

# Receiving asylum seekers: Risks and resources of professionals

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Health Psychology Open  
January-June 2020: 1–14  
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DOI: 10.1177/2055102920920312  
journals.sagepub.com/home/hpo



## Abstract

This study focuses on the experiences of professionals working with refugees and asylum seekers in the North of Italy. In the last years, professionals who work in this sector have been exposed to an increasing risk of physical and emotional malaise because of the number of challenges they daily manage. A qualitative study has been conducted with the aim of exploring the resource and the fatigue factors of professionals, in relation to their state of well-being or discomfort. Eight focus groups with multi-professional teams were held in eight refugee centres, for a total of 28 professionals involved (16 males and 12 females). The results allowed the description of three different professional profile conditions: Fatigued, Idealizing and Engaged.

## Keywords

asylum seekers, political refugees, reception migrants, refugee centres, risk and resources of professionals, well-being, malaise

## Introduction

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the professions working with asylum seekers (ASs) and political refugees. It focuses on the risks and resources experienced by staff working in a practical and supportive role with refugees and ASs in refugee centres. In Italy, reception systems are experiencing a strong phase of internal reconfiguration due to the migration crisis of recent years, which has involved the country as a key player. The problem is not unknown, and the numerical trend of asylum requests has had a fluctuating path determined by the succession of different outbreaks of crisis, especially in Africa and the Middle East. According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, from 1997 to 2017, asylum applications were 253,601, with peaks in 1999, 2008, 2011 and with a growing trend from 2014 until 2017. In 2018, asylum applications have recorded a decrease of 60%: the requests presented, in fact, were 53,596 against almost 130,000 of the previous year (Ministry of Interior, 2019).

Cities are the most involved in taking charge of this problem (D'Angelo et al., 2019); as a result of the increasing presence of migrants, Italy have seen a

growing numbers of government sector services being developed to meet the needs of this expanding population. In particular, on the Italian territory there is a network of local authorities that guarantee integration to ASs by taking advantage of a specific National Fund (the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees-SPRAR)<sup>1</sup> and in collaboration with Third Sector organizations. In the last months, reception services have been tightened up by regulations that have changed rapidly, going more and more towards a kind of stiffening. In particular, with the approval of the Security Decree in 2018, funding for hosting organizations has been reduced, controls have been increased and the whole system has become even more bureaucratic. It is clear that these factors have had a direct

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impact on the reception service and consequently on the operators' work. Working conditions have become increasingly complex and precarious for professionals.

Within this complex framework, welcoming professionals must excel at conducting their responsibilities and tasks in a delicate and assertive manner. Therefore, professionals working in reception services for ASs and political refugees are constantly facing great complexity and challenges. It is widely acknowledged in the existing literature that working with survivors of trauma can have a negative impact on professionals (Figley, 2002; McCann and Pearlman, 1990). The encounter with this kind of population may be more complex than others because of the implicit characteristics of the latter. Forced migrants, in fact, share a traumatic past that threatens psychological integrity and continuity, including exposure to war-related violence, sexual assault, torture, incarceration, genocide and other forms of threats and personal annihilation (Friedman and Jaranson, 1994). Mental health professionals familiar to narratives of different sort, may feel impotent facing such experiences and stories and be overwhelmed by their literality (Beneduce, 2008). Unlike migrants 'volunteers', refugees are people forced to leave their country, not because they are unemployed or underpaid, but because they are victims of violence, humiliation, threats, persecutions and so on (Castles, 2003). They are forced to flee because they come from war areas, dictatorial regimes and/or are personally at risk of death for having occupied uncomfortable roles of social and political importance. Compared to economic migrants, those who are forced to leave their country for reasons of persecution have inevitably less time to prepare themselves logistically and psychologically for departure, exercise less control over their future and carries within them wounds and humiliations that make difficult the elaboration of feelings towards their homeland (Gozzoli and Regalia, 2005). Leaving your country and going towards salvation means paying a high price: the breaking of family ties (e.g. abruptly interrupted parenthood), feelings of guilt, survivor's syndrome and the loss of social role. These aspects can seriously question the role of the operator and his identity.

A review of Tessitore and Margherita (2017) stresses some crucial questions of working with ASs and refugees bringing out the need to establish a secure relationship with these individuals. Professionals who work with migrants carry out an important function of incubation, that is, a function which provides, first of all, the primary conditions for survival and, then, helps to incubate a traumatic dimension which can, in the initial stages, be hosted in the health worker's mind (De Micco, 2017). This function can trigger strong emotional reactions, testing even those who are used to managing their emotions and being empathetic in the

encounter with the other. As some authors have defined, in fact, the complex task entrusted to the reception professionals presupposes that they demonstrate almost 'superhuman' characteristics (Slim, 1995). A recent German study found that professionals who work in refugee centre and with homeless frequently experienced stress, had problems switching off from work and felt tired and exhausted. Workers suffering from resultant long-term psychological effects worked primarily in refugee aid and, compared to those not experiencing strain, described job demands caused by restrictive legal requirements, demanding clients, inadequate supervision offers, conflicts within the team, unfavourable work environment and a dissolution of work/life boundaries (Wirth et al., 2019).

