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*Migrant Families, Social Policies and Community Relations: Towards What (Kind Of) Integration?*¹

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Abstract

This article aims to present a few considerations regarding the phenomenon of migrant families' integration processes, in the broader framework of the relationship between politics, policies and services. The stabilization of migrant people in Italy has determined, on the one hand, the growth of the family-based character of the immigrant population, in the face of which, institutions and reception services, in the wake of policy directives, have been called upon to remodel interventions and integration practices. On the other hand, the drastic reduction in political attention to the social, civil and economic integration of migrants and, in particular, of migrant families, linked to the direction taken by migration policies, has had serious effects in terms of social inclusion.

The effects of “unsupportive” policies towards migrants have generated major obstacles to integration (ISTAT, 2021), that are added to, exacerbating them, the crisis caused by the pandemic has exacerbated the fragility of migrant families. There has been a fall-out on integration processes, in which the family, the network of relationships and social and socio-medical services play a fundamental role. The provision of social welfare services, up to now, needs both to direct attention not only at the vulnerable and marginalized, but also at the collective dimension, and to integrate the ordinary

¹ The article is the result of the joint reflection of the two authors; however, in order to attribute authorship to the parts, the introduction and the concluding remarks were jointly authored; Roberta T. Di Rosa is the author of the paragraphs 2 and 3 and Elena Allegri is the author of paragraphs 4 and 5.

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provision with strategies and resources able to transform the immigrant population from simple consumers to active responsible protagonists.

Keywords: migrants families, integration, social services.

1. About integration, policies and services

Integration is a social process whose definition animates the scientific debate both with regard to its definition (Cotesta, 1999, Zanfrini, 2007; Cesareo, Blangiardo, 2009; Boccagni, Pollini, 2012; Sciortino, 2015) and measurement (Cellini, Fideli, 2002; Caselli, 2015). It is undoubtedly a multidimensional process (Cesareo, 2004) which brings into play identity and belonging, with regard to the community of the country of origin and the new country, all interwoven into the on-going cultural and political changes. It depends on multiple factors, ranging from micro-levels (individual and personality traits, age, education, occupation, and knowledge of the language of the country of immigration) to meso-levels (the family structure and community networks), and macro-levels (government policies of the host country, the habits of the population, and the presence and size of the ethnic community) (Portes, 1995). In addition to being multifactorial, it should not be understood as a one-way process, but as a “two-way movement of encounter between immigrants and the host society” (Ambrosini, 2008: 207-208) as “the process of becoming an accepted part of society” (Penninx e Martiniello, 2007: 33). Therefore, the process is social but also political, since its implementation reveals a community’s openness (or lack thereof) regarding the coexistence of different people and cultures: “Social policy choices, and norms issued, define the way in which the immigrant is represented and the idea of the role he or she should play within society” (Simone, 2016: 209).

In Italy, at the end of the 1990s, the declared objective, pursued through a specific “Commission for Integration Policies in Italy”, was that of “reasonable integration” (the cornerstones of which were the safeguarding of the individual and the quest for positive interaction, leading to peaceful coexistence) (Zincone, 2000: 1). On observing the growing characterization of migration as a family-based stabilization process, complex interpretations and responses were proposed that were far more complex than those aimed at predominantly male immigration (Monaci, Carbone, Bonapace, 2010; Barberis, Boccagni, 2017); these proposals were based on a different focus on social integration and the rights/duties of foreigners. Later, the themes of risk and social emergency have prevailed in legislation over the years since 2000; in fact, there has been a steady move towards priorities such as the immigrant’s security and economic utility,

shifting to the background other determinants for integration, such as identity or social and cultural capital (Di Rosa, 2017).

The toughening of the conditions for entry and permanence and the conditions related to family reunification, such as income requirements and the overcoming of bureaucratic obstacles, have jeopardized the path to stabilization and, therefore, also the character of the immigrant family, generating a strongly penalizing effect on the path to laying down roots locally (OECD, 2017).

