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What Mediators Want:
A Qualitative Needs Analysis on the Training and Formation of Future Intercultural Mediators

Denise Filmer

University of Pisa

Abstract

This article presents the results of a sample survey on the training of intercultural mediators working in rescue, primary, and second phases of migrant reception in the Sicilian province of Ragusa. Adopting ethnomethodological and phenomenological approaches (Moustakas 1994 Creswell 2013: 81), the survey focuses on the intercultural mediators' (henceforth ICMs) perception of the qualifications, experience, and skills they believe are necessary to carry out their work efficiently. A sample of 10 ICMs with different experiential and educational backgrounds responded to open ended questionnaires shedding light on the ways in which they experienced the shared phenomenon of mediating in contexts of emergency arrivals in Italy and their preparedness for such work. Informants included graduates in "Scienze per la mediazione interculturale" from the University of Catania's School of Modern Languages in Ragusa and ICMs who had attended a vocational course at the Il Centro Mediterraneo di Studi e Formazione Giorgio La Pira in Pozzallo. To gain further insights, in-depth semi-structured interviews were then carried out with six of the ICMs who had responded to the questionnaires, and with the course directors at the above-mentioned institutions. The study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the status of the intercultural mediator in Italy, both legally and ontologically. Most crucially, however, the research attempts to understand what intercultural mediators feel they need in terms of training and education, particularly for those who work in the field of the reception and integration of migrants coming from the African continent.

1. Positionality and Paradigms – the research rationale

This pilot study addresses two research aims: firstly, to investigate the status quo on intercultural mediator (ICM) training in and around the

Sicilian province of Ragusa, site of frequent disembarkations; secondly to discover how ICMs working within the context of migrant arrivals perceive the (in)adequacy of their training in relation to their working experience. Combining ethnomethodological approaches (Rouncefield and Tolmie 2016) with phenomenological research methods (Moustakas 1994: 180-82), the underlying theoretical premise of social constructivism calls for the acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality. Having already carried out research (see Filmer and Federici 2018, Filmer 2020, Filmer forthcoming) into intercultural mediation in Sicily where I lived and worked as a university researcher, it seemed essential to understand how the ICMs in the field felt about their training. Although the findings presented here are drawn from a small sample, the study has produced significant data. A similar survey on a larger scale would enable the identification of future ICM training needs and contribute to the formulation of recommendations to the relevant institutions and authorities. Furthermore, the study is a starting point for collaborative and comparative research with other European countries facing similar immigration phenomena, for example Spain and Greece.

Multiple forms of data were gathered for this project, drawn from documents, online websites, semi-structured interviews, observations, and open-ended questionnaires. 10 intercultural mediators from different training backgrounds, ethnicities, and life experiences were contacted via telephone, email or asked face to face if they would act as informants for the research. Following an explanation of the project, they were given the opportunity to ask questions, and told they could withdraw from the project at any time. Informed consent was then sought and obtained from each participant, who was guaranteed privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of data. Informants were asked to complete and return via email a questionnaire comprising a series of open-ended questions formulated in English, but were given the choice of answering in Italian, English, or French. This first stage served to gauge where the data-rich responses might lie and in which themes they were expressed. Having received and subsequently examined the questionnaires, I then set up and carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six respondents whose replies invited further exploration. I obtained authorisation from their employers where applicable. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, then stored. Once all the primary data had been gathered and examined, recurrent themes and patterns were identified in the experiences narrated and were then distilled into the topics discussed in section 5.

In order to interpret the data, however, a contextual framework in terms of locus and status is necessary: the following sections aim to provide such a backdrop against which the findings can be analysed.

2. Contextualising the intercultural mediator in Sicily

The small Port of Pozzallo on the southern coast of Sicily has witnessed innumerable migrant[1] arrivals from the African continent since the humanitarian migration crisis began in 2011. At its peak in 2016, the number of arrivals to Italy had reached 181,436, the majority of whom were disembarked at a Sicilian port. That year, the Port of Augusta saw the highest number of arrivals with 25,624, followed by Pozzallo with 18,970. During 2017 the number of migrants who arrived in Italy via sea decreased by 85 percent[2]. This was largely due to the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Italian Minister of the Interior, Marco Minniti and the leader of the UN-recognized Libyan government, Fayez al-Serraj promoting closer cooperation between the coastguards of Libya and Italy in order to block migrant vessels before they arrived in Italian waters. Since coming to power in June 2018, the successive Minister for the Interior, Matteo Salvini refused permission to all vessels wanting to disembark migrants at Italian ports, regardless of their physical and psychological condition. This drastically cut arrivals to Italian shores even further, while ignoring the fact that thousands are being held in Libya in inhumane conditions (see Filmer, 2020). Pozzallo saw the largest number of arrivals to Italy in 2018 with 3,818; and remains the location for one of Sicily's three Hotspots, which are primarily reception and identification centres. Between 1 January 2019 and 25 August 2019[3], despite the reduced numbers of migrants reaching Italian shores, 2,897 disembarked at the Port of Pozzallo.

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[1] No term surrounding migration is ever neutral; some have very specific legal meanings (e.g. illegal migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, permanent resident, etc.), however for expediency, I use the term "migrant" to cover all categories of people landing on the coasts and at the ports of Italy having moved from their place of origin.
[2] International Organisation for Migration
https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals
[3] https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205
According to the UNHCR, the key disembarkation points remain Sicilian ports, which have been identified as hotspots in Italy's Road Map: Pozzallo (19%), Augusta (15%), Lampedusa (14%), Taranto (10%) and Trapani (5%). Other disembarkation points include Reggio Calabria (11%), Catania (6%).

