PERCEPTIONS OF ASYLUM SEEKERS, REFUGEES AND PROFESSIONALS ON RECEIVING SERVICES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Social inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in Western countries is an issue that requires great attention to understand the psychological aspects underlying their relationships with receiving communities and to plan suitable services for them. The proposed research explored the features of facilities for temporary reception (CASs) and of the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) currently implemented in Tuscany (Italy). Semi-structured interviews were carried out to investigate asylum seekers', refugees' and professionals' perceptions. Thematic analysis showed that the reception system appears to be characterised by both significant strengths and weaknesses: The system's strengths consist of the peculiar features of the reception in Tuscany (small facilities in small towns with the involvement of local communities). Nevertheless, the time required to obtain asylum and the problems with local public services might produce weaknesses. The SPRAR is perceived as being more effective than CASs in promoting the integration of the hosted people and in increasing individual empowerment. Findings showed that receiving community members often have polarised attitudes and behaviours, divided between social support and exclusion and stigmatisation. This research might offer a contribution to the evaluation of the local reception system, highlighting some possible areas of improvement.

Keywords: *migrants, reception system, community-based interventions, social inclusion, qualitative research*

1.   Introduction

The reception of asylum seekers and refugees constitutes one of the main themes of the national and international social debate, and community psychology has contributed through policy statements and research (e.g. Balcazar, 2016; Esposito, Ornelas, Briozzo, & Arcidiacono, 2019a; Kellezi, Bowe, Wakefield, McNamara, & Bosworth, 2019; Rochira, Fasanelli, & Liguori, 2015). In the last decade, the migratory phenomenon of people who are forced to flee their city or country of origin due to wars, persecution, violence and climate change has significantly increased, reaching a total of 70.8 million forced migrants worldwide in 2018 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019); of these people, 41.3 million were internally displaced, 25.9 million were refugees and 3.5 million were asylum seekers.

In Italy, 53,596 asylum seekers were received in 2018, including 91 minors and 3,676 unaccompanied minors (Ministero dell'Interno, 2019). The main countries of origin were

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Pakistan (13.7%), Nigeria (11.8%), Bangladesh (9.3%), Senegal (5.3%), Ukraine (4.7%), Mali (4.2%) and Gambia (3.9%).

The Italian reception system foresees three main phases: arrival in the hotspots; inclusion in the centres for the reception of asylum seekers (CARAs) or in the temporary reception centres (CASs); and transfer of those who have obtained international protection or are in conditions of greater vulnerability (e.g. unaccompanied minors; family units; single pregnant women; victims of torture; individuals with psychiatric problems or physical disabilities) in the SPRAR - System for Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Association for Legal Studies on Immigration [ASGI], 2017; SPRAR, 2019). Despite the hotspots being officially classified as "first aid and identification centres", many researchers have highlighted that these structures are *de facto* sites of spatial confinement and mobility disruption aimed at regaining control over migration movements (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2018). Through a complex set of identification procedures, most migrants are excluded from procedures for obtaining asylum, classified as undocumented economic migrants, and then moved to detention centres or forced to be repatriated in their countries of origin. Instead, those who can start the asylum procedures are generally partitioned among the Italian regions and assigned to the CASs. During their stay in the CASs, asylum seekers receive some basic services, but they may greatly differ between one centre and another because only minimum standards are present at this level. These standards are listed in the contracts stipulated between the CASs' management and the local Prefecture and regard, for instance, meals and essential goods provision and services for social integration (e.g. linguistic-cultural mediation, Italian language courses, healthcare and psychological assistance). Those who obtain refugee status subsequently access the SPRAR projects that, contrary to the CASs, provide for complete homogeneity and standardisation of the services for social and work inclusion. SPRAR projects promote the community integration of refugees through services and activities of social support, teaching the Italian language, giving access to schools, offering vocational training, offering job placement and aiding in housing searches (SPRAR, 2019). The Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI, 2017)[1] and the Council of Europe (2017) have detected the presence of multiple critical issues in the Italian reception system, including the presence of overcrowded hotspots, the length of stay at those hotspots, the length of legal time taken to assess asylum applications, the lack of standards for services provided by CASs, the Prefectures' deficiencies in monitoring the centres and the lack of places in the SPRARs. Regarding Tuscany's reception system, in 2011, the "Tuscan Model for widespread reception" was developed. This model is based on cooperation between institutions, local authorities and associations. In contrast to the reception approach adopted in other Italian regions, the Tuscan's model focuses specifically on the reception of small groups of asylum seekers in small, diffused centres with the aim of facilitating their inclusion in the local communities and offering higher quality services (Agenzia Regionale di Sanità della Toscana, 2016). Data concerning the distribution of the CASs in Tuscany are updated to September 2017 and reveal the presence of 897 centres hosting a total of 11,506 asylum seekers, with an average of 13 people at each centre (ANCI Toscana & Regione Toscana, 2017).

