



ROLE OF CULTURAL MEDIATOR IN INTEGRATION PROCESS

ALEXANDROS MINOTAKIS

Interaction and vulnerability

- ▶ The interaction of different cultures is an integral part of contemporary societies and interconnected global economies.
- ▶ However, cultural interaction does not develop in an egalitarian setting nor are protected all the social groups involved.
- ▶ New forms of vulnerability arise as persons migrate either in groups or alone.
- ▶ In the case of refugees, a host-dominant culture comes into contact with social groups that may have been forced to migrate, may have experience traumatic events
- ▶ What arises is a need to overcome
- ▶ A) naïve accounts on globalization that overlook social contexts of inequality, exploitation and conflict
- ▶ B) Approaches that foster assimilation, treating refugee populations as tabula rasa

Mediation instead of assimilation

- ▶ Any demand that refugees and ethnic minorities abandon their culture, raises barriers and hinders the integration within a new cultural context (McAllum, 2020: 367).
- ▶ Maintenance of a cultural heritage, the continuation of cultural practices (rituals, customs, commemorations) is not a luxury afforded to vulnerable social groups but an important aspect of their resilience and their ability to cope with traumatic experiences (Hussain & Bhushan, 2011).
- ▶ Cultural mediation highlights the importance of cultural fusion as a way to overcome the notion of assimilation/acculturation.
- ▶ Cultural fusion, in that sense, “represents this blending of learning new behaviors/traits (acculturation) and maintaining old behaviors/traits” (Croucher & Kramer, 2017: 102)
- ▶ The aim of cultural fusion through cultural mediation is to balance out power asymmetries and achieve a mutual understanding and transformation of the two (or more) cultures and social groups that co-exist in a given setting.

A precarious in-between position

- ▶ Translators Without Borders, define cultural mediator as “a person who facilitates mutual understanding between a person or a group of people, the migrant/refugee population for example, and a caregiver, a doctor for example, by interpreting, considering cultural elements. S/he can give advice to both parties regarding appropriate cultural behaviors” (2017: 4).
- ▶ Cultural mediators are persons and institutions that take up the task of mediating between interacting cultures.
- ▶ *Mediators need to position themselves as intercultural individuals that occupy a hybrid third place while drawing perspectives from all the interacting cultures.* This in-between position, that a cultural mediator attempts to achieve demands a specific skill set and intercultural knowledge.
- ▶ The cultural mediator bears of the burden of transforming his/herself in that “liminal persona” which mediates cultural differences and different perspectives (Wilkinson, 2012: 300). This “in between” position is only feasible when a certain set skill has been acquired and developed

Towards professionalization

- ▶ As cultural mediation refers to a wide range of activities, it is exercised by professionals and nonprofessionals. The thousands of volunteers in refugee camps during the refugee crisis of 2015 are a characteristic example of volunteers cultural mediators. In the case of refugee flows, mediators can also emerge from the refugee population or from immigrants who have already spent time in the host country.
- ▶ There is a prevailing tendency towards professionalization and the need for certified professionals on the field of cultural mediation has increased the past decade. Cultural mediation is a demanding task, involving a number of skills as well as specific knowledge of foreign languages and cultural backgrounds.
- ▶ Unfortunately, in a number of European countries, there has been no official/legal recognition of cultural mediation as a profession. However, in France and Italy, cultural mediation has been recognized as a profession and state authorities have undertaken the task to offer specialized courses that qualify someone as a cultural mediator.

Fields of cultural mediation

- ▶ Humanitarian aid. A cultural mediator can guide the humanitarian efforts by providing information and mediating between the officials and the affected population. In that way needs and problems are better assessed.
- ▶ Education — especially important when refugee children enter an education system which is built around the culture of the host population.
- ▶ Interpretation which always entails a cultural aspect. In the process of interpretation, an intercultural speaker is not tasked only with conveying information but informing both sides on the context within which information is situated.
- ▶ Cultural policy development. State institutions as well as NGOs often attempt to assist the integration of refugees by promoting cultural events that will help refugees familiarize themselves with the culture of the native population. While the importance of such enterprises is undisputed, the guidance of a cultural mediator is necessary as cultural mediators embody the ideals and goals of cultural fusion.
- ▶ Integration in the labour market. Cultural mediators assist refugees entering the job market in a foreign country, helping them with preparing CVs and applications. Additionally, cultural mediators can help the official institutions to understand the economic needs and problems of the refugee population and prepare a welfare response that corresponds to their specific condition.
- ▶ Health services. Cultural differences are also involved in the way non-Westerners and Western medicine interact. Research focused on PTSD and Posttraumatic growth among refugees highlighted the importance of retaining connection with culture in overcoming a traumatic experience (Johnson, Thompson & Downs, 2009)
- ▶ Social movement-civil society institutions

