

**A dynamic model of intercultural competences and
its implications in the field of international cooperation.
Experience of Italian operators and cooperators abroad**

**Un modello dinamico di competenze interculturali e le
sue implicazioni nel campo della cooperazione internazionale.
L'esperienza degli operatori e dei cooperanti italiani all'estero**

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Abstract

The study explores intercultural competences in the field of international cooperation. The substantive research question was whether Italian operators who have gained experience abroad, think they have developed intercultural competences and what competences they think they possess. This study involved a total of 20 representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) from Lombardy (Italy), 16 operators working for NGOs in developing countries and 10 Italian international professionals from the UNDP and WHO agencies based in Geneva (Switzerland). In this empirical research project, a semi-structured interview was administered to NGO leaders, a questionnaire to NGO co-operators and UN international operators and a narrative interview to the latter. Qualitative methods of textual analysis were used. The author has created a dynamic model of intercultural competences consisting of fifteen recurrent competences. In this article, the author presents her model and how to assess intercultural competences. The empirical study involving professionals of Italian nationality. The topic of intercultural competences raises a substantial question about their deep, inner workings in the individual. Key issues for future developments in intercultural competences training are made explicit.

Keywords: interculturality, intercultural education, intercultural competences, functioning of competences, dynamic model.

Sommario

Lo studio esplora le competenze interculturali nel campo della cooperazione internazionale. La domanda sostanziale della ricerca è stata se gli operatori italiani, che hanno maturato un'esperienza all'estero, pensano di aver sviluppato delle competenze interculturali e quali competenze pensano di possedere. Questo studio ha coinvolto in tutto 20 rappresentanti di Organizzazioni Non Governative (ONG) della Lombardia (Italia), 16 operatori che lavorano per le ONG nei Paesi in via di sviluppo e 10 professionisti internazionali italiani delle agenzie UNDP e OMS con sede a Ginevra (Svizzera). In questa ricerca empirica sono stati somministrati un'intervista semi-strutturata ai responsabili di ONG, un questionario ai cooperanti di ONG e agli operatori internazionali dell'ONU e un'intervista narrativa a questi ultimi. Sono stati utilizzati i metodi qualitativi di analisi testuale. L'autrice ha creato un modello dinamico di competenze interculturali, composto da quindici competenze ricorrenti. In questo articolo l'autrice presenta il suo modello e il modo in cui valutare queste competenze. Lo studio empirico ha coinvolto professionisti di nazionalità italiana. Il tema delle competenze interculturali solleva una questione sostanziale sul loro funzionamento profondo e interiore nella persona. Vengono esplicitate le questioni chiave per gli sviluppi futuri della formazione alle competenze interculturali.

Parole chiave: interculturalità, educazione interculturale, competenze interculturali, funzionamento delle competenze, modello dinamico.

Introduction

The topic of intercultural competences has received increasing attention over time, due to the growing awareness that diversity is now the norm, i.e. it is part of the reality of the individual's life, and because of the implications this has on the individual. The first

questions that the researchers tackling the topic asked themselves were to define them, because there are multiple definitions, and to identify which competences should be considered. According to Deardorff, intercultural competence is «the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes (motivation), intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection» (2006b, p. 5). This is a multidimensional understanding of the term. In line with Deardorff, the research conducted defined intercultural competence as personal internal resources that mobilise «a process of change that leads to the development, in a dynamic way, of certain aspects of the cognitive, emotional, affective, motivational, behavioural, and interpersonal spheres» (Franzini, 2017, p. 356). The interpretative framework within which intercultural competences were addressed in the study is the process of profound transformation or change of the individual, which inevitably involves several dimensions of the person. The process of transformation of the individual occurs at certain times when the subject is willing to change significant aspects of him/herself. This internal disposition to change is linked to motivational aspect, that internal force that is propulsive to change.