It has been argued elsewhere (see Federici 2016 and Filmer, Federici 2018), that the effects of the so-called "migrant emergency" to a large extent could have been avoided or at least mitigated with strategic government planning and EU interventions. Federici points out that the migrant arrivals to Italy are particularly significant in terms of linguistic and cultural implications, for they "*highlighted the need for translators and interpreters on an unprecedented scale*" (Federici 2016: 10 my emphasis). A need that had hitherto been largely ignored, especially in crucial geographical areas such as Sicily.

With ill-defined contours and improvised training, those language and cultural mediators directly involved in the disembarkations in that historical period (and still today), for no fault of their own, had to cope with situations beyond their level of competence. From this premise, the study investigates how the practicing intercultural mediators operating on the coast of Sicily during the ongoing migratory flows perceive their needs in terms of types of training, knowledge, tools and skills. The following section focuses on the blurred definition and training requirements for this figure within the specific geographical location.

3. A question of recognition – what is the role of the ICM?

On the 9th January 2018 the Sicilian regional government approved decree law D.A/21 establishing legal recognition for, and a professional profile of, the intercultural mediator within its jurisdiction. On signing the decree, the Regional Councillor for education and vocational training, Roberto Lagalla, stated:

> The professional[4] figure of [the intercultural mediator] is indispensable to the multicultural society in which we live,

[4] I have translated "figura professionale" here as "professional figure". This is, however, open to interpretation. "Professionale" in Italian can mean professional in the sense of a person whose occupation requires special training or a university education, and therefore confers high status. It can equally mean vocational, as in "istituto professionale", which is similar to a technical school or college where technical and manual skills are taught. As the minimum entry requirement for regionally authorised courses in intercultural mediation is a high school diploma rather than a degree, thus, as far as Italian law is concerned, intercultural mediation appears to be considered more an occupation than a profession. However, I have chosen to leave "professional", given the social significance the speaker appears to attribute to the role.

guaranteeing social cohesion and equal opportunities through the gradual and assisted processes of integration and reception. […] Today, more than ever, intercultural mediation is indispensable to the removal of cultural and linguistic barriers, and for the protection of rights and duties, for example facilitating access to public and private services aimed at immigrant populations.[5]

Lagalla's affirmation that the intercultural mediator is "indispensable" in complex multilingual societies is undoubtedly a step forward. However, it begs the question as to why the region of Italy that has been most directly affected by the Mediterranean migratory crisis has only just legislated on a figure of such import. The Sicilian case, albeit counterintuitive, is by no means isolated. Attempts by previous national governments to formulate a unified framework in which the role of the ICM is better defined across the Italian peninsula have yet to be put into practice. Nearly a decade ago, Amato and Garwood (2011: 5) observed "despite the large use of cultural mediators in public services in Italy there is no national or central accreditation system, no single code of professional conduct, and no common recruitment requirements or procedures". This is still the case today. The most recent governmental recommendations on the subject were published in 2014 (Melandri *et al.*) by the Ministry of the Interior in conjunction with the European Union.[6] The dossier is a detailed study of the issues and dilemmas surrounding the figure of the ICM in the Italian context and delineates the competences, skills, and qualifications required in this overarching description:

The figure of the ICM is delimited by a clearly defined area of competence that on the one hand, is close to that of the social worker

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[5] "E' una figura professionale indispensabile per la società multiculturale nella quale viviamo per garantire coesione sociale e pari opportunità, attraverso processi di integrazione e accoglienza, graduali e assistiti […]. La mediazione interculturale è certamente, oggi più che mai, indispensabile per la rimozione delle barriere culturali, linguistiche e per la salvaguardia dei diritti e dei doveri, come per l'accesso ai servizi pubblici e privati della popolazione di immigrati". http://www.robertolagalla.it/

[6] "La qualifica del mediatore interculturale: Contributi per il suo inserimento nel futuro sistema nazionale di certificazione delle competenze" [The qualification of intercultural mediator: a contribution to its inclusion in the future national system of certification of competences and expertise. http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Documenti-e-ricerche/DOSSIER%20DI%20SINTESI%20QUALIFICA%20MEDIATORI_28_07.pdf

with notable intercultural skills and on the other, is close to that of a *professional interpreter* (my emphasis).[7]

Within these parameters, the scope of action intercultural mediators undertake is vast. While the long-term and general aim is that of facilitating social integration, the tasks carried out by ICMs on a regular basis include clinical and community interpreter, asylum and legal interpreter, cultural broker, health assistant, offering psychosocial support, preventing conflict and supporting resolution, and last and not least in the Sicilian context, emergency and crisis mediation during and immediately following disembarkations. (For discussions on the professional figure and competences of the ICM see Katan 2015; Merlini 2015; Rudvin and Spinzi 2014; Russo and Mack 2005; UNHCR 2017 and WHO 2019).

Asylum hearings are obviously one of the most critical situations in which an ICM may be called to interpret. Without the requisite linguistic, cultural and technical skills, however, the outcomes can be disastrous for the asylum seeker. The UNHCR's (2017) "Handbook for Interpreters in Asylum Procedures" points out that in many cases "interpreters are appointed on the strength of their language skills but often do not have specific training for the asylum situation" (ibid: 3).

