Beyond the inclusion vs. exclusion dichotomy: multiple and situated meanings of the access to social services

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1. Introduction

The regulation of the access of citizens to social services produces a selection which is conventionally represented with a static dichotomy: inclusion (of those whose request is accepted) vs. exclusion (of those whose demand is rejected). However, this dichotomy is inadequate for describing the complexity and the number of implications of this process. Firstly, it does not account for the multi-layered structure of the selection process, which is composed by an institutional, organizational and professional dimension. From this point of view, the selection of applicants can be understood as a process of social construction of welfare clients [Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006; Saraceno, 2004], rather than a mere distinction between included and excluded.

Secondly, the dichotomy inclusion vs. exclusion provides a binary juxtaposition between two options, as if social services were packages of resources to be delivered according to an “in or out” logic. On the contrary, the selection of applicants can be described as a sort of temporary agreement between a user and a provider. This agreement is subject to recurrent examinations, in order to assess its effectiveness (both for the recipient and for the provider). From this point of view, inclusion and exclusion are neither a permanent condition nor a factor of social discrimination.

The selection of applicants to social services is a complex organizational task, since it is based, on one hand, on a rigorous definition of criteria and conditions and, on the other, on a consistent degree of professional discretion. The notion of discretion is not equivalent to the notion of “free will” [Dworkin, 1977], but it refers to the idea that organizational members (such as, in this case, social workers) are not simply carriers of institutional meanings [Hallet and Ventresca, 2006: 215], but they shape and produce meanings through their social interactions. The result of this process is a further differentiation of institutional meanings and organizational practices [Binder, 2007]. From this viewpoint, both the definitions of the criteria of inclusion (or exclusion) and the evaluation of individuals’ applications takes the form of a process of organizational sensemaking [Weick et al, 2005], which produces both individual and collective effects. However, this process, rather than reducing the differentiation of claimants (splitting them into two macro-categories, included vs. excluded), introduces further differentiation, because institutional conditions of access (or exclusion) are matched with individual needs and requests.

Moreover, the dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion neglects the “voice” of claimants and their agency. This is the focus of the paper: beyond institutional arrangements and professional discretion, stands the agency of claimants, who can develop strategic approaches in order to tailor requested social services to their needs and preferences and resist (or subvert) the institutional framework of intervention [Prior and Barnes, 2012]. From this point of view, citizens are not to be considered passive claimants of social services. There is a wide consensus over the thesis that...
citizens act as co-producers of social services [Browne, 2010], but it is important to stress that this role does not exhaust their possibilities of agency: as co-protagonists of the interaction with the practitioners involved in their selection, users develop a specific capability of action, which emerges from “their own understandings, interpretations and evaluations of the situations in which they are required to act, drawing on their individual experiences and sources of knowledge” [Prior and Barnes, 2012: 267].

Starting from these assumptions, the paper examines the approaches users develop to claim the access to social services. The analyses of these approaches reveals the heterogeneity of meanings and representations attached the notion of access and the differentiation of strategies enacted by users in order to align organizational and institutional forms of inclusion to their needs, preferences and expectations.

The locus of the analysis is the service of “social secretariat”, which is a service provided by Italian Municipalities (who are responsible for the delivery of social services) where a direct encounter between claimants and “gatekeepers” take place. The paper is based on an empirical research conducted in three Municipalities, where social workers interview claimants in order to evaluate their requests. Through the presentation of some ethnographical sketches, the paper emphasizes the relevance of users’ agency in the selection process. Three typologies of claimants’ approaches are then identified and discussed. These typologies emphasize from different perspective the limits of the notions of inclusion and exclusion. In the conclusions, some considerations about the macro-implications of the necessity of overcoming the dichotomy inclusion vs. exclusion are proposed and shortly discussed.

2. The access to social services: a multi-layered but situated process

The regulation of the access to social services is a multi-faceted process. It can be understood from different perspectives and, as a consequence, it can take different and even contradictory meanings. Basically, this process can be described as a double-sided issue, because the access is the point of encounter between the offer and the demand for services.

