



The Blurred Lines of Intercultural Mediation: Professional Recognition through Formal and Informal Practices in Italy

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1. Introduction

When I was a child [...] I thought I'd become a teacher. Growing up and only being able to attend the first year of high school, at the end of which I was forced to flee, I imagined myself as a journalist. Such dreams have faded away... how did I become a cultural mediator? Randomly by chance! (C3)¹

The profession of mediator in Italy has over time remained rather unregulated. Despite the presence of the role for decades now, training and performing as a mediator unfold in a process of fragmented practices and unharmonised educational paths, with practitioners referring to sub-state institutional frameworks rather than to a national or European integrated professionalisation of the role. Professional recognition is an aching aspect: the text approaches mediation from such an angle, reflecting on its theories and practices.

This article aligns with the proposal that intercultural mediation serves as a systemic response to facilitate migrant participation and coexistence in a space of reciprocity and responsibility sharing (Arvanitis, Kameas 2014). The authors pursue a normative agenda that they make explicit: mediation is presented as an instrument capable of favouring constructive convivence among persons, promoting mutual learning and negotiating differences, rather than imposing an alleged homogeneity or indulging in assimilatory attempts.

The analysis started from the following research question: how is intercultural mediation both regulated and practised at the European and Italian level? Yet, as the study unfolded and a puzzled framework began to emerge, the authors challenged this basis and reasoned backward at an earlier stage: rather than how, is intercultural mediation altogether regulated and practised at the European and Italian level? The text retraces the contours of the profession and its extent. It further deepens the observation of the practice by enquiring: how does intercultural mediation in migration-related contexts intersect with the accommodation of cultural diversity? The objective is to investigate the distance between law in books and law in action through the combination of an analysis of the regulative context enriched and spoken through qualitative data from interviews. Observing such a distance imposes to con-

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¹ See interviewees' identification at page 126.

sider every law and policy of interest not as imperatives causing social change but as elements with a solely “potential” influence on society (Cottino 2019: 21-23): with this in mind, the article combines intercultural mediation theories and instances from practitioners to reflect on normative inefficiencies and their consequences. What ultimately guides the text is the query as to whether cultural diversity is approached as the widespread norm that permeates society or rather treated as limited to circumscribable occasions exceptionally occurring in otherwise homogeneous interactions among people. The role of mediation and what the practice is (and is not) devoted to inevitably change depending on the answer to such a question.

In a recent publication, Busch (2023) defines as “second and new generation of researchers on intercultural mediation” those currently addressing this field of study, after the initial enthusiasm the matter triggered in Western societies in the 1980s (ibid: 2). Since then, paradigms have shifted in research and policy. In Italy, mediation has witnessed different phases: early experimentation, development of the educational dimension, dissemination and isolation, pursuance of autonomous actions towards the professionalisation of the role (Balsamo 2006; Luatti 2021). As of 2005, it entered a phase of pluralisation of operational environments and of institutional disinterest towards recognition; this was followed by the progressive decline of the practice, no longer present in the institutional agenda and allocation of resources (ibid). This article nestles in this very stage: it enters the gap left by a progressive disengagement with the role of intercultural mediation – not counterintuitive to the authors, when placed against the broader background of identitarianisms, increasingly restrictive and “defensive” migration policy measures and cuts in the welfare systems (Caponio, Donatiello 2017; Luatti 2021).

All elements compounded in mediation and their political dimensions, from culture to religion and so on, are seen as having to do with power, how this is designed and contested (Abu-Nimer, Seidel 2023). Working on an understanding that policy is a concept or cultural phenomenon rather than a given (Shore, Wright 1997) and that as such the system does not address “problems” that just exist out there but rather problematises situations (Bacchi, Goodwin 2016), the authors criticise migration management as being transnationally narrated as a security threat, an easily escalating conflictual situation, an irresolvable wealth distribution issue stained with humanitarianism. Along the same lines, cultural diversity management is too often similarly represented. Reification and homogenisation are ignored and a “dominance paradigm” translates difference into “conflictual, unhealthy, and unimprovable [...] relationships” (Abu-Nimer, Seidel 2023: 113). The hope is in a revived interest in the centrality of mediation and in a paradigm shift, which the new generation of researchers may be proof of. The auspice is that a renewed vision on mediation may whelm decision-making (-makers) too and the regulatory frameworks they produce.

