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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION:

ANALYSIS OF A QUESTIONNAIRE ADMINISTERED TO 30 ITALIAN NGOs

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Intercultural competences in International Cooperation: the need for investigating the topic

This work is the result of the research project funded by the University of International Studies of Rome (UNINT), within the XXXV PhD cycle "Intercultural Relations and International Management (IRIM)".

The decision to investigate the field of intercultural competences stems from the awareness that today's interconnected and globalized society cannot ignore these skills in order to effectively manage the relationship with others. In fact, contacts with individuals of different cultural backgrounds are the order of the day: the internet, social media, international business, travels and Erasmus exchanges - just to name a few - are increasingly eliminating the space-time distances between communities of the world, favoring the creation of multicultural (physical or virtual) spaces. However, it is not obvious that cross-cultural interaction is always a positive experience: everyone conceives, interprets and re-elaborates the phenomena through "cultural lenses" from which we cannot escape. Thus, divergent interpretations and processing of the same events can lead to quarrels, closure or misunderstandings and generate disagreement, repulsion or indignation. The interculturally competent person is aware of this eventuality but does not let it scare him, because he knows that no value is universally valid and what he might deem unseemly or meaningless does not deserve to be hastily judged, otherwise he would run the risk of evaluating it only through his own cultural paradigm of reference, depriving himself of the opportunity to assume the others' perspective and try to understand their point of view. Being interculturally competent does not mean nullifying oneself or losing one's identity, but being aware of the interpretative mechanisms that guide our vision of the world, never "natural", "normal" or "right", but always culturally oriented. An awareness that leaves room for the implementation of emotional and communicative strategies useful for maximizing the effectiveness of the relationship. Although the literature is full of studies and reflections on intercultural skills, there are few references to these abilities in the specific field of International Cooperation, which makes cross-cultural exchange the fulcrum of its functioning: professionals in the sector are constantly exposed to cultural diversity but it is not obvious that they are all interculturally competent. Living abroad or interacting with foreigners, in fact, is not a sufficient condition for developing certain capabilities, on the contrary, if poorly managed, some experiences can even reinforce stereotypes and prejudices, even fueling racist feelings. For this reason, therefore, we wanted to explore the dimension of intercultural abilities among the operators of some Italian NGOs - Non Governmental Organizations - certainly not to give a judgmental

evaluation but to photograph the state of the art of a crucial aspect of International Cooperation, precisely that of the intercultural sensitivity of its protagonists. An ethnocentric approach, which does not include other visions than its own, risks transforming International Cooperation into a one-way transmission channel of Western value, social, political and economic models, because they are "more just". Indeed, the value of this work is also supported by the position of international agencies such as UNESCO[1], UNFPA[2], DANIDA[3] and CIDA[4], which have recently underlined the need to integrate, in the design and implementation of projects, a greater awareness of indigenous cultures, so that the interventions are truly successful, sustainable over time (also from a socio-cultural point of view) and relevant, i.e. responding to the real needs of the recipients.

1.2 Research questions

This study aims to explore the dimension of intercultural competences in International Cooperation, a theme that still occupies little space in the academic literature. In particular, we want to know if workers in this sector, constantly exposed to cultural diversity, are able to establish effective and constructive cross-cultural relationships. The human dimensions that we wish to observe are the cognitive one (conceptualization of some elements connected to culture); emotional (management of emotions, especially in cases of conflict of values and/or disagreement with the other); operational (management and resolution skills of an intercultural crisis in a project). Also, we want to understand if intercultural competences are a central issue for the institutions belonging to the sector, if they believe that these skills are important for the professional training of operators and for the proper functioning of the projects. The analytical approach chosen is quantitative but combined with typical elements of qualitative research, precious for the emergence of some data that would otherwise be difficult to identify. The research tool is the written questionnaire, addressed to expat and desk employees of Italian NGOs active in many regions of the world.

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[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Change in Continuity. Concepts and Tools for a Cultural Approach to Development*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris 2000
[2] United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Culture Matters – Working with Communities and Faith-based Organizations - Case Studies from Country Programmes*, UNFPA, New York 2005
[3] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (DANIDA), *Culture and Development – Strategy and guidelines*, DANIDA, Copenhagen 2002
[4] Eyford H., Eyford, G., *Involving Culture: a fieldworkers guide to culturally sensitive development*, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for UNESCO, Paris 1995

The questions related to the purpose of the research are:

1) What meaning is attributed to the concept of culture and intercultural relations?
2) Is there the ability to identify and manage the emotions experienced in the cross-cultural relationship?
3) Is there the ability to integrate different cultural paradigms within a project?
4) Is intercultural competence a central element in the training of NGOs' workers?

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This research thesis is developed in five chapters, divided as follows: (1) introduction to the work; (2) literature overview related to the topic of study; (3) explanation of the analysis methodology used; (4) presentation of the results and related considerations; (5) concluding remarks.

The first chapter is introductory to the topic of intercultural competences in International Cooperation, therefore explanatory about the objectives of the research and the questions connected to them.

The second chapter illustrates the studies dedicated to intercultural competences conducted so far, which form the scientific basis of this document: articles, books, extracts from conferences and courses, paragraphs from encyclopedias, definitions and considerations by contemporary and past scholars engaged in research on culture, cross-cultural relations and intercultural communication. In particular, the academical framework of the present research is constituted by the studies developed by: (1) Milton Bennett, creator of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), a theoretical tool through which an individual can get an idea of his own ability to conceptualize diversity and constructively relate to it; (2) Paolo Balboni and Fabio Caon, promoters of a theoretical model of intercultural communication useful to refine verbal and non-verbal communication strategies and to maximize the effectiveness in pluricultural contexts, but also to constantly develop new "soft skills" such as observation, active listening and empathy; (3) Manila Franzini, who has dedicated part of her academic life to exploring the world of intercultural skills in International Cooperation, offering a theoretical model centered on the dynamism of these skills; (4) Margalit Cohen-Emerique, who highlights the central role of the cultural dimension in international relations, placing particular emphasis on the widespread phenomenon of culture shock. Many other scholars have been a precious source of inspiration and knowledge in exploring the concepts of culture, multicultural, cross-culture and intercultural, as well as development and cooperation.

The third chapter is dedicated to the research methodology used for the implementation of the study. In particular, it explains why a mixed approach was chosen, combining typical elements of quantitative research and characteristic elements

of the qualitative method; why the questionnaire was preferred as an analysis tool; which variables were identified for the construction of the survey and what type of questions were asked to the participants. A brief description follows on the method of disseminating the questionnaire to Italian NGOs operating in Italy and abroad, and a more extensive explanation of the method for analyzing the results.

The fourth chapter presents the collected data both in graphic form (charts) and in textual form, depending on the type of question (open or close-ended). The chapter begins with the presentation of the socio-personal data of the participants, such as age, years of professional experience, role, educational qualification and previous cross-cultural experiences, followed by the analysis of the responses to the survey. We investigated the cognitive, emotional and operational dimension of the intercultural skills of the respondents, but also the importance that the International Cooperation system attributes to these abilities. The answers were read "horizontally" and not "vertically", therefore not for each interviewee but for each question (e.g. What did everyone answer to question 1? What did everyone answer to question 2?). This has made it possible to remain in the territory of social research without leading to the psychological one, which is not in keeping with the pre-established aims.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, a summary reflection on the collected data is proposed, accompanied by some considerations on the merits of the study, its limits but also its potential, possibly expressible in future further research.

2. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining "Culture"

Although the term "culture" is part of the common jargon, used daily in many contexts, the concept connected to it is not so easy to define, given the complexity of nuances and meanings attributed to it.

There are numerous scholars who are involved in studying culture, wondering its meaning and its role in human relations, but while formulating theories and reflections, the answers they provide never manage to make everyone agree. In short, there is no definition of "culture" that is universally accepted.

In 1952, American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn examined 164 definitions of culture after conducting a comprehensive analysis of the terms. No one, after them, has ever tried to take into account the various definitions of the word. They stated that the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may be considered as products of action, as patterns of behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts. In particular, Alfred Kroeber (1952) defined culture as a "superorganic level" that cannot be attributed to or dependent upon nature but is instead an ordered complex whose governing principles may be determined.

British anthropologist Edward Tylor (1987) was the very first to formulate a definition of culture. According to him, culture (or civilization), understood in its broadest ethnographic sense, is the complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, law, custom, and any other skills and habits acquired by man as a member of a society. The phrase "complex whole" is the element that has persisted the longest and is still thought to be accurate today. Previously, the predominant conception of culture was intended as a synonym for education, that is the heritage of knowledge that a person accumulates over the course of life. The anthropological sense attributed by Tylor, led to conceive that every human society and, by extension, every person, is a producer and bearer of culture. In this view, it is regarded as a characteristic shared by all members of the human race.

Actually, a few years earlier anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1932) developed the notion that every civilization had its own distinct sets of "configurations" or "cultural models" which were absorbed by the person in an irreducible way. Geertz's studies (1972) broadens the debate, suggesting that culture does not comprise behaviors but rather a collection of symbols (a network of meanings), as well as motivations, moods, and thoughts. Culture, therefore, manifests itself more through thought than practical and visible action. A few years later, Harris (1976) describes culture as the lifestyle

that a group of people has socially acquired. According to the American anthropologist, it consists of standardized and repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are shared by people who belong to a particular civilization or social group. This definition is quite close to the one formulated in 1992 by Schwartz, who conceives culture as the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations to contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves. The concept of the transmission of culture from one age group to another is also central to the thinking of Matsumoto (1996), who states that culture is a group of people's common yet unique set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that are passed down from one generation to the next. Instead, the idea of generational transmission is not prevalent in Hofstede (1991; 1994; 2001), but rather that of sharing, and not only at the family or national level: according to him, culture is the collective training of the mind that separates members of one group from another. In every group there are different people. If one were to believe that a bell curve represented the qualities of people, then the difference between cultures would be the shift in the bell curve that occurs when a person transits from one group to another. Until that moment, the term culture was most frequently used to refer to tribes or ethnic groups (in anthropology), to nations (in political sciences) and to organizations (in sociology) but never to jobs, that is, for instance, the group of engineers, accountants, academics, etc. The conceptualization can also be used to refer to social classes or genders. Thus, the idea of culture can be altered by altering the level of aggregation being researched. Of course, societal, national and gender cultures are ingrained in children starting at a young age and go much deeper into the human psyche than occupational ones, learned in the workplace.

Also in Byram (1997) there is the idea of sharing, in particular of meanings and social representations, values, behaviors of a social group, intended as a collectivity of people or a social institution. Similarly, Spencer-Oatey (2008) affirms that culture is the orientations to life, ideas, regulations, procedures, and behavioral norms that are shared by a group of people. Culture influences (but does not necessarily dictate) each member's behavior as well as their interpretation of the "meaning" of other people's behavior. According to Barbara Miller (2019), culture is the set of behaviors and beliefs learned and shared by people, while for American sociologist Milton Bennett (2004; 2013; 2016; 2020) culture is a group's ability to coordinate their meaning and habits, a conception widely taken into consideration in this research, since it seems to be the one most in line with the idea of inter-culture and intercultural competences illustrated below. As claimed by Bennett, the group is intended as an institution that could be families, political, economical, and religious systems, as well as other social structures. But beneath these institutions lies a routine arrangement of how the world is perceived, and consequently how it is experienced. Therefore, meanings are

produced by the human worldview and each individual belongs to groups with boundaries. People readily identify between one another based on color, making it easier for them to associate with others who share similar physical characteristics. Color discrimination is not always linked to prejudice, and organizational borders can show extremely strong and diverse cultural worldviews (e.g. corporate cultures, police culture, armed services culture, peace corps culture). Thus, similarly to Hofstede's reflection, different groups inside organizations, including accountants, teachers, architects, detectives, etc., are likely to have a culture. Certainly, culture is not limited to professional classifications, but it can also be based on sexual orientation, clothing style, way of feeding (ex. vegans versus meat lovers), age, and many other categories. The requirement to coordinate meaning and action among more regularly interacting people is what creates culture. In short, culture is how people interact with those they are more likely to come into contact with, that is people who belong to or identify with a specific group. They don't necessarily have the same convictions but they attribute similar meanings to behaviors and phenomena because they are like-minded. Culture understood as a dynamic, transversal and participatory process avoids the danger of its reification, that is to think of it as a "thing", a concept that could limit or even prevent a positive intercultural interaction. In fact, while a process is fluid and admits new elements or the reformulation of existing ones, a "thing" leads to a clash with something else, that is to say with another culture. For this reason, in the present study, the metaphor of culture as an iceberg, used by numerous scholars, was rejected: the iceberg model was proposed by Gary Weaver in 1986, inspired by the idea of culture as an integrated pattern of human behavior that incorporates ideas, words, deeds, and values of a particular racial, ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic group (Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Isaacs, 1989). The image of the iceberg (Fig.1) is to illustrate the various levels of which a culture is composed: the components of folk culture like arts, dancing style, dressing, food, language, etc., is the portion "above water", readily apparent and recognizable. Instead, the concept of justice, word ethics, eye behavior, the definition of insanity, ways to problem-solving, financial expression, and personality are examples of what is "below water", concealed from view. According to the scholar, therefore, an external culture is opposed to an internal one, much larger and more complex. Thus, when two icebergs (cultures) collide, the real impact happens underwater, where the conflict of values and thought patterns occurs (Salvai, 2011).

Surface Culture

LANGUAGE

ARTS, LITERATURE

RELIGIONS, MUSIC, DRESS

DANCE, GAMES, SPORTS, COOKING

Folk Culture

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NOTIONS OF MODESTY   CONCEPTS OF BEAUTY

Invisible   EDUCATION   CHILD RAISING   RULES OF DESCENT

COSMOLOGY   RELATIONSHIP TO THINGS, ANIMALS & PLANTS

COURTSHIP PRACTICES   CONCEPT OF JUSTICE   MOTIVATION TO WORK

CRITERIA FOR LEADERSHIP   DECISION MAKING PROCESSES   DEITIES   DEATH

IDEAS OF CLEANLINESS   LOCUS OF CONTROL   THEORY OF DISEASE   PHYSICAL SPACE

DEFINITION OF SANITY, FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, MURDER, LIFE, GENDER, FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

ROLES IN RELATION TO STATUS BY AGE, GENDER, CLASS, KINSHIP, OCCUPATION, RELIGION,

CONVERSATIONAL PATTERNS IN VARIOUS SOCIAL CONTEXTS, CONCEPTION OF TIME & SPACE

PREFERENCES FOR COMPETITION, COOPERATION, INDIVIDUALISM OR GROUP NORMS, SIN, GRACE

NOTION OF ADULTHOOD, NOTION OF LOGIC AND VALIDITY, PHYSICAL SPACE ARRANGEMENTS, LIFE

ODORS, HANDLING OF EMOTIONS, ACCEPTANCE OF FRUSTRATION OR PAIN, CONCEPT OF FAITH

Fig. 1: *Culture as an Iceberg, Hanley J. (1999)*

The iceberg is a reification of culture, making it something that exists in itself, totally independent of the human beings who act on it. In terms of effectiveness in intercultural communication, this metaphor risks frustrating any effort because it favors confrontation more than dialogue, negotiation, integration of multiple worldviews.

In conclusion, the image that best represents the dynamism of culture is the mosaic or rather the "kaleidoscopic flow" (Whorf, 1956), made up of many changeable pieces that can be "attached" and "reassembled" together to compose a cultural identity. An identity that people are constantly building and deconstructing (Melucci, 1996).

2.2 Defining "Intercultural Competences"

Definitions of intercultural competences are countless. According to Fantini's 2009 research many different terminologies were employed in the literature to refer to them: cross-cultural sensitivity, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, transcultural communication, multiculturalism, global competence, cross-cultural awareness, and global citizenship are a few of them. This variety is connected to the complexity of the topic, its transversality and fluidity. In fact, intercultural competences are applicable to any area of daily, professional and academic life, assuming always different meanings. To try to solve the problem of indefiniteness, American scholar Darla K. Deardorff

conducted a survey with 23 intercultural specialists mainly from the United States, asking them to agree on the definition of intercultural competence. Although no full agreement was reached, the sentence that produced the greatest level of consensus was: ability to interact responsibly and effectively across cultures, based on each person's unique intercultural knowledge, abilities, and attitudes. Below, in order of consent:

- ability to move the frame of reference appropriately and adapt behavior to the cultural context;
- ability to identify culture-driven behaviors and participate with new behaviors in other cultures, even when they are not familiar;
- behave appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills and motivation.

    Within the same study and with reference to the most popular definition, twenty-two essential components of intercultural competences were agreed upon by the experts, that are:

- understanding of other worldviews (100% of the votes);
- awareness of one's cultural self;
- adjustment to and integration into a new cultural environment;
- ability to observe and listen;
- general openness to intercultural learning and to people of different cultures;
- flexibility;
- analytical skills;
- tolerance for and acceptance of ambiguity;
- in-depth familiarity with and comprehension of one's own and other cultures;
- respect for other cultures;
- cross-cultural empathy;
- appreciation of the importance of cultural diversity;
- understanding of the function of culture;
- cognitive adaptability;
- sociolinguistic proficiency;
- consideration of others;
- reserve judgment;
- be curious and exploratory;
- learn through interaction;
- have an ethnocentric perspective
- have knowledge or awareness of the particular host culture.

The large number of components listed, gives the measure of the versatility of intercultural competence, but to Deardorff (2006; 2009) it can be defined as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, according to

specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflections. In a more articulated way, intercultural competences are a set of capacities, skills, knowledge, attitudes of intercultural value, which develop dynamically in the individual and which involve cognitive, emotional, affective, motivational, behavioral and interpersonal aspects.

Darla Deardorff's model of intercultural competences (Fig. 2) envisages four dimensions of intercultural competences, imagined within an individual process made up of lived experiences and reworking of the experiences themselves:

- the first step of the process is represented by the attitude. It must be positive towards situations of cultural diversity. Openness to the new and curiosity, in fact, are essential elements to be effective in interacting with the other by oneself;

- the second step consists of knowledge and skills. In this phase, awareness of the cultural self is essential, so keep in mind that we observe and interpret events not in a neutral way but (always) through cultural lenses, in line with the reflection of Hall (1976), who defines culture as a lens that gives context, structure, and meaning to how people perceive, interpret, and understand information and make sense of the world. Parallel to sociolinguistic knowledge, to those related to the cultural, social and religious context in which one acts, some practical skills are also required such as listening and observation, analysis, evaluation and narration of cultural elements;

- in the third step there are the internal results, that is the change of perspective, the relativization of one's own frame of reference and empathy. Thus the individual learns to adapt to new situations, to new styles of communication and life, to new rules;

- the fourth step consists of external results, that is the actual ability to weave constructive interactions with the other. The relationship is positive when a win-win situation occurs, in which no one violates the rules of the other and all the actors involved reach their communicative purpose (Balboni and Caon, 2015).
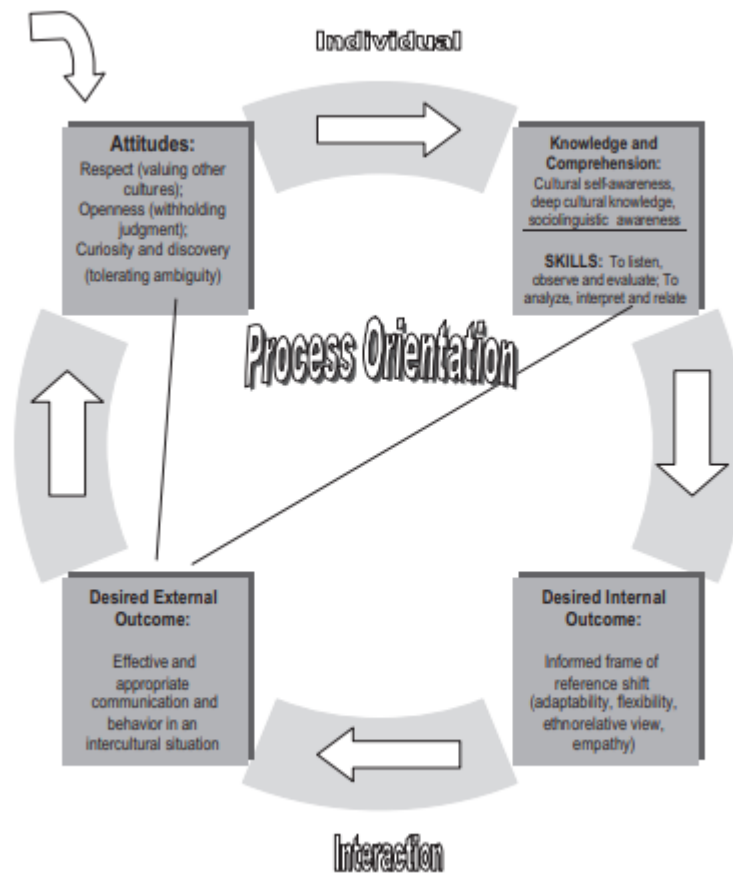
Fig. 2: *Process Model of Intercultural Competence, Deardorff D. K. (2006)*

According to Alred and Byram (2002), intercultural competence has become essential for people to live in the worldwide society of the twenty-first century.

Internet, social media, television, international business, ease of travel from one country to another, student exchanges have canceled the space-time distances and facilitated the encounter with other cultures. However, the meeting is not always pleasant if an individual has not the right predisposition and skills. To live positive experiences in today's interconnected and globalized world, the individual must be able to quickly adapt to new situations and change viewpoints (Taylor, 1994).

Deardorff's intuition about the different psycho-relational aspects that become relevant in the interaction with a culture other than his own, was an inspiration in the construction of the questionnaire for this research. However, the aspects highlighted by the American scholar were made to converge in only three macro dimensions, namely: cognitive, emotional, and operational. Coining her terminology but transposing it on a different level, it can be said that the first two are "internal" (to the individual), while the third is "external" (to the individual), therefore visible.

2.2.1 Cognitive dimension

In terms of intercultural competences, the cognitive dimension plays a crucial role. In fact, the ability to interact effectively with others cannot be developed solely by cross-cultural interaction but it needs a deep cultural awareness (Bennett, 2016). As Gudykunst (1996) states, in fact, theories that guide people's behaviors and values are implicit, not so conscious or manifest. That's why if consciousness misses, the interaction can even be harmful. Over the past few decades, the concept of cultural awareness (CA) has been increasingly important in understanding the cultural aspect of language education. Thus, according to Baker (2012), L2[5] users must recognize that L2 communication is a cultural process and be conscious of both their own and other people's cultural influences on how they communicate. Obviously, cultural awareness is not just about communication, which is also a relevant aspect, but about any behavior, thought, interpretation and ethical conviction. It is the awareness that everything that surrounds us - objects, people, behaviors, emotions, events, etc. - does not have a meaning in itself, it is rather attributed by individuals according to the culture with which they identify. Acquiring this vision of the world means relativizing one's position, not taking for granted that the concepts of right or wrong are universal, as well as those of good and bad, appropriate or immoral, normal or weird. Keeping in mind that each interpretation is culturally oriented, helps the person to avoid misunderstanding and intercultural crisis.

In this regard, a study by Quappe and Cantatore (2005) provides a practical example: Italians almost automatically think of Americans as being always busy, eating business lunches, and sipping coffee on the street rather than in a bar. Does it mean that all Italians are slothful whereas all Americans are overactive? No, it implies that, depending on the culture, various people may have different meanings for particular actions like eating lunch or dinner. In Italy, a country that places a great emphasis on relationships, gatherings for lunch, supper, or even just a quick cup of coffee have a strong social connotation: people come together to chat, unwind, and better know each other. In the USA, where "time is money", concluding a sale over lunch is the best way not to "waste time", as well as discussing the results of a project or signing a contract over a cup of coffee.

Misinterpretations mostly happen when we impose our own unaware behavioral rules onto others. When we don't know better, we prefer to assume rather than ask what an action implies to the other person. Of course it is challenging to become aware of our cultural dynamics, because culture is not conscious to us. We have developed the ability to see and act on an unconscious level ever since we were born. Our experiences, values, and cultural upbringing influence how we view and approach

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[5] L2 means, in linguistics and glottodidactics, a language learned at a later time than the learner's mother tongue, referred to as L1

the world. In order to understand how our culture affects our behavior, we occasionally need to move outside of our cultural comfort zones. To have a clearer understanding of our cultural characteristics, it is quite beneficial to seek input on our behavior from foreign colleagues. Indeed, according to Meyer (2021) the great majority of managers who work overseas are largely unaware of how culture affects their work. Whether a person is aware of it or not, the deep disparities between what is regarded as good business or common sense in different countries have a significant impact on how we perceive one another. Reiterating what has been said at the beginning of this paragraph, Meyer's studies confirm that "it is common to work across cultures for decades and travel frequently for business while remaining unaware and uniformed about how culture impacts you". Millions of people work in cross-cultural environments while taking things in from their own cultural views and presuming that all personality-based disparities, controversies, and miscommunications exist. Individuals do, of course, differ in their personality features, but if someone approaches every contact with the premise that culture doesn't matter or cultural patterns are totally ignored, the default mode will be to see other people through the prism of your own.

Quappe and Cantatore (2005) identified different stages of cultural awareness, showing how an individual can increase consciousness, hence intercultural competences. They are:
- Parochial stage: The only way is via me. People are conscious of their manner of doing things and believe that it is the only way to accomplish things. They are ignoring the effects of cultural variations at this point;
- Ethnocentric stage: I am aware of their method, but I believe mine is superior. At this level, people are aware of alternative methods but still believe theirs to be the most effective. Cultural differences are seen as a source of issues, and people frequently minimize or dismiss them;
- Synergistic stage: Their Way and My Way. At this stage, people are aware of their own and other people's methods, and they select the method that is most appropriate for the given circumstance. People are now eager to use cultural variety to develop fresh ideas and alternatives since they are aware that cultural differences can result in both issues and benefits;
- Participatory stage: Our Way. The fourth and final stage brings together individuals from various cultural backgrounds to develop a culture of common meanings. People engage in constant conversation with one another, develop new norms and definitions, and adapt existing ones to suit the circumstances. This is what Bennett (2013; 2016; 2017) and Castiglioni (2020) define as "third culture", a concept detailed in the following paragraphs.

2.2.2 Emotional dimension

A second dimension to take into consideration when talking about intercultural competences is the emotional one, which includes the dual ability to recognize the emotions that are being experienced and to manage them. This has been first conceptualized by Mayer and Salovey (1990) and later popularized by Goleman (1995). It is a concept called Emotional Intelligence (EI), defined as "the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others" (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, 2000).

Emotions are one the four basic kinds of mental operations, together with motivation, cognition and consciousness (Bain, 1855). Across mammalian species, emotions seem to have developed to signal and react to changes in how a person interacts with their environment. For instance, fear develops in response to perceived danger, while rage develops in response to perceived threat or injustice. When relationships are believed to be changing, emotions alter. Additionally, each emotion coordinates a number of fundamental behavioral reactions to the interaction; for instance, fear coordinates freezing or running away.

Intelligence, on the other hand, can be defined as the capacity to carry out valid abstract reasoning (Sternberg, 1997). It has frequently been shown that intelligence may be used to predict other kinds of success, most notably scholastic accomplishment, but prediction is far from perfection or guaranteed success. According to Goleman (1995) this is particularly true in social interactions, because it is described as the ability to motivate oneself and persist in pursuing a goal despite frustrations; to control impulses; to modulate the moods by avoiding that suffering prevents us from thinking; the ability to be empathetic. Therefore, emotional intelligence has nothing to do with IQ, which guarantees no opportunity to overcome moments of crisis and seize the opportunities offered by life. Goleman's research confirms that emotionally competent people are more likely to be happy and effective in interpersonal relationships because their attitudes are productivity-oriented. In an in-depth study on the subject, Salovey (1993) lists five main areas of which emotional intelligence is composed:

1) Knowledge of one's emotions: feel that you are experiencing emotions and recognize which ones;
2) Emotional control: don't let yourself be overwhelmed by the emotions you are experiencing;
3) Self-Motivation: knowing how to postpone gratification and calm impulses to maximize the result of any activity;
4) Recognition of the emotions of others: knowing how to feel empathy, taking

the perspective of the other;
5) Relationship management: knowing how to dominate the emotions of others to strengthen one's social role in a given context.

If emotional management is essential to maximize the effectiveness of social interactions, it is logical to deduce that it is also fundamental to positively manage intercultural relations: the encounter with a person from another culture is never neutral but can give rise to very intense emotions, such as amazement, enthusiasm, admiration, fear, anger, annoyance, indignation, etc.

2.2.3 Operational dimension

In the intercultural relationship a third dimension comes into play: the operational one, previously classified as "external". In fact, while the cognitive and emotional dynamics are internal to the person, the operational ones are visible (or listenable) because they translate into actions, words, behaviors, gestures, attitudes, proposed solutions, etc. The operational dimension comes from what has been previously worked out mentally and emotionally, it is its concretization. A worker from International Cooperation, for example, can find himself in potentially critical situations when working on a project that is culturally incompatible with indigenous habits, so once the cognitive and emotional dimensions have been elaborated, he must think an effective solution so that the project does not go wrong, proves useless or even harmful. The reflection, of course, can be extended to any other area in which there is an intercultural relationship: knowing how to manage the interaction positively can prevent quarrels, misunderstandings, crises, failures or can remedy if these have occurred. According to Charleston et al (2018) NGOs have different types of obstacles than traditional for-profit international businesses, particularly when it comes to delivering adequate training on managing multicultural teams and practically collaborating with local project partners and communities. The environmental and contextual hurdles that confront International Cooperation may make it difficult for workers to reach a high degree of operational effectiveness even when they have the required knowledge to live well in a cross-cultural setting (Johnson et al. 2006).
Being operationally effective means acting as a mediator between two or more cultural frameworks, in such a way as to produce behaviors that are appropriate and effective in the context (Giaccardi, 2005).
   A crucial area of this dimension is that of communication, a subject on which a lot of research has been done, even at an intercultural level. Indeed, intercultural communication increasingly represents a branch of study in itself, given its complexity. Whether verbal or non-verbal, it is the visible (or listenable) reflection of our thoughts, intentions, emotions. Krauss (2002) affirms that communication occurs

when signals carry information-bearing messages between a source (or sender) and a destination (or receiver). Considering that it is impossible not to communicate since any human attitude, even unconsciously, sends messages, they can be verbal or non-verbal. Verbal communication is transmitted through the sound of the voice (or by silence!) while non-verbal communication is conveyed through gestures, postures, facial expressions, clothing, physical distance, etc. The styles individuals use to communicate vary across cultures and within cultures (Gudykunst et al, 1996). Infact, with reference to intercultural skills, Lobasso (2014) affirms that intercultural communicative competence is the ability to exchange effective messages, in a relational exercise where the respective differences establish a dialectical relationship and mutual enrichment, if based on reciprocal respect and interest. Further details on this topic will be proposed later.

2.3 Multicultural, Cross-cultural, Intercultural: meanings and fields of application

Culture is such a large and complex universe that various branches have emerged over time. Some of these, for example, are those of interculturality, cross-culture and multiculturality, each characterized by particular semantic nuances.

Multiculturality, according to Filtzinger (1992), is the state of coexistence of people coming "from" and socialized "in" a certain cultural context, thus giving them a sense of static, consistent with the thought of Silva (2002), who imagines it as an agglomeration in which peoples live together without necessarily coming into contact. The multicultural condition, therefore, would allow people to share the same physical space while remaining separate, as if cultural groups were pieces of a mosaic. Indeed, this is precisely the metaphor used by Mantovani (2004): this form of coexistence between communities is steeped in obstacles, barriers, indifference or maximum tolerance. However, some scholars such as Giaccardi (2005) and Lobasso (2014) wonder if it is really possible that a situation arises in which some cultural groups are physically close even though they never meet. Accepting this idea would mean thinking of culture as a homogeneous and compact entity, something to be protected, preserved and safeguarded. Any contact with the outside would pollute it with alien elements. Although some are certainly phobic of mixing with the other, we must reflect on the fact that cultural crossbreeding is perhaps a much more real and realistic condition of today's interconnected and globalized world. The words of Audinet (2001) confirm this: human groups that inhabit the same territory constantly meet (or clash), mix their languages, customs, foods, symbols, bodies, generating something new and different from what they were before. Only imposed violence would prevent such a process. Granted that a multicultural society is possible in which groups coexist but do not interact, we must then ask ourselves whether this condition can be lasting

over time. Separation increases the fear of diversity, strengthens ethnocentrism, enhances stereotypes, and increases the phobia of losing one's identity. At first contact, an ethnic clash would break out, undermining that longed-for social security. In short, it would be counterproductive.

Colombo (2002) identifies four perspectives to observe the concept of multiculturalism: from a sociological point of view, the problematic dimension mainly refers to the polarity "difference VS solidarity" because the issue is guaranteeing a certain degree of social cohesion, tolerance and communication between differences, without renouncing their respective specificities; the political philosophy perspective tends to link the term "multiculturalism" to normative issues because the goal is to understand if and how differences are compatible with a theory of justice. The problematic dimension that catalyzes the discussion, in this case, is represented by the polarity "difference VS universalism"; the perspective of political science tends to use the term to define the concrete conditions to implement a series of social policies oriented towards the integration of minorities. From this point of view the problem is not the definition of a theory but of a practice that promotes participation. In this case the polarity is "effective political action VS equal opportunities"; the perspective of social coexistence uses the term multiculturalism to define an ideal form of cohabitation attentive to pluralism and sensitive to the defense of differences. Here the polarity refers to "stability VS change".

Cross-culturality is mainly applied in Psychology and its unity of analysis is indeed personality (Bennett, 2021). Adler and Bartholomew (1992) define a cross-culturally competent person as able to learn about other worldviews and approaches; skilled at working with people from different cultures; able to adjust to living in other contexts; aware of how to communicate with foreign coworkers. Many studies focused on cross-cultural competence link it to management capability, especially referring to international corporations: today's global market requires global strategies and this cannot ignore cultural differences. In particular, according to Adler (1986), research on cross-cultural management tries to answer five big questions: Does organizational behavior vary across cultures?; How much of the observed difference can be attributed to cultural determinants?; Is the variance in organizational behavior worldwide increasing, decreasing or remaining the same?; How can organizations best manage within cultures other than their own?; How can organizations best manage cultural diversity, including using diversity as an organizational resource?