Space constraints prohibit a detailed overview of the role of the interpreter compared to the ICM (see, for example, Pöchhacker 2008; Martin and Phelan 2010). Suffice it to say there is considerable dissent as to the division or conflation of tasks, and as to what indeed the respective roles might entail (see also Angelelli, 2004, 2015; Hale 2007; Inghilleri 2005, 2017; Katan 2015; Merlini 2015; Taviano 2019). Instead the UNHCR (2017) refers to the "interpreter as mediator for both language and culture" (ibid.: 56), thereby rendering the ICM redundant altogether.

Rudvin and Spinzi (2014: 58) have analysed this "terminological turmoil" and suggest that from a cross-cultural perspective the "community interpreter" could be considered the Anglophone equivalent of the ICM. Merlini (2015: 32), for her part, observes that the "cultural mediator" has become the "*inter*cultural mediator" in institutional discourse thus foregrounding "social cohesion as an overarching goal". Furthermore, this Special Issue of *Cultus* entitled "training for the language and cultural mediator" avoids the question

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[7] "La figura del MI è delimitata da un confine chiaro che la pone limitrofa da un lato all'operatore sociale con spiccate competenze di interculturalità, e dall'altro all'interprete professionale".

of interculture altogether. Terminology aside, we return to the real issues at stake: competences and tasks. As Martin and Phelan (2010) point out:

> there is considerable confusion across Europe about the exact role of cultural mediators. The term 'cultural mediation' is sometimes used as a blanket term to cover both translation and interpreting and the terms interpreter and cultural mediator can appear synonymous. In France, Italy and parts of Belgium and Germany the terms interpreter, cultural mediator and, also intercultural mediator are used interchangeably and the role boundaries are unclear, especially to outsiders.

Within the context of the Republic of Ireland's healthcare system, and in line with some of the opinions expressed by the informants interviewed for this study (see section 5), "the roles of medical interpreter and cultural mediator are complementary and distinct" (Phelan and Martin 2010). According to the authors, purely linguistic communication is the task of the interpreter, whereas the cultural mediator "is required when lack of cultural awareness and understanding of the system is the main impediment for the migrant population to access and benefit from health services". Akin to the situation in Italy, a recognised, unified code of ethics for what the authors refer to as cultural mediation within the Irish context does not exist. Phelan and Martin suggest that such recognition "would permit cultural mediation to develop and maintain standards at national and international level" (ibid. 2010). The mediator-interpreter dichotomy is further complicated by tensions surrounding the political and social stances implicit in the intercultural mediator's work. In the Sicilian context, Taviano's (2019) study describes what she refers to as "activist mediators" who "create active spaces of resistance" (Taviano 2019: 30). One of the ways the ICMs she interviewed do this, is "by encouraging intercultural and transcultural understanding while collaborating with social workers to make them reflect on the importance of accepting diversity beyond one's own prejudices".

While this appears to be less "activism" than best practices in intercultural mediation, she goes on to describe further "resistance tactics" (bid.: 31)

> [the ICMs interviewed] define their role as mediators on the basis of their own personal views and experiences of what this role involves, rather than according to predominant practices or predefined rules.

In this sense their initiatives, drawing on the informal acquisition of competences and skills, show how long-life learning can be even more significant than official formal training.

It might be reasonably argued that such an approach to mediating resonates with improvisation, flouts ethical codes, and may result in accusations of advocacy. Life experience is undeniably a crucial factor in the work of the ICM, especially where asylum cases are concerned; but in order to maintain neutrality, "personal views and experiences" cannot be privileged above professionalism.

Returning to the Ministry of the Interior's problematic definition of the ICM, the skills of a "professional interpreter" mentioned therein require training in interpreting techniques, theoretical underpinning, and a solid ethical grounding. These elements are lacking in many university and regionally authorised courses in intercultural mediation. The same ministerial document then lists the less onerous "non-professional interpreting and translation" [interventi (…) di interpretariato e traduzione non-professionali] (ibid.:14) as competences pertaining to the ICM, creating further confusion as to the required skills set. Equally dubious is the proposed "indispensable" requisite for the ICM: "preferably, of foreign extraction" [L'essere preferibilmente di origine straniera] (Melandri 2014: 36-38), which could be viewed as a form of inverted racism. These recommendations have never been enshrined in a national legal framework, and the responsibility for defining and training the ICM remains firmly with regional governments in Italy. Nevertheless, the Sicilian government's recently published profile of the ICM pays more than a passing resemblance the one set out in the abovementioned report. The four areas of competence identified are:

1. Analysing the needs and resources of the foreign national, and the context in which action should be taken;
2. Understanding the language and cultural codes of the various cultures and facilitate communicative exchanges;
3. Mediating in various communicative situations, facilitating exchanges between members of the immigrant community and operators, services, institutions, stake-holders, actors, partners, and businesses within the territorial area of reference;

4. Planning training initiatives and strategies of intercultural integration in various real life situations[8]

Despite the complexity of tasks and the intellectual skills such a delineation of intercultural mediation entails, the ICM is located on level 5 of the European Qualification Framework[9] and is thus considered a technician; a high school diploma is the entry level for a regionally recognised and authorised training course. In the Italian National Institute for Statistics' [ISTAT][10] (2011) classification of professions, ICMs are classified as "Technicians of social integration and rehabilitation" [Tecnici del reinserimento e dell'integrazione sociale]; a definition that belies the analytical, reflexive and evaluative abilities that are crucial to the core activity for an intercultural mediator; that is, negotiating encounters between individuals of diverse cultures and languages in a gamut of social situations. While the linguistic services provided by ICMs might not best be described as "professional interpreting and translation", the mindful activity of mediating between social actors from different socio-economic and lingua-cultural backgrounds in high-pressure situations of emergency or crisis is clearly beyond the scope of a technician. In clinical contexts where psychological health is concerned, inadequate training, lack of experience or lack of neutrality on the part of the intercultural mediator could result in serious communication failure between the parties (see Filmer 2020).

