

# “We were like them”

## Intersecting Identities and Mediators' Intercultural Communication in a Municipal Service

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### Abstract

The main aim of this article is to present an intercultural communication study conducted in a municipal service, which focuses on how cultural mediators make sense of their work with migrants, being both representatives of an Italian institution as well as former foreigners/migrants themselves: their shared everyday context, common destiny and their understanding of users' experiences.

The study, on the whole, underlines how cultural mediators use personal aspects of their own lives to build a “bridge” between the migrant users and the institutions they represent, thus lessening the gap between migrants' past experience and their present lives.

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication; cultural mediation in public services, identity*

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### Introduction and Background

This investigation studies intercultural communication within a public municipal service for foreigners and migrants of a middle-sized Italian town (Padua). The municipal service in question is Cisi: “Centro Informazioni e Servizi per Immigrati” (the Center for Information and Services for Immigrants). This service has locations in four different zones of the town: at a central Registration office (where migrants can also carry out common administrative activities), at another central office situated in the main Council building, and at two additional offices, which are located in two important neighborhoods (the last three Cisi are specifically devoted to migrant users).

The cultural mediators at these services, in Italy, are often foreigners/migrants themselves, but in their role as cultural mediators, they are Council employees and their respective national and/or cultural background is not supposed to interfere with their everyday activities.

We investigated whether cultural mediators meet this requirement, that is, not allowing their personal lives and origins as foreigners/migrants to interfere with their institutional role or whether, on the contrary, they go beyond this role.

In this study we conceive cities as shared “plural spaces” where the study of interaction between global and local “micropolitics of everyday contact and encounters” (Amin 2002:959) becomes relevant. Municipal services are here conceived as “contact zones” (Hermans and Kempen 1998) among migrants and the whole context of the municipality: they can be considered a sort of “space” in which intercultural exchanges mainly take the form of dialogic processes, allowing people to negotiate and make sense of such processes.

The present study takes into account the role of social interaction in the construction of intercultural processes, following Vygotsky's perspective (i. e. 1978), one of the leading psychologists who pointed out the social nature of individual processes, considering them the result of people's linguistic interaction in specific cultural contexts. According to this perspective, context provides norms, values and, in general, cultural artifacts, which allow people to take part in a given community, to think and behave in a mutually shared and understandable way.

The intersection among action, context and identity has also been emphasized by the Discursive Psychology perspective, which investigates the discursive practices of sense-making in everyday contexts (Potter and Edwards 2001, Parker 2011). This perspective relies on a variety of approaches, such as ethnography, discourse and conversation analysis, to investigate how language allows social actors to formulate specific views of the world and of their place within it. It approaches this aim referring to interpretative repertoires (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984) that are constructed through language: they can be defined, in fact, as “a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events” (Potter and Wetherell 1987:138) and as particular ways of talking, identified within people's discourses (Edley 2001), coherent with the perspective that frames everyday talk as a form of social action (Edwards and Potter 1992, Edwards and Potter 1993). As a consequence, Discursive Psychology points out the importance of analyzing

how discourse and interaction make it possible to organize work practices in institutional settings (Hepburn and Wiggins 2005, Parker 2011).

In this study we also used ethnography to investigate intercultural interaction (Mantovani 2001, 2008) and, in particular, mediators' work practices, in order to identify the main themes related to the intersection between their professional role and personal aspects of their private lives, such as their being foreigners and migrants.

## Methods

Both field notes and interviews were collected for this study: the latter served to deepen the observations included in field notes.

