Empowering people through reframing: experiences of guidance practitioners in a public network of career centres

Massimo Tomassini\textsuperscript{a}, Antonella Barile\textsuperscript{b}, Eleonora Fiumara\textsuperscript{b}, Paola Scarpello\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} University of Roma Tre, Rome, Italy \textsuperscript{b} Work Guidance Centres, Municipality of Rome, Italy

Online publication date: 13 April 2011
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Massimo Tomassini\textsuperscript{a*}, Antonella Barile\textsuperscript{b}, Eleonora Fiumara\textsuperscript{b} and Paola Scarpello\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}University of Roma Tre, Rome, Italy; \textsuperscript{b}Work Guidance Centres, Municipality of Rome, Italy

(Received 1 December 2010; final version received 7 February 2011)

In this article, empowerment is assumed as a phenomenon strictly related to agency dynamics and to the reflective abilities of actors in a given organisational context, which allow their own personal and professional fulfilment. The article is the outcome of a reflective interview in which the authors involved themselves, at the end of a two-year co-operation for the development of the Leonardo da Vinci Reflect-OR project. Five main processes of empowerment are taken into account related to the paths of professional identity construction, the opportunities for competence development, the functioning of the community of practice, the spaces for emotions and the opportunities for transformation. In the final remarks, the subjective side of empowerment is emphasised and some lines for future deepening of the above issues are highlighted.

Keywords: reflective learning; agency/structure; empowerment; identity; emotions; transformation

1. Questions about empowerment

The concept of empowerment played a central role in the Reflect-OR project as it was a project aimed at implementing a broad-scope methodology for practitioners’ development in career guidance public services. Written at the end of this two-year project, this article tries to provide a number of considerations about empowerment, drawing upon the direct perceptions and interpretations of the authors, all engaged in implementing Reflect-OR\textsuperscript{1} in one of the project’s contexts: the network of Centres for Career Guidance (Centri per l’Orientamento al Lavoro) (COLs) of the Municipality of Rome. The article has been produced through a reflective interview in which three of the COLs workers, stimulated by a researcher/facilitator, engaged in the projects since its very first design phases, tried to shed some light on the real nature of empowerment.

What does empowerment mean, in the very end? Which are the implications of this evocative, but also ambiguous and sometimes abused, term? Which way the contradiction between an idea that is intrinsically related to the acquisition of ‘power’, on one side and, on the other side, the work and organisation realities in which such an acquisition faces structural obstacles and hinders? What does it mean to introduce a participative and appreciative methodology in a contradictory organisational context in which empowerment did not represent a shared value until recently?

The following sections address such questions. In sections 2 and 3, a short theoretical framework and a depiction of some reflective interview characteristics are

\textsuperscript{*}Corresponding author. Email: max.tomassini@quipo.it
respectively provided. In sections 4 to 8, some of the outcomes of the reflective interview are presented (in a way necessarily compressed because of the nature and space of this contribution). In section 9 the reader will find brief final remarks related to the Reflect-OR experience together with suggestions for future action-reflection interventions aimed at enhancing the empowerment opportunities of people living and working in different contexts.

2. Empowerment: some preliminary remarks

In general, empowerment refers to individual opportunities in terms of ‘power, choice and responsibility’ originated by specific kinds of power re-distribution in the work place (Haar, 2006). However, a rather marked hiatus can be identified between top-down and bottom-up views regarding the nature of such a re-distribution. In top-down perspectives, typical of functionalistic approaches, the re-distribution is considered as an outcome of specific management strategies and, as a consequence, empowerment is assumed as an instrument for the delegation of decision-making and management responsibilities towards lower-level employees (Mills, 2006).

