory, its climate and atmosphere, landscape, embedded values, constraints, as well as the possibilities it offers.

We are inspired by complexity theory (Formenti, 2016, 2018; Glasersfeld, 1995; Morin, 2015) as a source of metaphors and imagination that challenges the dominant linear vocabulary. When complex phenomena are simplified for the sake of understanding and control, we can expect ecologic and social disasters (Bateson, 1972). The dominant discourse on migration is based on linear assumptions and metaphors; complexity allows to re-imagine it as the intersection of irreducible circular processes where the process of reception is seen as a whole entailing an entanglement of micro, meso and macro processes:

a) The individual construction of behaviors, perceptions, meanings, and emotions (microlevel);
b) The structural determinants and larger processes sustaining dominant and marginal models of coexistence in a certain society (macrolevel);

c) The relational and communicational spaces where real people meet, develop, transform their actions, ideas and perspectives within an ongoing dynamic context (mesolevel).

We are especially interested in the latter, where embodied and embedded narratives (Formenti, West & Horsdal, 2014) sustain a livable coexistence, and learning.

To give a method to this frame, we refer to embodied reflexivity (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Hunt, 2013; Pink, 2009), the 'space turn' in socio-linguistic (Higgins, 2017), and the 'sensory turn' in ethnographic studies. Walking together in the physical space, as maintained by De Certeau (1984), produces space itself through the embodied experience of moving, telling, and imagining together. We use sensobiographic walks, an ethnographic narrative method (Järviluoma, 2017; Luraschi & Del Negro, 2019; Murray & Järviluoma, 2019) where two subjects walk and talk together in a place of choice and share all kinds of perceptions, imaginations, and memories. The researcher facilitates the dialogue, documents, and asks further questions during or after the walk. This generative method develops meaning, beyond the mere collection of stories. We focus the 'sensescape' (Howes, 2005) and the construction of space by newcomers and natives who live in the 'same' territory, yet do not perceive it in the same way; we invite them to develop a 'common place' and co-create new meaning, that is original and notably different from the meaning assigned by urban planning or public discourse.

Changing winds: the context of our study

The public discourse of integration shifted dramatically, in Italy and Europe, in 2018 (Luraschi, Massena & Pitzalis, 2019). When we started the project, we wanted to explore the celebrated Italian *diffused model of integration* (Caneva, 2014), that was starting to bear its fruits at least in those territories where local administration, associations, citizens, and employers had taken responsibility to create a sense of community around newcomers, not least using the (uncertain and meagre) state resources in a virtuous way. Interestingly, this grassroots model has been a creative answer to the long-standing lack of solid policies and investments by the state (Korac, 2003). A world-renown example is Riace, a hilltop hamlet in the South of Italy, whose Mayor, Mimmo Lucano, was awarded by Fortune among the 50 Greatest Leaders in the World (Forthomme, 2016) for his achievements over nearly 20 years, receiving 6000 migrants and stabilizing around 450 of them in a town of 1800. Knowing that his little community was slowly dying with several empty houses and a population growing older, Lucano managed to offer housing and work to newcomers and their families, teaching them artisanal techniques and organizing a system of sheltering. Some decided to stay and re-populated the place; local citizens collaborated, for example accepting delays in payment for food and rent, waiting for state reimbursements.

In 2018, the winds of politics changed, Lucano was arrested in October for fraud and abetment of clandestine migration, and Riace's experiment was closed. In our territory (Province of Lecco), many apartments funded by the SPRAR system started to close in favor of larger centers with no resources for education, mostly located outside urban spaces in dismissed facilities or even camps. We are not going to analyze these changes or their reasons, here; what we are interested in, is their educational side. What do newcomers learn from the experience of being criminalized, rejected, and disciplined? How do adult educators live their shifting role, from facilitators of inclusion to

administrators of lives? What do natives learn from discourses of hate, racism, and fundamentalism, and from the lack of contact with the 'othered other'?

Thanks to our participatory framework, many subjects felt legitimized in bringing their worries and struggles into the research space; our aim shifted little by little from the task of chronicling best practices to chronicling the participants' frustration, fear, disillusionment, and uncertainty. And yet, the diffuse model was still celebrated by professionals, decision makers, employers, volunteers, who knew by experience that a sense of community, recognition, and cooperation is fundamental for real inclusion and participation. In several occasions, they signaled that 'inclusion' was a better word for them, referring to an Italian long-standing tradition of respect for diversity. A new research question was emerging from the field: which are the experiences of contact, on a daily base, between newcomers and natives living side by side in the same land? Can research itself be a way to enhance culture contact, beside documenting it?