This article thus introduces the experiences of intercultural mediators, here approached as social workers (Etzioni 1969; Fargion 2008), joining the debate on the recognition of the profession as a pivotal resource in current times. Indeed, the “post-multicultural era in which we are now entering” (Zapata-Barrero 2019: 347) requires

new concepts at the epistemological and policy-making levels: the text aims at offering a 'call to context', to reflect on "culture of diversity" (ibid) as a suitable option to respond to the limitations of alternative prevailing narratives. Through the process, the ideas of cultural diversity and of a culture of diversity were played with as a guiding compass in those exploratory attempts to answer the research questions. This contribution joins the discussion surrounding the gap produced by the observed governance direction taken, which progressively disincentivized the development of mediation with reverberations on scholarship and the reception system.

2. Structure, design, and methodology

The article begins by introducing the background of ideas behind accommodating cultural diversity and the role of intercultural mediation. It then offers an analysis of essential legal and policy tools regulating migration, cultural diversity management and mediation at the European level, indicative of an alleged common direction of states towards the pursuance of a European knowledge-based society. Instruments belong to the Council of Europe (CoE) and European Union (EU). Mediation at the Italian national level is then explored before offering concluding reflections.

Qualitative research methodology, and in particular the use of interviews, suited the collection of data on individuals' views and lived experiences, which the article considers to expand on the study of the practice and the variety of formal and informal 'professionalisation' paths. Samples of mediators' observations operating locally accompany the data retrieved from the reviewed state of the art and legal framework with a glimpse over practitioners' direct experiences. The idea is to present the system not only as framed in theory but to also offer a sense of how this is perceived by practitioners themselves, showing the discrepancies between a multi-layered and often contradicting normative design and social realities. The article attempts to address the relation between law in books and law in action by focusing: at a macro-level, on the regulatory framework of mediation, offering a descriptive documental analysis; at a micro-level, on the subjective, embodied experiences of the interviewees. The approach intends to stress the tension, the distance and yet the interconnection between norms and social practices in the specificity of the Italian context. The stylistic choices of the article attempt to visually reflect such an unresolved interdependence: the text combines the analysed regulative aspects of mediation with the accounts of those performing it, in an effort to create a narrative that accompanies the reader through an uninterrupted spectrum of theory and practice, with frequent reminders to how the latter drifts apart from the former and vice versa. Adhering to the cultural effort of interfering with the monological narrative of states' limited-migration carrying capacity, the contribution touches upon the European vision of an integrated system among neighbouring countries, the gaps in such a vision and offers input from the practice.

Data backing-up the policy and scholarship analysis was gathered in 2021/2022 through nine in-depth and semi-structured interviews with privileged interlocutors

who worked in different geographical and migratory contexts in Italy: the regions of Campania (in the South, "S"), Marche (Centre, "C"), Lombardia and Piemonte (North, "N"). This segment of the study adds value to the contribution through a brief exploration of the meanings attributed to the operational role of the intercultural mediator, observing professionals' daily challenges and structural and institutional limitations. Interlocutors were:

- four mediators: a man from Afghanistan (C3) and three women from Cameroon, Senegal and Nigeria (C4, C5, N2) working in Marche and Piemonte;
- the coordinator of the anti-trafficking service of a local association, a woman in Marche (C1);
- two anthropologists, both women, working in Campania (S1) and Marche and Emilia-Romagna (C6);
- one psychologist, a woman, with expertise in transcultural clinic in Lombardia (N1);
- the project manager of a reception centre, a woman in Marche (C2).

Participation was voluntary, anonymity and privacy issues addressed. Extracts of interviews hereby included were translated from Italian to English, keeping register as truthful to the original as possible.

3. Accommodating cultural diversity

Migration management as administered so far has shown its limits, highlighting lack of cohesion among European states, unable to act as a united bloc for the adoption of common policies to safeguard migrant persons' lives and ensure non-citizens' rights access and accessibility.

Multicultural societies [...] need to find ways of reconciling the legitimate demands of unity and diversity, achieving political unity without cultural uniformity, being inclusive without being assimilationist, cultivating among their citizens a common sense of belonging while respecting their legitimate cultural differences, and cherishing plural cultural identities without weakening the shared and precious identity of shared citizenship (Parekh 2000: 34).