On the other hand, within the more bottom-up perspectives, different views coexist. Those who underline the emergence of new organisational forms (lean, network, information-based, heterarchical, and many more) usually consider ‘top’ and ‘down’ as increasingly meaningless references and think that the re-distribution of decisions and tasks – and power as a consequence – is an unavoidable step for the search of organisational effectiveness. Such re-distribution effects are taken into account by innumerable authors who emphasise the rise of new professionalism and the knowledge-based nature of the majority of occupations in modern economies. Under a different viewpoint, the growing opportunities for non-traditional power equilibria are pointed out by post-modern approaches, which consider the force relations among individuals and social groups as the core issue of their analyses, but also tend to show how these are structured in relation to local and unstable substrates, highly variable from case to case. From a different perspective, ‘critical’ views about managerial ideologies depict current empowerment-based approaches in human resource management as deceitful and manipulative (Bauman, 2008). Even the bottom-up perspective as such, from this viewpoint, is deemed to be a different way of establishing inner conditionings in relation to management imperatives for order and productivity (Marzano, 2008).

In this article a middle-down-up notion of empowerment is retained. Such a definition is related to an idea of empowerment as an outcome of specific configurations of the agency/structure relationship in specific contexts. Following Giddens (1979), structure can be seen as the set of rules and resources that, in given context, facilitates or hinders social action. Such rules and resources are incorporated in recurrent social practices, but at the same time are autonomous from them. Structure cannot be identified with organisation. It represents an entity that is objective, enduring and external to the social actors. Agency, on the other side, is a ‘flow of intentional actions’, reflexively regulated, exposed to unconscious effects and unintended outcomes. It becomes in some way visible insofar as actors produce narrations and justifications (accounts) of their own actions. Agency, as an emerging correlate of structure, is based on the individuals’ power of contrasting the structure’s pressures and of adjusting structural rules and resources for their own advantage.
Arguably, *reflective empowerment* is a self-enabling phenomenon, strictly related to *agency*, through which those living in a given work and organisational context may build, over time, their own opportunities for personal and professional fulfilment (see Figure 1). The core causes of empowerment are seen as closely linked to reflective/reflexive abilities of understanding, choice and action which can accrue the actors’ subjective potentialities and can foster the material, relational and emotional advantages stemming from the participation in a specific action context.

An overall analysis of the Reflect-OR project activities and outcomes (see also the other articles of this special issue) enabled us to articulate the above vision of empowerment into five main processes:

- the paths of professional identity construction (which ways actors reflect on their personal and professional being, and to what extent such reflection helps them in reshaping their professional lives);
- the opportunities for competence development (to what extent competence is individually and collectively recognised and rewarded);
- the functioning of the community of practice (to what extent work practices constitute the ‘situated’ ground for goals identification, mutual learning and cultural artefacts);
- the spaces for emotions (to what extent emotions are recognised and considered as action triggers); and
- the opportunities for transformation (to what extent innovation is possible through the re-framing of shared visions and the emergence of new action paradigms).

The reflective interview (see note 2) was devoted to exploring such processes. The ideas emerged in relation to each of them are reported in the following sections, after a brief introduction about the context.

3. The intervention’s context
The COL network is composed of 16 units. Historically, it has been created not through a specific strategic choice and a subsequent organisational setup, but as an
aggregation process involving already existing autonomous small guidance organisations (belonging to the third sector, or linked to the trade unions or constituted as social co-operatives). In a period of about fifteen years, starting from 1990, the Municipality of Rome has promoted the aggregation of them through different measures (including a project for guidance services’ development funded by the European Social Fund). In 2005, all employees of these services were hired by the municipality, and the COL network officially started its activities. Each single COL developed its own activities, having as reference both general institutional objectives (guidance activities, mainly for disadvantaged target groups) and project-related objectives linked to local social demands and to temporary agreements with other organisations (e.g., schools, vocational education and training (VET) centres, associations, research institutions, etc.).

COLs are small-sized organisations. Their average staff is not above the six people dealing with two main kinds of activities:

1. reception and information for people willing to explore their own labour market opportunities; and
2. consulting support for those having subjective difficulties in work and learning paths, and needing help in relation to them.

Some boundaries are established between these two main activities, to be performed in a sequence (reception comes necessarily before counselling), and in fact assigned to different levels of personnel (reception is usually carried out either by lower-level workers or by students on internships). However, these boundaries are not rigid, at least in one sense. Those employees welcoming the public do not consult while, on the other side, consultants also play information and assistance roles and a number of other ones as well (even together with the ‘receptionists’). In organisational terms, what is currently defined as the COLs ‘network’ is in fact an organisational structure articulated into a ‘centre’ (the XIV Municipality’s Department) and a number of ‘peripheries’: the 17 COLs, each one with its own specific traits.

