Reflective practice, appreciative regard and organizational wellbeing: an experience in Swiss employment services

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The article presents experiences and lessons learned in the framework of a participative appreciative action and reflection (PAAR) laboratory organized in Ticino (Switzerland) by the ECAP Foundation, testing methods and tools developed by the Reflect-OR project. PAAR potentialities and pre-requisites are evaluated in a specific organizational context, provided by a public-private partnership in the field of active labor market policies. Coaching jobseekers, according to principles of empowerment and self-direction, is the task of private service providers; they work on behalf of public employment services, aiming at fostering activation and social responsibility of the ‘clients’. Clients are in fact asked to activate themselves for a quick reintegration in the job market, in order to reduce costs due to welfare indemnities. Well-established rules, reducing the autonomy of professionals and their organization, inform the partnership, producing sometimes tensions and misunderstandings. The article draws on representations and codes affecting the relationships between coaches, clients, mandatory institutions and service providers, detecting how and to which extent reflective practices and tools could be valued to improve the overall quality of the partnership. We focus on appreciative regard and story telling as means to improve awareness and competences of the actors, enabling personal and organizational learning processes.

Keywords: reflexivity; appreciative inquiry; empowerment; identity; community; emotions

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The laboratory
A Swiss laboratory organized the framework of the Reflect-OR project, involving a dozen of trainers and counselors active in ECAP Ticino – UNIA training center. They belong to a wider task force, in charge of supporting jobseekers, working according to a mandate given to ECAP by local public employment services (Ufficio Misure Attive, Sezione del Lavoro del Dipartimento Finanze ed Economia del Cantone Ticino). The laboratory, managed in cooperation with Reflective Learning Italy (RLI), has been articulated in different directions and activities, along a pathway of collective reflective sessions, moderated by the authors, acting as facilitators. The path, designed on the basis of the experience of the Centri per l’Orientamento al Lavoro (COL) laboratory in Rome, was articulated in a phase devoted to context analysis – based on a participative research processes – and in sessions focusing on relational dynamics linking participants to their clients, their colleagues and the organization to which they belong. The discussion in the group, adopting ‘story telling’ methods, put in practice ‘appreciative’ techniques, reflections, ‘normally’ fed by critical incidents (Soini, 2000; Stroobants, Chambers, & Clarke, 2007), that were stimulated by successful experiences, valued as positive triggers for setting and solving organizational blocks and misunderstandings.

In this paper we would like to deal with inputs and lessons learned during more or less 12 months of activity and encounters, which opened new perspectives in the way management and members of ECAP’s working group were trying to re-define their relational patterns. From a theoretical point of view, we will refer to concepts and notions clarified by Massimo Tomassini, moving from a middle-down-up notion of empowerment, even if our paper better focuses more on effects and features of an appreciative regard as a means to promote organizational reflection and transformation than on empowerment effects and trajectories. Nevertheless the agency/structure relationship, as defined by Tomassini, according to Giddens, plays a fundamental role also in our specific context, and therefore we should constantly bear it in mind reading results and potentialities of the laboratory.

At the same time, the five main processes of empowerment emerging in Rome’s COLs experience can be usefully taken in account to interpret Ticino’s laboratory in a comparative perspective. We will focus on efforts made by ECAP’s coaches in reshaping their professional identity, trying to connect change and new opportunities for competence development and recognition. We will try to detect to which extent daily work practices of the group constitute the ‘situated’ ground for goal identification, mutual learning and the development of a ‘community of practice’. We will deal with conflicts and tensions rising up in the group, trying to understand if appreciative regards can contribute to recognition and valuation of emotions as positive action triggers. We will conclude our article with some remarks about opportunities and constraints emerging in Ticino (in comparison with Rome’s experience) from the point of view of transformations induced by PAAR approaches (to what extent innovation is possible through the re-framing of shared visions and the emergence of new action paradigms).