This increases the precarious nature of the migrants' living conditions and determines a model of "subordinate integration" (Ferrero, Perocco, 2011), a system in which the foreigner's condition of marginality is perpetuated and legitimized, instead of being removed, and in which there is less and less room for the stabilization of migrants and their families; or "forgotten" integration (Coccia, Di Scullo, 2020) or even "halved" integration, in reference to the political and normative barriers that characterise Italian politics, whose attention to integration is constantly held back "by the combined effect of xenophobic attacks and the political timidity of parties" (Naso, 2021: 234).

In a territorial context, marked by an increase in the risks of poverty and social exclusion, access to social services and intervention becomes an area of "distributive conflicts" among those using the welfare system, triggering potential competition between users that is ideologically represented as a conflict between the Italian and the immigrant, in which the latter plays the part of the scrapper, the cause of the shortage of services (Vitiello, 2019a: 87).

2. Which family for which integration?

Variability and complexity distinguish family migration from other migratory channels: refugee migration comprises migrants from a limited range of countries of origin, while labour migrants and international students come from a limited range of age groups or possess specific skills. Migratory family flows are, internally, very different from each other; they range across all ages, from infants to the very old, including people with different levels of skills and, in general, with origins from the most disparate parts of the world.

The definition of the migrant family is the subject of debate in the literature, given the complexity of the elements that in any social system contribute to defining the family itself. Kofman (2004: 249-53) proposes a typology of family migration constructed considering the timing of migration, distinguishing between: full family migration, family migration for reunification and family migration for marriage. One cannot, therefore, speak of a migrant family in general and homogeneous terms; families are very different from each other not only in terms of their characteristics and chosen paths, but also

regarding variations in their composition during the different stages of the migration process, so much so that they are defined as families with “variable geometries” (Ambrosini, 2010).

Regarding the family definitions that have a direct impact on the issue of regulating family migration and family reunification (Simoni, Zucca, 2007), the knots that do not always remain resolved are in the identification of families in the nuclear sense, in the face of the prevalence in some ethno-national groups of the extended family, or in the very definition of family referring to one-person households or transnational families.

Focusing on the characteristics of families’ relationships with receiving contexts, Ambrosini (2014), also identifies six elements that differentiate family trajectories: legal status, housing title, household composition and stability, parents’ occupation, the presence, and degree of cohesion of the extended family network, and transnational references, interests, and projections. The examination of the different combinations of these factors allows, on the one hand, a more attentive and aware look at migrant families, on the other hand, to grasp and confirm how the family constitutes a fundamental lynchpin for insertion into a new context.

About the role of the family in integration processes, however, literature records the existence of two opposing visions of the role of the family in integration processes. On the one hand, the immigrant family is considered a driving-force of integration (Cesareo, Blangiardo, 2009), and, from this perspective, granting migrants the right to family unity has been seen as promoting the integration of migrants into the host society. The way in which people are able to cope with the constraints and restrictions imposed on them by the regulations in force in the area of settlement, is closely linked to the idea of possessing sound social capital (family and kinship, first of all, compatriots and friends), as well as a social position (Di Rosa, Tumminelli, 2021). In the process of integration in a local area, the migrants’ family provides emotional support, resources and protection during this process of social insertion, although it can also comprise a (sometimes very wearisome) area of conflict and negotiation between traditional practices and new lifestyles (Valtolina, Marazzi, 2008; Scabini, Rossi, 2008).

On the contrary, others consider that the migrant family constitutes an obstacle to integration (Kraler, Kofman, 2009), a place characterized by patriarchal relations, illiberal practices and traditions such as arranged and forced marriages; the support for limitations on family-based migration modes might be traced back to this view. The ethnicity-based, sealed-off migrant communities are seen as one of the causes of the alleged “failure” of integration, which somehow legitimizes the tightening of family-related modes of entry and existing rules of conditionality. “The attention of public opinion has, in fact,

been mostly directed towards other aspects of migration, such as questions of polygamy, infibulation, the Muslim veil, immigrant-family violence or the involvement of foreigners in criminal or illegal activities” (Bonizzoni, Cibeà, 2009: 38).

