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Abstract. Research on intercultural competences has identified intercultural competence as the term with the broadest consensus across social sciences and communication disciplines, along with Bennett's widely accepted definition: «Intercultural competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to effectively and appropriately interact with people from different cultural backgrounds in a variety of contexts» (Bennett 2009, p. 97). These competences are not innate but must be intentionally developed. Schools play a central role in this process, as they not only shape future citizens but also serve as spaces where cultural plurality is already a well-established reality. However, teachers are not the only ones involved; social workers are also frontline witnesses to demographic changes. This paper presents a systematic review based on the PRISMA method, analyzing articles on the application of intercultural competence in the specific field of social services, which involve adult users, diverse and complex needs, time-constrained interactions, and the evaluative nature of compulsory interventions. Three databases were used: Social Services Abstracts by Proquest, Scopus-Elsevier, and Google Scholar. Although interest in this issue remains limited, it has grown in recent years, with the majority of publications from 2008 to May 2024, partly due to increased dialogue with the international scientific community.

Keywords: Systematic Literature Review, Interculturalism, Intercultural Competence, Social Services.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, interculturalism has become established as the dominant model for managing diversity, embraced by European Union institutions and the Council of Europe. More specifically, the Council of Europe was the first to endorse this new political philosophy—superseding multiculturalism—with the publication, in 2008, of the well-known *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: Living Together as Equals in Dignity*. From a sociological perspective, interculturalism presupposes a constructivist conception of culture.

This conception contrasts with the idea of culture as a closed and homogeneous system (Barth 1969; Clifford 1986) and as an ascribed and distinctive property of a national or ethnic group (Baumann 1996, 1999). Such an understanding of culture as a composite and continually evolving product (Bakhtin 1981) also accommodates the super-diversity of the identities that constitute the social whole (Vertovec 2007) and opens up space for hybridity (Bhabha 1994). Individuals are recognized as having the potential to engage with and mediate between multiple systems of meaning.

This emphasis on agency (Giddens 1992) is evident in the prominent role assigned to intercultural competence in the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*. Intercultural competence is defined as “the set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral capacities that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett 2009, p. 97). Drawing on contact theory (Allport 1954), intercultural competence is believed to positively influence social cohesion by increasing interactions in which stereotypes and prejudices are kept in check. The resulting improvement in interpersonal perception is expected to foster better understanding between the groups as collective entities (Zapata-Barrero 2016).

However, this strong emphasis on the micro level has been the subject of criticism. Scholars point out not only the Western origins of interculturalism (Di Mauro 2010), but also argue that shifting responsibility to individuals may divert attention from the obligation of institutions to address difference where it results in inequality in the enjoyment of rights (Colombo 2020).

Nonetheless, intercultural competence remains a key concept within the framework adopted by European states, which, from that moment on, have sought to define its content in accordance with their particular national contexts. The Council of Europe designates education and social policy as the principal areas for the development of intercultural competence and puts forward Byram’s multidimensional model (Byram 1997, 2003, 2008) as a guiding framework, but it also asserts that its application must be consistent with a core component of any competence (Le Boterf 1994). This flexibility is also

consistent with the autonomy that countries—including EU member states—retain in matters of education and social policy (Contini & Pica-Smith 2017).

In Italy, initial policy responses began to take shape as early as 1990 with Ministerial Circular No. 205, followed in 1994 by Circulars No. 5 and No. 73, *Dialogo interculturale e convivenza democratica: l'impegno progettuale della scuola*, and culminating in the Ministry of Education's key 2007 document on the topic, *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri*. This document is of fundamental importance, as it formalizes the adoption of an intercultural approach by the Italian school system and defines principles and actions aimed at shaping concrete educational policies (Besozzi 2017). In this regard, it emphasizes the intercultural training of teachers, highlighting the need to overcome the traditional informational-cultural framework in favor of more critical approaches (Roverselli 2015). Alongside institutional texts, socio-pedagogical research has contributed significantly to defining intercultural competence (Fiorucci et al. 2017), also building on earlier reflections developed within the discipline, which had already begun addressing the topic in the late 1980s.

The same cannot be said of social work, which is equally affected by the rapid demographic changes in the population (Danso 2016), yet marked by its own specificities: a clientele consisting of adults and minors, a broad range of needs, limited interaction times, the emergency nature of certain situations, and the evaluative character of coercive interventions, which further exacerbates power asymmetries (Biffi & Pasini 2018). In fact, not only is there currently no equivalent of an Italian “roadmap” for intercultural social work, but scientific production in the field is still advancing cautiously, as this systematic literature review seeks to highlight. Although Julie Cheetham's pioneering work dates back to 1972, scientific literature and operational methodologies in the field of social work with immigrants have not made significant progress. Half a century later, the sector still appears to lack consolidated theoretical and practical foundation, continuing to operate in an uncertain and fragmented manner (Cabiati 2020). This delay in knowledge production has resulted in a training gap for social workers, such that the development of professional competences for working with migrant users risks being voluntary and based solely on experience (Barberis & Boccagni 2014; Agrusti et al. 2017; Lannutti 2023). It seems, in any case, that the gap between the level of advancement in school-focused knowledge and that related to social work is also evident at the international level (Abrams & Moio 2009; Puntervold Bø 2015; Cohen-Emerique 2017). According to Martorana, Rania and Lagomarsino (2017), the considerable attention devoted to teachers by many researchers stems from the central role schools have come to play in Western societies. A complementary perspective is offered by Salinaro and Tolomelli (2023), who argue that the lack of a defined theoretical

framework for reception professionals stems from the social marginalization surrounding migratory trajectories. Consequently, until host societies acknowledge the full significance of forced migration and inclusion processes, it will remain difficult to grant scientific legitimacy to those who work daily in close contact with the realities of mobility.