In the context of accommodating and operationalising diversity, approaches vary depending on policy orientation. The article touches upon multiculturalism and interculturalism as strategies predominantly adopted to address cultural diversity and meet social and political ends within European societies. Given the variety of meanings behind the notions, the debate is open, often confused and confusing (Grillo 2009).

[...] whereas multiculturalism seeks out and seeks to protect difference, interculturalism seeks out and seeks to enhance commonalities, what is shared, principally by getting people to talk to each other and co-operate in common enterprises, with a view, for example, to tackling xenophobia (Grillo 2009: 94).

According to Zapata-Barrero (2017), recent decades have been dominated in Europe by the multicultural policy paradigm (MCP), the narrative of which essentially adheres

to equality and human rights principles with a normative conception of justice in the background. The author observes that the inclusion of immigrants into society by embracing differences and appreciating their unique cultural practices, faiths and languages summarises the MCP core; fundamental blocks of the theory are also wealth distribution and political engagement. Depending on the context, the term multiculturalism has different meanings: it can indicate the presence, within the same political, social and legal space, of a diversity of religious and cultural groups, or refer to a political response to such reality. In social and political sciences, it is intended as a more normatively oriented framework determining “the extent to which minority cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic groups deserve special acknowledgment of their differences within a dominant political culture and system” (Foblets, Vetter 2020: 83).

Liberal multiculturalism [...] was theorized for situations in which immigrants were seen as legally authorized, permanently settled, and presumptively loyal. In an age of securitization and super-diversity, these assumptions are put into question. Early theories of multiculturalism now seem at best incomplete, and at worst outdated, resting on assumptions and preconditions that may no longer apply (Kymlicka 2014: 244).

The model, historically influenced by neoliberalism and often associated with a liberal approach, emphasises the protection of the rights of minority cultures and individuals and it is seen as a response to assimilation in Western societies (Kymlicka 2016). The approach however appears inadequate to the challenges of cultural diversity (Kymlicka 2016) for it increases essentialism, reifies groups' differences and stereotypes and risks eliciting resistance in a majority that can feel threatened by minorities (Yogeeswaran *et al.* 2021).

The concept of interculturalism is on the other hand understood as a framework addressing issues ignored by multiculturalism, especially failure of cohesion, by emphasising negotiation, dialogue and interaction. In fact, a criticised aspect of multiculturalism is the proposal of creating distinct and separate enclaves, seen as parallel spheres of lives; contrary to that, stressing populations' fluidity is fundamental against essentialism, highlighting that the existence of enclaves is not unilaterally demanded by minorities but rather depends on majority's actions (Zapata-Barrero 2017; 2019). Interculturalism is often associated with a communitarian or dialogue-based approach, emphasising exchange between cultural groups (Zapata-Barrero 2019). Intuitively, the prefix 'inter' underlines the intent of policies to encourage interactions among individuals of different backgrounds (Catarci 2016; Portera 2011; Reyvon Allmen 2011): cultural identities are not static but rather constantly evolving and shaped by relations with others.

I eat with my hands, you eat with a fork. I say: “Oh, this person is using a fork? Why!” and the other: “But... this person is eating with their hands, gross!”. No one is wrong in their habits - it is just different (C3).

Interculturalism is often seen as a response to the challenges of social fragmentation and cultural isolation faced by minority cultures, providing a more positive and

dynamic framework for diversity and promoting more social cohesion than traditional multiculturalist models (Kymlicka 2010; Zapata-Barrero 2017).

The idea of pursuing interculturality within the European context has an institutional history. Wood and Landry (2008) theoretically articulated the notion of interculturalism and then influenced the CoE's intercultural city programme (ICC) introduced in 2008 during the Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Since then, an ICC index has been used throughout Europe and abroad to benchmark implementation. The programme self-portrays as supporting local authorities in the design and implementation of integration policies and declares to endorse the development of institutional capacity, participation and power-sharing. Italy participates in the ICC programme with about 30 cities belonging to the "Città del Dialogo" network established in 2010.

Engaging in dialogue between host societies, immigrants and people with migration background bridges cultures and languages and requires specific competences to mediate situations, especially in areas such as welfare provision, education, the health and judicial system. A strategy of mediation however does not imply neutrality nor absence of disagreement: to the contrary, mediation operates in a space of conflict between different economic, political, moral and cultural codes (Catarci 2016).