Speaking of competence in this area confirms the hypothesis supported by many scholars that contact with foreigners alone does not imply a development of behavioral skills in pluricultural contexts. The relational ability has to be consciously trained. In fact, if the simple interaction with a foreigner were enough to be cross-cultural competent, all psychological studies on international companies would have no reason to exist. In order to develop these skills and achieve inclusion goals,

several corporations and institutions use the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)[6], a 50-item questionnaire designed by Mitchell R. Hammer. Based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)[7] designed by Milton Bennett, the IDI tool provides participants with a snapshot of their cross-cultural competence when completing the survey. The results are accompanied by reflections on the strengths and weaknesses with respect to the level of competence emerged, together with advice to be put into practice on a daily basis to enhance one's relational skills in pluricultural professional and educational contexts. Also, the research team of the Institute for Culture, Collaboration, and Management (ICCM)[8], lead by Prof. Richard Griffith, is completing the Cross-Cultural Competence Navigator (3C Navigator), a validated tool that assesses five success factors that predict an individual's effectiveness in cross-cultural interactions. The scale is intended for two major uses: 1) as part of an assessment battery designed to select employees with strong cross-cultural competence or a promising capacity to develop such skills, and 2) as a self-diagnostic tool administered prior to cross-cultural competence training in order to highlight individual strengths and needs.

The prefix "inter" - of Latin derivation - means exchange, interaction, mixing. It indicates a relationship of reciprocity and commonality. From a cultural point of view, it is the overcoming of the one-way process of the transmission of knowledge (Nanni and Curci, 2005). Therefore intercultural practices seem to better respond to the needs of contemporary, connected and globalized society (Lobasso, 2014). Not mere tolerance but search for encounter, mutual recognition, acceptance and legitimation of diversity, renunciation of ethnocentrism, search for dialogue: these are the characteristics of a person with intercultural competence.

So, if multiculturalism is a condition and cross-culture is a management mode, interculturality is an approach to life (and to people), a way of looking at the society in its diversity and complexity. This is why it is applicable to any kind of discipline: many models of intercultural competence have been developed by academics and practitioners from a variety of research fields, including global leadership (e.g., Morrison 2000), international business (e.g., Meyer 2014), intercultural diplomacy (e.g., Lobasso 2014), international management (e.g., Earley & Ang 2003), intercultural communication (e.g., Bennett 2013; Balboni & Caon 2015; Castiglioni 2020). The huge amount of practical and theoretical models designed by academics demonstrate how necessary it is to have intercultural skills to overcome the inevitable challenges posed by the encounter with the other. Although there is no universality in the definition of intercultural competence - as already expressed in the previous paragraphs - there is a general agreement that intercultural skill describes a person's

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[6] To find out more about the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI): www.idiinventory.com
[7] The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) will be explored in the following paragraphs
[8] To find out more about the Institute for Culture, Collaboration, and Management (ICCM), Florida, USA: www.research.fit.edu

capacity to function well across cultures (Whaley & Davis 2007). In particular, it is defined as "the ability to think and act in interculturally relevant ways" by Hammer et al. (2003), and something similar is proposed by Johnson et al. (2006): "An individual's efficacy in drawing upon a set of knowledge, abilities, and personal traits in order to interact successfully with people from various national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad".

According to Leung, Ang & Tan (2014) intercultural competences can be categorized into the following content domains: (a) intercultural traits, (b) intercultural attitudes and worldviews, (c) intercultural capabilities. Intercultural traits (a) are enduring personal characteristics that determine an individual's typical behaviors in cross-cultural contexts. Open-mindedness, dissimilarity, openness, and tolerance of uncertainty are a few examples. Intercultural attitudes and worldviews (b) concentrate on how people interpret information from or about other cultures. High levels of intercultural ability are characterized by sophisticated interpretations of cultural differences and similarities as opposed to ethnocentric or simplistic ones. Intercultural capabilities (c) place an emphasis on what a person can accomplish to be successful in cross-cultural contexts. Examples include having knowledge of many cultures and nations, as well as metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral cultural intelligence, linguistic proficiency, social adaptability, and communication flexibility.

Thus, given the urgency of intercultural individuals and interactive societies, initiatives have also been launched by politics. The Council of Europe, for example, promoted the "Intercultural Cities" programme[9] to support local authorities to design and implement inclusive integration policies. The project's final goal is enabling communities, organizations and businesses to manage the cultural diversity ensuring the equal value of all identities, cohesion and competitive advantage. Once a questionnaire has been filled in to apply to join the project, the Council of Europe sends back an analytical report with recommendations and examples of good practice from other cities. In a second stage, a variety of policymakers, practitioners, and advocates from each city are exposed to reflections and dialogues with peers through study trips, thematic events, and the exchange of experiences. The programme is now active in 130 European cities, Australia, Canada, Japan, Israel, Mexico, Morocco and the United States. In a study published in 2017[10], the Migration Policy Group affirms that local intercultural policies (1) contribute significantly to local well-being; (2) increase citizens' trust in public institutions and services without alienating voters; (3) are one of the most important determinants of a favorable public perception of migrants.

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[9] To find out more about "Intercultural cities" programme promoted by the Council of Europe: https://rm.coe.int/brochure-2019-on-the-intercultural-cities-programme/1680488e90

[10] Migration Policy Group, 2017, *How the Intercultural integration approach leads to a better quality of life in diverse cities* (online pdf)

2.4 Self-other relationship:
Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Among the literary references on intercultural competences, the theories developed by Milton Bennett have been widely taken into account for the construction of the present research. According to the American sociologist, intercultural skills rest on three pillars: (1) the idea of identity not as a thing but as a process of identification. So people do not have a culture but continually make their own culture, in interaction with the context; (2) categorizing the distinctive elements of cultures does not have to create rigid labels and reify but helps to observe the differences. Therefore, no culture is in itself "sexist", "sympathetic" or "noisy", it is always so in relation to other cultures; (3) observing and noting cultural differences serves to welcome new perspectives and know how to adapt to a given context. Indeed, focusing on differences helps to interact effectively. These concepts are inspired by the constructionist approach, that emphasizes the co-construction of meaning and the subjective link between the observant and the phenomenon observed. Things do not exist in themselves but only in relation to the meaning that the observer gives them.

Jean Piaget (1954) first used the term "Constructionism" to describe how children's perceptual skills develop. It started to be used more broadly to refer to the act of meaning-making on a personal and interpersonal level (e.g., Delia, 1976). According to this epistemological approach, humans sequentially acquire perceptual structures that enable them to interact with their worlds and adapt to their familiar environments in ever-more refined ways. Perceptions and abilities are so largely subjective and culturally specific, rather than being universal. Therefore, from an intercultural perspective, people must be conscious of their own culture and then prepared and trained in order to have an intercultural experience. The latter does not happen spontaneously just because people interact with a foreigner or are near a cross-cultural event. This is the theoretical core of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Communication (DMIS) designed by Milton Bennett: presenting six stages of experiencing diversity, it shows the conceptualization of cultural difference that a person could have. The more sophisticated the experience of cultural diversity, the more competence in intercultural relations potentially grows. Furthermore, George Kelly (1963) states that experience is not the result of what happens around us, but how much one is able to construct and reconstruct what happens. One of the first academics to focus her views on a constructivist perspective was Ruth Benedict (1946). For instance, when defining Japanese culture she did not use terms like "shame culture" but rather categories like "shame/guilt", because Japanese can feel more or less shame than others, not absolutely. Each culture can be defined only with respect to another (Meyer, 2021). In DMIS, the term "sensitivity" refers to an

individual's growing capacity for appropriate perceptual discrimination, which includes the capacity to observe both one's own and other cultures in terms of pertinent etic categories and the capacity to produce helpful meta contextual constructions of cross-cultural events (Bennett, 2020). The model started with careful observations of human behavior, just as grounded theory. After that, the observer "explains" the observations by using a logical framework. Perceptual constructivism serves as the basis for DMIS, which results in the development of "stages." Of course, their nature is arbitrary, serving as distinctions between different levels of perceptual capacity. On the model continuum (Fig.3), there are two extremes: ethnocentrism, which refers to the belief that one's own culture is the only real one, and ethnorelativism, which refers to the belief that cultures are relative to context. A person can be stationary in one stage for life or move, tendentially to the right, if the individual lives cross-cultural experiences, constructively re-elaborate them and refine the ability to create refined categories of diversity. The stages are: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, integration.

In details:

1) Denial: the person in this stage lacks the ability to discriminate, or to elaborate categories that are relevant to the difference. Being unable to articulate cultural distinctions in sophisticated ways, the individual lacks experience with diversity or links it with an undifferentiated category of otherness, such as "foreigners" or "immigrants." It is not as real as their own culture. The motto is "live and let live," which means that they do not need to be familiar with other cultures. The person at this stage has very little knowledge of other peoples and nations. Castiglioni (2020) reports that some Western workers frequently reside in privileged and segregated circumstances in various African and Middle Eastern nations without feeling the need to offend or disparage, displaying an attitude of isolation and/or separation;

2) Defense: although it exists, cultural variety has a negative value. Fear is the dominant emotion, which causes the person to constantly feel under attack. As a result, denigration is the most prevalent attitude. Either there is a sense of superiority that tends to overemphasize the positive aspects of their own group, or there are simplifications that are based on limited knowledge and indiscriminately make all members of a particular group be bearer of negative characteristics. Again Castiglioni (2020) states that some organizations engaged in International Cooperation appear to operate under the assumption that development occurs over time. This is best illustrated by the term "Developing Countries," previously "Third World" and now "South of the world". Anyway, even the latter might have an implicit dualistic view of "us" VS "them".

An attitude of "Reverse Defense" can be also registered in this stage: "us" and

"them" are reversed. One's own culture is disparaged in favor of another culture, especially within politically driven and educated groups. According to Castiglioni (2020), she frequently overheard Italians working in International Cooperation despise their own cultural heritage in an effort to romanticize the African or Central American realities into which they had been successfully assimilated. The techniques utilized to retain the position of strength have their roots in the same superiority and denigration that they struggle against inside their own culture. This stance is frequently mistaken for progressivism or greater relativism;

3) Minimization: the others do exist and do differ in certain ways from us, but overall they are like us. Language, daily routines, clothes or food are the only things that are considered to be different and are perceived to be folkloric features, superficial practices and customs that have no impact on people's essence. But if we are all the same, then everyone is like me, which is a serious (unconscious) ethnocentrism error. The outlook is frequently altruistic and universal. Indeed, in terms of International Cooperation, it might take the form of the attitude "I enable you to become like me, and if you don't accept it or rebel, it's because you don't deserve it". Milton Bennett distinguishes between (1) physical universalism: people essentially have the same physiological demands, and (2) transcendental universalism: we are all equal before God or the economic system or the Human Rights, etc. In short, the same factors affect all of us;

4) Acceptance: individuals in this stage value diversity and respect it as a normal aspect of human existence. They are interested in diversity and want to learn more. This mindset typically coexists with the gathering of information and observations about one's own culture, allowing for a more nuanced re-elaboration of cultural categories, including one's own. The danger is a relativistic impasse, wondering how far you can go in accepting values that are different from yours. Relativism can be (1) behavioral: recognizing other people's ways of being, speaking, and moving in space without wanting to criticize them; and (2) value: ability to accept different values, right VS wrong is a relative concept;

5) Adaptation: in this stage, the person is able to effectively relate to differences, feeling empathy and taking on other people's viewpoints. There are efforts made to find a "third virtual culture" (Bennett, 2013), that can serve as a synthesis space. Temporarily adopting a value or behavior does not compromise an individual's identity; rather, it increases the range of alternatives available in terms of thinking, communicating, feeling, and acting. Empathizing is a constant exercise. It does not produce results easily or immediately; on the contrary, it necessitates awareness, emotional control, and

ongoing mental practice. This topic will be better illustrated in the following paragraphs. It is important to stress once more that cross-cultural proximity experiences or living abroad do not ensure intercultural competency. It is possible to be bicultural while yet being ethnocentric, demeaning the cultural distinctions of other groups;

6) Integration: those who are able to experience an expanded self and continually create new identities by embracing and blending components of different cultures are in this phase. The individual who is able to integrate cultural differences always has a positive attitude and constructive approach. Also, the individual creates assessment systems that are contextually appropriate, constantly "becoming", "deconstructing" the current condition (Bennett, 2020).
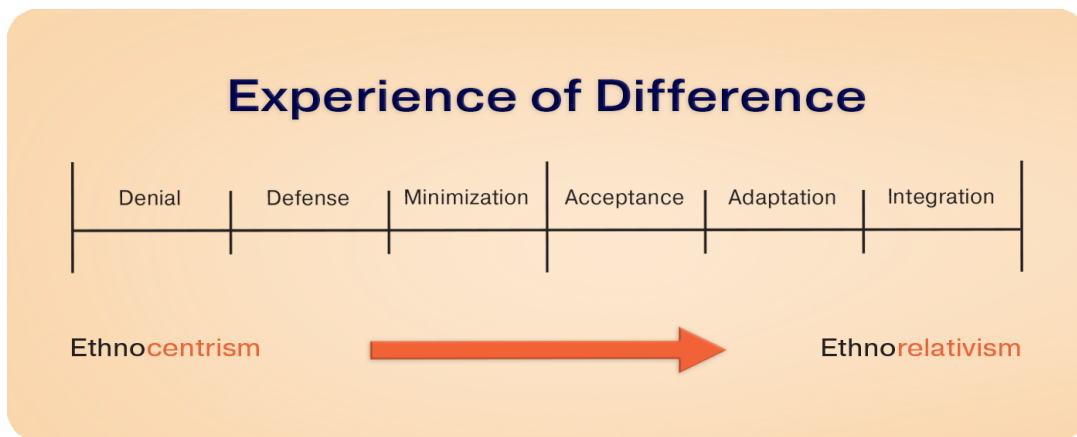
(Fig. 3) DMIS by Milton Bennett, the illustration is from IDRInstitute
https://www.idrinstitute.org/dmis/

2.4.1 Empathy and Sympathy

Empathy is "the imaginative, intellectual, and emotional participation in another person's experience" (Bennett, 1993). Thus, empathizing does not simply mean putting yourself in the other's shoes but taking the other's perspective, assuming the other's worldview. A reflection that Stotland (1969) stresses too: the scholar notes a distinction between "generic empathy" and "specific empathy": in the first case, for example, a boy who observes his peer feeling anger because he is being mistreated by his classmates, may feel concern and sadness. In the case of specific empathy, however, there is an exact correspondence between the two emotions. It is a mirrored emotional sharing, much more accurate than the previous one. Boella (2006) affirms that assuming the perspective of the other means experiencing oneself in otherness, beyond one's physical, mental and emotional boundaries.

Ethnocultural empathy can be defined as the awareness of one's own cultural

distortions and of the unique vision that the foreign interlocutor has of the world. To let this happen, decentralization is needed: get out of your own angle and enter that of the other (Anagnostopoulos et al, 2008). This ability is not simple nor produces quick results, it needs time to be understood and practiced. Also, it is possible only when the individual is no longer afraid of being overwhelmed by the other. Bennett (2002) identifies six fundamental phases while living the empathic experience: (1) Assume the diversity; (2) Getting to know each other; (3) Suspending the self; (4) Enabling guided imagery; (5) Enabling empathic experience; (6) Restoring the self.

This last is a fundamental phase: re-establishing the self means re-establishing contact with oneself, with one's original perspective and one's starting values. In fact, one's own identity is not annihilated by the assumption of the worldview of others, rather it is expanded, enriched, provided with new angles.

Studies on empathy are numerous, especially in the branch of intercultural communication. Many scholars cite it as one of the essential skills to be effective in cross-cultural interaction. According to Feshbach (1968) empathy is made up of three components:

- The capacity to decipher the emotional states experienced by others; this involves being able to identify and classify others' emotions using pertinent indices;

- The capacity to step into another person's shoes and view things from their point of view: this skill involves realizing that others, who are different from them, may be able to view and interpret events in ways that differ from their own. In other words, it relies on the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes and consider their perspective;

- The capacity to feel and express others' emotions, including the ability to experience their feelings in a vicarious way. Cognitive abilities make up the first two elements, while affective and emotional skills make up the third.

As it will be easy to imagine, research on empathy is crucial also in the field of medicine. From this perspective is defined as "clinical" and four dimensions have been identified, as reported by Stepien (2006): (1) Emotional, or the capacity to imagine the emotions and perspectives of patients; (2) Moral, or the physician's internal drive to empathize; (3) Cognitive, or the capacity to recognize and comprehend patients' emotions and perspectives; and (4) Behavioral, or the capacity to communicate that understanding to the patient.

In intercultural communication, as well as in the doctor-patient relationship, empathy is essential to be effective. A rule that extends to any other type of social interaction.

The reflection is even more interesting if we consider what the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) reports in some studies (1995; 2001) about International Cooperation: only 20% of aid operators excel in their work while operating in other nations. The efficacy gaps discovered, however, are not due to technical or operational shortcomings, but rather to a lack or underestimation of "soft

skills," such as empathy with local colleagues and project beneficiaries. Charleston (2018) affirms that empathy is the foundation of cross-cultural competence since it is essential to the cross-cultural encounter to recognize and feel the states of mind, beliefs, desires of others. Empathic individuals ideally consider more than simply people's words, behaviors, or gestures when conversing with them. So, a person can be defined as empathic if is able to perceive the others' mood, attitude, values, beliefs, desires, and emotions with interest, openness, and acceptance.

In common thinking, empathy is often confused with sympathy. The two terms are used interchangeably or their meanings are superimposed. Literature, however, is clear about their diversity: in the sympathetic perspective, physiological, psychological, and even cultural variations may be seen as superficial (Bennett, 2013). The observer attributes greater significance to human similarities than to human differences because is convinced that human nature transcends space, culture, and personal preferences. In fact, a sympathetic individual minimizes differences and searches for points of agreement with others. From this perspective, similarities reassure and differences terrify since they pose a danger to the integrity of one's own identity. A sympathetic stance is therefore more consistent with the ethnocentric worldview. The desire for similarities implies that the observer acts as the only point of reference for interpreting the thinking and behavior of others. Anything that goes beyond what is known is frightening. Also, according to Bennett (2013) sympathy can be (1) reminiscent, when the person has already lived a situation similar to that of the interlocutor, remembering the sensations she/he is experiencing or (2) imaginative, when the individual thinks about how she/he herself/himself would feel in the condition that the interlocutor is experiencing. Although sympathy is reassuring, credible, and frequently accurate (as we interact primarily with similar people, our sympathetic generalizations yield relatively right assumptions), it places the focus exclusively on the individual and, by extension, the cultural group she/he identifies with, treating it as the only source of truth. In conclusion, with reference to International Cooperation projects, it is necessary to consider that altruism motivated by sympathy - and not by empathy - may not be meeting the real needs of the beneficiaries, producing culturally incompatible outcomes.

2.5 Verbal and non verbal communication in a multicultural framework: Balboni and Caon's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Among the literary references on intercultural communication, one of the most considered for this research, is the model developed by the Italian scholars Paolo Balboni and Fabio Caon (2007). According to them, being competent in communication means exchanging effective messages, that is, interlocutors respectively achieve their communicative purpose. Being competent in intercultural

communication means knowing how to achieve the above mentioned purpose in a place where multiple cultures - or mental softwares[11] - are present together. Communication consists of an exchange of messages, i.e. complex sets of verbal and non-verbal languages: words, sounds, gestures, use of space, graphics, icons, objects, social role indicators, graphic layout, etc. (Balboni and Caon, 2015).

The exchange of messages always takes place in a situational context, which also influences communicative effectiveness. Although it may seem like a trivial consideration, it is good to remember that any situation, event or physical place is culturally interpreted. Possible sources of intercultural communication crises nestle precisely in the different meanings attributed to situations, events or places. Thus, a person competent in intercultural communication, while interacting with others, keeps this in mind. The situational contexts imagined by Balboni and Caon are:

- physical setting, like a school or a street: everyone interprets it according to the rules and values of their own culture;
- time: although it seems a universal concept, it is one of the most important cultural variable to take into consideration;
- topic of discussion: the same topic could be taboo in some cultures and something to talk about freely in others;
- role of the participants in terms of hierarchy and related signs of respect: this is one of the most evident problems of intercultural communication;
- aims of the participants in a conversation: specific aims are not declared in a given community because they are considered implicit and obvious, but for other groups this could be difficult to perceive;
- psychological attitudes such as sarcasm, irony, respect, admiration, distrust, etc. they emerge, even if we don't want to, especially in non-verbal languages;
- communicative actions, such as greeting, thanking, asking questions, disagreeing, interrupting, etc.: the evaluative parameters are specific to the different cultures, not universal;
- social norms like a formal dinner, a conference, a party, a Board of Directors meeting, a presentation of the results, etc., are managed differently according to the particular cultural rules.

The two Italian researchers assert that intercultural communicative competence cannot be taught for (1) qualitative reason, given that it is an ever-evolving concept; and (2) quantitative reasons, given the endless number of cultures. As a result, they suggest a model of intercultural communicative competence (Fig. 4) that users can improve or alter on a daily basis in light of their personal cross-cultural experiences. The model is actually intended to serve as a reference paradigm that aids in developing intercultural communication skills by enabling perception, documentation, and description of cultural difference. Intercultural communication skills, of course, assume the

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[11] The metaphor is by the Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede (1991)

willingness to open up to the other and the constancy in interacting with people from various cultural groups. The model organizes cultural diversity into four categories, namely: values; non-verbal languages; verbal languages; communicative events. In particular, the first three categories are described as "skills in the mind" of an individual, while the fourth concerns the actual "performance in the world" that the individual plays out. This way of intending intercultural competence - here tightly connected to the communicative act - takes up a concept expressed in some previous paragraphs: intercultural skills are a set of invisible abilities like cognitive or emotional and manifest abilities like operational. Each box presents some items that Balboni and Caon have identified as belonging to that category. In the case of values and communicative events the list of cultural variables is potentially infinite, while in the case of verbal and non-verbal languages it is limited to certain fixed elements.

cultural values

a. space and time
b. public / private
c. hierarchy, respect, social status
d. concept of family
e. honesty, reliability, fair play
f. metaphors
g. etc…

non-verbal languages

a. facial expressions, smells, gestures
b. physical distance
c. clothes, accessories, jewels, status symbols

verbal languages

a. sound
b. choice of words
c. grammatical problems
d. text structure
e. socio-pragmatic aspects

communicative events
a. cocktail and lunch
b. phone call
c. teamwork
d. public speech
e. negotiation
f. etc…

Fig. 4: Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence[12], Balboni E. and Caon F. (2015)

To accompany this paradigmatic model, Italian academics also provide a series of practical examples that can better orient the person, according to the various categories. For instance: the sequence "me and you" is common in Italy but

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[12] The original version of the model is in Italian. It has been recreated and translated in English for the purposes of this research

experienced as impolite in Germany and USA where "you and I" is instead required; in English a prohibition is rarely expressed with an explicit "no" and rather masked with a softer "I'm afraid you can't do that". For Jewish, Slavic and Balkan cultures, instead, the direct expression of thoughts is more appreciated, probably sounding rude to all Westerners; In Italy the advice to do psychotherapy is offensive, while in Argentina is felt like a manifestation of economic well-being; every culture has its own taboo: mentioning the Nazism in Germany, caressing child's head in India can be seen as a pedophile action; telling family anecdotes or asking questions about other people's families is normal and valued for Europeans but totally inappropriate for Japanese; in all Mediterranean cultures, but especially Greek, Spanish and Southern Italy, a high tone of voice normally indicate participation and involvement, but it is not usually appreciated in the rest of Europe and in the East, where the tendency to "whisper" is more appreciated; Mediterranean cultures also accept interruptions and overlaps in a conversation, while it is unbearable in other groups; in Arab cultures is prohibited to use the future tense as the future is in the hands of God (*Inshallah* is not mere fatalism, but a deep-rooted religious need, explicitly requested by the Koran); the American passion for the superlative can greatly embarrass a European and, vice versa, Americans could be disappointed by the quiet European presentations and introductions; in many Eastern cultures a close-ended question, i.e. with a yes / no answer, can only have a positive response, not to offend the interlocutor; in the linguistic structure of the neo-Latin languages, the segments intersect with secondary sentences that interrupt the main sentence and produce a broken line, accounting for the complexity of the argument, instead the Arabic or Iranian text proceeds by parallel constructions and continuous reprisals of what was said before, creating a spiral of concepts: the main topic is reached only after several reflections; expressing emotions and thoughts with facial expressions is common in Mediterranean Europe, Russia and Latin America but not appreciated in northern Europe and Eastern Asia where children are educated to show feelings only in intimate situations; a gold Rolex on the wrist, heavy gold chains or shiny rings on the fingers of an Arab or a Slav can appear tacky to the "chic" European, but in those groups showing the wealth through jewelry is culturally approved; it is *obvious* for an Italian that the day begins with dawn, while it is *obvious* for many Asians and Africans to think that the day starts with the beginning of the night; it is *obvious* for a member of Christian, Jewish and Islamic cultures that time is a line, while for a Buddhist or a Hindu it is a circle that always retraces its steps; for industrialized cultures punctuality is essential, while it is often a general indication for Africans, Arabs and Brazilians: being late on a meeting is not experienced as disrespect; the Italian hierarchy does not allow a person at level 4 to communicate proposals or objections to a person at level 2 without passing through level 3, that is, without respecting the hierarchical order, while it is common in the USA, where professional relationships are more informal; a "well-behaved" Chinese

lets a few minutes pass before answering a complex question, expressing esteem to the interlocutor. If this is Western, however, silence could be lived as a lack of opinions or linguistic fluency, so he/she could suggest a response to the Chinese, who sees his/her own respectful silence rejected.

Far from being a complete list of examples or unchanging over time, this series of samples of cultural diversity is a useful starting point for those who want to start to relativize their way of thinking and acting. According to the authors, however, to be effective in communicating with others, it is not enough to be aware that cultural diversity exists, but some relational skills are required to be exercised and strengthened over time. Intercultural communication is actually effective when a person is able to:

1) Observe: notice and mentally record what is in front of us (our interlocutor, for example: gestures, posture, tone of voice, clothing; the context in which the interaction takes place) and at the same time be aware that what we look at is filtered by cultural lenses and it is never a neutral gaze;

2) Relativize: recognizing the other entails deciding to relativize one's own system of beliefs and values, avoiding the risk of putting others' behavior into our conceptual and interpretive frameworks (Pinto Minerva, 2002);

3) Suspend judgment: abandon the need to classify everything according to our cultural paradigms, and develop the ability to live patiently with discomfort and uncertainty while interacting with others (Sclavi, 2003);

4) Listen actively: listening to the other's thoughts without the urge to judge if it is right or wrong, true or false, normal or abnormal, but to accept those words with interest and curiosity: try to understand why other people's behaviors and words irritate or excite us, and remember that for the other those behaviors and words are obviously approved in his/her culture (Sclavi, 2003). From a practical point of view, active listening is manifested through facial expressions or vocal sounds that indicate interest but also through communication strategies such as summarizing or paraphrasing what the other said to be sure that the perceived message is the same as sent;

5) Understand emotionally: recognize which emotions are being experienced in the interaction with the other and why the conversation or observation of a phenomenon is arousing those specific feelings;

6) Negotiate meanings: according to Wenger (2006) and in line with the constructivist approach (Bennett, 2017), a meaning is always the product of its negotiation. No meaning exists in us or in the other, but only in the interrelation. Things don't make sense *a priori* but we attribute it to them.

These six abilities must be trained with a constant work of deconstruction of our own truth, which is always partial, never universal nor definitive (Nanni and Curci, 2005).

2.6 Intercultural skills in International Cooperation:
Franzini's Dynamic Model of Intercultural competences

Some studies by Manila Franzini (2017; 2020) have investigated how intercultural skills transit in International Cooperation operators. According to the scholar, collocating interculture in International Cooperation means understanding what the relationship between NGOs workers and the local population is made of. Considering the similarity of the research topic, Franzini's outcomes have been an important theoretical reference for the setting and development of the present analysis. In particular, the Dynamic Model of Intercultural competences that the author has developed.

The research question that gave rise to the model is whether Italian expat cooperators and international workers think they have developed intercultural skills and, if so, how do they think they have used them. In a first step of work, the Italian scholar (2017) interviewed the aforementioned subjects to understand how much awareness about (their) intercultural skills and the following was revealed: the intercultural competences for cooperators are (a) based on knowledge and thought processes: linguistic skills, mental openness, ability to understand cognitive, motivational and behavioral aspects, knowledge of different cultures, styles of life and uses different from the majority, capacity for decentralization, ability to give meaning to cultural elements; (b) based on the relationship and the dimension of the other: empathy, tolerance, respect for lifestyles, ability to coexist and share, interact with people of different cultures, integrate cultural elements with their own, communicating with people of different communities, acceptance, ability to act in any context, questioning preconceptions and barriers, working in heterogeneous groups.

Furthermore, the difficulties encountered by the cooperators in working with people of other cultures were (a) from a thinking perspective: different way of observing the world, considering one's point of view to be the only or the best, lack of flexibility, conservatism on both sides, considering white as an economic source, taking knowledge for granted; (b) from a conception of work perspective: lack of punctuality, having a different perspective on the properties and use of resources, money and power as the basis of medicine; (c) from a social transmission perspective: consideration of women, acceptance of fatalism, national pride, living with customs that are considered ethically incorrect; (d) from an attitude perspective: arrogance, lack of frankness, gossip, falsehood, hypocrisy, cunning, the idea that Europeans are paternalistic and racist, little patience; (e) from a relationship perspective: understanding how to relate, bear the differences.

Then, the cooperators were asked to indicate which abilities they would transmit to people who have not experienced cultural diversity like them. Skills were indicated based on (a) the relationship: looking for opportunities to dialogue with the other, not

doing good, establishing relationships with the other, working and living alongside others, proposing solutions; (b) the knowledge: at least two years of on-site experience, what to do and what to avoid in various contexts, knowing traditional aspects; (c) the thought processes: openness; (d) the dimension of the other: curiosity, welcome, listening, appreciating diversity; (e) the Self: perseverance, adaptation, the idea that there is always to learn, humility, try and possibly make mistakes, seek the support of those who have more experience or skills, caution in entering situations, do not be judgmental.

As pointed out by the researcher, a discrepancy between what the interviewee affirms and what actually implements is always to consider: if in words are affirmed the principles of good International Cooperation, made up of equal exchange, patience, acceptance and dialogue, on the other hand, it seems that a real horizontal collaboration is struggling to emerge. Indeed, according to her experience as a scholar, the aid-workers can also react with attitudes of refusal or resistance towards the beneficiaries, sometimes transforming themself into "little dictators" who exploit the decision-making power in their favor, more or less aware of that sense of moral superiority that guides them.

After the analysis of the answers, 14 intercultural capabilities were identified, that is, the most recurrent in the interviews. Franzini presents them as individual resources that are activated in the intercultural relational dimension, and they are:

1. Take a broad view: not only a curiosity towards the cultural dynamics of other countries, but also towards the political, economic and social processes that characterize relations between countries;

2. Create spaces for sharing and "bridge" meanings: preserve a mental space dedicated to welcoming the new, in which diversity can be constructively and positively processed, to then formulate shared meanings;

3. Question the barriers of rejection: being able to identify the stereotypes and prejudices that guide thinking, and then question them. In the case of International Cooperation, also ask questions about the cultural heritage of Western colonialism;

4. Understand the cultural sense: be aware that culture manifests itself in macro dynamics, such as social and political ones, and micro, such as people's actions and reactions. Therefore, having linguistic knowledge, communicative abilities and interpretative skills to integrate more effectively into the context;

5. Decentralization capacity: observe situations and people from multiple perspectives. Contemplate diversity outside one's usual interpretative schemes;

6. Openness to diversity and recognition of the value of others and their thoughts: when interacting with people, assume that they are right, their behavior makes sense, their thinking is interesting and their words are intelligent. This does not mean agreeing *a priori* with others' reasoning but recognizing them a value;

7. Ability to explore: it is the motivational drive to explore different realities from one's own;

8. Listening skills: knowing how to listen to the other, even silences, without the urgency to intervene, argue, affirm one's opinion. And, according to the context, understand how to adapt to the times and ways of talking;

9. Empathy: take the perspective of the other, try to understand his/her emotions and his/her opinion, even if it clashes with one's own;

10. Confidence: rely on the other and entrust the person with parts of yourself, to allow a real knowledge of new situations and a real construction of shared meanings;

11. Suspend the judgment: put a stop to the tendency to judge situations, words, behaviors and take time to contemplate and elaborate them at a later time,

12. Flexibility: make one's own value paradigm elastic, to temporarily give space for new values, even if they are distant from one's own;

13. Humility and respect: relativize one's role in the world and the weight of one's own culture, to look at the other as a precious resource, bearer of fine knowledge and skills;

14. Dismantle certainties and manage uncertainty: while interacting with the others, letting oneself be completely overwhelmed by ambivalence and paradox (Surian, 2006). Knowing how to stay in momentary uncertainty will lead the individual to find new, effective, and inclusive solutions.