The complexity of coexistence: an embodied research process

The perception of space by newcomers is shaped by their movements within the territory and shapes them in turn: we were interested in their interactions with the human and non-human world, the relationships inside and outside hosting centres and apartments and with the public space, urban and rural. Fieldwork was organized in three phases.

1. Start-up phase: shaping the network

We met and interviewed several actors involved in the welcome programs: social workers in reception centers, teachers, coordinators, local policy makers, volunteers, employers, etc. Our aim was to create a solid network of informants and start to build a complex representation of the diffused model in the territory, to realize soon that this model was being dismantled piece by piece. Our participants were grateful nonetheless for this dialogic space where they could express their feelings and reflect on what was going on.

During a workshop within a school for adult students (CPIA), Ansou[2], a 22 years old refugee from Guinea-Bissau, opened his speech thanking Silvia and the other participants – 10 refugees and asylum seekers, 2 social workers and 1 teacher:

> ANSOU: (speaking Italian) I'm very pleased with all of us being here together! We're managing to take a break from everyday stress. I'm worried about my future in Italy, because I would like to become a gardener. I have studied for one year and it was hard and important for me, but now? I don't find a job because I know only few Italians… (our translation)

In these conversations, we also realized that newcomers and natives of the same age rarely meet. Most volunteers are retired people, and young native adults travel to the big cities of the region to work or study. Informal occasions to speak Italian are also very rare. This brought to the decision to create couples of about the same age during the third phase (sensobiographic walks).

2. Mapping phase: exploring newcomers' movements in the territory

We organized two workshops with 12 social workers and four workshops with overall 30 newcomers using a narrative-aesthetic method of participatory inquiry (Formenti, 2016; Heron, 1996) to explore the newcomers' movements in the territory, using an educational and learning framework. This idea was very strong among the professionals, as witnessed by Roberto during the first workshop with social workers:

ROBERTO: Mine is a B class job, since years ago they used to say that in order to work with migrants you didn't need much, just some good will, a couple of English words, a style. I used to agree with this idea that it was a social, not an educational work, but I changed my mind in time and realized how much education was involved. […] My function is to send out [of the reception centre] people who are as suitable as possible, which doesn't mean they are conformed, but they have the right means to build and use their own competences. [Our translation]

In the newcomers' workshops, we asked them to draw a map of their daily movements, then we had an open conversation with the group. Cultural mapping (Kingsolver & et al., 2017) is an ethnographic tool to investigate the subjective understanding of space, and reveal strategies of adaptation or resistance. Researchers in anthropology, psychology, and education use it to illuminate struggles, resources, and social justice issues. Drawing circumvents linguistic gaps and facilitates storytelling; as other forms of art, it sustains the expression of emotions (see for example Mullett, 2008), and leaves space for imagination and interpretation; maps are both literal and symbolic, they trigger stories and metaphors. Besides, art combined with biography may have transformative effects (Formenti & West, 2016; Horsdal, 2012; Illeris, 2014; O'Neill, 2008).

Most participants did not speak good Italian, so mapping enabled them to share their experience; the workshops highlighted the meaning of some special places (adult school, bus/train station, supermarket, parks, football field, workplace) and daily life relationships. We learnt much from and about them: they go to school and to work; they prefer supermarkets with Free Wi-Fi; not having cars, they walk, ride a bike or use public transportation (bus, train); their approach to the territory is 'slower' than residents: how does this influence their perception and meaning?

We also learnt that the rare contacts with local citizens are usually purposeful and based on needs: the construction of the newcomer as needing and vulnerable starts here. Informal contacts, free from specific purposes, are rare. Newcomers move around, yet they remain invisible to Italian citizens.
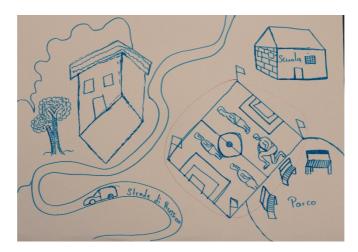

Figure 1: Lamin's drawing (workshop with newcomers)

In his drawing [fig. 1] Lamin, a 22 years old asylum seeker form Gambia, composed all his favourite places. He lives in a small mountain village and he is taking lessons for driving license.