Oftentimes we are not aware that when you switch contexts, dynamics are altered too. We started from this and realised that mediation was not only an act of translation but the ability to explain from the other side, to communicate in order to be understood: as they say "these black people (*'sti neri*)", so others say "these white people (*'sti bianchi*)". It generalises, essentialises. Acknowledging this was important (C5).

4. A European vision

Different welfare regimes have produced varied regulative frames and different implementations to enforce fundamental rights for migrants, thereby bringing about different incorporation outcomes. [...] Despite the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect towards diversities being central to social work, the issue is how these principles are enforced in social workers' everyday (Genova, Barberis 2018: 909).

Within the regional context, intercultural mediation rests within a broader framework of reference defined by the CoE and the EU.

The CoE human rights system is established around the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the European Social Charter. The latter explicitly refers to the rights of migrant workers and their families to protection and assistance, including facilitating the teaching of the receiving state's language and the migrants' mother tongue (article 19). The article also reads that parties undertake steps against misleading propaganda relating to emigration and immigration.

Additional instruments addressed a shared cultural heritage: the 1954 European Cultural Convention, the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (specifying however that "regional and minority languages" do not include "languages of migrants") and the 1994 Framework Convention for the Protection of Na-

tional Minorities. The CoE furthermore issues guidelines and reference tools to support states in language education and migration governance, such as the 2020 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), indicating descriptors on mediation and plurilingual and pluricultural competence. 'Mediation' thereby describes a social and cultural process of creating conditions for communication and cooperation to face and defuse tensions (CEFR: 91). The mediator is an intermediary between interlocutors unable to understand each other. Byram (2009) observes that mediation in the CEFR is an element maintained from the concept of "intercultural speaker", someone who has knowledges (*savoirs*) of intercultural competence (see the work of Deardorff 2006, 2009).

At the EU level, the human rights framework is *inter alia* complemented by the Charter of Fundamental Rights, foreseeing the EU shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity (article 22). In 2006, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) issued an opinion on immigration and integration policies; it defined integration as a two-way process and not "a question of the integration of immigrants into the host society, but rather with the host society: both sides must integrate", noting this does not entail immigrants' cultural adjustment. Identified objectives to be pursued included assistance of intercultural mediators, professional training and cultural programmes recognising cultural diversity. The proposal also highlighted the need to promote "learning to coexist" at the local level by encouraging all to a process of enrichment and lifestyle adjustment.

I used to teach languages and mediate at times in tiny and isolated [school] realities that were not aware of anything... I remember this one time, several kids asked me if I tasted like chocolate! They were innocent questions - I felt softened in a way, it is something that resonated with me with a sense of tenderness (*tenerezza*) (C5).

Along the same lines, in 2007, the Committee of the Regions expressed its opinion on the situation of migrant women by referring to integration as "sharing and respecting the fundamental rights and duties of the individual, which are part of the European legal *acquis*". The opinion favoured targeted measures to capitalise on cross-cultural dialogue, pursuing linguistic and cultural mediation.

The instruments so far included were reported in a rather uncritical manner to offer room for the reader's own considerations and space for practitioners' direct experiences. Mediators better than anyone express the challenges the system presents, acknowledging the distance between governing instruments and the social reality they regulate.

The 2020/2021 public tender foresees about 60 hours/month of mediation for 50 beneficiaries. The 2015 tender [...] foresaw 200 hours for 50 beneficiaries. The reduction is insane... and still this was the result of long lasting negotiations: others have even less resources [...]. Yes, it is [about an hour of mediation per month per person] and there no longer is Italian language teaching nor psychological support (C2).

As a concluding reflection, while policies refer to social cohesion, mutual learning and respect for EU's *acquis* rights, the position of EU's and states' institutions on

migration management shall not be forgotten. Patrolling Europe's alleged geographical and cultural borders is a filter one cannot omit when reflecting on the regional vision of convivence and knowledge-based society that this contribution analyses.