As reiterated several times by Franzini, these competences are to be understood not as a finite and schematic list of skills, but as a process of change that leads the individual to develop certain aspects of the cognitive, emotional, affective, motivational, interpersonal behavioral sphere, while interacting with people, especially if from different cultural backgrounds. These abilities, therefore, are not consequential but alternate dynamically. Also, they are governed by three macro processes: (1) process of interaction (the relationship with others); (2) process of change (the constant negotiation of meanings with oneself and with the others); (3) process of self-preservation (the exploration of diversity without the fear of losing one's own identity).

process of
interaction

process of
change

process of
self-preservation

take a broad view

create spaces for sharing
and "bridge" meanings

question the barriers
of rejection

understand the cultural sense

decentralization capacity

openness to diversity and
recognition of the value of
others and their thoughts

ability to explore

listening skills

empathy

confidence

suspend the judgment

flexibility

humility and respect

dismantle certainties and
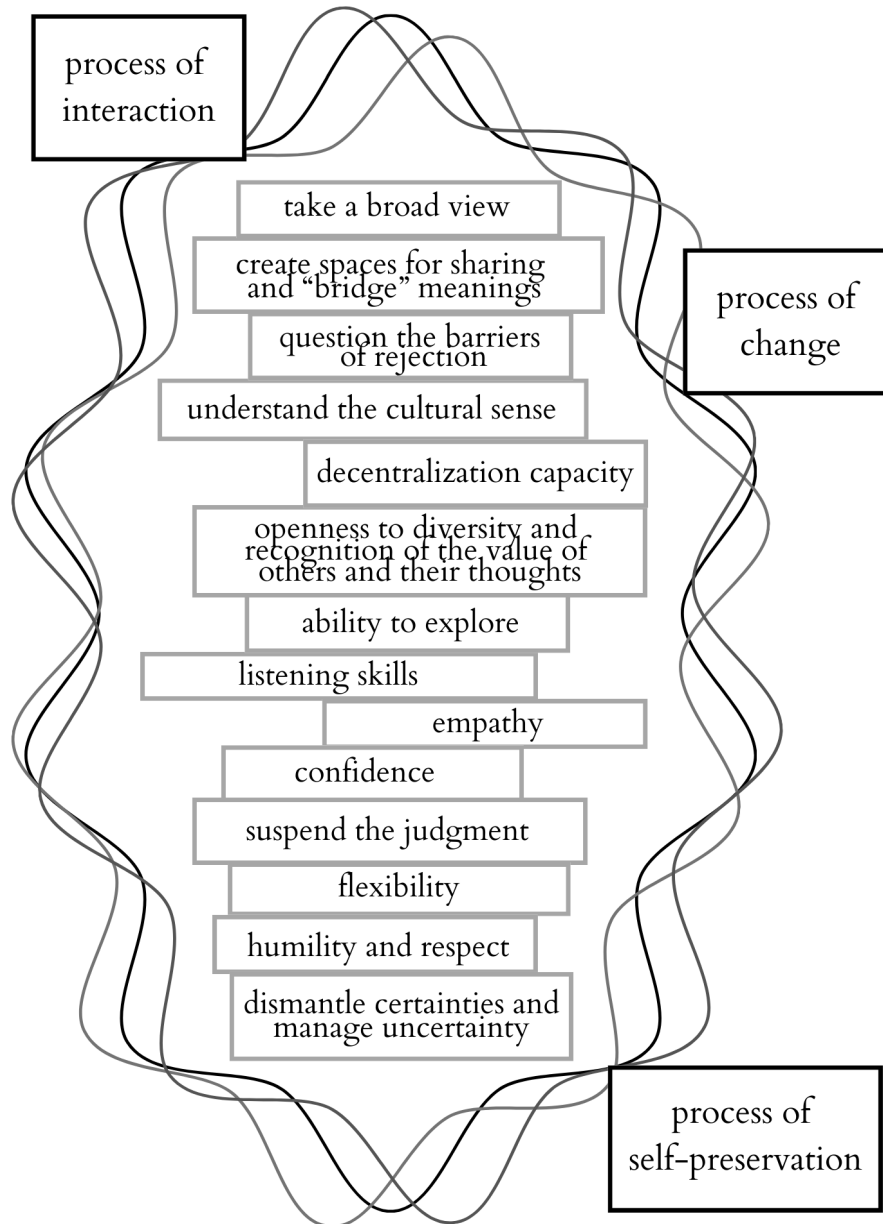manage uncertainty

Fig. 5: Dynamic Model of Intercultural competences[13], Franzini M. (2017)

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[13] The original version of the model is in Italian. It has been recreated and translated in English for the purposes of this research

2.7 Culture shock

Experiencing cultural diversity can be a stimulating and rewarding adventure, but it can also produce stress and bad feelings (Ward et al, 2020). In contemporary literature, this stress is defined as culture shock (Dongfeng, 2012). In particular, Miller (2019) describes it as the feeling of unease, alienation and anxiety that a person can feel when moving from his/her cultural context to another. The more the latter is different, the stronger the disorientation is. And the causing factors can be various: a new diet, linguistic barriers, loneliness, loss of reference points, ecc. According to the American anthropologist, a frequent psychological element associated with culture shock is the feeling of not being culturally skilled, but as stated by Fiorucci (2017), experiencing a culture shock has nothing to do with intercultural competence. Indeed, it doesn't guarantee a repair from stress and bad feelings, rather it requires knowing how to recognize and manage emotions, tolerate ambiguity, suspend temporarily judgment and assume others' perspectives to reach a constructive (and probably stressful) negotiation path. The encounter with people from different value and habit paradigms is not always a pleasant exchange, but can also be a clash. It reveals the existence of one's own culture. However, the shock, as reiterated by Cohen-Emerique (2015), is always at the individual level, not at the level of civilization. People meet, not cultures. The French scholar defines the feeling also as frustration, rejection, rebellion or enthusiastic amazement. Thus, it is an emotional, physical and cognitive experience that reveals culture relativity to those who live – temporarily or permanently – in a more diverse context than the one they come from. As many studies have shown, a return culture shock can also be experienced when going back home. Juffer (1987) identifies five reasons for culture shock: (1) encountering a new setting or circumstance; (2) poor interpersonal communication; (3) real or imagined threat to the sojourner's emotional or intrapsychic health; (4) necessity for behavior modification and a return to the new environment's supportive reinforcement; (5) "development experience" while living cultural diversity in a different place than home. The feelings that all these situations have in common are anxiety, stress and emotional overload, especially in the first transition period. According to Oberg (1960), it happens to almost everyone in various forms and at different levels, including physical symptoms, but there may also occur: obsessive concern for cleanliness and health, irritability, feelings of abandonment, disorientation, fear of being deceived or robbed, glazed look, homesickness, defensive communication. Schutz (1976) affirms that culture shock shakes the foundations of our identity, as it questions our normality. Lysgaard (1955) is the first who graphically transposes culture shock, imagining a U-shaped curve that describes an initial state of excitement, an intermediate depressive state and a final stage of psycho-emotional settlement. After him, many other scholars have hypothesized similar patterns, like Lesser and Peter (1957), who propose a three-stage process of adjustment to alien culture: (1) a

spectator phase on arrival; (2) an involvement phase; (3) a coming-to-term phase. In 1960 came one of the major contributions, by the abovementioned Oberg, who imagines four phases of the experience of culture shock: (1) the great expectations phase; (2) the "everything is beautiful" phase; (3) the "everything is bad" phase; (4) the phase in which everything, or almost everything, is ok. In particular: in the first stage, the person is excited about the upcoming journey. He/she is enthusiastic about his/her projects and is looking forward to meeting new people, wearing traditional clothes, eating local cuisine or learning a few words of a foreign language. However, he/she is afraid of any rejections or failures but lives the moment with optimism. In the second stage the person arrives in the place, and even if heshe has experienced some difficulties, feels a sense of euphoria for the novelty and satisfaction for having organized this trip. The food is good, the people seem friendly, and the culture is interesting. After a first positive period, the person enters the third phase, made up of anxiety, restlessness, disgust, isolation. Communicating with locals is difficult, as is adapting to local customs. The person begins to think that the great expectations were pure fantasy and many negative feelings take over. According to the author, this stage can last a few weeks or even months, but it can also happen that it does not occur at all. Each individual lives the experience in a personal way. After this phase, the person begins to adapt to the new environment, making a negative balance for some aspects but positive for others. The experience begins to be lived in a balanced way. Many things about the new culture have been learned, although not all of them are appreciated. However, he/she manages to live with it peacefully. Loneliness, anxiety or fear, as well as psychosomatic symptoms, become less frequent. As already stated above, these emotional phases can also be experienced upon returning home (Ward, 2020). In this regard, Gullahorn (1963) drew a W curve, also called stress curve, which presents the repetition of the emotional stages upon returning to the culture of origin. Later, Furnham and Bochner (1986) comment on several problems in the U-curve hypothesis about culture shock. The main accusation against the models of U and W curves is that they present too linear emotional stages, therefore unrealistic. Variations, according to the scholars, occur through a series of micro degeneration and regeneration events or crises in a non regular fluctuation. To Dongfeng (2012) culture shock and other cross-cultural adjustment stresses may represent a positive occasion with an educational impact to stimulate, motivate, and enhance interpersonal and communication skills. Indeed, Adler (1975) defines culture shock as a process of intercultural learning, leading to greater self-awareness and personal growth. And Kim (1991) agrees with the same line of thinking: culture shock is a necessary prerequisite for growing as human beings, in search of the reconquest of inner balance. The effective person in a foreign context, therefore, is not the one who does not experience any discomfort or stress but the one who, while experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, disorientation, psycho-physical malaise, is able to accept them as

constructive phases of the experience. Furthermore, those feelings denote a greater sensitivity towards cultural diversity and the awareness of the efforts to adapt to a particular context. However, a research conducted by Salvai (2011) shows that human resources managers still evaluate more positively those who apparently show no difficulty in adapting, although in many cases this may be due to a lack of intercultural sensitivity, not to a strong competence. The experience of culture shock, in fact, is often demonized and judged as a weakness by the officers of International Cooperation projects.

2.7.1 Cohen-Emerique's Culture Shock method

Managing the intercultural relationship it is not necessary to have an encyclopedic knowledge on a specific country or cultural group, rather it is developing certain skills. This training requires a long work on the perception, understanding and respect for diversity (Cohen-Emerique, 2015). The French scholar states that, according to her experience as a trainer, many social workers do not possess those skills and are convinced that cultural differences are pure folklore, superficial aspects that, after all, do not influence interpersonal interactions. In short, human beings are all the same. Probably these people are not even aware that they are representatives of a cultural group (or multiple), bearers of values and visions. According to Devereux (1997), in fact, people tend not to experience cultural representations as something external but as something deeply internalized, an integral part of their own structure, of their own essence. They ignore that any interpretation and representation of the world is not natural but cultural. Culture shock, Cohen-Emerique affirms, is the solution: the clash with another culture reveals the existence of one's own most critical areas. Disorientation, frustration, rejection, rebellion, anxiety, positive amazement can be felt while interacting in an alien context. What is important to keep in mind is that the shock occurs at the level of an individual, not at the level of civilization. The researcher has therefore devised an intercultural training method based on the experience of culture shock, often proposed to NGO workers. The latter seem to be often prepared for expatriation only from a technical and organizational point of view, not from a relational perspective nor from emotional management or self-awareness. Human resources normally assume that the greater the experience abroad, the greater the preparation, while, on the other hand, it can happen that a person leaves with high expectations and ideals but comes back home full of prejudices, embittered and disappointed. The method involves three training phases: (1) decentralization, (2) knowledge of the reference framework of others, (3) negotiation/mediation. In particular: introduction of what cultural shock is, drafting of an experienced culture shock, analysis of the shock during a group work, presentation of the work done. A

practical example of how the method works is described below[14]:

Situation:

- Alice, a 31-year-old French volunteer, had just arrived in Nepal to participate in an International Cooperation project for people with disabilities. The girl had to meet the local partners to agree on some next project steps, so she set off with the local administrator (Padam) and her assistant (Josna). They organized the meetings but one of them fails: after a whole morning of traveling by motorbike, in scorching heat, they reach the town and discover that the local leader was absent, busy elsewhere. Alice is upset, while Padam and Josna seem calm, indeed they propose to go to the nearby medical clinic because Josna has an appointment. On one hand Alice is happy because they have not made an empty trip but doubly upset: they are not dedicating themselves to the project, but to personal affairs and the mishap seems organized, premeditated. There is still something else that troubles her: after the visit, the doctor of the clinic turns to Padam and not to Josna for the report. Alice concludes that in Nepal (1) there is always a different - hidden - goal from what is declared and (2) the patient never speaks directly to the doctor, even if the issue is serious, such as the cancer that the woman has been diagnosed with.

Analyses:

I. Actors involved:
- Alice, volunteer, French, 31 years old, married, graduated, has traveled a lot but never in Asia, is the first mission for this NGO;
- Josna: assistant, Nepalese, 42 years old, single, it is not known which caste she belongs to and what level of education she has;
- Padam: association director, Nepalese, 42, married with children, state exam, caste lower than Josna;
- Doctor: 42 years old, Indian.

Relations between the actors:

- Josna and Padam live in the same country but belong to different castes, both of whom have had relationships with Western NGOs. Josna, Padam and Alice have professional relationships, they don't know each other outside of that. Alice, as a Westerner, is assimilated to American culture. In Nepal, a white is "an American".

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[14] This example and others are cited in Cohen-Emerique M. and Rothberg A. (2015), *Il metodo degli shock culturali*, FrancoAngeli

Relations between the groups to which they belong:

- Relations between Nepal and France are mostly tourist and economic. However, it must be remembered that between the 60s and 70s, many French hippies, breaking with the socio-cultural patterns of the time, left for Kathmandu. A place full of spirituality and opportunities to meditate but where there is also a free drug market (legal until 1973). This will cause the downfall of many of these young people. France and India, on the other hand, have a relationship more characterized by colonization, although not as heavily as Britain: the French had occupied the coastal cities of southern India.

Factors proximity between the actors involved:
- Alice and Josna: age, education
- Alice and Padam: age, level of education

Distance factors between the actors:
- Alice and Josna: marital status, expatriate / native, no experience in this NGO / expert, not known in the country / known and respected
- Alice and Padam: gender, expatriate / native, no experience in this NGO / expert and director, not known in the country / known and respected

II. Context:

- The declared purpose did not coincide with the real one, hidden from Alice but agreed between Josna and Padam. Good climate between them even if they know little of each other. The tension mounts when Alice is confronted with an accomplished fact.

III. The reaction to culture shock:

- Feeling of rupture, inconsistency with the project, deception, little respect. She feels in danger, "they were crafty, they manipulated me". Professional frustration because the goal has not been achieved. Anger: why my presence during the medical examination? And why is Padam talking to the doctor instead of Josna?

IV. Alice's frame of references:

- Work organization is a crucial factor for the success of the project. You have to set clear goals, assign tasks, respect tasks and appointments. Equal relationship within the team requires honesty and mutual respect. Communication must always be clear and straightforward. From a personal point of view, there is no sense of belonging to castes because the human being is recognized in his

dignity regardless of social class. Individualistic conception of the person. Equal conception of women, who make decisions autonomously and are free to speak. The doctor must maintain professional secrecy and confide the outcome of the visit only to the patient. Medical examinations should not be carried out during working hours. Alice took Josna and Padam's westernization for granted given their profession and experience. Hence the shock.

- Prejudice born as a result of the shock: there is always a hidden objective behind the one stated.

V. Image that comes out of the other, after the story:

- Negative, ridiculous, unreliable: society treats individuals like children.

VI. Josna and Padam's frame of reference:

- Holistic society, the individual exists as a member of a group, therefore subject to its rules for proper functioning. Hierarchy is important, it must be respected especially in public, in front of strangers. The upper castes deserve more respect. Everything has to be done in a specific place and time. The concept of efficiency is replaced by that of the scale of values: it is more urgent to dedicate oneself to Josna's health than to the project. It will be done later. Private and working life are intertwined, no distinction. Professional relationships are modeled on family ones: Padam plays the role of father in this context.

Hypothesis:

- During the medical examination, Alice's presence is a guarantee, giving prestige to the meeting. The doctor does not speak to Josna because perhaps she belongs to a higher caste and there is always a mediator between patient and doctor. The information content varies according to the caste of belonging and the social hierarchy, in any case it is full of turns of words and you never go to the precise goal. Maybe Alice has not been warned because the matter is private and she does not belong to a high caste, it is not usual to inform this type of person.

VII. Basic problems:

- Many expatriates experience cultural shocks like this, which leave them dumbfounded and confused, sometimes annoyed. The first few days are delicate, because there is a risk of reinforcing the negative judgment. NGOs should train their operators both from an information point of view on the country and on the likelihood of intercultural crises. Professionals must be prepared to manage emotions, formulate hypotheses without reaching hasty

conclusions or giving a moral judgment. Convincing others of bad intentions towards me is a big risk, and it is an attitude that is often observed among expats who are not properly oriented or trained. Certain prejudices and stereotypes are formed precisely as a result of cultural shocks that have not been reworked. The more distant the memory is, the deeper the negative emotions are, creating resistance to the formative training.

2.8 International Cooperation: historical background and main actors

Cooperation occurs when "actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others" (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985). Therefore, International Cooperation involves the contemporary interactions of different entities to achieve common objectives (Paulo, 2014).

In the literature, when referring to the specific sector of International Cooperation (for/and Development), authors intend the set of policies devised by governments or multilateral institutions that aims to create the necessary economic and social conditions for the growth of a country (Bonaglia and De Luca, 2006). The promoting entities decide to which State and in which specific sector to allocate aid, based on certain political, economic and relational interests. One of the main tools to implement the policies is the transfer of resources, goods, services, knowledge, and skills to third countries. The relation is defined as (1) bilateral if resulting from direct agreements between a donor and a recipient or (2) multilateral when it consists of voluntary or compulsory contributions from donor countries to specific international agencies. The implementation of these policies can be carried out by governmental or non-governmental bodies, such as NGOs, Non-Governmental Organizations.

The latter are becoming increasingly central protagonists of the "aid industry" (Lewis, 2007), due to the emergence of neoliberal development policies in the early 1980s that allowed their numerical growth in the system (Missoni and Alesani, 2014). Further on, some in-depth lines will be proposed on NGOs.

From a historical perspective, International Cooperation arises from the devastation caused by the Second World War. In fact, although already during the colonial era there were flows of financial aid from the motherland to the respective colonies, the first real program of International Cooperation is commonly referred to in the "Marshall Plan". In 1944, International Bodies were created, such as the World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which had the purpose of promoting post-war reconstruction. , a huge mobilization of financial and technical resources, and essential goods from the United Stated to the European institutions and population. The plan was designed and supported by George Marshall, who in 1945 affirmed the following:

"The world of suffering people looks to us for leadership. Their thoughts, however, are not concentrated alone on this problem. They have more immediate and terribly pressing concerns where the mouthful of food will come from, where they will find shelter tonight, and where they will find warmth. Along with the great problem of maintaining peace we must solve the problem of the pittance of food, of clothing and coal and homes"

A few years later, in 1947, Marshall declared the following to some students at Harvard University:*"It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health in the world , without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace [...] Any assistance that this Government may render in the future should provide a cure rather than a mere palliative [...] it is already evident that before the United States can proceed much further in its effort to alleviate the situation and help start the European world on its way to recovery, there must be some agreements among the countries of Europe as to the requirements of the situation and the part those countries themselves will take in order to give proper effect to whatever action might be undertaken by this Government [...] The initiative, I think, must come from Europe. The role of this country should consist of friendly aid in the drafting of a European program"*

According to Bonaglia and De Luca (2006), this speech contains a key passage, worthy of attention, that is *"The initiative, I think, must come from Europe"*: the document "The Future Approach to the Support of the European Union to the Budget of Third Countries"[15] confirms that those words are still pertinent. It states that while the EU is committed to providing predictable assistance through budget support, this assistance should complement (not substitute for) the partner country's own efforts to mobilize domestic resources. In other words, communities who get assistance must be proactive in order to prevent it from leading to addiction. Cooperation, therefore, should be a horizontal collaboration rather than mere help, both from the macro and micro perspective. Indeed, as observed by many scholars, poor intercultural training of International Cooperation operators can also trigger a relationship of dependence between them and the beneficiaries, limiting or even sabotaging the latter's proactivity: if the capacity for decentralization, acceptance of diversity, listening and communication is lacking, the risk is to propose western-centric projects, probably not effective and unsuccessful. According to Malighetti (2009), this approach, criticized in words but evident in practice, has created ever-worse internal contradictions and external dependency while failing to foster a true process of development in the

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[15] Council conclusions, *The Future Approach to EU Budget Support to Third Countries,* 3166th FOREIGN AFFAIRS Council meeting Brussels, 14 May 2012

so-called "Third World[16]". Even while the amount of wealth produced globally has increased significantly, inequality has expanded, and the only nations to flourish have been those of the "benefactors". Thus, the intercultural maturity (or immaturity) of expats and operators in the planning departments has a significant influence on the entire system of International Cooperation.

This latter concept was evidently unclear in the 1940s and 1950s, when aid programs had a purely welfare form. They were characterized by strong injections of external resources and motivated by the "modernization" of "underdeveloped" countries. In the 1960s the "Decade of Development" was officially launched by John F. Kennedy with the following words:

"To those who live in huts and villages around the world and struggle to break the bonds of suffering, we promise our utmost effort to aid them and help themselves"

As a result, the suffering of the people in many parts of the world became known to the Western audience. Those statements immediately captured people's attention, and they led them to categorically link "millions of hungry" with underdevelopment. This helped spread the idea that in order to make things right, knowledge and tools from the West, in addition to money, needed to be invested in infrastructure. At the end of the 1960s, however, that idea of development began to lose appeal: the long-awaited growth was slow to manifest itself and public opinion was increasingly disappointed and embittered by those policies that, after all, were only wasting public money and confirming dependence of South on the North. The report on aid effectiveness by Canadian diplomat Lester Pearson, commissioned by the World Bank[17], stated:

"It was not the task of our commission to go into all the ramifications of the development process; but rather to enquire whether the international co-operative effort, derived from this new feeling of commitment, and dedicated to promoting the growth of low-income areas, warrants continued heavy expenditures of energy and resources on the part of the richer, developed countries; and, if so, how the effort can be strengthened and improved by steps on both sides [...] Too many in both developed and developing countries are becoming cynical, not only about the effectiveness of the aid effort, but

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[16] The acceleration of the independence process of the African and Asian colonies reconfirmed the urgent strategic need to expand US influence (and stem Communism) in the "emerging" countries, in addition to Europe. Many nations opposed the trend by trying to stay on the side and during the Conference of Bandung (Indonesia, 1955), a movement of "non-aligned" countries was born. Thus the "Third World" was created, separated both from the capitalist West - First World - and from the Communist bloc, Second World (Black M., 2002)

[17] Pearson L.B. (1970), *A new strategy for global development*, World Bank, Commission on International Development

about the validity of the very concept of aid[…] Because some donor countries have attempted to seek political influence or direct economic gain from aid, sensitive leaders in governments of some developing countries see in such policies even if they are designated "aid" a form of neo-colonial intervention; not an expression of genuine international co-operation [...] Living conditions in most developing areas remain well below the standard of Europe before the industrial revolution [...] There are immense problems of uncontrolled urban migration and unemployment. We must now ask how we can use this knowledge for a new, accepted, and more systematic approach to the development problems of the 1970s and beyond"

A renewed vision of development and Cooperation was proposed by Pearson: the report highlighted the urgency of a radical transformation of aid policies both from a conceptual and practical point of view: the diplomat criticized the ethnocentrism and cynicism of many Western politicians who masked their interests with development programs and evaluated the social and economic damage from the policies that promised the opposite. It was therefore clear that economic growth could not be the only tool for evaluating the evolution of a nation. Aid had to be channeled into actions that could benefit everyone, directly: vaccinations, access to water, construction of houses, schools, hospitals, rural infrastructures and so on.

The awareness that effective Cooperation was synonymous with responding to the real and daily problems of the communities, opened the doors to new important actors: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Small private entities, free from political impositions and, above all, close to the recipients of aid. ECOSOC (1996)[18] defines them as organizations whose aims are in conformity with the spirit, purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, independent from any government, with an established headquarters and organizational structure, promoters of democratic decision-making and representation processes, and financed mainly from the contributions of its affiliates. As observed by Lewis (2009), NGOs' functions can be (1) implementer, (2) catalyst, and (3) partner: the mobilization of resources to deliver products and services to those in need is the responsibility of the implementer function. NGOs provide services in a variety of industries, including healthcare, microfinance, agricultural extension, disaster relief, and human rights. The capacity of an NGO to inspire, support, or contribute to better thought and action to advance social transformation can be characterized as playing the catalyst function. This endeavor may be focused on specific people or organizations in local communities or among other development players like the government, business, or donors. It could also involve lobbying and advocacy work, grassroots organization and group building, gender and empowerment work, attempts to sway larger policy processes through

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[18] ECOSOC, *Consultative relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations*, 1996/31

innovation, and policy entrepreneurship. The partner function represents the tendency for NGOs to collaborate with the government, donors, and the commercial sector on shared activities, such giving specialized inputs within a more general multi agency program or project, or launching socially responsible business ventures. It also entails interactions between NGOs and community members, such as "capacity development" activity that aims to increase and improve capacities.

The 80s were marked as the decade with the lowest level of International Cooperation for Development, due to the recession in the industrialized world and the debt crisis (Black, 2002). Ronald Reagan, US president and Margaret Thatcher, British prime minister led the international politics supporting the reduction of public interventions and criticizing the welfare state, so aid to third countries suffered a drastic leveling off. Therefore, an increasing number of nations had to initiate Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in order to obtain loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). To implement those programmes was necessary to perform free-market-inspired economic policies that reduced public spending by privatizing businesses and cutting education and health investments; increase the export of raw materials and products by replacing subsistence crops with marketable agricultural products and making the most of natural resources; raise interest rates and remove limits on the free movement of capital and reduce tariffs and barriers to the free flow of products and services. The socio-economic consequences of the SAPs were disastrous: poverty increased, as well as gender inequalities, difficulties in accessing essential services and medical care, child malnutrition, violence, and school dropout. In 1987 UNICEF[19] launched an appeal to politicians, asking them to give "a human face" to the adjustment policies. NGOs played a crucial role once again thanks to their proximity to the suffering populations, aware of the real problems and able to provide concrete help in a short time. The issue of poverty, also under the pressure of the World Bank[20], returned to be central in the international political debate. Thus, the UN launched a series of conferences on poverty, setting common goals such as the reduction of poverty and infant mortality; respect for the right to education; contrast to the spread of HIV-AIDS.

In the 90s, after the publication of the Brundtland Report[21], the issue of the social and environmental sustainability of development processes entered fully into the debate on Cooperation. The innovative document highlighted the deep link between environment and development: the reduction of poverty could not be guaranteed without ecological sustainability as well. It was beginning to be clear that in order to achieve overall and lasting development, a country would have to work

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[19] UNICEF, *Annual Report,* 1987
[20] World Bank, *World Development Report: Poverty,* 1990
[21] In 1987, Gro Harlem Brundtland, president of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), presented the report *"Our common future"*, formulating a guideline for sustainable development still valid today

simultaneously on environmental and anti-poverty policies, because people's quality of life depends on the quality of the territory they live in. The sad experience of structural adjustment, the financial crises in several countries, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the omnivorous expansion of capitalism, made it essential to rethink the international financial architecture, highlighting the need to invest in the quality of institutions and governance (Segna, 2017). Therefore, the awareness emerged that the effectiveness and sustainability of projects could only be guaranteed by the collaboration with the beneficiary communities, in the various project phases. As stated by Bonaglia and De Luca (2006), the key word of International Cooperation from now on is "ownership" (of the decision-making process by the indigenous peoples). This innovative participatory approach was enthusiastically shared by many international agencies and institutions that increasingly entrusted the implementation of their ideas to NGOs. However, as observed by Meggie Black (2002), the programs of many donors are still based on the old ideology, as if it were sure that all transfers are certainly helpful, ignoring or underestimating the cruciality of a confrontation with the beneficiary communities. Indeed, according to the scholar, terms like "partnership" often serve to mask the age-old sense of superiority and need for control that many Western donors still have over the Global South.

As Di Magliano and Liguori (2015) report, in the 2000s International Cooperation focused on three main challenges: (1) Fight against poverty, improvement of health, promotion of peace, human rights and gender equality, development sustainable environmental; (2) Increase of financial resources until reaching 0.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the donor country; (3) Improvement of effectiveness, transparency and accountability through the sharing of unique principles by the international community. The starting point was the "Millennium Declaration[22]" adopted by the UN General Assembly, which states:

"We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs"

Human beings have become the center of international policies in recent years, paving the way for the concept of "human capital", defined by OECD[23] as the stock of knowledge, skills and other personal characteristics embodied in people that helps them to be productive. Pursuing formal education (early childhood, formal school system, adult training programmes) but also informal and on-the-job learning and

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[22] The Millennium Declaration was adopted in September 2000 by the UN General Assembly - Resolution 55/28. The citation is contained in paragraph 1 "Values and Principles", point 2.
[23] For further information on the topic: https://www.oecd.org/economy/human-capital/

work experience all represent investment in human capital. Thus, International Cooperation began to focus on community development, commercial cooperation as well as technical and financial assistance, the reduction of public debt, support for foreign investments and the facilitation of the circulation of private capital. Awareness has also grown of the need for greater transparency and effectiveness of aid through close collaboration with NGOs and local institutions. The latest milestone of International Cooperation is represented by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015[24]. The action program consists of 17 points that recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve oceans and forests.

2.8.1 Cultural incompatible projects, a few examples

In the context of International Cooperation, culturally incompatible projects are not so rare. According to Kottak (1985), this definition is applicable to projects in which local culture has not been taken into account.

During the first decades of International Cooperation this incompatibility was the norm, as were the failures of Western-funded initiatives implemented in third countries. Thus, the growing awareness of the waste of money, as well as the damages caused to people and environment has led to the emergence of the critical anthropology of development: an approach to the study of International Cooperation in which the anthropologist questions the motivations and benefits of specific development programs and policies. This kind of research has led scholars to wonder if a certain project was valid from the beneficiaries' point of view or was really compatible with their lands (Miller, 2019).

Since the 1970s, many critical anthropologists have been called upon to evaluate specific projects and determine whether they had actually achieved their objectives, but from what Cochrane (1979) has observed, their research has shown that often these projects have resulted in enormous failures. The three main reasons for these failures were as follows: (1) the project was inappropriate for the environmental and cultural context; (2) its benefits did not reach the intended group; and (3) the living conditions of those who should have benefited from it were worse at the conclusion than they were before it was implemented. Bad project setup is the connecting element between these three issues (Cochrane, 2009). Infact, the initiatives were developed by bureaucrats, mostly Western economists, who lived in cities far from the location where they were to be implemented. They lacked firsthand understanding of the

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[24] The SDGs are incorporated in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, signed in September 2015 by the governments of the 193 UN member countries

circumstances and way of life of the populations that the projects were intended to serve. These professionals used an ethnocentric and generalized formula for any kind of situation, without taking into account cultural, social, economic and environmental specificities.

A series of programmes to improve food quality and health conditions for residents of several islands in the South Pacific included encouraging higher milk intake is an exemplary case of incompatibility between the project and the beneficiaries (Cochrane, 1974): the initiative involved shipping a sizable amount of powdered milk from the United States to an island community. However, the latter was lactose intolerant, and soon all of its members developed diarrhea. They stopped drinking milk as a result and began painting their homes white with the powder. Incompatible initiatives not only waste money, but also exclude individuals who should take advantage of them. That is why critical anthropologists can help develop projects that respect indigenous cultures and raise their chances of success. The anthropologist Gerald Murray, for example, helped redefine a costly and unsuccessful reforestation project supported by USAID that was carried out in Haiti in 1987. USAID sent millions of tree seedlings to Haiti, and the Haitian government urged its citizens to plant them, but the peyizan yo (local small farmers) refused to do so and fed the seedlings to their goats instead. He suggested that the agency switch out the fruit tree plants that had previously been sent (considered useless by peyizan yo because they could not be cut for sale) with trees that could be pruned and grow quickly, like eucalyptus. At that point, the farmers welcomed the new project, knowing it would have helped them in the near future. So, anthropologists can serve as cultural mediators, understanding both donors' and recipients' point of view, increasing the chances of success.

According to Horowitz and Salem-Murdock (1993), the Senegal River valley's dense population was able to get the resources it needed through forestry, agriculture, fishing, and pastoralism prior to the construction of the dam by periodically flooding the plain. However, once a development project was implemented and a dam was built, the water started to be released less regularly, the valley's residents discovered they didn't have enough resources to irrigate the planted crops, and fishing stopped being a dependable source of food. In addition, the crops might occasionally be harmed when the dam management discharged a significant amount of water. Those effects led many people who resided downstream to flee the area, and schistosomiasis - a parasitic disease that can be severely crippling - poses a big threat to those who remain because it spreads quickly in stagnant water pools that form downstream of the dam.

Again with reference to the construction of a dam designed for the development of an area, Black (2002) reports that a protest against the building on the Ganges in northern India has been going on for many years on the Himalayan foothills. The

potential of a similar calamity occurring again is considerable since the dam sits on a seismic fault that might unleash powerful earthquakes. In 2001, entire communities were drowned, overwhelming the homes of 10,000 residents. Cases like these frequently occur when factories, power plants, flyovers, palaces, and opulent residential neighborhoods are being built in emerging nations. In the name of progress, economic growth, and modernization - and probably to favor the conditions of the wealthier population - governments and funding bodies exclude democratic consultations.

An employee from an Italian NGO - with whom we came into contact outside the research project - reports he was involved in a project whose objective was the construction of a well in a rural village in central Africa. The intention was to facilitate the population residing in that area, allowing them to access water resources more easily, without having to travel miles of road to reach the nearest river. The activities were carried out as planned, without hitches, disputes or delays, only to discover - in the months following the closure of the project - that the inhabitants had stopped using that well immediately after the departure of the aid workers. The project evaluation investigations had discovered that the women of the village, normally in charge of stocking up on water from the river, preferred to walk in the sun for several kilometers bearing the heavy load of filled tanks, rather than replenishing them at the well near their home. The reason lay in the fact that for those women, the walk towards the river represented the only moment of female socialization. An important, almost sacred moment that allowed them to confront each other, let off steam, exchange ideas, give each other advice, and which they absolutely did not want to give up. In this case, it is evident that the conception of the project had not taken into account the needs of the community for which it was designed. The absence of a confrontation between the parties meant that the financial and human resources used were useless, indeed, harmful if that well had a negative impact on the environment and on the architecture of the village.