From the point of view of the “supply” side, it is possible to identify three layers of governance of this process, which can also be understood as contexts or dimensions of regulation: an institutional, an organizational/administrative and a professional dimension. The regulation of the access to social services is a recurrent issue in the institutional design of welfare policies: the identification of the criteria for the eligibility of social services implies intricate political negotiations, both at national and local level. In this case, the institutional level identifies the domain of policy makers and the term “institutional” is here used as an adjective which describes the profile and the action of
a specific actor (the State and its peripheral bodies, generically called “state agencies”) which works as an agent of rationalization of a variety of sectors of society [Scott, 1995]. The recent processes of rescaling of the governance of social policies [Kazepov, 2011] suggests however to consider this level as a sequence of levels, rather than as an unitary level. This has brought about the diffusion of experiences of multilevel governances, which can be defined as “new governance arrangements at the local level, involving co-operation between market and civil society actors and developing co-ordination between multiple policy-making scales” [Eizaguirre et al, 2012: 2002].

On a subsequent level, organizations are required to transform institutional policies into concrete actions. From this perspective, the regulation of the access can be understood as a situated organizational practice [Nicolini, 2009]: organizations are required to match institutional policies (i.e. the supply of social services) with the actual and local demand provided by citizens. Though organizational action is expected to conform to institutional logics [Friedland and Alford, 1991], a number of analyses demonstrate how organizations can respond creatively to multiple environmental pressures, developing distinctive logics of action [Binder, 2007; May and Winter, 2007]. As a consequence, organizations involved in the regulation of the access to social services face a growing tension between their expected institutional role and their situated action [Brodkin and Majmundar, 2010; Brodkin, 2011]. This phenomenon brings about a considerable differentiation in the implementation of welfare policies.

From a professional point of view, the regulation of the access (in the sense of the selection of claimants through the evaluation of individuals’ problems and conditions) is a typical situation where practitioners play the role of street-level bureaucrats [Lipsky, 1980] and are called to apply their professional discretion [Bjerregard, 2011; Rummery and Glendinning, 2000]. However, the dramatic contraction of resources for social services which many countries are facing, reinforce institutional and organizational pressures for a tight selection of claimants [Brodkin 2011:]. These pressures are frequently masked by requests for accountability [Ellis, 2011; Evans and Harris, 2004], which convey – more or less explicitly – severe indications for forcing professionals’ decisions [Page, 2005]. The intensity of such pressures challenges the representation of social workers (who are often responsible for the selection of claimants) as professionals [Jessen, 2010], since their discretionary power is reduced by emerging regulatory frames [Bracci and Llewellyn, 2012]

In this scenario, the role of applicants is generally neglected or marginalized [Teater, 2011; Pemberton, 2008]. The regulation of the access is interpreted as an administrative issue, which may result either in the acceptance or in the rejection of an individual’s demand. Applicants are thus classified into two categories: included (who benefit of services) vs. excluded (who do not). Though
this simple representation is basically plausible from an administrative viewpoint, the access to social services is not a mere transition from a status to another [Prior and Barnes, 2011: 267].