From a physical and psychosocial point of view, asylum seekers and refugees are particularly vulnerable because they are potentially exposed to three types of traumatic events: pre-migratory (e.g. having suffered violence and persecution or even being war survivors), migratory (e.g. having witnessed the deaths of family members or friends or having suffered violence and forced

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[1]ASGI is an association focusing on migrants' rights both in Italian and European contexts.

detention during their trajectories) and post-migratory (e.g. being subject to forced confinement in hotspots and detention centres – and more recently on safe and rescue boats, being victims of prejudice and discrimination, and having to quickly adapt to a new sociocultural context that is very different from that of their origin country) (Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011; Lindencrona, Ekblad, & Hauff, 2008; Tazzioli & Garelli, 2018). Recent studies on the attitudes of European and Italian citizens towards asylum seekers have revealed widespread prejudice and discrimination (Ministero dell'Interno, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2016). Among the explanatory theories of these processes, some of the most reliable are the relative deprivation theory (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015) and the social dominance theory (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). Furthermore, research on the acculturation process of immigrants shows that it can be both hindered and facilitated by the local population (Safdar, Dupuis, Lewis, El-Geledi, & Bourhis, 2008). Locals tend to facilitate the acculturation process of immigrants when they perceive these latter as being more similar to themselves in attitudes and values. Hence, the services activated by the reception facilities and the opportunities provided by the local context for the creation of positive intergroup relationships (e.g. the organisation of recreational, sporting and cultural events) are fundamental. Initiatives based on contact, exchange and collaboration reduce prejudice (Binder et al., 2009) and may provide the hosted people the possibility to rebuild their social networks. Research has widely demonstrated the positive effects on individual well-being of belonging to social networks (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Feeney & Collins, 2015). Conversely, refugees' lack of social networks and social support has been found to be a significant predictor of a lower health-related quality of life (Carlsson, Mortensen, & Kastrup, 2006).

Moreover, as discovered by Rochira and colleagues (2015), the social representations of migrants are also influenced by the perceived sense of community (SOC). The authors explored the perception of immigrants by natives and found that a positive SOC was related to the reflection on the motivational and affective drives underlying immigration as well as on the difficult circumstances experienced by migrants in the host society. On the other hand, a low SOC was associated with a lack of any thoughtful understanding of the emotional aspects related to immigration and immigrants' experiences. In another study, Buckingham and colleagues (2018) explored the ways in which immigrants and receiving community members (RCM) form a psychological sense of community (PSOC), finding that small, proximal and salient communities were more important than macro-communities for fostering nearly all aspects of PSOC, suggesting that enhancing opportunities for migrants and citizens to engage in relational micro-communities might be most impactful.

Regarding the professionals' perceptions on reception facilities, a recent project carried out in Tuscany (Regione Toscana & Anci Toscana, 2017) showed that professionals highlight some criticalities regarding the following areas: management standards, language courses, training–working area, social and health needs and relationship with the locals. Furthermore, they expressed the need to make the centres' regulations and the services offered homogeneous; to invest more in the training of professionals, especially on the recognition of psychological distress connected to the migration experience; to activate certifiable training courses and internships for the refugees and asylum seekers hosted in the centres; to adopt an ethnopsychological approach in local psychological services; and to promote cultural, social and volunteer activities based on collaboration between asylum seekers and locals (Regione Toscana & Anci Toscana, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the aim of this research was: i) to explore asylum seekers', refugees' and professionals' perceptions on the features of the reception system, CASs and the SPRARs, currently implemented in Tuscany (Italy); ii) to analyse the attitudes and behaviours of receiving community members towards asylum seekers and refugees. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were carried out, which were mainly designed to amplify the voices of the people hosted in the local reception facilities as well as the voices of professionals working with them.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The study involved 12 participants: 5 users (2 asylum seekers and 3 refugees) and 7 professionals of the local reception system (Table 1). Two refugees who had been recently moved to a new facility were interviewed in relation to their experiences in the last reception facility that had hosted them. For this reason, we decided not to include data related to the time spent in the actual facility in Table 1 but chose to include the time spent in the past facility where participants spent more time. Participants were recruited by snowball sampling, and they voluntarily joined the study after being guaranteed anonymity (in line with the privacy statement) and after they were informed about the purpose of the research and the methods of data analysis. The asylum seekers and refugees interviewed had an adequate Italian language proficiency to allow mutual understanding with the researcher. The features and location of the facilities in which participants were hosted are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Participants' socio-demographics

Interviewees	Gender	Age range (years)	Country of origin	Years of professional experience in the reception area	Time spent in Italy (months)	Time spent in the reception facility (months)
Asylum seekers and refugees	5 M	18-25	Countries in West Africa and South Asia	-	M = 28.2; SD = 4.8; range = 20-32	M = 15.2; SD = 5.3; range = 11-24
Professionals	6 F and 1 M	28-58	Italy and Mali	min 1; max 15	-	-

Note. The group of professionals included 1 CAS professional, 2 CAS/SPRAR professionals, 1 linguistic-cultural mediator, 2 SPRAR directors and 1 ONG director.