While intercultural competences training has been the subject of studies and research in recent times, there have been steps in the past that have supported this recognition. In the 1950s, studies on culture shock began to be conducted (DuBois, 1951; Oberg, 1960; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1960), but it was in the 1970s and 1980s that the first intercultural models, such as Ruben's (1976) and Bennett and Hammer's (2003) were developed. Ruben (1976) introduced the behavioural dimension in addition to the cognitive one. He realised that there was a gap between what a person knew and what she/he actually put into action. Bennett and Hammer's model of intercultural sensitivity development was created to explain how people construct cultural differences through individual experiences. This model identifies six orientations: three ethnocentric (denial, defence and minimisation) and three ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation and integration). The model focuses on a stadial view of individual development (Bennett, 1986; Bennett and Bennett, 2003; Castiglioni, 2005). Ruben's, Bennett's and Hammer's models can be considered as the first forms of study that have been successively and significantly treated since the 2000s with a dynamic approach to the development of intercultural competences in the individual (Franzini, 2017; Deardorff, 2009; Portera, 2011; Santerini, 2012).

A further aspect that arose was the specific areas within which intercultural competences were addressed. These areas have included, for example, young people studying in a country different from their country of origin (Anquetil, 2006; Ballatore, 2010; Deardorff, 2006a); couples adopting children through international adoption (Franzini, 2012). In addition to these thematic *lunges*, there was also exploratory research that investigated several areas together, like the research directed by Agostino Portera on intercultural competences in schooling, law, business, health and cultural mediation (Portera, 2013). In this sense, it should be considered that, in dealing with intercultural competences, there are both common and specific aspects. Intercultural competences are increasingly recognised as transversal, not ascribable to a profession, but to that set of personal internal resources that are mobilised in intercultural situations.

The substantive research question was whether Italian co-operators and international operators, who have gained experience abroad, think they have developed intercultural competences and what competences they think they have developed (Franzini, 2017): their experience helped to understand which intercultural competences are crucial in dealing with people from different cultures.

1. Theoretical aspects of intercultural competences and aspects of the dynamic model of intercultural competences

In the theoretical development of intercultural competences, in addition to the aspect of their definition, another aspect that was explored in depth was to clarify which competences should be considered. Several authors used the form of the model. While the definition of models has introduced the possibility of relating competences that were previously considered individually, the specific study of certain competences has made it possible to highlight characteristic aspects that have changed over time. One of these competences, which has pervasively affected several areas of pedagogy and psychology, is empathy (Albiero and Matricardi, 2006; Bellingreri, 2005; Bonino, Lo Coco and Tani, 1999). As early as the 1960s, empathy was treated as a turning point in interpreting the quality of human interactions, fostered by the contributions of Hoffman (1977) and Feshbach (Feshbach and Roe, 1968).

In addition to empathy, the models revealed several competences. Deardorff's model (2006b, 2020), which is considered to have more in common than the model proposed by the author and whose multi-perspective reading is shared, comprises four dimensions:

- attitudes: valuing cultural diversity and tolerating ambiguity. Favourable aspects of intercultural learning are respect, openness curiosity and discovery;
- knowledge and comprehension: cultural self-awareness, deep understanding and knowledge of culture, culture-specific information, sociolinguistic awareness; listening, observing and interpreting, analysing, evaluating and relating as skills;
- desired internal outcome: adaptability, flexibility, an ethno-relative view and empathy;
- desired external outcome: behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in order to achieve one's goals to some degree.

The competences in Deardorff's model, which are also found in the author's model, are: respect, openness, curiosity and discovery, knowledge of culture, capacity to decentralise, flexibility, empathy and effective and appropriate communication. The latter competence is expressed in the study as the ability to understand cultural meaning, which includes linguistic knowledge and communication skills. Other differences are related to the aspect of openness, part of the absence of judgment for Deardorff, while the author considers it a separate competence, and the tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, which in the study is named as breaking certainties and managing uncertainties, in terms of a greater capacity for internal processing.

