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Kristina Gustafsson ^{1,*} and Mette Rudvin ²

¹The Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Yrjö-Koskinens gata 3, 00170 Helsinki, Finland

²Departmento Culture e Società, University of Palermo, Piazza Marina 61, 90133 Palermo, Italy

*Corresponding author. The Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Yrjö-Koskinens gata 3, 00170 Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: kristina.gustafsson@helsinki.fi

Abstract

This article analyses intercultural mediation in encounters between social workers and migrants arriving from outside Europe to Sicily. The material derive from the Global ANSWER (H2020-MASCA-RISE) project and is drawn from individual interviews with cultural mediators, observations of mediation in practice and documentation from a workshop and a training course for cultural mediators. Research shows an increasing demand for mediation services in social work settings but also highlights numerous associated risks. By using a theoretical framework developed in Translation and Interpreting Studies the article proposes a model of four different positions of cultural mediation: *interpreting*, *guiding*, *brokering* and *mediation*. The ‘interpreter’ position is most adequate in *social work with decision making*, the ‘guiding’ position in *preventive social work*, the ‘broker’ position where the mediator acts on a freelance basis and ‘mediation’ position in *treatment and rehabilitating* social work. Regardless of the position, cultural mediation is most successful when there are clear rules between mediator and the organization/service provider. Although Italy presents a unique case, the results are of interest in other European countries where cultural mediation services are being developed to complement existing interpreting services and to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps between migrants and social workers.

Keywords: cultural mediation; brokering; guiding; interpreting; mediation; migration; social work.

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Introduction

How can culture and language diversity be handled in social work with migration? This is a core question with many answers depending on who, where and when the question is raised. [Harrison \(2006, 2007\)](#) and [Hall and Valdiviezo \(2020\)](#) have convincingly argued that social work is ‘language work’ that depends on many forms of communication. This is significant in numerous linguistic settings, but it is particularly significant in settings marked by global migration ([Gustafsson et al. 2023b](#)). In many countries the solution to bridging the language gap has been to develop institutionalized professional interpreting services, called ‘community interpreting’ or ‘public service interpreting’ ([Ozolins 2000](#)). However, in this context, Italy stands out as an exception. Due to underdeveloped public interpreting services they have adopted instead the role of language-and/or intercultural mediation as the standard solution when social workers communicate with and encounter people with whom they do not share a common language. While the role of interpreting is well-defined in both research and practice in the international literature, the role of cultural mediation is often ‘blurred’, fragmented, marginalized and based on temporary solutions ([Avolio, Cavallari, and Cecchini 2023](#)).

The aim of this paper is to learn more about how cultural mediation works in practice when social workers encounter migrants with whom they do not share a common language. This is done from the perspective of cultural mediators who are our main target group and research participants. The setting is social work with refugees and migrants arriving from outside Europe to Sicily, Italy. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted within the research program Global ANSWER (an H2020-MASCA-RISE program). The analysis is guided by a theoretical framework developed based on how interpreting and mediation has been conceptualized and understood within the field of Translation and Interpreting Studies, (hereafter TIS) (see e.g. [Hale 2007](#)). The main research questions are:

- How do cultural mediators describe and define the act of cultural mediation in social work settings in Italy?
- What are the challenges, shortcomings and ethical dilemmas that emerge from cultural mediation in social work settings depending on how the mediators perceive and define the role of mediation?

The topic of this article relates to an ongoing international debate about language and cultural mediation in social work and other welfare settings around the world ([Chand 2005](#); [Pokorn and Južnič 2020](#)). From a social work perspective, cultural mediation is an under-researched area; much could be learned about multilingualism, interpreting and language brokering in a broader context by exploring this issue ([Genova and Barberis](#)

2019). The issue is important also because there is an expanding interest in developing cultural mediation services as a complement to existing interpreting services in social work settings in many countries in other parts of Europe (Chand 2005; Gruber 2017; Akerö-Kasongo and van der Weele 2023).

Background for interpreting and cultural mediation

In the 1990s, a new sub discipline in TIS emerged, namely Community Interpreting (hereafter CI), also commonly labelled as Public Service Interpreting (hereafter PSI). PSI refers to interpreting for a public or private entity that provides services for a person who is not comfortable or proficient in speaking the host language. PSI developed as a discipline and as a profession partly in response to a concrete need for language services and interpreters because of the increasing post-war migration across the world (Ozolins 2000).