LAMIN: If you want a job, you need a car to get there. I go mountain running every morning and to school three times a week in the afternoon. I also love playing football with Italians…

SILVIA: Can I ask you if there are places that you don't like?

LAMIN: I hate smoke. I don't like places with people who smoke or sell bad things [drugs; dialogue is in Italian, translation is ours].

Drawings and stories illuminate the effects of public discourse on newcomers' experience. An example: on April 11th, 2019 newspapers and social media gave relief to an ordnance from the Mayor of Caloziocorte (LC), a city involved in our project, determining a new town planning scheme that banned reception facilities for refugees nearby schools and the train station and relocated apartments and centers at periphery. Newspapers bluntly titled 'A part of the city closed to migrants' [fig. 2]. Media and politicians often refer to 'migrants' as a generalized category; a not accidental mistake, reinforcing trivialization and construction of a generalized unwelcomed other. This policy of communication raises barriers nurturing fears, distrust and hate; the lack of spaces where it is possible to reflect and maybe challenge the meaning of words and decisions like the ones reported brings negative emotions to escalate and influences the use of space.

Figure 2: A national newspaper announcing, 'A part of the city closed to migrants' (Corriere della Sera, April 11th, 2019)

We had a workshop on April 16th, five days after these news; there had been no previous occasion to talk among the refugees or with social workers. Dumbia, a 19 years' old refugee arrived in 2016 as unaccompanied minor from Ivory Coast:

DUMBIA: I don't like going to Caloziocorte, but I am forced to go there to take a train and come here, to school.

SILVIA: And why don't you like to go there?

DUMBIA: I saw on Facebook that people do… how do you say… I saw the newspaper; they are saying this is a red area… it is a thing on immigration. You know, when I heard it, I felt pretty bad.

SILVIA: I felt bad too. Did anybody else hear this story? This news?

DUMBIA: I did not understand, I just watched a video where they talked about a red zone where strangers cannot live… and I am a stranger. [dialogue is in Italian, translation is ours]

Sabrina, a teacher, clarified that the new ordnance did not forbid walking in the streets, since red areas concern buildings, not people; she informed Dumbia and the others that she belongs to a local committee that was asking for cancellation of the ordnance. During our workshops, it became clear that these young men's choices in moving around do not only respond to their basic needs and adaptation, but answer complex needs, not least the need for meaning-full and care-full contact. Playing, sharing, caring for the other, or simply enjoying a beautiful place in good company are what makes them (us) human: we are mammals and born vulnerable, so we fear the unknown but we are sensitive and open to the experience of care. Reciprocal diffidence is nurtured by the lack of interaction and knowledge, which is massive in these stories. The possibility to develop reciprocal trust, meaning, and hope for the future is reduced in absence of good enough relational spaces. Media also play a role in boosting the scary effects of public discourse (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). In such a climate, narrative inquiry connects back to the original roots of adult education in activism and the desire to make a difference in communities (Formenti & West, 2016; 2018).

3. The embodied phase: walking side by side

In the third part of the project, we carried out twelve sensobiographic walks with 6 newcomers and 6 native young adults about the same age, accompanied by Silvia. The lack of contact between these two groups had emerged during the inquiry, and they confirmed it. These walks were meant to be a dialogic exploration of space, namely of what we called the 'place of the heart'. In our analysis, we used a systemic layered perspective with three levels of inquiry:

- at the microlevel, we focused the insiders' subjective experience, as they tell it: their perceptions, meanings, and possibilities revealed by their movements and the stories they tell;
- at the macro level, we focused the discursive patterns shaping their everyday lives and meanings, not least through internalization; for example, the influence of media on their movements (as in Dumbia's story);
- at the meso level, interaction itself is seen a learning context; our methodology is performative and transformative in creating and facilitating unprecedented relationships. This level, analyzed in the following paragraph, is especially interesting for educators as an occasion to reflect on culture contact as a learning experience.

The meso level: understanding and enacting culture contact

We do not only *explore* the human experience of contact; we enact such an experience in our study. Our method is performative: it creates a new space for embodied dialogue and unprecedented relationships; it fosters an atmosphere of friendship (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) enabling reciprocal recognition, trust, openness, and generating information that is hardly exchanged in more formal relationships. According to Tillmann-Healy, 'the most important aspect of this methodology is that we research with an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love. Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project (2003, p. 735)'.