Table 2. Reception facilities' features and locations

Reception facility	Type of structure	Number of asylum seekers/refugees hosted	Municipality's population (2018)*
CAS 1	Small centre	26	50,645
CAS 2	Small centre	17	12,170
SPRAR 1	Apartment	3	10,924
SPRAR 2	Apartment	5	20,607

Note. Two asylum seekers were hosted in the same CAS.
* Source: ISTAT (2019)

2.2 Instruments

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. Table 3 shows the interview protocol and its explored thematic areas for professionals, as well as for asylum seekers and refugees. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, assuring that their privacy would be protected. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee then in force in the Department of Education and Psychology (University of Florence), and it is in accordance with the Code of Ethics of Italian Association of Psychology and Italian Society of Community Psychology. Interviews were recorded and lasted between 25 and 75 minutes.

Table 3. Explored thematic areas

Thematic areas	Professionals	Asylum seekers and refugees
Strengths and weaknesses of the regional reception system	X	
Strengths and weaknesses of the services provided by the CAS/SPRAR facility	X	X
Quality of the relationships with the professionals and other reception facility users		X
RCM attitudes and behaviours towards asylum seekers/refugees	X	X

2.3 Procedures

Interviews were carried out between April 2017 and April 2018, and the research was conducted according to the following phases.

After defining the thematic areas to explore in the interviews, some reception facilities in the Florence area were identified. Subsequently, seven professionals working in the receiving associations were contacted and informed about the purpose and method of the research. After the interviews, some professionals suggested an asylum seeker/refugee hosted in the facility who might wish to be involved in the research.

2.4 Data analysis

Data were analysed using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2012), mainly following an inductive approach and using the software QCAmap (Mayring, 2014).

We chose this method due to its accessibility and flexibility, and the analysis was performed following the 6 steps described by the authors: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. A researcher conducted and transcribed the interviews, and, following the familiarisation step, progressively elaborated notes regarding significant ideas. Through the generation of semantic codes, he systematically analysed the data to identify and label all the text's portions in which the meanings potentially relevant to the research question were expressed. Subsequently, the research team revised all codes to define subthemes and themes; through a recursive process, some codes, subthemes and themes have been modified or redefined to achieve a coherent and

representative description of the participants' perceptions. Finally, the authors reached a main agreement on subthemes, themes and their interrelationships and produced the final report.

3.   Findings

Findings from thematic analysis were divided into 4 macro-themes: key positive and negative aspects of the reception system; the functioning of CASs and SPRAR projects; quality of the interpersonal relationships within the facilities; and perceptions of attitudes and behaviours of receiving community members.

In the quotes, participants are indicated as follows:
- legal status: "asylum seeker" or "refugee";
- working position: "professional" (professional CAS/SPRAR or linguistic–cultural mediator) or "director" (SPRAR coordinator or ONLUS director);
- experience: "+ exp" = professional experience between 8 and 15 years; "- exp" = professional experience between 1 and 7 years.
- I … [number]: refers to the interview number.

3.1 Key positive and negative aspects of the reception system

This macro-theme includes professionals' perceptions about the strengths and weaknesses of the reception system, mainly at the regional level. Table 4 shows the themes, subthemes and codes generated using the thematic analysis.

Table 4. Professionals' perceptions

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Key strengths (44)*	Existing resources to maximise social capital (18)	Aware of volunteering activities' use (10) Recreational and social activities with the citizens (5) Structural presence of volunteer organisations and NGOs in Tuscany (3)
	Existing networking (7)	Networking between reception facilities, local authorities, and local VOs/NGOs (7)
	Suitable features of the reception facilities in Tuscany (19)	Smaller facilities means better opportunities (13) Distribution of the facilities in the territory (4) Facilities located in urban centres (2)
Key weaknesses (68)	Problems with reception system management in Italy (27)	Length of time for assessing asylum applications (9) Emergency approach (8) Problems in overcrowded centres (7) Inadequacy of internships provided to asylum seekers if compared with their employment needs (3)
	Problems with local public services (8)	Lack of uniformity in the procedures for the services provision (4) Weaknesses in personnel competence (3) Weaknesses in mental health services (1)

Problems with professionals' competence (8)	Lack of state funding for training the mediators (5)	
	Lack of regulation for the role of CAS professional (3)	
Social dominance processes (19)	Work of social utility as a "return" (11)	
	Work exploitation (6)	
	Negative social representation of immigrants (2)	
Illegalisation due to asylum denial (6)	Lack of pathways in case asylum is denied (3)	
	Weaknesses of the repatriation system (3)	

