THE CULTURAL MEDIATOR AS A FACILITATOR FOR COLLABORATION: FOSTERING INTER-INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKING AMONG SERVICES FOR FORCED MIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The aim of the study is to explore the experience of cultural mediators in working with operators of reception and mental health care systems for forced migrants. Specifically, the study seeks to address strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement in the service network.
Background	Cultural mediation in Italy has developed as a response to the increasing cultural diversity within reception and healthcare systems, driven by significant migration flows. Nonetheless, the lack of inter-institutional relationships and standardized procedures hamper the effectiveness of cultural mediators in supporting forced migrants within the network of psycho-social services.
Methodology	The study implemented a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with 14 cultural mediators. The interviews aimed to understand the experience of cultural mediators in working in the network of services that support forced migrants. Cultural mediators with different work experiences and cultural backgrounds were selected through convenience sampling.
Contribution	This study adds to the literature the direct experience and perceptions of cultural mediators as regards their work with reception and mental health system

	operators and the collaboration between these stakeholders, highlighting the central role offered by cultural mediators in fostering such collaboration.
Findings	The study revealed both the strengths and weaknesses of collaboration between forced migrant reception and mental health services, highlighting the key role of cultural mediators in bridging gaps between different services. It also provides suggestions on how to improve collaboration between different stakeholders.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Practitioners should improve collaboration among different stakeholders by improving communication skills and cultural training of psycho-social operators involved in the aid network of forced migrants.
Recommendations for Researchers	Future research should investigate how efficient communication and resource location between psycho-social operators that support forced migrants could impact the work of cultural mediators and the quality of support provided to forced migrants.
Impact on Society	Study findings give useful insights on how to improve the reception and mental health care for forced migrants and the collaboration between different actors, ultimately impacting both the lives of migrants and society as a whole.
Future Research	Future studies should focus on evaluating the long-term effects of implementing the recommendations for improving service networks and understanding the impact of policy changes on the role of cultural mediators.
Keywords	cultural mediators, forced migrants, Italian reception system, mental health services, inter-organizational networks

INTRODUCTION

The network of reception and assistance services for forced migrants is complex and multifaceted (Oliver et al., 2020; Popp et al., 2014; Qayyum et al., 2014). The services must address a wide range of needs that migrants bring with them (De Leo et al., 2022), which requires constant collaboration among the various organizations involved in their care and reception, such as third-sector associations, local authorities, healthcare services, and public administrations. These entities often operate in a context characterized by different mandates, administrative confusion, and lack of resources, leading operators to struggle to find effective responses to support forced migrants (De Leo et al., 2023). This complexity is accentuated by the fact that forced migrants served by these organizations have very different cultural characteristics. This creates the need to activate cultural mediation interventions, as dialogue between beneficiaries and the wide range of operators in the field of reception and mental health care does not develop automatically (Morniroli et al., 2007). Reducing the communicative and cultural gap is crucial for the implementation of inclusion projects for individuals with a migratory background (Lannutti & Hoxha, 2015; Terranova, 1998).

Cultural mediation began to spread in Italy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, alongside the increase in the foreign population. The role of the cultural mediator was formally recognized for the first time with Law No. 40 of March 6, 1998 (L. 40/1998), which defines the mediator as a professional tasked with "facilitating relations between individual administrations and foreigners belonging to different ethnic, national, linguistic, and religious groups" (Morniroli et al., 2007; Tonioli, 2016). However, more than 25 years after the promulgation of this law, there is still no comprehensive recognition or standardized national definition of the role of the cultural mediator. This lack of formal recognition and a unified regulatory framework negatively impacts their work, limiting the value of their skills and creating inconsistency in professional practices. Despite the progress made, there is still no official

professional register or standardized training system for these professionals (Lannutti & Hoxha, 2015; Luatti, 2020).