The study made it possible to define a theoretical framework and the constituent elements of intercultural competences for their enhancement. Intercultural competences have been defined in the study as those internal personal resources that are mobilised in intercultural situations (Franzini, 2020, p. 8). This means that during encounters with people from cultures other than one's own and during the stay in another country, which in the case of international workers is a developing country, this mobilisation takes place that enables the person to respond to external stresses. In the analysis of the life experiences of international workers, the existence of recurrences, i.e. intercultural competences that repeatedly intervene in the various contexts in which the person experiences cultural diversity and that become variable resources that the person can make use of, emerged.

The most recurrent competences found in the authors considered (Deardorff, 2006b; Ruben, 1976; Fantini, 2000; Lusting and Kroester, 2006; Olson and Kroeger, 2001; Alred, Byram and Fleming, 2002; Hammer and Bennett, 2003) were:

- respect;
- flexibility;
- openness;
- curiosity;
- cultural knowledge;
- empathy;
- suspension of judgment;
- capacity to decentralise;
- communication skills;
- tolerance of ambiguity;
- relativising the self;
- relational abilities.

The dynamic model takes into account the dimension of the self, as present in other models such as that of Portera (2019). In order to identify intercultural competences, the criterion of their presence both in the studies of the various authors and in the discourses of the professionals involved in the survey was used. The dynamic intercultural competences model identifies fifteen intercultural competences, explained in the following session (Franzini, 2017).

2. Methodological aspects

The study is the product of a PhD carried out at the University of Verona under the supervision of Professor Agostino Portera. In the research (Franzini, 2017) carried out in 2012, a semi-structured interview (Sorzio, 2005; Cardano, 2011; Bichi, 2002) was administered to 20 heads of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) based in the Lombardy Region (Italy), a questionnaire (Manganelli Rattazzi, 1990) was administered to 16 Italian cooperators abroad at the time the survey was carried out, and a narrative interview (Atkinson, 2002; Mezirow, 2000) was administered to 10 Italian international operators who, at the time the study was carried out, worked in two United Nations Agencies (UNDP and WHO) at Geneva (Switzerland) headquarters. The term *co-operators* has been used to refer to people engaged in cooperation projects in developing countries on behalf of an NGO, while the term *international operators* has been used to designate professionals providing service for one of the United Nations Agencies. The Lombardy NGOs involved, through the interview administered to the contact persons of these NGOs, represented 62.5% of the total number of Lombardy NGOs that had Italian co-operators abroad at the time the survey was conducted.

A qualitative methodology was used in the empirical research, both in the choice of tools to be used and in the analysis of the data. The semi-structured interviews lasted from about forty minutes to one hour and thirty minutes. The interviews made it possible to construct a frame of meaning and to gather information on the experience of Italian co-operators' abroad. A further survey tool used was a questionnaire with open-ended questions referring to two aspects: the process of change in the person in the new work context and intercultural competences. They were asked what intercultural competences they felt they possessed and used in their work and in dealing with people from other cultures in the field of international cooperation. The same questionnaire administered to the co-operators was used with the UN international operators in the phase preceding the conduct of the narrative interview (Atkinson, 2002; Mezirow, 2001). The narrative

interview was used to deepen the intertwining of life history and intercultural competences.