Some countries, of which Canada, Australia and Sweden were forefront exemplary figures, took an early and pragmatic stand on the need for interpreting services. Observing the increasing numbers of migrants who did not speak the host language, they realized that if a public institution could not understand and make themselves understood vis-à-vis the client, they would hamper the relevant procedures as well as endanger the life and well-being of the foreign-language speaker. To ensure the smooth running of services, these countries began to organize training opportunities for PSI followed by accreditation, continuous education courses, and rigorous recruitment protocols. Central to this progress is the development of professional ethical principles for interpreting. The three cardinal ethical principles of PSI are: accuracy, confidentiality and impartiality (Gustafsson, Norström, and Fioretos 2013; Rudvin 2018).

Compared to the historical trajectory of PSI, the situation developed differently in Italy. With its lack of organization, infrastructure, financial resources, employment opportunities and political willpower, Italy had no concrete, organized response to the need for language services from the public services. As a result, it was left up to the voluntary third sector to pick up the pieces and provide assistance and services where it was needed. This led to the creation of a bond with the voluntary sector and language services for migrants, and that bond was seen and internalized as an ‘assistance-based’ function—i.e. assisting the migrant to access public services and to integrate into the community. It was articulated as ‘mediation’ between the migrant and the host community and facilitating a reciprocal understanding of each other’s cultures. Rather than being a practical, pragmatic, non-ideological solution to a concrete needs-based problem (lack of shared language), it took on a much broader and more flexible mandate for the facilitator (interpreter, mediator) and was closely

connected to the desire to assist the migrant (Rudvin 2002; Avolio, Cavallari, and Cecchini 2023).

The terminology used in Italy reflected the development of the practice of PSI and instead of using the term ‘interpreting’ or ‘translating’, the word ‘mediation’ was used, reflecting the above-mentioned desire to be of assistance to the migrant and to be a communication facilitator, a bridge between the two cultures who would help each person understand the other party and help reach a stated objective, be it a medical diagnosis, a written police report, a job application or explaining to parents the expectations for their child at school (Rudvin and Spinzi 2014). In this paper we use the term ‘mediation’ and the practice of intercultural mediation (hereafter ICM) when we refer to the Italian context, given the caveats that have been laid out here—i.e. the differences between interpreting and mediation.

Previous research on mediation and interpreting in social work

In this section we have reviewed research in social work that deals with the topic of bridging culture and language gaps in encounters when social workers and clients do not share a common language. The review is organized in three parts: research on social work and language issues in a broad perspective; research on ICM and social work in Italy, and research on ICM in social work settings in a wider international context.

Firstly, returning to the opening question, how can culture and language diversity be handled in social work with migration? The influential articles written by Harrison (2006, 2007) and Hall and Valdiviezo (2020) argue that the language aspect is forgotten or taken for granted in social work practice and therefore also under-researched. Furthermore, as discussed by Larjanko *et al.* (2026), based on a scoping review, *when* language diversity in social work settings is researched and taken into consideration in practice, it is often framed as a problem causing barriers and hindering relational work and trust-building between social workers and clients. This approach, where language diversity is perceived as a problem, reproduces mindsets that take for granted that monolingual communication is always superior to multilingual communication (Gustafsson *et al.* 2023b). This in turn, might affect the way that social work is carried out, with the risk of discrimination and exclusion of non-majority speaking people (Buzungu 2023; Larjanko *et al.* 2026). How language diversity and the use of interpreting and mediation might cause disadvantages for the clients in social work settings have been researched over the years by for example Chand (2005), Kriz and Skivenes (2010), Westlake and Jones (2018), Pollock (2023) and Gustafsson *et al.* (2023a). These studies all problematize the fact that non-majority language speaking clients’ rights to equal services as well as trust-building encounters is compromised both

by the lack of skills in using interpreters among social workers and the lack of sufficient competence among interpreters. Taken together these studies show that social workers tend to think about interpreting and language mediation services as a burden rather than asset.