Working for ‘their’ job: the context
In order to understand achievements and constraints that emerged by applying a PAAR approach, it is necessary to contextualize the dynamics of daily lived experiences by practitioners involved in the laboratory. Since the middle of the 1990s in
Switzerland, passive and active labor market policies (ALMPs) have been managed in an integrated way. Benefits accorded by Unemployment Insurance, on a basis of a general law affecting all salary workers, include both income indemnities and measures helping jobseekers find a new job (training, coaching, temporary work experience etc.). Federal and cantonal authorities are jointly responsible for the governance and implementation of ALMPs; strategies are defined at federal level, but cantons are asked to actually implement them. Cantons normally value private service providers in assuring specialized measures, such as training, guidance and in some cases also professional coaching to support more rapidly and actively jobseekers in their efforts. In Switzerland, as overall in Europe, ALMPs adopted in recent years feature some common choices, summarized by ‘employment first’ strategies (aiming at preventing long-term unemployment), interlaced with initiatives based on the activation of jobseekers and on risk factors profiling. These choices clearly also inform objectives and roles assigned to private service providers by Swiss public employment services, addressing strategies, methods and to some extent also tools that service providers have to adopt and respect. However, the responsibility of defining action plans and duties of unemployed, including the assignment to specific measures, strictly remains in the hand of public counselors. It means that private organizations and their professionals have a narrow space in which they should move. Clients are normally not motivated, nor free to decide. A huge investment has to be made to welcome clients in order to build a trustful and effective relationship, dealing with clients ‘forced’ to use coaches’ support to avoid monetary and non-monetary sanctions in case of refusal or non participation to the obligatory measure.

Figure 1 gives an overview of measures assigned to jobseekers in Ticino. Actually 72.6% of them belong to the area of so-called ‘training and accompaniment measures’, including the so-called Programma di Base (known under the acronym TRIS (Tecniche di Ricerca Impiego e Sostegno al collocamento – Job search techniques and support)) in which ECAP operators involved in the laboratory daily work.

Yearly, the ECAP Foundation is in charge about half of the people assigned to Basic Program measures in Ticino: 1000 unemployed per year. Clients represent a very heterogeneous landscape, considering gender, age and professional profiles. Women are 52% of participants, and they are concentrated in middle and older age cohorts, particularly those witnessing difficulties paid in their job search (such as single parent mothers) and persons trying to enter again the job market after a period of inactivity. At the same time, competition existing at the local level between local workforce and qualified trans-border workers coming from Italy determined a relevant increasing of male unemployment, both young and older people, sometime possessing good qualifications. Jobseekers belong to a wide range of professional profiles, including areas traditionally characterized by mobility and recurrent unemployment (tourism, construction, etc.) and areas particularly affected by restructuring and concurrence affecting even advanced services sectors (such as finance, insurance and ICT).

ECAP coaches operate on the basis of a very structured mandate, engineered by mandatory institution. Mandates define responsibilities, objectives, expected outcomes, sequences, administrative obligations and of course evaluation criteria and indicators to be adopted by external providers. Coaches’ activity, and in general private provider’s effectiveness, is submitted to a global evaluation, based on articulated criteria and indicators, including:
perceived quality of information delivered to the clients;
● pedagogical relationship established between coaches and coaches;
● organizational and logistic aspects (resources) of service delivery; and
● sustainability of learning outcomes achieved at the end of the measure, measuring actual development of clients’ employability three months after the conclusion, in terms of improved networking, quality of applications and candidature dossiers, autonomy and effectiveness in job search strategies, valuation of supports made available by private providers and of course quantitative results achieved in job search.

A quality system suggests a complex relationship between providers and mandatory institutions; even if it includes also self-evaluation activities, it remains largely based on supervision and evaluative regard of external mandatory institution. Criteria and indicators mainly focus on opinions and behaviors of clients who have to be put in a relationship with the wider legal and socio-economic context affecting job search strategies and realistic achievements. It is easy to understand the influence that these criteria and indicators finally have in orienting both organizations’ management choices and the work of the coaches, forcing them to negotiate constantly with different stakeholders: clients providing them with positive and ‘sense-making’ feedback, the organization to which they belong (responsible for reaching objectives defined by mandates) and the mandatory institutions in charge of defining strict rules for their action.

**Evolving roles and identity construction processes**

Ticino’s PAAR laboratory took place in a particular period of time that was characterized by an intensive work, due to job losses induced by the global economic crisis.
In 2008 public employment services realized in Ticino over 80,000 individual interviews with jobseekers, assigning over 7500 personal supportive measures (on a stock of about 8000 registered unemployed in the monthly average, and about 20,000 persons who applied for unemployment benefits during the year). At the same time the laboratory accompanied the evolution of coaching and accompaniment logics, shifting from collective activation schemes – allowing counselors to work on group dynamics and deliver proper ‘lessons’ – to individual one-to-one supportive sessions in which counselors are expected to accelerate the redaction of documents needed to improve candidatures and job search (CV, letters, evidence of skills and competence, etc.), assuring a targeted and individualized accompaniment to the job search, and stimulating autonomy, motivation and responsibility of jobseekers immediately in the initial phase of their unemployment.