The primary role of cultural mediators is to facilitate the interactions between migrants and operators of psycho-social services, taking care of the cultural and linguistic differences of the actors involved (Luatti, 2011). Cultural mediators must explain and contextualize messages and situations for both migrants and service operators while providing useful information regarding the needs and cultural background of migrants. They empower migrants to engage with public and private services by encouraging them to ask questions, prepare for consultations, and suggest communication strategies to providers (Verrept, 2019).

The quality of cultural mediators' interventions is most evident when they effectively adapt to their contexts (Theisen-Womersley, 2021). However, this adaptability is often challenged by the environments in which they operate, specifically, the reception and mental health care systems. These systems frequently lack the financial and resource capacity to meet the complex and diverse needs of the service users (Morniroli et al., 2007). The lack of an overarching and long-term vision, as well as centralized coordination of social policies for forced migrants, are the main causes of serious deficiencies in the reception system, leading to fragmented and ad hoc interventions to support forced migrants (De Leo et al., 2023; Morniroli et al., 2007). In addition, one of the main challenges for cultural mediators is collaborating with professional figures involved in mental health care (Russo et al., 2020). The language barriers and limited intercultural skills among healthcare staff impede long-term interactions with foreign patients, resulting in approximate healthcare delivery (Biga & Selicorni, 2022; Bove & Romano, 2021). Emergency interventions occur more frequently than long-term interventions due to the challenges that forced migrants have in accessing appropriate care (Gozzoli & De Leo, 2020). Different timeframes between the reception sector and psychological care also negatively impact the quality-of-care interventions (D'Anna et al., 2022; Lalli & Giacomelli, 2022).

The analysis above highlights that the ability to adapt to various contexts is crucial for cultural mediators (Venables et al., 2021). Properly trained cultural mediators are essential in connecting diverse services within the reception and care system for forced migrants. Specific networking skills are necessary for cultural mediators to effectively connect various services (Avolio et al., 2024). They must understand the complexities of the reception system and mental health care in order to be able to collaborate with different stakeholders. This results in effective support for forced migrants and enhanced communication between different psycho-social operators.

Building on existing literature, this research aims to explore the experiences of cultural mediators, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses they identify in the reception and care services and the networks that connect them. The study further investigates the competencies required by cultural mediators to navigate these networks effectively.

To explore this complexity and shed light on emerging issues, our research adopts a psychosociological approach to study collaboration and network creation from the perspective of cultural mediators (Gozzoli, 2016a, 2016b; Gozzoli et al., 2014; Kelly, 1955; Lewin, 1951). This approach takes into account the interconnection between people, groups, organizations, and institutions, allowing for the analysis of the organizational and psycho-social aspects both at the individual and collective levels. The focus is shifted towards the relational and symbolic dimension of work, other than its technicalities (Pozzi et al., 2023). Therefore, the emotional and symbolic dimensions of inter-personal and inter-institutional relationships and the operational aspects of work experience are considered. Consequently, in adopting the psycho-social approach, it is desirable to implement a qualitative research methodology as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of cultural mediators.

In the current study, semi-structured interviews with cultural mediators from diverse backgrounds are implemented to gain insights into their experiences and perspectives in working with forced migrants. By focusing on these aspects, the research provides rich, detailed insights into the intricacies

of cultural mediators' roles and the challenges they face within their specific contexts. In order to understand subjective meanings and complex social processes, the qualitative approach is better suited to the purpose of the study.

We examine cultural mediators working in northern Italy, with a focus on Lombardy, a region characterized by significant migration flows, extensive management of reception services, and complex inter-institutional relationships (ISTAT, 2023; Portale Integrazione Migranti, 2021). The organizational complexity of this territory offers a unique context for analyzing how cultural mediators interact with psycho-social operators, thoroughly understanding the challenges and opportunities of mediators' work as well as the specific network dynamics present in Lombardy. Given that this study focuses on service networks, it is essential to focus on a specific territory, as the functionality of a network depends on its geographic and cultural surroundings.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