According to the study of Century et al. (2007) with counsellors, working with refugee clients was considerably more stressful and posed greater ethical dilemmas than working with non-refugee clients. Counsellors also described several challenges to undertaking their work. For instance, those include difficulties managing language barriers and using interpreters, conflict between working with client's practical versus psychological needs, as well as difficulties in maintaining professional boundaries with clients (Century et al., 2007). In terms of emotional impact, the main elements of fatigue reported by counsellors in describing their work with refugees were anger, impotence and exhaustion. Century et al. (2007) reported that hearing their clients' traumatic accounts had a profound effect on many of the counsellors, and some respondents stated that they found difficult to control their own feelings during sessions. These elements, if mixed with feelings of lack of trust and inadequacy (Century et al., 2007), may cause vicarious traumatization, psycho-physical stress and lead, in the most serious cases, to burnout.

Boris Drozdek argues that the fear of annihilation caused by the exile experience is replaced by fear of insecurity (Wenzel and Drozdek, 2019); this means that the immediate risks from which one has fled are no longer there, but a sense of emptiness and disorientation – even if they are in a situation of relative security – replace them. Not even the arrival in the 'safe harbour' of the welcoming country is therefore a peaceful moment, and the permanence of migrants on the territory of the host country is not immune from 'risk factors' linked to the integration process. For this reason, one of the most important task of professionals working with ASs is to contain the uncertainty that the asylum process triggers, the fear of the potential repatriation of guests, as well as their feelings of helplessness and guilt (Ryde, 2011).

The advent of migration-driven superdiversity means more migrants are arriving from more places to more places, than ever before (Lindenmeyer et al.,

2016). Superdiversity highlights the need for policy-makers and public service practitioners to recognize new conditions created by the concurrent characteristics of global migration and population change (Phillimore, 2014). At an operational level this means that the population who access the service are different and more complex compared to the past.

The challenges associated with provision of appropriate services for such a diverse population have been widely acknowledged (Boccagni, 2015). The changing of the users has had a strong impact on the refugee centres. In the past, political refugees were a circumscribed group of individuals with very clear characteristics, so it was relatively easy to establish who could access the refugee centres. Today this category has widened and has become more heterogeneous. In fact, it includes also those who leave driven by economic factors which often depend on conflicts, totalitarian regimes or oppressive policies that cause poverty. People who access refugee centres are very different from the 'old refugees' across a wide range of variables including class, education, age and awareness of asylum applications. The restructuring of the political refugee category has obvious repercussions on the services: professionals have to change their way of working integrating new skills to their professional role. Working with very young people, with low schooling (if not straight illiterate) and unaware of their rights, requires very different skills and competences to put into play. Cultural competence engages the development of abilities and skills to respect differences and effectively interact with individuals from different backgrounds. This involves awareness of one's own biases or prejudices and is rooted in respect, validation and openness towards differences among people. Cultural competence begins with an awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and practices, and the recognition that others believe in different truths/realities than one's own. It also implies that there is more than one way of doing the same thing in a right manner (Kohli et al., 2010). Working in the intercultural field requires a complex constellation of skills, but being in possession of these competences is not obvious and their absences may expose operators to risks.

A recent literature review found that, although professionals work in refugee centre were exposed to high job demands, they also had various personal resources at their disposal to address the risks (Wirth et al., 2019). In particular, workers considered the acquired knowledge and skills to be a useful resource (Denkinger et al., 2018) as well as successful achievements with clients resulting from their work. Moreover, job resources available to workers in refugee centre include a great sense of purpose and support from the exchange with colleagues.

For all the reasons outlined above, the same idea of service is questioned. What are the resource and risk

factors of professionals working with ASs? Is it possible to identify different forms of well-being or discomfort that give rise to different 'professional profiles'?

While the scientific/empirical literature on the experience of professionals working with ASs and political refugees in certain country (see the German or Britain study cited above) has expanded in recent years, there is little research on Italian refugee centres situation although the country is experiencing a strong crisis. For this reason it seemed interesting to propose a study aimed at deepening the knowledge of the efforts versus resources of the operators who work in refugee centres.

With the aim to shed light on the issues emerged, it was decided to address the complexity of these contexts by adopting a psycho-sociological approach to the study of professional roles (Gorli et al., 2012; Gozzoli, 2016a, 2016b; Gozzoli et al., 2015; Kelly, 1955; Lewin, 1951). The psycho-sociological approach conceives work as a professional practice and focuses on the theme of change trying to get into the heart of the experiences to access new meanings. It focuses on the groups and considers at theoretical and operational level the interweaving of relationships between individuals, groups, organizations and institutions (Barus-Michel et al., 2002). According to this theoretical prospective and starting from previous studies that in this logic have explored the world of professions (D'Angelo et al., 2018; Gozzoli et al., 2018; Pietarinen et al., 2013; Scaratti et al., 2009; Stokols, 2000; Tamanza et al., 2016), the malaise or well-being of the professionals can be read as a multi-dimensional construct that not only depends from a single factor but involves different levels. In particular, it can be analysed as the results of the interweaving of three levels:

1. The individual level (stories, personal and professional experiences of the participants);
2. Group level (working group, relations with colleagues);
3. The organizational level (the functioning of the organization as a whole and its organizational culture).