Evolving roles demanded ECAP’s operators to reinvent and reshape their brand new identity of ‘adult trainers’ and facilitators, a recognized qualification born in the 1990s. Building a solid professional identity is not an easy task when you deal with a so undetermined ‘object’ of training, close to guidance, that is helping people define and implement an effective job search strategy. Setting up the laboratory we realized how in the new framework, competence and identity construction processes should have been strictly anchored to self-recognition and social-organizational recognition opportunities more than on codified practices. Respect for rules and disposition is not an effective identity trigger, when rules and disposition are a sort of external imposition, not the result of shared codes of behaviors produced by a community of practitioners.

Far apart from their Italian colleagues working in Rome, ECAP’s operators are used to move in secure and stable structures. They are expected to follow a well-defined road, from taking in charge clients to providing them with relatively standardized services. A central role in their performance is played by initial and continuing face-to-face interviews, aiming at profiling needs, targeting measures and monitoring the ‘agreement’ signed between clients and counselors, on expected outcomes of accompaniment and on learning processes integrated in the path. This ‘agreement’ is at the heart of a delicate trilateral relationship involving clients (jobseekers), coaches and public employment counselors. Coaches are asked to play the role of facilitators, both in some more directive and concrete actions related to the improvement of CVs or candidature dossiers, and training the people in order to enhance their capabilities required to apply for a new job. Coaches are also asked to help participants in recognizing, mapping and valuing their competences, tracing at the end a complete profile of their clients, useful action plans and coherent additional measures. They work according to a very structured plan: phases, tools and outputs are strictly defined on the basis of aims and objectives fixed in the mandate. ECAP is responsible for the fine-tuning of procedures and modalities of the process. The standardization of processes normally facilitates daily activities, provides rules to be followed, helps coaches concentrate on their tasks taking in charge needs and expectations of their clients. However, at the same time it provides limits and constraints to some sensibilities and hampers the valorization of personal styles and approaches to counseling and training, producing some frustration and disappointment.

Changes introduced in the system provoked a destabilization of ECAP’s operators’ professional identity, shifting its ‘locus’ from respecting a well-engineered collective path, acting as facilitators in a typical adult training setting, to defining a trustful individual relationship with their clients based on counseling methods and principles. At
the same time this needed to be conditioned by rules and externally driven expecta-
tions. This shifting clearly represented a hard challenge, but also a great opportunity
for most of Laboratory participants, bringing them to think about their identity in a
totally different way. The relational nature of competencies associated to counseling
from one side, and the need of situating learning processes (Illeris, 2007; Lave &
Wenger, 1991) in a shared context came to the fore.

Context analysis performed during the first sessions of the laboratory put in
evidence the delicate balance, made of invisible and ‘not written’ rules, interlacing the
need of respecting general and operational aims defined by mandatory institutions and
the attitude of the coaches in managing day-by-day their relational ‘obligations’,
mainly focusing on clients’ satisfaction and wellbeing. Positive feedback from clients
has the clear effect of empowering the coaches, giving sense to work otherwise
affected by a certain anonymity, controlling functions and bureaucratic dispositions,
imposed by mandatory institutions via the organization to which they belong. Forced
to re-think their professional identity, ECAP’s collaborators realized that their compe-
tencies were embedded in the way they manage complex relational dynamics, more
than in codified practices or existing qualifications. This unexpected discovery influ-
enced their representations about professional roles they are asked to play as well as
their expectations. It opened the road to new transitional perspectives that should be
interpreted under the lens of tensions characterizing structure/agency dynamics in that
specific context.

Voice, awareness, responsible action

ECAP’s laboratory can be interpreted, from this point of view, as a progressive, even
if uncertain and not definite, path from confused organizational disease to responsible
and positive collective action. ‘Voice’ attitudes and individual disappointment charac-
terized the initial stage of the Laboratory, in which an ‘I and them’ approach could be
easily traced. Competence and identity building processes are perceived in an individ-
ual perspective. I am acting as an individual player, building temporary alliances with
some colleagues, fighting ‘for the benefit of the clients’ against obstacles provided by
organizational constraints and lack of understanding. Dialectics between organization
and mandatory institutions were far from being critically evaluated, they were possibly
‘judged’: delays and uncertainties in giving responses to recognition expectations or
in developing new projects promoted by the team are defined as examples of ‘cowardly’ or ‘total sluggishness’.