Whatever the role attributed to it, it does seem undeniable the relevance of family dynamics in migration choices (Lagomarsino, 2005), as well as that the variability and complexity of migrant families is also based on the migratory experience (Gozzoli, Regalia, 2005; Cattaneo, Dal Verme, 2005; Tognetti Bordogna, 2008). The awareness of this centrality should be reflected in inclusion policies, that do not always manage to consider, in forecasting and services, the specificity and complexity of family systems, nor to take into account the profound differences between the values, preferences and social experience of the different classes, genders and generations of each migrant family. Integrating polarized viewpoints with an awareness of the internal complexity of family migration, might lead to policies designed for migrant families that quash a generalized view of population-specific cultures, in favour of frames that might usefully consider migrant families as social actors tackling the constraints to which they are regularly subjected.

3. Social policies and access to services: trajectories of inclusion

Integration processes entail a multiplication of needs and demands for specific services, dealing with the social vulnerability of immigrants, and posing new challenge to welfare systems. The relationship with the social and local services represents a key moment in the integration of migrant families, that tend (rather than individuals) to be more likely to remain in the host country than most other categories of migrants (OECD, 2017), and therefore need to have access to local health care, housing and work, schooling for children, assistance in bureaucratic procedures (Di Rosa, 2008; Coppola et al., 2021). Hence, the emergence of new social demands, and a growth in demand for intervention and support measures, in specific integration services and other support services, such as mediation services, and help in accessing housing, schooling and healthcare (Accorinti, 2015). Given the scale of family migratory flows, ensuring to migrant families access to adequate services, means to enable them to become active members of the host country’s society and labour market.

The access to social benefits embodies integration paths in the practices of public services and the third sector, where social intervention aims to reduce social distances and guarantee rights, so that they can be defined as “integration places”. The requests mainly addressed to services from families deal with the

exponential increase of obstacles encountered at various levels: regularity of documents, access to the labour market, impossibility of reconciling family commitments with the search for work. These obstacles are exacerbated in case of lack of eligibility requirements (regular employment contracts, legal residence, etc.) for welfare support and access to integration measures, arising from the progressive reduction in supply and a tightening of selection processes, largely due to assigning differentiated rights to different categories of migrants through processes of classification and selection, admission procedures, conditionality, and restrictions (Saraceno et al., 2013). More and more families are at risk of slipping under the radar of the social services, especially in those areas where the needs related to a wish for shared coexistence are still unfulfilled, due to the absence of services and interventions devoted to long-term resident migrants, in the key areas of integration: housing situation, religious practices, schooling and language inclusion (Boccagni, Pollini, 2012), access to training and employment.

Recent analysis (Vitiello, 2019a) of the scope of the expenditure that municipalities incur for the implementation of social services, shows just how much the goal of integration and inclusion through services (enshrined by the Plan for Integration in Security, Cons. Min., June 10, 2010 and by Law 328/2000) has been neglected regarding intervention on the part of local authorities; instead, this might represent a fundamental tool for the activation and the administration of the processes of immigrant inclusion. The consequent scarcity of resources accessible to migrant families has increased vulnerability and inequality and relative distancing regarding outcome and opportunity.

The latest legislative provisions seem to be moving in a different direction. Among others, the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion of November 2020 highlights the idea of a “needs-based approach”, which identify four areas of intervention (but for single migrant): education and training; employment and recognition of skills; access to health services; access to adequate and affordable housing; for the first time, attention is also paid to the specific needs of second generations (D'Angelo, 2021). It seems to focus more on the dimension of prevention of the risk of social marginality or radicalisation, while no space is given to reflection on the close connection between integration processes and migrants' legal statuses, nor to the issue of the recognition of citizenship as an accomplished form of integration.