Systematic Literature Review

To identify and analyze relevant publications on intercultural competence as a concept and in its practical articulations among social workers in Italy, a systematic literature review was conducted, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method (Moher et al. 2015). The PRISMA method provides a 17-item protocol designed to ensure transparency and replicability of the process, along with a flowchart to visually present the stages from identification to analysis: screening based on titles and abstracts, determination of eligibility, and inclusion through full-text reading.

Search Strategy

To conduct the review, three databases were selected. These can be distinguished by their degree of specialization with respect to the thematic scope of the study.

Social Services Abstracts by ProQuest focuses on social work and related areas such as welfare systems, social policies, and community development. Scopus-Elsevier is known for collecting a large volume of peer-reviewed publications across multiple disciplinary fields, including disciplines such as social and psychological sciences. Google Scholar is Google's search engine that is recognized for covering a wide range of academic and grey literature. The literature recommends using it in combination with verified databases, particularly due to the lack of a clear indexing policy and the limited capacity for advanced search (Haddaway et al. 2015; Halevi et al. 2017).

Given the characteristics of each database, the base search string—including the keywords “*competenze interculturali*” and “*servizi sociali*” / “*operatori sociali*”—was adapted accordingly. For Social Services Abstracts and Scopus-Elsevier, the searches were conducted in English, as no other option was available. The geographic context was introduced either as an additional keyword or by using the authors' country of affiliation. In the case of Google Scholar, the search was conducted in Italian, with the language itself serving as an indirect filter for a national focus. Moreover, in the absence of a filter restricting document types, the selection of articles and book chapters was carried out manually. Finally, in all three cases, the time frame was set from 2008 (the year the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*

was published) to 2024 (since the review was conducted in May). For a more detailed overview of the final search strings (Table 1). A total of 410 publications were identified, distributed as shown in Table 1.

Selection Process

Before the selection process itself began, the removal of duplicates both within and across databases, as well as the exclusion of results that did not correspond to academic articles or book chapters on Google Scholar, reduced the initial sample to 186.

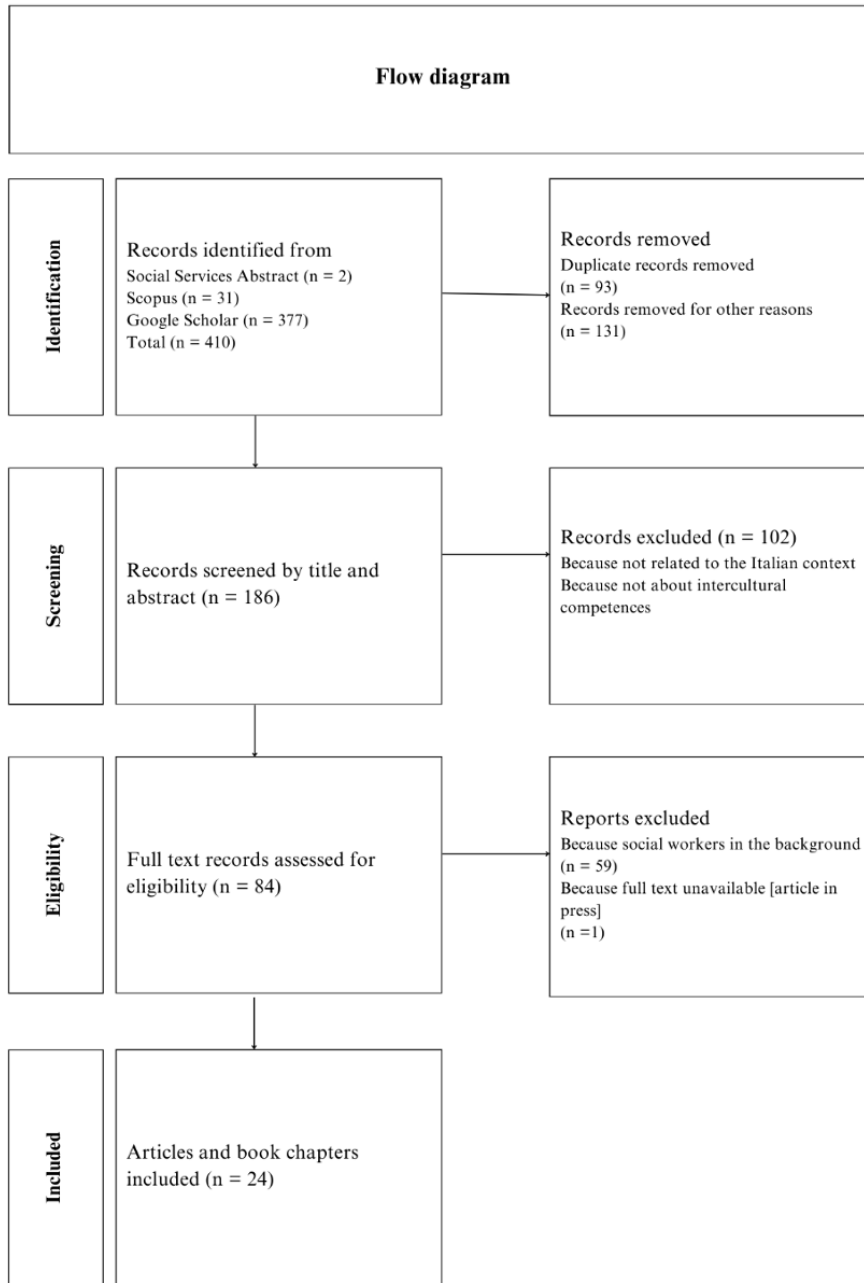
The selection process took place in two phases: screening and eligibility. Both the screening and eligibility phases were conducted by the primary researcher, with uncertain cases discussed and resolved through peerdebriefing sessions within the research team to minimize selection bias. During the screening phase, which involved reviewing titles and abstracts, 102 publications were excluded because they were not relevant to the Italian context or did not focus on intercultural competence. As a result, 84 publications were assessed for eligibility. After reading the full texts, 17 articles and 7 book chapters were included, for a total of 24. The main inclusion criterion was that the social worker be the primary subject of the discussion or, at a minimum, treated on equal footing with other professional figures. By “primary subject,” we refer to the main actor discussed by the author (e.g., case studies) or the intended audience of the theoretical contributions. As a result, in the 59 excluded publications, social workers - although clearly mentioned - remain in the background in favor of professionals who, in most cases, are school teachers or educators. The sixtieth publication was excluded due to the unavailability of the full text (article in press).