We illustrate this concept with two examples from our fieldwork.

Moussa and Silvia: a transformative conversation?

Moussa, 27 years old, was born in the Ivory Coast. He has been living in a small town in Brianza and following an 'integrated reception' program since the summer 2017. Talking with Silvia inside the apartment where he lives with other four newcomers from different African countries, he describes his first period in Italy [dialogue is in Italian and French, translation is ours]:

> MOUSSA: I arrived in Sicily and was transferred to Lecco some days after my application for asylum. I stayed at Bione camp for one year. Silvia, do you know Bione? It was a big tent camp for asylum seekers inside the public sport ground. We were around 200 people from different countries.
>
> SILVIA: What were you doing in Bione?
>
> MOUSSA: (smiling to her) We learnt eating 'pasta al sugo' and speaking some words in Italian, 'buongiorno' and 'come stai?'
>
> SILVIA: Was it easy?
>
> MOUSSA: (laughing) Not much! Volunteers gave Italian lessons and took us to see the top of the mountains near Lecco. Silvia, do you know that we painted your football stadium?
>
> SILVIA: I saw the picture in the local newspaper...
>
> MOUSSA: I love football and we did a great job for Lecco!
>
> SILVIA: Do you play?
>
> MOUSSA: Yes, I do. I play football with my friends…

Moussa shows a photo on his Smartphone:

Figure 3: A beautiful image from Moussa's gallery, showing him painting the stadium's steps in Lecco.

In this short, apparently simple conversation, Moussa evokes a complex and articulated situation. He spent one year in a tent camp where an association of volunteers supported newcomers with basic language programs, excursions, and football matches. The word 'camp' is not neutral: it evokes historical images of enclosures where subjugated people

are brought to live together in packed and highly disciplined situations (Ascari, 2019). Interrogating this word, and the reality it refers to, and becoming aware of our hidden imaginary and frameworks of meaning, we open the way to critical thinking and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

Since the dominant narrative defines asylum seekers as 'guests', not as holders of rights, they are encouraged to do 'something in return' for the local community hosting them (even if the quality of hospitality leaves much to be desired). The contrast is sharp: who is giving and receiving what, here? Moussa's narrative shows pride, connection to the Italians because of his love for football, and gratitude to the volunteers for the good time spent together. We wonder if this is a signal of integration or inclusion. Frankly, it does not look like participation.

During the workshop in their apartment, his roommate Jabaru, a 24 years' asylum seeker from Nigeria, reveals Moussa's capacity to give and take care for the other fellows:

JABARU: (speaking English) This is your sewing machine.

SILVIA: Do you sew, Moussa?

MOUSSA: (speaking Italian) Yes, I do. I worked for a tailor in Abidjan, the largest city of Ivory Coast.

SILVIA: What are you doing now?

JABARU: Moussa arranges clothes for us all. He's a professional! (Moussa & Jabaru laugh together)

SILVIA: Do you work as a tailor?

MOUSSA: I'd like to, but now I'm apprentice in a farm. I don't like that job! [Our translation]

Figure 4: Moussa's sewing machine

Moussa's frustration is determined by the adaptation discourse: since newcomers are expected to be low skilled, they only can have low quality jobs and salaries (Zanfrini, 2019), and they cannot be 'choosy'. They must integrate, no matter what they want or like, or their real capacities. Integration means working, learning the Italian language, and gaining stability. Dreams and preferences are not envisaged.

Some months after this conversation, Moussa decided to stop his traineeship at the farm, after meeting a guidance counsellor, and asking support to find another job as a tailor. Now he works for a company producing sportswear, and he wrote to Silvia that he feels far better in the new job.

Aziz and Abdiqani: from awkwardness to shared meaning

The sensobiographic walks with Aziz and Abdiqani show the struggles of culture contact as well as the effects of our method in creating an unprecedented possibility for reciprocal learning and understanding.

Aziz is Italian, a 21 years student of Law at Milano University, strongly motivated to be part of the project, not least because he is a native citizen with a migratory background, being the son of African parents arrived in Italy in the Eighties and now Italian citizens. Aziz's mother is from Ivory Coast and his father from Burkina Faso. When he met Silvia at an informal meeting with his local youth club, he saw a link with the association's motto - 'Rethinking future with youngsters' - and proposed to help with the complexity of organizing twelve sensobiographic walks.

