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## Passive adaptation or active engagement? The challenges of Housing First internationally and in the Italian case

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, a peculiar homelessness policy that goes under the name of 'Housing First' has become increasingly popular all over the world. Epitomising a quintessential case of policy-mobility, Housing First can today be considered an heterogeneous assemblage of experiences and approaches that sometimes have little in common with each other. Introducing and commenting upon this heterogeneity, the paper critically analyses why and how Housing First has become a planetary success and what are the issues at stake with its widespread implementation. If recent scholarship published in this journal has granted us a fine understanding of Housing First's functioning in the US, this paper offers something currently absent from the debate: a nuanced and critical understanding of the ambiguities related to the international success of this policy, with specific references to the challenges associated to its translation in the Italian case.

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### Introduction

This paper sets out to provide a resonated overview of the challenges associated with the widespread implementation of the Housing First (HF) policy in a number of Western contexts. Given that recent scholarship published in this journal has granted us a fine understanding of HF's functioning in the US (McNaughton Nicholls & Atherton, 2011) and of its scientific basis and results (Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2015), this paper expands knowledge on this particular policy in two ways. First, our contribution analyses why and how HF has become an international success in the West and what issues this success brings to the fore. Secondly, the paper offers a critical review of one of these implementations in the case of the experimental 'Network Housing First Italia' (for an introduction, see Cortese, 2016; Consoli *et al.*, 2016). By analysing HF internationally and in the Italian case, the aim of our work is to provide insights into a number of pressing questions: Why is HF so powerful and what kinds of issues does this create in a non-US context like Italy? Is a non-linear and non-dogmatic adaptation of HF still 'Housing First'? How can the policy be implemented maintaining fidelity to its ethos but also taking into consideration local necessities and specificities? In contrast with most US- and Canadian-based approaches,

which commend a rigid interpretation of what HF can and cannot do, the paper argues in favour of an active and plastic implementation of this policy-oriented both at preserving its ethos *and* at taking local contexts seriously.

In order to navigate the intricacy of HF internationally, it is necessary to adopt an operational definition of this policy. In these terms, HF may be defined as *a housing and support (harm reduction) policy directed at homeless people, in which access to housing and its continuance both take precedence over, and are independent of, any other type of programme*<sup>1</sup> (Lancione, 2015, p. 23). This definition gives a glimpse of the points regarded across the board in the international debate as marking operations referred to as HF (Pleace, 2012). They are as follows:

- *Housing first of all* – the goal is to provide homeless people with homes at once, as the *conditio sine qua non* of the operation;
- *Housing and support to be kept separate* – HF comprises a major personal support component (covering substance abuse, mental health and social relations), which is provided separately from housing itself;
- *The operation is based on a harm reduction philosophy* – the goal is not to bring about an immediate halt to substance abuse or to ‘cure’ mental illness, but to avert and reduce the harm they do the individual;
- *The operation is based on individual freedom of choice* – HF programme participants are free to choose where to live and whether or not to take up the personal support services being offered.

These points leave some grey areas, in which HF is interpreted at policy-makers’ discretion, depending on the context, the available resources and political will. Often, Western countries and organizations choosing to implement the approach find themselves dealing with questions such as the following: What kind of ‘homeless population’ can be included in the project? What is meant by a ‘home’? What types of services should the programme offer to the participants? All of these issues arise when one tries to apply and adapt the original and very specific model that was conceived and promoted by Sam Tsemberis in New York in 1992 (see below) to completely different socio-economic contexts, such as the Italian case, for example. This paper takes some of these concerns seriously and investigates where they come from and how they can be confronted.

To achieve its aims, the paper presents a tripartite reading of HF internationally, which is then used to explore the Italian case as well. First, we offer a critical assessment of the practices that led HF to achieve international *success*, setting out to clarify the driving forces behind that success by highlighting three key components: the results of the approach, their scientific validation and HF’s political appropriation. In doing so, we rely upon the critical literature on HF, which does not take the success of this policy and its publicized results for granted. To expand these critiques, we analyse the problem of HF’s *policy mobility* in the second part of the paper. We argue, in short, that a renewed theoretical consideration of the processes, whereby policies are translated from one context to another is necessary to explain HF’s many-faceted nature. In the light of these first two parts, the third part of our analytical approach will address the challenges of the *adaptation* of HF using the case of Italy as a springboard for wider reflections. The conclusions suggest that an active adaptation of HF requires both awareness of its power (as successful international policy) and a critical plasticity for a meaningful engagement with this policy.