The social effects of these policy choices and the lack of investment in terms of recognising the needs of migrant families and ensuring access to services have become evident in the last five years. The 2018 annual Istat report identifies low-income immigrant households as running the highest risk of absolute poverty (Istat, 2018: 56); there has also been a significant increase in demand for income support from immigrant households (Vitiello, 2019b). If in

the pre-pandemic years absolute poverty in foreign-only households stood at 24.4% (almost one in four households, according to ISTAT parameters, did not reach a decent standard of living), in the COVID-19 period the situation has further worsened. According to the Equitable and Sustainable Well-being (Bes) Report (ISTAT 2021) last March, 2020 left 335,000 more immigrant households in absolute poverty than the previous year, due to the effects of COVID-19's stranglehold on the foreign population in Italy. In 2021, more than one migrant family in four (26.7%) is poor in absolute terms (compared to an incidence of 6% among Italian-only households); over the course of a year, the incidence has risen by +2.3%, bringing the number of poor foreign families to 568,000 (Caritas-Migrantes, 2021).

The emergency has made even more evident - unfortunately through the observation of the negative effects of its absence - the relevance of access to services and its close connection with successful inclusion pathways. To tackle the COVID-19 epidemic emergency, extraordinary measures to support businesses were introduced; bonuses have also been introduced for specific categories of workers and for family support (leave and baby-sitter bonus). But analysing the different solutions from the point of view of foreign citizens, it is a substantial rejection of the interventions put in place to support the population groups overwhelmed by the economic crisis triggered by the restrictive measures against coronavirus (IDOS, 2021). The average incidence of non-EU citizens on the measures adopted is 9-10%, with the exception of the self-employed bonus, parental leave and the babysitter bonus, where it stops at 3-4%, confirming - underlines the report - the general difficulty in accessing the application by the entitled person and the poor attractiveness of measures that can be difficult to support in case of already low salaries (such as parental leave) the huge limits related to the coverage of foreigners, since one of the access requirements provides for residence in Italy for 10 years, the last two of which continuously (Caritas-Migrantes, 2021). In the pre-pandemic situation, foreign citizens already suffered from a double disadvantage: the permanence of poverty and insufficient protection through the ordinary income support measure for people in economic difficulty. The outbreak of the pandemic made it urgent to provide interventions to compensate the vulnerability closely linked to the stratification of job insecurity (Bazurli, Campomori, Marchetti, 2020; Naldini, 2021), by intervening not only on the conditions of poverty but also and above all by seeking intervention procedures that have a preventive and recovery effect on social marginalisation.

4. Between welcoming and distrusting in the local community (overcoming current conceptual categories?)

As emphasized in the previous paragraphs, studying migrant families means constantly considering the fluid and polysemic character of both migration and integration processes (Ambrosini, 2014).

In fact, in Italy, in the period before the pandemic crisis the concepts of national integrity and self-sufficiency inspired several migration policies, which indicated them as (populist) solutions to economic insecurity, social unrest and fear for the future, i.e., solutions to concrete and complex problems shared by citizens of many European countries. Thus, many of the devices activated, focusing only on the emergency representation of the migratory phenomenon, have been geared towards the erection of walls, real or symbolic, serving to create separations, to demarcate an ‘us’ with respect to the ‘other’, who has become progressively invisible as regards social inequality, stigmatization and segregation.