Skills and attitudes of cultural mediators

- ▶ Evidently, knowledge of foreign language is, one of the most important skills of the cultural mediator. Vulnerable social groups often tend to express themselves in their own language in order to convey complex messages about their needs.
- ▶ Byram draws a comparison between intercultural competence and the process of learning a new language. Learning the fundamental grammar rules, expanding the vocabulary etc., are all necessary steps in that process. However, really mastering a foreign language should place emphasis on *“the ability to use a language not only with correct application of knowledge of its grammar but also in socially appropriate ways...with ‘intercultural competence’”* (Byram, 2012:88).
- ▶ The intercultural mediator is not simply a native speaker of two or more languages but a person with a wide variety of skills that enable her/him to adapt in a number of different settings. As Wilkinson notes, intercultural competence (2012: 301), “does not equate to learned knowledge about a specific culture but rather to a general set of skills that enable the learner to interact with new people from other contexts”.
- ▶ The “liminal persona” of the cultural mediator needs to understand other cultures and relate their content as well as self-reflexively analyzing one’s own culture. Specific skills as well as a certain mentality and worldview are necessary in this process.
- ▶ However, that does not exclude anyone from becoming a cultural mediator. *On the contrary, the necessary skills can and should be provided from both formal and non-formal institutions.*

Communication skills in cultural

mediation

Widdah, Signitzer & Olson (1998: 52-55) argue that communicators should take into consideration four different variables to achieve a goal:

- ▶ The first one is the social perspective. Second, an understanding of the criteria that set the relation between the communicator and the receiver: the ability to recognize how the receiver thinks of the communicator. Third, the awareness of a case, which depends on the degree in which the communicator recognizes what must be transmitted under the existing conditions. Finally, empathy is the last variable, but the most important according to the same authors. It refers to a person's ability to recognize and understand how another person interprets the world and to accept the latter's way of thinking without departing from the former's view of reality.
- ▶ Byram (2012: 94-95) note the following specific communication skills necessary for cultural mediation:
- ▶ Acknowledging the identities of others: noticing how others have different identities and accepting their values and insights.
- ▶ Respecting otherness: showing curiosity about others and being willing to question what is usually taken for granted and viewed as 'normal'.
- ▶ Having empathy: being able to take someone else's perspective, to imagine their thoughts and feelings.
- ▶ Being sensitive to ways of communicating: recognising different ways of speaking and other forms of communication that exist in other languages or other ways of using the same language.
- ▶ Identifying positive and negative emotions and relating them to attitudes and knowledge

Strategies for cultural mediation in assist of refugees

- ▶ Benevolent intentions, empathy, a feeling of solidarity, are all important aspects. However, the above-mentioned qualities are necessary but not sufficient.
- ▶ Research has highlighted the tendency within volunteer cultural mediators in refugee camps to position themselves as purveyors of the host culture values and practices (Florian et al., 2019), exhibiting in that way a paternalistic attitude. McCallum in her research (2020) studied the different ways that volunteers face the challenge of cultural fusion. A narrative of authority and responsibility arose, as they felt that they were responsible for teaching the refugees how they should act in the new environment of the host culture (McCallum, 2020:379). What is manifested in that case as well, is an implicit belief that refugees, in order to be integrated and accepted, should abandon their own culture.
- ▶ This tendency is not restricted among nonprofessional cultural mediators, as research has shown similar approaches expressed by state officials that found unacceptable the habit of Afghan refugees to sit on the floor while eating (Nawyn, 2010: 158).
- ▶ On the other hand, in a conflict between refugees and Danish authorities regarding the upbringing of children, volunteers mediated between the refugees and the government, considering the cultural differences that frame the dispute. Functioning as cultural mediators, they maintained a double loyalty, advocating for refugee rights and adherence to the law. In that way, they achieved a wide recognition within the refugee community which facilitated their tasks as cultural mediators (Fehsenfels & Levinsen, 2019: 430).
- ▶ Understanding the opportunities and the pitfalls of the state's policies, navigating within those boundaries, or even challenging them are important aspects of a cultural mediation strategy for refugees.
- ▶ Fehsenfels & Levinsen (2019:431-432) note the importance of the "watchdog role" that cultural mediators may have to assume, by facilitating the co-operation between refugee population and civic employees and ensuring that the state officials respect the rights of the refugees.

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