5. The Italian context: migration and intercultural mediation

In Italy, institutions have engaged in late and inconsistent migration policy amidst securitarian concerns, humanitarian claims and functionalist perspectives (Barberis, Boccagni 2014; Genova, Barberis 2018). Migration and coexistence between host societies and persons on the move have been framed in terms of social conflicts; migrants' rights have been limited; migration, poverty and solidarity efforts have been subject to a process of criminalisation (*inter alia* Alterego - Fabbrica dei Diritti 2019).

In a context of differentiated migration flows and resident population with a migratory background, cultural sensitivity and competence are crucial to social work (Gordon, Gill 2013). What appears to be lacking at the national level is a consistent and adequate professionalisation framework.

The intercultural mediator is generally positioned between the social operator and the interpreter. The 2014 guidelines of the Italian Ministry of Interior (MINT) read mediators shall be confident with cultural and linguistic diversity. The role is to favour communication, dialogue and comprehension between foreigners and territorial administrations, decode stereotypes and facilitate the deconstruction of misunderstandings from both sides. A mediator eases the expression of migrants' needs while considering characteristics and resources of the welfare system (Catarci 2016).

The mediator is an intermediary between one culture and the other, a language and the other. [...] Everything you say... you have a responsibility. Maybe what they tell you may involve personal matters. It's important (C3).

The lexicon used to define the mediator is heterogeneous: terms are employed interchangeably (cultural, intercultural or transcultural mediator, interpreter, translator, etc.), blurring otherwise different competences.

If you want to be an interpreter or a cultural mediator... it is different. [...] A mediator doesn't just have to speak the languages, they have to explain to the people, help them, ask everything, even see all the documentation from the country of origin. Maybe many who come from remote villages, who don't even know what an identity card or date of birth is... they have to explain what it is (C3).

Although the Italian Constitution grants legislative powers to both state and regions, the Constitutional Court's jurisprudence recognised the state responsible for identifying professions and qualifying titles and regions responsible for aspects connected to more local realities (see *inter alia*: sentences 355 and 424/2005; 153 and 424/2006; 57 and 300/2007; 93/2008). This outlines a regulatory framework on professionalisation that does not depend on lower administrations' initiatives.

Against this background, in the late 1990s and early 2000s the professional role of the intercultural mediator emerged. It initially developed as a spontaneous bot-

tom-up practice involving associations, immigrants and volunteers in response to the need for assistance (Luatti 2021). While issued legal and policy instruments did not establish occupation-specific features, reference was made to the role of the mediator in the relationship between foreigners and the public administration in the justice, education and welfare systems (see *inter alia*: law 40/1998; legislative decree 286/1998; presidential decree 394/1999; law 328/2000; presidential decree 230/2000; law 7/2006). Lower administrations also issued early legislation foreseeing the employment of “experts and qualified immigrants” as mediators (*i.e.*, L.R. Marche 2/1998; Casadei, Franceschetti 2009).

Despite positive premises, the professionalisation of the mediator did not follow a linear path. Courses promoted by local entities are as heterogeneous as the level of competence of mediators working in different territories (Fabrizi, Ranieri, Serra 2009). Mediators often move throughout the country to compensate for the lack of resources and expertise in one area rather than another (C4, S1).

The first experimental mediation training took place in Milano (1990) and Torino (1992), prioritising mediators who had themselves migrated (Luatti 2021). Progress of initial years was followed by insufficient attention to training and assessments (Balsamo 2006) until a later revival of interest and development of courses (Luatti 2021). Overall, the latter have been promoted by NGOs, charities, social cooperatives, universities (Youmbi 2011), regional and local authorities. The level of education and training and the extent to which courses are beneficial to the actual practice vary, indicative of the lack of standardisation of career paths:

They called me to attend the training, if they didn't have enough people attending the class, it was not going to begin [...] Honestly, I don't think I have learnt anything [...] I could do several other things in other fields, like psychology [...] how to manage or defuse a situation with a person with a certain attitude (C5).

Because the trainer, their perspective [...] they tell you what's written in the book, the theory... afterwards you take such a theoretical teaching and have to move onto the field and put it into practice. But theory and practice are not the same. This is what's missing (C4).