This prospective allows to explore in deep the different dimensions of the organizational life and could provide an interesting point of view to address the question.

## Material and methods

### *Aims and scopes*

The purpose of this research is to identify and explore operators resource and fatigue factors in the perception

of professionals, with the aim to identify different forms of well-being or discomfort and outline possible types of professional profiles. In particular, consistent with the psycho-sociological approach adopted, the areas explored relate to the professional history, refugees and ASs representation, professional practices and the quality of organizational life.

### Sample

The investigation presented was conducted during 2018, in collaboration with eight contexts of residential reception services for ASs and political refugees in the northern Italy.<sup>2</sup> Eight focus groups were held with multi-professional teams, for a total of 28 professionals involved. The sample was composed by 14 educators, 9 social workers, 2 linguistic mediators, 1 coordinator, 1 teacher and 1 pedagogue; it consisted of 16 males and 12 females with an average age of 34.7 years (Table 1). The sample represents all the operators present in the visited structures. The focus groups were conducted on the basis of the active participation of the operators and their organizational context through the exploitation of their experiences. On the basis of their knowledge, the respondents were asked to report their personal reflections and experiences on the work they daily carry out in the reception contexts.

### Measures

The focus group was used in the following survey. According to Baldry (2005), it allows to bring out the different interpretations, the different emotional reactions and critical assessments on the topic under discussion through the interaction and exchange of ideas between the different participants. In our case, the experiences and representations of the operators have been investigated through some stimulus-based questions. The question focus areas are role (professional history, activities, tools), characteristics of their work (elements of satisfaction and risks in one's work) and finally organizational characteristics (mission, group of colleagues, organizational culture).

### Method

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and fully transcribed. In line with the research objectives, an analysis of paper-and-pencil content was carried out following the phenomenological-interpretative approach (Brocki and Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 1999; Smith and Osborn, 2003). It aims to understand the experiences and to explore the process of construction of meaning that individuals use to understand reality, through a subjective perspective, and takes into

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the refugee centres.

	Number of professionals	Types of professionals
Refugee centre 1	3	2 educators (2M) 1 social worker (1F)
Refugee centre 2	3	2 educators (2M) 1 social worker (1F)
Refugee centre 3	2	2 educators (2M)
Refugee centre 4	3	3 educators (3M)
Refugee centre 5	3	2 educators (1M; 1F) 1 social worker (1F)
Refugee centre 6	7	1 coordinator (1M) 2 educators (1M) 2 linguistic mediators (2F) 2 social workers (2F)
Refugee centre 7	4	4 social workers (4F)
Refugee centre 8	3	1 pedagogue (1M) 1 educator (1M) 1 teacher (1M)

account the socio-cultural context in the data interpretation process.

### Data analysis

The data analysis has been performed according to a hierarchical categorization system that combines a top-down logic with a bottom-up (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Specifically through the top-down logic, we analysed the text defining three macro-categories: 'individual' (personal history), 'group and relationships' and 'organization'. Subsequently, in order to identify within these macro-categories the emerging micro-categories, we analysed the parts of the text considered with a bottom-up logic. We applied the analysis of conventional content to discover in the specific micro-categories that characterizing the professionals and organizations involved in the study. After these two phases, we started an interpretative process to explain the relationship between macro and micro categories. Data analysis was conducted by two independent reviewers (the agreement was calculated for each of the under-pairs of judges C.G. & D.G.–C.G. & A.D. and after that we calculated the mean value). Interrater reliability was good (Cohen's  $K=84\%$ ) and was calculated using ComKappa software (Cohen, 1960; Robinson and Bakeman, 1998). Cases of disagreement were considered and discussed until consensus was reached.

The main thematic groups emerging from the analysis of the content of the eight focus groups will be reported below.

## Results

The main results of the focus groups will be presented below according to the objectives of the study. Recurrent and transversal elements regarding the three levels were considered – individual, group and organizational – and their different articulation will be analysed with specific attention to risks and resources. Afterwards, in line with the goals of the study, the three professional profiles emerged from the interweaving of the elements identified will be described.

### ‘Personal history and role perception’ – individual level

*Extrinsic motivation versus intrinsic motivation.* The interviews show how the professional histories of participants are distributed in a balanced way between two main and opposed motivations: intrinsic or extrinsic. Even if it is not excluded that at the base of the choices they can operate both in parallel – often, an individual can be motivated by internal and external factors for the same activity/action – here we will report the type of motivation that prevails in the story of the operators. In the case of intrinsic motivation, operators report a choice dictated by the desire to be useful to society, to do a job perceived as important and fundamental as a kind of vocation (Maslow, 1970).