As in the case of healthcare services [Reibling and Wendt, 2012], the access to social services is a process which is generally governed by an activity of gatekeeping. The process of gatekeeping is characterized by a significant interplay between the applicant (who plays a twofold role, because s/he is both a potential user of the service claimed and an actual user of the front-line service for the selection of applications) and the “gatekeeper”. In this interplay, the user, though s/he can appear to be bounded within administrative constraints, is a not a passive actor. As Normann [1984] stated, the user of a service is to be considered as a prosumer, since s/he is the user of a service, but s/he actually acts as a provider of the same service. This process of co-production is particularly relevant in contexts of care [Browne, 2010]. First of all, the user is the basic and essential source for the definition of the service s/he will benefit: the provider needs to gather detailed information from the user to define the services they need [Bracci and Llewellyn, 2012]. Bracci and Llewellyn argue “the way the client engages with the service has a crucial impact on outcomes” [2012: 2]. In the context of a specific domain of the welfare system which is based on personal service delivery of services, Prior and Barnes [2011: 269-70] point out that users are not likely to conform to institutional expectations (i.e. the criteria for benefiting social services) without putting in place strategies for the modification (i.e. the personalization) of services. They identify two main strategies of users’ resistance to the expected outcome of a service: subversion (which is to be intended as the research or construction of alternative strategies) and rejection (i.e. the refusal of becoming engaged in a service). Through the subversion of proposed services or their rejection, users denote a potentiality of agency whose relevance is twofold: on one hand, it outlines users’ interpretation and evaluation of the matching between their needs and interests and the content of a service/policy; on the other, both strategies alter the institutional formulation of a policy, shaping its impact and outcomes.

Considering users’ potentiality of agency, the regulation of the access to social services appears distinctively as a contingent and situated practice. It takes the form of a discursive practice [Taylor and Robichaud, 2004], which involves two categories of actor within an institutional context. The interplay between the claimant and the gatekeeper can be understood as a sense-making activity [Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2010], since both actors aim at producing an ordered representation of events and information. The point is that the criteria of sense-making are different: whereas the gatekeeper is supposed to refer mainly to institutional and organizational criteria of assessment of applications, complementing them with his/her professional evaluation, the user is likely to have different priorities and perspectives in the representation of his/her situation. The space produced by the discrepancy between these points of view is the area where users’ agency apply: this area is not
an empty space, but it is a “dialectic” region, where the differences of meanings arise and strategies such as subversion or rejection can take place. The aim of research which will be presented in the next section is hence to investigate this “dialectic” region, where the notions of inclusion and exclusion are re-shaped by applicants. In short, the paper proposes an analysis of the access to social service “in practice”, focusing on the situated construction of meanings and strategies developed by users for getting through the gatekeeping stage.

3. The service of “social secretariat” as the gateway to social service: an overview

On the basis of the theoretical and analytical framework proposed in the former paragraph, it is possible to proceed to the empirical examination of a specific experience of regulation of the access to social services. In Italy, the institutional arrangement of the regulation of the access to social services is characterized by a very decentralized architecture [Minas and Øverbye. 2010; Bergmark and Minas, 2010]: as stated by Bergmark and Minas, “each municipality decides which measures to establish depending on the political will and the resources available for the social assistance sector” [2010: 267]. Therefore, municipalities are responsible for the management and provision to citizens of a variety of social services.

The assessment of the eligibility of individual applications is one of the most relevant tasks assigned to the Municipalities. The overall process of selection of applications is characterized by a relevant space of discretion, which is both organizational and professional. Such a level of discretion corresponds to the third degree of discretion identified by Dworkin [1977]: organizations and professionals are called to define the criteria of decisions and take decisions about a specific issue (such as the eligibility of an application). For instance, since resources for social services are limited, professionals are required to prioritize most serious and urgent cases [Bergmark and Minas, 2010: 270], rather than pursuing equity of treatment.

Most Italian Municipalities offer a specific service for the selection of individual applications for social services. This service is called “social secretariat” and its purpose is twofold: on one hand, the social secretariat is expected to provide citizens information about the available services and their conditions of access, and inform (and orient) citizens about services they are entitled to on the basis of their situation. On the other, the social secretariat acts as a point of selection of individuals’ applications. The selection is the outcome of a double assessment: firstly, social workers (who act as front-line operators) provide an assessment of the situation of the applicant, through a short face-to-face interview; secondly, if the applicant gets through the first stage of assessment, his/her
economic condition will be evaluated, in order to evaluate whether s/he can afford the costs (partially or totally) the costs of the services, or s/he need economic support as well.

Depending on local arrangements, the services to be activated will be provided either by public or private (mainly not-for-profit) organizations. In some cases, claimants are given the possibility to choose the provider of the service among a list of recognized private organizations. The role of the social secretariat service is thus crucial in the institutional regulation of social assistance as well, since it provides a linkage between local public institutions (which act primarily as gatekeepers) and external providers.