In accordance with the ethnographic perspective, taken in consideration in this research, both field notes and transcriptions of interviews are considered as “inscriptions” (Latour 1986), that is to say “graphical” representations of our objects of interest – communication and interaction – that cannot be “seen” directly. From this perspective, they are not considered as tools for an objective reproduction of communication and interaction, but as cultural artifacts (Cole 1996). If there is a general agreement in considering field notes as “situated artifacts” (Suchman 2007), there is, however, an important debate in literature about objectivity *vs* situatedness of transcriptions (Ashmore 2004, Bulcholtz 2007). In this research we agree with the idea that transcriptions are not “objective” representations of the observed phenomena, yet they are selective in their nature, as they reflect researchers' goals (Ochs 1979). Following this perspective, Bulcholtz (2000:144) underlines that “embedded in the details of transcription are indications of purpose, audience, and the position of the transcriber toward the text”. These characteristics always guide what transcribers decide to include or exclude from a transcription. For this reason transcription can be considered as “a sociocultural practice of representing discourse” (Bulcholtz 2007:785). This perspective is also shared by scholars who refer to Discursive Psychology: Potter and Wetherell (1987:165) suggest that “transcription is a constructive and conventional activity. The transcriber struggles to make clear decisions about what is being said exactly, and then to represent those words in a conventional orthographic system” while Nikander (2008:226) points out that “despite technical guidelines, transcription remains a time consuming, messy, and imperfect process that constructs a textual version of the original interaction”. This perspective is also expressed by Levinson (2005), who underlines that transcriptions should be related to different levels of “contexts” to be understood: to consider transcriptions as part of a larger ethnographic activity makes it possible to avoid the risk of false objectivity (Ashmore *et al.* 2004).

## Data Analysis

A final corpus of 34 field notes, corresponding to 50 hours of in-field observations, was collected. The mean length of field notes is of three pages (about 3700 characters). A qualitative analysis of the discourses represented in the field notes was performed to identify the main themes which emerged when participants referred to their being foreigner or migrants. These themes were then deepened through semi-structured interviews with the five mediators previously observed. All interviews were audio-recorded, and they were transcribed according to Jefferson's System (Jefferson 1983), except for one as the mediator asked not to be recorded. However, he allowed notes to be taken during the interview.

Field notes and interviews have been considered as part of a unique corpus, because all of them are related to mediators' professional activities, and they have been analyzed together in order to identify how mediators refer to aspects of their personal lives while they perform their job.

The main issues related to mediators' sense-making processes will be discussed in the following section, according to two phases: (a) illustrative extracts related to each theme[1]; and (b) content discursive analysis.

The analysis of field notes will be performed by following the sequential course of interaction as reported by researchers, while the interviews will be analyzed by following the participants' co-construction of discursive and conversational turns. The mediators' references to personal aspects of their lives will be pointed out and this will be related to the contextual features of interaction, accordingly to the theoretical perspective pointed out in the introductory part of the paper. Both field notes and interviews have been divided in numbered lines in order to allow a reference to the specific course of interaction under analysis.

## Findings

Starting from the perspective previously outlined, our study focuses on communication and interactions taking place within the Cisi and, in particular, on the way mediators refer to personal events in their lives during their work. As

mentioned above, this Center is distributed in different locations throughout the municipality.

We investigated, through field notes, how the five mediators who worked in the municipality services refer to personal aspects of their lives, including their being foreigners and migrants, in their work practices and how personal experience allows them to make sense of their job.

The analysis of participants' interaction made it possible to identify three emerging themes related to aspects of their personal lives:

- Reference to personal life as a way to point out a “shared everyday context”.
- Reference to personal life as a way to “understand what users experienced”.
- Reference to personal life as a way to point out a “common destiny”.

## Reference to personal life as a way of pointing out “shared everyday context”

*Extract 1 – Field Note - Central Cisi*

1	U1 talks to the operators while filling out some documents. Durante la compilazione dei documenti, U1 scambia qualche battuta con le operatrici.
2	She mainly talks about money problems, in relation In particolare fa riferimento ai problemi economici connessi
3	to expenses for bureaucratic files and her difficulties in coping with the alle spese necessarie per sbrigare tutte le pratiche burocratiche necessarie, e delle difficoltà
4	institutions' requests (like local health system main institutions, ULSS). nel gestire le richieste delle istituzioni (v. ULSS).
5	U1 also talks about some personal issues, she mentions personal U1 parla anche di questioni più personali, si riferisce alle proprie difficoltà
6	difficulties, her child, and her house. personali, al proprio figlio, alla casa.
7	MX listens to U1, and sometimes makes comments. MX ascolta, ogni tanto interagisce con dei commenti,
8	She makes references to herself, by noting, fa dei riferimenti a se stessa, ad esempio commentando
9	for example, that they live in the same street. il fatto che abitano nella stessa via.

