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Skills, Attitudes, Relational Abilities & Reflexivity: Competences for a Multicultural Society.

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Abstract

This qualitative research is aimed at increasing knowledge about Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). After reviewing Western literature, we explored the Cultural Mediators' (CMs) point of view. They can be considered as privileged witnesses to understand what skills are needed to act with appropriacy in multicultural situations and how to acquire them.

Data were collected from 20 CMs, of different countries, who had been working in northern Italy in different areas for 10 years: Health, Education, Social Services, Courthouse. In order to identify the most important areas of investigation some focus groups have been conducted. The emerging themes were examined through 15 semi-structured interviews. What are the competences (attitudes, skills, knowledge) for an appropriate management of interaction between people in a multicultural context? What promotes the ICC acquisition and development?

The analysis of the data confirms the complex, systemic structure of ICC (attitudes, knowledge, and skills) and highlights the interdependence of various factors. The ICC development requires a continuous training over time, with particular attention to: i. self-knowledge; ii. social skills; iii. cultural awareness; iv. knowledge of the organizations in which the CM work. Many variables influence ICC, but these data seem to identify in self-awareness, relational skills and a continuous training, their real essence. In their implementation, the key role has been recognized to personality patterns, motivation and reflexivity; comparison with colleagues; periodical psychological supervision. These findings require further investigation in order to reach the specificity of the meanings attributed to ICC in non Western cultures.

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1. Introduction

In an ever globalizing world, the ability to relate to people from different backgrounds is an increasingly important competence, both domestically and abroad. In the contemporary world, boundaries have no fixed line, at least in the economic, cultural and linguistic sense. The acquisition of ICC, "may be important not only for individual enrichment and communicative proficiency but also for providing future educators, professionals, and leaders with the capabilities necessary for promoting successful collaboration across cultures" (Sinicrope, Norris & Watanabe, 2007:1).

But existing conceptualizations of ICC are highly different. According to the conducted research, ICC is something composite (e.g., skills, abilities, attitudes, personality patterns) and processual. Throughout literature, scholars and researchers use shared definition of more or less Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC).

In literature, over the years, the consent for the use of the term competence related to ICC (Spitzberg, 1987; Koester, Wiseman & Sanders, 1993) has spread. The word competence is itself a contested conceptual term, with many semantic and conceptual landmines. For some scholars, this word refers to the concept of "understanding"; for some others to the development of: relationship, effectiveness, appropriateness and adaptation. Each of these criteria of competence has been both criticized and defended (see McCroskey, 1982; Parks, 1985; Spitzberg, 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989, 2002). Besides, the same behavior can be perceived as an appropriate expression of competence in one context but is subject to negative evaluation in another.

Nevertheless, there is not a shared definition of ICC, because of its complexity. The ICC involves many psychological dimensions (e.g. cognitive, emotional, social). To define what constitutes the ICC, is a difficult task because it is something "subtle and intangible" in itself. We can even ask: "do we even know what the term really means?" (Bok, 2009, x).

2. Theoretical framework

The personal, cultural and social dimensions necessary to talk of ICC are under debate. Several models attempt to answer these questions (Arasaratnam, 2008; Bradford *et al.*, 2000; Byram, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2003; Deardoff, 2006, 2008; Hajek & Giles, 2003; Martin *et al.*, 1994; Milhouse, 1993; Prechtel & Lund, 2007). In search of potential similarities among the different conceptualization, not mutually exclusive, Spitzberg & Changnon (2009) divided the existing models of ICC into the following types:

- **Compositional models.** These models identify the ICC components without specifying the relations existing among those elements. Such models are, in short, a list of relevant traits, characteristics and skills supposed to be crucial for interacting with appropriateness in multicultural situations. Among them we report: Howard-Hamilton *et al.* (1998); Ting-Tomey & Kurogy (1998); Deardoff (2006); Hunter *et al.* (2006).

- **Co-orientational models.** These models are focused on conceptualizing the interactional achievement of intercultural understanding. They are primarily devoted to finding out "particular criterion of communicative mutuality and shared meanings". Among them we remember: Fantini (1995, 2012); Byram (1997; 2003); Kupka (2008); Rathje (2007).