Problem-solving methods and tools enabled and facilitated the path towards awareness. Awareness means being capable of critical thinking and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000); of reflexivity about both experience and intentions for change:

What really surprised me was the ‘problem solving’ methodology, it helps us detect where are problems, when we are blocked on the ‘other vision’.

Appreciative inquiry represented the key to change lenses through which reality used to be interpreted:

We tried to explore the problem, taking in account different points of view; we should me more open minded with our company, are we really sure that we know the vision of our organization? We should share something in the group, before sharing it with the organization (…).

When we reflect using the PAAR approach (Ghaye, 2008), we can better position ourselves as members of a team and of an organization, in a complex relational network; we can identify opportunities and constraints (and their origins), become aware of what supports us and hampers us in reaching our personal and professional goals, we can identify our expectations, reasoning at the same time according to a ‘we’ approach, open to represent ourselves as members of a team. Of course, the risk of translating the ‘I and them’ into a ‘we and them’ logic still remains, but it’s a first fundamental step.

Further on, there is no possibility of responsible planning without critical awareness. Responsibility implies a certain degree of formalization, the acceptance of rules and rituals of negotiation. We can draw on our expectations to focus on our goals, but at the same time the challenge is to be able to embed our personal objectives in the framework of general aims in which we are working, acting in a responsible way. Moments in which people can share ideas and opinions with colleagues and then with the company’s management might usefully be formalized thus:

We thought to claim for free time in which we could organize our internal meetings, to share our proposals. It could be useful to recognize our value, and then build a ‘collective vision’ in order to select actual priorities. A formal moment, useful also to avoid sub-groups dynamics (…) Claiming for a space in which we can talk to each other is also a matter of transparency.

Awareness led ECAP’s coaches to better interpret the relationships between them and clients (e.g., self-empowering and maintaining the right emphatic distance). Mainly it influenced behaviors characterizing relational dynamics amongst colleagues (from competitive mistrust to appreciation of differences) and between colleagues and the organization to which they belonged (from ‘claiming against the Empire’ to active listening, to negotiating more flexible working conditions, to building sustainable participation). Future developments will depend on the evolution of agency/structure dynamics.

Characteristics of this development path clearly emerged by the words of protagonists participating in Lugano’s follow-up project meeting:

It all really begun at the right moment. The team just lived a wide series of changes, changes in professional roles, changes occurring in logistics, changes in working
processes, we felt the need of a space for us, for reflecting on our practices…. I liked this proposal since the beginning, because I realized that we have been working on the basis of our needs and problems, such as normally occurs in reflective settings. As you know there’s nothing more irritating for a trainer than feeling forced to listen top-down lessons, based on externally defined contents; we like to work according to our expectations and needs. Therefore [the laboratory] represented a suitable method, based on structured and consistent procedures, enabling participants to work on self defined contents…. But we are only at an initial stage. We exploited a range of tools, and we already benefit of positive achievements, in terms of perception of our roles, of group dynamics, of the way in which we relate with cultures and values of the organization…but they are as buds, a systematic implementation of the method seems to me far from being a reality, even because it implies an open discussion with the management. What has been brought in our daily work? For sure a better attitude towards valuation of positive things, with respect to constantly feel victims of problems, it’s a fundamental change of perspective, but it’s not yet consolidated.

Achievements are related to the possibility of working together, acting as a group: a heterogeneous team composed by individual profiles not an indistinct ‘bunch of friends’, but capable of building something together:

Something is already there, doing it in a group, look to positive things, is easier if you work in a group; wake up every day trying to imagine a half-full glass depends from individual attitudes towards life, but making it in a group is a privileged moment. This experience gave us the possibility of meeting as a team of trainers; normally it’s not happening, we act as individuals in an institution, we occasionally meet during pauses or during monthly meetings, but in that frame we discuss organizational aspects, we don’t have any possibility of knowing one each other; it has been an unique opportunity of knowing my colleagues, from different points of view…. What’s happening is that a collective reality grows up, and personally speaking I consider the team a resource… but in a team relational dynamics always play a role; you can have a coffee always with the same people, it’s normal, you leave the other a part, and all these dynamics grow up; [the laboratory] helped us break this chain, gave us the possibility of looking one each other in a different way.