This type of interview allowed people to tell their personal stories. Over the course of three months, from September to December 2012, 10 international operators of the UN Agencies in Geneva (UNDP and WHO) were interviewed. Ten international operators were Italian, 8 males and 2 females, aged between 32 and 61. They had gained experience in international cooperation between 4 and 37 years; 8 out of 10 had started before the age of 30¹. The research involved people who had not necessarily lived for continuous periods in developing countries, but had travelled to more than ten countries during the year. Each subject was heard two to four times, preceded by the administration of a questionnaire. The narrative interview presented a minimal level of directness, leaving the subject free to conceptualise. Twenty narratives were collected of life episodes in which subjects thought they had acted out intercultural competences in the contexts of developing countries, places where subjects were engaged in international cooperation activities. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full and a text analysis was carried out. All interviews were analysed first individually and then cross-sectionally. The data were organised to identify similar and specific recurrences, phrases, aspects and characteristics. The organisation of the data was based on the analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured and narrative interviews. The narratives were divided into nine categories of analysis, such as: antecedents to the international cooperation experience; first cooperation experience; training/work; work at the UN; personal resources/difficulties encountered; experience of international cooperation; relationships with local people or people from other cultures; dangers encountered; work-life balance. The dynamic model of intercultural competences, created with this study, was built on the basis of Portera's (2011, 2017) intercultural competences model. The implications of the dynamic model were investigated within the specific empirical study involving some international operators, of Italian nationality, working in the field of international cooperation.

Empirical research has identified fifteen intercultural competences, which make up the dynamic model of intercultural competences (Franzini, 2017, pp. 356-370): taking a broad/global view; openness to diversity and recognition of the value of the other and their thinking; listening skills; understanding cultural meaning (linguistic knowledge and communicative and interpretative capacity); disassembling certainties (breaking down schemes) and managing uncertainties (dissent and paradox); capacity to decentralise; creating spaces of sharing and bridging meanings; challenging the barriers of refusal (stereotypes, prejudices, racism and discrimination); suspending judgement; capacity to explore (curiosity and discovery); flexibility; empathy; humility and respect; trust; patience. In the study following the definition of the dynamic model of intercultural competences², an assessment rubric was defined (Franzini, 2020), allowing the various aspects of each competence to be clarified. It should be emphasised that there is a link between these competences, so that it is possible to identify an area of boundary, but also an area of overlap. This rubric can be used as a compass to investigate these composite competences within an experiential dimension. Intercultural competences should not be understood as isolated and static elements, but in their dynamic form. Below are the dimensions of the assessment-rubric broken down by competence. The original table also includes criteria, indicators and levels of mastery for each intercultural competence (Franzini, 2020, pp. 75-87). The dimensions indicate the peculiar characteristics that distinguish each individual competence (Castoldi, 2016).

COMPETENCES	DIMENSIONS
Taking a broad/global view.	Knowledge of cultures in their dynamic form (cultural plurality); knowledge of world issues and problems (knowledge of the world and interdependence/interconnectedness); knowledge of global dynamics (globalisation); capacity for analysing the impact of human choices (global responsibility and social commitment).
Creating spaces of sharing and bridging meanings.	Capacity to share with the other than oneself (reconstruction of an attribution of new meaning); capacity for creating bridge meanings and putting units into relation with each other.
Challenging the barriers of refusal (stereotypes, prejudices, racism and discrimination).	Capacity for reconsidering one's own mental categories that lead to the refusal of another person; capacity for disassembling the logic of domination and powerlessness; capacity for coping with injustice.
Understanding cultural meaning (linguistic, knowledge, communicative skills and interpretative capacity of reality).	Knowledge of the language of conversation; linguistic and relational ability in communication; understanding the cultural dimension and contest in the communicative event; capacity for re-elaborating reality.
Ability to decentralise.	Capacity for differentiating one's point of view from that of others and seeing situations from that point of view.
Openness to diversity and recognition of the value of others and their way of thinking.	Interest in different people and a variety of habits and lifestyles; capacity for contributing positively to wide areas of cultural worth; capacity for enhancing one's own and others' cultural aspects; attributing value to others; tolerance of different values; capacity for the co-essentiality of different thoughts.
Capacity for exploration (curiosity and sense of discovery).	Interest in novelty (exploring the unknown); capacity for gaining experience and considering various possible alternatives; desire for knowledge (investigating, trying to find something out).
Listening skills.	Capacity for listening to other people's ideas.
Empathy.	Understanding the emotional state of another person and his/her experience (cognitive level); sharing/co-participation in the same or a similar emotion as that of the other person, feeling what the other person feels (emotional level), being aware that the shared emotion derives from the emotion of the other person (vicarious sharing);
Trust.	Capacity for trusting with serenity; capacity for feeling that the other person is familiar (proximity); capacity for feeling that one has nothing to fear from others (absence of danger); capacity for self-confidence and confidence in others; capacity for entering into a relationship of unlimited responsibility.
Suspending judgment.	Capacity for entertaining doubt and neither accepting nor refusing; unconditional positive consideration.
Flexibility.	Capacity for reviewing one's thought processes (multiple representations of reality); capacity for putting meaning into perspective (no absolutisation); tolerance of changes that are underway; ductility to change.
Humility and respect.	Awareness of the internal mechanisms that generate a sense of superiority; capacity for curtailing feelings of pride and excessive self-confidence; capacity for behaving in a straightforward manner with one or more people; knowledge of the various forms of respect; awareness of the occurrence of expressions of respect in communication; capacity for mastering forms of respect in interaction.
Disassemble certainties (breaking down belief systems) and managing uncertainty (dissent and paradox).	Desire to question predictability and to actively engage in the deployment of certainty; capacity for dealing with the paralysis of cognition and action in the face of uncertainty; capacity for addressing dissent and paradox;
Patience.	Postponement of one's immediate reaction; controlling one's emotions; persevering in a serene fashion when taking action