I have a bachelor’s degree in the Languages and Cultures of Eurasia and the Mediterranean; some years ago I naively chose this course because I wanted to work with foreigners in the field of migration and I was interested in working in Italy with foreigners. (Social worker (F; C1))<sup>3</sup>

I was interested in this project because was in my territory; from there arose the need to take care of this place that was part of my neighborhood. (Educator (M; C2))

The Maslow Pyramid comes to mind, and I think I’m in the yellow part. It’s a pyramid that basically, from the base to the top defines why you do things. At the base, the point is: ‘I have to do it for the salary’, while instead at the highest point it is about motivation, do it because you are motivated . . . the yellow part is at the top! (Social worker (F; C6))

In other words you have the impression of doing something very useful and especially very important. (Coordinator (M; C6))

As for extrinsic motivation, the choice to work in a refugee centre is dictated by contingent or random circumstances, such as the loss of previous job, causally find a work in a SPRAR project or because it represents the only job available.

I am at S. centre since 2010 and I have previously worked in other realities; many years ago I decided to come here to switch and work for a more regular service. (Educator (M; C3))

*Skills integration versus skills disruption.* An element of interest found in the analysis of interviews is related to the training of operators. In particular, almost everyone reported having had the opportunity to work in very heterogeneous contexts before arriving in the world of hospitality. The richness of the experiences and competences acquired in various contexts represents an element of great wealth and value for the operators who succeed in combining them in an integrated representation of their professional role.

. . . potentially any skills or knowledge could be useful. (Linguistic mediator (F; C6))

. . . I’ll tell you a little bit about the areas of intervention that I dealt with: minors and family, inter-culture, unaccompanied foreign minors . . . and then I arrived at the refugee centre as an Italian teacher and since August of last year I work here. (Teacher (M; C8))

Conversely, practitioners who fail to connect the various skills acquired from previous professional experience feel a strong sense of disintegration about the representation of their role. The risk is to have a wealth of knowledge, but not know how to put it into practice.

. . . In my life I am used to changing jobs every three or four years; this job is what I have been for the longest time. (Educator (M; C5))

. . . I can tell you that between my old experience and this one there are many elements of difference: basically there’s not element of continuity between the past and my current job. (Educator (M; C4))

*Uncertainty/precariousness versus stability.* The precarious working situation is a problem which affects many professionals working in the area of personal care and services and is certainly a central element also in the representation of the professional role of our operators. Many of them report, in fact, to work within a constant

framework of uncertainty: the frequent change of legal provisions on ASs, the variability of the number and specificities of the guests, and fixed-term contracts can be a source of stress and malaise. If not properly recognized and managed, this condition could lead to a deterioration of the commitment to work and to a limitation of the investment in it as perceived as limited in time and devoid of a real opportunity for professional growth.

(How will I see myself in seven years?) I don't think about it. (Educator (M; C4))

It's a horizon too far away ... I can't imagine myself in a year. (Educator (M; C4))

I have to work until December, then we do not know if we will continue to see each other. (Educator (M; C4))

... the assignments expire and that's the characteristic of social work; we have to deal with horizons not only related to the stories and guests, and these horizons are increasingly limited. (Educator (M; C1))

We have contracts for an indefinite period, but depend on the deal, on the procurement, and also on the decisions. (Coordinator (M; C6))

Professionals who are able to transform the sense of uncertainty – structurally linked to their profession – into an element of challenge and incentive to do better, who rely more on the group, on the team, on their colleagues and who have a design vision of their own professionalism connoted in the short term, are those who experience a greater sense of stability and balance in their work.

There is a lot to do forward in the sense that I know I'm not alone to walk on this road, in some way I think that even if what is ahead is a bit uncertain, in difficult times we can walk better, we also have the equipment and tools to find a way to do better. (Social worker (F; C6))

Therefore the richness of a reception centre is for the people who work there, for their attitude to the relationship of helping to get involved and to foster also affectively from this point of view. (Educator (M; C3))

### *'The others and the relationships' – group level*

From the group/relational point of view, we have taken into account the relationship with the political refugees and ASs, the relationship with the colleagues, and the

exchanges with the other organizations close to the cooperative.

### *Relationship with ASs*

The guests of the centre – whose representation does not always appear univocal among the various members of the team – have a central role in the reception process and for most professionals are a source of gratification. However, as well documented in literature (Century et al., 2007), the relationship with users, very often carriers of discomfort and suffering as well as diversity, can also represent a potential risk factor regarding the management of physical and emotional fatigue. Indeed, the focus groups show how an 'excessive' proximity to the pain of others can lead to the risk of being overwhelmed. On the contrary, if you remain 'too' distant, the risk is to deny the pain, not to process it in a conscious way and thus undermine the relationship and the process of inclusion.

Look, I limit myself to a relationship of circular continuity (between inside and out) due to a balance that I laboriously built in these years with great effort. (Educator (M; C4))

This work tires you enormously, sometimes gives you returns and sometimes empties you dramatically. (Educator (M; C4))

The encounter with foreign cultures is indeed a deeply involving experience – the interlocutor and his diversity can put in crisis his own role, the pattern of intervention and the same identity – difficult to manage and for which continuous follow-up would be useful. From the interviews it emerges that the use of a meta-reflexive capacity by professionals – that is, the ability to reflect on their actions and their thinking (Lane, 2007) – leads to a deeper acquisition of knowledge and skills, and allows for more critical and creative dialogue. It also allows the de-construction of certain representations of reality – stereotypes, prejudices – to create more complex alternatives.

