



## Multilingual communication: the role of gaze, physical contact, and time perception and organization in intercultural interactions

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years Italy has become one of the primary recipients of immigration in Europe (Eurostat statistics online<sup>1</sup>), and has become a multilingual and multicultural society. Yet, this phenomenon is rather new, and it is often met with hostility. At a national level, programs are set up to promote the inclusion and integration of the 'new Italians' in the social and cultural scene. These programs tend to prioritise linguistic and cultural communication, while, in general, less attention is given to non-verbal elements and how their culturally determined interpretation affects social interactions. However, it is well-known that non-verbal language plays a major role in human communication, and that, to a large extent, its interpretation is framed by culture (though speakers may not be fully aware of its uses and meanings) (Hall 1959; Hofstede 1980; Clyne 1987; Müller et al. 2014). Thus, in intercultural encounters differences in non-verbal codes may be a source for misunderstandings and stereotypes and, by affecting speakers' perception of the 'other', may hinder inclusion and integration. The need is felt for a greater understanding of the dynamics of intercultural non-verbal communication.

This paper investigates how intercultural differences in the use and interpretation of gaze, physical contact, and time can affect interactions between migrants and social workers. The data are drawn from responses to focus groups and online questionnaires submitted by social workers working in northern Italy and supporting migrants in their integration in the society. The first section discusses the role of non-verbal communication, and particularly gaze, physical contact, and time, in intercultural interactions. Section two presents the study aims and methodology. Section three presents the study results, showing that variations in gaze, physical contact and time perception and organization, which are subjected to considerable individual and cultural variation, may be causes of disruption in communication in intercultural settings.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=First\\_and\\_second-generation\\_immigrants\\_-\\_statistics\\_on\\_main\\_characteristics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=First_and_second-generation_immigrants_-_statistics_on_main_characteristics)

Codesigned on the Territory] (IMPACT), co-funded by the European Union through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)<sup>2</sup> and the *Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali* (Italian Ministry of Employment and Welfare); beneficiary of this action is the Veneto Region.

## **2. Non-verbal communication in intercultural interactions**

The spread of globalisation, economic crises and wars transforming the global geopolitical dynamics contribute significantly to the increase in migration flows. In Italy, the recent rise in immigration numbers is mainly connected to two factors: Italy's geographical position in the Mediterranean Sea and the country's development and labour market characteristics, which allow migrants to find employment and improve their socio-economic conditions (Zanfrini 2007, 2013).

The growing presence of foreigners in Italy has led to an increasing need to promote actions favouring inclusion and integration. These are often based on intercultural communication approaches that are aimed at understanding and bridging cultural differences by examining and interpreting culture-specific patterns of communication and social interaction (Hall 1959; Hofstede 1980; Bennett 2005; Ting-Toomey 2018). The underlying assumption is that speakers' cultures closely influence interaction (Clyne 1987; Li 2004) and, if not correctly interpreted, can compromise mutual understanding and impair communication. For example, greetings differ from culture to culture and generally reflect specific norms of use. As a consequence, knowing the conventions and forms of greetings, as well as being able to interpret them correctly, requires multicultural knowledge. Misunderstandings can happen due to the speakers' inability to interpret the interlocutor's non-verbal codes correctly. As this paper shows, this is particularly true for those non-verbal codes that speakers may be less conscious of, such as gaze, physical contact and time perception and organization. Studies (Sarangi 2014; Holliday 2016; Zhu Hua et al. 2022) have criticised intercultural communication research claiming that it has a reductionist approach because it creates generalisations. Though generalisations always pose problems, intercultural communication research does provide a lens to observe cultures and can be considered a valid tool to promote awareness on cultural issues.

### **2.1 Beyond gestures: elements of non-verbal communication**

A growing body of research has examined linguistic, cultural, and social aspects of intercultural communication (Argyle 1982; Ting-Toomey 1999; Scollon et al. 2012; Jackson 2014; Knapp 2015). However, fewer studies have addressed intercultural non-verbal communication and its central role in intercultural interactions (Birdwhistell 1970; Molinsky et al. 2005; Moore et al. 2010; Burgoon et al. 2021). Non-verbal communication has been defined as the set of codes produced non-linguistically,

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<sup>2</sup> The fund promotes national interventions on migrants' integration and inclusion in the society. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/funding/asylum-migration-and-integration-funds/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-2021-2027\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/funding/asylum-migration-and-integration-funds/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-2021-2027_en)

and includes (1) kinesic codes, such as gestures, facial expressions and gaze, (2) proxemic codes, such as speakers' use of space, (3) chronemic codes or individuals' time perception and organization, (4) paralinguistic codes, such as voice tone, volume and speech rate, (5) haptic codes, that is the dynamics of speakers' touch of interlocutors in interactions, (6) appearance codes, such as clothes, make-up and tattoos, and (7) olfactory or smell codes (Moore et al. 2010).