By the same token, the recently established minimum requirement of a high school diploma has created an impasse in ICM training in Sicily. For example, the regionally recognised cooperative "Centro Mediterraneo Giorgio La Pira" is a training centre and learning space for operators in the area of migration, and has trained many of the intercultural mediators working in Ragusa. However, due to the 2018 legislation their vocational course in "mediazione interculturale" is no longer active. Director of the centre, Giacomo Anastasi explains that

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[8] Analizzare i bisogni del Cittadino straniero ed il contest di cui bisogna intervenire; comprendere il linguaggio e i codici delle diverse culture e facilitare lo scambio comunicativo;
realizzare interventi di mediazione tra il cittadino straniero e i diversi contesti di riferimento, facilitando lo scambio tra immigrato e operatori, servizi, istituzioni, imprese del territorio di riferimento; progettare interventi di orientamento e percorsi di integrazione interculturale nei differenti contesti di vita.
[9] https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/search/site?f[0]=im_field_entity_type%3A97#
[10] http://professioni.istat.it/sistemainformativoprofessioni/cp2011/

the course was initially set up in 2016 to give refugee minors a chance to develop their skills and obtain a certificate that was authorised by the region at that time. Numerous training courses offered by private training bodies were springing up all over Sicily in the wake of the migratory crisis. Anastasi explains that, by law, reception centres for unaccompanied minors run by local co-operatives are obliged to employ an intercultural mediator as one of the requisites for constituting such reception services according to the emergency decree[11] issued by the Regional Department for the Family, Social Policy, and Work[12] but at that time no authorised regional training body existed.

Responding, therefore, to the urgent need for qualified mediators, the "Centro Mediterraneo Giorgio La Pira" offered a 500-hour blended learning course. Languages were not taught; they were a prerequisite. The course was structured over a period of six months with several weekend encounters and seminars with specialists in the field, such as NGOs and university lecturers, who offered one-off seminars gratis. The course also included 150 hours of e-learning and an 80-hour case study. Internships of at least 100 hours were organised with the network of partners operating in the field of migrant reception in the Ragusa area. In this way, explains Anastasi, those with a minority language, or even bridge languages such as English or Arabic could begin to earn a living. The new legislation not only affects minors but also many refugees, asylum seekers or migrants over 18; few will have a high school diploma, and those that do will have great difficulty providing evidence of such. The bureaucratic process known as "equipollenza", that is, recognition of a foreign qualification as equal to the corresponding Italian one, is a painfully long and laborious one requiring a level of documentation that would be practically impossible for a refugee to obtain from the place of origin. Ironically, then, by placing an educational threshold, the path to a recognised qualification as an intercultural mediator is blocked for those who may have relevant language skills, personal experience and disposition but either lack the formal education or the possibility to prove it. The next

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[11] DP513/GAB 18 January 2016.
[12]
http://pti.regione.sicilia.it/portal/page/portal/PIR_PORTALE/PIR_LaStrutturaRe gionale/PIR_PresidenzadellaRegione/uffici_diretta_collaborazione_Presidente/Tras parenza/decreti_presidenziali/Decreti_Presidenziali_Anno_2016/DP%2B513%2B Gab.pdf

section focuses on what type of qualification is required to be legally recognised for this role.

4. A question of qualifications

In order to understand which qualifications are required to get a job as an (inter)cultural mediator, the following example is provided. A recent call for applications[13] for the position of "cultural mediator" (a fixed term 500-hour annual contract) issued by a local health authority in Rome lists under its essential requirements, *either*

- a degree in *mediazione linguistica*/applied languages with translation, psychology, sociology or educational science, pedagogy, or social work and a regionally recognised certification in intercultural mediation;
- a regionally recognised certification in intercultural mediation and/or a degree that confers the title of intercultural mediator
- or a certificate conferring the title of intercultural and linguistic mediator issued following the completion of a regional, provincial or ministerial training course (my emphasis).

The wording of the requirements is far from clear: it appears that a regional vocational course is equated with an undergraduate degree, *plus* an additional course in intercultural mediation. It is also contentious to claim that any degree can "confer" the professional title of intercultural mediator. A degree in *mediazione linguistica* generally has little to do with intercultural mediation although it might offer the grounding in foreign languages and translation. Nevertheless, the uneven requirements undermine the value of a university education with regards to ICM formation. As one of the informants remarked:

> Those like myself who studied for three or even 5 years to obtain a degree in Applied Languages with Translation have the same professional

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opportunities, if not fewer, than those who do a training course approved
by the regional government of maybe 200, 300, or 600 hours.

ICM3 commented thus at the very beginning of our interview,
indicating its importance for her[14]. It also brings sharply into focus the
question of how "regionally authorised courses" might compare with
a university education. Anastasi comments "The way regional training
works is crazy, it's Kafkian". A tender is put out to private educational
institutions, co-operatives, and local training bodies. But in Anastasi's
opinion "there are no criteria – it's who gets there first, and strangely,
there's always someone who gets there before you!". He adds "and
regional training courses have only ever served the interests of the
course organisers".[15]

Due to the recent regional legislation on minimum requirements
and fewer migrant arrivals, many of the courses are no longer running.
At the time of writing, a search on internet revealed two "regionally
authorised" courses in Sicily: one of 300 and the other of 675 hours.
The regional requirements do not stipulate course duration. The
courses are free for the unemployed and those seeking first
employment, provided that the service provider, i.e. the training body,
receives funding from the regional government. Otherwise, non-
authorised courses may charge a fee of anywhere between 500-1,000
euros. "Abakos Formazione", for example, is a legally recognised co-
operative offering various vocational courses including intercultural
mediation. The course aims to "train the figure of the intercultural
mediator who facilitates immigrants and members of ethnic minorities
to access public services"[16]. Contrary to the norms of transparency,
the website[17] offers no information on the course content nor
structure, nor does it identify the teachers. There are no regionally
authorised courses in intercultural mediation in the province of Ragusa
where the port of Pozzallo and its Hotspot are situated.