Mediators are often not hired as part of institutional and civil society associations' work teams, with repercussions in terms of economic stability and engagement with the équipes; the latter often adopt condescending and paternalistic attitudes towards a role that may, at times, lack a formal or higher educational background and remains barely relied upon (C1, C4, C5, C6). It was also observed that for migrants without a stable resident permit, ties to a mediator position could be of “existential” importance, albeit professionally unfulfilling (C6). Mediators do not receive psychological support, despite it being a wearing job in which they are accountable for sensitive situations and asylum applications' processes (C1, C2, C4, C5, C6, N2). They furthermore often do not receive specific training in areas of intervention such as in the health or legal contexts (C2, C3, C5, C6):

A cultural mediator, also when they are just translating, is supposed to respect the privacy of their interlocutors and hold professional secrecy. [...] Let's talk about the

legal aspect of this... a person has to appear before the Territorial Commission, right? It's something very delicate and important. [...] And if you are not, the applicant's whole journey, all of the sacrifices made up to here, blow up [...] (C3).

In 2019/2020 the Ministry of Education (MIUR), with EU financial support (FAMI, 2014-2020 Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund), set up a European Intercultural Mediator advanced course. It offered professional training targeting intercultural mediation activities in the educational, socio-medical and legal spheres, with a minimum number of seats reserved for non-EU participants. It was an interdisciplinary course with teachings in law, history, sociology, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, cultural and religious mediation, conflict management and resolution, plus internship. Despite the initiative attempted to offer a standardised training path, courses have not been reconfirmed so far.

In terms of education, interviewees were of the opinion that holding a formal education or university degree in this discipline is not crucial. While some complained about the lack of an official register for qualified mediators (C1, C2), other positions emerged. C6 for instance argued it may be too early for the establishment of a register, as training are too heterogeneous and the initiative would not necessarily ensure harmonisation, while N1 focused instead on how crucial the mediator's role is:

Mediators are called by the [juvenile] court as well, they work for the quaestorship (*questura*), they work wherever they are required, including family counselling and social services [...]. There is no professional register but our mediators nonetheless have whole curricula and recognised competence; but above all they respond to the right of people to speak their own language (N1).

Selection criteria to be hired and practice as a mediator vary widely (Youmbi 2011). Linguistic competences are pivotal, especially intercultural communication (Tonioli 2016), but selection only on such a basis is unsatisfactory, especially in situations of heightened vulnerability and trafficking in persons cases (N2).

We make the request exclusively on the basis of language [...]. Only for some interviews, especially in psychiatric services, Prefecture, thus for sessions that are a bit more complex [...] we always call the same mediators. Then, we make a specific request, for we notice that mediators have different skills. There is someone who's unfit for a psychiatric interview, someone else is suitable (C2).

Interviewees acknowledged a nonfunctional system of informal networks and word of mouth-based recruiting involving civil society and institutions, including Territorial Commissions competent for asylum application auditions:

[...] He (Commission intermediary) said "get up, we have been looking for a Gambian-Mandinka speaking interpreter for a week. The Commission is almost blocked because of this, we can't go on, we don't have an interpreter. [...] We have the same problem in Bologna, Bari, Foggia, Lecce, Milan... get ready!". I said "listen, I'm scared of this job, psychologically I'm not ready..." [he said:] [...] "I'll buy you a train ticket right away [...]". And that's how I arrived at the Commission (C4).

The Health and Immigration Commission established a working group on health

professions and cultural mediation to develop standardisation strategies for facilities hosting foreigners and its 2007 final report highlighted the need to focus on mediators' professionalisation (Luatti 2021). In the same year, the *Associazione professionale italiana dei mediatori culturali* called for legislation recognising the profession and in 2008, the mediators' union was established within UGL General Labour Union (ibid). In 2009 a further legislative proposal (2138/2009) called on the government for an official register. The role of the intercultural mediator was also considered in the 2010 National Plan on integration that, amidst general securitarian tones, recognised the profession in relation to foreigners' access to job market, reception, social and health care services. Overall, during the first decade of 2000, scientific contributions shared good mediation practices in health and education from a dialogic and interactionist perspective (Baraldi 2012; Baraldi, Gavioli 2007), a theoretical approach yet to be comprehensively studied and empowered by workers and scholars (Luatti 2021). Further references to intercultural mediation are found: for the health sector, in the 158/2012 decree recognising the National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty as the public entity with transcultural mediation functions; for the educational sector, in the 2014 MIUR's guidelines on foreign students. In the same year, the MINT, co-financed by the EU, developed a report on the professional qualification of the mediator referring to decree 13/2013 on the promotion of lifelong learning and equality in recognition of one's cultural and professional heritage; it recommended authorities to agree on shared minimum qualification standards and define the role's professionalisation. A 2017 National Integration Plan on international protection referred to the involvement of mediators in integration processes. Between 2018 and 2020, additional legislative proposals were brought forward concerning mediation and its professionalisation (C.464/2018; C.555/2018; C.2397/2020). As for a 2019 decree, "linguistic-cultural mediation" was one of the mandatory minimum services offered within the reception system.