The interpretation of non-verbal codes varies depending on contextual factors such as situation, culture and individual attitudes. A number of studies have focused on the meanings of gestures (e.g., Kendon 1981, 2004; McNeill 1992; Poggi 2006) and facial expressions (e.g., Ekman and Friesen 1971; Ekman et al. 1987) both in intracultural and intercultural communication. Other non-verbal codes, such as gaze, physical contact and time perception and organization, have been the object of fewer investigations. However, cultural differences in the use and interpretation of gaze, physical contact and time may create misunderstandings as well as trigger interlocutors' reactions and thus undermine social relationships. For instance, speakers from cultures that value direct eye contact as a sign of attention and respect will potentially misinterpret interactants that avoid direct gaze. This may cause the disruption of smooth communication or alter the speakers' relationship. Similarly, speakers from cultures where public displays of physical contact is not encouraged may develop feelings of invasion of personal space or privacy when interacting with people whose cultures consider physical contact during interactions commonly acceptable. Finally, people having different cultural perceptions of time will tend to assign different values to punctuality, and this might have an impact on relationships and social encounters, especially in work-related settings.

This paper addresses the importance of gaze, physical contact, and time perception and organization in intercultural interactions; the aim is to raise awareness on the use and interpretation of these non-verbal codes which have not been the object of extensive research. The focus will be on the interactions between social workers and North African migrants in Italy.

### 2.1.1. Gaze

Gaze conveys more (and faster) information than touch and hearing and it plays a fundamental role in communication (Hall 1966; Rutter and Stephenson 1977; Goodwin 1980; Kendon 1981; Adams and Kleck 2005; Patterson et al., 2007). According to Moore et al. (2010) eye contact has four different functions: (1) it regulates the conversational turns by signalling the beginning and end of a speaker's turn; (2) it provides conversational feedback, since it reflects the listener's interest and attention; (3) it conveys speakers' emotions in speech; and (4) it expresses the type of relationship between interactants, for instance individuals with an intimate relationship will tend to prolong their eye contact, whereas strangers will avoid prolonged eye contact (Lunenburg 2010). In foreign language speaking, speakers may use gaze to help communicating and overcoming linguistic barriers (Li 2004).

Research on eye contact suggests that cultural upbringing determines the way individuals gaze at each other and use eye contact in conversations (Kendon 1981; Kleinke 1986; Li 2004; Rossano et al. 2009; Zhang and Kalinowski 2012). At the same time, the use of gaze is also affected by other factors, such as the individuals' gender and social roles. Though a number of studies have examined the cultural dimensions of gaze (Pierson and Bond 1982; Kleinke 1986; Iizuka 1995; Blais et al. 2008), fewer studies have investigated this topic from an intercultural perspective (Ezlinga 1978; Uono and Hietanen 2015).

### **2.1.2. Physical contact**

Haptics, or physical contact in social interactions, is also a powerful communication tool. The way speakers touch their interlocutor(s) while communicating expresses different meanings such as the speakers' role in society and their degree of intimacy. For instance, touching the interlocutor can be interpreted as a sign of closeness and familiarity. Touching can also convey speakers' emotions, e.g., agreement, approval, comfort, etc. (Paludi and Paludi 2010; Goodwin 2017). Like other non-verbal codes, the extent to which public displays of physical contact are accepted in a society is influenced by the speakers' culture (Hans and Hans 2015; Hamilton 2019). While in some cultures it is not considered appropriate to touch the interlocutor, in others it is common. Hall (1966) distinguishes between high-contact and low-contact cultures. In high-contact cultures, typically found in high-density regions of the world (e.g., China, India, metropolitan areas), people are used to restricted spaces, and physical contact is accepted and frequent. In low-contact cultures, typically found in low-density regions of the world (e.g., Scandinavia, North America, rural areas), physical contact tends to be avoided and speakers maintain a distance while conversing. Similarly to gaze, physical contact is also influenced by factors like speakers' gender, social relationship and context.

Studies have examined the different use of touch in Western and Eastern countries (Barnlund 1975; Di Biase and Gunnoe 2004; Kitayama et al. 2006; Tsai et al. 2019; Suvilehto et al. 2019; Burgoon et al. 2021), but little research has focused on the cultural differences in haptics between Italian and North African cultures.

### **2.1.3. Time perception and organization**

Chronemics, or time perception and organization, is another central, yet understudied, aspect of non-verbal communication. It concerns individuals' use of time, e.g., their attitude towards punctuality or lateness, their tendency to carry out more than one activity at the same time, and the value given to each activity (Moore et al. 2010). Hall (1966) distinguishes between monochronic and polychronic cultures. The first ones perceive time as something tangible that can be organised and planned in small and precise units. In these cultures, time is seen as something that can be spent, saved and wasted. Examples are the USA, Germany, and Japan. Punctuality is valued and expected, lateness is viewed as a lack of respect. On the contrary, polychronic cultures

view time as flexible and fluid, and punctuality is of secondary importance. Some examples are the Middle East, Latin America or Eastern Europe that have a relaxed attitude towards time (Levine 2006). Studies have examined the ways in which culture influences time perception and organization (Merriam 1983; Lin and Jones 2005; Vargas-Urpi 2013; Burgoon et al. 2021) but, to the authors' knowledge, research is lacking on the differences in chronemics between the Italian and North African cultures.