Similarly, underestimating the importance of a discussion with the beneficiaries during the project designing phase, an employee of an institution specialized in the monitoring and evaluation of projects - of which we prefer to keep the anonymity - has told the following: the initiative, managed by a network of European NGOs, involved the construction of a school in a rural area of an African country. Also in this case, the construction process passed without obstacles or reticence on the part of the local community, only to discover, a few months after the departure of the operators, that the building was not being used as a school but as a chicken coop. When asked for explanations, the natives said that according to local customs, educational activities had to be carried out outdoors, that the building overheated too quickly, making it impossible to stay inside, and that, lastly, the village lacked a chicken coop fenced and covered: in short, that building was perfect for that intended use. In this

case the human and financial resources employed were not entirely useless, but it is clear that the lack of involvement of the counterparty made the project ineffective in relation to the set objective.

2.8.2 Defining "Development"

Development is a process of transformation that results in an increase in the population's level of wellbeing (Rinaldi and Verga, 2021). Of course, income has a role in wellbeing, this is why the idea of development encompasses growth: if a country is engaged in development, it is growing, as evidenced by an increase in GDP, but development also refers to a general rise in the country's level of social endowment and culture. Therefore, the process of development brings a nation to a state of greater welfare and more effective utilization of its production capabilities. According to Rinaldi and Verga (2021), progress is made up of many different elements and a single indicator cannot adequately reflect all facets of development. The main factors are: (1) Physical capital (i.e., the machinery utilized in the various stages of production). If it rises, it indicates that businesses are investing more in new manufacturing endeavors. Consequently, more employees will be required. This expanded labor will profit from money that will be used (at least in part) for consumption, which raises demand and forces businesses to raise output levels; (2) Technology; advanced nations are those with the most cutting-edge tools at their disposal, which they use to boost production. The technologies employed in developing nations have lower production capacities and are less environmentally sustainable; yet, in certain emerging nations, the lack of the infrastructure needed to support the technology creates a barrier (for example in terms of water or electricity supply); (3) Demographics and Human Capital, not an issue of whether a workforce exists in a region, but rather of the caliber of the male and female employees who participate in the manufacturing process; (4) Institutions: the average education level of the population and the nation's human capital are directly correlated, and the institutions are crucial to the situation.

The market value of the goods and services produced by a nation during a given time period, often one year, is known as GDP and is one of the primary indices of development. The GNP always measures the goods and services created, but it is obtained starting from the GDP and adding taxes and tariffs on the items, net of government subsidies. As a result, the GDP indicates the wealth produced in a year, expressed in currency. Additionally, the country's citizens' money earned abroad is added, whilst the income earned abroad by foreign nationals who are present in the nation is deducted.

Although financial well-being is important, a person's level of happiness is influenced by extra-material elements, or factors without a monetary counterpart, such

as friendship, social connections, religious conviction, etc. These factors affect the person's standard of living in addition to possession and the ability to buy material goods. The Human Development Index (HDI), a metric developed in 1990 by Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, was therefore accepted by the UNDP in 1993. This index, which broadens the dimensions examined while beginning with the GDP, is a weighted arithmetic average of three indicators: per capita GDP at purchasing power parity, population education level, and life expectancy at birth. Three new fundamental elements for human development were introduced: a long and healthy life, knowledge, a dignified existence. Even today, development is thought of in this broad sense.

In a historical perspective, the narrative of development arose when US power replaced British and French colonialism in the years following World War II. It has remained the primary means by which Western "civilization" interventionism has been justified since its inception (Malighetti, 2009). Though many academics have been forced to reevaluate the definition of progress due to the failure of International Cooperation projects and the surprising resistance of cultural systems to developmental pressure (Ferguson, 1997; Hobart, 1993; Escobar, 1995; Arce and Long, 2000).

Numerous scholars contend that dependence on Western societies is the root of underdevelopment in various parts of the world and project failures (Crush, 1995; Olivier de Sardan, 1995; Grillo and Rew, 1997; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997; Moss and Lewis 2005). Their analyses, in particular, highlight the interplay between the Western-centric modernization regime and the process of global capitalist system expansion as it relates to the conceptualization and implementation of development. Thus, initiatives supported by Europe or the United States enforce particular mindsets, excluding or rendering impossible others (Horowitz, 1980; Latouche, 1989; Gardner and Lewis, 1996 and Rist, 1996). Following from this, International Cooperation assumes the shape of an ethnocentric, top-down, and technocratic enterprise, anchored to a unilinear evolutionary perspective and to the Illuminist idea of progress: it upholds the notion that a country must evolve from a technical and scientific standpoint in order to achieve ever more perfect social, architectural, and institutional forms in order to improve, regardless of regional differences and cultural specificities. Thus, the interactions between donors and recipients are always perceived as binary: traditional / modern; simple / complicated; uncivilized / civilized; poor / rich; backwards / forward-thinking (Malighetti, 2009).

This attitude is defined as the "they-have-the-problem-we-have-the-solution" approach by Arnfred (1998). However, the incapacity of some policies to spur a genuine process of development in the so-called "Third World" has repeatedly disproved the Western assumption, leading to, in fact, deeper and more acute internal problems and external reliance. Even if the amount of wealth created globally has expanded significantly,

inequality has grown, and the only nations that have experienced growth are those of the "benefactors" (Malighetti, 2009). As stated by Escobar (1995), numerous development processes have displaced indigenous groups, demolished villages, homes, and local infrastructure, and compelled people to alter biodiversity on their lands, in the name of progress.

In the 1950s Western politics embraced the theories of American psychologist Abraham Maslow since they legitimized the standardized method of providing assistance. In fact, the scholar envisions a pyramid of needs universally valid, ordered hierarchically: physiological needs (hunger, thirst, sleep); safety needs (protect yourself against external dangers); membership needs (recognition by other group members); esteem needs (self-esteem, therefore self-confidence, sex and hetero-esteem, therefore respect from others); and self-actualization needs (desire for continuing to grow and develop). Later, Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, made the connection between freedom and development: each individual pursues his/her personal life goals, which are not constrained by any list or pyramid because they depend on cultures as well as on personal preferences and free will.

Indeed, Black (2002) argues that there can never be a single recipe for development - only prospective recipes tailored to each unique circumstance. The industry of International Cooperation, however, operates as if the contrary were true. Real development must take into account individuals and their unique circumstances; there can be no generally effective formula. Development must draw on the variety of existing knowledge and processes if it is to actually benefit people. The great powers perpetuating an ethnocentric attitude are unable to overcome the protectionism and assistance on which their policies are based, and aid programs are frequently tied to the requirement to employ donors' technologies or businesses, impeding indigenous development capabilities. The analysis of planned change practices during the colonial era and current initiatives for the development of the former colonial countries have been connected in various ways (Augé, 1972; Cochrane, 1979; Leach, 1982; Nieuwenhuijze, 1983; Latouche, 1984; Said, 1990; Verhelst, 1990; Sachs, 1992; Colajanni, 1994; Malighetti, 2001). The communities benefiting from the projects are, after all, indistinct and delocalized masses, to be educated, fed, clothed, cared for, by imposing legitimized rules under the banner of those values proclaimed as universal (Agamben, 1995; Pandolfi, 2005).

NGOs have taken on an increasingly significant role in this area due to their proximity to the populations and familiarity with real problems, as already mentioned. They do this by participating in critical decision-making processes as a result of the consultative status that various international bodies have granted to them. They did this by acting as a network that was independent of the states. They have been successful in developing alternate non-governmental diplomatic forms, which have been strengthened by UN recognition (Badie, 2002).

If it is accepted that what we know are not "data" but "facts", culturally oriented and non-objective artificial constructs (Bennett, 2013; 2016), dealing with diversity would allow us to select from a huge variety of paradigms, theories, programs, or practices. Above importantly, it would enable genuine worldwide involvement in the process of accumulating knowledge and putting development into action (Long and Long, 1992). International Cooperation could overcome evolutionary concepts of growth and actualize a hybrid reality, rich in facets, which subsequently offers an infinite number of potential solutions to global problems.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Quantitative approach with qualitative elements

In the social sciences, two large strands of analysis are normally distinguished: quantitative and qualitative research (Stockmer, 2019). Quantitative research is presented as oriented to deductively testing theories; the qualitative one, on the other hand, is understood as rooted (or grounded) in empiricism and, rather, deductive. The goal of the research would be the emergence of nomothetic (general) knowledge in quantitative approach and of ideographic (specific) knowledge in the qualitative one (Della Porta, 2008). The following scheme, clearly illustrates the methodological diversity of the two approaches, comparing some crucial elements:

1. **Research setting:**

	Quantitative	**Qualitative**
Relationship between Research and theory	Structured	Open
Literature function	Fundamental for the definition of the theory and auxiliary	Hypotheses
Concepts	Operational	Orientative
Relationship with the environment	Manipulative	Naturalistic approach
Psychological Interaction between Scholar and Person studied	Distance	Proximity
Role of the subject studied	Passive	Active

2. **Detection of data:**

	Quantitative	**Qualitative**
Research design	Structured	Open

Representativeness	Statistically representative sample	Non statistically representative cases
Detection tool	Standardized	Depending on the subject
Nature of the data	Objective and standardized	Rich and deep
Subject of the analysis	Variable	Individual
Objective of the analysis	Explain the variance of the variables	Understanding the subject
Mathematical and Statistical Techniques	Heavy use	No use

3. Results:

	Quantitative	**Qualitative**
Data presentation	Tables	Interviews
Generalizations	Causal models	Classifications
Scope of the results	Generalizability	Specificity

Source: Corbetta P. (2003), La ricerca sociale: metodologia e tecniche, Bologna, il Mulino

The first major difference between the two styles is the nature of the research: in the first it is structured, geometric, consequential and planned; in the second, however, it is free: there are no pre-established schemes to follow but an exploration released from any theoretical model. Thus, one or the other approach influences the relationship between literature and theory. In fact, the quantitative approach is deductive while the other is inductive. The first corresponds to a form of investigation that starts from a hypothesis, and proceeds by collecting relevant information through observation, interviews and other research techniques, while the second does not foresee the existence of a starting hypothesis and favors the data acquisition through unstructured informal observation, conversation and other methodologies (Miller, 2019). It follows, therefore, that quantitative research tends to "operationalize" the concepts or to transform them into empirically analysable variables, while in the qualitative one they are in continuous evolution.

The relationship with the environment - that is, with people if the research is of a

social nature - is crucial in both cases, given the complex and changing human nature. However, the quantitative method admits a certain "controlled manipulation" (Corbetta, 2003), which allows the scholar to frame the observation through tools such as a standardized questionnaire. Conversely, those who choose the qualitative method, come to terms with a naturalistic approach (Corbetta, 2003), which frees human behavior from any external constraint. Thus, the scholar-observed relationship is detached in the quantitative and immersive method in the other.

The design of the entire research is studied at the table in the first case while it is unstructured in the second: on the one hand the analysis is weighted and built in consequential phases, on the other it is indefinite and ready to collect any news. This means that the quantitative method, unlike the qualitative one, is basically representative, i.e. its results can be generalized, constituting a statistical sample. Indeed, there is a kind of qualitative research in which the studied subject is only one[25].

Due to its informal and free nature, the qualitative tool varies according to the subject, even within the research itself; on the contrary, quantitative rigor imposes a standardization of analytical tools in order to guarantee uniformity. In fact, those who use this last approach can count on the comparability of the data they collect, being able to insert them into specific categories (evidently processed upstream).

Obviously, the two practices also differ in the objective of the research: the quantitative one aims to explain the variance of the variables, that is, the reason for the variations, while the other to explore the individual and formulate case studies. Based on how the research is structured, the results will be presented: the quantitative approach prefers tables, given the categorization and generalization by which it is characterized, while the qualitative approach favors narration.

The prevailing approach of this study is quantitative, although it presents some qualitative elements, such as the statistical non-representativeness of the sample analyzed and the use of open-ended questions that facilitate the full expression of the participants. As mentioned before, qualitative research is the methodology that best favors narration and, with it, an understanding of the meaning that people give of a certain reality (Della Porta, 2008). Thus, the choice of borrowing some elements of the qualitative method seemed to be the most effective for the purposes of the research. Indeed, the combination of the two is supported by authoritative scholars such as Bryman who in 1988 stated that although a researcher may prefer one method and exclude the other, when the research problem invites a combined approach there is no reason to avoid this strategy. Indeed, a fusion of methodological elements enriches the study. Therefore, even if the two criteria are the direct and logically

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[25] The life-story approach, a technique of analysis of anthropological disciplines. The collection of autobiographical (unsolicited by the interviewer) and biographical materials (the result of the anthropologist's questions) is aimed at reconstructing individual stories that lead to a more general understanding of culture, Treccani Encyclopedia

consequential expression of two different epistemological visions (Corbetta, 2003), they are by no means exclusive. In line with the thinking of Ragin (1994), who sees "unity" in the diversity of the two approaches. Lakshman and colleagues (2000) also lean towards a holistic approach: they affirm that although quantitative methods are frequently adopted because of their scientific reliability, the level of biological irregularity cannot be adequately documented by quantitative research alone. When applied in social circumstances, qualitative approaches adopt a comprehensive viewpoint while respecting the sophistication of human behavior by addressing the "why" and "how" concerns. Therefore, the combination of the two represents the right way to guarantee scientificity and catch human complexity.

3.2 The questionnaire as a research tool

A questionnaire is defined as a document containing questions and other types of variables designed to solicit information appropriate to analysis (Babbie, 1990). Its construction varies according to the type of research being conducted and the objectives to be achieved. For this work a written form of the questionnaire has been chosen. Many studies like Chambers's (1998) and Dollinger's (2012) have confirmed the validity of this methodology.

In general, there are three circumstances in which the use of questionnaires is crucial: first, when the data cannot be easily obtained by other methods; second, for the validation of data obtained by other methods; and third, when the subject's attitudes or approach strategies are likely to influence some aspects of observed behavior in a situation (Moser and Kalton, 1971).

The reasons underlying the choice of the written questionnaire are mostly of a practical and ethical nature: since the start of the study coincided with the most intense period of the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the isolation first and social distance then, it seemed appropriate to use a tool capable to avoid both displacement and encounter. The options of face-to-face interview and participant observation[26] were therefore excluded. The great advantage of a written questionnaire, in fact, is that respondents can fill it out wherever they are and when they are most comfortable, a reflection that mainly concerns expat workers, an important category for research purposes. It would have been difficult to reach them in the different places where they were. Certainly the problem could have been solved with the use of virtual meeting programs such as Skype or Zoom but it must be considered that in many of the countries where expats are located the quality of the internet line is poor, which would have resulted in continuous interruptions of the conversation. In any case, the ethical

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[26] Research technique that requires to spend a sufficiently long period of time, and a close contact with the chosen phenomenon, in order to reach a profound understanding of the specificities that characterize it. For further information: Semi G. (2010), *L'osservazione partecipante. Una guida pratica*. Bologna, il Mulino

reasons that led to the choice of the written questionnaire are based on the belief that the direct interaction between researcher and interviewee would have altered the authenticity of the answers: the participants were able to answer the questions without being observed or listened to by the researcher, increasing the possibility that they have given honest opinions, without feeling the anxiety of being misjudged. According to Silverman (2006), in a face-to-face encounter the interviewer may run the risk of expressing surprise, complacency or disapproval of an answer, offering impromptu explanations of questions, skipping some or suggesting possible answers. These are dangers that the written questionnaire avoids.

The quality of the questionnaire design affects all the analyses, results, general findings and areas for further research. Therefore, creating the questionnaires is a crucial step of the study. The most difficult challenge is to formulate understandable and clear questions: dubious and inconsistent questions produce ambiguous and inharmonious answers, resulting in futile analyzes and incoherent outcomes (Acharya, 2010). In fact, in a face-to-face interview the researcher immediately senses whether the question posed to the interviewee has been understood, because she/he can observe non-verbal communication and possibly reformulate the question, or simply by listening to the answer she/he understands if the topic has been centered, stimulating further reflections to refocus the discussion. In a written questionnaire, on the other hand, the interviewer and interviewee do not interact, so the possibility of misunderstanding is much higher. A question must be carefully crafted to ensure that it says exactly what is intended, being clear and unambiguous, and has a high likelihood of being understood by the readers. Also, according to Sinclair (1975) it is important to make sure that: (a) The respondent is driven to provide a response; (b) The respondent possesses the necessary specific knowledge; (c) The questionnaire takes into account the respondent's constraints and unique frame of reference, allowing him/her to easily understand the questions' goals and context; (d) The respondent provided a sufficient response based on his/her own knowledge. Among the characteristics that make a questionnaire reliable, Stone (1993) also highlights omnicompetence, or the ability to handle every response that might be given. However, since the range of possible replies is only constrained by the number of respondents, it is actually unrealistic to anticipate any question to provide that result, that's why the category "Other" among the possible answers is strongly recommended, particularly in closed-ended questions.

3.2.1 Identification of variables

The identification of the variables to be included in the questionnaire, according to Stone (1993), is a pivotal step for the success of the entire research. Indeed, ambiguous and constantly changing variables could be a symptom of an upstream

confusion: it is not clear what is being investigated or how. In that case, the scholar is not yet ready to start the project, so he/she needs to spend more time studying the topic. Once the variables to be taken into account have been displayed, they can be listed. At this point it becomes easier to understand what is the justification for each variable chosen, that is, why that item is useful for inquiring into a certain situation.

Hence, before listing the variables necessary for carrying out the questionnaire, we wondered about the thematic areas to be investigated. According to the research objectives and taking into account the insights from the literature on intercultural competences, the content areas or macro variables identified are the following:

a) socio-personal data of participants;

b) identity of NGOs represented;

c) cognitive dimension of intercultural competence;

d) emotional dimension of intercultural competence;

e) operational dimension of intercultural competence;

f) importance given to intercultural skills in International Cooperation.

At this point, for each macro variable, a series of micro variables has been formulated (hereinafter referred to simply as "variables") on which to build questions. At the end of the process, 22 variables have been identified, organized as follows:

a) Participants' socio-personal data (8 Variables)

VARIABLES
a1) Age
a2) Gender
a3) Nationality
a4) Level of education
a5) Years of experience in International Cooperation
a6) Personal motivation for working in International Cooperation
a7) Current role
a8) Previous experiences abroad

a1) Age

Socio-biographical information on the participants is secondary but important data: it helps the researcher to place the interviewee in a broader context, they facilitate understanding of the response (McCracken, 1988). In terms of intercultural skills, knowing the years of the interviewees can be useful for verifying whether there is a correlation between age and relational ability with the other. Once the responses of all the participants have been analyzed, therefore, it could be investigated whether the older sample, potentially more experienced in International Cooperation, is more able to adapt to different cultural contexts or more capable of managing emotions in the event of conflict. values with each other. Or the opposite: the young sample, potentially fresher in studies or more enthusiastic about the new job, could turn out to be more competent interculturally. Or again, there may be no relationship between age and intercultural ability. In short, the personal data proves to be a useful starting point for study and reflection.

a2) Gender

Knowing which gender the interviewee identifies with could prove interesting to investigate any correlations with his cognitive, emotional and practical skills. If, for example, it emerged that most of the participants identified as women are more proficient in intercultural terms, it could be hypothesized that the characteristics attributed to the female gender are more related to listening, welcoming, flexibility or emotional management skills, compared to gender. male. Indeed, the literature on emotions has highlighted a more marked presence of altruism and empathy in individuals with female orientation (Hoffman, 1977; Eisenberg and Lennon, 1983; Mehrabian, Young and Sato, 1988), prosocial behavior (Vecchione and Picconi, 2006), knowing how to name one's emotions (Bagby, Parker and Taylor, 2004). These factors are connected to the dimension of intercultural competences, especially in terms of adaptation, that is, knowing how to relate to difference in an effective way (Castiglioni, 2020). The research could confirm this correlation, find new ones or completely disprove it.

The data on the gender of the participants in the questionnaire may also prove useful for a socio-cultural, rather than intercultural analysis: on the Open Cooperation portal, updated to 2020, we read of a Gender Gap in the International Cooperation sector[27]: out of a total of 24,558 human resources 55% are men and 45% are women. The percentage of men employed in Italy is 9%, in the rest of the world it is 91%, while

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[27] Open Cooperazione, *Le risorse umane della cooperazione 2020*,
https://www.open-cooperazione.it/web/dati-risorse-umane.aspx?anno=2020

the percentage of women employed in Italy is 19% and abroad is 81%. In this sense, the present research could provide indications with respect to numbers.

a3) Nationality

Knowing the nationality of the participants in the questionnaire can be useful for two reasons: to detect any similarities between the answers of those who identify with a specific nationality; to get an idea of the composition - in terms of national identity - of human resources in Italian Cooperation. However, it must be considered that the questionnaire used for the research is in Italian, a condition that could limit the participation of those who do not know this language.

a4) Level of education

A study conducted by a group of researchers at some universities in Turkey (Penbek, 2009) revealed that as international experiences increase, so does the degree of respect for cultures other than one's own. The research has shown that students who have lived abroad or have close relationships with foreign colleagues are more capable of relativizing their worldview than those with fewer international interactions.

In fact, today's university systems promote the creation of international networks through Erasmus programs, summer schools abroad, the exchange of students and teachers, and partnerships between universities in different countries. The international dimension has become an added value to the curriculum, so it is easy to understand that the youngest participants in the questionnaire, if they are graduates, have lived experiences away from home or had relationships with foreign colleagues and teachers.

According to Missoni (2020), the increase in young people with educational and specialization qualifications has made access to International Cooperation more competitive than in the past, but an adequate human resource development strategy is still lacking. Based on this observation, this analysis could be useful from two perspectives: understanding whether those who have recently left the university system have actually acquired intercultural skills given the internationality of the programs; whether or not there is a discrepancy between the skills acquired and the actual ability to act in the relationship with the other.

a5) Years of experience in International Cooperation

In terms of intercultural competence, with specific reference to International Cooperation, the variable "years of experience" could be useful to understand if there is a relationship between the ability to act effectively in different cultural contexts and

professional seniority. And, if so, whether the relationship is directly or inversely proportional. In a research conducted by Mordini et al. (2013)[28], for example, a link between age and burnout syndrome emerges, understood as a stressful process: in the first years of a professional career the subject would be more vulnerable. Similarly, a young cooperator may have learned intercultural principles on a theoretical level but not be able to implement them in the relationship with the other. Therefore, it would be prepared from a cognitive but not a practical and emotional point of view, dimensions exercised through the experience of diversity. On the other hand, having experience is the very foundation of learning (Reggio, 2010) and the more the experience of cultural diversity is sophisticated, the more the competence in intercultural relations potentially grows (Kelly, 1963).

a6) Personal motivation for working in International Cooperation

Before the 1980s in Italy, Cooperation was not intended as a workplace, but rather as an experiential opportunity, far from home. Therefore, no specific knowledge or professional skills were required for those who participated in the projects. This is why, probably, the literature on intercultural abilities in International Cooperation is scarce. One of the few studies conducted in this field is by Manila Franzini (2017), who highlights how until the early 2000s there was a strong personal motivation for being active in humanitarian and development activities, as well as spirit of service and desire to help, while today it is more a professional choice. Indeed, according to Battistessa (2018), contemporary Cooperation is different from the past: we are witnessing a "vertical" professionalization of the sector. In past decades it was much more difficult to find qualified staff to be transferred to conflict zones or areas of the "political South of the World" and the aid programmes were open to everyone, while today the art of getting by is no longer allowed. That is why more and more Italian universities or institutions are offering graduate and higher education courses specialized in international non-profit. The cooperator is not the civilized one who helps and transmits skills to non-civilized communities, but a person who works together with others to face the challenges of today's world. And in working together they both give, both receive, both are motivated to face the global problems and are convinced that by facing them together there are more possibilities to find an effective and sustainable solutions (Pochettino, 2018)[29]. With specific reference to this research, participants' responses will clarify whether the work in International Cooperation is experienced as a social mission or a real professionalizing job. Furthermore, the study will be useful for understanding how the relationship with the other is experienced:

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[28] Mordini V. et al (2013), *Burnout, empatia e regolazione emotiva: quali relazioni*, Cognitivismo Clinico 10, 2, 185-199

[29] Introduction by Pochettino S. in Battistessa D. (2018), *Vorrei fare il cooperante*, Graphofeel

"vertical" help or "horizontal" collaboration?

a7) Current role

The professionals within an NGO are many and very different from each other. Not all of them have sufficient human resources to cover any area, but this is not always necessary: the body chooses which figures to select based on the mission, the projects to be implemented and the area of intervention. In the technical-health sector we can find engineers, architects, surveyors, agronomists, veterinarians, doctors, nurses, biologists, nutritionists, etc work; in the economic-financial sector there are administrators, treasurers, logisticians, etc; in the psychosocial one we can meet psychologists, educators, trainers, sociologists, cultural animators, linguistic mediators, etc; in the management there are designers, project managers, coordinators, etc; in communication work publicists, journalists, web developer, graphic designers, social media managers, etc.

In this research, operators involved in various fields were involved and they were asked to identify themselves with one of the following Variables: expat, desk in Italy, cultural animation in Italy. The double or triple option was possible because some entities, often small ones, have transversal professional figures, who are in charge of several aspects at the same time.

By expat we mean the person sent by the NGO to a foreign country to follow a project closely, on the ground. They have the task of carrying out, coordinating or monitoring certain activities, depending on the professional profile. The length of their stay depends on the terms of the contract: it can last a few days, months or years. Scholars who have investigated the adaptation process of expatriate workers have often pointed out that many face serious problems during their assignments (Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Dunbar, 1992; Tung, 1998) not so much for technical incompetence as for difficulty. of intercultural adaptation (Bird and Mukuda, 1989; Tung, 1993). When communication problems also occur, the pressure to endure is so strong that it pushes them to go home before the contract expires (Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Lachman et al, 1994; Black and Gregersen, 1991).

Those involved in cultural animation in Italy, on the other hand, are involved in initiatives to raise awareness of public opinion, linguistic-cultural mediation, education for global citizenship in schools, assistance in family homes or reception centers. Many of the NGOs participating in this research, in fact, carry out activities both abroad and in Italy, according to the mission of the project. The operators in charge of carrying out these initiatives often have to deal with cultural diversity given the heterogeneity of the public involved, so it seems important that they have ad hoc skills. Effective communication with the guests of a hub for refugees, for example, requires intercultural skills as well as technical abilities. Also, we should consider the

influence that this type of operators have on public opinion: the way they talk about cooperation, development or cultural diversity has an impact on people's consciousness.

a8) Previous experiences abroad

According to Fantini (2000), if you want to know about water, you shouldn't ask a goldfish, because "those who have never experienced another culture, nor struggled to communicate through another language, such as goldfish, are generally unaware of the milieu in which they have always existed. "It is not so obvious, therefore, that people are aware of being the bearers of a culture, of observing the world through cultural lenses, of representing one of the infinite ways of being in the world, of being different from someone else. Unless they are exposed to contact with culturally distinct groups. In that case the individual would clash with the concept of diversity because he would realize that there are multiple ways of speaking, gesturing, dressing, eating, organizing the day, living relationships, etc. The more encounters (or clashes) with otherness are experienced, the more solid the awareness of the existence of a diversity becomes cultural. However, it would be a mistake to think that this mechanically translates into intercultural competence: being involved in events that put us in contact with other cultures is not automatically synonymous with intercultural experience: to be able to live it you have to be prepared (Bennett, 2017). The acquisition of intercultural competences is a long and tiring process, as it requires the activation of a series of skills such as - among others - the intentionality in assuming the perspective of the other, the search for a third virtual culture that becomes a space for synthesis and adaptation, the temporary adoption of aspects of a value or behavior (Castiglioni, 2020). With specific reference to International Cooperation, it could be risky to assume that a subject is interculturally prepared for the very fact that he has worked abroad for years. This is also shown by the research by Manila Franzini (2017), who interviewed some operators in the sector: the international stay does not seem to be a systematic factor in knowing the other, nor a way to manage one's own ethnocentrism. Indeed, sometimes the journey generates a feeling of fear of facing the unknown and an increase in the sense of insecurity. The foreign context is steeped in cultural aspects with which the subject has to deal: diversity can also be irritating, it can make you angry; the encounter with the other can also activate racist feelings, perhaps dormant or of which one was not fully aware (Franzini, 2020).

Taking this into account, it is undeniable that the experience of contact with foreign realities is a fundamental step in the acquisition and improvement of one's intercultural skills. Having comparisons always and only with those who are part of your group would make the subject drowsy, leading him to think that outside that

reality there is nothing different. That is, that reality is the only possible one. Indeed, that reality is natural, obvious, universal.

The choice of the time span of three continuous months depended on the fact that most of the cultural exchange agencies and training stays abroad start from the minimum option of a quarter: in the literature there is no documentation about the "necessary" times to live away from home to have a cross-cultural experience, so it seemed appropriate to choose that as a parameter of analysis. The web is full of messages of encouragement to go on volunteer trips, au pairs or studies, promoted by NGOs and Youth Exchange Associations. On the AFSAI association website[30], for example, we read that the experience abroad is an "opportunity for study, personal growth, intercultural learning and fun" and that "projects abroad are not just an opportunity to improve language skills, but well-rounded experiences, which lead the young person to discover new and often distant realities". The Association Volontariato Internazionale[31] affirms that a period of volunteering abroad "is not only a great way to travel, but it is a unique opportunity for personal growth in a new and stimulating cultural context", titling the paragraph "Leave for an experience that will change your life. Forever." Thus, even the European institutions encourage young people to participate in international projects: on the Youth For Europe website[32] we read that this type of experience means "growing and collecting unforgettable memories" and gives the opportunity to "explore new cultures and countries".

Indeed, according to Onorati, Bednarz and Comi (2018), those who have less social capital, that is, little or no experience in multicultural contexts, appear less inclined to open up and rather focus their reflection in comparative terms, trying to integrate what they see in their mental schemes. On the other hand, when you have richer social capital, you are more able to relativize the values and strategies that guide your actions.

b) NGOs represented (2 Variables)

VARIABLES
b1) Organization identity
b2) Main areas of intervention

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[30] Association AFSAI, https://www.afsai.it/chi-siamo/
[31] Association Volontariato Internazionale, https://volontariatointernazionale.org/
[32] Youth For Europe, https://youthforeurope.eu/european-solidarity-corps/

b1) Organization identity and b2) Main areas of intervention

In Italy there are 256 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)[33]. They are non for profit entities deemed suitable by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, pursuant to law n. 125/2014. The organizations involved in this research are 30, not statistically representative but satisfying for the purposes of the study. Indeed, they vary greatly in size, mission, location, history, geographical areas of intervention and approach. This variety is the desirable condition for this type of analysis: from the perspective of operators' intercultural skills, it might be interesting to look for any similarities or differences depending on the size of the NGO, its longevity, its secular or religious identity. Moreover, as Corbetta (2003) states, the qualitative researcher should not follow a criterion of statistical representativeness but rather of substantive representativeness. Indeed, although NGOs have common characteristics such as their origin in civil society, the lack of profit, the absence of institutional constraints, the participatory approach (Salvai, 2011) and are committed to reducing inequalities between the North and the South of the world acting as a "bridge" (Governors, 2015), each one follows its own criteria for selecting cooperators, involving local partners and implementing interventions.

c)   Cognitive dimension of intercultural competence (6 Variables)

VARIABLES
c1) Conceptualization of International Cooperation
c2) Conceptualization of Intercultural competences
c3) Conceptualization of Culture
c4) Value attributed to Culture Shock
c5) Equality / Diversity of Human Beings
c6) Universality / Relativity of Ethical Principles

c1) Conceptualization of International Cooperation

Asking for a definition of "International Cooperation" is useful in order not to take the concept for granted. Indeed, qualitative research is not aimed at deductively testing theories (Della Porta, 2015) but at exploring new ones. This type of approach imagines reality as a procedural condition, constantly evolving, constructed and

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[33] AICS, *Elenco iscrizioni dei soggetti senza finalità di lucro*, March 2022

constantly reconstructed by the actor. Knowledge and experience of the world are constructed, not discovered (Bennett, 2013). Therefore reality does not exist in itself, it cannot be objectively described but assumes a meaning - unique - only in relation to those who interact with it. The observer is always in a co-ontological relationship with the object of observation; in other words, the existence of objects cannot be separated from the definition that the observer gives them (Bennett, 2020). At this point it appears essential to ask for a description of "International Cooperation", because each answer will tell a precise way of experiencing work, of looking at the other, of thinking about development, of portraying interculture, of representing the relationship between cooperators and local partners.

c2) Conceptualization of Intercultural Competences

The literature on intercultural competences gives numerous and varied definitions about. There is no univocal and concordant vision among scholars, so much so that researcher Darla Deardorff, in 2006, brought together twenty-three intercultural experts asking them to try to reach an agreement. Although each of the participants gave the theme a particular nuance, most agreed on the following definition: ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in multicultural situations based on each individual's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.

As part of the same experiment, scholars were then asked to list the constituent elements of this ability. 100% of the votes fell on "understanding other points of view on the world" and, to scale: awareness of the cultural self; adaptation to the new cultural environment; the ability to observe and listen; openness to intercultural learning and to people of different cultures; the ability to adapt to various intercultural communications; flexibility; the ability to analyze; tolerance of ambiguity; knowledge and deep understanding of one's own culture and that of others; respect for other cultures; cross-cultural empathy; understanding the value of cultural diversity; awareness of the role of culture; cognitive flexibility; socio-linguistic skills; knowing how to take the other into account; suspension of judgment; the curiosity; learning through interaction; the ethnorelative view; knowledge / understanding of the host culture.