## The success of Housing First

As already mentioned, HF was conceived in New York in 1992 by Sam Tsemberis – a community psychologist – and his organization, *Pathways to Housing* (PtH). Despite the potential ambiguity inherent in the organization's name, which might seem to imply a 'route' to obtaining a 'home', Tsemberis' chief intention was precisely to invert the logic behind canonical homelessness policies. As Tsemberis saw it, a home is to be seen not as a reward on completion of a course – be it one of rehabilitation, integration or treatment – but as an inalienable human right, and as such, it constitutes the prime response for any homelessness policy (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). Operations based on most other models, such as the 'Staircase', 'Continuum of Care' and 'Treatment First' approaches, although based on different premises, agree in arguing the need to prepare homeless individuals for life in permanent housing. Tsemberis' Pathways Housing First (PHF) attacks these approaches in their fundamental premises (Pleace, 2012; Tsemberis, 2010b).

The PHF approach is very specific about what HF is and who should serve. The target is strict: PHF is directed at chronically homeless people presenting severe mental illness or addiction-related issues (HUD, 2007). Moreover, PHF's service philosophy hinges on the principle of *choice* being given to the client taking up the service.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the individual's self-determination is at the centre of the operation: people can choose the house they want to live in and can decide whether, and how, they want to access additional personal support. Lastly, in relation to the latter point, PHF does not tend to simply redirect people to existing services but uses both the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) and the Intensive Case Management (ICM) approaches, which are both very demanding in terms of resources and personnel.

Yet, despite the apparent specificity of the original HF approach, the number of what is regarded as HF operations to date, both in the United States and in much of the Western world, is considerable (Padgett *et al.*, 2016). This success is due primarily to three factors. The first concerns the (partially contested) *results* achieved with original HF programmes, the second is the *scientific validation* of these results and of the PHF approach, whilst the third is the latter's *political appropriation*.

## Results of HF

The results have mostly been assessed in terms of cost reduction, housing retention and the client's psychophysical well-being, the latter given in particular from the sense of ontological security provided by the possibility of living in one's own house (Padgett, 2007; Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2015). According to several studies, HF operations result in economic savings compared with more conventional approaches, such as 'Treatment First' (Culhane, 2008; Culhane & Byrne, 2010; Tsemberis, 2010a), in which homeless people take up services with very high overheads, such as those incurred by dormitories, emergency hospitals and psychiatric hospitals. Since the frequency and continuity of accessing these services are linked to the precarious conditions inherent in life on the streets, via insuring a home and specific multidisciplinary support HF can bring a drop in their usage, which in turn can potentially make for an overall cut in welfare costs. Independent studies, such as the one conducted by Larimer *et al.* in Seattle (2009) – highlighting a 53% median cost reduction between an HF operation and a more conventional one – and the one by Sadowski

*et al.* (2009) in Chicago – showing a 29% cut in hospital admissions among an HF programme's clients – would seem to confirm that such programmes result in a reduction in costs. However, the literature also provides counterarguments in relation to the cost-saving capabilities of HF, which appear to be less significant than some scholars have claimed (see, for instance, the work of Culhane, who depicts a more nuanced vision of the US case (2008; Culhane & Byrne, 2010); Kertesz & Weiner (2009) on the costs associated with the set-up of HF interventions; and Johnsen & Teixeira (2012) on the contextual nature of the costs associated with homelessness).

In addition to the cost-related benefits, one of the results of HF policies that research has validated beyond all reasonable doubt is housing retention. Both the programme launched by Tsemberis (Gulcur *et al.*, 2003; Tsemberis *et al.*, 2004) and its US (Pearson *et al.*, 2007) and European spin-offs (Benjaminsen, 2013) achieve 80% housing retention rates 12 months after the clients move into their own homes. What is more, HF clients tend to keep up their leases to a significantly greater extent than those who have a home assigned to them after completing rehabilitation courses (Tsai *et al.*, 2010).

### **Scientific validation**

The second factor that has brought HF to international fame is its scientific validation. Two practices may be highlighted in this connection: the production of scientific evidence and the validation of HF's procedures on the basis of that evidence. The first practice is related to the direct involvement of Tsemberis and a recurrent number of researchers close to him (such as Padgett, Gulcur, Stefancic and Henwood) in the production of empirical evidence in support of the impact of PtH (see Waegemakers Schiff & Rook (2012) for a critique of this practice). In this framework, the studies of Padgett and her team are of great interest. In particular, the New York Service Study (2004–2008) and the New York Recovery Study (2010–2015) were both funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and used ethnographic methods and qualitative interviews to examine the role of housing in mental health recovery (much has been written; just to give an example, see Padgett *et al.*, 2013).