AIMS AND SCOPES

This study aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of cultural mediators on their role in assisting forced migrants within the network of reception and mental health services. The study focuses on the strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement in the collaboration between different services in Milan and Brescia. As the interpretation of subjective experiences and related meanings are difficult to quantify, a qualitative research method was adopted to analyze the complexity of the processes. The qualitative approach is particularly valuable when exploring under-researched topics, studying personal experiences, analyzing social dynamics, and investigating the meanings individuals attribute to different contexts. The Lombard metropolitan areas of Milan and Brescia were selected as case studies due to their high immigration rates (ISTAT, 2023; Martinelli, 2023; Rapporto Città Metropolitana di Milano, 2021) and the extensive availability of social and intercultural mediation services (Portale Integrazione Migranti, 2021). Approximately 15% of residents in Milan and 12% in Brescia represent the foreign population (ISTAT, 2023). The intense urbanization of the geographical areas, as well as the diversity of cultural backgrounds of foreign residents, present unique challenges for the organization of social and welfare services operating at the level of municipalities. Such coordination requires efficient integration among various institutions, many of which may lack adequate resources and expertise (Genova & Barberis, 2019).

PARTICIPANTS

A purposive sample of 14 cultural mediators working for various organizations collaborating with reception and/or mental health services in Lombardy participated in the study. The sample ensured diversity in gender (5 males, 9 females) and age (mean age = 41.8 years). Cultural backgrounds were also heterogeneous, with participants originating from Ukraine (n = 4), Senegal (n = 3), Nigeria (n = 2), Morocco (n = 2), Cameroon (n = 1), Mali (n=1), and Turkey (n = 1). Data collection was conducted between 2022 and 2023. Four interviews were conducted remotely, while the remaining were conducted in person.

MEASURES

A semi-structured interview format was employed to gather data from participants. This method utilizes a pre-defined interview guide with core questions while allowing flexibility for follow-up inquiries, question re-ordering, or exploration of emerging themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This approach facilitates dynamic conversation, fostering in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The semi-structured interview focused on investigating the experiences and professional backgrounds of cultural mediators in the context of forced migration strengths and weaknesses of service network collaboration.

PROCEDURE

Data were collected between 2022 and 2023. Following the preliminary phone call to determine interest, individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants whenever possible (n=10). Due to geographical limitations, four interviews were conducted remotely (n=4). Informed consents were collected, and interviews (mean duration = 1 hour) were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Ethical approval was granted by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart's Ethics Committee on Psychological Research (protocol number 4-24).

DATA ANALYSIS

Consistent with the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) (Smith, 2011, 2015; Smith et al., 1999), a content data analysis system was employed. This involved iterative analysis throughout data collection, allowing for deeper investigation of the interviewees' narratives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As emphasized in IPA, participants' experiences serve as the privileged starting point for interpretation (Eatough & Smith, 2017). A bottom-up thematic analysis was conducted due to the exploratory nature of the study. The analysis was grounded in participants' experiences and meanings, with coding categories emerging directly from the data. Specifically, each interview was evaluated individually to identify specific categories, followed by a comparative analysis to explore convergent and divergent themes across different interviews. Data were examined through an iterative process that facilitates the progressive development of themes that addressed research objects.

RESULTS

The research aim was to explore the strengths and weaknesses that cultural mediators identify in the reception and care services they work with, as well as the networks that connect them. In the section below, the major themes that emerged from the interviews conducted are presented (see Table 1 below for a representation of themes and sub-themes).

Table 1. Key themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Challenges	Role Ambiguity Fragmentation and Poor Communication between Services Lack of Professional Training Job Insecurity Poor Job Selection
Resources	Positive Collaboration Experience Development of Reception Network Cultural Mediators' Sensitivity
Areas of Improvement	Professional Role Regulation Teamwork Centralized Information System Professional Training for Operators

CHALLENGES

The results reflect the perceptions of cultural mediators regarding the challenges they face in collaborating within the network of reception and mental health care services for forced migrants. Participants of the study identified two main areas of difficulty: structural issues and concerns related to working conditions. In terms of structural challenges, cultural mediators noted difficulties in defining their roles, the fragmentation of services, and a lack of professional training that impacts their ability

to work efficiently in the network. As regards working conditions, participants addressed job insecurity and poor selection processes as factors that interfere with the quality of the services provided.