The concepts of culture and interculture, due to their dynamic (and culturally oriented) nature, are difficult to enclose in a universally acceptable definition. However, regardless of the label given to them, intercultural skills must be understood as essential to ensure the human ability to coexist peacefully, both locally and globally (Deardorff, 2016). Asking participants to list the most useful ones in the context of International Cooperation would be a useful way to understand if and how much awareness there is around the topic, but also which conceptualization they have acquired such skills. The question, in fact, implies several levels of consciousness,

because it contains at least two other reflections: to make a project work, what human and social skills are needed? To communicate effectively with partners, what skills are needed?

c3) Conceptualization of Culture

The risk of defining culture is to reify it, that is, to think of it as a "thing", an object that exists in itself. Avruch (1998) describes reification as a semantic trap, because it leads us to think that culture is separable from the individual, independent of human thought and action. It is a risk because considering cultures as closed wholes would justify attitudes of defense and confrontation, thus making the efforts of intercultural communication useless. In any case, even if we wanted to, it would be impossible to delineate the boundaries of a culture: it is like a horizon that recedes as it approaches (Benhabib, 2002). It has neither a beginning nor an end, it is not a compact block, a homogeneous essence and it is enough to imagine the culture one does not identify with to understand it. For example, how to exhaustively define Italianness? Would eating pasta, speaking Italian and loving the family be enough to describe the complex heterogeneity of Italian culture? Does an inhabitant of the South have identical characteristics to one of the North? Does anyone who lives in the countryside have the same vision as someone who lives in the city? A worker and an academic? Do a meat lover and a vegan share the same culture just because they are Italian? The questions are potentially endless because the angles from which to observe "Italianness" are multiple. Culture, therefore, must be thought of as a changing dimension according to who identifies with it. In fact, from the constructivist perspective, widely taken into consideration for this research, identity does not exist in itself but is a process. People do not have an identity but they identify with something. And, by and large, human beings do not have a culture but they create it, they continuously build it in the interaction with the context (Bennett, 2013; 2016; 2021). Many other scholars such as Tajfel & Turner (1979), Triandis (1988), Lee & Gudykunst (2001) support the hypothesis that identity is not monolithic but changeable, multilevel and multifaceted. This point of view could avoid, as far as possible, the reification of culture.

Trying to identify the constituent elements of cultures is not wrong. Organizing ideas into categories is essential for processing external stimuli and recommended in cross-cultural interaction, for perceiving differences and adapting one's behavior to the context. However, the cognitive labels that we construct while living cross-cultural experiences must not be rigid geometries but momentarily useful tools to integrate effectively into the situation. The more labels we are able to develop, the wider the range of prospects that can be adopted. This allows us to think of cultures not as someone's property but as spaces of exchange, porous systems (Mantovani, 2009).
In common speech - and sometimes also in social research - the concept of culture is

treated as a monolithic reality, often assimilated to the image of the inherited "baggage" or the "iceberg", in which only the superficial area of the structure is visible, but thus the risk of objectifying culture is high. In the constructivist sense it can be translated rather as the coordination of meanings and actions that develops in a given human context (Bennett, 2021). Culture is the experience of the mental organization of the world, and each cultural entity does it in its own way. The cultural entity can be a nation, an ethnic group, a company, a family, and countless other things (Bennett, 2021)[34].

Investigating what kind of abstraction the operators of International Cooperation make of culture can provide useful insights into understanding how the relationship with the other actually acts and manage differences. The way in which culture is described is indicative of the way in which it is lived.

c4) Value attributed to Culture Shock

The encounter with another culture can cause a shock on an individual level: it can trigger feelings of disorientation, frustration, nostalgia, rejection, rebellion, anxiety (Cohen-Emerique and Rothberg, 2015). When you face people who have different value references, it can be hard to understand them, accept them, integrate them with your own. All the more so if the event occurs in a place other than the one where you live. The phenomenon of culture shock has nothing negative or wrong in itself, indeed according to many scholars it is physiological, it happens continuously but we are not always able to grasp or re-elaborate it (Castiglioni, 2020). Indeed, according to some it is positive and desirable because it breaks the mold of one's own identity, questioning the "obvious" and "natural" conception of the world (Schutz, 1976). It follows, therefore, that the individual who is aware that he is going through a culture shock is more ready to develop communication and behavioral strategies that help him better adapt to the new context.
In fact, the feeling of disorientation typical of culture shock can be triggered "simply" by a different diet, homesickness or language barriers.
American anthropologist Barbara Miller (2019) noted that one of the psychological elements associated with culture shock is the feeling of being under-competent as "cultural actors". Hence the decision to include the question in the questionnaire. If the cooperators attribute a devaluing value to it, it could mean that they do not accept the idea of being able to experience negative emotions in meeting others. And which, therefore, link disorientation and stress to an intercultural incapacity, rather than to a loss of one's own references.

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[34] Bennett M. (2021), "*Facilitating Intercultural Consciousness: Applying the New Paradigm*", online course

c5) Equality / Diversity of Human Beings

Talking about the equality of human beings can be risky, because it can be interpreted in various ways. In terms of recognition of equal dignity, for example, equality tends to have a positive and shared value, at least in Western democracies. But from an intercultural perspective, thinking that people are the same can be misleading, even dangerous.

According to the American sociologist Milton Bennett, whose approach to intercultural communication is widely considered for this research, thinking of human beings as equals is an ethnocentric attitude, which makes us interpret phenomena by assuming that what we see, hear, we perceive it is objective, natural, universal, and not cultural. An ethnocentric look at the world makes us ignore that we too are bearers of culture. Hence, assuming that others are like us while we interact with them is tantamount to talking to ourselves (Bennett, 2013). In this sense, the principle of the Golden Rule "treat your neighbor as you would like to be treated", so popular in common and religious language, is wrong if you want to adopt an effective intercultural approach. When cultures communicate, the recipient cannot be expected to interpret the world in the same way as the sender and be subject to the same social values (Beamer, 1992). To think that, after all, all human beings are equal, excluding the most "superficial" diversities such as the most evident physiognomy, language and habits, means minimizing diversity, even denying it. Because if we are all the same, then everyone is like me. A necessary - but not sufficient - condition for being interculturally competent is to keep in mind that we are all different, both individually and systemically, due to the regional and national culture with which we identify, for the ethnic group, the socio-economic status, age, gender, sexual and political orientation, level of education, profession, etc.

To exclude the hypothesis that the participants in the questionnaire could read equality in terms of equal dignity, two key elements were included in the question: the phrase "at the bottom", which refers to a profound inner dimension and the reference to the most "Superficial" such as language and habits, for example those of food or clothing which, in an ethnocentric vision, do not affect the common condition of human beings (Castiglioni, 2020). An affirmative answer to this question, therefore, would imply a minimizing attitude (of diversity), therefore not intercultural. Indeed, it could suggest an assimilationist style: "I help you to become like me, if you do not accept it or you rebel then it is because you do not deserve it" (Castiglioni, 2020).

c6) Universality / Relativity of Ethical Principles

Admitting that there are universal ethical principles, valid for any human being, means thinking that there is only one truth, probably yours (or the cultural group's you identify with). It follows, therefore, that a positive answer to the question would reflect an ethnocentric vision. The concept of universalism strongly contrasts with that of interculture, which admits multiple truths, multiple interpretations, different moralities. It can be physical, when it is based on the idea that basically people have the same physiological needs, and transcendent, if it rests on the postulate of equality before God or certain "natural" laws (Castiglioni, 2020).

With specific reference to the present research, it could be hypothesized that a transcendental universalistic vision could be found among the operators of religious NGOs. The analysis of the answers will give way to confirm or deny the supposition.

In any case, according to Colombo (2002), whatever the approach to cultural diversity may be, Western white people cannot ignore the asymmetry of wealth and power in the relationship with each other.

Accepting that our morality is not the most correct can be tiring, sometimes frightening, but an intercultural communicative approach cannot ignore knowing how to question the criteria of thought in which we have always wallowed, more or less unconsciously. The interculturally competent individual is able to compare the most sacred and intimate beliefs with those, equally sacred and intimate, of those who have had different historical experiences. "Refusing this confrontation means exercising a form of power that allows you to define who is admitted and who is excluded from the debate" (Colombo, 2002).

The same reasoning applies to the concept of human rights, so much in vogue in International Cooperation: how can a list of precepts describe the socio-cultural complexity of the peoples of the world, welcoming every specificity? How can some principles thought of by certain individuals represent the vision of anyone else? How can they promote the concept of freedom, assuming it has that meaning for everyone?

The goal of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in 1948 by the United Nations, was undoubtedly that of protecting the personality and individual dignity, which however are inseparable from the culture of the same. In 1947, the American anthropologist Herskovits proposed a critical reflection to the UN Commission for Human Rights: the document was certainly designed to protect the personality of the individual, so that he could fully express his own development, but on a level of global consideration, respect for different societies was equally important, since the individual can only express himself through the social group to which he belongs. The scholar, therefore, asks: "How can such a declaration be applicable to all human beings without resulting in an affirmation of rights conceived exclusively in terms of the values prevailing in the countries of Western Europe and

America?"

According to Herskovits (1947), any characteristic of the human being, from behavior to hopes, from moral principles to aspirations, from eating habits to the meaning given to life, is shaped by the customs of the group with which he identifies. Consequently, the right to be able to develop one's essence must be based on the "recognition of the fact that the personality of an individual can only develop in terms of the culture of his society".

Imagining a Charter of Human Rights that takes these reflections into consideration, the anthropologist proposes three assertions that can constitute the pillars:

1) "The individual develops his personality through his own culture and, consequently, respect for individual differences entails respect for cultural differences";

2) "Respect for differences between cultures is based on the scientific fact that no method for the qualitative evaluation of cultures has been discovered";

3) "Principles and values are related to the culture from which they derive; consequently, any attempt to formulate postulates that arise from convictions or from the moral code of a culture, at the same time reduces the possibility of applying any Declaration of Human Rights to humanity as a whole".

d) Emotional dimension of intercultural competence (2 Variables)

VARIABLES
d1) Ability to empathize
d2) Emotional management of intercultural conflicts

d1) Ability to empathize

When, in interacting with a foreign person, we focus on different aspects, we are better prepared for an interculturally effective response: noticing and mentally recording what we consider different from what we would do or say while communicating with someone, is important for three main reasons: (1) it relativizes our position; (2) it widens the range of adoptable perspectives; (3) it prepares us to elaborate the right adaptive strategy.

Looking for similarities with one's interlocutor may seem an attitude of openness and acceptance, but it is not synonymous with intercultural sensitivity because it triggers a process of sympathy and not of empathy, which is necessary for good intercultural relational functioning. Feeling sympathy for someone means looking for something of oneself in the other, understanding their feelings because they have

already been experienced in the first person. In short, put yourself at the center.

In fact, in the cross-cultural relationship, sympathy translates into a tendency to see people using (unconsciously) their own group as a standard of judgment (Porter and Samovar, 1976), risking to consider them "strange" or "rude" if they deviate from it.

By attaching greater importance to the common aspects, the observer ends up ignoring or diminishing the importance of human differences, perhaps believing that, after all, they are superficial (Bennett, 2013), but this vision is the reflection of a unique reality in which there is only one true truth: one's own.

On the contrary, admitting that reality is multiple means assuming diversity, therefore being able to feel empathy, which is the most appropriate communication strategy in intercultural circumstances (Kelly, 1963). According to Costantini (et al, 1985) empathy is the "experience of a foreign consciousness", while Anagnostopoulos (et al, 2008) defines it as "the way of understanding the other thanks to the ability to put oneself in his place and see the world as he sees it".

d2) Emotional management of intercultural conflicts

The encounter with the other is not always pleasant and free of internal conflicts. Indeed, dealing with diversity means going through disturbances, experiencing moments of rupture with one's own cultural patterns, losing the meanings previously attributed to things (Franzini, 2017). Witnessing behaviors that we would instinctively consider immoral or inappropriate can cause deep emotional crises, but the interaction is effectively intercultural when one learns to manage one's own emotions: recognize negative feelings, welcome them and "allow ourselves a margin of curiosity" (Lobasso, 2014). For example, faced with the delay of a foreign colleague with whom you have an appointment, before thinking that he is rude and disrespectful, it would be good to ask whether (and to what extent) the delay in his culture is accepted. Keeping in mind, however, that the encounter with the other is never an encounter with a culture but with a person who interprets and acts (also) a culture (Aime, 2014).

Acting interculturally does not mean abandoning one's values and blindly adopting those of the place where one expatriates (Balboni and Caon, 2015) but admitting that there are other possible worlds, alongside and together with ours. "Temporarily adopting aspects of a value or a behavior does not threaten our identity but rather expands our cognitive, communicative, emotional and behavioral repertoire by adding alternative options" (Castiglioni, 2020).

Irritation, anger or frustration are legitimate emotions, especially if they are caused by behaviors that, according to their own values, are intolerable. However, a good dose of "emotional intelligence" is necessary to avoid (or resolve) an intercultural crisis and find effective communication solutions, which lead to a win-win situation, where all the actors involved benefit, reaching their goal. The term "emotional intelligence" was

coined by Salovey and Mayer in 1990 and more recently was treated by Goleman (1996), who describes it as "the ability to control impulses (...) to modulate one's own states of mind (...) to read the feelings of others and treat them effectively". According to the author, those with emotional intelligence are on average happier and socially balanced. In short, a proactive attitude in the cross-cultural relationship, if reciprocal, allows for the construction of a "third virtual culture that becomes a space for synthesis and adaptation" (Castiglioni, 2020). Thus, two or more cultural models meet and initiate new coordination of meanings, without supplanting the original cultural schemes (Bennett, 2013).

e) Operational dimension of intercultural competence (2 Variables)

VARIABLES
e1) Involvement of local partners
e2) Operational management of intercultural conflicts

e1) Involvement of local partners

Between the 70s and 80s of the last century, a complex system of non-governmental bodies, researchers and specialized professionals was born around the development. The creation of this network parallel to the government institutions had become necessary given the failure of many state aid programs, too distant from the realities to which the initiatives were aimed. In fact, non-governmental activities were much more effective because they were carried out in close contact with indigenous populations, or in any case in collaboration with local representatives (Black, 2002). That horizontal type of work has been maintained until now, becoming increasingly important also for government institutions. Calls for proposals for the presentation of project ideas, for example, are published on the basis of the needs identified in the field, therefore the objectives to be achieved within the project are connected to the needs of a certain geographical area or social category, ascertained in a previous phase. Certainly the economic and commercial interests of a country strongly influence its foreign policy, which can use International Cooperation as a means of implementation. However, aid policies must be given greater attention to the inclusion of local partners. Since their inception, NGOs have represented, more than any other Cooperation actor, the bodies closest to the beneficiaries of the initiatives thanks to the more or less constant and continuous presence of "expat" operators in the field. Coordination with local people is essential for the success of the project, but it is not

always taken for granted that this happens in a truly inclusive, horizontal, and therefore intercultural way. Indeed, according to a recent research conducted by Manila Franzini (2017), if the cooperators are not adequately prepared to meet each other, they risk transforming themselves into "little dictators", making their position of power and responsibility weigh on them. The attitude implemented, therefore, is one of superiority and certainly not one of cooperation, a necessary element to ensure sustainability of the project. The inability to accept other visions and negotiate solutions to a problem, can trigger a conflict between the parties and mess everything up or induce the counterpart to assume passive behavior, running the risk that the relationship will turn into a crushing process.

When the relationship between expat operators and local partners is also reciprocal and fruitful, a factor must in any case be considered: they are usually elites, mostly male, well educated and less poor than the rural communities in which they aspire to intervene (Salvai, 2011). These elites include, for example, exponents of indigenous associations or religious leaders who, although connoisseurs of the geographical and socio-cultural reality of the context, are nevertheless bearers of a different worldview from that of the final recipients of the project. An interculturally sensitive cooperator should be able to recognize this aspect and act accordingly. He will understand that to meet the needs of the beneficiaries it is necessary to participate in local life, building relationships of mutual respect and trust. Even according to CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency)[35], if people are to participate in the formulation of the project, coexistence should precede its drafting. To adopt a truly intercultural approach, the institute proposes to reverse the planning phases: the cooperators should first spend time with the indigenous populations to understand the problems and identify solutions together, and then, on the basis of these, develop the interventions.

e2) Operational management of intercultural conflicts

The encounter with the other can produce a crisis, especially if the misunderstanding is played out on the diversity of values. The repercussions are both emotional and operational, causing - in the case of Cooperation, for example - design fractures. In fact, although the practice of confrontation with local partners in the drafting phase of the project is more or less consolidated, it often happens that the activities, in progress, clash with local beliefs and habits. The project turns out to be culturally incompatible, therefore difficult to apply to the native context, if not even rejected by the beneficiary population. According to Cochrane (2009) cultural incompatibility is the main factor in the failure of a project.
The question included in the questionnaire aims to investigate the management

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[35] Eyford H., Eyford, G. (1995), *Involving Culture: a fieldworkers guide to culturally sensitive development*, Paris, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for UNESCO

capacity of the conflict: what solution to devise if the mandating body requires to implement certain activities which, however, turn out to be in contrast with the local culture? Carry out the job assignment, evade the mandate or find a compromise?

To be interculturally effective, not only must know, understood as study, knowledge and awareness, but also knowing how to do, that is, knowing how to act fruitfully in the relationship with the other by oneself (Fantini, 2000). In fact, among the intercultural skills identified by scholars Koester and Olebe, merged into the BASIC model - Behavioral Assessment Scale of Intercultural Competence (1988), there are some behavioral skills such as: interaction management, problem solving, knowing how to weave and maintain positive personal relationships.

f) The importance given to Intercultural Competences in International Cooperation (2 Variables)

VARIABLES
f1) Intercultural competences training
f2) Attention of NGOs to candidates' intercultural skills

f1) Intercultural competences training

Having contact with people from other cultures is no guarantee of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2013; 2016). Indeed, if mismanaged, the meeting can arouse negative emotions, conflicts, misunderstandings, confirming stereotypes or creating new ones, or triggering racist feelings. Even living abroad does not seem to be a systematic factor of knowledge of the other (Franzini, 2017; Castiglioni, 2020) or of constructive ability towards diversity. To confirm these positions, it is sufficient to think that all students or workers immersed in international contexts or citizens of multicultural metropolises should be excellent intercultural communicators simply because they are constantly exposed to cultural diversity. To become one, they would need to acquire some cognitive tools, taking part in a potentially infinite process of ethnocentric awareness: also in this case the metaphor of the goldfish by Fantini (2000) is useful to reflect on the fact that if an individual is not conscious of being the bearer of a culture himself, he will not be able to relativize his gaze on the world: only when he succeeds in doing so will he realize that his vision is not "natural", "obvious" or "universal" but it is one of many possible. The other is different from himself as he is different from the other. Once he has entered this order of thought, he will be able to understand diversity in the Latin sense of the term: cum-prehendere. Take it with you,

assimilate it, become one. Only in this way is one capable of giving dignity to the vision of others.

Therefore, intercultural competences are not spontaneous and natural skills but intentionally learned (Bennett, 2016) through a long, conscious and sometimes tiring process. They are not limited to the knowledge of certain characteristics of a specific culture or geographical area, but must be considered as a "phenomenological knowledge" thanks to which an individual develops the ability to interpret, understand and deal with any intercultural situation (Salvai, 2011). Knowledge is not necessarily competence (Bennett, 2016). In fact, intercultural communication courses are dynamic in nature and promote interaction between individuals with different visions, to ensure that they learn to co-construct the meanings of things (Bennett, 2017). The first step is to become aware of one's own inevitable ethnocentrism, which filters - in spite of ourselves - every observation, interpretation and action. Once it is understood that any conceptualization is culturally oriented, one realizes that one's way of being in the world (therefore of the cultural groups with which one identifies) is one of many possible, neither the only nor the most correct. At this point the individual may be able to recognize dignity and respect for other cultural forms. To transform this awareness into practical ability, to be implemented in a multicultural context, it is necessary to exercise certain emotional attitudes such as empathy, and relational attitudes such as observation, active listening, negotiation of meanings (Balboni and Caon, 2015). When you empathize with the other, you take part in their emotional and cognitive experience (Castiglioni, 2020). According to Bennett (2002), empathic feeling is a real process made up of six gradual phases: assuming diversity; know each other; suspend the self; allow guided imagery; allow the empathic experience; restore the self. In fact, empathy is not just putting yourself in the other's shoes but temporarily adopting his perspective, even if you have never experienced the situation he is describing. It must be distinguished from sympathy, which is the harmony generated by a common vision of things or by the understanding of the feelings of others because they have already been experienced. In this sense, sympathetic emotion is an ethnocentric expression because we place ourselves at the center of the interaction with the other ("I understand you because (I) have felt the same"). Empathy, on the other hand, is ethnorelative because it recognizes the uniqueness of the interlocutor, gives him space, allowing him to actively participate in his particular emotional experience (Bennett, 2013). Knowing how to change perspective means knowing how to decentralize, that is to assume the cultural angle of the other and admit, even for a moment, that he is completely right, dismantling his own certainties and without being afraid of "getting confused" or losing his own identity (Franzini, 2017). It is a process of estrangement (Balboni and Caon, 2015) necessary to get out of one's own cultural patterns and then re-establish the connection with the self. Interculture is not about canceling oneself out but expanding the cognitive horizon, welcoming and collecting many visions,

making a synthesis of them and acting appropriately in the situation.

Parallel to the emotional-cognitive dimension, to make intercultural interaction successful, the relational one must be taken into account. In particular, it is necessary to be able to observe, listen actively and negotiate meanings. They are intentional process strategies (Balboni and Caon, 2015) that must be constantly trained (Nanni and Curci, 2005). A good observation is careful to grasp every peculiarity of the interaction: the details of the environment in which it takes place, the clothes, facial expressions, gesticulation, posture, use of space, etc., taking into account that one's own gaze is not neutral and striving not to judge immediately, so as not to fall into the trap of stereotype or prejudice. The mental photograph of these elements is necessary to identify the points of diversity or communion with the other, therefore to gradually adapt to the situation. According to Bennett (2013) focusing on different aspects is even more useful because it optimizes the modeling of one's behavior to circumstances. According to Sclavi (2005), good active listening assumes the transition from a dichotomous attitude such as "right / wrong, true / false, normal / abnormal" to one in which the interlocutor is assumed to be intelligent, and behaviors that appear unreasonable or unpleasant they definitely make sense to him. To maximize its effectiveness, you can ask for feedback from the interlocutor to make sure you have correctly understood what has been said, paraphrase or summarize what has been heard (Balboni, 2015).

Finally, the negotiation of meanings: according to Wenger (2006) the meaning of things does not exist in itself, it does not exist in us or in the world. Rather, it is the product of the dynamic relationship with others. The attribution of a meaning to any phenomenon is the result of the co-construction between the observer and (what is) observed (Bennett, 2017). Therefore, the interpretation of a gesture, an event, a sentence, a behavior, a look should not be taken for granted. It is filtered by the cultural lenses that we always wear, more or less consciously. So, to implement efficient communication it is good to ask the other for the most correct reading for that context, the purpose for which a word or gesture was said (Balboni, 2015).
Good intentions are not enough for the negotiation to be successful (Mantovani, 2009) but we must recognize the other who is the bearer of an alternative truth to ours.

f2) Attention of NGOs to candidates' intercultural skills

Although the literature on intercultural communication highlights the importance of cultural awareness and the constant exercise of certain skills, a study by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)[36] found that many recruiters from the NGOs involved regard the applicant's previous experiences abroad as a relational

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[36] Eyford H., Eyford G., 1995, *Involving Culture: a fieldworker's guide to culturally sensitive development*, CIDA

success factor. Therefore, they would assume that having lived outside the home is a sufficient condition to be able to act effectively in multicultural contexts. Indeed, some studies on the subject (Franzini, 2020; 2017; Governatori, 2015; Salvai, 2011) confirm that in the recruiting process, managers focus mainly on the previous experience and technical preparation of candidates, although the failures of some projects have highlighted the crucial importance of emotional management, psychological balance and interpersonal relationship skills.

Almost all of the NGO leaders involved in studies conducted by Manila Franzini (2017; 2020) stated that a tool would be useful to assess the intercultural competences of those who are proposing for a role, but it does not exist - or at least not a standardized one - and it is difficult to imagine how this can be done. It would seem, therefore, that there is awareness of the importance of this aspect but that until now it has never translated into proper evaluation methods. It is not surprising, at this point, that in the last three-year document for planning and addressing Development Cooperation policy, produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI)[37], interculture is never mentioned, neither as a phenomenon nor as a skill. The dossier talks about strategies, objectives, resources, thematic and geographical priorities without ever referring to the intercultural dimension.

3.2.2 Questionnaire construction: open-ended, closed-ended, multiple choice questions

Once the selection of the variables to be investigated was completed, a question was formulated for each one. Open-ended (9), closed-ended (10) and multiple-choice (2) questions were alternated.

Both closed-ended and open-ended questions are frequently used in research. Literature depicts both types as *structured* and *unstructured*, respectively. Closed-ended inquiries contain enough options for the respondent to choose from or fill in with the information provided. Open ended questions, on the other hand, are up to interpretation. So, with reference to this research, the "stimulus" is the same for all interviewees because the questions have been ordered and drawn up in the same way but people were free to express as they wanted. According to Acharya (2010) the most challenging stage for closed-ended questions is the design, while for open-ended ones, the analysis.

In detail: the open-ended questions, typical of qualitative research, allow the participant to respond with more spontaneity and the researcher to limit his influence (Reja et al, 2003). Although some scholars have expressed doubts about the accuracy of the results deriving from open answers (Geer, 1988), the decision was made to use

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[37] MAECI, *Documento triennale di programmazione e di indirizzo della politica di cooperazione allo sviluppo 2021-2023*, (Delibera n. 1/2021), (21A06560), GU Serie Generale n.269 del 11-11-2021

them because the purpose of this research is not to *measure* something but to *discover* something. According to Corbetta (2003), the purpose of the qualitative interview is to capture the complexity of people's perceptions and experiences, understanding how they see the world, which terminology they use and what is their way of judging.

Indeed, this research wants to find out how the respondents define certain situations and concepts, without any kind of suggestion that could deflect or channel opinions in precise directions. Asking someone to freely describe something is interesting to get an idea of how the individual conceptualizes an abstraction, which nouns or adjectives you use to describe it. It was therefore considered appropriate to use this option for questions related to Variables c1, c2, c3 or conceptualizations.

For the same reasoning, it appeared interesting to leave freedom of response for Variables d2, e2, or how the respondent imagines managing an intercultural conflict, from an emotional and operational point of view. Providing possible choices would have polluted research.

This category also includes Variable e1: involvement of the counterparty. The question, in fact, did not presuppose a simple "yes or no", but was built to capture different aspects of the project partnership. The answer therefore required a sharing of the participant's personal experience.

Finally, this strategy also seemed necessary to investigate Variables a3 and b1: a complete list of existing nationalities and NGOs would have taken too much time both in creation by the researcher and in reading by the participants.

For closed ended questions participants must use only predetermined choices. This method limits the possibility of expressing complete and in-depth opinions, in fact it was preferred for questions that investigated the position of respondents with respect to a precise statement. The most common variants are forced choices, the option agree / disagree and Likert scales, used to rate each variable on a response scale. In this study, the forced choice structure was used.

Closed-ended questions guarantee data consistency and ease of collection because they provide everyone with the same frame of reference in the response (Colosi, 2006). An additional advantage lies in the speed of response times, reducing the possibility that participants abandon the questionnaire before completion. The possibility of this happening is not that rare and it is extremely frustrating for the researcher who has to deal with a collection of patchworked data. This strategy was applied to the Variables a1 (Age), a2 (Gender), a4 (Level of education), a5 (Years of experience in International Cooperation), a8 (Previous experiences abroad), whose questions asked the participants to place themselves in one of the proposed options; c4 (Value attributed to Culture Shock), c5 (Equality / Diversity of Human Beings), c6 (Universality / Relativity of Ethical Principles), d1 (Ability to empathize), f2 (Attention of NGOs to candidates' intercultural skills), whose questions asked the respondents to express an affirmative or negative judgment with respect to a sentence.

As mentioned in a few paragraphs above, the option "Other" was always possible for this kind of inquiry, to guarantee people to express opinions in case they didn't fit in such absolute answers.

Although the standard format of multiple-choice questions (MCQs) consists of three components, namely: the correct answer, the stem, and several plausible but incorrect answers (Isaacs 1994, Nunnally & Bernstein 1994, Haladyna 1999), for this research the method was used for the questions that could presuppose numerous "correct" answers. These are the questions related to Variables a7 and f1. The first investigates the professional role that the participant plays at the time of compilation. Within NGOs it often happens that the same person carries out multiple tasks at the same time: a designer, for example, can also handle communication or take part in missions abroad.

As for the Variable f1, on the other hand, the option of multiple Variables was given because it is likely that the person has received intercultural training several times in life and on different occasions.

Considering the audience that the research aimed to involve, i.e. Italian actors of International Cooperation, the questionnaire was formulated in Italian. It appeared plausible, in fact, that most of the participants would have been Italian or in any case Italian speakers. The considerations underlying this decision are pragmatic and psychological. First of all, it cannot be taken for granted that those who work in International Cooperation know English to the point of understanding the meaning of (emotionally) complex questions such as those chosen for this study, nor to formulate detailed answers. In this case it is likely that the participant refuses to fill in the survey or only partially completes it, where the meaning of the question is clear. Secondly, expressing in a foreign language may not fully grasp the individual's depth of thought, depleting or limiting the expression of the actual opinions. Marika Ceracchi (2007) analyzed the psychological transformations caused by the passage from one's own language to a foreign one, demonstrating that the person experiences an emotional distance towards the second language. This is due to the different affective investment that is made on the words in one or in the other language. Indeed, according to Woodrow (2006), speaking a foreign language can trigger anxiety and stress mechanisms. It will be noted that, in the following paragraphs, the questionnaire items are translated in English, for reasons of consistency with the rest of the thesis.

The following tables outline the connection between the variable, the question and the answer option, according to the content area:

a) Socio-personal data of participants (8 questions):

VARIABLE	QUESTION	OPTION(S)
a1) Age	"Age"	18-30; 31-40; 41-50; 51-60; 61-70; Other
a2) Gender	"Gender"	F; M; Other
a3) Nationality	"Nationality"	Open-ended
a4) Level of education	"Level of education"	Diploma; Bachelor's Degree; Master's Degree; PhD; Other
a5) Years of experience in International Cooperation	"How long have you been working in International Cooperation?"	Less than 1 year; 1-5 years; 5-10 years; More than 10 years
a6) Personal motivation for working in International Cooperation	"What prompted you to work in this field?"	Open-ended
a7) Current role	"What role do you currently play?"	Expat; Desk in Italy; Cultural Animation in Italy; Other
a8) Previous experiences abroad	"Have you ever lived abroad for more than three (continuous) months?	Yes; No

b) Identity of NGOs and Associations represented (1 question):

Variable	QUESTION	OPTION(S)
b1) Organization identity	"What NGO do you work for?"	Open-ended

c) Cognitive dimension of intercultural competence (6 questions):

VARIABLE	QUESTION	OPTION(S)
c1) Conceptualization of International Cooperation	"How would you define the concept of International Cooperation?	Open-ended
c2) Conceptualization of Intercultural Competences	"What are, in your opinion, the intercultural skills that an NGO operator should have?"	Open-ended
c3) Conceptualization of Culture	"How would you define the concept of Culture?	Open-ended
c4) Value attributed to Culture Shock	"Experiencing culture shocks (disorientation, psycho-physical discomfort, difficulty in adapting) is a symptom of intercultural incapacity. Agree?"	Yes; No; Other
c5) Equality / Diversity of Human Beings	"Beyond the superficial differences in language and habits, after all, human beings are all the same. Agree?"	Yes; No; Other
c6) Universality / Relativity of Ethical Principles	"Some ethical principles are universal. They should be respected everywhere and in any case, regardless of the context (e.g. the protection of privacy, gender equality, democratic values). Agree?"	Yes; No, Other

d) Emotional dimension of intercultural competence (2 questions):

VARIABLE	QUESTION	OPTION(S)
d1) Ability to empathize	"While communicating with a foreign person, your attention is focused more on:"	Common aspects; Different aspects; Other
d2) Emotional management of intercultural conflicts	"When, in the interaction with others, you feel disagreement with one or more cultural values, what emotions do you feel? How do you handle the conflict?"	Open-ended

e) Operational dimension of intercultural competence (2 questions):

VARIABLE	QUESTION	OPTION(S)
e1) Involvement of local partners	"Think about the project you are participating in, or which you are monitoring from Italy. In the stage of identifying the beneficiaries' needs, were local partners involved? If so, who?	Open-ended
e2) Operational management of intercultural conflicts	"If the project envisaged the realization of essential activities for the NGO but in conflict with local customs (e.g. contrasting the practice of female genital mutilation or child labor), how would you behave?"	Open-ended

f) Importance given to Intercultural Skills in International Cooperation (2 questions):

VARIABLE	QUESTION	OPTION(S)
f1) Intercultural competences training	"Have you ever received specific training on intercultural competences so far?"	Never; Yes, from University; Yes, from the NGO I am working for; Yes, from private courses; Other
f2) Attention of NGOs to candidates' intercultural skills	"Did the NGO you work for assess your intercultural competences at the selection stage?"	Yes; No; Other

3.3 Dissemination of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was constructed on a Google form, whose validity as a research tool is confirmed by numerous studies, including Djenno and colleagues (2015), Haddad & Kalaani (2014), Iqbal et al. (2018), Narayanaswamy & Harinarayana (2016). As reported by Saleh and Bista (2017), over the previous three decades, online surveys have supplanted other methods for eliciting participation in academic research, due to their advantages: no-cost, ease of dissemination and analysis, and quick response. The disadvantage, on the other hand, lies in the fact that a participant can fill in the same questionnaire two or more times, as actually happened: a respondent, at the conclusion of the survey, presumably clicked on "send another answer", filling in the same questions a second time. This drawback, however, did not affect the value of the study because the two versions were almost identical, so one of the two was not taken into account in the analysis of the final results.

The mandatory answer option is another advantage to consider: the person cannot move on to the next question or close the questionnaire if he has not written something in each box. Given the importance of each variable, therefore of each question, it was considered appropriate to insert the compulsory option for all. This strategy is especially useful to avoid some participants leaving a question completely blank, compromising the completeness of the research.

As mentioned above, one of the strengths of the Google form is the ease of dissemination, obviously online. Participants were contacted by email, the content of

which consisted of: presentation of the researcher, explanation of the reason for the contact, request to fill in the research questionnaire. Access to the questionnaire was possible by clicking on a hyperlink in the text, at the conclusion of which it was announced that the study would guarantee anonymity and that the aim was not to judge, but to take a photograph of the state of the art about intercultural competences in International Cooperation. It seemed important to highlight the elements of anonymity and non-judgment to entice people to participate. Indeed, results from Saleh and Bista's study (2017) indicated that research survey response rate was highly influenced by interests of participants, survey structure, communication   methods, assurance of privacy and confidentiality.