Table 1. Search Strategy

Database	Search String	No. of Records
Social Services Abstracts	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Social work*” OR “Social service*”)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY “Intercultural competenc*”) (ALL (“Ital*”) OR AF (Italy)) AND (LIMIT TO - 2008 < PUBYEAR < 2024) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE “ar”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE “ch”))	2
Scopus-Elsevier	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Social work*” OR “Social service*”)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY “Intercultural competenc*”) AND (ALL (“Ital*”) OR AF (Italy)) AND PUBYEAR > 2008 AND (LIMIT TO - 2008 < PUBYEAR < 2024) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE “ar”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE “ch”))	31
Google Scholar	WITH ALL THE WORDS “operatori sociali” “competenze interculturali” CUSTOM RANGE 2008-2024 WITH ALL THE WORDS “servizi sociali” “competenze interculturali” CUSTOM RANGE 2008-2024	136 + 241

Source: developed by the Authors (2024).

Fig.1. Flow Diagram



Source: developed by the Authors (2024) based on PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram.

Data Extraction

The following questions guided the analysis of the selected publications:

- Are social workers the primary focus of the discussion, thereby emphasizing the need to examine intercultural competence within the specificities of their professional field?
- In what types of services do they operate, and can a distinction be made between public sector social workers and Third Sector educators responsible for the management of projects?
- Within which theoretical frameworks is intercultural competence expected of them conceptualized?
- To what extent are the three core components—attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive—presented, and how is each one articulated?

To address these questions, the qualitative synthesis of the included studies followed a hybrid thematic analysis approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006).

This method allowed for the deductive application of the three core components as a preliminary coding framework, while remaining open to the inductive emergence of specific themes related to the Italian social work context. The extraction and overall analysis of the information in each article or book chapter addressing these questions were carried out using NVivo software (Sharma & Bhattarai 2022; Netaniel et al. 2024). To ensure transparency and coding reliability, the emerging nodes and categorized data were iteratively reviewed and discussed within the research team until a final consensus was reached.

Results

The results are presented in two sections. The first section provides data on the types of selected publications (case studies or theoretical contributions), whether social workers occupy a prominent or equivalent role compared to other professional figures mentioned, the services in which they are employed (services targeting migrant users are grouped under the term “reception services”; those without this specific focus under “social citizenship services”), and, finally, the profiles they assume as social workers or educators.

The second section delves into intercultural competence, examining the theoretical models in which it is situated, the specific content through which it is articulated, and the innovations this content introduces, particularly in comparison to what has been observed in studies on schoolteachers and educators in other contexts (Martorana et al. 2021).

Initial Selection of Results

Types of Publications

Of the 24 selected publications, 10 are theoretical contributions [Spinelli 2010; Ciancio 2014; Allemann-Ghionda 2015; Cima 2017a; Schirripa 2017; Cabiati 2020; Pasta 2020; Salinaro 2020; Colombo & Gilardoni 2022; Cabiati 2024], and 14 are case studies [Perrucca 2008; Cima 2017b; Alba & Foresti 2018; Pattaro 2018; Roverselli 2018; Mantovani & Manella 2019; Sanfelici 2019; Alba 2020; Gozzoli & De Leo 2020; Roverselli 2020; Di Rosa & Reich 2022; Pasta et al. 2023; Pescarmona & Gozzolino 2023; Pinna Pintor & Ricucci 2023].

This distinction goes beyond mere categorization, which is typical in systematic reviews, but it is also intended to capture possible links between scientific knowledge and experiential knowledge. Research-training projects - 4 of the 14 case studies [Perrucca 2008; Cima 2017b; Roverselli 2020; Pasta et al. 2023] - offer a unique perspective on these dynamics of exchange between “inside” and “outside” the field, due to the dual purpose at the heart of research-training itself (Nigris 2018). On the one hand, there is the need to bridge the significant gap between academic thinking and professional practice, beginning with the awareness that the former is not always informed about, or able to anticipate, variables that arise in the reality of the latter. On the other hand, there is a critique of reducing professionals in training to mere executors of principles defined by scholars. The response offered by such approaches - which challenge the authorship of knowledge - is the opportunity to enter into the uniqueness of specific contexts and investigate them based on hypotheses considered valid precisely because they are firmly grounded in the concrete problems faced by social workers (Vannini 2018).

This is the premise of the contribution by Pasta and colleagues [2023], who, through a process of reflective re-examination of daily professional practice undertaken by the research participants, gave shape to the “second-level intercultural competences”—namely, reducing prejudice, interpreting cultures, and identifying shared horizons—developed earlier within a PRIN project framework by the Research Centre on Intercultural Relations at the Catholic University of Milan (Reggio & Santerini 2014). “At the end of the research-training process, the three complex intercultural competences were articulated in the intervention contexts with refugees and asylum seekers” [Pasta et al. 2023, p. 95]¹.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian to English are the Authors' own.