Role ambiguity

The lack of institutional recognition and specific professional training has an impact on the definition of the role of cultural mediators in the different settings in which they operate. Cultural mediators often find the distinction between interpreting and mediating confusing, and this is reflected in their work context. The confusion regarding the role of the linguistic-cultural mediator, according to our participants, is also felt by the operators of the various services they interface with, who have different expectations regarding the functions that the mediators should assume. Sometimes, they are asked to simply act as translators, while in other circumstances, they are required to have broader social competencies:

> *I mean, sometimes it's little, sometimes identical, sometimes completely different, that is, in the sense of being an interpreter. Especially I can make a comparison with the Commission or in the Police Station. I don't have the slightest percentage of interpreting, if I have to translate exactly what I am told, it's as if I don't exist. When I act as a mediator, there, my ideas exist more.* (M, 40, Turkish mediator)

The uncertainty regarding the specific functions of the cultural mediator is evident in unclear job mandates. Consequently, cultural mediators fail to fully grasp the crucial role they play in building a network among various organizations. Instead, they often find themselves navigating fragmented realities. One interviewee expressed the perception of confusion from working for multiple cooperatives simultaneously:

> *It's a bit of a mess, because I have to deal with about ten cooperatives.* (M, 40, Turkish mediator)

Fragmentation and poor communication between services

Cultural mediators revealed certain challenges associated with the collaboration among different reception and care services. Primarily, different mediators noted a fragmentation within these services. These mediators encountered a surprising lack of awareness within the services themselves. Specifically, service providers weren't familiar with the other organizations or entities operating in the area, nor did they understand their specific roles:

> *There are various fragments within the network that are unaware of each other ... "but come together," and you know, it's been like asking, I don't know, asking for something extraterrestrial, to say that all parties must know each other, otherwise the case always remains problematic, nothing gets resolved; so between the health sector, neuropsychiatry, social, technical-administrative, school, I mean, to bring these meetings about what's missing.* (F, 51, Moroccan cultural mediator)

The lack of knowledge among various services operating in the area leads to difficult communication within the services themselves and with cultural mediators, as emphasized in the interviews:

> *They struggle to respond. They can't give you any information.* (M, 44, Senegalese cultural mediator)

One of the interviewees pointed out that this intricate framework arises due to the absence of an institutional steering committee and the role that local municipalities should play in promoting a network and facilitating cooperation between services:

> *I would say it depends on the Municipality. I mean, there's no system, uh, whoever starts well and goes well up to the mediator, but it's all a bit random, all the components. If you catch the right hook, everything goes well, but it's not guaranteed that you'll find it.* (M, 40, Turkish cultural mediator)

Lack of professional training

The interviewees highlighted the lack of support from national institutions and various services regarding the training of cultural mediators. These deficiencies affect the ability of the mediators themselves to feel competent and effective in carrying out their role and to facilitate them in creating a

network for which complex professional skills are required. One mediator reported ending up performing this role by chance without receiving any training:

> *I also did not receive this training, and I became a mediator by chance.* (M, 40, Turkish cultural mediator)

The same cultural mediator also suggested that services should respond to this need by providing specific information:

> *Perhaps having a sort of training both on the psychological dimension and on the cultural, geographical, and even the origin of people.* (M, 40, Turkish cultural mediator)

Job insecurity

The interviews shed light on the fact that cultural mediators frequently operate independently from reception and care services. They often work as freelancers, offering occasional services, which can result in situations of significant job insecurity and precariousness, as emphasized by one of the interviewees.

> *I was working with a cooperative that hadn't even sent me a contract and was asking me to go and do this mediation during the pandemic.* (M, 40 Turkish cultural mediator)

> *Currently, I work on projects and on-call with various cooperatives, always in the field of reception and linguistic-cultural consultancy. Additionally, I also work as a cultural interpreter in legal settings, both with the police, the courts, and various administrations.* (F, 51, Moroccan cultural mediator)

In terms of their role, cultural mediators find it challenging to perceive themselves as integral parts of the networks in which they operate. One participant emphasized the need to incorporate cultural mediators into reception and care services to enhance effectiveness and encourage collaboration among different service providers.