### 3. This study

This paper presents the results of a pilot study on the use and interpretation of non-verbal language in intercultural interactions. The aim was to collect data on the awareness of the differences in non-verbal codes existing between cultures, and to understand whether such differences may determine misunderstandings and communication breakdowns which, in the long term, could lead to prejudice and stereotypes and hinder migrants' inclusion and integration in the Italian society. To this end, opinions were collected, through focus groups and questionnaires, of social workers residing in the Veneto, Emilia Romagna, and Lombardy regions.

#### 3.1 Method

Nine focus groups were carried out, in the months of February and March 2022, with social workers operating in organisations, NGOs and Italian language schools for migrants in northern Italy (the Veneto, Emilia Romagna, and Lombardy regions). The focus groups had a semi-structured interview style: every participant was asked the same questions, but was also allowed to expand on any topic they considered relevant. The data was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. On the basis of the focus groups responses, four online questionnaires were created to be sent to the same organisations. The questionnaires aimed at gathering more structured data on three aspects of non-verbal language in communicative interactions with migrants which appeared particularly understudied in the literature, that is: gaze, physical contact and time. Data relating to four geographical areas and cultures were targeted: North Africa, Sub Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and South Asia. However, only the data relating to North African cultures, and specifically Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, is presented here because of the significant presence of migrants from these areas in the associations that took part in the study and in the northern part of Italy. The questionnaires were distributed between May and June 2022, through *Google Forms*, a tool that allows to collect users' information through a personalised online quiz. The participants (social workers) were asked to answer anonymously and specify only the name of the association they work for and the kind of services the association offers. The focus group consisted of open-ended questions regarding gaze, physical contact and time perception. Short videos and pictures representing gestures were used to motivate the participants to share their own experiences on the interpretation of the migrants' non-verbal language. The questionnaire (shown in the appendix) included single and multiple-choice questions together with an open-ended section ('other'),

where participants could specify the culture and the gender of the migrants they work with. For each culture, the questionnaire was divided in two parts: the first aimed at gaining quantitative information on the social workers, the migrants and the services offered by the association; the second was designed to collect qualitative data on intercultural differences concerning gaze, physical contact and time between the Italian and the North African cultures.

### **3.1.1. Participants**

A total of 40 participants (i.e., social workers) took part in the pilot study. The focus groups were carried out with 9 associations that are located in northern Italy and work closely with migrants and that agreed to participate both in person and online. 20 social workers participated in the focus groups. The questionnaires were distributed via email to the same associations. Every email contained four questionnaires, each one designed specifically for one of the four different geographic areas (see section 3.1), so that the participants could choose the questionnaire according to the origin of the migrants they work with. 17 associations participated in the survey on the North African cultures: 7 from Veneto, 3 from Lombardy and 7 from Emilia-Romagna. The total number of responses received was 20, including more than one staff member per association.

## **4. Data analysis and results**

This section presents the results of the transcriptions of the focus groups, when relevant, as well as the responses to the questionnaire. The questionnaire data are presented in percentages. These were calculated, in the single response questions, out of the totality of the participants, that is to say out of 20 responses; in the multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions, they were calculated out of the total number of responses obtained for each question. Before discussing the focus groups, section 4.1 presents the information on the participants' sample, as collected from the questionnaire.

### **4.1 Information on the participants**

Questions 1.1 and 1.2 of the questionnaire aimed at collecting information on the participants (e.g., name, activities carried out by the social worker and the association).

The data are shown in Figure 1. 18.67% of the associations offer generic orientation activities such as help with job orientation; 14.67% provide Italian language courses; 12% legal and administrative services; 10.67% linguistic and cultural mediation; 9.33% school activities such as training courses, after-school activities, and curricular courses; 8% provide shelter for the refugees; 6.67% provide job placement and listening centres and 6.67% include a listening point inside the association; 5.33% offer services such as promotion to associationism, charity and family support, edu-



cational and therapeutic activities for drug addicts and cultural activities; 4% offer home finding services; and finally, 4% help migrants find a home and offer psycho-pedagogical services.