Table 1. Assessment Rubric of Intercultural Competences (Franzini, 2020).

The rubric was created on the basis of an in-depth theoretical study and an analysis of the existing scales of measurement, which are listed below.

Taking a broad/global view: *Global competency indexed questions* (Koester and Olebe, 1988); openness to diversity and recognition of the value of others and their thinking: *Big five questionnaire* (Caprara *et al.*, 1993; Caprara *et al.*, 1994). Only one of the five identified dimensions of the *Big Five Questionnaire* was considered, namely that of openness of mind (M), which in turn is subdivided into two sub-dimensions: openness to culture (Ac) and openness to experience (Ae) (Caprara *et al.*, 1993; Caprara *et al.*, 1994); listening skills was explored through the descriptions, analysis categories and items of the Listening styles profile-revised (LSP-R) (Bodie *et al.*, 2012, 2013); understanding cultural meaning (linguistic knowledge, communication skills and ability to interpret reality): The *Intercultural development inventory* (Hammer and Bennett, 2003) examined the items of the stages of acceptance and adaptation, i.e. the stages that for Bennett and Hammer (2003) characterise the ethnorelative perspective, in relation to the understanding of cultural meaning; disassembling certainty and managing uncertainty: *Intolerance of uncertainty scale* (IUS-12). This assesses intolerance to uncertainty through the assessment of one's situation in terms of how the subject might react emotionally, cognitively and behaviourally to the uncertainties of life (Freeston *et al.*, 1994); ability to decentralise: *Metacognitive functions screening scale - 30 items* (MFSS-30), specific to the capacity for decentralisation (CDD), consisting of 12 items, was considered. Again, as with the other skills, it was considered what measures the component, which for CDD is «the ability to make appropriate inferences about the mental state of others, attributing beliefs, desires, intentions and expectations» (Alaimo and Schimmenti, 2013); empathy: Empathy is one of the most recognised and oft-cited competences in the various pedagogical and psychological disciplines. Empathy was examined by means of the BES-A, a 20-item measurement scale for Adults: 9 items assess cognitive empathy and 11 items affective empathy (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987; Carré *et al.*, 2013). For the remaining competences in the model, theoretical aspects were used to construct analysis categories that could provide qualitative elements for their assessment (Franzini, 2020).