The service of social secretariat embodies the typical ambivalence of the regulation of the access to public services, with its complex assortment of organizational and professional implications. On one hand, this service is expected to promote the access, informing and orienting citizens, since the provision of social services is a social right for all citizens; on the other, this service is called to select applicants, rejecting their demands and excluding them from the benefit of social services.

3.1 Research setting and methodology

The service of social secretariat has been the focus of an empirical research conducted in three Italian Municipalities, whose general purpose was the analysis of the processes of organizational communication of municipal social services offices. A major attention has been given to the relationship between social workers and citizens in the setting of the “social secretariat” service. The researcher has been given the possibility to observe the short interviews made by professionals to citizens applying for social services. Through this process of observation, it has been possible to study the strategies developed by citizens in order to shape the contents and the expected outcomes of the services proposed by social workers as a response to their needs.

The three Municipalities (whose fictional names are Main Ville, Green Ville and Velvet Ville) belong to the same Region and they share the same legislative framework. These Municipalities differ for a variety of factors: size, numbers of professionals (social workers) employed, organizational configuration of the service of social secretariat, nature of services’ providers (public or private organizations). Table 1 synthesizes some relevant information about the Municipalities.
The differences between the Municipalities allow catching the differentiation of the regulation of the access to social services in different urban and organizational contexts, although these Municipalities share a common regional legislative frame. From this point of view, Main Ville represents an urban context, where the social secretariat service is provided in five different locations across the town. The service is very accessible: it is open five days per week and each day it is provided by two offices in different circumscriptions of the town. Green Ville and Velvet Ville are smaller town and they offer different options of access: while the social secretariat of Green Ville is open only one day per week, Velvet Ville offers three weekly options of access. Since the number of professionals is the same, this difference depends on the relevance and interpretation local organizations attach to this service: Velvet Ville emphasizes the role of the social secretariat as a provider of information to citizens, whereas Green Ville interprets the social secretariat mainly as a filter to the access to social services and, as a consequence, it reduced the options of access to the social secretariat as well.

The researcher has spent around two months in each of three Municipalities. Table 2 reports the number of interviews observed in each context. From a methodological point of view, the observation of the interviews between applicants and professionals can be considered as a semi-participant observation, since the researcher has been allowed to stay within the offices where interviews took place, but could not interact with the user. The user was asked whether the presence of the researcher (who was explicitly presented as an external auditor) could disturb him/her. During the research period, the researcher has been asked to leave the offices in just two cases.
Table 2 – *Interviews observed during the research process*

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<th>Main Ville</th>
<th>Green Ville</th>
<th>Velvet Ville</th>
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<tr>
<td># of interviews</td>
<td>24</td>
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Beyond the observation of the interviews, a number of ethnographical interviews [Spradley, 1979] of professionals have been conducted. The analysis has been supplemented with the study of internal documentation provided by the offices (e.g. statistics on the accesses to the services, social accounts, etc.)

5. Typologies of approaches to social services’ gateways

5.1 Prologue

The encounter between a professional and a person claiming for a social service is typically a very delicate event. Claimants are likely to get through a period of stress, tension and sufferance, for a variety of reasons. From the point of view of professionals, it is important to notice they are expected to deal with “important stakes, heterogeneous populations and expectations, convergence of situations of failure and rancor” [Dubois, 2010: 37]. Moreover, the population of claimants has radically changed in last years: the emergence of the new poverty challenges organizational arrangements and professional practices.