Social Workers' Position in the Publications

In 20 publications, social workers are presented as the primary focus of the discussion [Perrucca 2008; Spinelli 2010; Ciancio 2014; Cima 2017a; Cima 2017b; Schirripa 2017; Alba & Foresti 2018; Pattaro 2018; Roverselli 2018; Mantovani & Manella 2019; Sanfelici 2019; Alba 2020; Cabiati 2020; Gozzoli & De Leo 2020; Salinaro 2020; Di Rosa & Reich 2022; Pasta 2020; Pasta et al. 2023; Pinna Pintor & Ricucci 2023; Cabiati 2024], compared to the remaining 4 in which the authors simultaneously focus on other professional figures such as schoolteachers and educators [Allemann-Ghionda 2015; Colombo & Gilardoni 2022; Roverselli 2020; Pescarmona & Gozzelino 2023].

6 authors in the first group explicitly justify the decision to focus on a single professional figure when addressing the issue of intercultural competence. They highlight the profession's specificity, which lies in the high level of complexity generated by the combination of 3 factors.

The first factor is time. "This is a profession practiced in contexts marked by the provisional and precarious nature of beneficiaries' life trajectories" [Pasta et al. 2023, p. 100], which requires social workers to act promptly. On one hand, the pressure to act is linked to objective factors such as the rapid evolution of legal statuses and regulations for asylum seekers, or the needs arising from sensitive life stages - such as early childhood among the children of economic migrants with limited informal support networks. On the other hand, social workers are keenly aware of the psychological burden that waiting places on their beneficiaries, and of the consequences that can result from prolonged periods of "empty" time (Rotter 2016; Crawley & Fynn Bruey 2022). The second factor is the multiplicity of actors involved. Relationships are never simply one-to-one between worker and beneficiary, since the worker also interfaces with the organizational structure of services - an environment that tends to favor standardization over individualization. In the best-case scenario, "social workers end up constructing their professionalism in the field, day by day, having to mediate among multiple cultural logics: their own, those of the users, and those of the institution in which they work" [Pattaro 2018, p. 79]. In the worst-case scenario, "discretionary power becomes a defensive mechanism rather than a tool for action, reflecting an inability to navigate between the pressures of institutional mandates and the frustrations caused by a lack of means to respond to users' needs" [Salinaro 2020, pp. 19-20; Saruis 2008, pp. 13-14]. The third and final factor is the current political context. "In a time of economic crisis, in which demand for welfare is broadly and increasingly growing while available resources are being cut, the issue of competition for access - along with the widespread public narrative in some circles that depicts immigrants as excessive and 'illegitimate' users of welfare (Ambrosini 2017) - adds a further layer of difficulty to the work of professionals" [Pattaro 2018, p. 81]. Being labeled

as “friends of migrants” can further complicate the adherence to the professional mandate, which involves a commitment to anti-oppressive and social justice practices [Di Rosa & Reich 2022]. It is in this context that “media-educational competences (...) are essential for completing second-generation intercultural competences, especially for social workers who engage with migrants, minorities, and groups potentially targeted as scapegoats” [Pasta 2020, p. 105]. It is worth noting that in this latter reflection, the specificity of the profession - in terms of its direct involvement in addressing the broader societal tensions - is highlighted through the use of the term “second-generation intercultural competences”. This expression parallels the concept of “second-level intercultural competences” used by the Research Centre on Intercultural Relations at the Catholic University of Milan [Pasta et al. 2023], as discussed in Section 3.1. The implication seems to be that the competences expected of the general public are insufficient and should instead serve as a starting point for developing more context-specific competences.

Social Workers’ Professional Sector

Of the 20 publications that focus on social workers as the central subject of the discussion, 10 refer to social workers who work in reception services [Cima 2017b, p. 22; Schirripa 2017, p. 15; Roverselli 2018, p. 34; Alba 2020, p. 45; Gozzoli & De Leo 2020, p. 66; Salinaro 2020, p. 77; Pasta 2020, p. 88; Di Rosa & Reich 2022, p. 99; Pasta et al. 2023, p. 110; Pinna Pintor & Ricucci 2023, p. 121], while 10 refer to social workers who work in social citizenship services [Perrucca 2008, p. 12; Spinelli 2010, p. 23; Ciancio 2014, p. 34; Cima 2017a, p. 45; Alba & Foresti 2018, p. 56; Pattaro 2018, p. 67; Mantovani & Manella 2019, p. 78; Sanfelici 2019, p. 89; Cabiati 2020, p. 90; Cabiati 2024, p. 101], according to the classification introduced in Section 2.4. This distinction between the two sectors of intervention is suggested because it appears to reflect the existence of different interpretations of the concept of culture or perhaps of cultural identity itself.

Where culture is understood in a narrow sense as a set of values, beliefs, norms, languages, and behaviors shared by a people and passed down from one generation to the next (Taylor 1871, p. 12)—and therefore cultural identities are national or ethnic—intercultural competence appears to be mainly useful in dialogue with immigrants, and until they are able to navigate the host society’s system of meaning with sufficient ease. In other words, intercultural competence of reception workers is framed as complementing the bicultural competence of individuals with a migratory background (Byram 2003). However, when culture is considered in a broader sense—that is, identities are not solely determined by geography—the intercultural competence of social workers retains its “bridge” function even in services not specifically aimed at users with a migratory background: “Intercultural competence

represents a set of knowledge and skills to be used in all complex situations” [Roverselli 2020, p. 85]. In the publications that look beyond the reception sector, it is also not uncommon to find explicit or implicit references to intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1989, p. 12; Davis 2008, p. 24; Marsiglia & Kulis 2015, p. 35; Bubar et al. 2016, p. 46), in its analytical value, prior to its political implications. As Ciancio puts it, “culture can relate to nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual preferences, religion, and age of people, and this also applies to immigrants” [Ciancio 2014, p. 3]. The need for “greater attention to intracultural diversity as well as between the cultures that immigrants bring” [Spinelli 2010, p. 57] soon becomes attention to “super-diversity” (Vertovec 2007, p. 68; Meissner 2015, p. 79; Geldof 2016, p. 80), another concept evoked in more than one of the publications in question. “Superdiversity highlights the need for policy-makers and public service practitioners to recognize new conditions created by the concurrent characteristics of global migration and population change (Phillimore 2014, p. 91). At an operational level, this means that the population who accesses the service is different and more complex compared to the past” [Gozzoli & De Leo 2020, p. 3].