Secondly, to learn more about what competences a social worker can expect from a cultural mediator, [Avolio, Cavallari, and Cecchini \(2023\)](#) present a comprehensive overview of current visions and guidelines for ICM in Italy and Europe. Their goal is to understand what kind of profession it is expected to be, and the legal/bureaucratic criteria that regulate it. [Avolio, Cavallari, and Cecchini \(2023: 123\)](#) observe that the mediators often have a normative agenda where mediation is expected to induce 'constructive convivence among persons, promoting mutual learning and negotiating differences rather than imposing an alleged homogeneity or indulging in assimilatory attempts'. Rather than focusing on language, cultural diversity is described as the driving force for developing mediation, highlighting *culture* as the main competence. In another study, [Catarki \(2016: 137\)](#) describes that having cultural competences is foremost defined as having appropriate knowledge of the Italian socio-cultural context and the background of immigrants and to a lesser extent knowledge of Italian language and the language of the immigrant. This definition of cultural competence correlates better with the more intervening and assistance-focused position of ICM, than that of a professional PSI, described in the background section. In line with this emphasis on the intervening role of ICM, [Genova and Barberis \(2019, 917\)](#) argue, based on a qualitative study among social workers and cultural mediators in Italy, that to be efficient there must be:

/—/ room for negotiating protocols, tasks, and coordinated partnerships as well as room for equal and fair negotiation, by means of which intercultural mediators can express their knowledge and be properly respected as partners.

Hence, Genova and Barberis as well as [Gerbino \(2023\)](#) recommended more and clearly defined interprofessional collaboration between social workers and mediators.

Thirdly, the lack of established infrastructure for ICM services and the lack of mutual respect between stakeholders, social workers and mediators in Italy, is a picture that resonates very much with what we have found about cultural mediation when it is practiced in other parts of Europe and particularly in the Nordic countries ([Chand 2005](#); [Abrahamsson and Agevall 2010](#); [Gruber 2017](#); [Akerö-Kasongo and van der Wee 2023](#)). In line with [Genova and Barberis' \(2019\)](#) argument above, this literature identifies several problems with the use of ICM due to the para-professional position. One problem is that mediators might conduct work that they are not formally trained for, and they have no ethical codes to follow. Their working situation is precarious due to a lack of

long-term employment and low salaries. Cultural mediators are often exposed to discrimination in ethnified and racialized labour markets (Chand 2005; Abrahamsson and Agevall 2010; Gruber 2017). Another problem is that when cultural mediators conduct tasks that trained professionals are supposed to do, the legal security and the formal responsibility of the professional service providers is undermined.

In sum, the reviewed literature shows how there is on the one hand a demand for more ICM services in social work settings and on the other hand research shows that there are numerous risks and shortcomings when employing cultural mediation. The most apparent problems are the lack of rules, ethical guidelines, training and accreditation, and the para-professional position. By using a theoretical framework developed in TIS, our ambition is to contribute with a model that might be helpful for overcoming these problems in social work settings.

Methods, material and theory

The empirical material for this article was collected within the Horizon 2020 program ‘Global Answer’ that focuses on social work with human mobility. A core activity in the program is exchange between researchers and social workers in northern and southern Europe. The goal is to promote learning and exchange good practice. Cultural mediation was one of the aspects we wanted to learn more about during two months of ethnographic fieldwork in Palermo, Sicily 2023–2024, including individual interviewing and ethnographic observations that were combined with a workshop for participants with experience and expertise in cultural mediation.

The individual interviews ($n = 15$ interviews with 6 mediators) included three women and three men, all with different languages, ages, backgrounds and working situations. Based on ethnographic interviewing and narrative methods (Davies 2008; Riessman 2008) we had prepared overarching questions and topics:

Tell us about your background

How did you become a cultural mediator?

Describe the act of mediation for us as concretely as

Tell us about the settings you work in, what challenges and shortcomings do you perceive when it comes to training and working conditions?

These topics gave room for the participants to give detailed descriptions and to explore the act of mediation in dialogue with the interviewers (the authors). All interviews were conducted in English, and sometimes in combination with Italian, and recorded as well as documented by taking notes.

The ethnographic observations ($n=24$ observations at 8 organizations) were designed to meet cultural mediators in context and included visits and documented conversations at social organizations working with: Psychotherapy and social and health-care activities; Employment guidance in the labour market; Internships and work training; Legal advice and guiding in migration cases; and a temporary shelter for asylum seekers. All the organizations conduct social work and ICM is recognized as a necessity for achieving the organization's social and health-care goals. All observations were documented by taking notes.