> *There must be mediators within the cooperatives who know how to do this job. Otherwise, for someone who has only worked in a specific office and has not seen different realities they lack this competence. This way the difficulty of the mediator cannot be known.* (M, 40, Turkish cultural mediator)

Poor job selection

Participants of the study highlighted another negative aspect concerning working conditions, which is the common tendency of reception and care services to primarily work in an "emergency" capacity. As highlighted by a participant, psycho-social operators often rush the selection process for cultural mediators in order to secure immediate rather than efficient services. Consequently, a thorough selection procedure aimed at identifying the most suitable candidate for the specific type and context of mediation is often bypassed. This circumstance can cause feelings of ineffectiveness and stress among mediators, ultimately impeding their ability to perform optimally within the network.

> *I receive mediation requests from obstetrics, and it just occurred to me that cooperatives don't even look at the content. The mediation request is sent, mediator, but sometimes you have to consider what type of mediator is required.* (M, 40, Turkish cultural mediator)

RESOURCES

The interviews highlighted several positive factors that facilitate successful collaboration and networking among services involved in migrant reception and care. These factors include the experience of effective collaboration, the gradual development of a strong reception network, and the significance of individual mediator sensitivity in promoting teamwork.

Positive collaboration experience

Cultural mediators who have had the opportunity to work within networked services have clearly observed the importance and effectiveness of such collaboration in promoting the positive inclusion of

beneficiaries. One interviewee provided a concrete example: coordinated efforts across reception services, the Municipality, and civil society organizations resulted in tangible benefits for service recipients:

> *The networked work functions well. We work with psychologists from the START project, who take care of the boys when they have problems [...] in the Municipality. When it comes to making the document with the identity card [...] they do things immediately [...] a referring doctor who is a primary care physician for the entire structure, when we need help, we just call there, and he is always ready to solve the problem [...] the neighborhood has tried to collaborate with the center and there, from time to time when there are parties in the neighborhood, they invite the boys (immigrants) to participate [...] the parish that gave space to the boys to do volunteer work [...] also with companies to do internships for the boys and it also works.* (M, 58, Senegalese cultural mediator)

> *It works very well, very well because everyone there is available, they already follow the boys very well and they are monitored [...] reports on the health status of the boys, vaccinations, they are all still well monitored.* (M, 58, Senegalese cultural mediator)

Development of reception network

According to the perspective of the interviewees, the reception network has seen significant development compared to many years ago, both in terms of organization and internal structure, as well as in terms of training and sensitivity of internal service operators.

> *Now there is real reception, there is a relationship of understanding, there is space, there is fertile ground, and the Italian operator has this great sensitivity towards the applicant.* (F, 51, Senegalese cultural mediator)

This improvement is particularly visible in the services' ability to better adapt to the specific needs of users.

> *It was discovered that maybe the user liked sewing; a volunteer was found who said: but I sew, so if you want, come for two hours [...] after Italian lessons.* (F, 51, Cameroonian cultural mediator)

Cultural mediators' sensitivity

According to different interviewees, the ability to work within the network significantly depends on the cultural mediators' sensitivity and attitude. Personal motivation and recognition of their role allow cultural mediators to bridge the gap between services and secure commitment in coordinating the network. This collaborative approach fosters cooperation among stakeholders, ultimately leading to improved care for beneficiaries.

> *Therefore, in my opinion, it is important that information circulates among all the figures involved. Often in the past, they would say: "oh no, let's have meetings, the mediator is not requested, it doesn't make much sense for them to be present." Fortunately, things are slowly changing now because before, when there was no user, the mediator's presence wasn't required. Today, it is perhaps realized that when we have meetings without a mediator, what I report to the mediator based on what I've heard and understood is what I communicate, and there are many things that are lost, so it doesn't become efficient to work this way, and we need to change this approach.* (F, 32, Cameroonian cultural mediator)

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

After examining the strengths and weaknesses of network collaboration according to the perspectives of cultural mediators, this section will explore prospects to improve the joint effort between services. Participants identified several practical areas for improvement that include professional role regulation, strengthening teamwork, the development of a centralized information system, and increasing cultural training among service operators.