This note is taken from the interaction between a mediator (MX) and a female user (U1) at the Cisi located in the main Council building. U1 refers to some personal difficulties (her child and her house, lines 5-6) which should not receive an answer from the mediator, that is, unless the mediator goes beyond her institutional duty and field of responsibility.

Through this reference U1 discursively introduces a personal context into this professional interaction. As outlined in the theoretical section the discursive context is one of the resources which mediates the interaction: the mediator (MX), on

the one hand, does not talk explicitly about responsibilities that go beyond her role, but we can outline, on the other hand, that she does not completely ignore U2's difficulties. She talks about her personal life and, this way, she creates a shared context with U1, by pointing out that they live in the same street (lines 8-9).

*Extract 2 – Interview – Cisi at the Registration Office*

39	MV: By the way, this is a very important information point comunque noi facciamo <u>sempre</u> un <u>punto</u> molto importante <u>di</u>
40	for orientation er... for assistance with dealing with informazione, orientamento e::m di assistenza nel fare
41	bureaucratic files with foreigners. pratiche: con gli stranieri.
42	RD: Vo... voluntary, in effect, voluntary as it seems, because vo- volontaristico di fatto di volontà mi pare di capire perché
43	it's not requested of you. non vi viene richiesto
44	MV: Sure. Sure. I can assure you that when a di sicuro. di sicuro. glielo posso garantire perché quando il
45	citizen comes here in person, face to face, and needs something I cittadino mi viene a me di fronte e vuole fare una cosa (.) <u>io</u>
46	if I can see what the matter is, I ask him a question to understand... if he's se <u>vedo</u> che c'è gli faccio una domanda per capire (..) se è
47	interested or not, or if he is aware that he can get further interessato o non è interessato o se lo <u>sa</u> che può avere una
48	assistance. I... I'm personally speaking about myself, cosa di più. Io <u>io</u> personalmente parlo per il mio adoperato io
49	I always offer more assistance. vado oltre sempre. (.)
50	RD: Er.. e::[m ]
51	MV: I say this to them... I mean heart-to-heart. [glie]lo dico:: cioè con il cuore in mano

52	RD: Yes, yes, I have seen that all of you do this. sì sì ma ho visto che lo fate [tutti]
53	MV: I mean. I should not... in practice... say anything. [cioè ] non devo:: (.) praticamente:: (.) dire niente:
54	RD: I have seen that it's not... that it's not... that any of you avoid giving more ho visto che non è- che non è- che nessuno di voi è avaro di
55	information, on the contrary... informazioni anzi
56	MV: Yes, basically I put myself on that side of the counter sì praticamente <u>io</u> mi metto da questa parte dello sportello
57	Basically. I'm here now. praticamente (..) adesso sono qua [(.)]
58	RD: Yes. [m ] [m ]
59	MV: But I'm here, I'm here on this side of the [pe]rò sono <u>qua</u> (.) sono da questa parte dello
60	counter (I'm everywhere), I'm on the other side of the counter. Then, as I sportello (dovunque) (.) sono dall'altra parte dello sportello. allora <u>come</u> io ho
61	often need to be informed and assisted myself, I put myself in their shoes, bisogno spesso di essere informata e di essere seguita, mi metto al posto
62	in...in their position, and I try to... to do my best. del- del cittadino e cerco di:: di dare il mio meglio.

In the first part of this interview, a mediator (MV) answers the researcher's (RD) questions about the services they provide users, both the institutional ones and those related to requests that go beyond their professional responsibilities. Before the present extract the mediator said that, in the past, she pursued the goal of assisting users to deal with the town's services, thus going beyond her work duties. Then she said that this was impossible to do because of the sheer number of users. At the beginning of this extract we can see that, however, such activity continues, and she defines her municipal service as “a very important information point for orientation er... for assistance” (lines 39-40) for foreigners (line 41). When RD points out that such activities are not requested (lines 42-43) MV, at first, confirms that she performs them on her own initiative (lines 46-48): this is reinforced also by her repetition and stress of the pronoun “I” (lines 48 and 56) and by the word “personally” (line 48). She then justifies such activities from a sort of moral point of view (she says she performs them “heart-to-heart”, line 51). RD, on one hand, acknowledges MV's moral point of view (“Yes, yes”, line 52) but, on the other hand, he takes the issue to a more general level by claiming that all mediators behave in this way (“it's not that any of you avoid giving more information”, lines 54-55). MV acknowledges RD's comment (“yes”, line 56) and then she explains her behavior from another point of view. She refers to her experience, in fact, using a metaphor: to be “on the other side of the counter” (line 60). This way she discursively recalls the users' context, she positions herself in a common context with them (“in their shoes”, lines 61-62) and she compares their needs with hers