Social Workers’ Profile

The term “*operatori sociali*” was used as a keyword in the database search to identify all publications addressing intercultural competence within Italian social services. Its use as an umbrella term is supported by the publications themselves, which in some cases explicitly state—or clearly imply—whether they focus more specifically on social workers (7 publications: [Perrucca 2008; Pattaro 2018; Sanfelici 2019; Cabiati 2020; Di Rosa & Reich 2022; Pinna Pintor & Ricucci 2023; Cabiati 2024]) or on educators (11 publications: [Spinelli 2010; Schirripa 2017; Alba & Foresti 2018; Roverselli 2018; Alba 2020; Gozzoli & De Leo 2020; Pasta 2020; Roverselli 2020; Salinaro 2020; Pasta et al. 2023; Pescarmona & Gozzolino 2023]).

This distinction is significant because, although the two professional roles share operational settings and user populations, their responsibilities differ and the practical possibility of coordinating their complementary functions is becoming increasingly constrained, despite formal insistence on professional integration and inter-agency collaboration (Fabbri 2006; Ferrario 2009; Anconelli & Franzoni, 2021). This is due not only to the disappearance of a shared overarching organizational structure—social workers are now typically public employees, while educators are generally employed by cooperatives—but also to the increasing time pressure. The outsourcing of service management to the Third Sector, initiated by the Social Assistance Reform in 2000, along with the fluctuating availability of resources, has gradually led to a view of the social worker’s role increasingly oriented toward performance and service delivery (Bifulco 2015). The project-oriented dimension and the

development of supportive relationships that enhance beneficiaries' capacities appear increasingly residual and marginal in the day-to-day reality of the profession (Bertotti 2014, 2016).

Although the workload for educators has also increased overall, for them, continuity, depth, and non-standardization in their relationships with users remain central. Their interventions unfold over time, becoming rooted in people's life contexts, as is well expressed by the term "accompaniment" (Brandani & Masciadri 2005). This is particularly true in cases of mandated interventions - such as home-based educational services or residential placements - which educators do not initiate, but in which their presence becomes essential to help individuals make sense of the process and face its implications.

In relation to intercultural competence, both the degree of interaction with users and the degree of conflict inherent in the role can have a significant impact (Premoli et al. 2012). Educators tend to have more opportunities to refine an intercultural sensitivity based on situated observation and prolonged listening. Social workers, by contrast, have more limited access to these tools and must be careful to distinguish between misunderstandings and tensions stemming from cultural differences - i.e., different attributions of meaning to the matter at hand - and those arising from their institutional mandate, which, not coincidentally, Folgheraiter defines as "the difficult art of providing citizens with the services that society decides to make available through political decisions" (2007, p. 7).

Second Selection of Publications

Type of Publications

Of the total number of publications, 7 explicitly mention a theoretical model of intercultural competence, and 1 cites two models. The model by Bennett (1986, 2009) is referenced four times [Allemann-Ghionda 2015; Schirripa 2017; Sanfelici 2019; Cabiati 2020]. According to the classification by Spitzberg & Changnon (2009), this model falls under the category of developmental models because of the importance it assigns to the temporal dimension of interaction and the identification of stages through which intercultural competence is presumed to develop. Specifically, each stage along Bennett's continuum represents a different level of complexity in how individuals perceive and organize cultural differences. The first three stages, grouped as "ethnocentric," are: denial, defense, and minimization. The final three stages, called "ethnorelative", are: acceptance, adaptation, and integration.

In her case study, Sanfelici not only cites Bennett's model, but applies it directly, "positioning" the interviewed social workers along the scale based on their reactions to a stimulus story: "The interview aimed to explore how the meanings attributed to the concepts of equality and difference are constructed in the discursive practices of social workers, and how professionals consider cultural differences within the helping process" [2019, p. 1]. Cabiati also references the model, though critically, in a theoretical reflection in which she classifies helping professionals' operational styles according to ethnocentric and cultural relativist approaches. "Through their operational style, a helping professional represents not only their professional mandate externally but also the cognitive and emotional world they carry within themselves" [2020, p. 91]. While her description of "ethnocentric styles" (*achromatic, comparative and competitive, categorizing, or knowledge-centric*) partly overlaps with Bennett's first three stages, her account of "relativist styles" diverges. The *optimistic-exoticist, permissive-renunciatory, and culturalizing-justificatory* styles—though opposed to the former—still promote a rigid and inaccessible idea of culture and risk diminishing professional reflexivity.

The author therefore invites us to understand the endpoint of the process of acquiring intercultural competence not as reaching the ethnorelative pole, but as attaining a form of balance. A balance that is not merely a hybrid of the two approaches: "The aim is not to replicate a multi-paradigmatic framework already attempted, with considerable difficulty, in other disciplines, particularly in the field of intercultural communication (Bennett 2002). From a certain perspective, we could accept a degree of ethnocentrism in a social worker. They should be ethnocentric in the sense of being firmly grounded in the methodology and principles of their professional culture, unable to distance themselves from them—especially in the face of non-negotiable issues. At the same time, they must be relativist, that is, incapable of imagining a 'cultural truth about people' in their absence. Only under these conditions can we say that the relational approach is situated midway between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism" [Cabiati 2020, p. 107].