Professional role regulation

The majority of interviewees addressed the primary necessity to formally recognize the role of cultural mediators, comprising a legal and regulatory framework, defined competencies and mandates, and secure labor rights. One participant indicated that the formal recognition of cultural mediators as a precise professional category would clarify their functions and responsibilities, enhancing the efficacy of their services. By establishing a clear definition of their responsibilities and rights, cultural mediators would be better positioned to navigate the challenges of their work.

> *It also makes known that there are figures who are specialists, who have undergone training, who can help facilitate dialogue between services and immigrants.* (M, 52, Senegalese cultural mediator)

Teamwork

It is essential to create collaborative environments within and among different services. Some interviewees suggest carrying out regular meetings and adopting shared workspaces for the operators involved in the reception and care of forced migrants. Sharing mutual time and space might ease the discussion and the follow-up on beneficiaries and strengthen the relationship between service operators. Additionally, promoting collaborative practices fosters an effective approach to address the needs of migrants and improve the overall quality of care.

> *We work as a team regularly on the various cases we follow, that is, both sides follow them […], so always check in person.* (F, Cameroonian cultural mediator)

> *All parties come together to talk, with the presence of the linguistic-cultural figure.* (F, 51, Moroccan cultural mediator)

> *We always talk and discuss before conducting an interview, and then also meet to try to follow up on what we have.* (M, 52, Senegalese cultural mediator)

Centralized information system

Some mediators highlight the need for investments in developing a centralized information system, where each operator can gradually expand the user's file with emerging information over time. This aims to develop a shared history for each user who accesses various services and interacts with different operators:

> *There needs to be investment regarding the information system and, I don't know, centralizing it.* (M, 44, Senegalese cultural mediator)

> *Centralizing some data makes it much simpler, and giving access to teachers, hospitals, giving access to these entities.* (M, 44, Senegalese cultural mediator)

Centralizing the exchange of information allows for an updated response to the specific need of migrants that would ultimately improve the quality of care and promote a sense of continuity for the beneficiaries that access different services.

Professional training for operators

According to the perspective of participants, intercultural training courses are essential for psychosocial practitioners. This would enhance the understanding of the sociocultural backgrounds of migrants and the adoption of an "intercultural touch" that might reduce the gap between service operators and forced migrants themselves. Therefore, integrating intercultural practice into the training process of operators might benefit the progression of their professional careers. Integrating intercultural training into professional development offers significant benefits. By equipping service providers with essential knowledge and skills, this training stimulates stronger connections among service operators, cultural mediators, and the migrant community. Such an approach is crucial for cultivating an inclusive environment that values and understands the diverse backgrounds of migrants.

Continuous training, in my opinion, is essential to organize, I don't know, even short courses, conferences, intercultural symposiums where listening is also crucial. (F, 51, Moroccan cultural mediator)

Now, we need to include some training where we talk about interculturality, where we can hear testimonies, bring up cases, bring up critical issues, bring up successful and failed cases; we talk, we talk about reality, we talk a bit about why because by talking about it, we can reflect. (F, 51, Moroccan cultural mediator)

DISCUSSION

This research examines the challenges and opportunities of network collaboration in the reception and assistance services for forced migrants, starting from the perspective of cultural mediators. Our findings illustrate how creating an effective network could improve the support offered to forced migrants while also highlighting some significant structural and organizational challenges. These results validate existing literature and provide interesting insights. According to the perspectives of cultural mediators, the reception and mental health care system have improved over time. However, other aspects, such as service fragmentation and poor communication among psycho-social operators, impact the network's functioning. This indicates that, although there are elements of success, there are still difficulties in creating a truly cohesive and collaborative network.