Still, it is useful to consider terms such as integration, assimilation and acculturation, which, often preceded by adjectives that qualify them, refer to questions regarding “the capacity of receiving societies to confront change, the way in which those who arrive deal with settling in the new country, and the forms in which this change takes place” (Colombo, La Fauci, 2018: 71). In this sense, it seems appropriate to consider that the changes in the conceptual categories, as used in both regulatory provisions and policies, are also influenced by the public debate, often exacerbated by the representations presented and/or disseminated by the media. The culturalist understanding, which sees integration as a sort of cultural assimilation, and the construction of the ‘desirable’ migrant as an ‘archetypal’ humanitarian victim have been investigated as powerful discourses (Benson, 2013) that compete, often successfully, with other discourses in the contemporary Italian public sphere. The media arena, and its agenda setting, is increasingly intertwined with the political arena, thus contributing to fomenting not only moral panic (Cohen, 1972) among the public, but also to wrong-footing the professionals and other agencies in local communities assigned with the task of converting political and organizational directives into practice.

However, even in the debate on integration policies and strategies at the local level, the focus seems to be on the individual rather than on migrant families. Instead, the geographical moves have major and long-lasting sociological consequences, in terms, for example, of position in the labour market, social networks, changes in family structure associated with the separations and reunions so frequent in migration (Eve, Perino, 2011).

On the policy level, the National Plan for the Integration of Holders of International Protection indicates that “integration requires sensitivity and information on the part of the receiving population; it must be based on local realities and integrated into existing welfare” (Ministry for Home Affairs, 2017: 9). Whilst these indications might enhance the community local dimension, i.e. the level in which the co-planning capacity of public and private actors in the local area has displayed an ability to provide interesting, innovative solutions in the twenty Regional welfare structures that now characterize Italy, it is, nevertheless, important to note that migrant integration interventions are characterized by a high level of heterogeneity. These differences, therefore, reverberate in the planning and implementation of public policy at the local level, creating highly diversified conditions and opportunities for immigrants to enjoy the rights of social citizenship, as more or less recognized by national legislation. Currently, policies for immigrants even at the local level tend to be thought of as a specific field, centred on ethnic-cultural issues. However, as Perino and Allasino have pointed out “if we recognize that migration is a process which shapes the system of social stratification, it is clear that a more general, *integrated* approach is needed which does not focus *primarily* on discrimination or cultural misunderstandings, but rather on changes in the labour market, school systems, urban areas, etc.” (2014: 277).

Therefore, activating an approach at the micro, meso and macro levels, which goes beyond the generalized view of the specific culture of populations, implies adopting frameworks that consider migrant households not as foreign and unequal (Saraceno et al., 2013), but as social actors tackling the restrictions which they face, within specific communities and regions, in the same way as all other citizens (Eve, 2013). Of course, adopting such a perspective does not mean reproducing the social construction of migrant families as something anomalous, or denying specificities and diversities that are present. On the contrary, it is about looking at the socio-legal condition of that family as one of the variables at play among others (Boccagni, 2015) present in local social and community networks. Currently, the migrant families limited access to formal services is at least partly compensated for by informal networks (as tools of support, mutual aid and access to information) and their social capital (Granovetter, 1998; Portes, 1998); these social resources (material and non-material) are mediated by the social circles of belonging and enable the social actor to achieve goals and realize levels of social performance that he/she alone could not achieve (Di Nicola, 2013). This suggests an opportunity to overcome the limitations deriving from the scarce attention given to these informal resources by formal or institutional services, which fail to systemize their support potential and transform it into potential for integration.

In order to analyse the differences present in the various local contexts, Campomori (2008) suggests applying three fundamental dimensions: the cognitive dimension (the frames for the action of decision-makers), the organizational dimension (structures, agencies, procedures, use of knowledge, capacity for intervention) and the governance dimension (relations between local government and civil society, but also administrative styles that emerge from the respective political sub-cultures).

Lately, other research has explored reception practices and the actual criticalities that social services and social workers encounter in facilitating (or regulating) the access of new users in local communities (Pattaro, Nigris, 2018); the critical organisation and functioning of the reception system in a local case (Boccagni et al, 2020); the social trajectories of the second generation in schools and the labour market (Perino, Allasino, 2014). According to Ricucci, the policies and interventions activated in favour of second generations are illuminating with regard to the effectiveness of the integration process, because they should act “to build and/or reinforce processes of civil coexistence, within a citizenship that is becoming more aware of the transformations of immigration, both induced and unavoidable” (2016: 66).