Achievements are at the same time related to appreciative logics and approaches, at least in two perspectives: considering triggers activating story telling (and proposals), and efforts made at dialogical level, expressing and debating opinions:

Motivations behind proposals always refer to positive experiences…we moved from identification of positive conditions allowing a successful experience. Then it’s clear that we begun to speak about positive things reaching at the end also problems and negative aspects… but the initial approach is what really counts.

This was in order to prepare constructive solutions. In the meantime, appreciative approach means also capability of taking in account interests, constraints and stakes affecting relational dynamics between colleagues and organization:

In a top-down geared organization a project such as Reflect-OR is hard to imagine, it has no chance to be developed…. If your company allows you to develop this experience means that it is managed by open minded persons.

Participants in the laboratory recognized the need of overcoming ‘I/we and them’ philosophies, discussed during the second session:

Why have certain proposals been successful? We activate a good strategy: demonstrating perseverance, monitoring delays, soliciting, but also recognizing prerogatives of the
institutions, respecting hierarchies, involving people with enthusiasm, without overcoming, acting in a transparent way. We presented a proposal highlighting the added value both for the group and for the whole organization....

On the other side, responsible planning and critical awareness produced, at least initially, limited results, above all disappointing laboratory participants, because they perceived the gap between levels of reflection activated during the sessions and claims formalized to the management board. We can say that only heavy ‘objects’ passed through the funnel, during negotiations in the group. Many aspects proved to be difficult to translate in formal claims:

All these themes, such as our interest in developing new projects, in managing new projects, or factors influencing internal communication and work division, some questions of organizational nature or other issues related to our professional identity in relationship with the organization… we try to put everything in the funnel, but only heavy objects passed through. This result seems to be perceived as disappointing. We worked on us, as a team, and it has been a success, but we left apart the organization.

Structure/agency dynamics clearly came to the fore. Feeling accepted as a team by the management and being aware of it represented a first step to activate a second level negotiation that was more mature and capable of modifying the structure, its written and non-written rules:

Now that we have discussed, that we feel we share many ideas as a group, maybe we are ready to dialogue with ‘the other’ (the organization), that in effect is not properly other than us, because it simply includes us….. We face now the challenge of giving a name and consistency to lighter objects.

The challenge of valuing a new awareness of being a community of practitioners – part of the organization – in order to overcome superficial changes anchored to traditional levels of negotiations, began to become significant.

Rules and change management between unrest and participation
Looking at the socio-organizational dynamics in ECAP, through the lenses used for the COLs’ case (see Tomassini and alias, already quoted) allows some further considerations about the results of Reflect-OR experience in Switzerland.

A first set of considerations can be briefly provided in relation to the characteristics of the structure/agency dyad in the Swiss case, putting the focus on the interrelations between its regulatory environment and mission statements, on one side, and the ‘agentic’ aspects implied in guidance work and organizations. As already underlined in previous sections of this paper, the Swiss system at the national level, both considering lifelong career guidance and public-private partnership in employment services (as in our case), is characterized by high functional stability, wide social recognition and acceptance, internal mechanisms of change related to both the social demand of guidance services and the evolution of conceptual backgrounds and techniques in this field. The overall Swiss system is in fact an interesting hybrid between the highly privatized Anglo-Saxon model and the more public-orientated German system. Public institutions and agencies at the cantonal level coexist with – and provide regulations and financing to – private institutions. At the local level, ECAP is a key player among the latter: its mission is to carry out specific training and guidance activities...
for well-identified target groups, in particular for people who recently lost their job and are forced to quickly re-employ themselves before the welfare grants’ expiration. In practice, ECAP has to take in charge unemployed persons, sent by the local labor authority, and to accompany them in processes in which training and guidance on one side and active job search on the other side are mutually reinforcing.

Such a mission is structurally different from the one of the Roman COLs, the other field of Reflect-OR’s implementation to which we referred earlier. COLs’ mission is in fact related to wide population segments (including short- and long-term unemployed and ‘weak’ social groups such as women in midlife, socially disadvantaged people, migrants, etc.). COLs’ clients autonomously address the guidance services while the latter assume them as subjects of direct relations aimed at providing information and (in some cases) guidance counseling, without any specific mandate regarding the final results of such activities.