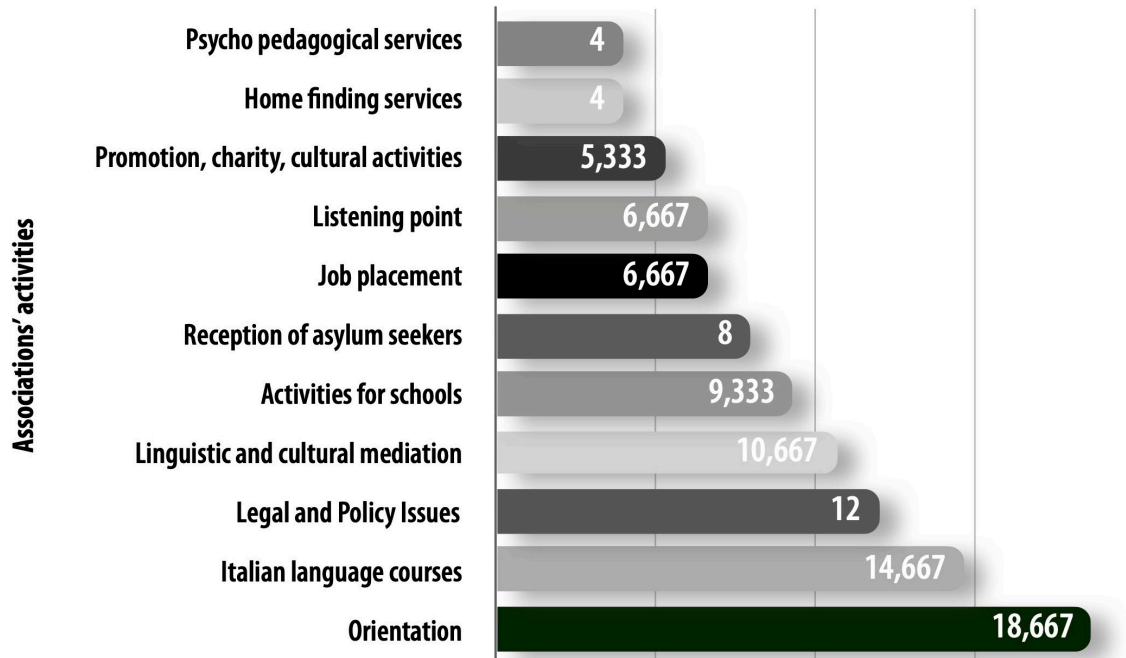


Figure 1: Associations' activities

Questions 1.3-1.5 were aimed at getting information on the participants' citizenship, the migrants' status and their age. 95% of the participants have Italian citizenship; 5% has Moroccan citizenship (Figure 2). The migrants' statutes are shown in Figure 3: expatriates (43.24%), asylum seekers (27.03%) and refugees (21.62%); 8.11% (grouped under the category 'other') are prisoners, Italian citizens and individuals addicted to drugs. Figure 4 shows the migrants' age: 35.85% is between 19 and 30 years old; 33.96% is between 31 and 50; 20.75% is over 50 and 9.43% are minors.