(“I often need to be informed and assisted myself”, lines 60-61). This imagined context mediates a discursive construction of a shared “space” with users. The context plays an important role in the mediator's work practices (as we saw also in the previous extract) and, in this case, it appears as a discursive resource that allows her to justify the fact that she satisfies those users' requests which go beyond her professional responsibilities.

## Reference to personal life as a way to “understand what users experience”

*Extract 3 – Field note from a conversation with a mediator – Peripheral Cisi*

1	RD greets MC and says that he finds it interesting the way RD saluta MC e dice che gli sembra interessante il modo
2	in which she manages interaction. She says that she behaves in cui gestisce l'interazione. Ella dice che agisce
3	as if she is dealing with "people". come se si stesse relazionando con delle "persone".
4	She then points out that the fact that they are both foreigners Fa notare poi che il fatto di essere stranieri sia
5	is an advantage (“we understand each other”). lei che gli utenti è un vantaggio (“ci si capisce”).
6	She says that she often has to deal with Dice che spesso le capita di aver a che fare con
7	very difficult issues. She tells him, for instance, that the questioni molto delicate. Gli racconta, ad esempio, che il
8	Bengali man, from whom she took notes today, signore Bengalese, su cui ha preso note oggi,
9	got upset last time he came here la volta scorsa che si sono visti si è
10	when he told her about the death of his son. commosso raccontandole della morte di un figlio.

This field note starts with a comment from the researcher (RD) about the way in which the mediator (MC) manages the interaction with users (lines 1-2). After RD's comment MC explains some factors that mediate her interaction: she says, at first, that while dealing with users she treats them as “people” (line 3) and then she refers to the fact that they are both “foreigners” (line 4). What is interesting is MC's usage of the word “people” (instead of “users”) and of the plural form of the noun “foreigners”, which enables her to consider herself as part of a group that also includes the users. She then adds that their being foreigners allows them to “understand each other” (line 5) and that this is an “advantage” (line 5). This way MC's reference to her experience is presented as a way to understand the users' experience. She relates, as in the previous note, personal aspects of her life to an occasion in which the user talked about issues that were not related to the mediator's professional responsibilities, such as the death of the user's son (line 10).

## Reference to personal life as a way to point out a “common destiny”

1	((MC)) asks us if we have any more questions; RV talks about the (MC) ci chiede se abbiamo altre domande; RV riprende il discorso
2	issue she broached last time, about being affrontato l'altra volta, relativo al fatto di
3	able to provide users information that goes saper dare agli utenti anche informazioni che vanno
4	beyond their responsibilities. She asks him if this oltre le competenze del CISI. Gli chiede se non si
5	risks confusing the users to the point that they don't know which corra in questo modo il rischio che gli utenti stranieri non capiscano mai a chi
6	service they should refer to. He replies that it is right not to dovrebbero effettivamente rivolgersi. Lui risponde che è giusto non
7	focus just on providing those services for which one was hired because it pensare soltanto a portare a termine i servizi per cui si viene assunti, perché
8	would be wrong to perform just one or two actions and, then, sarebbe sbagliato saper fare solo una o due cose e poi
9	leave it at that once the counter closes. It is necessary, appena si chiude lo sportello è tutto finito. Bisogna
10	on the contrary, to remember that “we were like them” and al contrario ricordarsi che “noi eravamo come loro” e
11	to try and give them advice even if this goes beyond ones cercare di dare consigli anche se questo esula dal proprio
12	duty. lavoro.