- **Developmental models.** Such models retain - in ICC - a dominant role for the time dimension. They may even share components of other models but they emphasize the process, the ICC progression over time through specifying stages of maturity. Among these models: King & Baxter Magolda (2005); Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1962).

- **Adaptational models** emphasize the interdependence among the multiple interactants that envision in the process of ICC development and their mutual adjustment. Among such models we recall: Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles & Coupland (1988); Berry, Kim, Power, Young & Bujaki (1989); Navas, Rojas, García & Pumares (2007).

- **Causal path models** attempt to represent ICC as a theoretical linear system. Among them we can mention: Arasaratnam (2008); Griffith & Harvey (2000); Ting-Toomey (1999); Hammer et al. (2003); Imahori & Lanigan (1989); Deardoff (2006).

A broader definition, which can contain several theoretical existing models, refers to ICC as "a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (Fantini, 2006:12) or "appropriate and effective communication and behavior in intercultural situations" (Deardoff, 2009:13). According to Spitzberg & Changnon, ICC is "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world" (2009:7).

What all of these different definitions point out is the need to be able to step beyond one's own culture and perspective, to interact with appropriateness and effectiveness with other individuals. Above all when linguistic and cultural backgrounds are diverse. The theories and models existing in literature display considerable similarity in their fundamental areas (e.g. knowledge, skills, outcomes), but also an extensive diversity at the level of specific subcomponents.

3. Research

What are then the characteristics, attitudes and skills necessary to be considered competent in an intercultural sense? Still today there are a multiplicity of frameworks and approaches to define ICC. In this direction, the purpose of this qualitative research is to contribute to increasing knowledge about ICC.

The main research questions were: What are the competences (attitudes, skills, knowledge) for an appropriate management of interaction between people in multicultural context? What promotes the ICC acquisition and development?

3.1. Participants and methodology

The Cultural Mediators' (CMs) point of view has been explored after reviewing western literature. Consequently we can say that it may be considered a privileged role and a witness to understand what skills are needed to act with appropriacy in multicultural situations and how to acquire them.

The CM has been described as an active agent in the process of integration who acts as a bridge between an ethnic minority user and an operator of a public or private social service in order to promote the connection between people of different cultures, and to work as a go-between the two parties involved in the communicative exchange in equidistantly (ONC, 2000:3).

In this qualitative research, data were collected from 20 Cultural Mediators (CMs), of different countries, who have been working in different areas in Northern Italy for the past 10 years: Health, Education, Social Services, Courthouse. In order to identify the most important areas of investigation some focus groups have been conducted. The emerging themes were examined through 15 semi-structured interviews. Focus groups and interviews have been recorded and transcribed.

3.2. Findings

Our data analysis confirms the complex, systemic structure of ICC (attitudes, knowledge, skills) and highlights the interdependence of various factors involved. Mediation is a complex action which must take various aspects and knowledge into account in the context of intervention. Mediation is also a dynamic practice because it calls into play the cultural nature and life of humans and their cultural products, from language to assumptions that guide our interpretation of reality ranging from the values of the habitus, to the specificities of the institutional contexts.

What competences are required for appropriate interactions between people in intercultural contexts? *The analysis of our data indicates the importance of certain attitudes, skills, and knowledge which are fundamental dimensions that characterize professional practice.* These are: i. Self-knowledge; ii. social skills; iii. Cultural awareness; iv. knowledge of the organizations in which CMs work.

i. *Self-Knowledge.* Pursuing a profession based on interwoven relationships requires a considerable mastery of one's self and a deep contact with one's own emotional life. Our participants outline the work of a CM as an accompanying action, assistance and support with various life challenges. It is this dimension of "care" that evokes feelings, ties, and memberships. As stated by a practitioner:

to mediate first of all we need to mediate with ourselves because it's not easy to know ourselves deeply, to discover, to ? Our own conscience, our own habits, our own practices that nonetheless we try to forget, that we don't like becoming closer to another culture. (IPRINMED2/69)

In order to remain true to our role - performing the function of mediation - it is crucial to recognize one's own emotional reactions while you are working with the other, particularly to be aware of how problems, narrated experiences, and emotions that are circulating in the mediation meetings resonate within oneself. It is this awareness that can allow one to maintain the "right distance" which is essential for a successful outcome of the work.