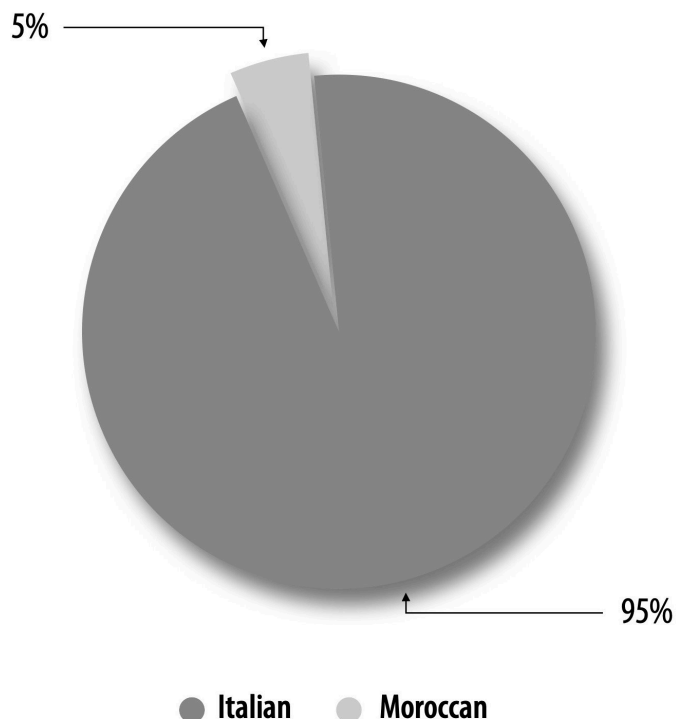


Figure 2.: Participants' citizenship

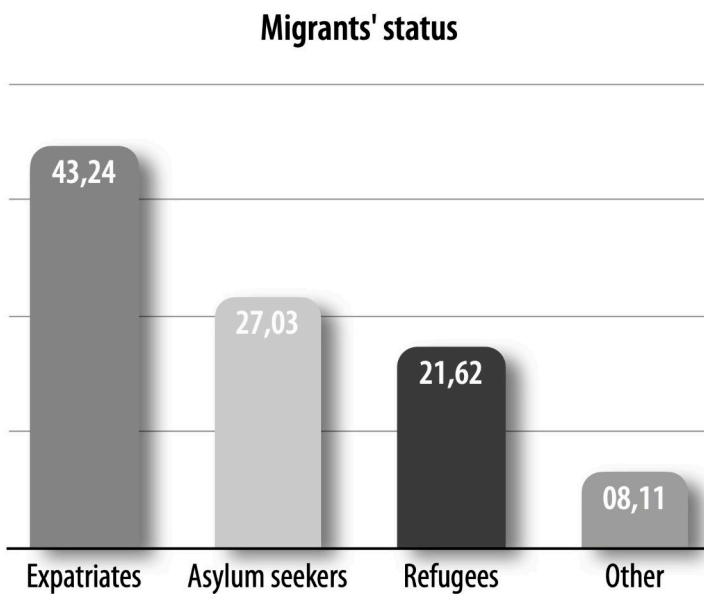


Figure 3.: Status of the migrants using the associations services

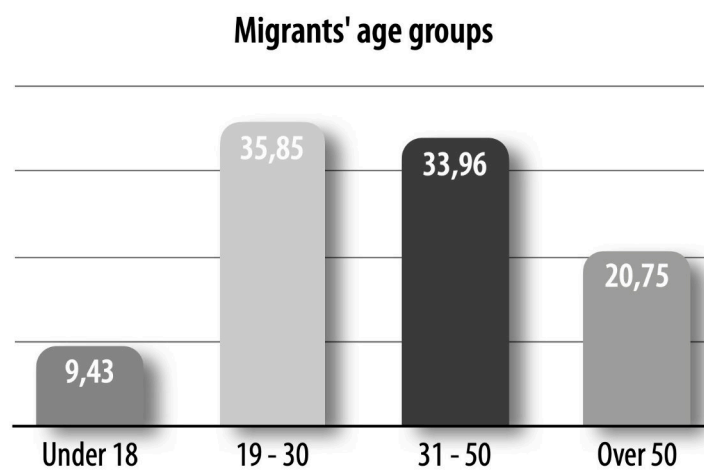


Figure 4.: Migrants' age groups

migrants speak with interlocutors of different gender, they use direct eye contact; according to 25% of the participants migrants use indirect gaze with social workers of different gender.

Questions 2.3 and 2.4 investigated how the use of eye contact can vary depending on the migrants' duration of their stay in Italy. In question 2.3 40% of the participants responded that migrants who have arrived recently to Italy use direct gaze; 60% said that newly-arrived migrants use indirect gaze. Two social workers specified that women tend to lower their gaze compared to men.

Question 2.4 investigated the gaze of migrants settled in Italy. 94.74% of the participants said that long term north African migrants use direct eye contact; 5.26% said that gaze tends to be indirect despite the migrants' time spent in Italy. This suggests that, overall, the use of gaze tends to change when migrants have been in Italy for several years.

## 4.2 Gaze

### 4.2.1. Focus groups

The responses of the focus groups show that most participants are aware of intercultural differences in the use of gaze. Particularly, speakers tend to use indirect eye contact with interlocutors of different gender. The participants also underlined that in the North African cultures gaze changes according to the situation and the speakers' role and age. Some of the participants' observations are reported in table 1.

### 4.2.2. Questionnaire

The analysis of the questionnaire confirmed what emerged in the focus groups. In question 2.1 90% of the participants reported that in interactions with speakers of the same gender, migrants' gaze is direct, while 10% of the participants said it is indirect. In question 2.2 75% of the participants said that when migrants speak with interlocutors of different gender, they use direct eye contact; according to 25% of the participants migrants use indirect gaze with social workers of different gender.



<p>If the meeting is between a man and a Muslim woman, the gaze is indirect: a small direct hint of a gaze, quick and respectful, then the gaze is lowered;</p>
<p>When there is a male presence, African women use a direct gaze, whereas if the husband is present, the woman tends to use an indirect gaze. The same can be said for the parents' presence with minors;</p>
<p>The cultural influence on gaze can also be related to religion, and not being aware of that can cause problems in intercultural interactions;</p>
<p>It happened with a Moroccan or Tunisian man. In the first meetings he was using an indirect gaze, then after a while, since he was coming often (to our institution), he broke his inhibitions, and started to look at me in the eyes;</p>
<p>If we're meeting to have tea then we can also look at each other in the eyes, but if two hours later I have a meeting with the same person in the city hall then we don't use direct gaze anymore;</p>
<p>An anecdote that comes to my mind is with a person I have a great confidence with, and that happened the day after the beginning of the Ramadan. I didn't know it, and for a week the person didn't look at me in the eyes. I personally got upset because I thought: what did I do wrong? [In fact, during Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to avoid direct eye contact in order to be as 'pure' as possible].</p>

Table 1.: Examples of participants' experiences relating to migrants' eye contact

#### 4.2.3. Discussion

The participants' answers show the awareness of the existence of differences in the use of gaze between the Italian and the North African cultures. The focus groups indicate that gender influences the use of gaze, and that women tend to avoid direct eye contact with men. On the other hand, the analysis of the questionnaire shows that in most participants' opinion the different uses of eye contact are not influenced by gender but rather by the duration of the migrants' stay in Italy. In general, newly arrived migrants tend to use a lower gaze and adopt indirect eye contact; on the contrary, migrants that have lived in Italy for several years tend to use more direct eye contact. This may indicate that, with time, migrants adopt not only the verbal code but also aspects of the non-verbal codes of the society where they want to integrate.

### 4.3 Physical Contact

#### 4.3.1 Focus groups

The analysis of the focus groups shows a general awareness of the differences in physical contact between the Italian and the North African cultures. 50% of the participants underlined that being aware of the differences in physical contact between different cultures is important and it can help avoid situations of discomfort and misunderstandings. Some of their observations are reported in Table 2. The participants

I faced situations of discomfort because of physical contact;
I felt uncomfortable when a migrant was shaking his/her hand very tightly;
Usually, the discomfort is felt by the migrant because of the social workers' behaviours in using physical contact (shaking hands or hugging).

Table 2.: Examples of participants' experiences of discomfort due to differences in use and interpretation of migrants' physical contact

also appeared to be aware of the existence of differences in physical contact due to factors such as gender, social relationship and religion. Some observations are reported in Table 3.