Thus, thinking in terms of community social work implies transforming the traditional restorative approach of services into a capacitative approach (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). In other words, it means developing a set of processes that involve as many as possible of the inhabitants of a given community (those who were born there and those who arrived later) to join their efforts with those of public institutions in order to improve the social, health, economic and cultural condition of the same community of which they are part. On the level of practices, this may mean creating conditions that facilitate cooperative behaviour. Two factors appear particularly significant in building frameworks in the manner indicated: trust and the tension between the individual and the social dimension of each problem faced.

The first factor concerns trust¹, which is considered fundamental if cooperative behaviour is to be established (Pendenza, 1999). Favretto (2018) suggests that we should bear in mind that trust has been indicated (Luhmann, 1988) as one of the specific and cheapest solutions to problems of risk, such as those regarding social inclusion. Among the conditions for trust there are the structural and cyclical characteristics of the context in which trust is present. The author takes into consideration the regulatory apparatus and, in particular, the relationship between this and trust, highlighting its circular character: “the

¹ Trust can be defined as “an expectation of experiences with positive valences for the actor, accrued under conditions of uncertainty, but in the presence of such a cognitive and/or emotional load that the threshold of mere hope is crossed” (Mutti, 2003: 516).

greater the uncertainty and non-regulation, the more trust is required for associated living; trust induces the creation of stable and norm-based contexts; stable and norm-based contexts create, in their turn, possible conditions for trust and an increase in trust, but only in the presence of certain conditions, such as consistency, completeness, clarity, poor manipulative level of rules, as well as the certainty of sanctions” (Favretto, 2018: 230).

The second factor that may influence frames used for considering migrant families as social actors, concerns regional welfare planning, which ought to focus on a complex phenomenon: the tension between the individual and social dimension of each problem. Many problems (e.g. the search for accommodation and work, and integration processes in a specific society) have both an individual and social dimension (often inter-related). If problems and resources are social, then they belong to everyone, i.e. they are public and political, and the actors in question, and, first and foremost, the incumbent institutions, can act responsibly and intentionally within this frame of meaning. It follows that organizations, services and professionals should direct their attention not only at the vulnerable and marginalized, but also at the collective dimension, which includes all those who reside in, inhabit and pass through a local area.

In other words, if today’s social problems are related, for example, to the fragmentation of ties, to loneliness, to relative, absolute and relational poverty, to intolerance towards others, it is not the individual level that should be deemed a priority for bringing about significant change, but rather the social level: a level at which ethics and the relationship with politics come together. Of course, it is fitting to respond to the emergency of the individual, but is it possible to activate processes that might prevent the emergency from lingering indefinitely until it eventually becomes an annoying routine? (Allegri, 2015).

Planning and implementing a reception system for migrant families demands not only complex knowledge and skills, but also the ability to think critically about public and private organizations as well as the daily practices that professionals trigger as a concrete transfer of the directives emanating from public and social policies.

5. How to overcome the cultural difference? Other ‘lenses’ for understanding migration processes

It should be noted that social workers operate at a crossroads between different types of mandate, institutional, professional and social. Daily tensions render this a rather uncomfortable position in organizational contexts characterized by uncertainty and turbulence.

An example of an activity aimed at overcoming the conceptual category of cultural difference and at undermining the barriers present in the Italian reception system could be that of a multidisciplinary training project reserved for different types of workers in the field of migration.

The project called VeSTA (*Verso servizi territoriali accoglienti*: Towards Welcoming Services), funded by the EU's Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration (FAMI), was headed by Piedmont Region, the partners being the Regional Institute for Social and Economic Research (IRES), an association of legal experts on migration law (ASGI) and the Department of Law, Political, Economic and Social Studies of the University of Piemonte Orientale (Eastern Piedmont), Alessandria.