Instead, the University of Catania's School of Modern Languages
located in Ragusa offers an undergraduate course in *mediazione*

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[14] All informants are referred to with the female gender for convenience and to
maintain anonymity.

[15] "è pazzesco come funziona la formazione regionale, è Kafkiana […] non ci sono
criteri – è chi arriva prima […] ma stranamente c'è sempre qualcuno che arriva prima
di te! […] ma i corsi regionali hanno sempre servito solo gli interessi degli enti
organizzatori".

[16] "…formare la figura di mediatore interculturale che facilita gli immigrati e i membri
delle minoranze etniche a accedere ai servizi pubblici".

[17] http://www.abakosform.it/mediatore_interculturale.html

linguistica / Applied Languages with Translation, and has done since 2002. Course Director, Professor Massimo Sturiale acknowledges that although the current degree course satisfies the ministerial criteria in terms of core subjects for the degree class of "Mediazione Linguistica", there are some significant gaps in what are considered optional subjects. "Cultural Anthropology, Economy, EU law…this is a problem that we can no longer offer these subjects" comments Sturiale but "this is not the department's fault, it the Ministry of Education's". Stringent budgets and a reduction in the number of contract lecturers that a degree course can sustain inevitably also reduce the choice of secondary subjects on offer. In Sturiale's opinion the first generation of degree courses in *mediazione linguistica*, that is, before the Gelmini Reform[18] were much stronger - precisely because they were not bound by the number of contract professors that could be employed and therefore offered a richer variety of subjects. For the moment, he opines "even if we wanted to change something by adding other subjects, we simply don't have the staff to cover them". On a more positive note, a way out of this gridlock is co-operation between institutions by swapping expertise. "What I would like to change, and what I will implement is a series of seminars – using our own networks to invite colleagues to give guest lectures". Secondly, the degree programme will aim to offer better organised and more relevant internships by exploiting connections and involving local government, institutions and associations in the territory.

Having described the status quo of intercultural mediation training in the context of the Sicilian province of Ragusa, what follows is a discussion on the most significant results of the surveys and interviews carried out.

5. Discussion

Ten intercultural mediators from varying backgrounds (see below) were asked to take part in a survey comprising open ended questions, which was distributed via email. Based on the richness of the responses 6 of the informants were interviewed face-to face between July 4th 2019-30 August 2019. The table below gives a brief overview of essential data on the ten informants who participated.

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[18] Decree law 240/30 December 2010

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The Informants

	Training	Ethnic origin	Experience (in years)	Permanent, fixed term contract or self-employed
ICM1	Regionally authorised course of 600 hours.	Morocco	20	Self-employed
ICM2	"Centro Giorgio La Pira" 500 hour course for intercultural mediation.	Mali	4	Self-employed
ICM3	University degree "Scienze per la Mediazione linguistica".	Italy	5	Permanent contract with the "Fondazione San Giovanni Battista"
ICM4	University degree "Scienze per la Mediazione linguistica".	Italy	3	Self-employed- returned to full-time education, completing "Magistrale" course
ICM5	University degree "Mediazione linguistica e interculturale".	Italy	1	Volunteer worker in full-time education
ICM6	Degree in "Scienze della Mediazione Linguistica".	Italy	3	Permanent contract with the "Fondazione San Giovanni Battista"
ICM7	University degree in Modern languages/Master in Orientamento e Mediazione Culturale - Counselling and Cultural Mediation.	Italy	18	Permanent position
ICM8	"Centro Giorgio La Pira" 500 hour course in intercultural mediation.	Nigeria	3	Permanent contract with the "Fondazione San Giovanni Battista"
ICM9	Short training courses provided by MEDU (medici per i diritti umani) and currently studying for a degree in "mediazione linguistica e interculturale".	Morocco	7	Self-employed, returned to full-time education.
ICM10	Degree in Modern Languages; Magistrale Degree of II level (2 years) in modern foreign languages for international cooperation; regional course of 900 hours for certification as "Mediatore Culturale" in 2014, therefore before the current decree (see section 3 above).	Tunisia	8	Self-employed

An initial observation relates to employment. Apart from one university employee, a further three, who work for the "Fondazione San Giovanni Battista", have a permanent contract. The Foundation, like many others in Italy, is a religious organisation/co-operative that collaborates with the Ministry for the Interior on the question of migrant reception. It runs several small reception centres in Ragusa. As mentioned previously, reception centres have the legal obligation to employ at least one intercultural mediator on the staff. ICM7 is employed at a university and deals with the integration of foreign students. She is also a Red Cross Volunteer and has assisted during the height of the numerous disembarkations. According to ICM 10, "intercultural mediators are real losers" when it comes to working opportunities. Highly qualified with several years' experience, her precarious, self-employed status is like most of the ICMs working in the context of migrant reception in Sicily.