I perceived differences in the use of physical contact between migrants coming from different geographical areas and with different religious beliefs;
There are differences in the use of physical contact between interlocutors of different gender;
The way two teachers of different gender greet each other can create a situation of discomfort for migrants;
For many Africans, physical contact, especially between people of different gender and between those who are not in an intimate relationship, is strictly forbidden;
Moroccans are used to seeing displays of affection, they aren't a taboo for them. Nevertheless, men and women don't shake hands, nor do they kiss in public in Italy or in Morocco;
It is very important who is introducing you in the relationship with Moroccans. If you are introduced by friends or family members, physical contact is accepted, if the role is external (social worker/teacher) there's no physical contact;
Students from Islamic countries do not want to be touched or touch people of different gender;
Physical contact is not well received during Ramadan.

Table 3.: Examples of participants' experiences showing awareness of differences in physical contact due to gender, social relationship and religion

#### 4.3.2. Questionnaire

The awareness of differences in physical contact is confirmed by the participants' responses to the questionnaire. In Question 2.5 the participants were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated no differences and 4 many differences, their perceived extent of migrants' differences in physical contact. All the participants (100%) declared that physical contact is different in the Italian and North African cultures. Specifically, 47.37% of the participants said that the differences are many (rating = 4); 31.58% reported a few differences (rating = 2), and 21.05% reported plenty of differences (rating = 3).

Question 2.6 asked the participants about their perception of physical contact in interactions between interlocutors of the same gender, and in particular whether, when talking to them, the North African migrants showed a tendency to touch them, to touch them only to get their attention, say hello, or similar, or to avoid touch altogether. 28.57% of the participants responded that in their experience migrants tend to avoid physical contact; 66.67% said that they use physical contact to get attention; 4.76% said that physical contact occurs during conversations.

Question 2.7 asked about the interactions between speakers of different gender. 75% of the participants said that physical contact is avoided, and 20% that it is limited to get attention; only 5% said that the use of physical contact is used in interactions.

### 4.3.3. Discussion

The analysis of the focus groups showed that the social workers are generally aware of the existence of differences in physical contact between the Italians and the North Africans. The responses in the focus groups show that for 50% of the participants the differences in physical contact are influenced by culture and subjected to variables like gender, social relationships and religion; 50% of the participants have experienced situations where intercultural differences in physical contact have created discomfort. The responses to the questionnaire confirm that the participants perceive differences in the use of physical contact, and particularly between interlocutors of different gender.

## 4.4. Time perception and organization

### 4.4.1. Focus groups / participant's observation

Punctuality is a big problem that social workers have to face;
There is a big problem relating to punctuality perception and this is a huge limit to integration;
The ways different cultures organise time is a critical factor in the association's activities;
When migrants that have studied one year of Italian but still don't speak the language arrive, we ask 'what did you do during this time?' and they answer that they waited. If I had to wait one year, I would get crazy but they wait one year. In this context our staff doesn't know what to do. [...] The goal is what counts to them, not time;
Migrants tend to focus on the goal they want to achieve, without considering time or deadlines;
I was surprised by the migrants' patience and their ability "to wait 5 years just for a document";
Migrants have a tendency "to live in the present" and have no projects for the future;
In their countries they tend not to have goals, to have a goal is a European concept. The idea of a project starts when there's something concrete, when they learn that here it is done like that;
We would like to teach them to organise time, but this is difficult.

Table 4.: Participant's observations regarding the migrants' time perception and organization

The opinions expressed in the focus groups show that the social workers are aware that different cultures perceive punctuality differently, and this is regarded as a potential problem and a possible limit to integration. The social workers agree that migrants need to be taught that Italian time perception and organization is different from theirs, and that this would help them integrate better in the Italian society. However, the participants are aware that teaching this is complicated.

#### 4.4.2. Questionnaire

In Question 2.8 the participants had to choose, on a scale from 1 to 4 where 1 indicated no differences and 4 many differences, what was the extent of the dissimilarity between the punctuality concept of the Italian vs the North African cultures. 85% of the participants showed awareness of differences in punctuality between the cultures. Specifically, 25% of the participants rated these differences as 3 on the scale; 55% rated them as 2; 5% rated them as 4. 15% of the participants reported noticing no difference in punctuality between the cultures and rated these differences as 1 on the 1-to-4 scale.

It should be noted that many associations activities do not require punctuality (e.g., help desk for legal consultations or home finding), while for other activities, like Italian language classes or mediation services, punctuality is important. For this reason, many social workers may not have experienced the migrants' lack of punctuality. On the other hand, in the 'Other' option, shown in Table 5, the participants appear to be aware that punctuality depends on many factors. Two participants noted that punctuality often depends on how the migrant organises time in relation to their duty or activity. Factors such as the number of children in the family or the transportation the person uses can also have an influence on punctuality.

More than on education, punctuality depends on many factors: first of all, on how many people you need to organise before going out, on your responsibilities (children, husband and other family members), then on the transportation you can use (bus, cycle, car);

The presence of children and the family situation needs to be taken into account. In the majority of the cases women that are late are the ones with children, often young. They seem to take care of them alone;

Egyptian men, if they don't have other work duties, are always quite on time. Moroccan women are always punctual.