Leave your children in your own country, go away without your husband, there are some stories that as an operator I would probably not be able to relive in that same way; in my opinion one of the skills that you can also learn working in this field – but that maybe also belong to your personality – is to start to detach and understand that those are choices made by people who are very different from you who have a different history, a different culture and who have a completely different conception of the journey or their own future. (Linguistic mediator (F; C6))

In my opinion, an operator must also detach himself a little from his own way of seeing things, both personally and culturally. Very often, for example, we find ourselves, or I find myself asking ‘what would I do in their situation?’ (Social worker (F; C6))

... empathic ability leads you to ‘dress up the cloths of the other’ and be able to understand also what is not in the verbal language; these signs are not explicit ... (Social worker (F; C7))

Cultural competence is imperative for quality provider–guest interactions. Significant numbers of competent operators fall victim to two of the most painful phrases in our current health care jargon: ‘the failure to communicate’ or ‘the failure to cultural nuances’ (Rowe and Paterson, 2010). This is a central issue in reception contexts. Even though much operators can speak different languages, it can happen that they know too little of each other’s language and that they struggle and simplify certain concepts by translating them with simple words. This ability can be compared to the construct of the cultural intelligence, defined as an individual’s capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings (Gozzoli and Gazzaroli, 2018). These elements can be a source of great difficulty, especially in the process of establishing a good relationship between the operators and ASs. The most creative operators, those who showed a good cultural intelligence, are able to overcome this obstacle more easily; in our interviews they reported using various tricks to allow a successful communication (e.g. non-verbal language, the use of visual stimuli, being multitasking). These operators are those who usually recognize the ASs as active constructors of meanings with its own communication.

... maybe it becomes complicated also to express their feelings, what they really feel; we have linguistic difficulty. (Educator (M; C3))

You have to be creative with respect to communication: so you have to use gestures, hands, feet, whatever stuff ... (Linguistic mediator (F; C6))

... when you actually get someone who speaks a strange language to you, sometimes I wonder if maybe even the symbols are equal. (Linguistic mediator (F; C6))

Another difficulty is identified by the operators’ inability to understand the meaning of certain behaviours, attitudes and/or codes that are typical of cultures that are often very different from that of belonging. The main risk is that of an erroneous assessment of the

meaning of certain behavioural manifestations, such as the lack of respect for the operator, reticence and indifference that in reality could be indicators of other (Gozzoli and Regalia, 2005).

These difficulties – adjustment of emotional distance, linguistic-communicative and cultural – if not adequately represented and built through spaces of dialogue and reflection (such as coordination, training or supervision) can be a source of discomfort and cause burnout.

### *Relationship with colleagues*

The need for operators to work in teams in a multi-disciplinary approach is strongly felt. For them, the relationship with colleagues is an important and necessary source of relations.

*Meeting vs ‘letterbox box’.* Team-working passes essentially through a communicative exchange between the members of the group; communication is the essential prerequisite for working in a group.

Communication must be clear to be efficient; it means that it should not include double/rhetorical codes and it should be circulated between the various components. As can be seen from the interviews, refugee centres which normally adopt coordination arrangements – the so-called ‘equipe’ – to facilitate the exchange of information between group members are able to better redefine the frames of the problems and to find more creative and innovative solutions.

Well, we meet three or four times a week, among ourselves. We have different working times and assignments but we see each other in a homogeneous way. In practical terms if I have to report one thing to C., I’m not send an email, I tell ‘C. here is your guest’. (Social worker (F; C1))

Conversely, few spaces dedicated to the exchange and interaction between team members can create phenomena of isolation; increasing sense of uncertainty, loneliness, impotence; and undermine one’s sense of self-effectiveness.

We do not have a diary, we have a letter box ... It is like a binder! (Educator (M; C4))

*Poor clarity and rigidity of role vs clarity of role and flexibility.* A clear awareness of role is important in the performance of the operator’s tasks, and consequently is essential for a good team-working. The operator is required to recognize the specificities of his role and organizational mandate to coordinate with the other members of the team in the search for solutions. The

clarity of the organizational mandate is essential in the working group so that we can move forward – together – in the same direction. In situations of uncertainty it may happen that you proceed simply by applying your role, with a consequent flattening on it.

I live my relationship with the committee in a bureaucratic way ... I do not care about what is not in our mandate. (Educator (M; C4))

Therefore it may be that I too do not have clear ideas about my profession. (Social worker (F; C7))

It is important to apply the professional role in a dynamic way, readjust it and rework it according to tasks and functions; during the meeting fundamental is understanding the needs of the other and arranging the various solutions.