While before we had a majority of asylum seekers from Nigeria, so almost everyone could understand each other with English anyway, now there is really a need for mediation. This obviously clashes a bit with the national policy trend, which instead has significantly reduced mediation hours. On this, however, the cooperative is not very strict, so we call [the mediator] whenever needed (C2).

Recently, the professionalisation of the intercultural mediator has attracted less interest (Luatti 2021).

The absence of professionals in the formalisation of migrant's asylum applications was moreover denounced at the most basic level: while the MINT's 2020 Practical Guide for asylum seekers foresees the right to be assisted by an interpreter when filling out the written asylum request, this is not always enforced (Meltingpot Europa 2022). Such gap was witnessed by the interviewees too: in the case of S1, responsible in 2016-18 for the mediation services in a reception centre hosting 870 asylum seekers in Campania, workers could not speak any vehicular language but were expected to fill in the relevant documentation due to the absence of other professionals who could assist migrants.

[...] we managed to involve various staff, including migrants themselves who became our intercultural mediators [...]. It was very complicated to manage things with the social workers of the centre because the operators, migrants included [...], are employed without qualifications, and qualifications are extremely necessary. At that time, former gas stations, farmers, bricklayers (without diminishing their professions) were employed [as operators] in the CAS [emergency reception centre] (S1).

Discrepancies exist between international, national policies and daily practices but “in order to respond to rights, it is necessary to have qualified practitioners” (C6) who benefit from professional recognition, irrespective of formal or informal training paths. Foreigners’ enjoyment of rights and their access to state-guaranteed services often depend on effective mediation. As reported by ASGI (Bove, Romano 2021), one of the main obstacles for foreigners in accessing health care services is the language barrier. Migrants’ descendants, sharing the language of the medical operators but not the same cultural heritage may also encounter difficulties (Zorzetto 2016).

[...] in reality similar situations [a trained mediator guaranteed by the health care service] are very rare and therefore maybe you find a pregnant woman talking to the gynaecologist [...] the social operator improvises themselves as a mediator - obviously communicating with a vehicular language that is not suitable to address the case in depth (C6).

Luatti (2021) sees the revival of intercultural mediation as needing a wider boost, depending on the political will to invest in it. Social and territorial cohesion should be central in the political agenda, canvassed in a broader vision intercepting post-pandemic economic resources in combination with bottom-up proposals made by mediators entitled to speak for the future of their profession (ibid). Too many horrors exist in the system controlling migration and flaws in the practice of mediation, highlighting the distance between governing instruments and people’s lives.

6. Concluding reflections

[...] when we use culture theoretically situated in anthropology, then, the notion of cultural mediator gives prominence and weight to cultural and symbolic processes of everyday interaction. But, we should always bear in mind, that all this rich symbolic work is situated in a broader political and formal framework. At the same time, this framework (e.g., legal framework) regulates cultural mediation as a clear defined task, or profession (Papageorgiou 2014: 29).

In the past decades, the European region has witnessed the exacerbations of frictions and conflicts in a multi-level system showing reluctance to move as a cohesive and rights-abiding community; addressing migration, the EU fortified behind a narrative of securitisation and emergency.

The regional framework analysed on the other hand revealed to stand on an alleged common intention to build a knowledge-based society. Instruments propose an *acquis* of an evolving character foreseeing respect for individuals, in the fulfilment of institutions’ obligations, and a purported vision of substantial equality. But equal-

ity for whom? Such proclaimed rights-oriented content shall be filtered through the lenses of current migration and diversity management policies. What is proposed by institutions as “our European way of life” embraces marginalisation, border externalisation and militarisation as “values” for citizens’ “protection”². Amidst such a climate, euroscepticism may either blend with nationalisms feeding on racism and xenophobia or emerge as a disillusioned consequence of the direction taken by the EU, either way dismantling a vision of an integrated system that is not only an economic union.