Table 5.: Examples of participants' experiences regarding the migrants' punctuality (section 'other' of the questionnaire)

In Question 2.9 and 2.10 the participants were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated early and 5 indicated that the person does not show up, their perceived extent of the migrants' punctuality in formal and informal settings.

In formal meetings 18.18% of the participants said that migrants tend to arrive early (rating = 1); 50% said that they tend to arrive on time (rating = 2), and 27.27% experienced situations where the migrants arrived a little late (rating = 3). 4.55. % said that migrants tend not to show up (rating = 5).

In informal meetings, 8.70% of the participants said that migrants tend to arrive early (rating = 1); 34.78% that they tend to arrive on time (rating = 2); 43.48% that they arrive a little late (rating = 3); 4.35% over 20 minutes late, (rating = 4); and 8.70% that they don't show up (rating = 5).

Some observations from the open comment section (the 'Other' option) are reported in Table 6. They indicate that men do not show up unless the meeting is official, like for example receiving a participation certificate. In pre-scheduled meetings (e.g., Italian language classes) Egyptian men tend to arrive on time or a bit late (15-20 minutes). Migrants, women in particular, arrive tendentially on time.

Egyptian men do not show up for the Italian language class unless the meeting includes the delivery of a participation certificate. Egyptian men tend to arrive on time or a bit late (15/20 minutes) for Italian classes with pre-scheduled timings and days;
In general, migrants from the Maghreb region tend to arrive early;
Moroccan women are always punctual;
Women that can participate in informal meetings do it for the pleasure of being together;
Women know how fundamental it is to be there at the given time, especially for the difficulties and the limits of the people that will receive them (very often there is no one available that knows some words, or a person that could translate or mediate).

Table 6.: Examples of participants' experiences regarding the migrants' punctuality in informal settings (section 'other' of the questionnaire)

In Question 2.11 the participants were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated before the deadline and 4 the task is not finished, their perceived extent of migrants' respect for deadlines. 19.05% of the participants said migrants complete tasks before the deadline (rating = 1); 38.1% said that migrants tend to complete tasks the day of the deadline (rating = 2); 33.33% said that migrants tend to complete tasks after the deadline (rating = 3); 9.25% said migrants do not complete the task at all (rating = 4). It is likely that the kind of activities offered by the associations has an influence on the participants' answers. For instance, services such as listening points or orientation services do not require migrants to meet specific deadlines, hence the participants may have no experience of migrants' respect for deadlines.

#### 4.4.3. Discussion

The answers given in the focus groups show the participants' awareness of the cultural differences in the organisation of time, and how this can affect relationships



and hinder integration. The answers of the questionnaire are less clear-cut. This might be due to the fact that focus groups allow participants to express themselves freely by sharing their personal experiences, while with questionnaires participants are more constrained by multiple-choice questions. Not all the participants consider the differences in time organisation a central element in intercultural interactions, nor do they perceive considerable differences with their own culture. Rather, they observe that the migrants' punctuality is affected by a plurality of factors. For instance, women may be late due to the number of responsibilities and chores they have at home and in their life. The type of circumstance may also have an effect on the migrants' punctuality. For instance, migrants may arrive late to informal meetings but not to formal meetings. Also, events that are considered important, like collecting a language course certificate or meeting mediators or interpreters, call for punctuality. Finally, differences between men and women may exist.

## **5. Conclusions**

This paper presents the results of a preliminary study aimed at investigating the differences in the use and interpretation of gaze, physical contact and time between the Italian and North African cultures. Social workers' awareness of these differences and their possible impact in social relations were also investigated.

The analysis shows that the social workers who participated in this study are aware of the existence of intercultural differences in gaze, physical contact and time, though these may be subjected to variables such as the migrant's gender, type of relationship with the interlocutor and religion, as well as individual factors. The length of time in which the migrant has been in Italy is also a factor. The way in which these differences are interpreted depends on the specific circumstances in which the interaction takes place, as well as the area in which the association operates, the services it provides and the participants' role inside the association. For instance, the non-verbal codes used in an Italian language class may differ from those used in an asylum seekers' shelter. In general, though, the difference in use and interpretation of gaze, physical contact and time does seem to create some sort of hindrance in communication and may be a source of discomfort in rapports.

There is some discrepancy between the responses given in the focus groups and in the questionnaire. The former report the social workers' personal experiences and anecdotes about the difficulties in understanding the migrants' non-verbal codes. The latter do not evidence the existence of great differences between the Italian and the North African cultures, especially with regards to gaze and time. This mismatch may be due to the fact that in the focus groups participants are free to share their personal opinions and are not constrained by pre-set questions.

Though the data presented in this paper is only preliminary, we believe it does provide indications that gaze, physical contact and time perception and organization may be the cause of intercultural misunderstandings and have the potential to undermine communication and social relationships. Thus, this study suggests the need



to investigate these non-verbal elements of communication in interactions with migrants. Raising awareness on the use and interpretation of all non-verbal codes of communication is functional to promoting integration and inclusion between different cultures.