Considering that single COLs are components of a scattered and fragmented network, the average level of inter-organisational communication and sense-making among them is considered not too bad by workers, although several problems persist due to local differences in dealing with day-to-day activities and in interpreting the organisational mission. The network is not yet really established but the way is open towards such a goal. On the contrary, the centre/periphery relations are mostly of a formal-bureaucratic nature. The centre generates very limited strategic inputs and, so far, has intended its own role to be in terms of control of performances’ regularity (opening hours, work attendances, etc.). This is a consequence of the missed accomplishment of the original organisational design and strategy. In the first half of the 2000s, in parallel with the formal structuring process, important changes took place in the management team. The municipality management team that initially supported the COLs’ creation was disbanded and its political momentum subsided. Moreover, an institutional contradiction emerged as a national reform process established a new network of local placement centres institutionally attached to provinces, also having guidance functions. Therefore the COLs had to further clarify their own mission and raison-d’être.

As a whole, following an agency/structure interpretative framework, the formal organisation that structurally embodies rules and resources for COLs’ functioning is
still in search of a clear self-definition and is kept together by formal bureaucratic criteria within a survival perspective. At the same time, in the largest majority of COLs, an agency push from individuals and small groups is manifest towards self-development, based on local resources and abilities and focused on social reference interests. Such agency tends to counter the bureaucratic tendencies and to recover initiative and empowerment spaces on the basis of direct link with local social needs and of commonalities and alliances with other institutions (schools, VET centres, social assistance centres and many more). Due to the interplay of such factors, the ‘centre’ has tended to take an objectively dis-empowering function over time, while, in parallel, in a different COL a significant need for role confirmation and action empowerment has tended to grow up and to find ways for affirmation.

4. Professional identity

The agency/structure perspective helps in underlining the central role of the professional identity dimension. For COLs workers, far from being stable and once-for-all established, the latter appears as a continuously re-built entity, showing strong links with the individuals’ reflexively constituted self-identity on one side (Giddens, 1992) and the dynamics of work practices on the other side. Such traits are evidently reinforced in the Italian reality. Guidance activities carried out in COLs have much to do with purposes of lifelong learning career counselling (LLCG), according to a definition currently in use in scientific literature and in European guidelines. However, as in the overall Italian context, guidance is still an insufficiently recognised function both in social and legal terms, LLCG cannot be referred to a clearly defined set of procedures and behaviours. On the contrary, it is continuously enmeshed with information, assistance and other functions of this kind. In COLs’ work organisation there are boundaries between information and consultation activities, but the professional role and even the job title (orientatore) can be indifferently applied to workers performing both simpler information roles and more complex consultation roles.

Given such a background, those more involved in career counselling accept the multifaceted and even ambiguous nature of their activity, and are engaged in bottom-up enforcement of it because of the resulting greater satisfaction and clearer social acknowledgment. In many ways their professional identity is of an ‘emerging’ nature, in which different action models converge, taken from other professions (in particular, but not only, the counselling and psychotherapeutic professions), and is adapted in relation to mixed and ever changing needs.

Our work is a puzzle composed of different pieces to be put together. The aim is not reaching a pre-defined shape but getting to a construction which might allow the reproduction of identity and motivation for us. Our work is made significant by our practices as such, by what we do day-by-day. For instance, yesterday, during a support activity for migrants in which I had a pivotal role, I realised how important is our facilitation function regarding people having cultural and linguistic difficulties. Facilitation is a further piece of my game: I must be aware of it, although one cannot find any recognition of it.

I developed my identity in the world of guidance starting from a psychology background. Over time I got a passion for this world. Now, after 17 years, I feel that the process is accomplished: I perceive myself as an orientatrice, and my entourage do so as well,
while for a long time they considered me as a psychologist. There is a lot to do in this context. We have to bring our help in many different situations. And this requires that we really play this game and are able to re-invent us continuously.