The second practice is the validation, in the form of a 'fidelity scale', of the specific procedural approach adopted in the PHF implementation of HF (Gilmer *et al.*, 2013; Tsemberis, 2010b). The first fidelity scale was redacted by Tsemberis and Stefancic. It consists of a 38-item quantitative assessment of programme adherence to the original HF model (Stefancic *et al.*, 2013). Its promotion has taken place via ad hoc consultancy work (for agencies, policymakers and organizations) performed by Tsemberis himself in the United States, Canada and all over Europe. In those contexts in which HF has been adopted strictly following the approach of *Pathways to Housing*, such as Canada, the fidelity scale has worked as a way to document adherence to the method – as an exercise for the programme's staff to stay on track and an opportunity to provide insights and suggestions for organizations in similar positions (Aubry *et al.*, 2015; MacNaughton *et al.*, 2015; Nelson *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, scholars have argued that the combination of quantitative measurements, such as the fidelity scale, with qualitative methods seems to be an optimal strategy not only to verify the 'right' implementation of the approach but also to better rethink complex interventions on vulnerable adults (MacNaughton *et al.*, 2012).

### **Political appropriation**

Describing the historical dynamics governing the adoption of HF in America by a conservative government not particularly open to welfare innovations and investments, Stanhope & Dunn (2011) highlight how, in the HF case, the relationship between researchers and policy-making has been closer to an evidence-based approach, typical of European countries, such as the UK. This relationship between researchers and policy-makers (which correlates closely to the publicity and intensive promotion lavished on the results) is, in the end, the last element determining the success of HF in the United States and beyond. A key event in this connection occurred in 2002, when George Bush's administration appointed Philip Mangano head of the *Interagency Council on Homelessness* (ICH), a government agency whose job it is to coordinate the drives to address homelessness at various decision-making levels (federal, state and local). Mangano and the ICH performed a crucial role in the promotion of HF in the United States, calling explicitly on local authorities to establish 10-year action plans based on the approach promoted by PtH in New York (Klodawsky, 2009). The political appropriation of HF thus filtered down from the federal to the local level, triggering a process of policy 'contagion' from one context to another, in accordance with the typical stages of the 'policy boosterism' that raises particular policies (suitably validated and 'boosted') to 'best practice' status (McCann, 2013).

### **Towards a critical reading of HF**

Results, scientific validation of the approach and its political appropriation form the core from which HF began its worldwide expansion. This core is none other than the 'cultural' validation of HF: its 'proven' results, the 'scientific nature' of the approach and its elevation to 'good practice' status are arguably markers of what is currently (at least in the West) taken for, and branded as, 'success'. A key factor in this dynamic has been, arguably, the reassuring (in positivist terms) role played by the fidelity scale. In providing a clear-cut definition of what HF is and how it *must* be done, the fidelity scale allowed for a quick appropriation and implementation of HF by policymakers in search of effective solutions to homelessness (a policy-transfer approach we will critically comment upon in the following section).

A critical reading of HF's success is by no means dismissive of its results; rather, it simply does not assume that they, or their cultural validation, should be taken for granted. Along these lines, scholars such as Lofstrand and Juhilia have argued that PHF, born as an alternative to the linear residential treatment approach, finds points in common with the latter. In particular, they show that even in the PHF model, consumers' choices are, at least in part, negotiated with professionals. The existence of these forms of consumer independence often supported by some form of guidance demonstrates that PHF is another instance of what the authors define as the 'larger discursive formation called advanced liberalism' (Lofstrand & Juhila, 2012, p. 53).

Even more relevant to the kind of critique that we propose in our paper, Tsai & Rosenheck – in response to what Pleace underlined in 2011 by remarking that HF should not be considered a panacea (Pleace, 2011) – focus on the exportability of a model that still lacks a clear definition and that needs further certifications of its usability in homelessness contexts that are different from that in which the model itself was born. Referring in particular to the European context, the authors recommend a reasoned approach – by testing

other forms of housing and empirically evaluating the results of the various forms at the same time – to better programme meaningful future interventions (Tsai & Rosenheck, 2012; for the European context see also Pleace & Bretherton, 2012).

Other criticisms that may be levelled at the HF approach range from a lack of structured scientific evidence on the results (Groton, 2013; McNaughton Nicholls & Atherton, 2011) to the wisdom of the cost-saving philosophy (Löfstrand & Juhila, 2012) (see also Baker & Evans (2016) for an overall critique on the lines of that developed in this paper). These criticisms are relegated to the sidelines by the legitimacy that HF has acquired, *precisely because that legitimacy* – and not the approach in itself – *is the real driving force behind HF's worldwide expansion*. Reconsidering the way this legitimacy has been gained is the first necessary step to a sound approach to HF.