He walked, then, with Abdiqani, 28 years old, refugee, married and father of a 6 years old daughter still living in Somalia; after arrival at Lampedusa (the Italian landing isle in the middle of the Mediterranean see) in the summer 2017, he applied for international protection then lived on the street before crossing the France border to join his relatives there. Two years later, summoned for refugee audience, he came back to Italy. Today he is living in Lecco, still unemployed, as he told Silvia in her car towards meeting Aziz, because his Italian is not good enough, despite having attended a course managed by volunteers for months, three times a week. He has no informal occasion to speak Italian. Working could be such an occasion.

In the first sensobiographic walk, Aziz led Abdiqani to the garden of his elementary school in the small town where he has always lived. This is his place of heart because, he explains, here he felt part of the local community for the first time in his life and he met his present friends. Notwithstanding Aziz's engagement, the start of their relationship is awkward and communication difficult. Aziz's flowery Italian represents a barrier for Abdiqani. Ironically, apart from their skin color they seem far too different:

ABDIQANI: (speaking Italian) Where were you born?

AZIZ: Here, in Lecco.

ABDIQANI: You are an African from here. [Our translation]

After the walk, Aziz says to Silvia: 'I'm not sure if he understood much of what I tried to tell him […] It is hard to communicate if you miss any common reference point'.

During the second walk, when it was Abdiquani's turn to choose the place, the atmosphere changed. Abdiquani walked Aziz and Silvia through Lecco, the city where he lives, showing the places where he usually hangs around: the soup kitchen, the school of Italian, the mosque in the industrial district. He invited them for a coffee in the

reception center where he lives. Aziz was surprised of how many places he did not know in his own city. He also found a way to communicate:

AZIZ: Do you like sport?

ABDIQANI: I like running. We Somalians are strong in running.

AZIZ: Did you compete in Somali?

ABDIQANI: Yes, I was an athlete of the National Youth before the war. I escaped Somali because a friend told me that I could ask political asylum in Canada and keep on my training. But I failed the application… that is an old story.

AZIZ: And now, do you still love to run? Do you go running here in Lecco?

ABDIQANI: No… I'm out of practice. [dialogue is in Italian and French, translation is ours]

Figure 5: Abdiqani and Aziz walking in Lecco

This conversation brings to surface what the social workers in our meetings called 'the underworld', the unexplored lives of newcomers. Differently from traditional biographic interviews, sensobiographic walks trigger more fragmentary stories, less structured by an intentional plot. These people are accustomed to formal interviews and to the need to deliver a good refugee story. Embodiment and dialogue seem to change this common discursive frame, and open space for some real exchange.

One month later, Abdiqani chose to abandon the program and return to France. In the same period, during summer holidays, Aziz also went to France to visit his cousins and try to learn some French. On reentry, he described this first experience abroad as the most important in his life. We lost contact with Abdiqani afterword.

A discussion on culture contact and the levels of systemic interaction

Our data offer many insights on culture contact and the possibility to learn from a systemic and embodied imagination. The process of becoming part of a certain society entails the composition of the legal (residence status and political rights), socio-economic and cultural frameworks (Finotelli & Ponzo, 2018). The 'cultural' is defined by Finotelli

and Ponzo as a domain of reciprocal perceptions and practices between migrants and citizens, namely in the management of their perceived differences and diversities. Without this, the legal and economical frameworks are weak. In fact, due to their entanglement, the three frameworks 'can move at different paces and even reverse their course, worsening instead of progressing (2018, p. 2037)'.

How can we sustain the development of a good enough cultural framework in times when culture contact, and the dilemmas it raises, are massive? We saw how discourse, at the macrolevel, shapes the newcomers', professionals', and citizens' perception, meaning and interactions that can be observed at the micro and meso levels. Meeting stakeholders and social workers, we identified two main narratives shaping the model of intervention: the first gives for granted that newcomers want to live and stabilize in the place, which is false in most cases. If they had a choice, they would go away: to France, Germany, Scandinavia, or where their families and friends already live. Even in Riace, only 450 out of 6000 newcomers had settled down. The second narrative is the pervasive push to integration, hence the obligation to learn specific skills, such as speaking good Italian, which is problematic for someone who is not planning to settle down.