3. Results

The research aimed to investigate the intercultural competences acquired by international operators in the course of their personal and professional lives. In this sense, research has shown that the boundary between personal and professional dimensions in dealing with intercultural competences is blurred. This is a real boundary, but when a person experiences people from different cultures in the context of international cooperation, these dimensions mix internally (Franzini, 2017). In the second study, the focus shifted from the investigation of competences to the identification of useful application tools for their assessment (Franzini, 2020).

According to fourteen out of sixteen co-operators and seven out of ten international operators, the events experienced in international cooperation have produced at least one profound change, sometimes compared to the birth of a child or the death or illness of a family member. The transformation process tells of a meaning involvement of the person and a reference to what moves within the individual when the subject relates to a person from another culture, which can sometimes present itself in the form of difficulties. The profound change experienced by the subject implies a different way of dealing with life's circumstances, of interpreting them and giving meaning to them.

The presence of multiple languages and cultures raises the question of the plurality of existing forms of diversity and how people experience this plurality internally. The experience of the other proved to be a way to increase awareness of one's own *cultural traces*. One international operator tells of discovering aspects of diversity in his work experience on some islands in Africa:

there are no certain categories of either experience or situation. People basically don't understand you. That heritage of mine, which was after all the only one I had, was not expendable there. None of my experiences matched theirs. So, one opens up and says: How do I talk to these people? What am I talking about? And you find a whole new set of situations where mutual interest becomes curiosity (1A, male, 57 years, October 2012).

In this sense, the competence that has taken shape in the dynamic model is the one called creating spaces of sharing and bridging meanings, as if the construction of *a space within oneself* and *a bridge to the other* were not taken for granted or an effect of the development of other competences. Creating space in the mind for the other also means being able to make one's own process of change possible. The study, through the in-depth study of the life episodes of international UN operators, showed that it is possible to construct the co/existence of different visions of things, without triggering a conflict, even on aspects that could be considered fundamental. This becomes possible because a rupture event occurs that allows the individual to disassemble certainties and break his/her own mental schemes in order to build a bridge between oneself and the other. It is about developing the ability to build bridging meanings even when diversity becomes shocking, destabilising and very tiring. In the narration of a life episode, an international operator recounts an encounter he had with a marabou or sorcerer during his service at a hospital in Senegal (Franzini, 2017, pp. 294-297). The operator recounts that he had to make room in his mind for another way of thinking and feeling emotionally in order to surgically intervene on the person who did not want to be cured. Therefore, he sought a mode that did not conflict between his vision and that of the marabou. In this way, the practitioner recognises more value in the other's vision and keeps the two thoughts co-essential, even if he had initially experienced them as opposing.

The research revealed an awareness on the part of the NGOs participating in the study that the intercultural dimension in international cooperation is transversal and widespread, but risks remaining hidden. NGO leaders believe that it is not easy to address the dimension of cultural diversity and intercultural competences, which are relevant in a job that brings individuals into constant relation with each other. Intercultural competences have been described in research as a set of abilities, skills, knowledge and attitudes that develop dynamically in the individual. These are forces that act continuously and can open up resistance, even very strong resistance, in the individual. The analysis showed that while the competences of respect, flexibility, openness, curiosity, empathy, suspension of judgment and the capacity to decentralise are those common to the models considered in relation to the author's model, different competences are also present in the dynamic model. In the dynamic model, barriers and resistance to encountering the other are explored and, in addition to respect, humility emerges, which is relevant in the relationships created in international cooperation, as well as trust and patience, in building a positive relationship based on reciprocity. An NGO contact person reports:

Respect is also rapprochement. You get closer, you get to know the other person and you also respect diversity. It is a combination of getting closer and therefore becoming more equal and also knowing that you keep your identity, your culture and therefore there is mutual respect (representative of NGO, female, November 2018).