I would like to add one element: the flexibility regarding the interpretation of the role. Every day you find yourself doing things that aren't exactly what you did the day before, not in the same way; it that doesn't mean that you betray your role. I don't need to change my role, but be able to reinterpret it in the light of the situation. (Educator (M; C3))

### *Relationship with other organizations*

Networking with other organizations and/or institutions appears to be fundamental to the reception services. Taking charge of a user is an articulated and complex work that involves dozens of organizations with organizational cultures also very different from each other. We start from CARA (Italian Reception Centres for ASs) that deal with the first reception to the prosecutors who deal with identification and registration of newcomers; there are municipalities that manage the displacement of applicants in the reception facilities, the social health system, the hospital companies, the school and so on. It is clear that if the aim of the service, and therefore of the professionals who work there, is to activate processes that promote inclusion to 360°, it is not possible to avoid establishing a good connection and collaboration between the actors involved in this process. But many studies report that professionals commonly speak about the difficulties and frustrations of working alongside other agencies and systems involved in their clients' care. Overall, staffs' experiences of dealing with other agencies tend to be negative and stressful, particularly in relation to the asylum system. Staff largely view the system as oppressive and persecutory and to be the key cause of their clients' difficulties (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani,

2011). Unfortunately, this is not always the case; interviews have shown that it is difficult to relate to certain organizations, particularly those very close to the service, whose contacts/exchanges are frequent and whose tasks are very similar. When the organizational mandate is unclear or confusing, a conflict may arise between organizations where it is not clear who does what.

I put an 'X' on the Municipality, It's very hard to work with them ... (Social worker (F; C2))

Conversely, if the connections between the various organizations are positive and effective (open and frequent communication exchanges, clear mandates) with a view to cooperation, the likelihood that the inclusion process will be successful will be higher.

We are always in contact with the S. centre and we coordinate on the management of the guests. (Social worker (F; C7))

### *'Culture' – organizational level*

As regard the organizational level, the focus group did not reveal the presence of a single integrated organizational culture, but of various not well defined sub-cultures that depend on the structures and individual micro-teams that work there. Alongside some core service values shared by most operators – substantially in accordance with the SPRAR lines on the issue of integration – each small group refers to its own values that act as regulators; it depends on the size of the structure, the type of professionals working there and the temporal history of the group. With regard to the size of the structure – understood by number of hospitable subjects – it has been found in fact that in the smaller reception centres (maximum of three professionals) there is a greater communicative exchange between the members of the team and an idea of integration process that can only be achieved through strong teamwork. On the contrary, in the larger reception centres, even if recognized the importance of the work of the team, the effort to connect the various professionals and integrate the different professionalities is more tiring. This becomes even more evident when structures do not provide moments for reflection and sharing.

This is a house of 92 people who are involved in different projects. In the house are present five educators, three social workers, a coordinator and there is always a caretaker (...). We have different schedule and assignments and we do not see each other in a homogeneous

way; we use the box of letters to communicate.  
(Educator (M; C4))

The coexistence of professionals with professional histories and very different formations is typical of organizations such as the service for the reception for ASs; in fact, the complexity and variability of the figures requested by this kind of service favours the confluence of different types of professionals.

I did a few jobs; I worked a bit at school as teacher, I worked in the field of disability, took care of a kid with learning disorders for a while and then I did the night shift here (...) Sometimes it is not easy to work with other professionals, specially if they come from different backgrounds. (Educator (M; C6))

This peculiarity while on the one hand it represents a source of wealth, on the other it turns out to be a delicate element that needs a proper management by the providers; according to our hypothesis, this is one of the main motivations that led to the birth of different organizational cultures in different structures. As already mentioned, excluding some values shared by the majority, there are sub-cultures that depend on the specificities of the professionals and individual teams working there. The history of each group, in particular its stability over time, fosters closer links between professionals and thus an adjustment on a given working method (organizational culture). The wide turnover of professionals, typical of this type of organization – the projects are short-term, the number of guests is variable, changes in regulations are on the agenda – however, makes difficult for stable groups to persist and for there to be a single static organizational culture. In fact, we are witnessing the birth of new sub-cultures that find their place of application according to the structure and characteristics of the groups present at a given moment. There is therefore a shift from established organizational cultures to new emerging sub-cultures. At this time it is also difficult to outline what types of sub-cultures are developing precisely because the reception service is experiencing a strong phase of change. It is important to activate a space of reflection and analyse the phenomenon within a procedural perspective; only in this way it will be possible to access the complex organizational life that allows us to better understand and treat the resources and obstacles that arise in the complex intercultural work.

### Professional profiles

Theoretically, the elements identified in the three levels surveyed in this research (personnel, interpersonal relationships and organizational-institutional dimension)

can be combined and intertwined in multiple forms giving life to different profiles and different forms of well-being or discomfort of professionals. At the empirical level, however, we have traced three ‘mark-types’ of profiles, identified through the listening of the stories and experiences of the protagonists and through the analysis of the data produced. The qualitative criteria we used to build the three professional profiles are:

- Personal motivation that led to the choice of a role in a refugee centre;
- Role representation;
- Relationships with colleagues, the ASs, and the other organizations;
- Organizational culture.

Professionals were assigned to one of the three profiles by their positioning on the four criteria indicated above.