### The assemblage of policy

HF is a classic example of ‘urban policy mobilities’. According to the latest literature on the topic, policies travel and move from one context to another, borne along by the cultural legitimation discussed above (see Temenos & McCann, 2013 for a literature round-up). In other words, this legitimation is the ‘Foucauldian’ truth in which a particular type of knowledge wields the power to mobilize interests, sets processes in motion and changes the state of affairs of things (Foucault, 2000). Once that truth has been established by ‘experts’, such as the researchers and politicians involved in the legitimization of the approach, the policy moves on via reports, conferences, encounters, forums, e-mails and websites. As McCann argues:

These mobilities facilitate the production of a particular form of relational knowledge in and through which policy actors understand themselves and their cities’ policies to be tied up in wider circuits of knowledge – regional, national, and global networks of teaching and learning, emulation, and transfer. (McCann, 2008, p. 6)

But there is more to it than that. The more traditional literature studies these movements as ‘transfers’: policy A, devised in context X, is judged ‘best practice’ and rationally implemented in contexts Y and Z by experts in the field, in the (positivist) assumption that any divergence from A is an unacceptable divergence from the reference benchmark (Peck, 2011). However, the real world is often different and less linear. As the case of HF demonstrates, in the transition from an ‘operation’ conducted by a group of individuals based in New York to a good practice ‘model’ ripe for export to every corner of the world, *HF did not remain the same as it was, but changed*. It was ‘assembled’ into the contexts it encountered, inevitably turning into ‘something else’ (McCann, 2011; see also Arapoglou, 2016 in the case of homelessness policies). In this sense, policies are always ‘mobilised’, not simply ‘transferred’: policy A, devised in context X, is subjected to a set of discordant appraisals, at various levels, which renegotiate its premises and purposes at the discursive level; it is implemented in different contexts, such as Y and Z, by a wide range of social players who will be constantly renegotiating its application in the light of the dynamics prevailing in their context. The policy changes in its contextual implementation and during its ‘innocuous’ (only in appearance) travels as well:

Mobile policies rarely travel as complete ‘packages’, they move in bits and pieces – as selective discourses, inchoate ideas, and synthesized models – and they therefore ‘arrive not as replicas but as policies already-in-transformation. (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 170)

When ‘mobilised’, a policy is demobilized and remobilized. In other words, it is assembled, disassembled and reassembled according to the elements (both discursive and material) that it encounters. This is not the place to embark on an introduction to thinking about the *agencements* at the root of the literature on ‘policy mobilities’ (assemblage, see Deleuze & Guattari [1987]; or, for an application of this thinking in research into homelessness, Lancione [2013, 2014]). It is important to emphasize that the HF approach, which is strong through its legitimation, is travelling, but its travels bring it constantly up against practices, thinking, customs, desires, resources and systems that tend to modify it. In short, this happens because policies are not instruction manuals for operating in the world, but social artefacts that spring from constantly changing territories and contexts (Governata, 2014).

This theoretical reference framework allows one to appreciate the measure of the intensity of the numerous models through which HF has been assembled around the world: Maine’s HF (Mondello *et al.*, 2009) is not the same as New Mexico’s (Guerin, 2011), which, in turn, differs from its implementation in Canada (Goering *et al.*, 2014), Sweden (Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013) and various European contexts (Busch-Geertsema, 2013). HF ceases to be ‘one’ and unavoidably becomes ‘many’; in this regard, scholars have already identified three main groups of HF models – PHF, Communal Housing First (CHF), and Housing First Light (HFL) (for a review, see Pleace [2012]) – which differs on a number of points including target, level of choice granted to the clients and level of assistance provided (for a helpful reconsideration of these categories, see Busch-Geertsema [2013] and Pleace & Bretherton [2013]). Albeit sharing a number of the misgivings voiced in the international debate, our intention is not to propose yet another modelization of HF, but simply to stress that due to its mobility, HF cannot be ‘one’ thing: models in this sense should not be seen as repositories of instructions but at best as analytical tools for approaching the ongoing metamorphosis of policy iterations.