Our bosses think about us as clerks, not as professionals. They do not care very much about the ways in which we cope with our challenges and produce concrete results. This is a dis-empowering factor for us. But our work cannot be done without engagement and will for change. We tend to continuously improve our performances: we are developing approaches that work. We are finding ways for showing it: Reflect-OR is one of them.

5. Competence

Being empowered largely means to be able to shape one’s own professional competence, which, in turn, depends on reflection about both one’s experience and intentions for change. Individuals and groups have simultaneously to express their engagement, will and power in order to develop well-being and satisfaction in their work contexts (Ghaye, 2001). This competence/empowerment process also appears, besides the one related to professional identity, as highly contingent in COL workers’ experience:

Our identity and competences are linked to ‘listening’ capabilities typical of counselling techniques, but evolve according to specific practical needs as they require tailor-made solutions. I realised that most of what I do comes from similarity and approximation. The essence of ‘competence’ for me is the ability to introduce continuous shifts in my action repertoire, implementing what has to be used in a specific situation and not implementing what is inappropriate.

Competence means versatility for me. I deal with persons who are very different from one another. I must be able to treat a teenager getting inside his insecurities, his unwillingness neither of studying nor of working, his absolute distance from the world. And, in the next hour, I have somebody aged between 50 and 60 in front of me, somebody who is going to miss his job: I must be able to deal with his despair and fear. In the two cases I must be different, and I think my competence is nested in such difference.

6. Community of practice

In the practice dimension, different aspects converge in the material side of activities that are daily carried out: the sense-making about what is going on and what is to be done, the ways in which the capabilities have to be implemented and the forms that internal and external relations have to take. The community perspective helps in understanding the ways in which such aspects are continuously negotiated and identity and competence continuously reproduced. In the COL network, considering its genesis and internal dynamics, things are more complex than in some other organisations. Every worker is in fact at the same time member of two communities: the micro-organisational one and the ‘network’ one:

Our activity is composed by many elements: we give information, we listen to problems, we do guidance counselling through specific tools (like ‘competence budgets’ for instance). In some cases our relation with the client lasts the time of a short meeting, in other cases a longer and more dense kind of activity is needed. The openness of our mission gives rise to different inconveniences: sometimes we risk to go beyond our assigned role with difficult persons whose needs are far beyond the ‘job’ as such. What
do we have to do? Up to which point do we have to reach? This is a relevant example of a permanent questioning within our group. But this is also an example of how it is difficult the tuning with the rest of the network. What do the others do? Which are their real practices? Which is the ‘community’ for me?

I tend to realise that the ‘network’ is in some way a recent phenomenon and that its community effects are emerging only in the last periods. I have been working here for 10 years but I had the chance of meeting colleagues of the other COLs only four years ago in a training course. In this course we got to know each other and generated common tools and procedures. It was a good starting point. Now there are much more relationships but we still have to construct a real network.

The network and the extended community are mostly growing up through the participation in external projects:

Reflect-OR is an excellent example of the ways in which a viable community should be built up, through reciprocal recognition and the creation of common goals. There are other examples (another European project with French partners; some projects developed with schools and VET centres; a research study on juvenile deviant behaviours which implied the participation of several COLs in co-operation with the University of Rome).

All these activities have generated something that might be better labelled in terms of ‘community of motivation’, in which we recognise each other not only as bearers of common interests but also as persons and professionals characterised by specific modes of being and acting.

7. Emotions

In a context such as the one of COLs, relevant empowerment phenomena can be understood when one overcomes the traditional dimensions of organisational analysis, only focused on the socio-cognitive aspects of working and relational practices. The emotional dimension of work and organisation must also be carefully taken into account, due to at least two different reasons:

(1) a larger consideration of emotions in a mostly female work environment and culture (as the COLs network is); and
(2) the familiarity with emotions as integral component of a working life exposed to a difficult audience and, in some way, as a current ‘working tool’ for guidance counselling activities.