#### *Fatigued profile*

The first profile identified is characterized by a widespread and manifest discomfort. The subjects covered by this profile are united by the fact that the professional choice is dictated by an extrinsic motivation, ‘unintentional’: the work has been chosen for causal, fallback or need reasons. There is a high emotional distance from the user; this can be a protective factor against the emotional overload to which these professions are exposed, but at the same time an excessive distance can undermine the construction of a good relationship with the users and be an obstacle to the integration process. The professional role is perceived as undervalued and little supported by the community and public opinion. There is a perception of fatigue which is constantly increasing due to the complexity of the social context and the increasingly rapid and contradictory demands which can only be met by affectively and investing less and less, ‘only the duties I have to’; this attitude can result in a flattening of the activities prescribed by one’s role or vice versa a state of total confusion in which everyone do everything and there is no differentiation of tasks. Loneliness, sense of uncertainty and insecurity are the prevailing feelings, alongside a widespread perception of lack of organizational support. Psychosomatic symptoms (headaches, sleep disturbances, general malaise, etc.) may also occur (Maslach et al., 2001). The service is perceived as chaotic and the organizational culture confused. Professionals rely mainly on the contingent values of the operating unit (team) of the membership structure which are often occasional/changeable and unclear.

### *Idealizing profile*

The idealizing profile is characterized by a tendency to idealize their work and the ASs. Professionals with this profile show a strong involvement and investment in their work dictated by a strong intrinsic motivation. There is an inability to recognize physical and mental fatigue and the tendency to take on colleagues' duties because of the fear that it will not be properly absolved by others. If on the one hand the idealization can act as a protective factor – because it supports and helps combat fatigue – on the other hand it can lead to the creation of a good world opposed to a bad one (devaluation). This mechanism is used to face the anguish arising from essentially ambivalent aspects both of themselves and of others. From the point of view of the relationship with users, there is an excessive emotional involvement which is often not limited to the professional sphere. The interviews, in fact, showed that the aspect of the 'work-family balance' is often compromised, and the border between professional and private sphere appears blurred (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011). This happens because there are no adequate tools to manage the fatigue caused by the contact with the ASs dramatic lived or because they do not feel able to adequately meet the huge request. There is also an inability to seek help from colleagues and to find a way to cooperate. From the point of view of the relationship with the organization, the values appear idealized, excessively positive, although at the same time we see the devaluation of the work done by the other organizations. All these elements, combined with a constant sense of experienced precariousness, can evolve in typical manifestations of profile I, such as episodes of psycho-physical stress or in the most serious cases in the burnout syndrome.

### *Engaged profile*

In the engaged profile, one's profession is a choice dictated by the desire to take care of ASs (intrinsic motivation). An engaged profile, according to the definition of work engagement, means in particular a positive state of mind and satisfaction with one's work characterized by vigour, dedication and immersion (Schaufeli et al., 2002). There is a strong and significant investment in their professionalism that turns into a willingness to learn and put themselves at risk in the challenges that arise every day; besides, there is a flexible and dynamic representation of its role. The relationship with ASs is regulated by the balance between the right 'proximity' and the right emotional 'distance' and is guaranteed by a good meta-reflective competence. The boundaries between the private and professional spheres are clear and defined. The teamwork

with colleagues is seen as an important and fundamental resource in the accomplishment of the task. The relationship with the organizational culture of one's service is positive, as most of its values are shared and it is perceived as a source of support. This category is less exposed to the risk of malaise and ensures a good functioning of the service.

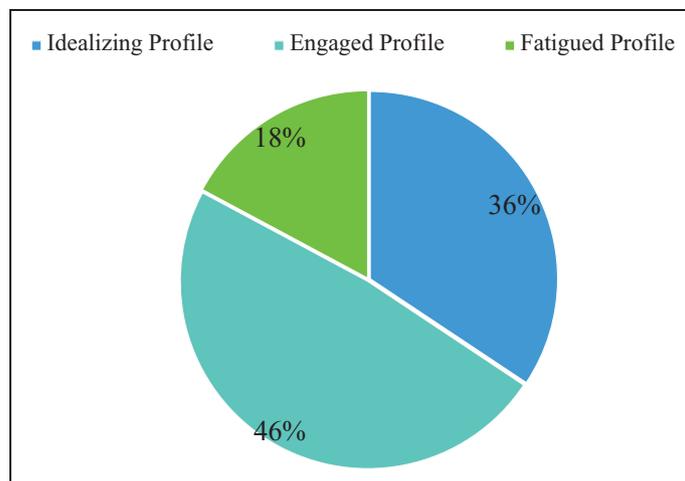
## **Discussion**

From the analysis of the materials and the interrelation between the different elements, it is emerged that the professionals interviewed are distributed more or less evenly between the three profiles traced: 48% Engaged profile, 34% Idealizing profile and 17% Fatigued profile. As visible in the chart (Figure 1), almost half of the interviewed professionals (48%) have managed to find their own balance in the accomplishment of their work (Engaged profile) while the other half shows a more tiring experience. In particular, 34% of professionals tend to have an idealized vision of users and their organizational context (Idealizing profile): in this profile, even if there are elements of fatigue, disease appears in a latent form, not yet established as reported by 17% of interviewees who claimed to feel very tired and overwhelmed by their work (Fatigued profile).

The details about the professional roles that compose the different profiles are reported below:

- Engaged profile (46%) is composed by 3 educators, 5 social workers, 2 linguistic mediators, 1 teacher, 1 coordinator and 1 pedagogue.
- Idealizing profile (36%) is composed by 7 educators and 3 social workers.
- Fatigued profile (18%) is composed by 4 educators and 1 social worker.