While ‘newcomers’ in Italy are portrayed as a threat, persons and families permanently residing in host communities experience the yoke of discriminatory and incoherent policies hindering social cohesion. Decades into migration being at the centre of the public debate, April 2023 saw for instance the Italian government declaring a state of emergency in light of the umpteenth ‘exceptional’ arrival of people via the Mediterranean. The state remains unable to pass legislation on citizenship for millions born on Italian soil from foreign parents or immigrated at a young age. Obstacles on residency and visas undercut foreigners’ possibility to become part of the country’s social fabric, have space for recognition and political engagement.

Margins can be understood as physical borders. Borders, nations, and languages delineate communities. I had been studying the crosslinguistic needs that result from migratory movements. Also, margins can evoke the imaginary lines that define privileged and underprivileged groups within a given country. In the self-recognition as a member of an underprivileged group, there is potential for political action [...] (Garcia-Beyaert 2021: 1).

Despite the existence of a few initiatives to develop a unified framework for the mediators’ professionalisation, the landscape remains fragmented and affected by public disengagement. Mediation remains a matter of informal networks and *ad hoc* recruitments to compensate for the lack of professionals with the necessary skills and recognition. Albeit identified by scholarship as an essential element for cohesion and promotion of a culture of diversity, mediation is kept a scattered, secondary competence and service.

In a committed diverse knowledge-based society, those who bridge cultural and linguistic divides would be regarded as fundamental to safe communities and ensured adequate resources. The need for intercultural mediation has always been present in society and the work of mediators does not concern only migrants but the collectiveness as a whole (Catarci 2016).

Does, in light of such policy choices, a system of this sort resonate with a true(r) intercultural paradigm? A framework that relegates cultural diversity to the margins and implements actions that do not recognise the pervasiveness of such an element in reality, negating its widespread manifestation and reducing it to an exception, remains discriminatory, untenable and inefficient (or efficient for a few only). The widespread use of the term ‘integration’ and *integrazione* in policy documents at the re-

²To consult the European Commission priorities, see: European Commission (n.d.), *Promoting our European way of life. Protecting our citizens and our values*. Retrieved from: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-of-life_en.

gional and national level, in combination with predominant securitarian tones, may be one more indicative sign of the mismatch between the theoretical frameworks allegedly endorsed and the actual operationalisation of migration and convivence management.

Mediation does not only concern situations of alleged emergency but should be performed as the norm: not recognising this, hinders the possibility to rethink and advance equal access to the welfare system (Catarci 2016).

Papageorgiou (2014) stresses that “political discourses of interculturalism are often normative and simplistic, stressing values like tolerance, acceptance, dialogue or aiming at principles such as cohesion and integration” but may not consider the “problems” that indeed occur in daily interactions (2014: 37). The asymmetrical relationships produced by current migration governance create and reinforce inequalities, undermining the political goals of intercultural practice. In this sense, intercultural mediation stresses the challenges of connecting policy makers’ choices with the experiences of people working with migrants, managing “difference” and coming to terms with it through on-the-ground struggles (DeMaria Harney 2020).

As a new generation of researchers on intercultural mediation emerges (Bush 2023), future interdisciplinary research will be required in different sociocultural settings to assess and develop the effectiveness of intercultural mediation and the operationalisation of learned abilities at the cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels. Every root cause of complex social conflicts where power is expressed will not be addressed by mediation (Abu-Nimer, Seidel 2023) but recognising the centrality of the practice should be a prerogative for a chance to influence policy makers’ strategies.

What is the future for intercultural mediation? Interculturalism and intercultural practices do not function in a vacuum but are intertwined with hospitality and convivence management and their assumptions, encumbered now by maintaining a veneer of security and control over interpersonal dynamics (DeMaria Harney 2020). Good opportunities should instead be seized: the hope is that by identifying (mal) functions of the institutions, a movement of readjustment of policy priorities may set forth, giving space to a vision of appreciation of cultural diversity and safe mutual learning. As long as inequality is ingrained in the receiving system’s fundamental premises, containing and controlling the spatio-temporal “welcome” of foreigners and exercising sovereignty by keeping alterity in abeyance, prospects are not bright.

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