* Frequency of the quotations

One of the key strengths of the regional reception system consists of the existing resources to maximise social capital, such as asylum seekers being involved in volunteer activities, a process facilitated by the structural presence of volunteer organisations (VOs) and NGOs in Tuscany. However, as highlighted by professionals, being "aware" of volunteering activities' use is fundamental. This is possible through the organisation of activities that migrants do *with* the inhabitants and not *for* them. To foster asylum seekers' and refugees' community integration, it is necessary to promote recreational and social activities with citizens. Through such activities, it might be possible to reduce prejudice, to foster positive relationships, and to create opportunities for the employment of asylum seekers and refugees. Professionals have reported several examples of such activities: social dinners, local celebrations, multi-ethnic shows and musical and theatrical workshops. One director stated the following:

> These social activities allow us to know each other better, to start to know all the positive qualities that these people have, to free ourselves from the prejudice [...] to build the premises – I specifically say "premises" and nothing more – for a possible integration. (Director, I 10, + exp)

> To activate these resources, networking among the different actors of the reception system is crucial: "The reception works when there is collaboration among the facilities, the authorities and the whole citizenship, and the volunteer organisations network. It is not always easy!" (Professional, I 5, - exp)

Another strength consists of the features of the receiving facilities in the explored area. These features, combined with the structural presence of VOs and NGOs, are a peculiarity of the "Tuscan Model for widespread reception" and, as stated by professionals, are fundamental in developing more effective integration pathways.

Professionals have also indicated many weaknesses in the Italian reception system, such as the use of an emergency approach and the length of time for assessing asylum applications:

> People who arrive in the CASs should know that they will remain there at least two years, or even three, because they often receive a negative response to their asylum application, then they appeal and so they have to wait… and legal timing is very long. (Professional, I 9, + exp)

Difficulties also concern the professionals' competences and are mainly due to the lack of regulation for the role of "CAS professional", which might reduce the quality of the services

provided in the centres: "The public agreements do not require the presence of specific professional roles, of professionals with specific competences, and for this reason anyone can improvise himself as [a] 'CAS professional'" (Professional, I 7, - exp).

Furthermore, another weakness consists of the illegalisation of migrants due to asylum denial. Following this refusal, migrants are prevented to integrate themselves in the community and are formally asked to leave Italy within few days or forced to be repatriated in their countries of origin:

> Most migrants arrived in Italy in recent years have only been offered the possibility to be repatriated, but they rarely come back. […] Therefore, the problem of irregular migrants in Italy is becoming more serious – and in my opinion it is the greatest challenge we are currently facing. (Director, I 10, + exp)

Among the other weaknesses, the involvement of asylum seekers and refugees in work of social utility as a "return" to the local community, in exchange for the reception, frequently emerged during the interviews. As one participant observed, the message that the local community does a sort of favour to asylum seekers by hosting them is inappropriate because they are entitled to be protected, in compliance with the Geneva Convention (1951).

This problem, combined with the well-known phenomenon of work exploitation of immigrants and their increasing negative social representation, may be read as a process of social dominance through which the Italian national community try to maintain its position of power and exert political control over social and economic resources, simultaneously forcing a negative social value upon immigrants as members of a subordinate group.

Some professionals also spoke about problems concerning the local public services, such as the lack of uniformity in the procedures for the services provision. This greatly complicates the work done by the professionals, who in some cases had to ask about the services of other municipalities where the procedures are clearer and more efficient.

3.2 The functioning of CASs and SPRAR projects

The professionals and the refugees/asylum seekers interviewed described the functioning of the CASs (less positively) and of the SPRAR differently.

Table 5 shows the themes, subthemes and codes regarding the CASs, while Table 6 shows those regarding the SPRAR projects.

Table 5. Functioning of CASs

Theme	Subtheme	Professionals' codes	Asylum seekers' and refugees' codes
Building inclusion opportunities through school, vocational training and socialisation (45)	School and job placement services (26)	Implementing vocational training and internships (5) Importance of collaboration with the local authorities (3) Inclusion in the school system (2)	Participating in vocational training and internships (11) Access to schools (5)
	Improving social competences and promoting the	Organising recreational and social activities with the citizens (6) Promoting asylum seekers'	Participating in recreational and social activities with RCM (5)

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	rebuilding of social networks (19)	independence (3)	Participating in volunteer activities (3) Importance of the activities to keeping people busy (2)
Lack of networking and high heterogeneity in the services provision (28)	Lack of networking and monitoring (14)	Problems concerning the collaboration with the local authorities (8) Problems concerning the Prefectures monitoring (6)	
	Problems with the services provided by the CASs (14)	Nothing but minimum standards in the services provision (8) Lack of training activities in some CASs (4) Staff without ad-hoc competences (1)	Length of time for assessing asylum applications (1)