Equally important is the ability to listen, which can take on different characteristics of intensity, from grasping and interpreting the content of the conversation to deep listening. The ability to listen was named by the Lombardy NGO's representative contact persons as the ability to remain silent, the ability to wait, the ability to give appropriate feedback and the ability to tune in to the interlocutor's state. The most significant number of NGO representatives interviewed considered open-mindedness, tolerance, respect, the ability to listen and curiosity to be essential competences for co-operators (Franzini, 2017, p. 173), while the competences most mentioned by the co-operators, which they felt they practised the most, were patience and humility (Franzini, 2017, p. 193). The above-mentioned competences are part of the presented model. The following have emerged as specific aspects to the work environment of international cooperation: disassembling of feelings of superiority; the ability to put problems in perspective and problem-solving skills (based on available resources and responsiveness); the ability to work in heterogeneous groups; managing emotions and stress (such as environmental stress) (Franzini, 2017, pp. 368-369). The emotional resilience to certain situations is expressed by an NGO representative in these terms: «when an individual has to implement a food distribution project and is faced with thousands of people, it means developing a capacity to cope with the demands without being overwhelmed» (representative of NGO, male, June 2012).

Disassembling feelings of superiority was made to fall under the competence of humility, while the other aspects were reported by the participants as being more related to a contextual dimension. All competences in the model were confirmed on the basis of the data collected and processing. The worker's activity abroad is played out between feelings of familiarity and strangeness, between distance and proximity. The feeling of being different is sometimes perceived by the practitioner as very strong, an otherness that is evident and immediately perceived in the new living context, especially if the subject lives in rural environment or moves from one place to another in the country. Living in an unfamiliar environment induces the operator to activate an effort to know, understand and interpret the context in which she/he is living, an environment in which the practitioner wants to make a positive contribution. Knowledge and understanding of the cultural dimension are also asserted in this study as relevant, as recognised by the authors cited above. The effort to understand a new culture is linked to curiosity and the desire to explore a new environment. An international operator tells of a time when he was on duty as a doctor in an African hospital:

I was immersed in a natural environment. Discover, then, how nature becomes the term and comparison of everyday life. In Swahili, there is no definition of a time, but they always tell you a story to, for example, answer the question: How long have you been in pain? If the pain is excruciating and quick, they tell you: «How long does it take a stone to fall», or if it lasts two or three months, they say: «How long does the mango go from being a flower to being green». But you have to know where the person lives, because if the mango is in a sunny area, this happens much sooner. This means that for a simple question, the discussion can go on for up to twenty minutes (1A, male, 57 years, September 2012).

The reported part of the story also shows a different conception of space and time of the operator compared to the context. Analysis of the experience of international operators also shows that individuals sometimes *decompensate* in contact with people and places that *say* a lot about diversity. In this sense, an important point clearly emerges, namely how intercultural competences cannot be taken for granted. Experiences in which the international operator has felt unprepared reveal the importance of not leaving this dimension to spontaneity, that is, of not letting the person according to her or his own experiential background, which may or may not be appropriate to the situation she or he will face. This making do, on the basis of the internal resources that the person would have at her or his disposal, has shown some representatives of Lombardy NGOs, in some cases, particularly serious consequences that have jeopardised the implementation of international cooperation projects.

4. Theoretical and practical implications and the limits of research

Training in intercultural competences has a very important function: intercultural competences lie within human beings, they are part and parcel of a person and they are in motion within us, often on an unknowing level. This is why targeted intercultural competences training would allow this even unconscious internal movement to emerge, to enable people to understand how it works, to be able to identify, understand, manage and strengthen them. Starting with that capacity to identify and name, which needs to be built, it is possible to begin that process of identification and empowerment. However, awareness is not enough. It is necessary to make the transition from awareness to good functioning, that enables the person to make relationships with people from other cultures beneficial for themselves and others. The challenge facing education is considerable and requires further investigation in the field of education research and practice. It seems relevant to create and give space to this dimension that is still too hidden in the discourses and depths of human beings. The recognition of intercultural competences is so close to the individual's consciousness that it seems that *it only takes an active to reveal them*.