Sometimes it is really difficult as not only you are a cultural mediator, perhaps you are a mother, a daughter, a sister. For instance in my culture (the Pakistan one) the user considers me also as a sister. But I have to stay inside my role in that moment even if they consider me as a sister, even if I have a good relationship with the operator. So you also have to be competent enough to stay focused on mediation and hold "the two poles far" from you. I remember the first years of work I was very upset by what came out during a mediation. (IPRINMED13/127)

Therefore it means to work on themselves to gain self-awareness through the revision of their migratory experience, recognition of beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices associated with one's culture reference. To be able to know and understand other cultural horizons, it is vital to gain self-awareness of their own cultural-symbolic universe (Deardoff, 2008). Some respondents attach importance to these aspects of their training both at the beginning and in-service:

Our training course was very demanding because the work started from us. We have been working on ourselves first to then reach the profession. (IPRINMED11/16).

Jointly with the deepest emotional dimensions involved in the work of mediation, from the interviews the awareness arises that in order to facilitate the meeting and dialogue between the two parties, it is essential to keep at bay the natural process of categorizing reality that carries in itself the judgment and the other on his world. The ability to suspend judgment on both the realities that meet is considered essential:

It is fundamental to accept the other, accept dialogue, without judgment. It is very difficult to master our own feelings, prejudices, and judgments and to be neutral when we are in the mediation. Sometimes it comes naturally to take the part you feel closer as culture even if (the user) has not the same experience and sometimes I put myself in his shoe, I feel like him. (IPRINMED12/79)

The practice of mediation puts one in contact with difficult situations with fragile family relationships, with painful aspects of the life of others, and this evokes memories, emotions and tests the professional competence. Once own experience as a migrant is always at stake in the work and continually likely to be reactivated. For this, if the CM is able to recognize and revise his personal experiences, the great risk is contamination, or the inability

to resist to the problems of the other, for which the exercise of the profession becomes tiresome from the emotional point of view and not very effective at the operational level:

It is necessary to work on ourselves as... for a certain period I was really down... even because I thought of not being able to do certain things (...) it can happen that at a certain moment you think you are doing the right thing, then eventually (you realize that your intervention) is totally wrong and so you feel guilty. (IPRINMED15/113)

The practice of supervision and of the comparison group with colleagues is not only a need widely felt by those interviewed, but identified as one of the preferred strategies to ensure the quality of their work: the meetings are essential moments in order to avoid the burn-out, the low self-esteem, to assess the correctness of one's action, to rethink their strategies and to get support and suggestions.

We form a group, then there is a psychologist, but it is not compulsory that you speak, sometimes it is enough to listen. Even just listening allows me to work on myself (...) if I want I can speak and tell my situation and listen to the different opinions. (IPRINMED11/115)

Taking care of communicative-relational spaces of others, of those who go through difficult moments in their existence or transition is very difficult emotionally. The interviewed associate the feeling of failure to guilt. The painful emotions experienced at work, if well managed and analyzed, provide insights into the nature of relationships and are an incentive to engage in more self-formation and acquisition of additional skills

ii. Social skills. The analysis of the data collected, highlights the central role played by nature communicative-relational skills. Knowing how to establish contact with each other, able to weave a bond of trust between the operator and user, sometimes over a short and fragmented time, is the *sine-qua-non* for the success of the mediation. The CM interviewed seem to have in mind that the specific nature of their work task is to "create a bridge of communication" between people and different worlds. In some testimonies that metaphor is stated further highlighting how in reality it is the creation of a "common space shared" in which the three actors agreed (operator / s, broker and user / s) are intertwined.

The three points intertwine and there is only one space where all three take place: this is the space where all happens – if then it does. (...)Because it happens only if you manage to build a relationship between two realities that are really very distant, very different, very separated from one another , (...) if you are not able to build a relationship nothing happens. (IPRINMED7/2)

What does the mediator? There were three circles and a space in the middle, there is only one space where these three circles can have a point of contact. (FGBS/69)

The creation of spaces for communication, that is, of recognition, of encounter and exchange, is anything but simple. The user and the operator need both to receive support from the CMs because they are called to trust the other, to believe in the possibility of the meeting.