The email was sent to 73 Italian entities active in International Cooperation but only 30 filled in the questionnaire, for a total of 52 individuals. Non-participation is a risk factor to keep in mind and does not always depend on the researcher's ineffective strategy. There are unpredictable or uncontrollable factors that cause people not to try their hand at filling in, and many scholars have expressed concern about the poor response rate of online surveys. Yan and Fan (2010) estimated that web surveys have an 11% lower response rate than other survey formats. Thus, taking into consideration what is written above, the number of actual participants to this study met expectations and was considered acceptable to ensure validity. Salvai (2011), with reference to a study on intercultural sensitivity, recommends to consider that the organizations that accept to participate could be those already more attentive to (or interested in) intercultural issues. The criterion for choosing the organizations to be involved followed the principle of substantive representativeness, not statistical (Corbetta, 2003). As mentioned in paragraphs above, this represents one of the typical elements of qualitative research, together with the space given to the participants' narration.

3.4 Data collection and insights: textual analysis and charts

As described above, the tool for creating the questionnaire was the Google form. In addition to the advantages mentioned, this tool was also chosen for its ability to easily collect data: whenever a person completed the questionnaire, the answers were automatically saved to a file. For technical reasons, the possibility of participating in the survey had a limited time, about three months (July-September, 2021).
The first step was to extract them in an Excel sheet, in order to have a global and orderly view. The operation was not done manually but automatically, to avoid losing or overlapping data. The table reported the participants on y-axis and the variables on x-axis, making it possible to observe the data cross-referenced, ensuring clarity of intersection between the respondents and the answer given. At the same time, through an application of the Google form, for each question all the answers were downloaded, in order to have an overall and comparative view. The goal, in fact, was

to read the answers vertically, not horizontally: the research does not have the mission of studying the profile of each participant based on the answers given (methodology closer to the psychological analysis), but collect everyone's responses to each single question (or variable). Through the program Canva, charts were developed for the closed and multiple choice questions, allowing the percentages to be calculated.

The open question answers, on the other hand, have been left as text. The choice was dictated by the need to mathematically analyze the former (quantitative approach) and textually the latter (qualitative approach). Indeed, the accumulation of textual data (interview transcripts, documents, observation reports, etc.) is typical of qualitative research methods and helps researchers gain a comprehensive picture of certain situations (Marradi, 1997). More specifically, the textual analysis of the acquired data proves to be a superb method for bridging qualitative and quantitative research, negating or at least lessening the purported basic incompatibility (Della Ratta Rinaldi, 2022). According to Ricolfi (1997), the explicitness of the processes, which ensures the inspectability of the empirical base of the study, lends scientificity and reliability to this technique. The so-called "noise of textual diversity" must be taken into account in this form of analysis, too, as the same topic can be conveyed in multiple ways and thereby avoid automated readings (Lana, 2004). Additionally, a significant factor in the interpretation of textual data is the interviewer's or researcher's own perspective.

Della Ratta Rinaldi (2022) suggests the following work phases to follow, to ensure scientific rigor to the research:

1 - After identifying the texts to be analyzed (written documents, interview reports, online forums, etc.), it is important to take care of their internal structure and transcription, paying attention to particular requirements that are crucial for the importance of the findings. A fundamental requirement is that each corpus' texts are comparable to one another in terms of their structure, size, authors, or recipients;

2 - It is then helpful to associate the corpus with one or more variables referring to the characteristics of each text fragment's authors (for example, the gender, age, or level of education of each interviewee in the case of interviews or open questions in a questionnaire), to analyze the differences between the different corpora;

3 - It is then important to associate the corpus with one or more variables, even if it is difficult to suggest a helpful route for the description of the content and the argumentation structure because of the text's multidimensional and multi-thematic nature;

4 - By comparing the relative frequency with which words appear in the analysis, it is then possible to obtain a measure of significance (standardized deviation), which indicates the over- or under-representation of the form in the text. This criticality can be overcome by identifying sets of keywords that refer to its specific content (Bolasco, 1999). Naturally, the more strongly the gap describes the shape of the text, the more significant the words with the highest gap are. Textual statistical analysis approaches

promote inductive text exploration, enabling one to go deeply into a text and pinpoint its key dimensions of meaning while preventing a precise quantification of the different themes discovered;

5 - Once the relevant keywords have been chosen for the analysis, it is helpful to place them back into a few thematic groups to make it easier to understand the findings.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Participants' socio-personal data

a1) Age:
Type: close-ended question

18-30 y (27 responses)
31-40 y (15 responses)
41-50 y (2 responses)
51-60 y (4 responses)
61-70 y (4 responses)
Other (0 responses)
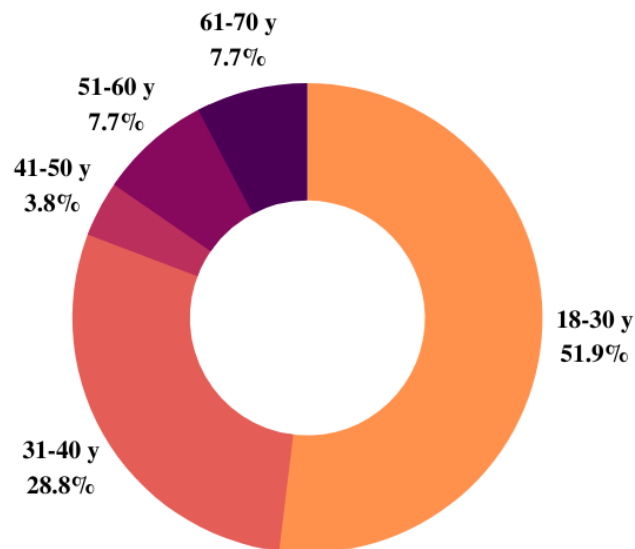
a2) Gender:

Type: Close-ended question + "Other"

Female (40 responses)
Male (12 responses)
Other (0 responses)
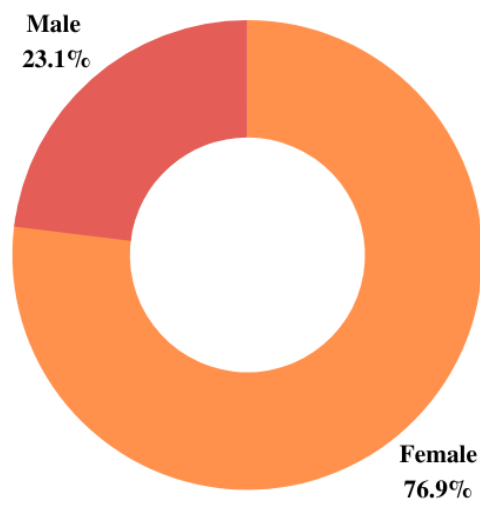
a3) Nationality

Type: Open ended question

Italian (51 responses)
Egyptian (1 response)

Egyptian
1.9%

Italian
98.1%
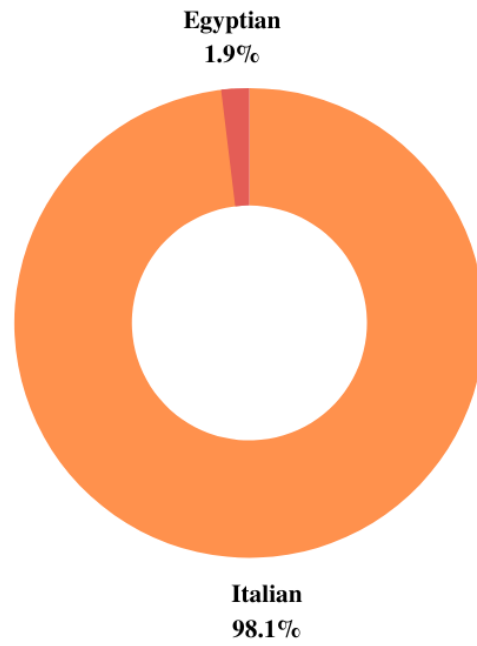
a4) Level of education

Type: Multiple choice question

High school diploma (10 responses)
Bachelor's degree (5 responses)
Post graduate degree (5 responses)
Master's degree (30 responses)
PhD (2 responses)
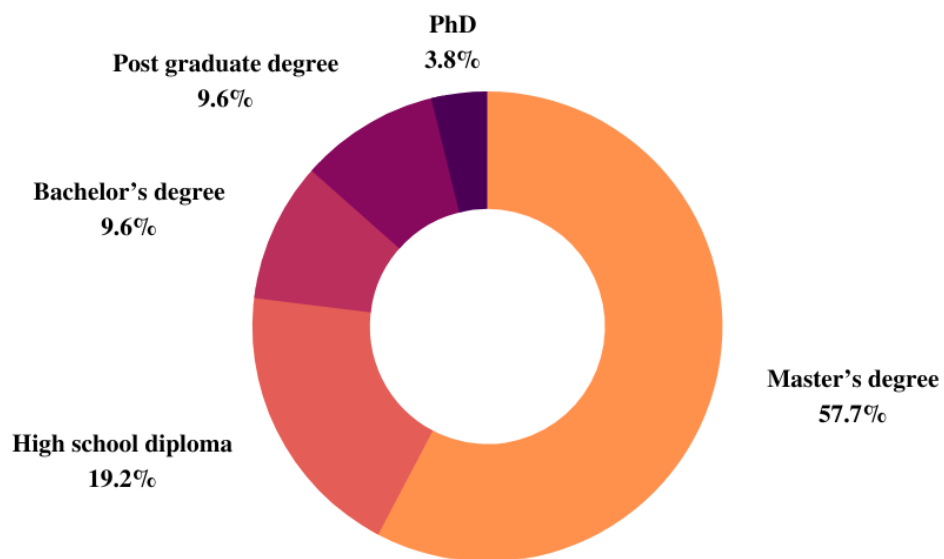
a5) Years of experience
Type: Close ended question

Less than 1 year (14 responses)
Between 1-5 years (23 responses)
Between 5-10 years (4 responses)
More than 10 years (11 responses)

More than 10 years
21.2%

Between 5-10 years
7.7%

Between 1-5 years
44.2%

Less than 1 year
26.9%
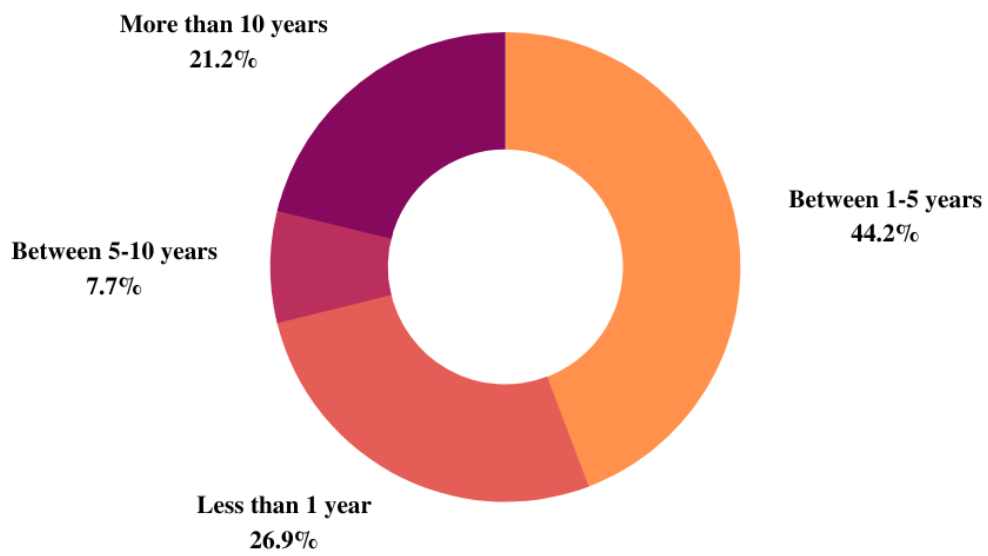
a6) Personal motivation for working in International Cooperation

Question: What made you want to work in International Cooperation?
Type: open-ended

The first step of the analysis was to read all the responses entirely. In a second moment, the keywords of each response were identified, then grouped by similarity of meaning. Considering that the question was open-ended, some answers contained more than a keyword and not all belonged to the same semantic area. Thus, in order not to exclude them, it was decided to merge each into their respective categories. It follows therefore that the number of responses is greater than the participants. This does not distort the study because the result produced is to be read in qualitative and not quantitative terms. Indeed, arbitrarily ignoring some keywords to respect the number of participants would have compromised the analysis.
Four semantic macro categories have emerged, namely:

1) Help; Doing good, Spirit of service (20 responses)
2) Curiosity towards other cultures; Fascination for the differences; Passion for traveling and discover new things (15 responses)
3) Interest/Passion for the International Cooperation sector (11 responses)
4) Need to change the international balance; Contribution to a global development process (8 responses).
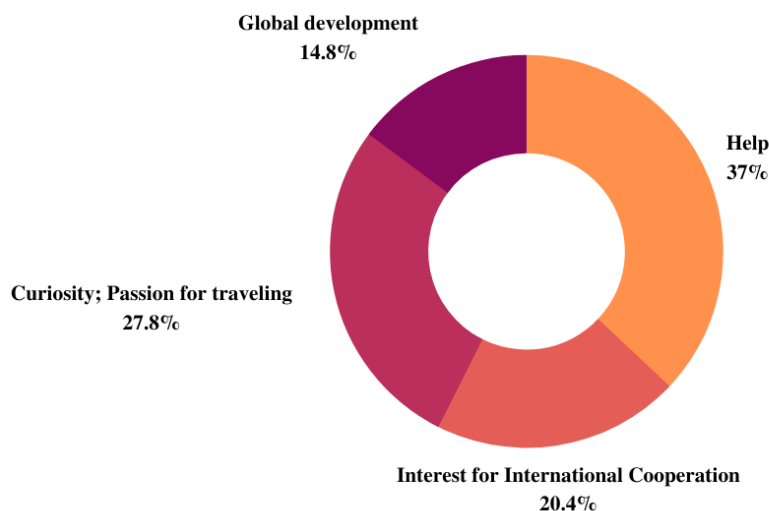
The relative majority of the respondents (20 people or 37%) decided to start a career in International Cooperation driven by the "spirit of service", the desire to "help" and "do good". In particular, those who provided this type of motivation referred to the populations benefiting from the interventions in terms of "marginal groups", "disadvantaged categories", "set aside" or "forgotten part of the world", "those in need", "the last". The common denominator of these expressions seems to be solidarity, understood as an aid to those who do not have the tools, financial resources, skills and knowledge to live a dignified life. Thinking of Cooperation as charity would presuppose that there is someone in difficulty and someone else who is in solidarity with him, but from the intercultural perspective this kind of relation would lose the sense of horizontality and participation in the creation of common solutions. Working together means that both give, both receive, both are motivated to face global issues. Indeed, an interviewee writes about "help for self-help", as if to underline the non-welfare approach of the project in which he is involved: not a mere response to contingent needs but sharing a program of autonomous growth, independent of help. A reflection that seems to align with a very popular motto in International Cooperation, that goes "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and you feed him for life". The sense of the proverb is to banish assistance from projects and make room for the transmission of know-how to make the other capable of doing it alone. An apparently virtuous concept but weak if read through the intercultural lenses: in a relationship where someone teaches, transmits knowledge, shows a model to somebody else who learns, receives and eventually emulates, where is the reciprocity? The relationship between the parts appears more unilateral than bilateral, or more ethnocentric than ethnorelative. Such a similar approach could be generated by a reasoning like "I'll show you how to properly live", that is "how I live" or "my cultural group lives". Thus, the capacity for decentralization - knowing how to dismantle one's own certainties to make room for another point of view - would seem to be lacking. Even more so, decentralization is hard if the starting assumption is that Cooperation is a channel of (westerm) know-how transfer. Although someone among this group affirms that "something cannot be lowered from above", there is talk of "listening to the needs and entering on tiptoe to bring about a change": the terminological succession "listen, enter, bring" still sounds more a vertical transfer rather than a peer collaboration.

The fascination for diversity and the passion for traveling emerge as a motivation in 15 responses (27.8%). The most recurring words are "curiosity"; "desire to know something completely new"; "wish to know the people of the world"; "interest for countries and cultures". This data is not surprising because it is also reported by other studies, such as those of Manila Franzini (2017; 2020), confirming that the desire to explore the new is common among those who decide to work in this field.

A different approach has been observed among 8 interviewees (14.8%), whose

motivations were "the need to change the international balance"; "contribution to a global development process"; "make a concrete contribution to social change on a global level"; "desire to build a better world" and "the willingness to seek answers to common problems". In this case, the focus seems to shift from the "helper-assisted" interaction to a bilateral and pluricultural one. Read from an intercultural angle, these data seem positive and in line with what the literature says about sharing in decision-making processes.

The remaining 11 respondents (20.4%) cite the more generic concept of "personal interest" about International Relations. Due to their vagueness, it is not possible to elaborate in depth reflections on these statements.

References to North and South "dynamics", "disparities" and "differences" can be read in multiple answers, presuming a dualistic perspective of "us VS them". According to Amerio (2017) everything located in the South is labeled with prejudices that underline some inferiority in terms of reliability and intellectual abilities. The author affirms that prejudices tend to take root because they are the result of categorizations of the social environment "normally" used to quickly and immediately "get an idea" of the other, especially if more specific information about the person is missing.

a7) Current role

Type: multiple choice question

Desk in Italy (19 responses)
Expat (13 responses)
Socio-cultural activities in Italy (12 responses)
Desk and Socio-cultural activities in Italy (6 responses)
President (1 response)
Invalid response (1) - The answer contained only a few letters, not a complete or interpretable sentence
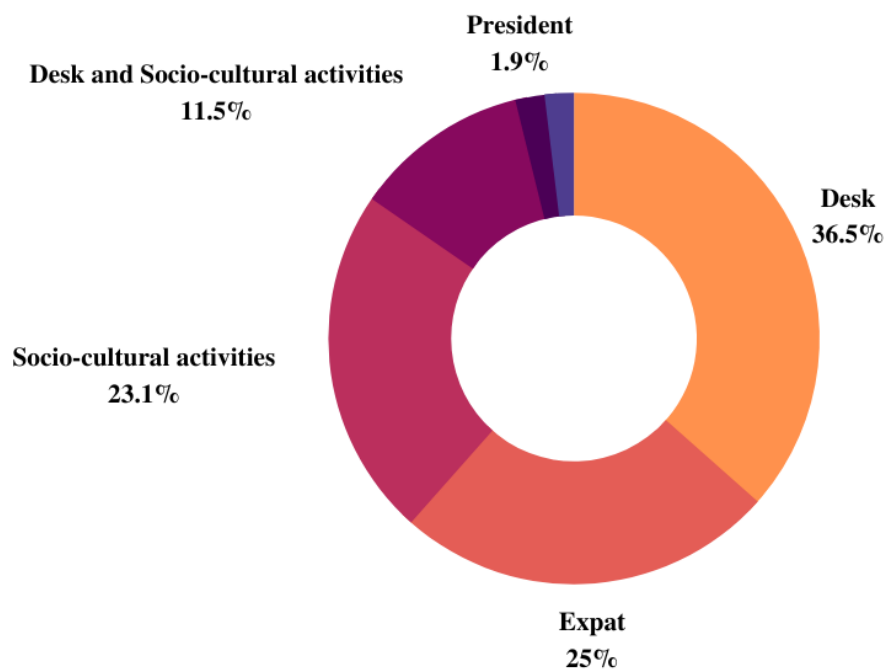
a8) Previous experiences abroad (more than 3 continuous months)

Type: Close ended question

Yes (33 responses)
No (19 responses)
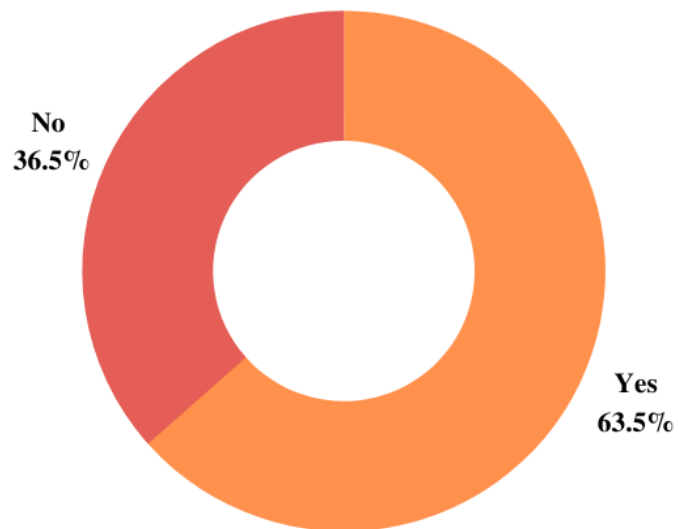
4.2 NGOs represented

Question: What NGO do you work for?
Type: Open ended question

Thirty Italian NGOs engaged in International Cooperation are involved in the research. Although the number is small and does not allow for the elaboration of representative statistics at a national level, the participating organizations have quite different characteristics, so we are satisfied with the variety of identities represented. In particular, the entities in this sector differ in their mission, the planning approach, the dimension, the geographical area of intervention, the personnel selection criteria and the nature of the proposed activities. Consistent with the structure and aims of this study, as well as with the literary references taken into consideration, it seems interesting to report the data on participant NGOs' identity and area(s) of intervention. No specific questions were asked about these two elements but these information were easily found on the websites of each organization mentioned. Given the versatility that characterizes many NGOs, it will be noted that the thematic fields are more numerous than the associations represented. It is easy to understand that the same entity can be engaged on several fronts.

b1) Identity:
Secular NGOs: 27 organizations
Religious NGOs: 3 organizations
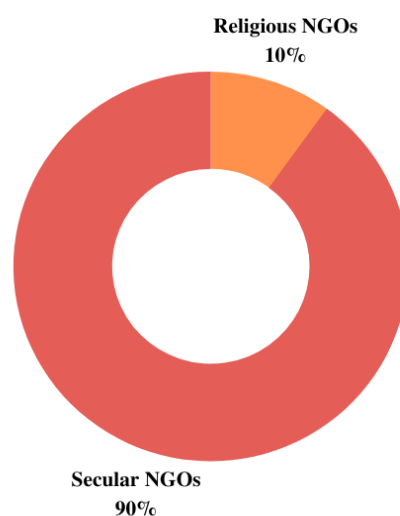
b2) Main areas of intervention:

Nutrition; Health: 15 organizations
Education; Training: 9 organizations
Child Rights: 7 organizations
Poverty: 6 organizations
Agriculture projects; Environmental sustainability: 5 organizations
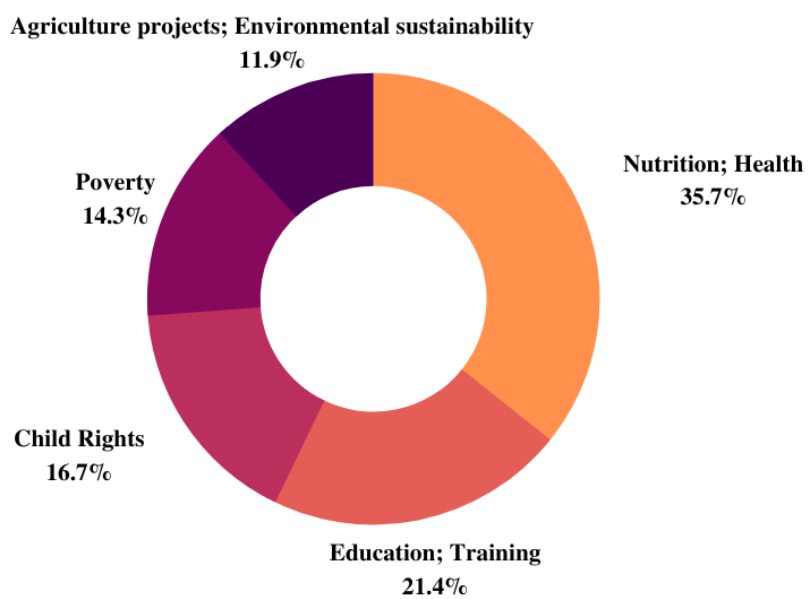
4.3 Cognitive competence

c1) Conceptualization of International Cooperation

Question: How would you define the concept of International Cooperation?
Type: Open-ended question

Although all the participants work in the same sector, their responses on how to define International Cooperation varied and, in some cases, conflicting. The choice of words to describe something gives clues about the meaning attributed to it. Indeed, as mentioned in the literature review chapter, language shapes culture and, in turn, cultural context shapes language.

The keywords identified for each answer have brought out two semantic macro categories, plus a third into which the non-similar answers have converged:

- Regional growth; Help; Give resources (26 responses)
- Global growth; Collaboration (23 responses)
- Other (3 responses)
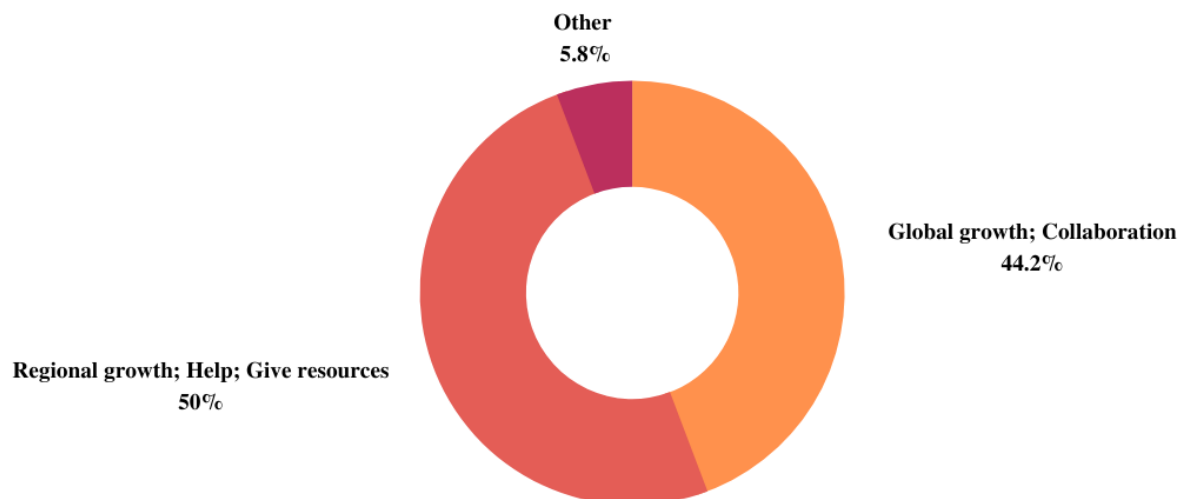
With regard to the terminological variety that emerged here, these are some of the expressions used to answer the question: Regional growth, Help, Assistance, Transfer of resources, Global growth, Walking together, Collaboration, Exchange, Communication. Each word hiddens a universe of meanings. Indeed, the concepts of Global growth and Collaboration (mentioned by 44.2%) are semantically opposed to Regional growth, Help and Transfer of resources (cited by 50%). In the first case it seems that the relationship triggered by Cooperation is thought of as "horizontal", aimed at reciprocity rather than the unilateral transmission of tools and wisdom, which instead is typical of the helper-assisted relationship, closer to the second category. In an intercultural perspective, the idea of collaboration is undoubtedly more pertinent because it would leave room for an exchange. Those from the first semantic group, in fact, use expressions such as "opportunity for mutual and global growth" and "co-construction of shared solutions". Sentences such as "economic and social development of a region in need", "of disadvantaged areas" , of "weak areas", instead, seem to highlight the dichotomy between North and South, that is civilized and modern countries VS backward and underdeveloped countries.

Translated in terms of an intercultural mindset, the position of the latter would suggest an ethnocentric idea of development: it is understood as a universally desirable condition, resting on a timeline, where the beginning correspond to a state of underdevelopment and the end to the achievement of the optimal status, i.e. the western one, from where (actually) money, moral values, economic models, ideas, tools and experts come. Therefore, the prevalent idea seems to be that some countries are "ahead" and others must work to reach that position, as the following expressions about the development confirm: "progress", "change of existing conditions", "improvement", "achievement of higher quality of life". It is difficult to reconcile them with the idea of peer participation, recognition of reciprocal dignity and integration of different frameworks, which are typical attitudes of intercultural approaches. Also, although the literature reports that individual professionalism and efforts for valuing cultural sensitivity have increased, traces of the need to redeem from the Western colonial and slavery past still remain: a respondent who describes Cooperation in terms of help, states that "Cooperating is creating a network beyond borders, so that others can re-determine themselves, inhabiting the time and space that belongs to them but have been stolen by our history". According to Recupero (2021), Europeans are obsessed with the mantra "we plundered Africa and for this reason we must atone for our sins".

c2) Conceptualization of Intercultural competences

Question: What intercultural skills should an NGO worker have?
Type: Open-ended question

For each response, one or more recurring keywords were identified. They have given rise to six semantic macro-groups, namely:

- Mental openness (15 responses)
- Knowledge of one or more foreign languages (14 responses)
- Listening skills (13 responses)
- Empathy (10 responses)
- Respect (10 responses)
- Awareness of one's cultural model (7 responses)
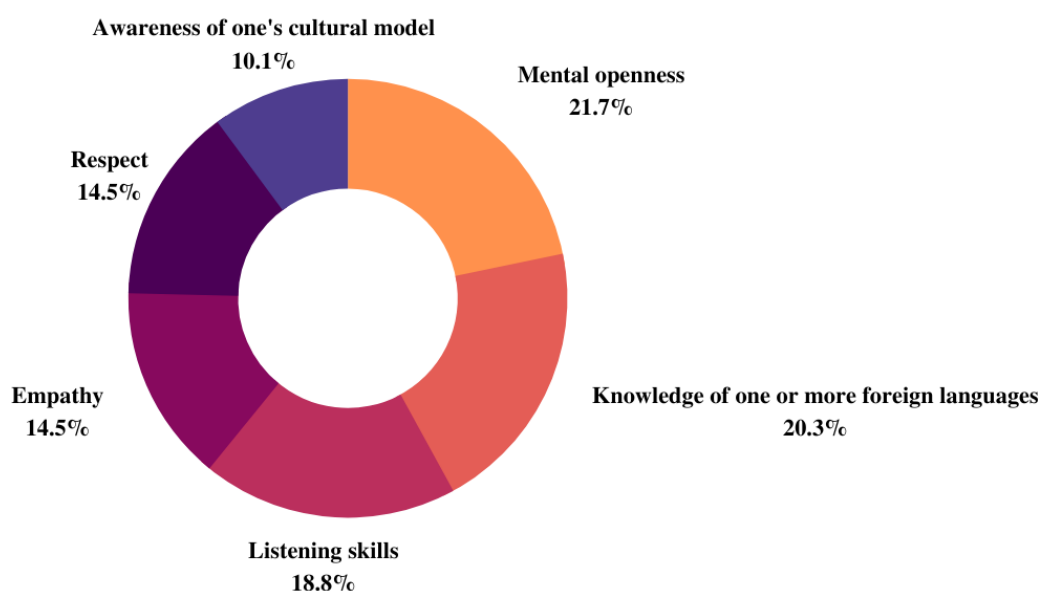
In general, welcoming others seems to be a positive and necessary ability for most, but several categories emerged through the analysis: Mental openness; Knowledge of one or more foreign languages; Listening skills; Empathy; Respect; Awareness of one's cultural model.

Mental openness is the most recurring concept among the participants (21.7%) and undoubtedly evaluated favorably by academics, because it corresponds to an elastic mental state typical of those who can make room for different visions, thus, not afraid of diversity. A few people (20.3%) make explicit reference to the knowledge of foreign languages, meaning that an intercultural preparation cannot be separated from

it, "even if not perfectly". Despite the literature appreciating the effort to learn different idioms to interact more effectively in multicultural contexts, intercultural skills seem mostly limited to the verbal communication level, rather than to a cognitive and emotional one. This consideration mainly refers to the participants who gave this answer as the only necessary skill.

Thirteen mentions (18.8%) of listening skills are found, which are certainly fundamental elements in the constructive relationship with each other, but they still refer (only) to the verbal dimension. This would suggest that intercultural skills are somewhat underestimated, both in the generic relationship with people and as a key ability for the proper functioning of projects.

The concept of respect is mentioned 10 times, as well as empathy (respectively 14.5% of the total). Both elements seem relevant in the desire to interact effectively with others and play a central role in the literature on intercultural competences. It would have been interesting to explore the meaning attributed to them, which is perhaps less obvious than it might appear. Their semantic boundaries are ephemeral, of course, because they are culturally oriented. For instance, how far can I show my respect for attitudes that I consider immoral? Is respect more similar to tolerance or recognition of dignity to others' beliefs, even if they are distant from my own? So, do I respect something that deviates from (my) norm but basically I consider it inferior or do I welcome diversity by recognizing it as equal in elevation? In the same way, the concept of empathy should be explored: what meaning do the participants attribute to it? The literature in this regard has been clearly expressed but it is not obvious that the participants are aware of it.

A very remarkable element is in 7 participants' responses (10.1%), who openly talk about the "operators' culture of reference"; "their own biases and prejudices"; "emotional literacy of their own cultural context"; "knowledge and understanding of one's own culture" and "their cultural models". In these answers the ability to relativize could be catched: highlighting the presence of the self in the interaction with the other suggests the awareness of occupying a (cultural) space in the relationship. So, just as the foreigner is the bearer of values, habits and beliefs, so do I. Others are different from me just as I am different from the others. According to the contributions of numerous experts, as shown in previous chapters, cultural awareness is one of the most important elements to be truly effective in intercultural relations.

Instead, one reflection about culture catches our attention due to its incompatibility with the literature: with reference to "beliefs, behaviors, myths and attitudes attributable to a given society", an interviewee affirms that to be interculturally competent a person should be able to "separate them from the behavior of the single individual", suggesting the possibility that the individual is separable from his own culture. In this hypothesis there is an action of reification of it, its "objectification": something with defined borders that human beings would use from time to time, more

or less consciously. Secondly, the operator seems to think that the individual may not be influenced by the community he lives in, so he would be culturally divisible from it, as if basically every human being is guided by a "natural soul" which, sometimes, in contact with society, is enriched with cultural elements, to then return to its original state. On the basis of this hypothesis, people all over the Globe would be made in the same way, would reason with the same principles and would be guided by universal values. Similarly, the statement of an interviewee who defines intercultural competence as a "natural predisposition". The "naturalness" of an attitude would suggest that culture is identified as an object distinguishable from the person. Competence, therefore, would be neither learnt nor exercised. A person would own it or not, be born with it or not. Or, everyone would own it but only a few know how to put it into practice. The idea of the universality of individuals, separated from culture, is also emerging in the following statement: "Good manners, courtesy and smiles can even be enough to interact properly". Thus, politeness is conceived as objective, with the same characteristics and meanings all over the world, therefore manifested equally everywhere. The risk of such a belief is to sink into ethnocentrism: I behave according to the etiquette I grew up with, expecting the other to act the same way.