5.1 Who am I? What am I?

The first issue is an ontological one and refers to the informants' desire to define terms as to who they are and what they do. Katan (2018: 18) affirms "Post-positivists suggest that although phenomena may (possibly) be observed, it is the observer's subjectivity that will bias what is perceived towards a particular construction of 'reality' and towards a particular way of defining 'the thing'". Bearing this in mind, the respondents were asked to choose from a list of terms. ICM6 describes her work as "a passion, a calling", while ICM7 classifies the role in more pragmatic terms as "a professional who works towards the removal of cultural and linguistic barriers". Eight of the informants prefer the denomination "intercultural mediator", while two opted for "cultural mediator". ICM9 elaborates on her choice of "intercultural" mediator: "in my work I try to demonstrate that cultures are not so far apart […] because no culture is self-contained and each one has aspects that are compatible with the other[19]". ICM8 was the only one to choose both intercultural mediator and interpreter/community interpreter as possible denominations. As the researcher and the interviewer, I must acknowledge this may be the outcome of an exchange between the interviewee and myself in which ICM8 made a

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[19] Nel mio lavoro di mediazione cerco di mostrare che le culture non sonno così lontane […] perché non esiste nessuna cultura che non racchiude delle cose e degli aspetti compatibili con ognuno di noi.

net distinction between the roles of ICM and interpreter. ICM8 performs both tasks but in different settings, considering "interpreting" as what she does when working with the police, for example, whereas "mediating" takes place in situations where cultural diversity needs to be explicated before communication can effectively take place. This, according to ICM8 does not require word for word interpretation. During the interview she states:

> There is a big difference between the translator [sic. interpreter] compared to the mediator. The translator is someone who translates what one person says to another person without regard to logic, without additional reasoning. The mediator goes beyond that […] he applies logic, goes beyond listening. It's someone who tries to understand, someone who tries to find meaning […] with regard to cultural difference.

When this comment is compared with interviews carried out previously with other ICMs trained at the "Centro Giorgio Pira" (see also Filmer and, Federici 2018: 246-248), a recurrent perception of the interpreter emerges; the interpreter follows the strict conduit model (Solow 1981: ix) while the ICM "builds bridges" across cultures. If trainee ICMs are told that the interpreter translates "without regard to logic" or "reasoning", then this risks reductionism and denigration of the work performed by the interpreter. Interpreting word for word has a fundamental role in the process of seeking asylum, for example during the asylum hearing. ICM8 states that apart from her work as an ICM, she also interprets for the police. Having arrived in Italy in July 2016 it is likely that ICM8's knowledge of Italian goes beyond the minimum B1 level stipulated in the regional requirements. Nevertheless, a B1 or even a B2 level of target language competence would be insufficient for professional interpreting tasks, and, it may be argued, barely sufficient for non-professional interpreting activity especially in contexts such as police enquiries.

5.2. The adequacy of training - ready or not?

The core of this study is the ICMs' perception of their preparedness. What surfaced was an overwhelming awareness of their failings and shortcomings in the face of certain challenges their work often needs to embrace. All the informants replied that they had felt ill-equipped to deal with certain situations, and provided examples. ICM1's story is representative:

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> There was an episode with a young man who had arrived in Italy as an unaccompanied minor. He was imprisoned as soon as he landed because he was accused of human trafficking. When he was let out on probation, he was sent to the reception centre where I was working. He found it difficult to integrate with the others; he didn't trust anyone and couldn't keep to the rules[20].

This example poses questions regarding the boundaries of what an intercultural mediator should, or is able to, do. Clearly, the mediator in this case feels some sense of guilt for not having been able to assist the person in question. A grounding in psychology might have helped the ICM. ICM5 on the other hand recounts her failure to read the non-verbal messages of those she was mediating for:

> The first time I mediated in a reception centre I didn't know much about the culture of the beneficiaries nor their variety of English: for example, in many African cultures it is a sign of respect not to look the interlocutor in the eye, above all if this person has a higher social position in the communicative context. During the interviews, the young men tended to lower their gaze and initially I thought this was a sign of their disinterest, which I found deeply discouraging. I subsequently understood, with experience, that it was the exact opposite. It meant they were listening to me attentively and respectfully[21].

ICM5's experience highlights the gap between theory and practice. She is a graduate of Applied Languages and Translation, yet the theoretical knowledge she obtained did not match the skills needed in practical situations. ICM4 echoes this notion by commenting "all the subjects I

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[20] C'è stato un episodio con un ragazzo che è arrivato in Italia come minore straniere non accompagnato. È stato in carcere appena sbarcato perché è stato accusato di essere un trafficante, quando questo ragazzo è stato liberato con messa in prova in centro d'accoglienza dove lavoravo, aveva difficolta a integrarsi con la comunità, il ragazzo non si fidava di nessuno, aveva difficolta a seguire le regole.

[21] Le prime volte che mi sono trovata a fare da mediatrice per dei colloqui all'interno del centro d'accoglienza, non conoscevo molti elementi della cultura dei beneficiari o della loro varietà linguistica: per esempio, nella cultura africana è segno di rispetto non guardare l'interlocutore negli occhi, soprattutto se questo ha una posizione socialmente rilevante all'interno di un determinato contesto comunicativo; durante i colloqui, dunque, i ragazzi tendevano ad abbassare lo sguardo, ed inizialmente, pensavo fosse per una loro mancanza di interesse e questo mi scoraggiava profondamente. Ho capito con la pratica, che in realtà era esattamente l'opposto, significava che mi stavano ascoltando con attenzione e rispetto.