Three publications [Roverselli 2018; Colombo & Gilardoni 2022; Pasta et al. 2023] mention Deardorff's model (2006), which, according to Spitzberg & Changnon (2009), shares features of both causal process models—which highlight recurring relationships among the components of intercultural competence - and co-orientational models - which focus on the outcomes of applying it. In Deardorff's pyramid framework, the attitudinal or motivational component (*savoir être*), tied to the emotional sphere, is a prerequisite for the cognitive (*savoir*) and behavioral (*savoir faire*) components, which relate to intellectual and action domains respectively. Together, these components are thought to generate both internal outcomes - adaptability, flex-

ibility, decentered perspective, empathy - and external outcomes - effective and appropriate behaviors and communication in intercultural interactions. Unlike Bennett's model, Deardorff's model is adopted fully. However, as explored in Section 4.2, some authors criticize what it omits: other actors who indirectly shape the social worker-beneficiary relationship [Cima 2017b; Mantovani & Manella 2019; Gozzoli & De Leo 2020; Pinna Pintor & Ricucci 2023]. None of its dimensions explicitly encourages individuals to reflect on how the organizational, institutional, or societal system in which they operate either supports or hinders expected outcomes.

Byram's model (1997, 2003), promoted by the Council of Europe, is mentioned only by Pattaro [2018]. Like Deardorff's, it falls under the category of causal process models.

Lastly, one publication [Alba 2020] refers to Portera's model (2013, 2019), which fits within the adaptational models. These partially respond to the critique that systemic factors influencing individuals' ability to fully develop and activate their attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive resources are often overlooked. Drawing from Kim's model (1998), Portera highlights the dialectic between the individual and collective dimensions of intercultural competence. Alba illustrates this reciprocal influence as follows: "Around the area [of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors], in a circular and interactive way, lies the internal system composed of empathic and practice-based communities (Wenger 2006), both physical and symbolic communities where bonds of care and trust are formed. The two empirical investigations, in addition to offering an initial overview of intercultural competence of professionals working in migrant reception, revealed the positive practices that these communities are capable of generating. Synthesizing the data, a clear awareness emerges among practitioners of their role as promoters of new spaces in which genuine processes of migrant inclusion can take place" [2020, pp. 59-60].

Articulation of the Components of Intercultural Competence

The aim of this section is to examine how the three components of intercultural competence are articulated in the selected publications, and to identify any innovations compared to the general frameworks outlined by the authors of the aforementioned models and to the more context-specific insights developed by other researchers in relation to educational professionals in school settings.

Regarding the attitudinal or motivational component, there is a general adherence to the content outlined by Deardorff: respect, openness, and curiosity toward cultural diversity are present across both theoretical contributions and case studies. A minority of authors go further in clarifying this content by linking it to the concepts of cultural humility (Tervalon &

Murray-García 1998; Fisher-Borne et al. 2015; Gottlieb 2020) and tolerance of ambiguity. Cabiati speaks of an ethical relationship with difference, which means accepting that differences are infinite and cannot be fully known [2020, p. 37]. Di Rosa and Reich similarly advocate for the right of identities to remain elusive, evoking Glissant's right to opacity (2007) and Delgado's right to indifference (2007) [2022, p. 256]. Such awareness helps avoid "the illusion of knowing the Other" [Cima 2017b, p. 127], and instead fosters the ability "to tolerate the discomfort of not knowing" [Cabiati 2020, p. 38], patiently working to build spaces of proximity and mutual recognition. Patience - "giving time and having time" - is, according to Alba, a disposition directed not only toward the other but also toward oneself [2020, p. 56].

Similarly oriented toward both self and others is listening, the most frequently cited articulation of the behavioral component. Alba refers to "active listening" [2020, p. 58]; Pattaro to "genuine listening" [2018, p. 234]; Cabiati to "attentive and critical listening" [2020, p. 108]; Cima to "listening deeply" [2017b, p. 222]; and Pescarmona and Gozzelino to "listening directly" [2023, p. 46]. Silence, too, should be heard: "because it can prove to be a resource, offering depth and reflection, but also signaling emotional, social, cognitive, or psychological discomfort and allowing us to glimpse hidden vulnerabilities. In this sense, listening to the other's silences also enables one to embrace their own silences in constructive and existential terms" [Salinaro 2020, p. 21]. Social workers should listen to service users, the experts by experience (Stevens & Tanner 2006; Preston-Shoot 2007; McLaughlin 2009), "in order to be guided by them in understanding which aspects of their social and cultural lives matter most to them" [Cabiati 2020, p. 108].

Listening to oneself is also an essential part of the "process of decentering" [Spinelli 2010; Schirripa 2017; Pattaro 2018; Alba 2020; Roverselli 2020; Colombo & Gilardoni 2022], a concept referring to the ability to suspend judgment of emergent cultural elements, to become aware of one's own cultural reference points, and not to prioritize them when trying to understand the Other (Cattaneo & Dal Verme 2009). Becoming aware of one's counter-attitudes toward interlocutors—to avoid these becoming distorting filters—requires "constant attention to one's inner states" [Alba & Foresti 2018, p. 108], particularly those tied to the emotional experiences typically associated with culture shock (disorientation, frustration, defiance, or even positive wonder) [Cabiati 2020; Pasta et al. 2023]. Only by attending to these emotions, rather than suppressing them under the mistaken belief they can be eliminated, can professionals begin to identify their own sensitive zones and, through these, uncover their inner guiding images: mental representations "locked deep within our personalities, shaped by sensations and personal memories, influenced by cultural references (Chombart de Lauwe 1964)" [Cabiati 2020, p. 142]. In the same direction—not of avoidance but,

conversely, of recognition and responsibility—lies the capacity for conflict management, highlighted in a small body of literature as the final articulation of the behavioral dimension [Salinaro 2020; Roverselli 2020; Pasta et al. 2023; Cima 2017b]. This capacity is not so much about synthesizing opposing positions or restoring neutrality, but about safeguarding relationships and maintaining trust between parties despite ongoing tensions.