An important objective of the VeSTA² project was to question the interpretation of migrants' behaviour and needs in terms of 'their culture', since perspectives of this kind are common among those working with migrants and interventions are often influenced in consequence (Allegri et al., 2020). During the training, we suggested that interpreting migrant behavior in terms of a presumed national culture poses major problems because it does not take into consideration the profound differences between the values, preferences, and social experience of migrants of different classes, genders, and generations, as is the case with "Italian culture" (Eve, 2013).

In VeSTA we tried to offer some elements of an alternative type of explanation, focusing on social processes which are regularly involved in labour migration, independently of the nationality or ethnicity of the persons concerned.

A particularly innovative part of the project was the involvement of 16 migrants, as 'experts in the relationship with the social services', who had all lived in Italy for many years. After brief training (12 hours), 'expert migrants' participated with lecturers in certain lessons. The aim of this part of the project was, on the one hand, to encourage migrants to reflect on their experience as knowledgeable and competent social actors, and, on the other hand, to value

² Overall, 687 employees from reception centres for asylum seekers, social workers and employees from the social and health services took part in VeSTA. There were 55 sessions and 330 hours of training, held in 7 different towns in the Region by 13 trainers. A total of 63 % of those who took part had not taken part in any training regarding the issues covered in the last 3 years. The training was divided into two parts. The first, devoted to sociological, anthropological and socio-legal issues, consisted of 25 training sessions. The second part, centred on working in the local community and on the approach of working in networks, consisted of 30 training sessions. The VeSTA project took place between December 2016 and March 2018, so before the law (L.132/2018) had been approved by Parliament at the end of 2018, which radically changed the whole system of reception for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

their knowledge and make it available to trainee social workers. In fact, at the end of the twentieth century in a number of countries, movements of user-citizens sprung up in various fields, demanding to be included as equal partners in decisions which regarded them, and to be involved in the formulation of policies for the health and social services. In other words, social service users involved in these movements wanted to affirm their experiential knowledge, to be more involved in decision-making (Beresford, Boxall, 2012) and enhancing ‘capabilities’ (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011).

Using participatory-action research approaches into biographic narrative interviewing, migration timelines and a focus group (Winter, Munn-Giddings, 2000) life stories were intertwined and shared, extrapolating in particular those experiences connected with *processes* activated by the social services and the relationship between *migrants and* social workers.³ Then, the *immigrant experts* culled tips to suggest to social workers how to build a critical approach in their organizations, mixing professional and organizational dynamics with those relating to policies for migrants.

This experiment, which has been much appreciated by social workers, shows that migrant service users can be effectively involved in many kinds of project, although it is necessary to reflect more widely on certain critical points, e.g. the relatively short time devoted to the training of the ‘experienced migrant users’ and the risk that social workers – if not systematically supported – would return to contemporary, dominant practices, focusing on individual social work and overlooking structural issues (Boccagni, 2015; Dominelli, 2008; Lorenz, 2006).

Beyond these points, this experience shows that ‘migrants’, if recognised as experts, benefit in terms of inclusion from being seen as social actors in the full sense, to be fully consulted and informed. For that reason, it could be usefully replicated in other trainings involving migrant families, in order to transform their contact with the services into a pathway of connection with the wider reality in which they are embedded.

Not infrequently, migrant families tend to remain confined within their families and communities, which makes it difficult to reach them through normal information channels. In this case, specific participatory activities become an important part of successful integration pathways. Enhancing and stimulating their potential as active agents, the effects that could be pursued through such an intervention with migrant families are manifold: firstly, it offers

³ For a description of the methodology and the results please refer to Allegri, Eve, Mazzola, Perino, Pogliano (2020), Other ‘lenses’: a training programme for social workers and others working with asylum seekers and migrants in Italy, *European Journal of Social Work*, 23, 3, 529-540.

considerable opportunities to improve the relationship between professionals and users, mitigating the perception often held by 'migrant experts' of a difficulty on the part of social workers to understand the social situation migrants were in.