## The challenge of adaptation

Engaging with the powerful ethos of HF demands the reconsideration of organizational cultures, approaches and practices. The struggle that unavoidably follows is tamed both by the power of HF – the ‘truth’ of an internationally recognized ‘best policy’, which comes with its own ‘fidelity scale’ and checks – and by the peculiarities of each context of implementation. To grasp the full extent of this struggle we propose to understand HF as a policy in the dual sense of the word: both as a programme of measures to be implemented (the policy, as practice) and as a system of thought (the political, as a philosophy of intervention). In policy terms, HF imposes a radical change in the *modus operandi* of an organization (which has to rethink its time frames, modes and goals); in political terms, HF feeds on a political philosophy that is different from the one on which standard programmes are based (housing ceases to be a ‘reward’ and becomes a ‘right’).

In light of this understanding of HF, the adaptation of this policy to any given context will always bring forward very specific challenges: How does one relate to the international success of HF and its implicit and explicit power? How does one deal with the fact that HF is ‘sold’ as a policy transfer, whilst in reality it can only be a matter of partial mobilization and assemblage? And how does one make HF flexible enough to become relevant for the clients, whilst at the same time keeping its original ethos intact? Following our analysis thus

far, adaptation to HF may be interpreted as a challenge at three levels of intensity, which are as follows:

- *Passive adaptation* – HF is ‘imported’; that is, it is sold as a successful, innovative policy and, as such, as inevitably necessary. HF is not probed regarding its multiplicity and complexity. There is no rethinking of either *policy* or *politics*: HF’s impact is, indeed, purely nominal. In short, passive adaptation sets out from the assumption that policies can be ‘copied’ and implemented mechanically;
- *Neutral adaptation* – HF is ‘imported’ and adapted to the context, *but without adapting the context to the actual operation*; there is thus an alteration of the reference model (PHF), which is superimposed on the established *modus operandi*. There is no substantial rethinking of *policy* (which is changed largely in superficial terms) or, even less so, of *politics* (there is no substantial change in the system of thought on which the pre-existing operations were based). In short, neutral adaptation does not stop at ‘copying’, but ‘adapts’ the policy in a single aspect of assemblage, that of the model, without making deep inroads into the context-related dynamics;
- *Active engagement* – HF is ‘studied’ before its adaptation in relation to the specificities of the context. Adaptation is systemic, in terms of both the model (which is modified to meet local requirements) and the context (which truly takes up the gauntlet, responding to the challenges that HF brings with it). Active engagement also calls for a critical appraisal of both the *policy* (in-depth renegotiation of the operating models) and the *politics* (demolition of the consolidated system of thought). HF in this sense is likely not to be equal to what Tsemberis did in 1992 in NY, but in adhering to the core ethos of the approach, it becomes a powerful tool for challenging established policies and approaches. In short, active adaptation does not stop at copying or partially adapting, but takes up the relational challenge of assemblage: both the parts involved (model and context) are modified to bring about changes in practice and thinking.

In the short term, *actively* engaging in HF poses more questions than it brings solutions. In the medium-to-long term, moreover, a critical attitude towards HF may result in a heightened awareness surrounding this approach and relativize it (see Johnson (2012) for a similar point made in the case of Australia). However, actively engaging in HF is the only way to take its revolutionary ethos seriously, an approach that is aimed at putting housing and support before any form of clients’ compliance to provide for a *substantial* rethinking of the canonical *modus operandi*. As we are going to show with our survey of the Italian case, the challenges to such engagement are however many and by no means easy to detect.

## Housing First in Italy

A brief introduction to the specific features of the Italian context is needed to explain how HF came into existence in Italy. Those features include aspects of welfare, housing policy and governance (Allen, 2006; De Luca *et al.*, 2009) and others that are more intrinsically cultural (see the classic Putnam (1992); and, more recently, Parks (2014)). There are two major aspects to be kept in mind. The first is the lack of a national policy on homelessness, a situation to be found in other southern and eastern European countries as well (Arapoglou, 2004; Filipovi *et al.*, 2009; for a different case see Baptista, 2009). This situation inevitably calls for flexibility on the part of local authorities working with homeless people, which

operate in line with their local statutes and do not abide by a national framework, which is largely non-existent. The second concerns the features of the current Italian welfare system, which may be dubbed a *welfare mix* (Bertin, 2012). In short, the state delegates most of its welfare provision to local agencies that range from welfare cooperatives to religious institutions, which are marked by widely differing organizational features, missions and blueprints for action. The Italian HF has therefore to be viewed in the context of a geographical and legislative complexity and by myriad public, private for-profit and private non-profit agencies, often working without any formal coordination.