The two-day workshop included a Roundtable discussion where researchers ($n=4$), cultural mediators ($n=8$) and social workers ($n=5$)—in total 19 participants—discussed ICM in theory and practice as well as current challenges and working conditions. The workshop also included a training course for mediators. A total of twelve cultural mediators (not the same as in the Roundtable) participated in lectures on ethics, digital tools, personal security and storytelling where the participants exchanged stories from their work as mediators. The Roundtable and training course were documented by taking notes.

The research is ethically approved within the framework of Global Answer (WP 1 Ethical requirements) and by the National Ethical Research Agency in Sweden (Dnr 2023-05184-01). To safeguard the letter and spirit of informed consent and confidentiality, we have not revealed the names of the participating organizations nor the nationalities, languages or other identifiers of the cultural mediators in this section. In the presentation of the results below we have adopted an ethnographic style to give the reader an understanding of the circumstances and sites where mediation takes place in social work with migration in Sicily. To protect the integrity of the mediators who sometimes worked in highly precarious conditions and problematic areas, all the mediators presented in the text have been given fictitious names. The first letter in their name explains whether the person took part in the training and storytelling (S), individual interviews (I) or in observations at the different organization (O). Accordingly, details in their narratives are changed to make sure that they cannot be identified. Taken together, these ethical precautions might impact the analysis (Davies 2008), but because the aim of the study is to understand different acts of ICM, the social work setting is of greater importance than the abovementioned details.

We employed thematic analysis to interpret the collected material (Riessman 2008). Examples of themes are: acts of describing cultural features for the social worker after the meeting or acts of intervening in the discussion between the social worker and client. These acts were organized by operatizing a theoretical framework on interpreting and mediation developed with TIS.

From a theoretical perspective on 'interpreting' and 'mediation', Hale (2007) suggests that the concepts 'mediated interaction' and 'directly

interpreted interaction' are two main approaches. In directly interpreted interaction, the interpreter interprets every turn, and public service providers and clients address each other through the interpreter. In mediated interaction, the interpreter also becomes a direct conversation partner, for example by explaining things to the public service provider or client. In addition, Pokorn and Južnič (2020) have theorized on the ethical positioning of the two profiles. Their main result is that while the codes of ethics of interpreters tend to emphasize impartiality, the documents defining the emerging profile of intercultural mediators in for example Italy position advocacy.

To theorize these ethical positions we use the dichotomy *impartiality* and *partiality*, although we are mindful that it is a complicated dichotomy. We use the dichotomy in a pragmatic sense. Clearly, both the PSI and the ICM are always involved and actively participate when they interpret and mediate in encounters, but the two concepts give us a possibility to create a scale of different sorts of involvement. Hence, impartiality/partiality is used in the analysis to grade different types of involvement, without being biased and without any connotations of ranking—which is better or worse—just to make visible that different positions work in different contexts. For the purposes of this analysis impartiality refers to a lower grade on the scale of being actively involved (see the Four square model below) and not taking the side of either party, while partiality refers to being more personally involved and taking one or both other parties' side, which we see as a form of advocacy.

Furthermore, as discussed above, although it is a tricky endeavour to separate language from culture, not to mention the problem of defining culture (Gustafsson, Norström, and Åberg 2022), the division between interpreting and mediation includes a different emphasis, where the former focus is on language and the latter on culture (Avolio, Cavallari, and Cecchini 2023).

Based on these differences between 'interpreting' and 'mediation' found in the international literature on TIS, we have formulated a theoretical framework where the act of 'interpreting' is built on the *directly interpreted interaction*, *language mediation* and *impartiality*, while the act of 'mediation' is built on *mediated interaction*, *cultural mediation* and *partiality*. Different acts of ICM are identified in the analysed empirical material and categorized in relation to two scales. One scale goes between partiality and impartiality and the other scale between language and culture. Based on these two scales we have constructed a Four-square model that illustrates four different positions of ICM: interpreting, guiding, brokering and mediation. A similar model has been formulated by Leanza (2005) in medical contexts and has proved useful for further development of when and how to use mediation in medical encounters. These four-square positions are of course abstractions showing ideal types (Asplund 1968). Nevertheless, all positions are exemplified and discussed based on individual participants' experiences, meaning that some participants' experiences

are given more room in the text than others and presented in ethnographic narratives, as discussed above.