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## Appendix 1. Questionnaire on North African cultures

<p><b>This questionnaire aims to collect observations and perceptions on non-verbal codes in intercultural interactions.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Please respond based on your personal experience;</li> <li>➤ While some questions may seem like generalisations, these are a starting point for investigating some issues;</li> <li>➤ In the “other” section you can report your personal experiences;</li> <li>➤ The questionnaire takes ten minutes to complete.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Part 1: Information on the association, the social workers, the migrants and the services offered</b></p>	
1.1 What is the name of the association/cooperative in which you work?	
1.2 In which field does the association/cooperative you belong to operate? You can choose more than one answer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reception of asylum seekers</li> <li>- Italian language courses</li> <li>- Linguistic and cultural mediation</li> <li>- Psycho-pedagogical services</li> <li>- Legal and Policy Issues</li> <li>- Job placement</li> <li>- Listening point</li> <li>- Activities for schools</li> <li>- Home finding services</li> <li>- Orientation</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>
1.3 What is your citizenship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Italian</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>
1.4 Which is the status of the people you work with? You can choose more than one answer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expatriates</li> <li>- Asylum seekers</li> <li>- Refugees</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>
1.5 What is the age of the people you work with? You can choose more than one answer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Under 18</li> <li>- 19 - 30</li> <li>- 31 - 50</li> <li>- Over 50</li> </ul>
<p><b>Part 2: Data on intercultural differences concerning non-verbal codes that can cause intercultural communication misunderstandings between Italian and North African cultures.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Please respond based on your personal experience;</li> <li>➤ In the “other” section you can report the culture you are referring to, for example “Morocco”, “Egypt” ...; you can also specify the gender “man”, “woman” or “other”.</li> </ul>	
2.1 You have contacted migrants of the same gender to offer a service (accompanying to police headquarters / Italian lesson / mediation / other). In your experience, migrants from North African cultures tend to use...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Direct gaze: they have no problem looking at me in the eyes</li> <li>- Indirect gaze: they don't look at me in the eyes or they look down</li> </ul>
2.2 You have contacted migrants of the different gender to offer a service (accompanying to police headquarters / Italian lesson / mediation / other). In your experience, migrants from North African cultures tend to use...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Direct gaze: they have no problem looking at me in the eyes</li> <li>- Indirect gaze: they don't look at me in the eyes or they look down</li> </ul>
2.3 You have contacted migrants that have newly arrived to Italy to offer a service (accompanying to police headquarters / Italian lesson / mediation / other). In your experience, migrants from North African cultures tend to use...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Direct gaze: they have no problem looking at me in the eyes</li> <li>- Indirect gaze: they don't look at me in the eyes or they look down</li> </ul>



<p>2.4 You have contacted migrants who have been in Italy for several years to offer a service (accompanying to police headquarters / Italian lesson / mediation / other). In your experience, migrants from North African cultures tend to use . . .</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Direct gaze: they have no problem looking at me in the eyes</li> <li>- Indirect gaze: they don't look at me in the eyes or they look down</li> </ul>
<p>2.5 Do you think there are differences regarding physical contact between Italians and North African migrants? Check the "other" box and write the specific culture and gender.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No differences</li> <li>2. Few differences</li> <li>3. Some differences</li> <li>4. Many differences</li> </ol>
<p>2.6 You are talking to North African culture migrants of the same gender as you. In your experience, they tend to: Check the "other" box and write the specific culture and gender.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Touch you while they were talking or while you were talking.</li> <li>2. Touch you to get your attention, say hello, etc.</li> <li>3. Never touch you</li> </ol>
<p>2.7 You are talking to North African culture migrants of the different gender. In your experience, they tend to: . . . Check the "other" box and write the specific culture and gender.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Touch you while they were talking or while you were talking.</li> <li>2. Touch you to get your attention, say hello, etc.</li> <li>3. Never touch you</li> </ol>
<p>2.8 Do you think there are differences regarding the idea of punctuality between the Italian and North African cultures? Express your opinion on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates no difference and 4 many differences. Check the "other" box and write the specific culture and gender.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No differences</li> <li>2. Few differences</li> <li>3. Some differences</li> <li>4. Many differences</li> </ol>
<p>2.9 You have set up a formal meeting to offer a service to a migrant (accompanying to the police headquarters / Italian language classes / mediation / other ..). In your experience, migrants from North African cultures tend to arrive. . . Express your opinion on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates early, 4 very late and 5 'don't show up'. Check the "other" box and write the specific culture and gender.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Early</li> <li>2. On time</li> <li>3. A little late (15-20 min)</li> <li>4. Very late (over 20 min)</li> <li>5. Don't show up</li> </ol>
<p>2.10 You have set up an informal meeting, for example a party in your association/cooperative. In your experience, migrants from North African cultures tend to arrive. . . Express your opinion on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates early and 5 very late. Check the "other" box and write the specific culture and gender.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Early</li> <li>2. On time</li> <li>3. A little late (15-20 min)</li> <li>4. Very late (over 20 min)</li> <li>5. Don't show up</li> </ol>
<p>2.11 You have asked to complete a task or an activity with a deadline (fill documents, complete an Italian language exercise, other...). In your experience, migrants from North African cultures tend to finish. . . Express your opinion on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates before the deadline and 4 indicates incomplete task. Check the "other" box and write the specific culture and gender.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Before the deadline</li> <li>2. The day of the deadline</li> <li>3. After the deadline</li> <li>4. The task is not finished</li> </ol>





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