In comparison with the Roman colleagues, the ECAP guidance practitioners operate in a much more structured and homogeneous context. We already stressed the importance of acting under mandate of a local authority holding different levels of control on goals and even, to a certain extent, on means used to reach such goals. Moreover, ECAP has a consolidated tradition in terms of history, culture and accumulated know-how and routines. It represents the modern evolution of a former trade-union-owned assistance institution for Italian migrants in Switzerland. Its present activities, mainly oriented towards adults’ training and guidance, follow (and in some cases are still linked to) previous vocational training initiatives, addressed to group of workers or would-be workers in different sectors. ECAP as an organizational system is connoted by structuring properties which entail: a significant stability of practical knowledge in use (‘how things are to be done’); clearly established work routines, inscribed in actors’ memory and behavior; continuity of the social practices linked to the institutional aims; continuous informal adjustment of the capabilities needed for performing such practices, and even for
innovating them over time according to changes occurring on the side of clients and of mandatory authority as well.

The pace of such changes has been significantly accelerated in the past few years. At present, different stress factors condition the ECAP workers’ ‘agency’, and trigger it at the same time, pushing towards faster transformations as far as knowledge in-use, routines, performances, capabilities and attitudes towards innovation are concerned. Starting from very different background conditions in comparison with those observable in the Roman case, ECAP ‘coaches’ – feeling a bit like adult trainers, a bit like guidance practitioners – find themselves in the midst of a complex transition phase, requiring clearer awareness about the depth of the occurring changes. Several aspects of such an awareness have emerged in the reflective workshops during the implementation of the Reflect-OR project. They can be re-read through the scheme already used for the analysis of the empowerment processes.

Concerning professional identity construction, ECAP coaches have reflected several times on the changes taking place at this level. The now prevailing role behavior appears less and less linked to given sets of attitudes and capabilities and largely connoted in terms of multiplicity and continuous innovation:

The mask we wear is different in relations to the situations: in the past, as we lived in a stable group we used to take for granted that people [the clients, the mandatory authority] see us only in a given way. Now we realize that it’s important to be able to offer different images of ourselves.

The activity routines are also changing over time, especially because of variances in clients’ needs:

There are different repetitive aspects in this work, but it also allows me – and requires from me – to continuously ‘refresh’ my specificities.

The opportunities for competence development are wider than in the past and largely linked to experiential factors and work-based learning:

Despite our basic theory and formal training we always have to privilege intuition and capture the moment. This is the way our competence really grew up.

The relations with clients represent a fundamental benchmark regarding competence development and a source of relevant questions at this regard:

How can I be able to motivate and to instill the importance of self-motivation? Did I say the right things in order to help the person in front of me in keeping alive his/her own self-motivation? Am I on the right track at this regard?

Moreover, the chances for professional growth are seen as resulting from both individual and collective efforts. A potential community of practice has emerged over time and it is now challenged by the arrival of several newcomers. Many consolidated intra-group relations are pushed towards uncertain changes; however, the sense of the community resists and is perceived as valuable per se, from both the internal and the external viewpoint:

Of course everybody likes to go and have a coffee with somebody that is nice. This way some levels of complicity emerge…. This is not wrong, but we should do more…. We
should be more visible as group and then we should try to be acknowledged outside. This is a relevant improvement objective. We have to make efforts about it.

The emotional life at work and the need to foster higher levels of emotional intelligence are clearly perceived within the group, especially regarding the relations with clients, very often source of anxiety and risks:

Clients learn ways of knowing and trusting us. Sometimes they try to take the lead in the relationship and to instrumentally use personal issues, anxieties and fears. Sometimes they make us feel unable to handle the situations. One has to know how to put boundaries. We must be guides ...and we must be able to manage ourselves and to help them [the clients] in putting themselves into play.

The transformational effects of reflection have been realized at the end of the workshops. It has been very much appreciated that the Reflect-OR project attempted, in many ways successfully, to systematize reflection and to put it in the service of better work conditions and prospects:

Because of the project we had chances for appreciating what we are able do and, for the first time, for establishing an explicit common reflection about the relevant changes that recently took place in our work environment. Exchange, support and sharing are surely useful for everybody. Now we are motivated in putting us into play and to improve our openness to better relations with colleagues.

**PAAR in practice: lessons to learn**

Achievements of the laboratory, potentialities as well as limits of reflective practices coping with change in organizational patterns and professional identity, must be finally read under the lens of the spaces and contradictions which actually emerged, as well as of requirements needed to enable experiential learning through participative appreciative action and reflection methods.