Finally, we employ this framework to analyse and understand different acts of ICM in social work settings in Sicily. It is important however to keep in mind that these concepts, the English word ‘interpreter’ (covering a broad range of interpreting activities) does not fully overlap with the Italian word ‘mediatore (inter)culturale’ but it is roughly synonymous with ‘mediatore linguistico’ where the emphasis is more on language than culture. The boundaries are somewhat blurred, and when using both English and Italian terminology it becomes even more problematic (see [Rudvin and Spinzi 2014](#) for further discussion on the concepts).

Result

Different positions for cultural mediation

The Four-square model provides an overview of the typical positions we defined based on the analysis of the collected material ([Table 1](#)). In the following sections these positions are discussed and filled with content based on ethnographic narratives answering the research questions: How do cultural mediators describe and define the act of cultural mediation in social work settings in Italy? And: What are the challenges, shortcomings and ethical dilemmas that emerge from cultural mediation in social work settings depending on how the mediators perceive and define the role of mediation?

Interpreting

The first position ‘interpreting’ is exemplified with the stories of three Italian mediators, Irene, Ilaria and Iacopo. Irene explained that early on in life she had a passion for learning languages. For several years she studied Arabic, French and English at the university and this took her to a position as a translator (working with written material) in another part of Italy for several years. For different reasons she moved back to Sicily and took a job as a social worker in a group residence for unaccompanied minors. In her everyday work she finds her language skills beneficial since she can communicate in different languages with the minors. Yet, her skills are also used for interpreting, for example at the Tribunal for

Table 1. Four-square model 1. Four positions for cultural mediation.

Scales from—to	Language	Culture
Impartiality	Interpreting	Guiding
Partiality	Brokering	Mediation

Minors (Tribunale per Minorenni). Irene describes how accompanying the minor is one of her duties as a social worker. There is rarely any formal interpreting service booked for these encounters, so she does the interpreting as well. During these encounters she is solely responsible for translating everything that is said. Following the ethical guidelines for legal interpreting—accuracy, impartiality and confidentiality—she does not intervene, add or exclude anything.

Ilaria is younger than Irene but has a similar background with a strong desire to learn languages. Being a top student at the university, she dedicated herself to humanitarian work with refugees and migrants crossing the sea. For the last few years, she has regularly boarded a ship as a volunteer, responsible for interpreting ('mediatore linguistico') for the social workers and medical crew when they communicate with people they have rescued. We ask her about how she copes, and she explains that she is part of the team at sea, but she is also 'like a bridge' between rescued people and the medical team and social workers. Her assignment is to interpret, in the strict sense of the word as opposed to 'mediate', but she is also always involved in debriefing and supervision together with the other volunteers, social workers and medical staff. She finds her contribution to be a small but important piece in a larger scheme. Ilaria is strict about her role as an interpreter, following the above described ethical principles, but admits that it happens that she needs to intervene since there are many emergencies and she cannot allow mistakes to occur that she could have prevented based on her linguistic skills. An example could be if a refugee has a disease that the social workers or medical staff do not acknowledge, but that Ilaria learns about. In that case, she would tell them about it.

Iacopo is also a well-educated person with a passion for languages, different cultures and religions and that was his main reason for starting to work as a cultural mediator. He is troubled by all sorts of prejudices and stereotypes that migrants are met with, and he wants to help people who live in poverty and difficult situations. He has been trained as mediator by a local organization specialized in charity for the Roma people. As with Irene and Ilaria, we discuss the fine line between 'interpreting' and 'mediation' and when to intervene. He explains that although he knows the language, he can never know what is really happening or what the other participants really mean. Therefore, Iacopo argues that a mediator's main skill is to listen and then give people a chance to talk with each other even if they do not share the same language(s).

Irene, Ilaria and Iacopo all share some common features. Italian is their first language, they have academic merits, and they work for a specific organization. Ilaria and Iacopo have a direct role in their organizations and professional teams, being responsible for translation and following the practice of 'directly interpreted' interaction (Hale 2007). In the assignments that they were describing to us, there was no expectation to

intervene in other ways (Pokorn and Južnič 2020) although they may have been expected to be more interventionist and mediate in other assignments. Thus, there are defined structures for interprofessional collaboration as suggested by Genova and Barberis (2019), but these structures are there to separate mediation from social work.