studied [at university], the exams, the dissertation, the books…we're light years away from what we actually have to do […] only experience in the field can give you the practical skills needed for the job".[22] Lack of experience can have far-reaching consequences: a young neo graduate with no hands-on experience entering an environment such as a Hotspot can have serious psychological disturbances. ICM4 explains,

> It was a traumatic experience for many reasons. On a psychological level, I was afraid of the responsibility that the job entailed; something much, much bigger than me, I felt …but there you don't have the time to think, just to act. Full stop….it was emotionally shocking, other people like myself started but then left… in the first days I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep…then I started to get used to it, if you can ever get used to these situations.[23]

ICM1, who did a vocational course, admits that cultural and religious differences at first were difficult her to fathom: "In the past, my training wasn't enough to overcome the mental closure and rigidity from a religious point of view of some of the young men. For example, why is there so much self-harm on the part of North Africans?" ICM9, on the other hand, notes the limitations of instructors and lecturers as to the cultural knowledge they impart, for example drawing on stereotypes rather than looking for the underlying reasons. She gives this example of cultural stereotyping proffered by a lecturer: "sub-Saharan women are not interested in birth control because it does not exist in their culture". ICM9 sustains that the lecturer's assertion is erroneous because in some cultures, certain topics are not discussed with foreigners, and above all not in groups. Furthermore, she points out that when a (foreign) researcher does field work in reception centres, they are always treated with diffidence by the guests and will therefore never get a real picture.

5.3 Academic approaches or hands-on experience? What makes a good intercultural mediator?

[22] Tutte le materie che ho fatto, gli esami, la tesi, I libri…siamo anni luci da quello che dobbiamo fare in realtà.

[23] Era una trauma per tanti motivi All livello psicologico avevo paura della risponsibilità, era qualcosa molto più grande di me. Sentivo…ma lì non hai tempo di pensare, solo agire e basta. Era molto forte, pesante, la gente inizia e poi lascia, I primi giorni non riuscivo a mangiare a dormire…poi mi sono un po abituata se si puo' mai abituarsi a queste cose.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (*OED* online), vocational education or training is "focused on preparing students for a particular (esp. manual or technical) occupation and teaching them the necessary skills". Academic training on the other hand "is concerned with the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship; scholarly, educational, intellectual". We might juxtapose a couple of phrases here to make the dichotomy apparent: technical skills as opposed to intellectual skills – which are more pertinent to the intercultural mediator? Opinions were varied and vociferous on this point. From ICM4, who had university background and who freely admitted (see above) that for the type of challenges she had to face in the field, "a vocational course would be better [than a university degree]. More practical and technical skills such as languages for specific purposes, for example terminology on immigration law that can be applied immediately within the migration context would be really useful". Although the courses Anastasi has run at the La Pira centre are vocational, he sees the natural collocation for intercultural mediation training at University:[24]

> it's not about theory against practice but about getting a balance between the two elements […]. An intercultural mediator is an interdisciplinary figure par excellence - subjects like anthropology, politics, sociology, law – it is essential that the basis comes from a university education.

ICM8, who did a course at the La Pira centre points out that "Having a university degree does not make one a skilled mediator. A good vocational course in addition to experience is good" but concludes "a university degree would be an added advantage". ICM9 feels that a university education gives the intercultural mediator self-confidence because it provides the analytical and critical tools and foundations necessary to interact on the same level as with other professionals involved in the mediating triad, for example, doctors. For this reason, she views the regionally recognised courses as inadequate: "I think these courses are often set up as a way for the organisers to make money" and in any case "a course that lasts just a few hours could

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[24] Non una questione di teorie contro la pratica ma trovare un equilibrio fra I due elementi. Il mediatore interculturale è una figura interdisciplinare per eccellenza – antropologia, politica, sociologia, i diritti – è essenziale che queste basi vengono forniti all'università].

never provide sufficient training for the depth and breadth of work we perform" [Purtroppo credo che questi corsi vengono usati semplicemente come una scusa per incassare soldi, e gli iscritti spesso lo fanno solo perchè lo devono fare ma non perchè lo vogliono fare. Un corso di qualche ora non potrebbe mai formare una persona per l'ampiezza del lavoro che svogliamo].

5.4 Knowledge gaps and empathy – what skills make a mediator?

Many were the suggested gaps in knowledge. From religious studies, geography, global economy, ethnology, pedagogy and transcultural psychology, to problem solving and conflict management. The breadth of subjects that all the informants felt were essential to their tasks indicates that the expert ICM needs to be trained in an interdisciplinary perspective that cuts across traditional academic boundaries. Yet, according to ICM4 "the most important skills are empathy, understanding, and being supportive. They are soft skills that perhaps cannot be learned but are equally as important as the hard skills". ICM7 agrees empathy is the key and adds "either you have it or you don't. It's not something that can be taught". Todorova (2019: 166), believes that:

> Interpreters working in emergency situations, and those who want to specialize to work with refugees in humanitarian emergencies, should be provided with appropriate training which will draw not only on the most recent-development in interpreting studies, but also on conflict resolution, peace building, and crisis management studies. This training should prepare interpreters to develop their empathic reactions, being able to identify the most vulnerable groups and individuals providing them with a voice.