This field note of an interview to a mediator describes, at the beginning, how the researcher (RV) asks the mediator (MC) for information about his “ability” (line 3) to address users by providing them information that goes beyond the mediators' institutional responsibilities (lines 3-4). When RV talks to MC about this issue he justifies the importance of providing such information by referring, through the expression “we were like them” (line 10), to his past experience as a migrant. It is interesting to underline, in this interview, the clear anchoring of the mediator's speech to his migrant “identity” and private life (like in the previous field note that was analyzed) when users make requests that exceed the mediator's responsibilities. Users' reference to a context which goes beyond mediators' professional responsibilities mediates MC's anchoring to his personal experience, as we pointed out also in the analysis of the first field note. This

anchoring allows him to point out a common “destiny” between himself and the users and to point out a moral duty (“it is necessary”, line 9) associated to such a destiny, as it is suggested from the moral term “wrong” (line 8).

## Discussion

Six instances of how mediators refer to their personal life within work practices have been identified in field observations[2] and interviews. The references are related to a discursive construction of a shared context with users, to understand what users experience and to point out to a common destiny with them. As we underlined in the review of literature, where we introduced Vigotky's and the Discursive Psychology approach, the context plays an important role in these processes at different levels. The conversational context (an user reference to his personal life, extract 1 and extract 4) allows the mediator to point out a shared everyday context with him. We showed that the spatial context is a discursive resource which allows the mediator to imagine herself “on the other side of the counter” (extract 2). The Discursive Psychology approach suggests that social actors construct, through language, their views of a social phenomenon and to position themselves among them. This has been shown in extract 2, where the mediator justifies her reference to her personal life from a moral point of view and in extract 3, where the mediator considers in different ways both users (“people”, “foreigners”) and herself (as a foreigner) in order to better understand users' experience.

The reference of mediators to their personal life, which has been observed through field notes and has been confirmed by mediators in interviews (thus suggesting that they are not isolated cases, but common practice in mediators' work), is interesting because mediators, as municipal employees, should not refer to issues that are related to their personal lives: they should provide on the contrary, accordingly to their work ethics, information about institutional and town services (public and private) for migrants[3]. Such references suggest a complexity in their communication practices and in the construction of their professional role, crossing the border of what is requested by the town's institutions.

## Conclusions

Our work was aimed at investigating intercultural communication between cultural mediators and migrants. The research has outlined the salience of focusing on interaction between migrants and cultural mediators, the latter being, at the same time, migrants themselves and municipal employees. The study is thus interested in analyzing how users and mediators interactively manage and construct this faceted communication, shaped through their multiple “identities”.

Analyses show that mediators refer to personal aspects of their lives as former foreigners (or migrants) to create a shared context with the users: physical and historical, the latter mostly represented by the depicting of a common destiny, focusing on the shared experience of the critical migration process.

On the whole, this study underlines how cultural mediators refer also to personal aspects of their lives to interactively build a “communicative bridge” between the official “ingroup” institutions and the migrants. This bridge can be considered a sort of shared new “space” that reduces problems and lessens the gap between the migrants' past experience and their present-day lives, allowing them to manage their “new life”.

Further studies, from this perspective, should investigate how municipal services could be considered by migrant users as a “concrete communicative environment” and a “symbolic place” in which migrants make an effort to belong to the new community they are approaching. Finally, this study can be expanded upon by comparing it to other studies with different countries, by taking into account the complexity of the different laws which govern the organization of public services.

As a main point of interest this paper would suggest the importance of studying the work activities and practices of cultural mediators as an opportunity to further explore the dynamics of communication, by taking into account the ways in which formal roles and personal identities are employed to manage interaction in everyday intercultural contexts.

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[1] Each extract presents a row number, an English translation of the original Italian extract reported below.

[2] The small amount of observations collected is coherent with the ethnographic approach chosen which, according to an emic perspective, does not pursue the goal of generalization.

[3] Memorandum of Understanding among the Province of Padua, the Municipalities of Abano Terme, Camposampiero, Conselve, Este, Limena, Loreggia, Monselice, Piazzola sul Brenta, Piove di Sacco, San Giorgio delle Pertiche, Selvazzano Dentro, Vigodarzere and the “Migranti” Association. Retrieved on 03/01/2012 from <https://extranet.provincia.padova.it/vis.php?MODULO=24&azione=portaleEstProt&id=1525&cosa=alboP>