Table 6. Functioning of SPRAR projects

Theme	Subtheme	Professionals' codes	Refugees' codes
Building inclusion opportunities through school, vocational training and socialisation (43)	School and job placement services (26)	Implementing vocational training and internships (6) Implementing *ad hoc* individual projects (3)	Participating in vocational training and internships (13) Access to schools (4)
	Improving social competences and promoting the rebuilding of social networks (17)	Inclusion through recreational and sporting activities (5) Empowering approach (4) Activities for amplifying refugees' voices (1)	Participating in recreational and social activities with RCM (7)
Intense networking and high homogeneity in service provision (12)	Networking between SPRAR, local authorities and public services (9)	Leading role of the local authorities (8) Improving the local welfare (1)	
	Monitoring the services' quality (3)	Constant monitoring of the projects from the SPRAR (3)	
Lack of spatial, temporal and financial resources (19)	Too few and too short to meet the protection demand (4)	Lack of places (2) Short-term projects (2)	
	Difficulties in meeting refugees' housing and employment needs (10)	Concerns in housing searches (2) Lack of internship options (1)	Difficulties in finding a house and a job (4) Inadequacy of internships compared to employment needs (3)
	Bureaucratic and financial problems (5)	Tightening of the bureaucracy (2) Delays in allocating funds (1) Lack of support from some local authorities (1)	Reduction of financial support (1)
Weaknesses in the information-sharing process (2)			Problems with sharing information among professionals (1) Lack of information about the changes taking place in the SPRAR (1)

The core differences between CASs and SPRAR projects, perceived by the ***professionals***, concern the networking with local authorities (lacking for CASs and intense for SPRAR) and the homogeneity in service provision (low for CASs and high for SPRAR). In the case of the CASs, the high heterogeneity of the services is due to the presence of nothing but minimum standards in the regulations. This leads to significant differences in the services provided between one centre and another, and constitutes a point of discontinuity with the SPRAR system.

Moreover, some professionals stated that some local CASs (not included in this research) often do not provide enough or appropriate training activities for the people hosted. The lack of training has an impact also on the subsequent integration for those who obtain the refugee status and enter the SPRAR projects, and becomes particularly relevant when refugees did not receive adequate Italian language training during their stay in the CASs. Therefore, they have to attend again language courses in the SPRARs, instead of participating in other integration activities. As pointed out by a director,

> This is a problem because, in the SPRAR, the project foresees 6 months of stay for hosted people. [...] If they need to attend language classes, they have not enough time to continue the training where some competences in the Italian language are required and should be already achieved. (Director, I 8, + exp)

Nevertheless, the analysis of the strengths showed the adequate functioning of the CASs involved in this study regarding school and job placement services:

> After the vocational training, we move on to internships – in this case, with a little funding – that give the guy the opportunity to keep busy, learn a job and get in touch with people living in the same context. (Professional, I 6, - exp)

The collaboration with local authorities constitutes a crucial factor for the management of the reception services and, as mentioned above, there is a great difference between CASs and SPRAR regarding this point. The advantage of the SPRAR consists of the leading role of the local authorities in the projects' management. Another difference between CASs and SPRAR, underlined by a participant, concerns the monitoring of the facilities and services provided: CASs projects are not always supervised by the Prefecture, even if it is asked for, while the SPRAR projects are adequately and continuously supervised.

Professionals showed a strong sense of responsibility towards their role and also stressed the effectiveness of the SPRAR approach:

> Another strength is surely that, in the SPRAR, the beneficiary is not seen as a passive 'object' to be supported but as the protagonist of his/her own life. That is, the SPRAR's approach is based on reactivating the beneficiary's resources, which everyone has, and on promoting – together with him/her– social inclusion and autonomy. (Director, I 8, + exp)

According to this description, it might be appropriate to use the code *empowering approach*. Even though two professionals discussed the importance of autonomy promotion in the CASs, the lack and the heterogeneity of the services provided by the CAS network are quite far from representing an empowering process. On the contrary, in the SPRAR system, the refugees' empowerment promotion is the founding approach for each implemented project. Among

SPRAR's positive aspects, one professional talked about the activities aimed at amplifying refugees' voices, such as participating in a radio programme.

SPRAR's main weaknesses consist of the lack of places and the short-term nature of the projects, which increases the difficulties in meeting refugees' housing and employment needs. In this respect, a refugee stated,

> I still need help from professionals. I know that they have helped me so much in these months and that I have been in this project for a long time... but I still don't have a home to go to, I don't have a job… (Refugee, I 4)

Furthermore, a refugee talked about the problems in sharing information and in communication that have occurred both towards him and among professionals. For instance, he was requested several times to repeat to different professionals the reasons for his migration in Italy, or he did not receive any updating about the reduction of his financial support.