The relationship between users and providers of social services (where providers play here the role of gatekeepers as well) has traditionally been defined as asymmetrical [Olivetti Manoukian, 1998], since gatekeepers hold a substantial authority on users. The asymmetry is a brought about by the discrepancy in the knowledge of available services, conditions of access, criteria of assignment; moreover, gatekeeper hold the responsibility for the evaluation and hence the selection of applications. According to Dubois [2009], this asymmetry (which is both informative and deliberative) is a potential source of social control. Because of the socio-economic crisis started from 2008, this asymmetry is now deeper, for at least two orders of factors: on the “demand” side, the number of claimants has increased and very critical cases are more frequent as well; on the “supply” side, the reduction of economic resources for social assistance has reduced the amount of available services. As a consequence, citizens who apply for a social service face today a growing number of difficulties.
The following paragraphs report some ethnographical sketches, which illustrate some cases of users’ agency in the interplay with social workers in the context of the social secretariat service. These forms of agency embody and convey the different interpretations users may attach to the access to social services and the distinctive strategies enacted for shaping the outcomes of required services. In the analysis of these cases, the service of social secretariat is both the context and the subject of the situation: since the regulation of the access is a situated organizational practice, its outcome is not only the decision about the application of the user, but also the redefinition of the meaning of this service. These cases allow the identification of three typologies of users’ approaches to the gateway (i.e. the social secretariat) for the access to social services:

a) the gateway as a landing place;
b) the gateway as a door to be forced;
c) the gateway as space of negotiation;

5.1 The gateway secretariat as a landing place
This typology identify a recurrent situation in social services offices. Applying for social assistance is a decision an individual takes when s/he is going through a difficult period and s/he needs some forms of support. However, most users who claim services (“knocking” on the door of the social secretariat service) are not fully aware of the function of this gateway and they know just partially the typologies of services they can apply for. The main necessity is giving voice to troubles and needs; the formulation of a request comes later, after the first contact with the gatekeeper, whose purpose is to inform users about their own rights and the services they can apply for, aligning their needs to the institutional repertoire of services. Giving voice to personal troubles and needs is a process which can take different forms and produce different outcomes. The cases #1 and #2 illustrate two cases which exemplify such circumstances.

Case 1: The access to social secretariat as a space for personal rants
Social secretariat service of Green Ville
The user is a forty years old woman, who has a seven years old daughter. She knows the local welfare system, because in the past she worked as a waiter in the canteen of the Municipality Offices. She asks for a financial contribution, because she is currently unemployed and her ex-husband is not paying his contributions. The woman says she feels down and she starts crying. Then, she asks whether it is possible to have the support of a psychologist as well.

Case 2: The social secretariat as a wrong destination
Social secretariat service of Main Ville
The user is an old person who is currently unable to pay the rent because of economic troubles. He goes to the social secretariat service in order to ask information about public housing. He complains because he says nobody within the Municipality Offices can give him information about it. However, the social worker who is performing the services, tells him he has no information too, because the Office for Social Services does not cover these issues. The social worker invites the user to ask to Office for Public Housing, but he replies saying that “no one wants to give me any information in purpose”.

The analysis of cases #1 and #2 points out that the service of social secretariat (whose main institutional task is the regulation of the access to social services) is a sort of landing place for people who are facing troubles (in both cases economic troubles) and need, first of all, a space for being heard. In the first case, the user joins two different requests: a request for financial support (which the social service office might provide) and a request for psychological support: this kind of request cannot be satisfied by the local social services office, since it does not provide that kind of service. As a landing place, the social secretariat can be a wrong destination as well: in the first case, though the users says she knows the functioning of social services, she asks for a service which cannot be provided. In the second case, the user is annoyed because he does not find someone who can give him information, but the social secretariat reveals to be a wrong destination as well.

5.2 The gateway as a door to be forced
This category includes those situations when an user attempts to force or bypass the gateway of the social secretariat, with the aim of being admitted to specific services of social care. In other terms, the social secretariat is interpreted not as a gateway but as barrier. As a consequence, users elaborate different strategies in order to clear this hurdle. These strategies can take different forms: they can take the form of discursive strategies, to be performed during the interview with the social worker; vice-versa, similar discursive performances can be a part of a broader “systemic” strategy, whereby an user applies for social services “knocking” on a variety of institutional doors, regardless of their administrative or institutional role.