Regarding the theoretical understanding of interpreting in relation to mediation, the three interviewees illustrate a high level of awareness of their own assignment in contrast to the assignment of other professionals, in their cases lawyers, medical staff and social workers. They all explain that their role as cultural mediators is to strive for impartiality and not to intervene more than necessary and only if it seems like mistakes are being made. However, at the same time, they strictly distinguish between interpreters and cultural mediators and describe themselves as the latter; their stories clearly show that they are assistance-focused in a way that PSI are not expected to be (see the background above).

The main difference between interpreting and mediation at this level is the lack of clear deontological and operative boundaries, i.e. principles for how and when the mediator can intervene. As such, the mediators presented in this section are self-regulating in that they respect the PSI code of ethics by using the first-person mode, being impartial, interpreting everything that is said and respecting confidentiality. Based on this we can conclude that their position has a high level of impartiality and that they are primarily involved in interpreting language rather than cultural aspects, although these can never be fully separated (Hale 2007; Gustafsson, Norström, and Fioretos 2013). Their academic relation to language could be understood as a factor that strengthens this position.

Guiding

The next position is guiding. This was something that almost all mediators were involved in occasionally. Oliver, however, had guiding as his main task as a cultural mediator. Oliver came to Sicily as an unaccompanied minor in 2015 and was currently struggling with finishing university studies. With his background in a large African country where English is the majority language but with many minority languages, Oliver, being proficient in Italian, quickly became a valuable resource for interpreting and mediation for his compatriots arriving in Sicily. It is his main source of income. We met Oliver at an organization working with internships and employment where he was employed as a cultural mediator.

Once a week the organization had an open-access desk ('Sportello') at a small library in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of Palermo where many immigrants live. The idea was to increase access to adequate information and support for seeking employment for those living in this area. A crucial part of the work at the desk was to explain what documents were needed and how to get them. Much time was spent on providing

information about different forms and about how to acquire a residence permit, bank account, identity card and employment with a proper contract. Oliver also gave basic advice about how to send an email, make passwords or safeguard important documents for future employment. If a person did not know how to send an email, Oliver showed them how to do it, encouraging them to do the actual sending themselves. Hence, his main task as a cultural mediator is not to interpret different languages but to 'mediate' the system and bureaucracy in Italy and Sicily and make it understandable and tangible for the migrant who seeks support.

Although all participants in this study had examples about how they took responsibility for giving advice to migrants and acted as councillors or guides in particular situations, for example at the hospital by giving instructions about how to find the pharmacy, Oliver is the only one of our participants who had this role uniquely and defined so clearly by the organization he worked for. Relating this to the Four-square model, he conducts directly interpreted interaction but in a context where the Italian society is one party and the migrant the other. It is the cultural part of mediation that is in focus, culture in the sense of institutional bureaucracy, framed in terms of the social and administrative culture of the receiving country rather than knowledge about those who arrive from other countries (Catarci 2016). Yet, his language skills are crucial for reaching the migrants and so is perhaps also his own migration experiences (Musser-Granski and Carrillo 1997; Gruber 2017). This puts Oliver in a position where he focuses on bureaucratic-cultural aspects combined with a high level of impartiality since the work is conducted independently. He does not represent an authority, and he is not involved in the clients' cases. This conclusion does not mean that he does not act in other ways at other occasions sharing his own experiences and giving personal advice.

Brokering

In this section, the position of brokering is exemplified based on two stories that were told and discussed during the storytelling exercise in the training course. These stories formed the basis for discussions and reflections on working conditions and ethical dilemmas in cultural mediation. One of the mediators, Stella, told a story about how people at the Red Cross had asked her to help them identify a man who lived on the street in a remote area of Palermo. The people at the Red Cross thought that the man was from either Russia or Ukraine and, based on her competences in languages and in cultural aspects, she was expected to conduct an independent evaluation of him. She was also expected to engage with him, and it was here her ethical considerations emerged. The people from the Red Cross drove her to the street where the man was, but then she was left on her own to interact with him. Once they had made contact, she found herself in a situation where both the Red Cross and the man treated her as if she were the man's advocate (cf.

[Pokorn and Južnič 2020](#)). Another problem was that she was not reimbursed for her work; Stella eventually refused to proceed but found herself feeling sorry for the man but also feeling disloyal towards the humanitarian work of the Red Cross.