The configurations identified, therefore, confirm some evidence already present in the literature, but by virtue of the particular organizational situation analysed some innovative elements have emerged; they underline the importance of the impact of organizational change processes on the role and well-being of professionals working within the service for the reception with the ASs. In particular, it can be seen that the organizational well-being of professionals does not depend exclusively on the own professional history but is largely influenced by the organizational culture and the functioning of the service. The variable 'professional history' thus has less weight and influence than group dynamics and more exquisitely organizational. To confirm this, we observe the data from our study shown in Table 2, which testify that in each single structure there is the clear prevalence of a specific profile. In practice, to maintain psychological stability,



**Figure 1.** Percentages of professional profiles in total.

**Table 2.** Number of professional profiles in the structures analysed.

	Fatigued profile	Idealizing profile	Engaged profile
Refugee centre 1	–	2	1
Refugee centre 2	–	2	1
Refugee centre 3	–	–	2
Refugee centre 4	3	–	–
Refugee centre 5	1	2	–
Refugee centre 6	1	2	4
Refugee centre 7	1	–	3
Refugee centre 8	–	1	2

operators use various coping strategies depending on the severity of the discomfort. However, these strategies do not depend solely on the psyche and behaviour of the individual operator. At a deeper and more complex level, these strategies end up influencing – institutionalizing – through a circular process, the common organizational culture (Walkup, 1997). In summary, while the personal and professional identity of individuals questions the social and organizational context, on the other hand, the organizational and social context redefines the problems posed by individuals in terms of limits and possibilities.

### *Limitations and future directions*

The ‘occupational profiles’, empirically derived from our sample, cannot be considered as exhaustive in terms of the representativeness of the different situations nor even definitive in time; rather, we believe that they can reflect a historical moment of crisis in which the service for the reception and its professionals are operating, and that they can therefore be subjected to changes over time and in other realities. We suggest

that future studies could involve other contexts to better understand if a specific professional role (e.g. educator, social worker, cultural mediator) is more exposed than others to the risk of malaise (see the percentage of roles emerged for each profile above). In addition it could be interesting to explore, given the recent regulatory changes promoted by the ‘Security Decree’ concerning the reorganization of the ordinary primary and secondary reception system (Margherita and Tessitore, 2019), if these changes have an impact on the professionals. Future studies could also investigate and try to understand which are the elements of the organizational culture that influence largely the well-being or malaise of the operators independently from their professional task. It would also be interesting to combine the use of different tools that can capture elements at different levels. In this sense, an interesting integration could be provided by ethnographic observations and by the use of graphic symbolic tools. These kinds of tools, by their nature, allows to bypass the cognitive area and to access on a more unconscious dimension that play an important role in terms of well-being and malaise. Finally, we suggest to

explore deeply the impact that relationship between the ASs and the professionals has on the well-being or malaise of professionals and verify if there is a correlation between the two.

## Conclusion

Within a psycho-sociological perspective and thanks to a qualitative methodology, the research presented tried to explore the depth and complexity of individual stories by linking them with the organizational contexts of their own and with the social context. This study represents an attempt to outline some organizers able to provide a hypothesis of reading and understanding the elements that participate to support the well-being of operators working with ASs (e.g. an intrinsic motivation, a clear representation of the role, a good relationship and sharing of goals with colleagues, the ability to manage the effort that the encounter with ASs brings, a shared organizational culture). These elements, on the contrary, could also expose the operators to the risk of discomfort, which in some cases can also evolve into a definite malaise (e.g. an extrinsic motivation, skills disruption, uncertainty and precariousness, an unclear or a rigid role representation, latent conflicts with the various interlocutors and a climate of loneliness, excessive emotional involvement or excessive distance in the relationship with the ASs, an organizational culture chaotic weather conditions). The definition of these indicators has revealed three different ‘occupational profiles’; these profiles appear to be largely influenced by the organizational culture, and have to be evaluated considering properly the influence that the organizational and social context have on the well-being of operators who work with ASs and political refugees. Understanding the environment and the external dynamic is crucial to help management to set up more effective interventions. These configurations provide a key/indication to read the well-being and malaise of the operators and help us to identify individual and/or group areas to support the professionals. The findings underlying the need to design specific intervention and the possibility of realizing activities focused on preventing dissatisfaction working on strengthening protective factors and reducing risk. For all these reasons it is necessary to provide well-timed moments of reflection, such as the supervisions, that are an essential component of clinical work, as well as a significant source of support that can empower practitioners to embrace the challenges of their work (Apostolidou and Schweitzer, 2017). In conclusion, our work, starting from the own personal experience of the professionals, allows to open a space for reflection, to dialogue on the practices of the reception service which is experiencing a historical moment of great contradiction and complexity.

## Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the High School of Psychology Agostino Gemelli of the Catholic University.

## Notes

1. SPRAR (2018) is the Italian Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees.
2. The highest concentration of refugee centres is in northern Italy, more specifically in Lombardy.
3. Professionals will be identified with labels that report the professional role, the sex and the refugee centre they belong (i.e. C1 = Refugee centre 1).

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