This strategy relies on two complementary assumptions: on one hand, an user might be aware of the discretionary power of different institutional and organizational actors. S/he thus tries to creep into the spaces of discretion allowed by the institutional framework of regulation of social services. On the other hand, an user can enact a dialectic interaction with the local institutions, complaining about supposed discriminations or a partial recognition of his/her rights.

The cases #3 and #4 exemplify two situations where similar strategies have been enacted.
Cases #3 – Knocking on the mayor’s door
[Social secretariat service of Velvet Ville]

The user arrives at the social secretariat accompanied by a member of the administrative staff of the Municipality. He went to the office of the Mayor in order to ask him a grant-in-aid, because he has some economic problems, but the Mayor was not there.
He says to the social worker he deserves the grant because he helped the Mayor during the electoral campaign. He says he know the local Social Services Chairman as well and, if he will not get the grant, he will report this directly to him.

Cases #4 – Looking for a job
[Social secretariat of Green Ville]

The user arrives at the social secretariat because he is currently unemployed and he is looking for a job. He says he heard that the social secretariat service can provide a job to foreign citizens. He wonder whether this is true and if, in case, he (who is an autochthon) can get a job as well.

In both cases #3 and #4 users’ agency is based on erroneous interpretations of the role and the functioning of the social secretariat. As a consequence, the access to social services is intended either as a multi-situated or as a discriminating process. Forcing the access to social services implies either knocking on a plurality of doors, or denouncing practices which are supposed to produce discriminations.

5.3 The gateway as a space of negotiation

This category includes a variety of situations which strongly emphasize the role of users’ agency in the interplay with gatekeepers. The service of social secretariat, intended as a gateway to the access to social services, may become a space of negotiation between the user and the gatekeeper. Since care services are typically co-constructed services [Browne, 2010], a number of factors can be negotiated between the actors who meet at the “gateway”. This is particularly true in the context of decentralized organization of social services, where a variety of actors are involved in the definition of eligibility of criteria [Minas et al, 2012: 288]. Issues which can be subject to negotiation include:
- the number and typologies of services which may be provided;
- the conditions of eligibility for a service;
- the specific content of the service requested and/or provided;
- the expected outcome of the service requested and/or provided.
This list can be surprising, since it seems that nearly all aspects of the relationship between user and providers of social services can be negotiated. This would lead to an unfair differentiation of the forms of delivery of services. Though the spaces for professional and organizational discretion are very broad within the Italian institutional framework of regulation of the access to social services, this does not mean that all attempts of negotiation result in a personalization of services. The growing adoption of managerial forms of gatekeeping [Rummery and Glendinning, 1999] is reducing the options of bureaucratic gatekeeping, where the spaces of negotiation between user and gatekeepers are broader. However, it is important to stress the forms of discretion users can enact in the interplay with the practitioner. Discretion may affect both the user’s representation of his/her personal condition, and his/her selective identification and evaluation of the service claimed.

The situation presented in case #5 is an useful example of negotiation conducted by an user.

Case #5 – The interview with the professional as a raising process

The user is the son of an elderly woman. His mother lives alone, but because of aging she is now becoming non-self-sufficient. The user asks the social workers which services the Municipality may provide for her mother.

The social worker asks the man some information about his mother, in order to examine her situation. Then she asks the son whether they have already thought to some possible solutions. The user says no, and the social worker replies that in a long-term perspective the more suitable solution is her admission in a nursery home. The user says his mother is against this solution: they have already visited some nursery homes and she doesn’t want to get there, because she thinks those are places for “elderly people”.

The man asks whether the Municipality can provide her mother some alternative solutions and the social worker proposes a Community Center for elderly people. The man says her mother doesn’t like this solution too. The social worker asks the man what kind of service he is asking for and he says he would like to know if the Municipality can provide him a grant for a personal care assistant for her mother.