Because if I recognize both the one and the other, then the two of them recognize each other (...) This is the main objective. (IPRINMED7/19 – 90)

In the words of CMs respondents there is a strong emphasis on the recognition of the fact that it is a profession structurally centered on relationships. For the user a rapport somehow forced upon them by a state of need, and therefore even more fragile, undermined by the need, from a distance and from different cultural frame. The task of generating a communicative space starting from the assumption of user needs is up to the CM. It is very clear to interviewed that communicative competence is highly complex and embraces knowledge that goes beyond linguistic knowledge. For some CMs the ability to communicate, seen in its dual dimension - the ability to

understand and express themselves in both verbal and non-verbal - is the very essence of mediation. The ability to accept others, to listen, to inspire confidence, to decentralize from oneself, are traits that allow the practitioner to establish a bond with the two (or more) parties involved and open up spaces for dialogue with them and between them.

Those responsibilities which CMs respondents perceive in their work must therefore be twofold:

We always have to support our operator but also give a support (to the user) because we speak the same language, we must have a sweeter word to conquer their trust. (IPRINMED13/62)

iii. *Cultural awareness.* The task of the mediator is to open communication between the two subjects that have to interact and don't know each other and live in different language-cultural worlds. The symbolic code of those educated in one cultural context refer to different values and assumptions (Stewart, Danelian & Foster, 2002), they embody different views of man and the world. The people interviewed affirm that the CM is the one that has the linguistic-cultural codes. That's what allows us to open communication between subjects that are involved, that make one person understand the words of another.

From this point of view, translating is one thing and linguistic mediation is another. Linguistic mediation includes giving meaning to the words that the user says and that the service tells the user, that is why it is of high importance to have perfect knowledge of the Italian language and of your own mother tongue. (FGBS/69)

The double "citizenship" that distinguishes the CMs allows him to meet two worlds, often very far from each other. Only when the mediator "possesses" both worlds in question, that is, when he is able to move from one world to the other, then he can put the communication process into action and thus the mediation takes place.

The mediator has to know his own culture first, he has to know it very well and then know well the territory where he lives, as well as be aware of both, otherwise [the process] does not work (FGBS/48).

Knowing your own culture means not only knowing the language as a digital code but to possess its analogical dimensions. In the communication process, the non-verbal language conveys most of the information and that occurs outside of any awareness whatsoever (Hall, 1981). The mediators are supposed to pay attention in particular to these aspects, to gather information needed, giving the right meaning to the message and avoid misunderstandings. Some CMs interviewed assign a relevant role to the value of non-verbal "culturally located" language: gestures, facial expressions, posture, proxemic and aptic aspects, even the way of dressing. What the body shows is inscribed in the culture:

[A central role is carried out by the] non-verbal language, made of gestures, movements, personal things, even the way of walking, because if you take notice, every country has its own way of walking, even these aspects are important (...). [Observing these aspects], for example, you can understand from which social stratus, from which geographical area of the country [a person] comes from. (IPRINMED1/59-61)

Words and body can sometimes say different things, not knowing the meaning of non-verbal communication can favour tensions and misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings happen. (...) many times, a gesture may be interpreted wrongly, because maybe in one culture it is used in specific situations and in another it is not, and so, all comes to a halt (IPRINMED12/91).

The task of the mediator is to grasp the misunderstandings, see the shadows thrown on the communication gathering the most subtle nuances and bring to light with explanations that which allows people involved to understand the other's point of view, the intention of the communication, the sense of the words.

I believe that the mediator needs to have a good knowledge of his own culture. It is not enough to know how to do cultural things, but need to know also why you do it in India. Therefore the mediator has to question himself constantly on all things; because people ask a mediator what normally they don't ask other people (...) Therefore he needs to know very well why things are done in a certain way, he has to know how the society works, how it's made, how an individual is shaped here in Italy as well as in India; not only the service, but also the society, the people, the relationships, the behaviour. (IPRINMED15/137).