The cognitive component is where there is the greatest disagreement between case studies and theoretical contributions, particularly regarding its relative importance in comparison to the other two components of intercultural competence. In the case studies—that is, in the accounts of social workers interviewed—it is generally the most elaborated component. In contrast, in the theoretical contributions, academics tend to distribute their attention more evenly among the three components. “As partially revealed by other research, social workers increasingly feel the need to acquire intercultural competences. However, when analyzing in detail the specific training needs they express, a sort of dichotomy emerges between those [21 responses] who remain convinced that learning the specifics of a particular culture can develop a kind of competence for working with individuals from different backgrounds, and can almost in itself serve as a vehicle for integration, and those [6 responses] who instead problematize the desired intercultural training, linking it also to relational aspects, deeper self-knowledge, and the need for a multidisciplinary approach” [Pattaro 2018, p. 273]. However, the biggest divide lies in how this component is conceptualized. In the case studies, knowledge is primarily associated with linguistic and anthropological knowledge. It is about becoming familiar with the characteristics of the ethnic or national groups most represented in the area where the work takes place. Roverselli writes: “The third issue [of the research conducted] dealt with the training of social workers. Aware that education is a lifelong process, these individuals admit to feeling not only trained but also ‘untrained’ by their professional experience: they almost acknowledge burnout when they appreciate the freshness and enthusiasm of new colleagues entering the field. They express a clear need for training, do not consider it at all unnecessary, and would like to know more about the culture and backgrounds of their guests” [2020, p. 88]. This is echoed in the interview excerpt cited by Mantovani and Manella: “Too little is known about the cultural aspects of these families and their motivations. For instance, why are Eastern European women often alone and their children join them later? Why do North African fathers not consider witnessed violence a risk factor, and why does being a violent husband and father not necessarily imply being a dysfunctional father? Why are Pakistani and Indian women often alone, isolated, and not integrated?” [2019, p. 93]. According to the authors of the theoretical contributions, however, the knowledge to be enhanced is not only the

“culture-specific knowledge” (Kim 2009), but also “historical knowledge regarding the violence of European conquests and global domination” [Colombo & Gilardoni 2022, p. 152]. This knowledge should be gained through “a displaced gaze” [Cima 2017b, p. 129], challenging “the notion of ‘one truth’ (Ngozi Adichie 2009)” [Di Rosa & Reich 2022, p. 256], because only by opening oneself to multiple narratives can both the past and present be revealed in a different light: intertwined. Intertwined at the structural level where ‘coloniality,’ theorized by Quijano (2000) [Cima 2017a] and Grosfoguel (2017) [Pescarmona & Gozzelino 2023], continues to operate in the form of institutional racism [Cabiati 2020; Colombo & Gilardoni 2022], which refers to the reproduction of discrimination through policies, norms, and administrative practices. These elements are also intertwined at the individual level, where, often unconsciously, “we fail to give the same weight to words expressed with difficulty due to lack of competence in the country’s language, to words from a non-Western cosmogony, and to words spoken by black bodies, marginalized from social and economic life” [Cima 2017b, p. 222]. Social workers are therefore encouraged to engage with postcolonial studies of Indian origin (Said 1978; Spivak 1990; Mohanty 1991) [Pescarmona & Gozzelino 2023], with decolonial thought and pedagogies developed in Latin America (Freire 1970; Quijano 1992; Mignolo 1995; Walsh 2009) and Africa (Fanon 1961; Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986; Mbembe 2001) [Cima 2017b], and with Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw 1989; Bell 1992; Delgado 2001) [Cabiati 2020], in order to develop the habit of asking the question: “When is difference simply different and when is it unfair?” [Di Rosa & Reich 2022, p. 259]. However, a group of authors argues that merely addressing inequality in the interventions they are responsible for is not sufficient. Professionals should do their part in instigating change at the macro level. A “disposition to get involved” [Roverselli 2020, p. 85] is needed to actively promote actions aimed at removing obstacles that risk undermining the fundamental rights of service users on a daily basis [Salinaro 2020, p. 16]. While not underestimating the difficulties of the situation, Cabiati reminds us that tools already exist that can be mobilized: “By containing expectations of ‘magical resolution’ and starting from one’s own concerns or dissatisfaction, a social worker can understand which organizational resources and limits strengthen or inhibit the practice of non-discriminatory operations, criticize the actions of the organization they belong to, and then help others to do the same, each from their own function” [2020, p. 233]. Likewise, “professionals can draw on the political nature of social work, taking to the streets” - or to digital spaces, considering the media literacy skills emphasized by Pasta [2020] - “and fight for the rights of the people they help, as suggested internationally by Radical Social Work or Critical Social Work (...). Advocacy can be understood as

a process aimed at representing the viewpoint of a person and supporting them in acquiring their rights” [Cabiati 2020, pp. 235–236].

Ways of Acquiring Intercultural Competence

Lastly, a recurring theme in many of the selected publications is the exploration of how intercultural competence can be acquired. While Bennett’s model is cited only four times, all authors agree on the learned and evolving nature of these competences. But what, precisely, are the experiences considered most appropriate for their gradual assimilation by social workers?

In this regard, the responses recorded in the case studies addressing this issue show an internal divergence. On one side, some social workers emphasize the importance of “being immersed in diversity” [Roverselli 2018], referring to the everyday reality of their profession. This does not imply, however, that their work should be unsupported; on the contrary, the idea is that already available tools—such as supervision—can be effective when properly implemented”. In fact, not only did the training contribute to making the operator feel culturally competent, but the work experience was also equally significant. For this reason, many practitioners did not perceive the need to deepen the beliefs and values of migrants related to the service, because of their previous experience in the field. These findings suggested that ‘learning in action’ (Schön 1983) with adequate supervision and feedback could also be a valuable teaching tool” [Pinna Pintor & Ricucci 2023, p. 28].