In this case, discretion is an essential component of the user’s strategy: he wants to explore the possible solutions available for her mother, though he (and his mother) have already explored and evaluated some options. As a consequence, he elaborates a discursive strategy which is based on a “maieutic” management of the interplay with the social worker. This discursive strategy relies on:

- the selective presentation of information to the professional;
- the gradual and sequential introduction of information during the interview;
- the masking of his actual request until the end of the interview.
The situation presented in case #6 represents a different form of negotiation: the user is searching support for a specific problem, but he does not accept the options proposed by the social worker. This situation can be described as an unilateral research of support, where negotiation is bound to the refusal of the engagement in a specific program.

Case #6: A strict path to negotiation

[Social secretariat of Green Ville]

The user is a foreign citizen, who is currently unemployed and has received an eviction order, because in last months he did not pay the rent. He asks the social worker whether it is possible to get a grant from the Municipality, in order to pay his arrearages. The social worker says this could be possible, under the condition he finds an agreement with the owner and persuade him to withdraw the eviction order. He say he does no longer want to talk with the owner, because he cannot stand to receive an eviction order just for three months of delay, having paid regularly the rent for years. The social worker replies that an agreement with the owner is necessary, but the user says he just wants the money and then he will charge his bank for the payment, without talking with the owner.

The social worker is not able to persuade the user, who terminates the interview without accepting to find an agreement with the owner. After he left the office, the social worker tells me: “He is a very proud person, he perceives this problem as an argument between him and the owner. I think he feels to be the victim of a discrimination because he is a stranger”.

The strategy enacted by the user of case #6 reminds the option of the refusal (in other terms, the exit) prospected by Prior and Barnes [2011]. However, this refusal is not absolute: the user does not refuse a specific service (that he is actually asking for), but one of its conditions. In this case, the spaces of negotiation are quite narrow: it is the user who prefigures the hypothesis of an exclusion from the service, because he does not want to conform to its conditions. The issue is not the struggle between inclusion and exclusion, but the definition of the conditions of inclusion (which are discussed both by the gatekeeper and the claimant).

6. Discussion

The data collected in the three Municipalities confirm that the regulation of the access to social services is not only an administrative issue, but it is a complex and situated organizational practice. The situatedness of this practice is reinforced by the peculiar institutional architecture of Italian social services, which is grounded on the discretionary power of local actors and institutions. Within this context, the interplay between claimants and gatekeepers, beyond its formal and functional arrangement, can take the form of a strategic interaction: while the social worker is called
to put in practice the institutional and organizational design of regulation (embodied, for instance, in the criteria of assessment of individuals’ application), the user can react strategically to this design, on the basis of the perception of his/her needs and preferences. This does not mean users are supposed to mystify their own condition in order to increase the probability of success of their applications. Vice-versa, this is to say that claimants can attach different meanings to the social services and have different expectations as well.

The heterogeneity of meanings and expectations brings about the differentiation of claimants’ approaches to the process of regulation of the access to social services. This heterogeneity reminds the notion of capability introduced by Sen [1985]: the agency involved in the individual’s representation of social services and in the identification of their contents and outcomes puts the user in a strategic position, regardless of his/her condition. In other terms, the strategy enacted in the interplay with the gatekeeper is the manifestation of a subjective capability.

Three different typologies of strategic approaches have been described in the paper. In the first typology, the access to social services is metaphorically described as the research of “a place where to land”: claimants are getting through very though experiences and they need to find a support, regardless of its conditions and constraints. Social services can be thus described as a source of hope for these users, who perceive the gatekeeper not as barrier but as a first provider of support. As a consequence, accessing the “right” gateway is a preliminary but relevant form of inclusion for users.

In the second typology, the interplay between claimants and gatekeepers takes the form of a dialectical interaction. Claimants consider social services as a social right they are eligible for. They are ready to put in place different (and alternative) dialectical strategies in order to have their application accepted. The stake here is not the content, but the access to the service. As a consequence, users consider the social secretariat as one of the potential “doors” for claiming services, and/or they try force its rules. The reject of an application is likely to be interpreted as an injustice, whose roots can be either institutional (i.e. the criteria of selection of applications) or discretionery (i.e. a supposed discrimination).