Living and working in such an environment naturally implies the development of some levels of ‘emotional awareness’ (Dalai Lama & Ekman, 2008) having specific physical/mental manifestations, and of ‘emotional intelligence’: self-perceived ability of recognising own and others’ feelings and of positively handling emotions at the personal and relational level (Goleman, 1995):

Recently, in order to implement what was established by an agreement with the provincial employment offices, we had to deal with a number of cases of over-50s who already lost their jobs or are very close to be unemployed. I feel the effect of my own professional empowerment in talking with these people: I’m increasingly more able to overcome negative emotions and to put positive empathy into action. The parallel listening to ourselves and to the client is a fundamental component of our work: this helps me in keeping in touch with my inner reactions and to avoid frustrating and depressive
attitudes. I have to also take care of myself, in particular when I’m kept by thoughts such as ‘I cannot do anything useful in such a desperately hopeless case’; ‘I have no answer to provide’; ‘what am I doing here’. If I understand my emotional background I’m more able to cope the situations that generate such thoughts.

Two important phenomena have to be underlined regarding the emotional dimension. On the one hand, COLs actors appear as active reflective observers of their own emotions. On the other hand, such levels of reflection have significant effects on organisational action and on forms of self-empowerment that are largely based on ethical presuppositions. As put forward within the organising reflection approach, by bringing to the fore the emotions that are part of the dynamic flow of interacting between social and political forces, important organising processes emerge that underpin the way individuals make sense of their own experiences (Antonacopoulou, 2004):

When we get to emotionally intense points, our sense of the team gets also reinforced. Recently, for instance, when we had to deal with the over-50s, we had a double reaction. We reinforced the levels of our mutual help but we also found new practical courses of action while discussing our emotional states. For example, we considered it wiser to ‘go out’, to do something that we never did before in these terms: we directly contacted both the small businesses that were putting in jeopardy our clients’ employment with them and the public bodies having a say on these issues. We went beyond the classical life-long career guidance action framework and tried to establish new action patterns. Of course this cannot be a constant modus operandi: we are not equipped for doing it systematically. And nevertheless it was important for us. Afterwards we reflected on such a behaviour and realised that emotions can be the trigger even of mobilising (not paralysing) effects.

8. Transformation

All the above processes, each one with its specificities, tend in many ways towards transformations of the present situation. People empowerment, from this viewpoint, is concurrent with social-cultural-organisational transformations. For COLs workers, being empowered means being positively involved in circuits of emerging transformations based on step-by-step re-framing of action reality. Such re-framing should be seen both as a cognitive endeavour (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) and as the result of different processes’ interplay in which social, emotional and ethical factors are also involved (Ghaye et al., 2008) and qualitatively characterise the overall transformation. The Reflect-OR project played a significant role in such transformative empowerment:

The project gave us chances for expressing fears, emotions, difficult moments within a totally new for us (appreciative) approach. The presence of external facilitators was in fact of great support. They provided innovative keys which helped us in putting some aspects of our collective discourse back in their own perspective. For example, we are now able to better see the negative effects of the contraposition ‘we/them’ between us and the department’s managers. We overcame the ‘wall-against-wall’ perception of this relationship.

At the beginning it was difficult to identify the ‘success stories’ concerning our macro-organisation. However, when we were able to do it, we perceived us as having made important steps forward. Now it is as if we were more aware of our reality and, because of it, less afraid of our manager. Our propensities towards conflict are now better channelled. We can understand even ‘their’ problems, as having deep roots in the structures
of administrative action in our context, where it is impossible to escape from formal procedures. While we are even less prone to confuse our role image with that of the ‘clerk’, at the same time we are increasingly aware of the need of behaving according to formal procedures.

I must admit that in the past I was somehow disgusted by the world of procedures. When our managers were asking us to follow the bureaucratic procedures I tended to refuse to listen to them. Now I realise that we should take possession of these instruments in order to use them appropriately in relation to our ends. For better or worse they are a component of our world: this kind of understanding makes me feel more mature and responsible, more empowered regarding my activity and my position in the organisation.

9. Concluding remarks

The reflective interview presented in this article has been a positive experience for us. It has proved to be a valuable means for the re-exploration of our individual and group experiences. Far from being aimed at merely eliciting contents from field actors – like traditional distal research tools do – this kind of collective exercise functioned as a proximal trigger for us, fostering subjective awareness and shared understanding processes. It showed interesting opportunities for even bringing about some research advances. In many ways, the use and results of the reflective interview seem to represent a small but not insignificant contribution to closing – as envisaged in recent organisation research – the chasm between practice-driven theorising of what people do in their workplace and the academic theory-driven theorising about it (Yanow, 2006, quoted in Nicolini, 2009).