Another mediator, Sara, described a different situation illustrating other sorts of blurred roles and boundaries. She had been involved as a cultural mediator in a family case at the public social services. It was a case of domestic violence and the woman, who had been abused by her husband, was protected by the social services in a women's shelter managed by an NGO. Sara mediated at the shelter, but she was also employed to conduct linguistic mediation (PSI) by the public social services. Thus, she could follow the process involving the couple and their children from different perspectives as a witness of what happened at the shelter as well as in the social services. At one point she got frustrated by having all this information about the family without being able to share it. Based on her prior knowledge, she felt that the social workers were pushing for a family reunion too fast. Sara's dilemma was that as a linguistic mediator she had quite a lot of freedom to intervene, but not in the way she wanted, namely, to influence the way the social work was conducted. This was not accepted by the social services who expected her to act exclusively as a linguistic mediator (PSI) who should not intervene but follow the rule of impartiality and confidentiality.

Stella's and Sarah's experiences are reminiscent of the need for clearer rules for interprofessional collaboration ([Genova and Barberis 2019](#); [Gerbino 2023](#)). In contrast to the previous examples, Irene's, Ilaria's, Iacopo's and Oliver's, reasons for lack of clarity is Stella and Sarah's independent role, i.e. not being employed on a regular basis by a special organization, but free-lancing. Stella's and Sarah's stories differ from each other's, but the results are similar, a blurred position that creates stress and puts them in vulnerable and ethically difficult situations perceiving high responsibility for the clients' situation but not being able to act on it. Both are hired for their language skills but in Stella's case she feels that the Red Cross staff turns her into an advocate for the client. The same happens for Sarah: based on what she learned about the family and social work while working, she takes on the advocacy role and asks to be a part of the social work team.

In relation to the Four-square model, this is the most unclear position, showing how the mediator must balance their own role between partiality and impartiality as well as the language and culture scale creating different sorts of expectations, internally for the mediators themselves and vis-à-vis the interlocutors, about what they can and cannot do ([Avolio, Cavallari, and Cecchini 2023](#)).

Mediation

The last position is called 'mediation' and this is a position that is furthest away from the interpreting position in the Four-square model. This

position is found in many of the participants' interviews and stories. Olga is an example of how it was organized in the context of psychiatric treatment. We first met her at a women's safe space. She used to work as linguistic mediator (PSI) at the municipality and particularly at the Casa di Dritti ('House of rights'), where most migrants and refugees that arrive in Palermo are directed to sort out their residency permits. However, she found the role as PSI too limited. People coming from her country are in extremely vulnerable situations, especially women, often victims of trafficking, and she wanted to be able to offer more help than 'only' interpreting. Besides the safe space, Olga was involved as a mediator with expertise in cultural issues in ethno-psychiatry. Together with colleagues, a leading psychiatrist had developed a therapeutic method focusing specifically on migrants with traumatic experiences of leaving their home countries, losing family and kin, violence, war, trafficking, insecure and poor living conditions. The therapy included a sequence of sessions with a group of people led by a psychiatrist in collaboration with one or more cultural mediators if the participants spoke different languages. To be admitted for the assignment the mediators needed to attend special training, regular supervision and to strictly follow ethical guidelines about confidentiality. Besides interpreting in the group therapy sessions, the mediators contributed as culture experts. This included mostly expertise on the culture of the clients' countries of origin (in contrast to the guiding role described above).

In Olga's case, she practices mediated interaction with a focus on her cultural competence, although language skills are crucial as well. She is defined as a part of the professional team, albeit with specific guidelines for how the interprofessional collaboration should work (cf. Genova and Barberis 2019). Because the cultural mediators were offered special training, supervision and ethical guidelines, the meaning and content of cultural mediation was clear to both the mediator and the other professionals that they worked with.

Summary and conclusion

Based on the participants' narratives and observed activities, we have analysed how they describe and define different ways of ICM in social work with migration as well as challenges and shortcomings that might impact social work with human mobility. In sum we have learned that:

The position of interpreting as a professional category relies on an impartial position and direct interpreted interaction where interpreting language (translation) is the main focus. Hence, the mediators here have a clear role and assignment that is different and separate from the role and assignment of the social workers.