On the other hand, there are professionals who advocate for greater investment in training. This second, larger group aligns with the theoretical contributions and calls for moving beyond traditional lecture-based and overly conceptual training formats, starting from the awareness that otherwise, “the risk is to have a wealth of knowledge, but not know how to put it into practice” [Gozzoli & De Leo 2020, p. 6].

“There is a demand for learning experiences that reconcile theory with practice and foster meaningful, outcome-oriented discussions. Accordingly, seminar or workshop formats are recommended, in which social workers are encouraged to draw on the expertise of colleagues working with migrants, as well as the lived experiences of migrants themselves” [Pattaro 2018, p. 270]. Among the active and collaborative methods suggested by the authors are role-playing [Ciancio 2014], discussions of literary and cinematic works from diverse cultural backgrounds [Cima 2017b], and the analysis of “problem situations” based on Cohen-Emerique’s (1984, 2011, 2017) perspective on cultural shock [Cabiati 2020; Pasta et al. 2023]. The premise of this last methodology, specifically designed for social workers and international cooperation, is precisely the critique of training that remains sterile (Cohen-Emerique 1993). As a result, social workers are offered the opportunity to reflect on cultural shocks from their own experiences, which are shared in

the non-judgmental space of the training group. In other words, it involves training to decenter with the help of others, so that one can later adopt an external perspective on oneself independently.

Limitations of the Study

Before concluding, it is worth highlighting two main limitations of this systematic literature review, even if they are less immediately apparent. The obvious limitations lie in the consideration of only three databases, the screening of only articles and book chapters, and the fact that the search was conducted from 2008 onwards, even though it is well known that scientific research on interculturalism predates the adoption of the interculturalist philosophy by the Council of Europe's member states. The first limitation to point out concerns the not always consistent relationship between the language of the publications and the geographical context they address. This is evident in the databases—Social Services Abstracts and Scopus-Elsevier—whose search interface is set to English, requiring that at least the titles and abstracts of publications be in English. Including “Italy” as a keyword or using it as the authors' country of affiliation was deemed the most appropriate strategy, though it remains only a partial solution. Conversely, on Google Scholar, the search was conducted exclusively in Italian, because it is not possible to refine queries to detect keywords only in titles and abstracts. Applying the same strategy used in the other two databases would have produced an unmanageably large number of results. This set would likely have inflated the number of publications not truly relevant to the national context, failed to show many of those that were ultimately analyzed, but might also have captured others that are pertinent to this study.

The second limitation to focus on is the repetition of some authors (namely 5 specifically) in the 24 selected publications. This does not present a problem when these authors contribute to two distinct case studies, given the uniqueness of each context investigated, or in a case study and a theoretical reflection, given the different nature of the research type. However, it could become an issue when two theoretical contributions are involved, due to the repetition of content, although any thesis is subject to revisions, clarifications, or further expansions incorporating previously overlooked aspects.

Conclusion

This paper set out to provide an overview of intercultural competence as a concept and in its practical articulations in the Italian context of social services. To this end, a systematic literature review method was adopted,

leading to the analysis of 17 articles and 7 book chapters, published between 2008 and May 2024.

However, the first significant finding precedes the thematization of the selected publications and concerns the growing interest in intercultural competence within social services in recent years. In fact, 80% of the publications are concentrated in the second half of the considered time frame (2017-2024). The effort to explore the topic encompasses both empirical and theoretical research. The authors examine the representations held by field experts, or by themselves during their own time as social workers, with regard to the specific characteristics of the helping profession - such as limited time, the plurality of actors involved, and the prevailing public hostility towards migration.

However, the commitment extended beyond that stage. In seeking to articulate the three components of intercultural competence, several authors highlight the problematic nature of the individualistic approach attributed to it by the Council of Europe and European institutions. In fact, structural factors hinder individuals' ability to follow the path - including that modeled by Bennett - which aims to integrate cultural differences into an ethnorelative view or, as Cabiati [2020, p. 37] suggests, a *critical ethnocentrism* as conceptualized by De Martino (1977). Hence, attention was drawn to the responsibility of organizations: they should strengthen the tools they already have, such as supervision, or invest in tailored training, ideally structured horizontally to foster peer comparison and include practical exercises focusing on introspective listening. All this is relevant not only for employees who engage with migrant populations (first and second reception), but also for those who work in services related to the "normal" everyday life of the beneficiaries. While it is true that this group increasingly includes individuals with a migrant background, the reason also lies in the broad definition suggested for the concept of culture, as well as the intersection of multiple identities, which should be seen as the result of such intersections.

The ethnorelative view - or critical ethnocentrism, as it may be termed - consists of adopting a posture aware of the limitations of one's own judgment and, most importantly, does not forget its historical roots steeped in oppression. Restoring multidimensionality to the history of the "West" by rereading it from different perspectives is the major element of novelty found when delving into the content of the selected publications. Knowledge, which falls within the intellectual dimension of intercultural competence, should therefore not be limited to information about other cultures and one's own, but should extend to the times and places where these cultures have already intertwined. This would make individuals more receptive to the sense of "us" versus "them," which is embedded in collective memories and often resurfaces in encounters between two groups (Abdallah-Pretceille

1986); as well as to the subtle processes through which certain differences are transformed into inequalities. It is through advocacy - understood as “amplifying” the political voices of those who are less heard due to a lack of representation - that, for some authors, the final and unique articulation of intercultural competence within social services emerges.

Authors Contributions.

The data collection and conceptual framework of this article are the result of a collaborative effort by all three authors. Specifically, Chiara Cocchi authored sections 3, 4; Francesca Lagomarsino authored sections 1, 6; and Nadia Rania authored sections 2, 5.

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