We can think about empowerment as a phenomenon largely dependent on individual and collective interpretative efforts, or, in other terms, as the outcome of accounts that hinge on closer understandings of structure dynamics and that tend to step-by-step reshape their own local agency. Following the terms briefly introduced in section 2, the COLs seem to represent an interesting case of ‘prevalence of agency on structure’. Even in that contradictory organisation, constantly at risk of being blocked by social and organisational factors, the workers show specific abilities for the identification of affordances (i.e., the real ‘possibilities for action’) present in their own contexts and for the exploitation of them. The main trigger of such emerging and continuously evolving abilities is a general need of ‘being themselves’, i.e., being recognised, valorised, acknowledged in relation to – and on the basis of – their activities and results.

The self-valorisation of subjective attitudes and dispositions at the individual and at the small group level represents the crucial underpinning of these abilities. In the COLs’ case, it is particularly evident that empowering processes are not only related to local historical-contextual conditions but also to autonomously settled values and aspirations. The interpretations that we provided about our own empowerment dynamics largely appeared as stemming from personal stories and work-based learning paths. Reflectivity (regarding reality) and reflexivity (regarding the perceived subjective position in the reality) – one can conclude – are not at all an automatic outcome of experience. They require specific dispositions that can of course be favoured by a certain kind of contextual structural arrangements but are basically rooted in individual abilities to let them coherently grow. In this process even the individuals’ ‘ultimate concerns’ about personal projects play an important role. Together with the idea of empowerment as a social construction, the reflective interview seems
in fact to bring about the idea of empowerment as maintained by the continuous interplay of individual ‘internal conversations’ (Archer, 2003) each one regarding the directions to follow in order to satisfy important personal concerns. In this sense the hypotheses that provided the overall framework of our interview (such as those about, for instance, the self-identity or the emotional side of work) should be integrated by a further – and in many ways different – view that assumes as crucial the role of reflexivity, manifested through the ‘internal conversation’, in an intermediate position between agency and structure (Archer, 2007).

The participative appreciative action and reflection (PAAR) methodology has positively stimulated our reflection about empowerment processes, providing conceptual, relational and rhetoric artefacts that helped shed light on the continuum between the individual, small group and overall collective/organisational dimensions. These artefacts allowed us to review our practices, putting the focus alternatively on details (such as in small stories with clients) and on the wider action landscape within bureaucratic organisations. This process has something to do with the ‘zooming-in/zooming-out’ image recently suggested in order to define the navigation through work practices using both different investigation methods and theoretical lenses (Nicolini, 2009). In terms of empowerment, such focus switching helped our self-understanding and paved the way for positive evolutions of the guidance practitioner’s role, of the functioning of practitioners’ communities and of the relational policies within a public administration.

Future implementations of the Reflect-OR methodology should capitalise on its multi-level potential, trying to deepen the interplay between action and reflection at the crossing of the ‘first person’ level (the personal/professional I), of the ‘second person’ level (the I-you and I-we of the community) and of the ‘third person’ level (the we-they of overall organisation). The success of future implementations will very much depend on the capacity of supporting a shift from a language of certainty to a language of inquiry (Yanow, 2009), as Reflect-OR in COLs did. Also, in other contexts it may be possible to harvest the fruits of such a shift — and those of the passionate humility, which usually underpins the language of inquiry (Yanow, 2009) — as happened in the COLs’ case where we put ourselves under discussion and found new ways of empowerment through a kind of reframing in which we tried to alternate appreciation and sincerity. Some of the possibilities are shown in Figure 2.

Notes

1. This article has been prepared by a group of Reflect-OR participants who met several times specifically for this purpose. Antonella Barile, Eleonora Fiumara and Paola Scarpello – guidance counselling practitioners – work in the Centri di Orientamento al Lavoro (COLs) of the Municipality of Rome. They took part in the project’s steering task force. Massimo Tomassini – researcher, counsellor, contract professor at the University of Roma Tre – played different roles in project’s design, co-ordination, facilitation and research.