By focusing on culture contact, we bypass the discourse of integration and its neoliberal underpinnings, but also inclusion, which is preferable in many respects (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017), but still problematic. In times of superdiversity and transnationalism, in fact, we think that only dialogic participation, nurtured by curiosity for the other, would ensure sustainable ways to manage with difference and create the conditions for harmonic coexistence. We play in favor of Bateson's third solution, 'the persistence of both groups in dynamic equilibrium within one major community' (Bateson, 1935, p. 65).

The arrival of newcomers produces disequilibrium, conflict, and political, relational and psychological dilemmas. Education has a role to play here: How do we learn to tackle with feelings of insecurity and fear (especially if the other is *already narrated* as potentially disruptive and disturbing) on one hand, and, on the other hand, to embrace curiosity and the desire for the other, not least as a resource for our economy, culture, and lives (Wildemeersch, 2017)?

The historical Italian ambivalence towards migrants (Colucci, 2018), exacerbated by long standing poor policies, the lack of adequate resources and – more recently - hate speech in public discourse, could become a starting point for transformation. Transformative contexts are needed, recognizing dilemmas and endorsing the revision of previous perspectives of meaning (Mezirow, 1991). Here, the quality of the meso level interaction is crucial: people can find their own solutions, sometimes anticipating norms, plans and measures of intervention from the State. In formal education, socio-educational work, counselling and training, and also in informal meetings and grassroots work, authenticity, carefulness, and wisdom are necessary (Fraser, 2018). We tried to show that an embodied relational experience is transformative, even in a research setting, when the *subjective and embodied* is weaved together with the *relational and dialogical* dimensions (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro, 2019).

Conclusions

In our study, we documented the effects of recent policies and practices of newcomers' reception, increasingly driven by bureaucratic management, if not deportation and internment of masses of people. All over Europe, and in our territory, forced allocation is extensively used to manage thousands of people who are not acknowledged the right to enter or move freely within and between state territories. They do not belong, they do not

have the same rights as the natives, and the disciplinary machine works constantly, strengthening its procedures of control, age fixation, identity definition, status determination. Every day, the skies of Europe are traveled by the 'dublinated', i.e. those who, after Dublin III Treats, are sent back to their place of first docking, where they must wait until their status is clarified (which may take years). As a result, in 2019 the greatest flux of people seeking international protection in Italy came, paradoxically, from other EU countries (Villa, 2019).

Movement – a fundamental aspect of human biology, culture, and history - is not free: it is ruled by law and administration, mindless of human needs, desires, relationships, or meaning. Moreover, it is shaped by discourse. We are worried about the consequences of this, and the role of adult learning and education, too often narrowed down to normalization. The need for qualitative, ethnographic and participatory studies in this matter is urgent.

We saw that dominant narratives on refugees and asylum seekers are false: Italy is a country of transit, where most newcomers do not intend to live. They may have relatives and friends in other EU countries and aspire to family reunification. Or, as documented by Anna Tuckett (2018) in her ethnographic study on migrants' everyday struggles with the Italian bureaucracy, they perceive a lingering sense of failure and disappointment. Culture contact is a daily issue for them: 'people described the racial discrimination they faced in Italy, as well as the associated lack of higher-status job opportunities and the concern that their children would also face discrimination. This […] shapes and fuels their desire to leave Italy and produce it as an inferior country in migrant imaginaries (2018, p. 89)'. After 2018, the possibilities to work, to be regularized, even to have a roof over their heads became extremely reduced for newcomers. The long-standing lack of an overarching policy for integration, and insensitivity for the problems of culture contact, were made even worse by 'the predominance of control issues over integration concerns in the migration agenda' (Finotelli & Ponzo, 2018, p. 2036).

Here, we used the systemic framework to make visible the dilemmas, tensions, and contradictions of the present situation, at many levels, but also the generative learning potential they contain, when the relationship is good enough. The one-sided discourse of integration, leaning on the shoulders of the individual (Schinkel, 2018), provides only one way to be part of the neoliberal society, defined by accessing the labor market, and reduces learning to language skills and job competence (Fejes, 2019). We took a different stance, interrogating coexistence as a concrete, relational, embodied process occurring in a material and symbolic space and producing new unexpected modes of living together. Coexistence entails the negotiation of everyday life in space, managing with awkwardness and conflicts, with diversity, opening possibilities in dialogue and reciprocal learning. This is not granted, as we tried to show. We hope that our study will inspire researchers and educators towards more reflexivity and relational sensitivity.

Notes

[1] Women and families follow different paths: therefore, they are not involved in this study.
[2] Participants' names are changed for privacy reasons.

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