Strengths outlined by professionals match those highlighted by *asylum seekers and refugees.* Both groups perceived the implementation of vocational training and internships as crucial activities. One refugee described his experience as follows:

> [My colleagues] were good and kind to me; we were fine together. Some of them were migrants, and others were Italians; we were about 20 people in that group. There were also some guys coming from a reception centre, but not from a SPRAR project like me. I was fine with each of them; we talked a lot about many things. (Refugee, I 4)

Nevertheless, a refugee pointed out the inadequacy of the internships – even if paid – compared to his employment needs:

> You can do many things, but only if you have a lot of time. When I told the professionals that I was interested in working in the leather sector, they found me one training for leather goods, but it was too long. It lasted one year, so I could not do it… I need to work. (Refugee, I 12)

Recreational and social activities with receiving community members are equally important for participants. Such activities can enable refugees and asylum seekers to feel accepted by the local community and to see their cultural traditions acknowledged:

> We had a Christmas party at a school, and everyone ate the traditional food we cooked. There were so many people, more than 200 persons. There was Italian, Nigerian, Romanian, Moroccan and Philippine food. After dinner, we all danced together. (Refugee, I 3)

3.3 Quality of the interpersonal relationships within the facilities

This macro-theme concerns the asylum seekers' and refugees' points of view of the quality of their interpersonal relationships inside the facility, both between them and with the professionals

(Table 7). These relationships might have a substantial influence on individuals' well-being during their stay at the receiving facilities and could affect the outcome of the inclusion process.

Table 7. Asylum seekers' and refugees' perceptions

Theme	Code **Relationships with the other hosted people**	Code **Relationships with the professionals**
Supportive and significant relationships (22)	Friendships (5) Mutual support (1)	Instrumental support (12) Significant bonds (4)
Stressful situations (6)	Difficulties in cohabitation (2) Lack of commitment to activities by some asylum seekers (1)	Conflictual situations (3)

Overall, the quality of the relationships with the professionals and the other hosted people was positively perceived. The latter were mainly characterised by friendship and mutual support: "Then the guys of the SPRAR helped me find another job, and now I have been working as a porter for three months" (Refugee, I 12).

All participants underlined the importance of the instrumental support received daily from professionals, due to which significant bonds arose:

> Since I arrived in Italy, the professionals have always helped me. They helped me find a job and live better, all of them. I usually say that they are my family, because when I need something [...] they help me quickly, really. (Asylum seeker, I 2)

In some cases, participants faced stressful situations with other people hosted in the same facility, due to the difficulties in cohabitation and the lack of commitment to activities by some asylum seekers. Moreover, a refugee talked about a conflictual situation that arose between him and a professional.

3.4 Perceptions of attitudes and behaviours of receiving community members

Throughout the reception process, asylum seekers and refugees had both positive and negative experiences with receiving community members (Table 8). Professionals also talked about both the positive initiatives organised by some citizens and the prejudices and discriminations acted out by others.

Table 8. Professionals' and asylum seekers' and refugees' perceptions

Theme	**Professionals' codes**	**Asylum seekers' and refugees' codes**
Social support and positive relationships (18)	Inclusion promotion (7) Positive initiatives (3)	Friendships (4) Respect and friendliness (3) Mutual support (1)
Exclusion and stigmatisation (22)	Stereotypes and prejudice (5) Difficulties in intercultural dialogue (4) Protests (4) Discrimination (3)	Stigma (3) Episodes of racism (3)

Table 8 shows that receiving community members are perceived as having polarised attitudes and behaviours, divided between social support and positive relationships construction, and exclusion and stigmatisation.

The code *inclusion promotion* represents the activities and projects carried out with the locals that fostered the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees. One professional described the social inclusion that was constructed, thanks to the support from receiving community members, as follows:

> By means of the local community, they have found jobs and houses, and now they live here without being in the reception system anymore... They are integrated; they have some friends within the community, and they work, thanks to these links. (Professional, I 7, - esp.)

The code *positive initiatives* refers to the occasions in which some inhabitants spontaneously took action to support the refugees and asylum seekers by organising, for instance, conversational meetings in Italian.

Among the positive experiences, a refugee talked about the friendships made with the inhabitants of a local village: "I made friends with many local people. I met a very good girl and two very good boys; all the three were students of that village. They were aged about seventeen or eighteen" (Refugee, I 4).

When friendships were not forged, the participants still underlined that they had developed positive relationships with many locals, characterised by respect and friendliness.

Regarding negative experiences, two asylum seekers described the stigma they felt exposed to and the episodes of racism that they suffered:

> When I moved [from another CAS], we were about ten people. Some guys arrived. I don't remember their faces. They didn't want to see black people, so they made a fuss. A professional who was with us called the police [...] (Asylum seeker, I 2)

Similarly, the professionals emphasised the spread of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination at the national and local level: "Especially against the asylum seeker. Some guys told us about discrimination against them, because they are black" (Professional, I 6, - exp). "SPRAR requires that the beneficiaries find a regular lease contract, but the problem is that most of them get illegal lease contracts, and many owners who lease legally have said they don't want foreigners" (Professional, I 7, - exp).