A further interesting recurring element in the responses was the dichotomy between "generic" and "specific for each context" intercultural skills: according to the participants of the first group (62.7%), these abilities are independent of the cultural frame in which they act: a way of being and thinking, useful for behaving successfully in any situation and managing differences. For those in the second group (37.3%), on the other hand, intercultural skills are to be understood as linked to a precise context, or capabilities to be implemented according to the country where one works, not usable always and everywhere. For example, an interviewee affirms that in order to be effective, it is important to know "what can be considered offensive" and what are the "reference regulations /laws /standards /institutions that govern the area you will work in"; or that it is necessary to have a "knowledge, even approximate, of the country where the project takes place", "of low- and middle-income countries, "of cultural minorities", "of the reality where one fits"; or again, that it is good to have "geographical, historical and religious knowledge" of the place the project will be implemented in. Numbers and percentages are reported below:

- Intercultural competences as generic (32 responses)
- Intercultural competences as specific to a cultural context (19 responses)

Specific to a cultural context
37.3%

Generic
62.7%
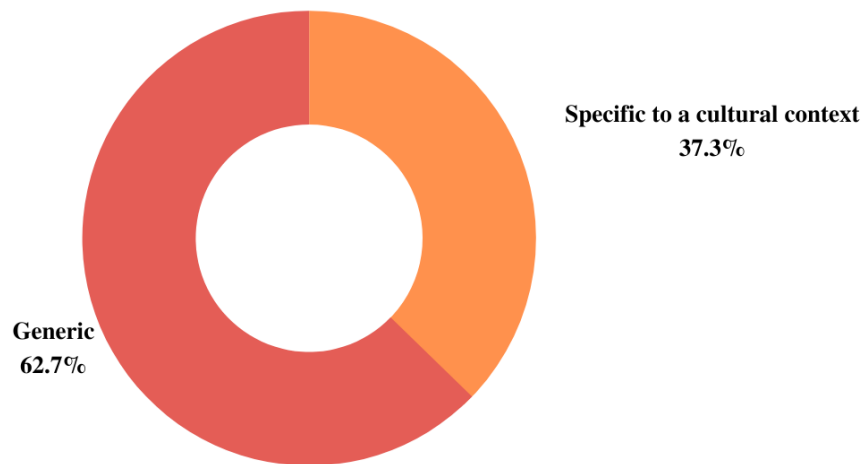
c3) Conceptualization of Culture

Question: How would you define the concept of Culture?
Type: Open-ended question

The analysis of the answers highlighted the presence of some recurring keywords, namely:
- "set" (27 responses), which was the noun most used to describe the concept of culture;
- "population" (17 responses), to which many participants associated culture.

From an intercultural perspective, with reference to the literature considered for this study, both terms could raise some perplexities: in mathematics the set is defined as a grouping of elements united by specific characteristics[38]. Any element, therefore, due to this criterion, can certainly be part or not of the whole examined. The whole, therefore, is precise, clear-cut. Can culture be? Is Christian culture, for example, made up of certain, objective, unquestionable elements? Assuming that it is possible to delineate a set of Christian values, would its constituent elements really represent all the Christians of the world? All facets and nuances of Christianity? This, of course, is reasoning applicable to any other religion, group, phenomenon, profession, community, etc. In short, to place the factors of a whole, an arbitrary, objective and shared criterion is followed, which is difficult to apply to the cultural dimension.
In the same way, the use of the word "population" to indicate the community bearer of

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[38] University of Catania, Department of Political and Social Sciences, *Set Theory*, 2019-2020

a certain culture could clash with the meaning of interculturality as understood by contemporary literature: if the population is the complex of individuals of the same country[39], the culture would exist only as a function of the territory in which a certain community lives. Therefore, the boundaries of a certain culture would correspond to the geographical boundaries. Each nation, therefore, would have its own internal, homogeneous, univocal, compact culture. But can Italians, like New Zealanders, Moroccans, Americans or Chinese, fully identify with the culture of their own country, just because they live in the same territory? If so, it would mean that an Italian is equal to any other Italian, a New Zealander has the same approach to life as any other New Zealander, and so on. This perspective paves the way for a much broader conception of the concept of culture, which definitely manages to cross geographical borders to permeate any aspect of everyone's life. Thus, gym-goers (from all over the world) might identify with a gym "culture" no matter where they live, just like movie buffs, young people, queers, vegans, engineers, optimists, and any other human category that can come to mind. In this sense, the participants who defined culture as a set of "traditions", "values", "customs", "customs" and "rules" of a people, would manifest a limited and misleading idea of culture, risking experience the relationship with the other as a potential clash between systems, rather than as an encounter between single individuals.

In fact, another interesting fact was found among the answers: 33 people (63.5%) referred to culture as something external to the individual, something that "identifies", "gives an identity", "defines", "characterizes". An entity detached and autonomous from the human being. Someone calls it "superstructure", to underline its external, even overwhelming nature. In this sense, the person would passively undergo culture and would not have an active role towards it. On the contrary, in 13 responses (25%) culture is something in which and over which people have power, more in line with the literature. In particular, the most used words were "manifestation", "expression", "sharing". These terms suggest a human protagonism that would allow people to actively identify with something, to participate in the construction of meanings, to play a role in their (own) interpretation of the world. For this group of interviewees, culture is inside the human being, not outside. And it is inside not because it is a "set" of innate or inherited values at birth, but because it is a process triggered by the person himself as he interacts with the external environment. The remaining 6 answers (or 11.5% of the total) could not be placed in any of the two categories mentioned, which we graphically represent as follows:

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[39] Treccani Encyclopedia, Definition of "*Population*"

Culture as something within the human being
25%

Other
11.5%

Culture as something external to the human being
63.5%
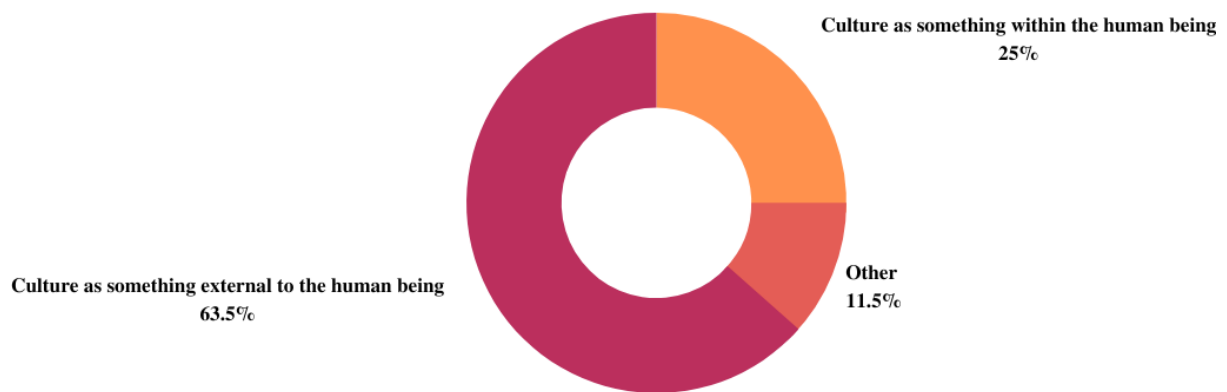
c4) Value attributed to Culture Shock

Question: Experiencing cultural shocks (disorientation, psycho-physical malaise, difficulty in adapting) is a symptom of intercultural incapacity. Agree?

Type: Close-ended question + Other

A large part of the participants (38 responses or 73.1%) believes that cultural shock, amply illustrated in the chapter on literature, is not synonymous with cultural incapacity, in line with what many experts state: the sense of disorientation, physical or psychological malaise that one might feel in interacting in an environment other than one's own, it is regarded as a part of the experience itself. Indeed, according to some scholars, experiencing negative sensations when one is in an alien context is even desirable because, in terms of intercultural competence, it demonstrates awareness of one's own cultural framework of reference, stimulates the ability to manage emotions and highlights diversity, alerting the individual on what and how to change his own attitude to better adapt to the new situation. Since the data in the literature report that the phenomenon of cultural shock is very frequent among expat operators of NGOs, the favorable reception by many interviewees appears to be a positive and heartening fact. It would demonstrate awareness and tolerance towards

negative emotions which, if mismanaged or rejected, could damage the stay abroad, therefore the relationships with the counterparty and the realization of the project.

Only 8 interviewees (17.3%) declared that culture shock is a symptom of intercultural incapacity, while 5 (9.6%) filled the box "Other" with personal answers such as "it depends on the context", "on the situation" and "on how you can manage to transform that malaise into opportunity".

Other
9.6%

Culture shock as inability
17.3%

Culture shock as part of the experience
73.1%
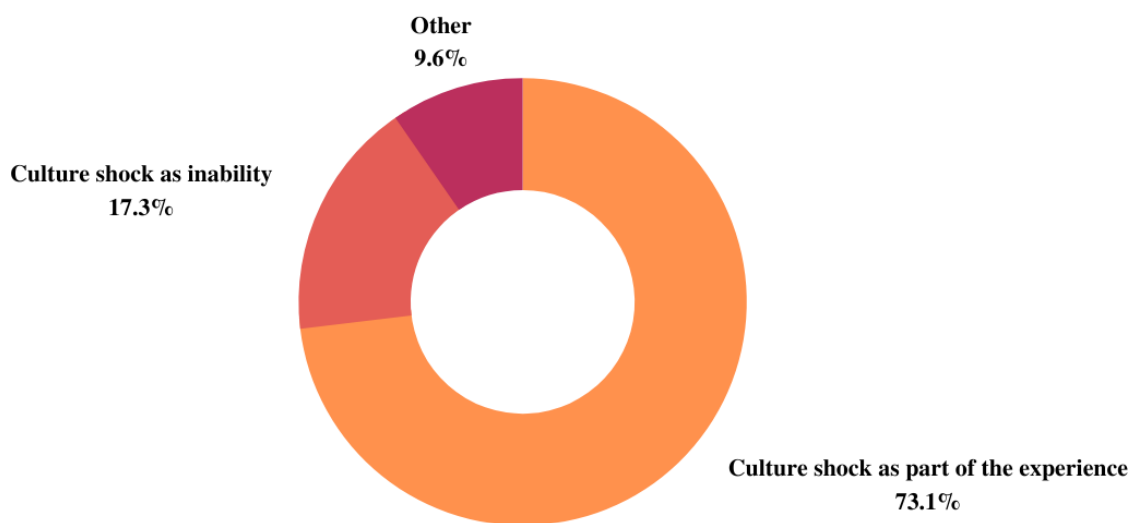
c5) Equality / Diversity of Human Beings

Question: Beyond the superficial differences of language and customs, human beings are all the same after all. Agree?

Type: Close-ended question + Other

For the purposes of this research this question was crucial. Read through the intercultural lenses, in fact, the idea that people are all different or all the same (apart from the cultural aspects) tells a lot about how culture itself is perceived, therefore about the potential of everyone's effectiveness in interacting with others. Based on what is reported by contemporary studies on the subject, widely mentioned in the chapter dedicated to literature, the opinion is widespread that culture is a superficial and folkloric component, which "envelops" the "natural" and "true" essence of individual who, therefore, has the same innate characteristics as anyone else. The

analysis actually confirmed the trend as 78.8% of the participants (41 responses) selected the "yes" option. Only one person chose the open answer option ("Other") writing that "we are all equal in rights and dignity", remaining vague with respect to the content of the question. In fact, the reference was to the cultural aspects and not to the dignity of humanity: to ensure that the interviewees did not overlap the two dimensions, the formula "*Beyond the superficial differences of language and customs*" was used. This open response, therefore, fell into neither category and represents 1.9%. Even the choice to use the adjective "superficial" was strategic to convey a precise message. The remaining 19.2%, (10 responses), selected the "no" option declaring that human beings are all different, that cultural aspects are not folklore and that not even the most visible diversities such as language and daily habits can be considered to have less impact on the personality. According to this perspective, which is consistent with contemporary literature, any cultural facet of the human being has a profound influence on his way of living, acting, reacting, weaving relationships, organizing life and giving meaning to phenomena. Culture is not outside the individual but inside. It is not always visible or audible, such as the way we dress, eat and talk. Thus, this approach seems to be constructive and successful because it is not taken for granted that, deep down, we are all the same, therefore all the same as me. The behavior of the native counterpart in an International Cooperation project is not interpreted according to one's own cultural models but accepted without (pre)judgment, evaluated from new and always different angles, (re)elaborated according to different criteria from the usual ones. Thinking of all human beings as equal could translate into an ethnocentric approach, while the opposite would be the reflection of an ethno-relative view.

Humans are all different
19.2%

Other
1.9%

Humans are all the same
78.8%
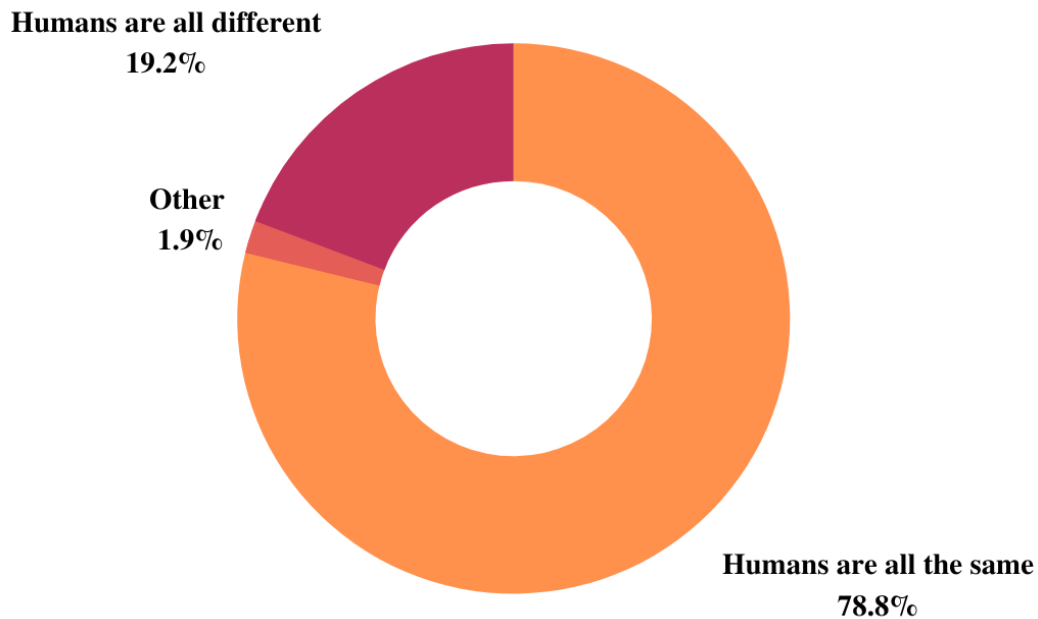
c6) Universality / Relativity of Ethical Principles

Question: Some ethical principles are universal, they should be respected everywhere and in any case, regardless of the context (e.g. the protection of the private sphere, gender equality, democratic values). Agree?

Type: Close-ended question + Other

Just like the question on the equality of people "beyond the most visible aspects of diversity such as language and habits", this too on the universality of ethical principles reveals a lot about the respondents' interculturalism: according to the literary references taken into consideration for this study, it seems that most of the participants (88.5% or 46 responses) have an ethnocentric vision of life, and only 9.6% (5 responses) observe the phenomena from a more ethno-relative point of view.

Contemplating some values as objective, therefore universally valid, would attribute a secondary and folkloric role to culture. Basically a variable but not influential accessory, combined with a fixed and well-defined paradigm that would unite any human community and would outline the "true" and "right" way of living, thinking, organizing society. The vision of culture that ignores the context is widely criticized by intercultural studies, which indeed demonstrate the groundlessness of the claim that

ethics can be judged through unique criteria, which can be shared by the human being as a human being (in the biological sense) and not cultural. If this were the case, i.e. if only one right model existed, it would coincide (what a coincidence!) with whoever decides its characteristics. It would be steeped in ethnocentrism and unable to represent the infinite cultural nuances of those who do not reflect themselves. Just as the concept of "set" mentioned a few pages earlier sounds incompatible with the cultural dimension, so does ethics as a universal principle. How can we make a list of absolutely definable and defined elements, which outline which behavior is moral, acceptable, virtuous and which is immoral, shameful, punishable?

Therefore, returning to the analysis of the responses, most of the workers involved in the study would be convinced that some values must always be respected, regardless of the cultural context, leading to the assumption that if the International Cooperation project in which they are involved envisages activities in contrast to certain local practices, they would carry them forward because "it's right". From an intercultural point of view, the risk would be to play the role of "little dictators" (Franzini, 2017) who must enforce the "right" rules as interpreters of "true morality". Therefore, the counterpart, the bearer of a different value paradigm, would risk being completely ignored, indeed crushed in the name of (Western) justice. This attitude would nullify the spirit of horizontal collaboration, of welcoming diversity, of sharing in decision-making processes and of building satisfactory solutions for all the parties involved. An ethno-relative approach, the latter, in which only 5 out of 52 participants are reflected.

One person (1.9%) chose the open answer option "Other" writing that "The universal principle that should be protected everywhere can be summarized with the prohibition of violence in all its forms and respect for human dignity and the environment... then the rest follows by itself". This reflection cannot be placed in one of the two categories that emerged given the vagueness of the position expressed, however the quote "the rest follows by itself" would suggest that a sort of universal ethical design would exist, therefore once some practices have been adjusted here and there, the life path of living beings would follow a predefined value path, the same for everyone.

Ethical principles are relative
9.6%

Other
1.9%

Ethical principles are universal
88.5%
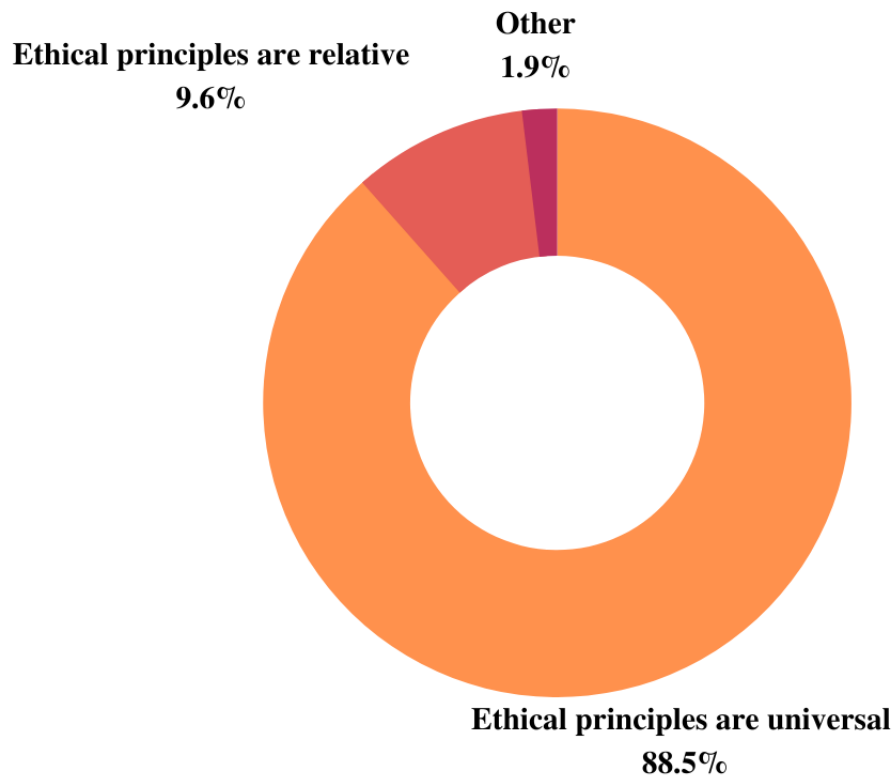
4.4 Emotional competence

(d1) Ability to empathize

Question: While communicating with a foreign person, your attention is focused more on [different / similar aspects]

Type: closed-ended question + Other

The literature on cross-cultural communication and in particular the analyzes of the American sociologist Milton Bennett report that a positive attitude in terms of intercultural efficacy is to focus mainly on the differences with our interlocutor. Observing and memorizing the characteristics of others farthest from us would favor a constructive approach in the relationship: in the first phase, it leads the individual to remember that his behavioral model is cultural and not universal; in a second phase, it pushes the individual to make an effort of observation, listening, memorization of the elements that emerge; in a third phase it spurs the individual to implement a communication suitable for the context and for the person in front of him. This is the attitude that 10 out of 52 participants (19.2%) seem to have. Furthermore, focusing on the differences with the interlocutor would be a symptom of empathetic capacity, a

skill that research on intercultural issues celebrates as essential. These interviewees, therefore, would know how to feel empathy because being able to assume another's vision requires knowing how to do it, even (and above all) when opinions and behaviors are not approved. Thus, in the context of an International Cooperation project, these 10 would be able to accept the alternative position with respect and interest. In short, dwelling on differences rather than on points in common with the other triggers a constructive process that encourages the individual to go out of himself, from what is familiar, from the "comfort zone" and to develop new communication tools and better adapt to the context.

Most of the participants (27 responses, or 51.9%) would instead prefer a more reassuring rather than exploratory attitude. In technical terms, more sympathizing than empathizing: the search for aspects in common with the interlocutor reflects an ethnocentric approach, stimulated by a need for similarity. However, these NGO operators - strengthened by the similarities observed - could slip into the risk of considering the other as a photocopy of themselves, assuming that the meanings are shared, the interpretation of the phenomena is the same, the behaviors are understood and its value model is approved. Furthermore, focusing on equality with others does not spur the development of new communication styles to fit contexts, thus limiting the intercultural potential.

15.4% of the interviewees (8 people out of 52), opted for the answer "Other" specifying "Both aspects". In this case, the analysis would reveal a holistic, therefore positive and effective relational approach: these people would be able to observe, record and process both the points in common and the different ones with the interlocutor at the same time, demonstrating a refined ability to observe and listen but also a promptness of behavioral response to any situation. The remaining 13.5% (7 responses) also chose the open-ended option "Other" but reporting different reflections, such as "I try to focus on what the person tells me"; "On the topic I'm dealing with"; "The other is me". These three answers sounded particularly interesting because in the first two the interviewees suggest that the interaction (which is explicitly referred to in the question) is only verbal communication, ignoring or underestimating the importance of paraverbal and non-verbal messages which must be kept in mind, especially in cross-cultural contexts; the third answer would suggest an ethnocentric attitude, although probably unconscious and in good faith, but still ineffective in the intercultural relationship.

Other
13.5%

Both
15.4%

Similar aspects
51.9%

Different aspects
19.2%
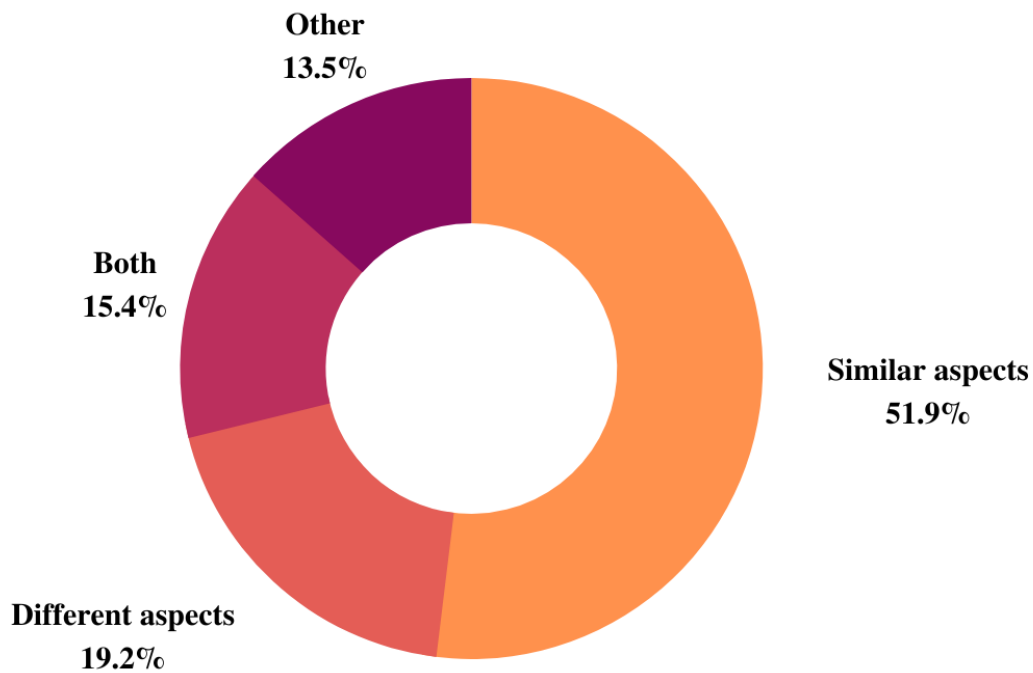
(d2) Emotional management of intercultural conflicts

Question: When, in the interaction with others, you feel disagreement with one or more cultural values, what emotions do you feel? How do you handle the conflict?

Type: open-ended question

This question has a double level of answer: emotional awareness in the first instance and emotional management in the second instance, with specific reference to the conflict of values with the interlocutor. Since the question type was open-ended, everyone was free to write their own reflection, possibly referring to both levels or just one. The analysis showed that all 52 interviewees told of how they manage emotional conflict but only 21 of them mentioned the emotions experienced. This data is interesting because it could testify that few of the participants are able to recognize the emotional variations experienced during a cross-cultural interaction (perhaps in any social interaction), which is, however, a crucial element in the category of intercultural competences. Emotional intelligence, mentioned very often in the literature, is one of the essential factors of fruitful communication and constructive relationships. To implement it, it is necessary to be able to recognize which feelings

one experiences while interacting with other people, especially if culturally distant. In the context of International Cooperation, as many studies mentioned in the previous chapters testify, it can happen that NGO operators engage in the implementation of activities not always aligned with beneficiaries' value paradigms, who therefore can oppose or propose alternative solutions, thus arousing some emotion in the western counterpart. Not realizing them, ignoring them or repressing them can be harmful in terms of intercultural efficacy and counterproductive towards the successful outcome of the project.

Respondents who explicitly mentioned emotions cited the following: Curiosity / interest (10 responses); Anger / annoyance (6 responses); Embarrassment / discomfort (5 responses). The first group represents 19.2% of the total and says they feel curiosity and interest in the divergence of opinion/behavior of others; the second group coincides with 11.5% and admits to getting angry or annoyed in front of the conflict of values; the third group, on the other hand, feels embarrassment and discomfort and represents 9.6% of the total. In the perspective of intercultural competence, it is not possible to give a judgment on the type of feeling experienced because all are legitimate, assuming that they are elaborated and channeled constructively at a later stage. In any case, as highlighted above, being aware of feeling certain emotions in certain contexts is in itself a positive sign.
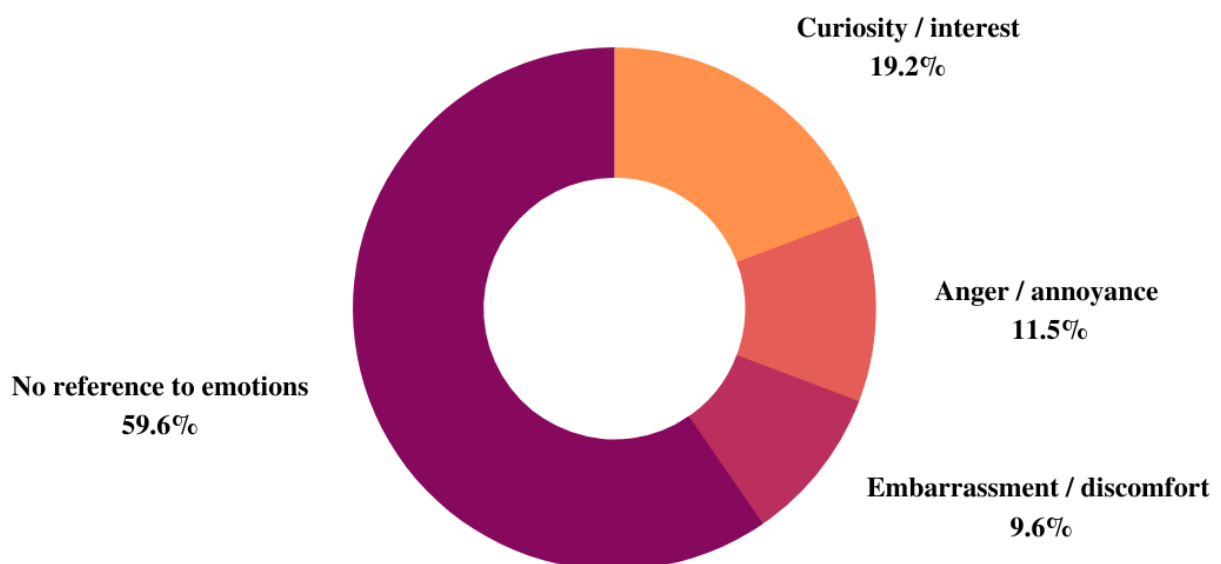
With regard to the emotional management of the contrast, the semantic macro categories that emerged from the analysis of the keywords are:

- Understanding (of others' point of view); Collection of information (about the cause of the value conflict) (30 responses)
- Dialogue; Mediation (15 responses)
- Indulgence; Acceptance (6 responses)
- Self-closure (1 response)

Most of the participants (57.7%) declare that if they feel disagreement with one or more values, they act trying to understand the different point of view, reflecting on the fact that "people come from different cultural paradigms"; reminding that "one is a guest of a certain context"; trying to "understand the origins of the belief/conviction of others" and "understand the social rule or the wider motivations behind the different value"; gathering information "with respect to certain issues underlying the conflict". According to the literary references taken into consideration, this attitude would seem positive in terms of intercultural competence because it would suggest an empathic approach, i.e. taking on the perspective of others, despite the divergence of values. The effort would therefore be to respect the divergence, not rush to judge it and, finally, understand what motivates it. Such a welcoming attitude offers itself as an optimal tool for starting a horizontal and shared interaction. With reference to International Cooperation projects, this attitude would allow problems to be observed from different angles, therefore to consider varied solutions and to experiment with multiple actions, increasing the chances of success of the activities.

28.8% of the interviewees follow the same line, declaring that they resolve the (potential) intercultural crisis through dialogue and mediation. In this case it would seem that not only empathy manifests itself but also the ability to create space for a "third culture" - as it is defined by some scholars mentioned in the previous chapters - in which to virtually bring together the different positions and integrate them, devising compromises, giving life to a new set of values that can bring all the parties into agreement. This would allow one to embrace the positions of the other without canceling one's own. Those who face the conflict of values through dialogue and the search for mediation, therefore, would manifest a very high intercultural competence. The third semantic category given by the recurrence of some recurring keywords is that linked to indulgence/acceptance, nominated by 7 people, or 11.5% of the total. In particular, some interviewees write "I would not say I feel conflicted, I accept and respect the difference in value"; "I accept the difference, I think it's still a resource"; "I indulge"; "I accept diversity because I think it makes us both grow". These reflections, which are only apparently positive from an intercultural point of view, seem to hide in themselves a certain passivity, which is an unsuitable element for a

fruitful and participatory relationship. Therefore, individuals who declare that they accept/indulge diversity without asking questions, without seeking compromise solutions and without attempting a dialogue that integrates the different values, would demonstrate little curiosity and proactivity; he would let his beliefs be watered down by those of others; it would manifest that xenophilia which according to some scholars mentioned above would lead (dangerously) to an attitude of "defense on the contrary", or of complete acceptance of other cultural models, considered better. A romantic and naïve vision that has nothing to do with intercultural competence. A second hypothesis that could be made with respect to this presumed emotional and relational passivity is that it is moved by a sense of latent moral superiority which leads one to look at the other as a harmless, folkloric being: even if the interlocutor behaves not shared, "I let him do so much he won't have a great impact on the (International Cooperation) project" or, more generally, "I go along with him out of niceness but the real right values are others, that is mine". Only one person among the participants (1.9%) answered that in the face of a conflict of values he would withdraw into himself, and would have difficulty continuing the interaction. According to what the literature says, although the emotions in the cross-cultural relationship can be intense, tiring and annoying, stiffening and blocking the dialogue is certainly not the tool for weaving a relationship of mutual exchange.
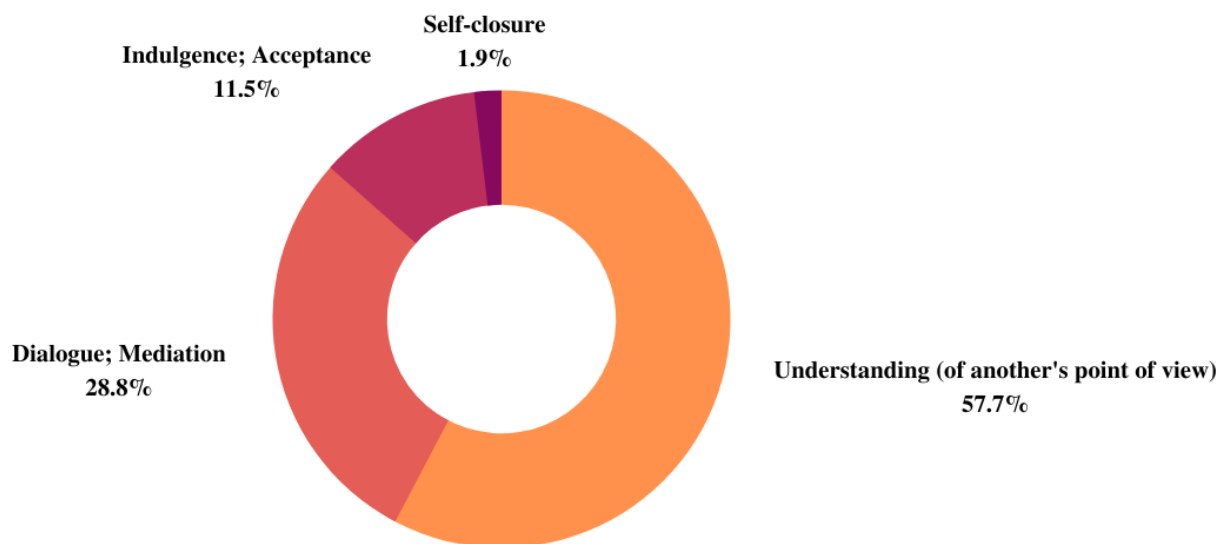
4.5 Operational competence

e1) Involvement of local partners
Question: Think about the project(s) you are participating in, or you are monitoring from Italy. In the stage of identifying the beneficiaries' needs, were local partners involved? If so, who?