The people interviewed bring to light the complexity of the symbolic-cultural world inhabited by man and the difficulty to penetrate in representations of different existences from ones own. In order to open communication channels, the mediators are asked to understand not only the language but also what belongs to the *hidden word*, to the culture of the new world. That means not only knowing the two language universes but also the explicit meanings of the two cultures, what belongs to the non-said. According to Edward T. Hall it is about hidden cultures of what makes a culture "function" (Hall, 1977). If "people do not comply with these invisible fundamental rules of behaviour and communication, it is impossible to make a culture work" (Hall, 2004:73). In order to manage communication processes in multicultural situations, where the meeting between two worlds brings leads to misunderstandings and disagreements (Barna, 2002) it is essential to know the invisible rules of communication and behaviour, the underlying meanings on which the culture lies. An interviewed person:

Culture is very, very important, maybe it could even be the first on the list of the skills needed (FGVR2/101).

A mastery of the hidden meaning of a cultural context makes it possible to reach a non-literal translation and to make sense of the two symbolic universes which are called to interact. The competence regarding the cultural worlds at play – the result of continuous updating – allows the CMs not only to manage the features potentially in conflict, to make the worlds at play understandable, but also to give value to the culture under the eyes of another one, to bring to light the reasons, practices and habits that sometimes may turn out to be not understandable, and due to this, may be object of *tranchant* prejudices. In order to carry out one's own work, it is necessary to gain in depth cultural knowledge regarding both the country of arrival as well as the one of origin. In this sense it is necessary to know how to listen, observe, interpret, analyse, evaluate and establish correlations between the various characteristics of the culture (Deardoff, 2006), making continuous research, going back to the country of origin if possible, maintaining contacts with those who live there still (in particular family and friends) in order to gather information and remain in contact with the social-linguistic-cultural situation at its origin and at its changing.

iv. Knowledge of the organizations in which CMs work. There are many institutional places where the CM carries out its profession, ranging from the school to the hospital, from the clinics to the social services, from court house rooms to prisons. Each of these situations makes up a micro-universe, where the language and its norms, even if not written have to be learnt. Even the verbal language conveys implicitly the organizational culture of the context in question, a culture that a CM needs to know in its informal and formal features (roles, functions, rules, norms, concerning both the organizations where the operators are, as well as the migrant situation). Knowledge of specific sectorial languages is another skill, which is considered essential by the people interviewed.

In every area language is different...therefore it is necessary to know that language, otherwise, making the meaning understood becomes very difficult (FGVR1/79).

There are many different working sectors for the CM: this concerns many different and complex contexts. The people interviewed are clearly aware of the need to have specific sectorial knowledge from different contexts.

Even if we are talking about the work of human beings, they all have different educational training, a different way of seeing things. Sooner or later we will quickly reach levels of specializations even in the mediation field, because there are transformations taking place constantly from the moment you get out of one context to the

moment you go to work in another, because the places are different, the rules are different, the ways of living within the contexts are different (IPRINMED13/160).

Besides measuring themselves up against the culture and the rules in force in the different institutional orders, the CM is also required to confront himself with each operator, who in turn interprets his profession in a personal way both in relationship with the mediator and with the user.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Many variables influence ICC, but these data seem to be identified in: i. Self-knowledge; ii. Social skills; iii. Cultural awareness; iv. Knowledge of the organizations. One relevant feature is the reaffirmed reference to the need of "maintenance" of such mentioned skills through on-going education and training, which through a comparison with colleagues and a periodical psychological supervision, is qualified as learning from experience. With respect to what is written in literature, research highlights a strong accent of relational skills and individual maturity. Therefore, in the heart of the ICC you can find self-awareness, which is also awareness of the cultural *frame* that guides its own eye view on the world, and it allows an elaboration of one's own experience and habitus and a continuous sharpening of a receptive sensitivity with respect to another. Working on ones self means working on attitudes that have a central role in the mediation practices, since "the degree that comprehensive cultural knowledge cannot be definitively known, process-oriented skills on how to handle the situation grow in importance" (Stiftung & Fondazione Cariplo, 2008: 9). Another relevant characteristic of the ICC for the professionals interviewed is the sociolinguistic awareness concerning the existing relationship between language and meaning (Deardoff, 2012) in the different cultural world, as well as the ability to exhibit the behaviour expected (Arasaratnam, 2012) both on the part of the operator and on the part of the user involved in the mediation.

It's critical to continue to pursue research about ICC. The literature presents mostly English models, that have an individualistic approach, a marked view of western culture. These findings require further investigation in order to reach the specificity of the meanings attributed to ICC in non Western cultures.

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