Furthermore, two professionals reported protests organised by some locals against the opening of the reception centre; such protests required police intervention.

4. Discussion

This study showed that the Tuscan reception system appears to be characterised by both strengths and weaknesses. The main strengths consist of the existing resources used to maximise social capital and the opportunities provided by the "Tuscan Model for widespread reception". The effectiveness of this model lies in the reception of small groups of asylum seekers in small,

diffused centres with the involvement of local associations, institutions and citizens. Additionally, the structural presence of VOs and NGOs in Tuscany increases the possibilities to maximise asylum seekers' and refugees' social capital by involving them in volunteer activities based on shared participation with receiving community members. Another crucial factor for successful inclusion programmes consists of networking between receiving facilities, local authorities and NGOs.

Regarding the system's weaknesses, an important one concerns the involvement of asylum seekers and refugees in social utility work as a form of return to the local community in exchange for the reception. As some professionals noted, this practice might send the message that the local community is doing a favour to asylum seekers by hosting them, whereas the truth is that they are entitled to be protected by the state in compliance with the Geneva Convention (1951). This issue, combined with the phenomenon of work exploitation and the increasing negative social representation of immigrants, can be read according to the social dominance theory (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) as a process through which the Italian national community try to maintain its power position and exert control over the social and economic resources. Furthermore, the lack of alternative pathways to legalisation, in the case of asylum denial, leads to a condition of protracted "undocumentedness" (and thus liminality) in which the person find herself stuck[2]. Other problems concerning the Italian reception system are the length of time taken by authorities to assess the asylum applications (also highlighted by a refugee) and the presence of some overcrowded centres; these issues are in line with those previously highlighted by the Council of Europe (2017) and by the Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI, 2017). The first one might be damaging because it exacerbates the psychological distress of the people who remain in a state of uncertainty and hinders their integration in the receiving communities. Moreover, the lack of regulation of the role of CAS professionals, with an adequate definition of their specific knowledge and competences and of the suitable training for achieving them, means that in some cases, they might not have the necessary competences to effectively support the asylum seekers.

Regarding the functioning of the CASs and SPRAR projects, the findings showed that the latter are perceived by the professionals as being more effective, whereas asylum seekers and refugees offered a sufficiently positive description of both. Among the most useful activities, they talked about the vocational training and internships that they took part in, participation in school and Italian language courses, and recreational and social activities with receiving community members. The importance of these aspects was also stressed by professionals. The participation in training and internships was fundamental for asylum seekers and refugees because it allowed them to gain professional competences, to obtain income and to build positive relationships with local inhabitants. Furthermore, thanks to the activities carried out with the receiving community members, participants felt accepted and increased their social capital. Asylum seekers, refugees and professionals reported several examples of such activities, promoted both by CASs and SPRARs. These activities may help the hosted people build friendships and find a job or housing opportunities. Such findings are consistent with the buffering effect (as in Cohen & Willis, 1985) provided by supportive social relationships, which improve the well-being. An increase in feelings of stability and well-being resulting from membership to social networks, that occurs when migrants build positive relationships with local

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[2] In Italy, according to Law (189/2002), is not anymore possible for asylum seekers that did not obtain the refugee status to get a permit to stay for working reasons.

inhabitants, and the received support from the professionals, may reduce the negative outcomes of stressful events.

On the contrary, refugees' lack of social networks and social support appear as significant predictors of a lower health-related quality of life (Carlsson et al., 2006). Moreover, according to the contact theory (Binder et al., 2009), contact quality and quantity with outgroup members help reduce the majority group's prejudice.

Regarding the differences between CASs and SPRAR projects, findings showed that substantial differences consist of networking with local authorities (lacking for CASs and intense for SPRAR projects), homogeneity in the services provision (low for CASs and high for SPRAR projects) and monitoring the facilities and services provided (superficial for CASs and rigorous for SPRAR projects). The high heterogeneity of the services provided by CASs is due to the presence of nothing more than minimum standards in the regulations; this leads to significant differences between one centre and another.

Regarding the SPRAR projects, professionals shared the perception that such projects might be a positive way to organise the reception. SPRAR professionals stated that all the hosted individuals have resources, even if they are unaware. Therefore, the SPRAR system is aimed at "reactivate" their possibilities through the co-construction of *ad hoc* inclusion projects. Founding on these aspects, the approach underlying the SPRAR could be defined as empowering. In fact, it is aimed at the promotion of the individual factors characterising the empowerment process, such as participation in defining and achieving goals, as well as improvement of one's abilities to gain access and control over resources (Zimmerman, 2000). One professional talked about the activities carried out that were aimed at amplifying refugees' voices, such as the participation in a radio programme. As emphasised by Rappaport (1995), the interventions and activities aimed at amplifying marginalised and stigmatised people's voices are fundamental for allowing them to construct new, truthful and positive identity narratives, which progressively replace society's dominant ones.