Type: Open-ended question

The decision to formulate this question in the open answer mode is justified by its multi-dimension: the participants are asked if, with reference to the project they are involved in, the local partners have been consulted. If so, who? A multi-level, complex and multifaceted question that probably needs its own research to be studied in depth. However, even if in the framework of a questionnaire, the answers provided have produced very interesting results. The first fact worthy of being commented is that all of the interviewees gave an answer to the first question, as follows: 42 people (80.8%) declared that the project they are working on envisaged the involvement of local partners; 9 people (17.3%) said they didn't know how to give an answer; 1 person (1.9%) stated that in the planning phase there was no discussion with the local counterpart "causing great difficulty in carrying out the activities".

These numbers, in intercultural terms, are positive because a truly participatory International Cooperation presupposes the involvement of the indigenous partners. It would therefore seem that the representatives of the NGOs involved testify to a good way of working. In particular, these data would demonstrate that the participating entities identify the causes of a problem through discussions with the counterparty, with whom they also develop solutions. This would show sensitivity towards the concept of cultural compatibility.

I can't say
17.3%

No
1.9%

Yes
80.8%
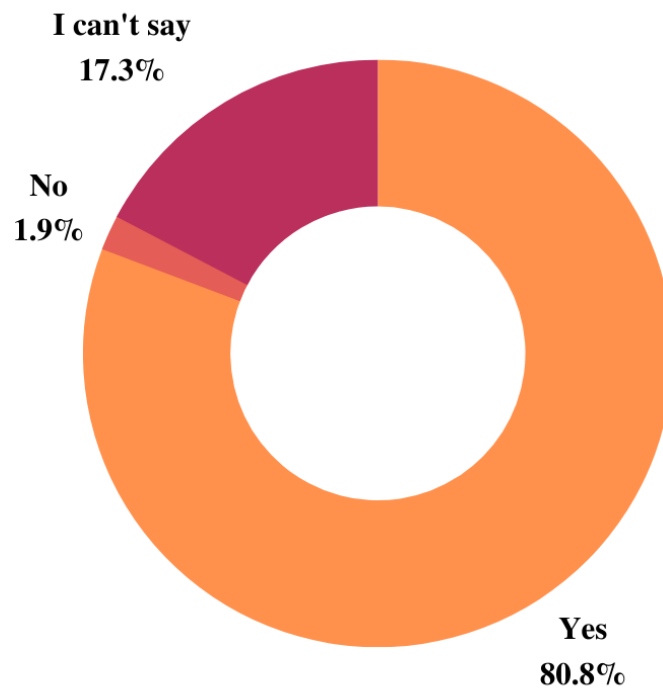
Having ascertained that most of the participants answered that the involvement of the counterpart takes place, and is a fundamental step for the proper functioning of the project, the second level of the question allowed us to zoom in on the collaboration between the NGOs represented and the local communities: in fact, it was asked who of the counterparty was consulted. According to the literature, although it is virtuous to establish a relationship of exchange and dialogue with local partners, the entities involved in International Cooperation should take into account the fact that project partners often represent a subculture or even an alternative culture to the direct beneficiaries', despite being part of the same community or living in the same territory. As noted by many scholars, widely quoted in the previous chapters, in most cases Western NGOs turn to the territorial authorities, local health personnel, local administrations or indigenous associations who know the area of intervention but (often) enjoy a higher socio-economic status than the communities targeted by the project, as well as likely to also have a higher level of education and live in areas with greater infrastructural services. In short, the risk would be to propose a project that is not totally effective, sustainable and culturally compatible. In fact, the data collected would confirm the trend highlighted in the literature: 69.2% of the interviewees (36 responses) declare that the counterpart involved is made up of authorities, administrations, doctors, activists and local staff, while only 13.5% (7 responses) states that the counterparty is intended as final beneficiaries, who are consulted directly, with the possible mediation of native experts. The remaining 17.3% (9 responses) corresponds to the "I don't know/I can't say" statement mentioned above.

I can't say
17.3%

Direct beneficiaries
13.5%

Local staff / authorities / associations / doctors
69.2%
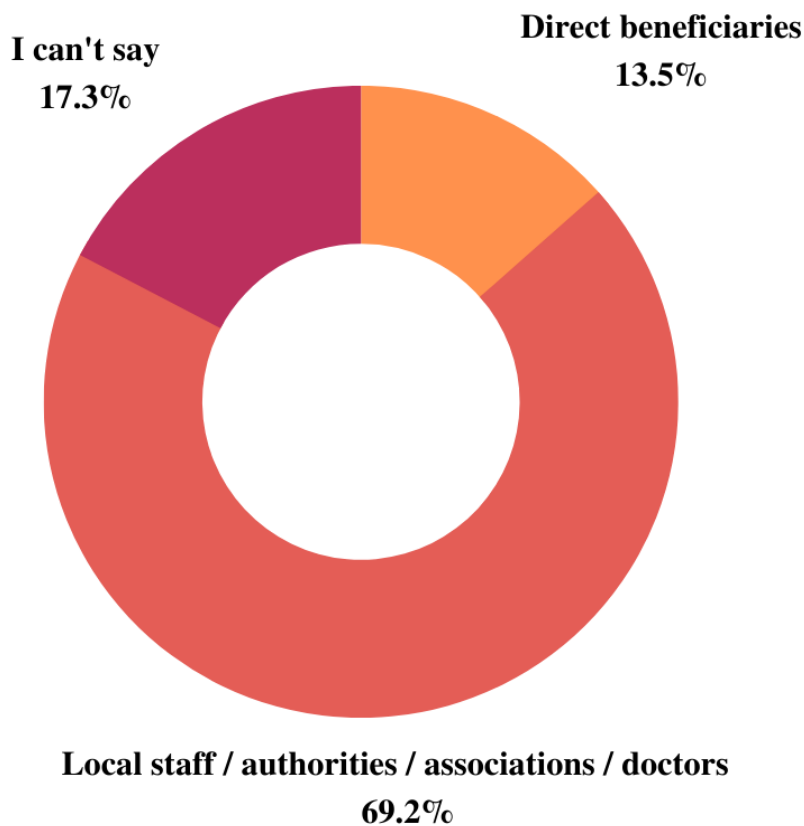
e2) Operational management of intercultural conflicts

Question: If the project envisaged the realization of essential activities for the NGO but in conflict with local customs (e.g. contrasting the practice of female genital mutilation or child labor), how would you behave?

Type: Open-ended question

Reading the answers to this question provided very interesting data, which can be grouped into four macro categories:

- Criticism of the NGO and disapproval of the project (16 responses);
- Undisputed support for the NGO (8 responses);
- Support for the NGO mediated by a process of raising awareness among the local population (22 responses);
- Uncertain opinion about the position to take (6 responses).

Based on what is reported in the literature, it would seem that the statements of criticism and disapproval expressed by 30.8% of the participants are the most aligned with the skills defined as intercultural in International Cooperation. Contesting the organization when it proposes activities that are culturally incompatible with a given context would suggest a ethnorelative approach by the operator, aware that the conceived project is culturally oriented, therefore questionable, not applicable everywhere nor absolutely right. This group of respondents would show a high degree of intercultural sensitivity, as they are willing to question their own vision of the world, and therefore of the NGO they represent, and welcome that of others without judgment. Being interculturally competent, as repeatedly highlighted by the literature, does not mean canceling oneself and accepting the positions of others without filters, but recognizing their dignity, therefore evaluating them as possible alternatives to one's own thinking. This way of thinking would allow for truly horizontal and participatory cooperation, as it would leave room for the integration of multiple interpretations and the elaboration of satisfactory solutions for all the parties involved. The second category of responses, which can be summarized under the label "undisputed support for the NGO", can be placed in the opposite corner to the one illustrated above: 8 people, or 15.4% of the total, declared that they would support their organization also if the project is in contrast with the native customs. It could be assumed that these individuals are convinced that the ethical principles they hold are universally right, therefore to be exported everywhere and in any case. In intercultural terms, this attitude can be defined as ethnocentric: one's own value paradigm is not questioned, either because one is not even aware of having one or because it is consciously considered the most correct.

In the same way, a third group of 22 participants (42.3%), which however was combined with a further category, that of supporting the project - even if culturally incompatible - but combined with a work of education / awareness / information of the community beneficiary, so that it is convinced that the proposed model is actually right, and therefore accepted. Although the position appears more moderate, it would still present the typical features of ethnocentrism as it would assume the existence of only one right model of values - one's own - which must be transmitted to others, not (yet) enlightened. The tool, according to the participants' statements, is certainly not the compulsory command but teaching the rules that a proper society should give itself. The "right" rules, which the beneficiary populations evidently (yet) do not have. In this sense, however, International Cooperation runs the risk of being configured as a method of transferring Western knowledge to the rest of the world, so that it takes on the appearance of the West itself. In short, the principles of horizontality and sharing which are the prerequisite for a virtuous intercultural exchange would be missing. Also: understanding Cooperation in this way would mean thinking of culture as an

accessory and folkloric element, which has nothing to do with "universal" ethics and human rights. An approach negatively evaluated by scholars on the subject, as amply illustrated in the previous chapters.

Accompanying what is reported, some statements of the interviewees: "I think there are universal rights above individual cultures"; the rights of the individual must in any case always be put first"; "it is necessary to say clearly, in a firm voice, what is unacceptable"; "an integral part of a cooperation project should be the awareness and training of local people"; "as long as it's a correct thing, I feel right, I support it without problems"; "education on certain issues is essential so that then the protagonists of these practices themselves ask for their suppression"; "it is necessary to mediate, talk, and educate before being able to act". A particularly interesting testimony is that of an operator who writes: "If the local partner agrees but the so-called local culture is in contrast, then with the local partner who knows the language - in a broad sense - of the place, I would think of ways of conveying the project idea". These words deserve attention because they would confirm what was reported in the analysis of the previous question, regarding the (possible) socio-cultural differences between the autochthonous partners and the direct beneficiaries of the activities, which must be taken into account.

The fourth group that emerged from studying the responses is the one made up of 6 people (i.e. 11.5% of the total) who admit that they do not know what to say or what position they would take.

Support the NGO without hesitation
15.4%

Support the NGO and foster an education process for the beneficiaries
42.3%

Criticize the NGO
30.8%

I can't say
11.5%
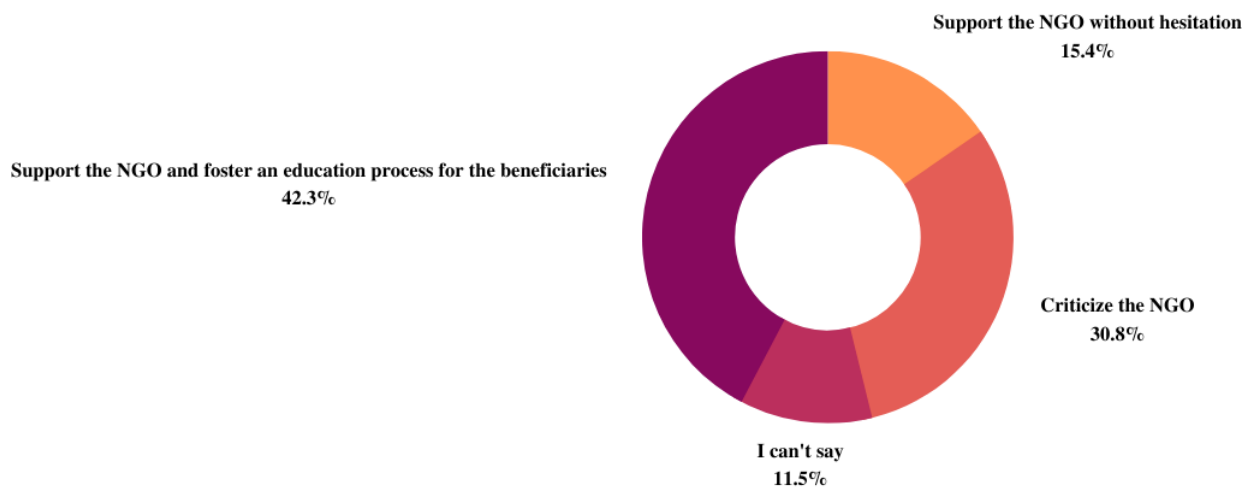
4.6 Importance given to Intercultural Skills in International Cooperation

f1) Intercultural competences training
Question: Have you ever received specific training on intercultural competences so far?

Type: Multiple choice question

This question was a useful tool for investigating the centrality of intercultural competences in International Cooperation. The response modality, as explained in the previous chapters, allowed the participants to choose one or more options given the likelihood that they had studied intercultural issues at different stages of their lives and/or at multiple institutions. It will be noted, in fact, that the totality of the answers exceeds the number of interviewees. In any case, the results that emerged are reliable and a valuable source of investigation: 22 people (32.4%) claim to have received specific training on the subject at the University; 17 people (25%) state that the NGO they work for or those they have worked for in the past has provided them with an education on the topic; 16 people (23.5%) answered that they obtained training on intercultural skills through private courses sought independently; and finally 13 people (19.1%) have never received any training in this regard. The analyzes would show that

intercultural skills are not recognized as essential for the effectiveness of a project nor, in general, for the proper functioning of International Cooperation, but that they are nevertheless sufficiently valued at the university level; essential for some NGOs; important for some operators in the sector, who have chosen to follow specific specialization courses. Considering what the literature says, it would seem a little too high the percentage of those who, despite experiencing cross-cultural relationships on a daily basis, have never faced interculturality from a theoretical point of view, dealing with philosophical reflections and engaging in mindful exercises.
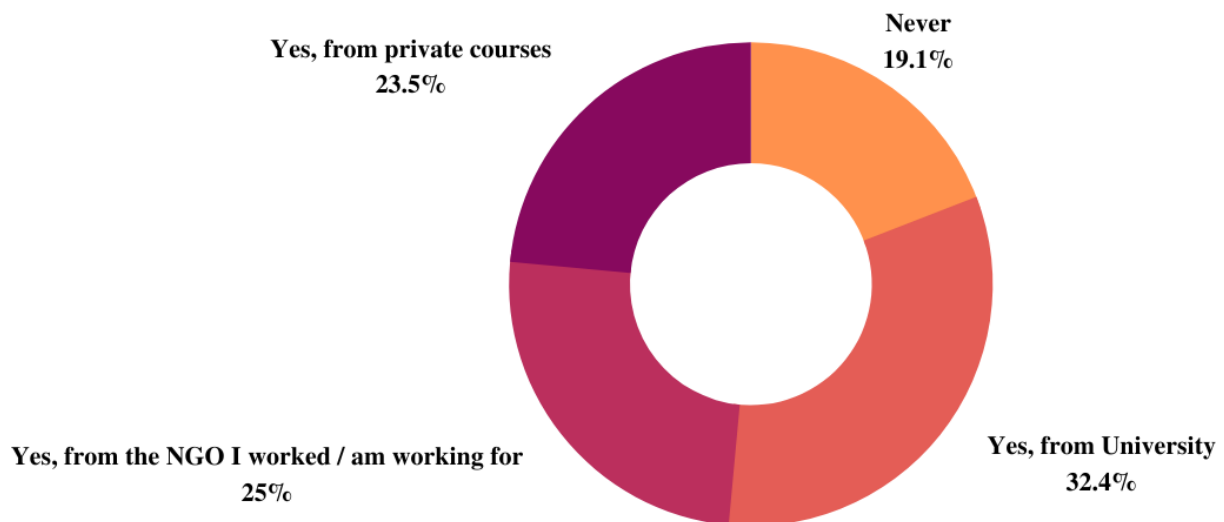
f2) Attention of NGOs to candidates' intercultural skills

Question: Did the NGO you work for assess your intercultural competences at the selection stage?

Type: Close-ended question + "Other"

Similar to the previous one, this question was instrumental in understanding the importance that NGOs involved in International Cooperation give to the intercultural skills of their employees. The analyzes of the answers established that most of the participants (33 people, or 63.5%) had their intercultural skills assessed during the

selection phase. It is an interesting and clearly positive figure in terms of the centrality of these skills in the world of Cooperation. This would mean that, despite what is reported in the literature, the recruiters do not only look at the technical skills of the candidates, functional to the realization of the projects. However, although the self-perception of the interviewees is a completely respectable criterion, to fathom the question thoroughly it would have been useful to know how intercultural competences were assessed. Unfortunately, the reflection was made afterwards, when the answers had already all been collected, but it could be the object of study for any future research. Another interesting figure was the "No" response: 15 people or 28.8% of the total declared that the NGO they work for has never assessed their intercultural skills, probably considered secondary or just ignored. The "Other" option was filled in by 4 respondents (7.7%), who admitted they did not remember and/or could not answer for sure.
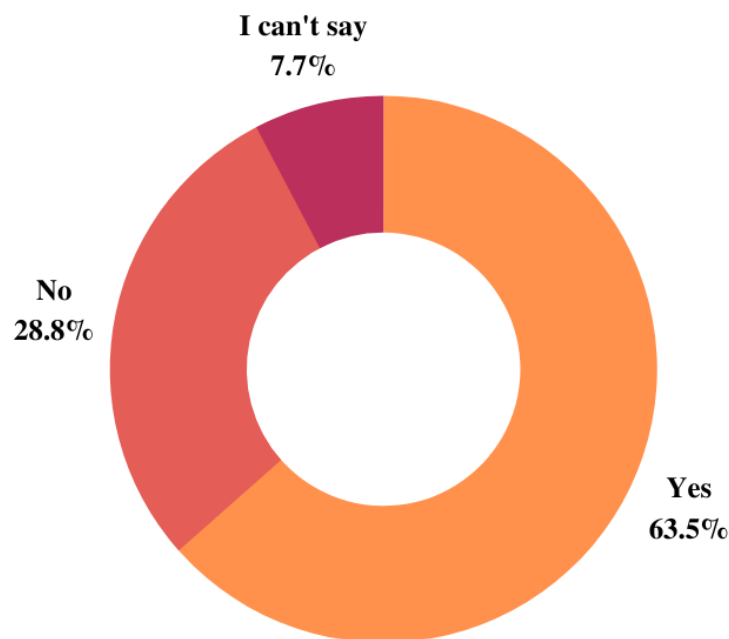
4.7 Key elements of the results

Culture, as claimed by the majority of participants, "gives an identity" and "defines" people. It is actually reified, therefore conceptualized as a thing that exists independently of humans, taking action on its own. According to the literary references considered for this study, this idea seems to produce a negative impact on cross-cultural interactions for at least two main reasons: (1) it can make participants believe that they are interacting with an entire cultural system rather than a single person, giving space to assumptions based on stereotypes and prejudices; (2) it can give the human being a passive role, as if individuals were mere executors and not protagonists of their own actions or thoughts. As a consequence, this would lessen the chance of creating a "third space" or "virtual culture" that combines many viewpoints and offers cooperative answers.

From an emotional perspective, only few interviewees have the capacity to recognize the psychological nuances emerging during cross-cultural contacts. This ability, which converges with the emotional intelligence dimension, is pointed out by scholars as one of the crucial elements of successful intercultural communication and fruitful relationships. Emotional awareness and self-control, indeed, are winning factors in social interactions, especially if they take place in multicultural settings.

The majority of the operators declared that they would support their NGO in case of cultural incompatibility with the setting. They even stated that they would support efforts to educate the indigenous communities until they accepted the suggestions as "right". Not considering the effectiveness and dignity of different approaches to respond to situations, sounds like an ethnocentric strategy, running the risk of serving as a conduit for the spread of (only) Western ideals and habits. As reported by various academic texts, ethnocentrism is the enemy of intercultural sensitivity, because it leads the individual to take for granted that his own way of thinking is the only absolutely right one.

Being coached on intercultural skills is acknowledged as helpful but not crucial to a project's success or, generally, to the good functioning of International Cooperation. In reality, even though a few of the participants claimed to have received specialized training on the topic, particularly at university, a sizeable portion has never encountered one, despite the fact that they plan and monitor international projects, implement activities for heterogeneous communities, live abroad, and regularly interact with people from various cultural backgrounds.

In short, these data - although not statistically representative - seem to provide not a brilliant snapshot of intercultural capabilities in Italian International Cooperation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Contribution of this research

This research deserves credits for having explored an issue scarcely studied: intercultural competences in International Cooperation. The literature in this regard is scarce but the topic is worthy to be paid more attention, observed from multiple angles and deepened. The intercultural communication and behavioral skills of those who work in this sector are essential for truly horizontal, shared and inclusive collaboration between global communities. Therefore it is important to study and value them.

For many decades following its birth, International Cooperation was treated as a mere instrument for the transfer of financial resources and, later, of Western know-how to the rest of the world, in an ethnocentric way. The political, economic, ethical and social model of the West has been proposed as the unique paradigm to emulate, so International Cooperation activities have proved to be perfect export channels. Today, however, there is a widespread awareness that to ensure effectiveness, efficacy and sustainability of projects, it is necessary to integrate multiple (cultural) readings both to identify global problems and to develop possible solutions. For this to be possible, it is essential that all the actors involved have intercultural skills, such as the awareness of being interpreters of a cultural model that has nothing universal; the emotional management in the midst of a conflict of values; the conceptualization of culture as coordination of meanings of a given social group and not as an inherited and external entity to the human being; the belief that others are the bearer of a dignified and respectable vision, even if not approved; the ability not to hastily judge an action that we do not understand; the competence to integrate different proposals to implement any activity, without one prevailing to the detriment of the others. This series of cognitive, emotional and operational skills are the result of a slow and tiring process that is not activated only by living abroad or interacting with foreign people, but must be nourished with study and constant exercise.

Thus, this research was able to initiate an early survey of those capabilities of 52 operators from 30 Italian NGOs, of different ages and years of experience, engaged in different projects and located in various parts of the world, including Italy. A sample that was not statistically representative but which brought out new and extremely interesting data. Particularly: the majority of the respondents declared that they started working in International Cooperation driven by the "spirit of service", by the desire to "help" and "do good". Those who provided this type of motivation referred to the populations benefiting from the interventions in terms of "marginal groups", "disadvantaged categories", "set aside" or "forgotten part of the world", "those in need", "the last". Thinking of Cooperation as an act of help would presuppose that

there is someone in difficulty and someone else who is in solidarity with him. In this perspective, it would lose the sense of working together to face the global challenges and elaborate common solutions, leaving room for the idea of transmitting knowledge and skills so that "the others become like us".

The intercultural abilities considered most important by the interviewees were: mental openness, knowledge of one or more foreign languages, listening skills, empathy, respect and awareness of one's cultural model.

"Set" was the noun most used to describe the concept of culture and the majority of participants referred to culture as external to the individual, something that "identifies", "gives an identity", "defines", "characterizes" a person. An entity detached and autonomous from the human being, eventually described as "superstructure", to underline its overwhelming nature. The interviewees seem to think that people passively undergo culture and do not have an active role towards it, a view criticized by contemporary studies on intercultural competences.

The largest part of the participants believe that culture shock is not synonymous with intercultural incapacity, as many scholars state too: the sense of disorientation, physical or psychological malaise that one might feel in interacting in a foreign environment, it is regarded as part of the experience itself. Indeed, experiencing negative sensations when in an alien context is even desirable because, in intercultural terms, it demonstrates awareness of one's own cultural framework of reference, stimulates the ability to manage emotions and highlights diversity, alerting the individual on what and how to change his own attitude to better fit the new situation.

The most common opinion among the respondents was that human beings, after all, are all the same, assuming that culture is a folkloric component which "envelops" the "natural" and "true" essence of individuals. Beyond the more visible differences of language and customs, people around the world have the same innate characteristics, morality and needs. This attitude clashes with literature: any cultural facet of the human being has a profound influence on his way of living, acting, reacting, weaving relationships, organizing life and giving meaning to phenomena. This approach is successful because it is not taken for granted that, deep down, we are all the same, therefore all the same as me.

Most of the workers involved in the study is convinced that some ethical values must always be respected, regardless of the cultural context, leading to the assumption that if the International Cooperation project in which they are involved envisages activities in contrast to certain local practices, they would carry them forward because "it's right". Read through intercultural lenses, the risk would be to play the role of "little dictators" (Franzini, 2017) who must enforce the "right" rules as interpreters of "true morality". Therefore, the counterpart would risk being completely ignored, indeed crushed in the name of (Western) justice.

A high percentage of those interviewed, while interacting with a foreign person,

focus more on the common aspects than on the different ones. According to the literature, this would reflect the need for similarity, thus choosing familiarity and keeping in the "comfort-zone", rather than exploring diversity and activating new, potentially more effective methods of communication. Milton Bennett (2013; 2016) defines those two attitudes as sympathizing and empathizing. The ability to implement the latter is an indication of a high degree of intercultural sensitivity.

Many interviewees wrote that they normally manage value conflicts by welcoming the others' point of view and collecting information about the cause of the contrast, but only few of them mentioned what emotions they usually experience, even though it was explicitly requested. The data could testify that just a small part of the group is able to recognize the emotional variations felt during a cross-cultural interaction, which is a crucial element in the category of intercultural competences. Indeed, according to the literature, emotional intelligence is one of the essential factors of fruitful communication and constructive relationships.

With reference to the involvement of local counterparty, the majority of respondents declared it was a crucial step of the project they are participating in, demonstrating that the represented NGOs identify the causes of a problem and the respective solutions through discussions with autochthonous people. This data would therefore show sensitivity towards the concept of cultural compatibility of projects. However, the local counterparty, according to the answers, is mainly made of authorities, administrations, doctors and activists, who probably represent a subculture or even an alternative culture to the direct beneficiaries', despite being part of the same community or living in the same territory. This is something to be aware of.

In a situation of cultural incompatibility of the project with respect to the context where it takes place, most of the operators stated that they would support their NGO, for sharing ethics and objectives, but they also would foster a process of information, awareness and / or education of the beneficiary community, until it understands that the proposals are "right". In this sense, International Cooperation runs the risk of being configured as a method of transferring Western wisdom to the rest of the world, so that it takes on the appearance of the West itself.
Intercultural abilities, from the training perspective, are sufficiently valued at the university level and for some NGOs. However, considering what the literature says, it would seem too high the percentage of those who, despite experiencing cross-cultural relationships on a daily basis, have never faced interculturality from a theoretical point of view, dealing with philosophical reflections and engaging in mindful exercises.

5.2 Limitations of this analysis and ethical concerns

Although the research has provided new and interesting results with respect to the theme of intercultural competences in International Cooperation, filling a still very

empty space in the academic literature, it is necessary to clarify the limits of the study and highlight some deontological reflections.

First of all, it is necessary to take into account the limited group of interviewees which cannot be considered as statistically representative. Even if the participants had different ages, as well as different roles and experiences, and worked for Italian NGOs with various characteristics, from a numerical point of view they certainly cannot be considered a statistical sample.

Secondly, it is important to consider that the written questionnaire, although recognized as a valid scientific tool and celebrated for its effectiveness and speed, did not allow for verbal interaction with the interviewees, limiting their analysis: there was no direct listening of the testimonies as well as the observation of the non-verbal language, elements that would have ensured a more complete understanding of the answers. Furthermore, it is fair to consider that the written questionnaire gave participants the opportunity to think at length about the answers to give, possibly deleting or modifying words already written. They were able to pay more attention to the aspect of social desirability, probably less controlled in a direct dialogue with the interviewer.

As in any research, especially qualitative ones, it is correct to keep in mind that the researcher's subjective interpretation influences the analysis of the answers: although the scholar is aware of the importance of estranging himself and not issuing judgements, he is in any case the bearer of a own cultural vision of the phenomena, including the answers provided by the participants. Therefore, the grouping into semantic categories, the reading of the collected data and the concluding reflections are the result of a personal interpretative process, albeit supported by literary references.

5.3 Suggestions for further studies

Since the topic of study is still understudied at an academic level, the potential for exploration is considerable. Thus, this same research offers many insights. It would be interesting, for example, to understand if there are similarities in the approach to the cross-cultural relationship between operators of the same age group. In particular, a comparison could be made between those who recently left university and those who concluded their studies many years ago, to understand whether (and how) contemporary university programs are more attentive to the development of intercultural skills than in the past. A cross-analysis of socio-personal data could also be useful to find out if there are differences between NGO desk operators and expat operators who, working abroad, experience cultural diversity in a more constant and intense way. Similarly, the analysis could be applied to the gender dimension, allowing to explore any discrepancies in emotional and operational management

empty space in the academic literature, it is necessary to clarify the limits of the study and highlight some deontological reflections.

First of all, it is necessary to take into account the limited group of interviewees which cannot be considered as statistically representative. Even if the participants had different ages, as well as different roles and experiences, and worked for Italian NGOs with various characteristics, from a numerical point of view they certainly cannot be considered a statistical sample.

Secondly, it is important to consider that the written questionnaire, although recognized as a valid scientific tool and celebrated for its effectiveness and speed, did not allow for verbal interaction with the interviewees, limiting their analysis: there was no direct listening of the testimonies as well as the observation of the non-verbal language, elements that would have ensured a more complete understanding of the answers. Furthermore, it is fair to consider that the written questionnaire gave participants the opportunity to think at length about the answers to give, possibly deleting or modifying words already written. They were able to pay more attention to the aspect of social desirability, probably less controlled in a direct dialogue with the interviewer.

As in any research, especially qualitative ones, it is correct to keep in mind that the researcher's subjective interpretation influences the analysis of the answers: although the scholar is aware of the importance of estranging himself and not issuing judgements, he is in any case the bearer of a own cultural vision of the phenomena, including the answers provided by the participants. Therefore, the grouping into semantic categories, the reading of the collected data and the concluding reflections are the result of a personal interpretative process, albeit supported by literary references.

5.3 Suggestions for further studies

Since the topic of study is still understudied at an academic level, the potential for exploration is considerable. Thus, this same research offers many insights. It would be interesting, for example, to understand if there are similarities in the approach to the cross-cultural relationship between operators of the same age group. In particular, a comparison could be made between those who recently left university and those who concluded their studies many years ago, to understand whether (and how) contemporary university programs are more attentive to the development of intercultural skills than in the past. A cross-analysis of socio-personal data could also be useful to find out if there are differences between NGO desk operators and expat operators who, working abroad, experience cultural diversity in a more constant and intense way. Similarly, the analysis could be applied to the gender dimension, allowing to explore any discrepancies in emotional and operational management

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between men and women, but also to the participants' years of professional experience: the study could reveal a directly proportional relationship between the time spent in this area and the refinement of intercultural competences, or not.

Even the conceptualization of issues related to International Cooperation and cultural diversity is a field that offers ideas for further analysis: for this research, in fact, some variables considered most useful for the set purposes have been selected, but many others could be used. The same consideration applies to the study of the emotional and operational management of the cross-cultural relationship, observed here from the angles considered most responsive to the set objectives, but could be expanded with the addition of new variables.

Wanting to keep the same variables, a different approach to the topic could be given by replacing the written questionnaire with the oral interview: the questions, therefore, could be addressed to the same group of workers or to new ones. In the first case, the research could demonstrate discrepancies between the answers sent in writing - compiled without being observed by the scholar - and those provided orally, in the presence of the interviewer. Probably the social desirability variable would play a key role. In the second case, however, this research would lend itself to a new beginning, proving to be a model that can be replicated in different contexts.

As reported in the chapter about the results, the "multi-level" questions of the questionnaire, those containing several inquiries in one, deserve to be studied more thoroughly, and therefore be studied for future research.

Finally, it could be very intriguing to put together the most virtuous answers in terms of intercultural ability, then compare them and find out if the respective respondents have elements in common. Basically, understanding if the profile of the interculturally competent cooperator exists (and what it is).

5.4 Conclusive remarks

As a conclusive remark, it can be stated that this study answered all research questions. In detail: (1) What meaning is attributed to the concept of culture and intercultural relations? Most participants referred to culture as something external to the individual, that "gives an identity" and "defines" a person. A separate entity from humans and acting on its own, letting people be quite passive. This conception negatively affects intercultural relations because it would lead to thinking that the encounter with the other is an encounter with an entire cultural system and not with a single individual, increasing the risk of reasoning based on prejudices and stereotypes. This would reduce the potential for building a "third space" or a "virtual culture" that integrates different visions and provides shared solutions; (2) Is there the ability to identify and manage the emotions experienced in the cross-cultural relationship, possibly conflictual? Even though it was specifically asked for, few interviewees

expressed what feelings they often experience. The statistics may show that just a tiny portion of the group possesses the ability to perceive the emotional variances experienced during cross-cultural interactions. This skill, confluent in the dimension of emotional intelligence, is one of the key components of effective intercultural communication and positive relationships; (3) Is there the ability to integrate different cultural paradigms within a project? Most of the operators stated that they would support their NGO in case of cultural incompatibility with the context, because of shared ethics and objectives, and they would also encourage a process of education of locals until they recognize that the proposals are "right". The approach sounds ethnocentric and International Cooperation risks being a channel for the propagation of Western values and knowledge, without taking into account the efficacy and dignity of different approaches; (4) Is intercultural competence a central element in the training of NGOs' workers? It seems it is recognized as useful but not essential for the success of a project nor, in general, for the proper functioning of International Cooperation. In fact, although the relative majority of the participants declared that they had received specific training on the subject, above all at university, a good part has never faced one, even though they live abroad, design, direct and implement international projects, and interact daily with different cultural frameworks.

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