The main issue raised by the study participants is the lack of institutional professionalization for cultural mediators, which significantly affects their effectiveness and their ability to strengthen the network among various stakeholders. This concern is also supported by previous literature, which highlights how the absence of institutionalization is evident at both the macro and micro levels (Avolio et al., 2024; Genova & Barberis, 2019; Luatti & Torre, 2012). At the macro level, there is an absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework to institutionalize the profession of cultural mediation. In addition, national and regional policies for cultural mediators often fail to align with lower administrative levels (Avolio et al., 2024; Genova & Barberis, 2019; Luatti, 2020). At the micro level, the absence of clear registries and standardized selection procedures leads local stakeholders to encounter difficulties in finding contacts and having a clear idea of what cultural mediators could offer (Avolio et al., 2024). This often translates into unclear job mandates where the role and functions of the cultural mediators are intertwined with the ones of interpreters and social workers, compromising the perception and expectation of cultural mediators of their own jobs (Avolio et al., 2024). Therefore, the lack of institutional recognition has a cascade effect, beginning with the professional legitimacy of cultural mediators and culminating in their working conditions.

These findings are in line with previous literature that illustrates how cultural mediators' working experience is characterized by several issues, such as job insecurity, poor selection processes, and informal hiring practices from service operators (Avolio et al., 2024; Genova & Barberis, 2019). In addition, standardized training and clear access to the profession are scarce, leading to a fragmentation of career paths. These factors have an impact on cultural mediators' inner experiences towards their profession, resulting in feelings of marginalization and a lower sense of belonging to the service network (Avolio et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the emotional and relational dimensions of their work experiences are often overlooked in response to the frequent emphasis given to operational aspects such as administrative workload and emergency facets. This asymmetry could be easily reproduced in the interaction between cultural mediators and forced migrants, where cultural mediators' support is addressed to material needs instead of psychological and relational challenges often experienced by migrants. Ultimately, inefficiencies in the interpersonal dimension between cultural mediators, forced migrants, and service operators have an impact on cultural mediators' well-being, who often tend to assume supplementary responsibilities. During the interviews, even when asked about their personal work experiences, mediators consistently redirected the conversation to the relationships they maintain with users. The core of these professionals' work is outwardly focused toward the users they must guide and protect through the bureaucratic process of accessing services. In doing so, they often neglect their own well-being, sacrificing as much as possible for the successful outcome of the

reception process. This external orientation can have deep consequences for the professional identity of cultural mediators. On the one hand, by identifying so closely with users and experiencing the entire reception process alongside them, mediators gain a unique and privileged perspective on how the service network operates and on the specific needs of the users. On the other hand, mediators inevitably absorb the same difficulties that users face when navigating a fragmented and often inefficient service network, as well as the stigma and hate speech directed at migrants (De Leo & Russo, 2023), resulting in discomfort and a significant increase in stress.

As regards the efficiency of reception and care services for forced migrants, participants of the study highlighted significant improvements in terms of professional competencies and collaborative efforts among practitioners. Over time, psycho-social operators acquired a collective vision of reception and mental health care as a right and issue of equal opportunities. This sense of unity is supported by increased dialogue between professionals from different institutions, who can exchange skills and experiences. Professionals who experienced situations of effective collaboration emphasized the importance of a well-coordinated network in improving care and support to forced migrants. Furthermore, many interviewees observed positive changes in the structure, organization, and sensitivity of the reception system as more aligned with migrants' needs, producing greater inclusion interventions. However, it is worth mentioning that these positive experiences are reported by cultural mediators who mainly operate in urban contexts with a wide range of reception centers, and this is likely because Lombardy is a region with a high concentration of migrants in the reception sector (Statista Search Department, 2024).