Instead, the main weaknesses concerning the SPRAR system seem to be the lack of spatial, temporal and financial resources, which are linked to the difficulties in meeting refugees' housing and employment needs. The difficulties that refugees face during the housing search are not only due to the lack of income and jobs as a guarantee for the lease contract but are also due to the discrimination from local landlords who do not want to have immigrants as tenants. Aside from these difficulties, a refugee also pointed out the inadequacy of the internships compared to his employment needs.

Regarding asylum seekers' and refugees' relationships with the other people hosted in the facilities, the birth of important friendships based on mutual support was highlighted. Likewise, the relationships with the professionals were positively perceived, and each participant pointed out the support daily received from them. Significant bonds also emerged: for instance, one asylum seeker expressed his affection for the professionals of the centre by comparing them to his family. As Feeney and Collins (2015) highlighted, the support behaviours appeared responsive to participants' needs and have played a key role in helping them to cope with the adverse life circumstances they faced, and to rebuild significant bonds. Furthermore, membership in the SPRARs as micro-communities has been shown to be important in fostering immigrants' PSOC, especially the fulfilment of needs (Buckingham et al., 2018).

Concerning the relationships between the hosted people and receiving community members, findings showed that the latter have often polarised attitudes and behaviours: social support and positive relationship construction on the one hand; exclusion and stigmatisation on the other.

Being a victim of prejudice and discrimination is one of the core components of resettlement stress and can significantly affect the psychological well-being of the hosted people (Lindencrona, Ekblad, & Hauff, 2008). The widespread stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, at both the local and national level, have been pointed out by professionals (as in Pew Research Center, 2016). However, professionals also highlighted the positive initiatives of some residents who organised meetings to help the hosted people learn Italian and find a job. Moreover, together with receiving community members, activities, events and projects have been carried out that promoted the asylum seekers' and refugees' inclusion and that have allowed the receiving facilities to take root in the local community.

Overall, the findings of this study show that the participation of receiving community members has been crucial for the success of the explored community-based interventions.

Although the reception of asylum seekers and refugees constitutes one of the main themes discussed at the national level, to our knowledge, community psychology studies that explore professionals' and hosted people's perceptions of the Italian reception system are not sufficiently numerous. A similar lack of studies, not in SPRARs and in CASs, but in detention centres, was pointed out by Esposito and colleagues (2019a) in their case study of Rome's Ponte Galeria centre. While their findings highlighted the oppressive and pathogenic qualities of detention settings and the consequences in terms of human suffering, our findings pointed out how, on one hand, the management of the Italian reception system may be affected by the process of migrants' illegalisation, and, on the other hand, how the social dominance attitudes, which are structurally present in Italy, despite some interesting local experiences of inclusion, may negatively impact on the relationships between migrants and local community.

5.   Limitations and future directions

The participants involved in this study came from four Tuscan municipalities located in the Florence area. Therefore, the findings mainly regard the features of the local reception contexts and are not representative of the reception in Italy as a whole, especially regarding the CASs' features, which may greatly vary even on a regional scale. Thus, it could be useful to conduct future research aimed at exploring the features of similar reception facilities at a larger spatial level, namely at the regional or inter-regional level.

Regarding asylum seekers' and refugees' perceptions, we should consider that the findings may be affected by some bias. The first bias concerns participants' gender (only male participants), because, as highlighted by some scholars (Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi, & Arcidiacono, 2019b; Rigo, 2017; Schmoll, 2014), migration experiences are gendered and sexualised, and women are more exposed to violence, abuse and exploitation; hence, future studies comparing the lived experiences of men and women seeking asylum and being accommodated in reception facilities are needed.

Another bias may concern the free expression of asylum seekers because of their precarious legal status. In fact, asylum seekers may have not talked about several problems for fear of a negative impact on their asylum application, even if they were guaranteed free participation and anonymity. The greater number of weaknesses highlighted by participants who already obtained refugee status might support this hypothesis.

Furthermore, the migrants involved in this research were able to speak Italian, and perhaps they benefited the most from the inclusion activities implemented by the facilities. This hypothesis, combined with the previous one, might explain why they offered a quite positive description of their experiences within the facilities.

In this study, we also take into account the voices of the people who live and work in the reception system daily. The findings we obtained might therefore offer insights for future research and actions regarding reception system management at both the community and policy level. In particular, the differences existing between the two reception levels (CAS and SPRAR) require to be better analysed in terms of professionals' competences, services' homogeneity, networking and quality monitoring. Moreover, the services for asylum seekers' and refugees' inclusion require significant improvements, since these people often face difficulties in finding a job and a house. For this purpose, the promotion (both from local associations and authorities) of events, activities and projects aimed at allowing asylum seekers and refugees to build positive and supportive relationships with the locals might be useful, since the latter have a crucial role in the inclusion process of these people.

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