In recent years, Italian institutions have tried to reduce this fragmentation both through administrative reforms and through coordinated research efforts. At least to a certain extent, it is thanks to these initiatives that the HF policy eventually found its way into Italy as well. One of the most significant initiatives in this respect has been the launch of the National Survey on the Condition of Homeless People in Italy in 2012 (Istat, 2012, 2015), one of the first quantitative research studies on homelessness commissioned by a national public authority – the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy – in association with the national statistics office (Istat). One important feature has been the role played in the survey by the Federazione Italiana Organismi per le Persone senza dimora [Italian Federation of the Organisations for Homeless People] (fio.PSD), an organization comprising 107 social-economy organizations, which may be regarded as the sole ‘soft point of coordination’ among Italy’s many different local actors.<sup>3</sup>

### **‘Network Housing First Italia’**

In light of the survey’s findings, many Italian organizations, including the fio.PSD, have begun asking themselves what solutions should be adopted to address the homelessness phenomenon more effectively. Such debates have been conducted in parallel with the fio.PSD’s interest in initiatives taking their cue from the HF model, which had been becoming more widespread following the Housing First Europe (2011–2013) project, funded by the European PROGRESS programme, in which the fio.PSD took part as a member of the steering group.

Spurred on by the success of this initiative, which is documented in the ‘Housing First Europe’ report (Busch-Geertsema, 2013), the fio.PSD leadership group thus proposed that the federation’s member organizations should introduce HF in Italy. The proposal acquired concrete form in March 2014 with the launch of ‘Network Housing First Italia’<sup>4</sup> (NHFI). Currently, it is made up of a network of 54 public, private and social economy organizations from 10 regions, which have, together, launched a national HF experiment.<sup>5</sup>

### **NHFI as politics: buying into the success of PHF**

The network exerts its functions in three areas. First, organizations are provided with specific training on the theory and methods of HF – and in particular PHF – which are delivered through yearly summer and winter schools and webinars organized by the fio.PSD. These training sessions have seen thus far the participation of national and international experts on the HF approach – including San Tsemberis and leading scholars such as Deborah Padgett from the US and José Ornelas from Portugal – who have played an active part in the internationalization of HF (McCann, 2008). Secondly, when signing up to the network

organization, members were invited to commit themselves to undertake a supervised experimentation of the HF approach. Such experimentation should have consisted of allocating a minimum number of three apartments per organization to be used for HF purposes and monitoring and collecting data for implementing the policy. Finally, several organizations agreed to take part in a national research on HF in Italy, which included quantitative and qualitative monitoring by a team of national and international social scientists, to which the authors of this paper have belonged at various phases.

Although things changed in its practical implementation (see below), looking at the Network's characteristics it is possible to argue that the NHFI was designed in order to transfer into Italy the 'established', internationally accepted and successful version of HF. This is evident looking at the international experts that were involved in the programme, as well as the importance given to the scientific evaluation of the experimentation, which was framed around measurement scales adopted internationally in research on HF, translated and minimally adapted to the national context (Stefancic *et al.*, 2013). A fidelity scale moulded around the one designed by PtH was also requested by the fio.PSD, and later devised by the scientific committee, in order to understand the progress of each organization involved in the experimentation. This latter point, in particular, demonstrates the will to use what are considered to be appropriate (because they are internationally recognized) measurements to justify the approach adopted in Italy in the eyes of political observers both domestic and international – heedful of the role played by 'good practices'. In line with these practices and in connection with the model's *political* appropriation, the fio.PSD's advocacy work has made it possible to include HF as one of the Guidelines for Countering Severe Adult Marginalization in Italy, as promoted by the Labour and Welfare Policies Ministry in 2015.<sup>6</sup> This accreditation is in line with the aspiration to win endorsement at the institutional level for the HF 'project', not dissimilarly to what happened in the US in the triangulations between the ICH, Philip Mangano and PtH. This time, however, the accreditation was not based on the national result, but purely on the publicized international success of the policy (the validation by the Italian Labour and Welfare Policies Ministry preceded most of the analysis of the implementation of HF in the country).

### ***NHFI as policy: the struggle of everyday engagement***

As the authors of this paper have witnessed many times at the training events organized by the fio.PSD, the organizations involved in the NHFI are deeply interested in, and motivated towards, finding new ways of challenging homelessness in Italy. At the same time, however, participants have been frustrated by the difficulties of 'applying' HF – and in particular the PHF approach they had been exposed to – in the Italian context(s): some have complained about the inappropriateness of the 'original model', whilst others have requested greater guidance and presence in its everyday implementation. In order to deal with these issues, organizations in Italy have adapted to HF by modifying several aspects of the original PHF model, as follows.