Secondly, it may permit to spread in services an anti-oppressive approach to social services. This is not to say that these issues are not without tension, challenges or struggles, but working with them helps to ensure that the social workers and managers of the future can operate more effectively, in meeting service users' priorities and needs (McLaughlin et al., 2018; Ramon et al., 2019).

Last but not least, the more competent services can have a positive effect but also acquire a potential for preventing forms of isolation because they make it possible to transform families who 'ask for help' into families who are recognised as active social actors in the community of the area of settlement.

It therefore seems appropriate to suggest the opportunity of future developments going in the direction of integrating service practice through pathways of participation of migrant families, both to support social workers who want to learn this way of working, and to develop awareness among migrant families about their competence as "experts in their experience", rising their participation in improving the organisation of services and processes.

6. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, on the basis of the reasoning proposed in this article, it seems appropriate to highlight the fact that the issues raised by migration flows suggest the need to activate policies capable of promoting social coexistence and conflict control, thus going beyond the vision of recognition, management and possible reconciliation between cultural diversities. It is a matter of adopting conceptual frameworks that consider migrants and their families as social actors, who have to tackle the restrictions to which they are subjected, within specific areas, just like all other citizens (as we have tried to demonstrate in the previous paragraphs). Social policies are called upon to identify forms of public intervention that consent, not so much the coherent development of a theory of justice, but, in a more pragmatic form, a reduction in forms of discrimination and exclusion on ethnic grounds (Monaci, Carbone, Bonapace, 2020: 93).

During the COVID19 health emergency, contrary to what has just been stated, fear of the foreigner and anybody seen as different, was endorsed by fear of contagion, for which the quarantine ships used to isolate migrants provided an emblematic model. We might contemplate the establishment of networks of trust and solidarity within counter-posed communities, but we know that, in

emergency situations, rather than a reinforcing of social capital within communities, there is a generalized withdrawal of trust that affects all the individuals and groups involved (Putnam 2007). Thus, during the pandemic, the full, all-embracing alarm ended up relegating to the background issues related to fragility and exposure to a high risk of contagion as experienced by non-Italians residing in Italy, due to that vulnerability closely linked to conditions of poverty and social marginality, otherwise definable as stratification of job insecurity (Bazurli, Campomori, Marchetti, 2020; Naldini, 2021).

Looking towards the future, the integration process should be carried out on the basis of the undertaking of the local community in generating and protecting a social fabric sensitive to specific differences, in which integration is sought, at the micro and meso level, in a manner compatible with the resources and exigencies of the local area, as well as with other public and private actors present in the field. Dialogue and mutual respect are prerequisites, on the level of egalitarian dignity, ability and availability for the recognition of problems and resources, for planning and change, as a possibility of expression in a context capable of nurturing trust (Bramanti, 2011; Coccia, Di Scullo, 2020). These are the essential elements for the concrete transformation into social life of the formal acknowledgement enshrined in law via integration policies (Zanfrini, 2007).

A strategic objective, in the planning of new social policies, especially at the local level, should comprise the effective integration of the existing situation, which might be placed in a hypothetical formal/informal continuum, where an important role for the institutions lies in supporting and sustaining the informal, local realities, and trying to involve them in social projects aimed at improving the integration strategies of migrant families, which, like all the other families, represent a “social fact” (Di Nicola, 2013).

Creating a renewed, connective tissue linking historical citizenship and new forms of citizenship, in a mind-set of inclusiveness, may prove a valid deterrent against disintegration and emerging conflict. Involvement and participation may sound like obsolete words, but yet they are the keystones to arriving at a delineation of projects and pacts, which the different social components of each local area might share (in a revitalization of belonging), whilst bestowing a new value on genuine social cohesion.

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