2. ‘Reflective interview’ is the definition attributed to the activity that this article is based on. It consisted of three sessions (of about three hours each) aimed at going through the Reflect-OR contents and results with the help of an interpretative self-questioning grid concerning five processes of empowerment (see above). The grid was previously created by the researcher-facilitator on the basis of his experience of the whole Reflect-OR project activities (mostly consisting in storytelling by COLs workers within ‘reflective workshops’). The sessions took a form close to the one of an open focus-group, through which the three authors, having an operational role, were allowed to re-think their own overall
The team spirit gets reinforced and effectiveness grows, as we emotionally touch difficult points. .... we established conditions of mutual relief and support at the individual level. but we also found new practical courses of action while discussing our emotional states...

**RE-THINKING WORK EXPERIENCE**

A community of motivation has emerged among us... we recognize ourselves as bearers of the same interests ... we understand each other in our ways of being, as guidance workers and as persons..

With Reflect-OR we got to the point of being less afraid of our managers and more aware of our rights, resources and abilities. Now we can better channel our will for conflict, trying to even understand 'their' problems... rooted not only in bureaucratic mindsets but also in administrative action structures ... Procedures are unavoidable..

...our work is a puzzle composed by different pieces, that we have to put together, in order not to get a pre-defined figure but to build up something from which we gain identity and motivation..

**REFRAMING WAYS OF LIVING AND WORKING IN GUIDANCE CENTRES**

Figure 2. Some possibilities for action.
project experience, to reflectively take into account several different results and to put forward their own understanding of different empowerment issues.

3. For reasons of space it was impossible to retain all the contents that emerged during the reflective interview. Only the most relevant dicta that provide more direct insights regarding the issues at stake have been retained.

4. Internship practices are very frequent. Being structurally understaffed, COLs willingly host the voluntary work of students (mostly from faculties of psychology and sociology). Students, on the other hand, can largely profit of experiences within COLs on both substantive and formal side (internships are regulated by agreements with universities and formally certified).

5. A short discussion about lifelong career guidance and about different guidance models in Europe can be found in the *Reflect-OR project fieldbook* (Ghaye et al., forthcoming).

6. As already explained in notes 2 and 3, the reflective interview was largely based on re-thinking and interpretations of the project activities and outcomes by the authors having an operational role. The pieces of text shown as quotations above are extracted through the reflections of such authors expressed during the interview and directly regard their work experience in COLs contexts.

Notes on contributors

Massimo Tomassini (born 1947, www.massimotomassini.org). He is engaged in different activities within three main fields: Research: applying reflective/reflexive methods in different areas: work-based learning; work transitions; personal/professional identity; life skills; Education: holding a ‘laboratory of organisational learning’ as contract professor at the Roma Tre University (faculty of education science); implementing education projects in companies and non-profit organisations; and Individual and group development, carrying out a private activity as counselor and teacher of the Cultivating Emotional Balance® program. His latest publication is *Guidelines for life skills education and peer education* in Ministero della Salute, CCM, Regione Toscana, [Educating for responsibility: life skills e peer education], Firenze, Giunti, 2010.

Antonella Barile is from a social studies background and engaged in career guidance activities for about fifteen years. At present she is a career guidance officer at the Simonetta Tosi Work Guidance Centre of the Municipality of Rome. In her role, Antonella integrates consulting and counselling competencies, according to the holistic-gestaltic approach of the Atmos Institute for Art Therapies from which she received a counselling diploma in 1996 after a three-year course.

Eleonora Fiumara is a career guidance officer at the Municipality of Rome. A psychology graduate, she specialises in systemic-relational psychotherapy. She has over 20 years’ experience dealing with training, guidance and counselling issues in private and public services for employment. Paola Scarpello is a psychologist and psychotherapist. From 2002 she dealt with career guidance activities and from 2003 she has been employed as first-level guidance officer at the Luigi Petroselli Work Guidance Centre of the Municipality of Rome.

Paola Scarpello is currently a career guidance officer at the Municipality of Rome.

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