In the discourses to the interviewees, diversity, which is expressed in the relationship with the other, is sometimes felt as both a loss and a resource. At other times, it can also be felt as a danger, and so protective responses become even more tenacious. There are different forms of the subject's defence and this, in a training course aimed at enhancing intercultural competences, must be taken into account and addressed. It would be equally useful to explore the various forms of refusal of the other, as presented in the dynamic model. It is necessary to understand how virtuous processes could be created and implemented to strengthen intercultural competences in the individual, as they can play a key role. They can build a fertile inner dimension in the individual to create positive relationships with others, including those from different cultures. Furthermore, these competences can guide the design and creation of training courses that develop people's capacity to experience diversity in its various forms. Cultural roots are deep and sometimes strongly expressed, but the state of disorientation or bewilderment allows one to recognise one's own and others' diversity in order to build a bridge between oneself and the other, aware that some things take shape through the other (Franzini, 2017).

It must be considered that the study involved a limited number of people. Furthermore, it would be useful to be able to equip operators and managers with assessment or self-assessment tools that can provide additional quantitative and qualitative elements and information aimed at understanding which aspects of fragility are present in the person on whom to intervene.

Conclusions

Competences are not always conscious or intentional. They travel in the discourses of professionals without an acknowledgement that kind of appearance is a competence and that it has certain characteristics of its own, which differentiates it from others. In this sense, the intercultural competences model and the intercultural competence assessment rubric above can be useful for people to make this transition. Intercultural competences travel *silently* in discourses and texts. They also sometimes show themselves shyly, in a *leopard-like* way in dialogues (like spots that are separated from each other). This failure to recognise competences leads to making the steps difficult, namely the possibility of their enhancement, of identifying non-functional aspects, of understanding the effect of aspects of one's own behaviour on others and of their modifiability with a view to improvement. Understanding how they are expressed, how they are categorised, how they are defined, how they are interpreted, could make it possible to use another *register* of meaning, represented, precisely, intercultural competences. All these aspects can be addressed in training courses aimed at international operators leaving for foreign countries or already in the contexts, but also at various professionals in the educational, training and social field. Teacher training in the intercultural field is a privileged field to explore intercultural competences, given that encounters between teachers, students and their families with migrant backgrounds are a daily event.

There also seems to be a continuum between competences and scarcity of competences. This is not to say that there should be a problem-centeredness in the treatment of incompetence, but that the smooth functioning of competences seems to move from the desire for enhancement. It is not an all-or-nothing operation, but competences are part of people's lives and *fluctuate*. Furthermore, there seems to be a common matrix that holds together the various competences, which have been specifically studied over time. One thinks of empathy, for example, which has been studied for a long time and has also been regarded in the psychological field as a crucial protective factor, as in the case of adolescent psychosocial adaptation (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2006). Today, we can assume that empathy, like other competences, is not unrelated to various aspects that tell us about the way the person experiences the other. It is believed that by adopting an attentive and experienced *gaze*, one can identify intercultural competences, point them out and do work that has the potential, in the wake of the drive for change that is inherent in human beings and their aspiration for improvement, to make relationships beneficial for oneself and others and reduce their negative effects.

One of the risks could be to limit the discourse of intercultural competences to its constituent elements, i.e. the various competences, and to detach the discourse from an integral view of the person. On the contrary, this article emphasises the importance of developing the issue of intercultural competences in the functioning of the person. Continuous in-depth study of the subject would provide a theoretical basis necessary to guide the professional engaged in education, training, social and personal care. Interdisciplinary comparison and studies in different disciplines would keep the development of the topic alive and rich.

Notes

¹ In this article, in order to maintain anonymity, sentences collected during the course of the interviews, were reported. Each person (10 in all) was assigned a sequential code: 1A, 2B, 3C, 4D, 5E, 6F, 7G, 8H, 9I, 10L.

² The second study was the product of the post-doctoral research that benefited from the contribution of the Fondazione Fratelli Confalonieri of Milan.

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Short Bio

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