The position of guiding focuses on mediation culture in the sense that they mediate the social and administrative system of Italy and make it tangible to

newcomers in their own language. The mediator acts independently and does not mediate between interlocutors as such, but between the host society and the individual. This position on the scale is marked with a high level of impartiality, low level of mediated interaction and with mediation of culture.

The position of brokering turns out to be the most difficult position since it is commissioned without clear boundaries and assignments. The mediator seems to be employed for interpreting languages but ends up advocating based on other kinds of boundaries. They can explain cultural perceptions but are not invited to intervene in social work. Rather they are perceived as partial and required first and foremost to 'stand by' the client.

The position of mediation is found in our material where mediators work as part of a professional team. The cultural mediators found themselves in settings with clear borders and boundaries between the different positions and professions. This included training, supervision, ethical guidelines and a more equal position to the psychotherapist than in the brokering position. This position was based on mediated ICM interaction, culture and partiality—as opposed to impartial and uninvolved—as they were part of the professional team.

Discussion on cultural mediation in social work with migration

By employing a conceptual and theoretical framework that evolved in TIS, we have developed the scale impartial/partial, language/culture that has guided our analysis and led to a Four-square model. As always, when empirical material is analysed through theoretical concepts the result is an abstraction of the reality. These abstractions are useful, however, as they help us to find nuances and variations in the dichotomy between interpreting and mediation debated in TIS (Hale 2007). The ethnographic material gives grounds for exploring various standpoints and combinations of direct interpreted interaction and mediated interaction as well as various positions on the scales of impartiality/partiality and language/culture. Hence, the result of the theoretical framework we have practiced is useful both in TIS and social work studies. In the former because it unlocks the strong dichotomy. In the latter case, the theoretical framework is helpful for making otherwise vague role divisions and jurisdictions between social workers and mediators tangible; subsequently it becomes easier to discuss and relate to in further developments of mediation services in social work settings as called for by previous research in Italy as well as other parts of Europe (Chand 2005; Abrahamsson and Agevall 2010; Catarci 2016; Gruber 2017; Genova and Barberis 2019; Akerö-Kasongo and van der Weele 2023; Avolio, Cavallari, and Cecchini 2023).

A conclusion is that the Italian context is in many ways a unique site for studying ICM in the context of social work with migration, given the emphasis on voluntary and third sector initiatives. Nevertheless, as abstractions, and in comparison to how cultural mediation has been described and discussed in previous international research (see the section Previous research on mediation and interpreting in social work above), the four positions might go beyond national borders and provide social workers, educators and even policy makers with a framework for discussing how to avoid shortcomings that could violate legal security, safety and quality standards in the treatment of clients. Above all, a deeper understanding of mediators' roles in social work could help improve inter-professional collaboration with social workers and other professionals as well as improving working conditions and training possibilities for ICM (ibid.).

There are some significant learning outcomes and possible implications for social work that we have highlighted. 'Intercultural mediation', ICM, is a label that includes several different possible actions depending on in which environment the mediator is working and what kind of social work is employed. The interpreting position seems most adequate *in social work with decision making (an operative setting)*, the guiding position in *preventive social work* and mediation in *treatment and rehabilitating social work*. Regardless of the position, cultural mediation seems to work better when there are clear rules and guidelines and where the mediator is part of a broader professional team but with clear boundaries. The traditional broker position, where the mediator acts on a freelance basis, might lead to ethical dilemmas where the mediators are left with responsibility for situations, they do not have the necessary resources to actuate nor the mandate to solve. This is a difficult situation for the mediators who have an assistance-focused approach but are left to deal with feelings of stress and frustration when their efforts are not adequately addressed.

Although there are obviously limitations and methodological constraints in the way the study was conducted, this study opens for reflection on the often-neglected aspect of language diversity in social work practice and research. The Global ANSWER project provided access to sites that otherwise would have been difficult to reach in a two-month time limit. As stated above, a major part of social work with migration in Sicily is conducted by third sector organizations. The ones we observed were specialized in migration. One of the shortcomings of the study is that we did not conduct observations of cultural mediation in public service organizations such as public hospitals or social services provided by the municipality. Compared to other countries in Europe where ICM is not yet an established profession and service, Italy relies on a different welfare system (Esping-Andersen 1990). Hence, it would be valuable to make more structured comparisons between the use of mediators both in the third and public sector and in countries with different welfare regimes.

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