In the third typology, social services are intended as an opportunity to be shaped. In this case, the focus is not on the access, but on the content of the requested service. Therefore, users refuse the one-way direction of gatekeeping: they are interested in exploring the contents and the conditions of services, in order to evaluate whether they meet their needs and interests. Exclusion is an option users consider to put in practice voluntarily.

These typologies emphasize the thesis that the regulation of the access to social service is a process of sense-making [Weick et al, 2010]. However, the encounter between the applicant and the
gatekeeper does not imply only the definition of an order within a flux of events and circumstances (the conditions of the applicant, the criteria of eligibility, the availability of services and so on), but it is a dialectical (yet asymmetrical) juxtaposition of different options and hypotheses of intervention. From this point of view, the interview which takes place in the social secretariat service can be understood as a sense-giving process: as noticed by Gioia and Chittipeddi, sense-giving can be described as “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of […] reality” [1991: 442]. The notion of sense-giving emphasizes the relevance of user’s agency in the institutional context of gatekeeping to the access to social services: from this point of view, inclusion and exclusion are not only the outcome of the selection processes, but two options which the user can discursively interact with, according to his/her interpretation of social services and his/her strategic approach to the selection process. As a consequence, the user is not only a co-producer of services, but s/he can act as a counter-producer of the same services, refusing their contents and expected outcome or altering the conditions of inclusion.

7. Conclusions
The analysis of the local regulation of the access to social services deals with a variety of foundational issues of welfare policies. It has been argued that inclusion and exclusion represent two static labels: though they clearly identify the outcome of the selection process of claimants of social services, they do not offer a thick perspective for the study of the strategies of access. These strategies rely on a plurality of motives and different interpretations of the role, content and outcome of social services.

The findings of the research have been mainly discussed in order to emphasize the micro-implications of the dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion from the access to social services. In this short concluding section, it is possible to advance some theoretical reflections which put new light in broader and macro issues of welfare studies too.

The first point is related to the implications of the evolution of welfare policies in contemporary western societies. Dubois [2009] argues that individualization, together with responsibility, is one of keywords of the broad wave of reforms of the welfare state which originates in the nineties. The findings of the research allow to state that individualization is not only an ideological and structural dimension of welfare policies, but also a distinctive attribute of individual strategies in the process of application for social services. Far from being a rhetorical hype, individualization is subjectively performed through different strategies: the research of the a gateway to access services, the negotiation over the contents of services and the reject of services. There is space and need for
investigating the relationship between strategies of individualization and organizational and professional discretion: since the latter is quite relevant in the institutional context examined in the research, it would be interesting to analyze the consistency of individualized strategies of access in contexts where the space of organizational and professional discretion is more narrow.

The second point is concerned with the debate around dependency and responsibility of individuals with respect to welfare state [Schmidtz and Goodin, 1999]. The research discussed in this paper reinforces the view that such a dichotomy (as in the case of the dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion) is mainly a rhetorical construct, whereas it appears to be elusive and limitative for the analysis of specific situations and circumstances. The negotiation around the content of a social service is a clear illustration of the limits of this dichotomy: should it be considered as a virtuous case of individual responsibility or an unsuitable example of an individual increasing his/her dependence from the welfare state, tailoring services to his/her preferences? The refusal of being engaged in a service is it a critical example of individual responsibility or an opportunity of reduction of an individual’s dependency from the welfare state?

In the end, in accordance with the notion of capability [Sen, 1985] the re-design of more equal welfare policies should consider the fact users are not merely the input of a welfare system (or, at least, their micro co-producers), but they have different motives and strategies in the their approach to social institution, while facing different circumstances as well. The evaluation of capabilities of the claimant is currently a professional challenge mainly for social workers [Cooper and Broadfoot, 2006]: can this become a challenge also for organizational and institutional actors?

References