Firstly, many organizations have not only focused on chronically homeless people with severe mental health problems, but extended the target to take in single adults and families with economic problems, migrants, asylum seekers and, more generally, 'crisis victims'. The decision to expand the target reflects a number of structural factors in the socio-economic system that have increased the impoverishment of several categories of people and families

experiencing hardship on the housing front (evicted tenants, the jobless or workers lacking job security, single mothers and fathers, and single-income or incomeless families). Moreover, in recent years Italy has ‘welcomed’ increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, despite lacking consolidated, well-structured integration systems (in 2014, more than 170,000 migrants from Syria, Eritrea and other countries facing war arrived in the country). Secondly, a number of organizations – due to a lack of resources and/or the chance to work with the private property market – do not provide a single home, but use apartments where several people live together (at times even without a separate room of their own). Thirdly, in many cases the lack of substantive resources allocated to the creation of structured teams has resulted in an inability to define an operating model for personal support, such as the ACT or ICM programmes. As is the case with the programmes that Pleace calls HFL, personal support is of limited duration in the Italian experiment and largely consists of referral to social services.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the greatest challenge of adaptation has been of a cultural nature and concerns the very operating philosophy of HF. Italy has traditionally subscribed to a philosophy of charity, in a strongly religious mould as well, and of institutionalized welfare. The social service and health system is based on the meeting of requisites (such as having a registered place of residence and holding a job) for entitlement to a service, or else they reflect an emergency, problem/phenomenon containment approach. These factors make it very hard work to bring in a radical change in thinking on the welfare services based on personal freedom of choice (Gaboardi & Santinello, 2016; Stefanizzi & La Marca, 2016).

### **An Italian way to HF?**

In line with the account set out in the previous two sections, the combination of a political will that is tending towards the simplification of policy transfer (which is merely nominal) and a context marked by the complexity of policy mobility (which, however, is substantive) leads to the sole result possible: as in other countries, we cannot talk in terms of ‘one’ HF model in Italy either. What is more, given the NHFI’s experimental nature and the lack of a conclusive appraisal of the project (which is still under way at the time of writing this paper), it is still too early to assess the Italian HF experiment. We may nonetheless highlight a number of significant features marking what we may provisionally call ‘the Italian way to HF’, namely, the way in which a heterogeneous number of organizations are both nodding at the established version of HF and trying to contextualize it in meaningful ways.

First, the network was established as an effort of self-organization brought forward by the fio.PSD and its associates rather than as a national policy, such as in the Canadian or Finnish case. Secondly, and as a consequence of this, the NHFI did not benefit from any national fund for experimentation. A model of self-financing was instead put in place, where the organizations had to pay the fio.PSD a fee for accessing the network (and its training sessions and materials), and they had to self-finance the implementation of their experimentation. Third, the NHFI, despite producing a fidelity scale and guidelines for each participant organization, allows for great differences in the ways projects are organizationally laid out and undertaken (mainly to reflect the legislative and cultural contexts in which the organizations operate, which differ widely one from the other). Fourth, the NHFI is a mirror of the *welfare mix* approach that we have discussed. The organizational parts of the

network include public bodies (such as the City of Turin), private NGOs (such as Piazza Grande, a prominent group based in Bologna) and faith-based organizations (FBOs, such as the powerful Caritas). The differences among them are not only related to the organizational level, but also to the operational and economical levels (e.g. private and corporate fund-raising), which means that some organizations have more resources, both economic and political, than others, and can therefore achieve different ends.

One could arguably say that the NHFI is made of many different experiences and struggles to actively adapt to – and engage with – the ethos of HF. The key experience for the network is characterized by a detachment between what is depicted by a successful policy and what this policy delivers once people try to implement it – suddenly, things need to be adjusted, changed and twisted to remain as true as possible to their progressive ethos, whilst at the same time, their representation needs to stick to the dominant narrative for the sake of political interests and logic.

In these regards, the making of HF in Italy is an unavoidable mix of tactical political manoeuvres and genuine interest in change punctuated by uncertainty and doubts. Perhaps the two have to coexist so that a complex exercise in policy-making (such as HF) can find its way in a layered country such as Italy. It is appropriate to imagine that similar dynamics have been at play in other nuanced contexts too, such as in the case with the Housing First Europe programme (Busch-Geertsema, 2013), in the Swedish case (Knutågard & Kristiansen, 2013) and perhaps even in the American one, where the mingling between radical social change and personal political interest in the case of HF has been clearly highlighted. The making of HF in Italy is in this sense less a matter of specific outcomes and evidence – which are still to come and are indeed contested even in the case of PHF – but more a matter of specific practices that include scientific results and validation, drivers to change and political appropriation, all assembled under the umbrella of HF.