First of all we should bear in mind that we are in the middle of an uncertain evolution in the dynamics affecting structure/agency relationship in the framework of the ECAP training center. PAAR opened windows and reflective frames and let laboratory participants experience new ways of developing reflection, gaining awareness of their identity and role. They learned to appreciate positive outcomes of their job, rooting in positive stories, claims and proposals addressed to the organization. Management discovered new ways for setting and solving organizational challenges, potentially effective, but implying a certain degree of transformation in leadership styles and patterns. Globally considered, actors seem now looking for consolidating new relational frames. Contradictions are still there, both considering operators’ temptation of excluding the management from reflective discussions, channeling proposals in a narrow negotiation of daily job arrangements, that could paradoxically meet management need of restoring an affordable hierarchical control, reducing at the same time autonomous learning spaces opened by the laboratory.

The Swiss case study is the opposite of Rome’s situation. It allowed us to identify braking factors and constraints hampering ‘change’ that emerge in a structured and well-established organizational environment. Shifts in professional identities, induced under the pressure of external pushes, could be a trigger for change. We found that our reflections helped to enhance our self esteem, thus diminishing defensive attitudes. Hierarchical and rigid structure of mandates, limiting autonomy and participative
decision-making processes, as well as bureaucratic monitoring and evaluation systems, based on summative criteria and indicators, produced a ‘sense of injustice’ and influenced in a negative way, the perception operators have of career development logics. Critical attitudes and self reflection are likely to be refused, perceived as evidences of weakness and unsecure behavior. From one side, clients’ satisfaction, and from the other side acceptance of institutional regulations, became the reference point orienting structure/agency dynamics. The organization pays obviously attention to the latter, while operators look at clients’ reactions, trying to ‘capture’ positive feedback in order to reinforce their self-confidence and find ‘recognition’. Doing so they risk reducing the right ‘empathic distance that should characterize their guidance and counseling action. On the other hand the need for ‘surviving’ in a structured organization and in a working team determines the emergence of compromises and relational artifacts. Sometimes we had the impression that tensions, conflicts and competitive behaviors remained hidden under the surface of formal participative appreciation ‘rhetoric’.

Beyond the peculiarities of the context, clearly underlined in this paper, ECAP’s laboratory helped us understand the relevance of some general requirements for a successful exploitation of reflective practices, both at individual and organizational level. At the individual level we needed open-minded people whose personal self esteem has been nurtured and enabled by critical ‘reflective attitudes’, counter balancing natural tendencies (above all in group settings) to activating self-defense rituals and behaviors. The capability of critical thinking and ability to sustain others’ regard fosters membership to a community of practitioners, feeds a solid professional identity. Satisfactory incentives (enhancing affective dimensions of learning) also play a relevant role, as well as individual attitude and readiness to cope with cognitive challenges (changing and unstable roles should be conceived as learning triggers not only threats).

On the other hand, organizational requirements come to the fore. Independence and ‘strength’ of the organization, towards ‘market’ logics (in a very delicate sector, as in public-private guidance services) plays a fundamental role. Courage, sufficient autonomy of the organization in defining procedures and plans to organize the team and deliver services, are to be valued, avoiding in any case ‘self defense’ attitudes of the management, always present also in relationships between organizations and its members. Visibility of the mission, based on a constant ‘narration’ of history and achievements, reinforces a sense of belonging and enables mutual understanding, facilitating constructive dynamics. A ‘delegating’ leadership style, fostering shared responsibilities and participation, seems to be more adequate than a structured functional hierarchy, to promote peer-reviewing practices. However, leaders should not skip to manage in a transparent way all rituals and dynamics normally affecting any working group. The demand for transparency and recognition by management and by the organization emerged stronger at the end of the laboratory. This implies that in order to develop all potentialities of PAAR, effective organizational strategies should assure a clear career and professionalization management system, based on shared criteria, indicators and open confrontation practices.

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Notes

1. See in this special issue Massimo Tomassini, Antonella Barile, Eleonora Fiumara and Paola Scarpello, Empowering people through reframing: experiences of guidance practitioners in a public network of career centres.

2. Massimo Tomassini, Antonella Barile, Eleonora Fiumara and Paola Scarpello, Empowering people through reframing: experiences of guidance practitioners in a public network of career centres

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