Another positive aspect observed by participants is the tendency of cultural mediators to work within a network. Practitioners should recognize the essential role played by cultural mediators in facilitating collaboration between services and their users. Cultural mediators could promote information exchange and structured meetings between various psycho-social operators. These skills are essential to building a collaborative network culture. However, the current excessive dependence on initiatives and personal motivations of cultural mediators indicates the need for a more institutionalized approach to cultural mediation apparatus. As Luatti (2020) emphasized, cultural mediation should be seen as an intervention device, not just a professional role. In order to achieve this, resources should be allocated to building "mediation interventions" – namely, creating specific spaces, teams, and relationships that promote effective communication between cultural mediators and different stakeholders.

Our study also identifies several areas of improvement to promote collaboration between psycho-social practitioners. Primarily, a proper institutionalization of the professional role of cultural mediators could further legitimize their functions as key connectors in building effective collaboration, ensuring their inclusion as crucial members of the network (Avolio et al., 2024; Harney, 2022). Mediators could bridge gaps not only between users and service providers but also between services themselves, potentially contributing to a network governance model that reflects ongoing transformations within the welfare system (Groutsis et al., 2015). Participants also stressed the need to improve certain operational aspects. They highlighted the importance of implementing structured meetings and collaborative group work procedures. In addition, the need for a centralized information system was further addressed by participants in the study. Implementing a common information system could provide an integrated view of forced migrants' needs and overcome the services communication gaps previously outlined in the literature (De Leo et al., 2023). Finally, interviewees indicated that intercultural training for psycho-social operators is essential to promoting effective collaboration between service practitioners.

Interestingly, previous literature addresses this topic, indicating a critical issue: should psycho-social workers invest in cultural training, or should this be all delegated to a specialized professional figure (Genova & Barberis, 2019)? This "dilemma" is particularly evident when comparing countries that have well-established approaches for managing migration to those with unstructured and recent

models. In the former case, practitioners involved in supporting forced migrants are required to develop cultural sensitivity and training. In the latter case, the same responsibilities are delegated to external figures who often struggle to fit into different teamwork and fulfill operational gaps, as observed in Italy (Genova & Barberis, 2019).

In conclusion, the role of the cultural mediator is complex and multifaceted, often proving to be essential to assist forced migrants. They embody the ideal of a welcoming society that should work not only on differences but also on similarities to promote cultural hybridization. The recognition of their professionalism and "intercultural touch" must come, as highlighted by both the interviewees and existing literature, through structured and standardized training for both cultural mediators and operators aimed at developing cultural competencies that foster mutual listening and dialogue among diverse professionals. Our research suggests that promoting cultural training for both social workers and cultural mediators can enhance communication within the service network and with external stakeholders. Particularly in super-diverse societies (Vertovec, 2007), cultural sensitivity is of paramount importance, and cultural mediators play a crucial role in bridging the gap between support services for forced migrants, thereby facilitating communication between migrant communities and civil society.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

The study offers valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of cultural mediators collaborating within the network of migrant reception and care services. However, there are a few limitations that must be taken into consideration.

First, the current study focused only on a specific region of Italy, restricting the generalizability of the results to other areas that might have different organizations and network dynamics. It could be interesting to explore the experiences of cultural mediators in other national or international contexts in future research and make a comparison between different geographical and cultural areas.

In addition, despite being frequent in qualitative research, we included a relatively small sample size that could be integrated into further investigations to ensure a more robust analysis of the collaboration between services involved in supporting forced migrants.

Finally, we limited our study to addressing the experiences and perspectives of cultural mediators only. Further investigations could include a wider range of psycho-social operators and stakeholders to provide different insights into the configuration and coordination of services network and gain a deeper understanding of the potential role of cultural mediators in enhancing such collaboration and providing effective care for forced migrants.

CONCLUSION

Our study highlights the complexities and criticalities of the role and asset of cultural mediators in improving the network of services for forced migrants. Structural and organizational challenges add to the lack of professional recognition of cultural mediators and adequate training for practitioners, posing significant challenges to the efficacy of collaboration between different stakeholders. However, the pivotal role of cultural mediators in connecting such networks offers promising prospects to enhance service delivery for forced migrants. Therefore, official recognition, intercultural training, and the creation of a collaborative culture might significantly improve the reception and care of forced migrants.

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