## **Conclusion: the problem of policy and politics**

What is HF, and how and why is it practised? It will be clear to the reader, in light of the approach adopted in this paper, that there is no *one* clear-cut answer to those questions, nor could it be otherwise: HF is a policy of continuous adaptation, triggered by the assemblages that inevitably spring from its international mobilization. The operational definition of HF given in the introduction may serve as a minimum reference framework for addressing the salient features of the approach. Scientific evidence and political appropriation may provide a springboard for debate and dialogue on what HF can and cannot do, and the various models outlined in the literature may ultimately provide guidance in steering a course through the complexities encountered when implementing HF in context (Baker & Evans, 2016). None of these things must, however, be ends in themselves, nor must they be approached acritically: the definition is operational, not instrumental; the results and scientific evidence are partial and very much limited to a few aspects (such as housing retention), and the models are analytical abstractions, not instruction manuals.

Many countries in Europe and around the world are currently experimenting with Housing First. In this paper, we offered an introduction to the case of Italy, where a national two-year pilot programme and study of HF was launched in 2014. The organizations involved in the national project face a major challenge: firstly, they have to make out what HF is and what purpose it can serve; secondly, they have to address the resistance to change typical of

every political and social context. Although the path is undoubtedly an arduous one, strewn with unknown factors, the ethos at the root of HF may be hailed as an opportunity to do away with a number of traditional policies that add to the homelessness problem instead of countering it. If it is to do so, HF has to be addressed critically in its many forms, bearing in mind its nature as an assemblage policy undergoing constant metamorphosis.

Our classification of adaptation as passive, neutral and active engagement and our experience with the NHFI enable us to conclude that the Italian experiment is still contradictory and rife with uncertainties. A number of organizations have adopted the model 'passively', using HF as a label that makes something that was actually already being done (e.g. social housing and temporary shelter) sound innovative. These passive organizations begin with a view of 'starting to talk' about HF, rather than making a real change in the services provided. Others have used a 'neutral wire', adapting the HF principles to their own context, for instance by providing housing assistance for a limited period, placing people in shared accommodation, or using volunteers rather than professional workers to provide personal support. This option is in use primarily where there is no strong funding to support experimentation.

Other programmes have struggled to get off the ground precisely because they have taken up the challenge of an 'active' engagement in the policy and politics, having long time frames for achieving operational changes in both model and context. These changes – some of which were implemented in 2015 by organizations from various cities (Milan, Bologna, Turin and Rimini) – have involved a major drive to raise the authorities' awareness of HF issues, appoint and train specialized teams and give specific attention to the needs of the individual client. To give an example, four organizations from Milan (Opera San Francesco per i Poveri, Fondazione Progetto Arca onlus, Caritas and Cooperativa Comunità Progetto) have carried out advocacy campaigns together and have constituted a common *Manifesto* on HF in the city to better sensitize the institutions (e.g. the Municipality of Milan) and to channel all the resources available in the most productive way. Furthermore, they share a monthly psychological supervision schedule (offered by one of the organizations involved) and meet once a month to discuss the most interesting cases and to support each other (creating in this way a sort of common municipal team). These and other factors bestow legitimacy on an active HF assemblage.

Engaging with HF calls for a critical analysis of the context specificities, the experiences reported in the existing literature and, first and foremost, the issues that the approach is intended to address. The aim of our paper has been to highlight some of these challenges and to offer an analytical framework to access them openly, to inform both theory and further practice. The Italian programme and the other programmes worldwide engaged in HF will be able to steer a course beyond the existing operating model only by taking a critical approach to HF: by no means does the model call for a 'passive' or 'neutral' deinstitutionalization of powers and practices. Instead, it demands a course that is actively radical.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. This definition has been translated from Italian.
2. It may usefully be borne in mind, in this connection, that Tsemberis called PHF 'Consumer Preference Supported Housing' in his initial writings on the subject (Tsemberis & Asmussen, 1999).

3. It is 'soft' for two reasons. First, membership of the Federation is voluntary, and not all the organisations working with homeless people in Italy are part of it. Secondly, the Federation can coordinate jointly defined projects, but it has no power to dictate action.
4. For an introduction to the NHFI see Consoli *et al.* (2016).
5. See: <http://www.housingfirstitalia.org>.
6. See <http://www.fiopsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Linee-di-Indirizzo.pdf>.
7. Such an approach to HF requires first and foremost a post-disciplinary and radical approach to homelessness theory and practice (see Lancione, 2016).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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