Overlooking the conflation of interpreter with intercultural mediator for the moment, Todorova sustains that interpreters working with refugees in humanitarian emergency scenarios would benefit from training in "conflict resolution, peace-building, and crisis management studies", in order to cultivate "empathetic reactions". As the informants themselves confirm, skills such as conflict resolution (ICM 3) would undoubtedly be useful in emergency migratory contexts but that such skills would lead to "empathic reactions" is debateable. Initially used in the context of psychotherapy, the theoretical construct of empathy has been adopted in various health settings, not least in intercultural mediation or community interpreting (for a detailed, lucid

discussion on empathy in intercultural mediation see Merlini 2015: 27-50). A slippery paradigm to say the least, as Davies (1990: 707) points out, "Empathy […] is often confused with related concepts such as sympathy, pity, identification and self-transposal". She argues, however, with German phenomenologist Edith Stein, that

> What makes empathy unique […] is that it happens to us, it is indirectly given to us, "nonprimordially." When empathy occurs, we find ourselves experiencing it, rather than directly causing it to happen. This is the characteristic that makes the act of empathy *unteachable*. (my emphasis).

She concludes that "Empathy is a process that eludes teaching". Nevertheless, it can be fostered through professional socialization experiences, modelling compassion and raising students' awareness to "negative, fragmenting behaviours such as prejudice, self-preoccupation, […] poor listening and poor assertiveness skills, and low self-esteem" that may block empathy.

While "experience" may not exactly be considered a skill, it featured in 8 of the 10 responses on essential subjects for future mediators. Finally, ICM9 observed[25] that intellectual curiosity is a fundamental part of the profile: "you always need to have the curiosity to do some research every time we encounter something about the Other that we do not understand".

5.5 So, what do mediators want?

From those who answered the questionnaire, 9 of the 10 felt that a university degree is the most suitable form of qualification because it could offer more insight into the theoretical knowledge and critical tools required for the job. However, it was stressed that alongside the language content, the course should also contain subjects that provide relevant secondary subjects such as cultural anthropology, psychology, transcultural psychology, sociology, immigration law, EU law, and finally more exposure to non-standard English varieties such as Pidgeon English – or at least an overview of variations on pronunciation from the non-Anglican English speakers. ICM8 thinks that "the application of Psychology, Philosophy and Sociology would really improve mediation practice as they deal with the science of human behaviours". Practical training in "problem solving" and

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[25] Bisogna avere sempre la curiosità che ci spinge ad andare a documentarci ogni talvolta che incontriamo qualcosa nell'altro che non capiamo.

"conflict resolution or management" were other subject areas mentioned as highly relevant to the work of the ICM. Above all, respondents emphasised the need to integrate a university course with experience in the field via extended internships with local stake-holders and partners, such as the police, the Prefecture, and the reception centres in the territory thereby encouraging closer ties with the working reality. In addition, such experience would provide students with a practical grounding to prepare them for what their future work might entail.

6. Concluding remarks

This sample survey on the training of intercultural mediators working in the context of migrant arrivals in Sicily can only scratch the surface of what, on a wider national, and supranational scale, is a vast and largely neglected area of investigation which requires urgent attention. A recent review by the World Health Organisation (Verrept 2019: 13) reveals that in Europe:

> Limited evidence was found on the training of intercultural mediators. The review found a lack of standardized training programmes to prepare mediators for their numerous and complex tasks […] To what extent and how intercultural mediators are evaluated and accredited also remains unclear. In addition, the dearth of professional guidelines, standards and quality assurance strategies and the limited involvement of academic institutions in the professionalization of the intercultural mediator are serious concerns.

These immense lacunae in regulating the profession lead to the profoundly worrying suspicion that ethical issues in mediation practices become merely academic. The absolute priority in the context of Italy must be to legislate on the role, functions, and competences of the intercultural mediator. While it is true that each geographical territory has its own specific needs, not least of all Sicily, there still must be a baseline; a unified framework of the training and qualifications necessary to accede the title of intercultural mediator, and an official professional register for each region to which the police, health services and courtrooms would have to refer when requiring mediation and linguistic services. Secondly, better co-ordination needs to be established between local authorities and the educational

institutions who provide training, be they state or private universities or authorised private colleges; this would help to ease the is-ought dilemma. Is intercultural mediation a vocational occupation or a profession? If it is the former, then university training, contrary to what most of the mediators interviewed believe, is superfluous. In this case, better structured vocational training is required that responds to the criteria set out in the regional framework.

If, on the other hand, intercultural mediation is viewed as a profession whereby a university background is essential, what would "appropriate training" be for future cohorts? Currently, in Italy, undergraduate courses with false-friend names such as *Scienze per la mediazione interculturale* or *Mediazione linguistica* focus principally on language and translation, and lack the subject areas that would provide the breadth of knowledge that the role demands. Anastasi rightly suggests that the interdisciplinary nature of the ICM would require an undergraduate foundation course structured to span diverse subject areas including anthropology, political science, psychology, and crisis studies. A specialisation (Laurea Magistrale or Master) in specific fields of mediation such as clinical/medical, psychological, educative or legal/asylum would then ideally follow. The reality is rather different. Italian universities tend to build degree courses around the teaching expertise of existing staff within a particular department instead of stretching their vision across disciplinary boundaries (and departments) in order to respond to the needs of today's complex employment market in which the ICM is firmly situated.

Further research and a much broader survey of intercultural mediators' needs in different national and European contexts might include reflective practices, such as "debriefing and discussion groups for your interpreters" (Tiselius 2019)[26] enabling informed recommendations for educators and institutions. We should be harnessing the knowledge and experience accrued by those who are the "first generation" of a "new breed of linguist" (Amato and Garwood 2011) in order to better approach the complex societal and multicultural challenges of the twenty first century. Investment in research is essential. Research that aims to provide training paths and skills to better equip those already involved, and those who have yet to start on a path of intercultural mediation: not as a part time, ad hoc job but as a mission and chosen profession.

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[26] Tiselius, private communication 22 September 2019.

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