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Intercultural Competence of Social Service Professionals Working with Migrants: Voices from Poland

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Abstract: Growing migration to Poland over the past decade has heightened the need for social service professionals to work effectively with culturally diverse populations. Although intercultural competence has been widely theorised in Western contexts, its application within Central and Eastern European institutional settings remains underexplored. This study seeks to examine how intercultural competence is understood and enacted by Polish social service professionals and to adapt Jürgen Bolten's model of intercultural competence to the organisational and cultural context of social services working with migrants in Poland. A qualitative research design was employed, consisting of focus group interviews and problem-centered narrative interviews with civil servants, psychologists, social workers, career counsellors, teachers, intercultural assistants, and staff from Foreigners' Integration Centres and non-governmental organisations. Data were analysed through a triangulated coding process embedded in a hermeneutic spiral. Participants identified and described the domains of professional, social, strategic, personal, and integrative (intercultural) competences, revealing how these are enacted in everyday interactions with migrants. In addition to the categories present in Bolten's original model, respondents highlighted a new dimension, Institutional and Organisational Conditions Shaping Intercultural Competence, reflecting the impact of coordination gaps, systemic rigidity, and institutional culture on their ability to work effectively with migrants. The study demonstrates that Bolten's model requires contextualisation when applied to the Polish social services sector. Intercultural competence is shaped not only by individual skills and attitudes but also by institutional frameworks that can either support or constrain culturally responsive practice. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive intercultural training, improved coordination among institutions supporting migrants, and organisational reforms that enhance flexibility and cultural sensitivity. The contextualised model developed in this study may inform the work of newly established Centers for the Integration of Foreigners and guide future research on intercultural competence in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Migrant Integration, Contextualization, Social Service Professionals, Participatory Research, Bolten's Model, Central And Eastern Europe

1. Introduction

As early as the first decade of the 21st century, scholars predicted that within ten years, Poland would shift from being predominantly a country of emigration and transitory migration to one increasingly becoming a destination for immigrants (Castles & Miller, 2011). In anticipation of this transition, experts called for the development of coherent migration strategies at both governmental and local levels, and emphasized the necessity of preparing professionals to work effectively with migrants. They also stressed the importance of public consultation to ensure that social service staff could respond adequately to the emerging needs of migrant populations within the Polish context (Górny & Grabowska-Lusińska, 2010; Szymańska-Zybertowicz, 2011).

These issues gained particular urgency following the large influx of refugees from Belarus and Ukraine between 2020 (Kazanecki, 2020) and 2022 (Soroka, 2022), which significantly increased the demand for well-prepared social services capable of navigating culturally diverse encounters (Łodziński & Szonert, 2023). In response, the Polish government published *Regaining Control. Ensuring Security. Migration Strategy for 2025-2030* in 2024 *(*'Zapewnić kontrolę, odzyskać bezpieczeństwo'. Kompleksowa i odpowiedzialna strategia migracyjna Polski na lata 2025-2030, 2024), a policy document that explicitly underscores the need to strengthen the intercultural competence of social service professionals.

Against this backdrop, the present article examines the intercultural competence of social service professionals, including civil servants, psychologists, social workers, career counsellors, teachers, intercultural assistants, and employees of non-governmental organisations, who work directly with migrants in Poland. Although intercultural competence has been extensively theorised, the concept has predominantly emerged from American and Western European contexts. Scholars have increasingly noted that this theoretical construct requires examination and contextualization within other cultural settings, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, where historical trajectories, institutional structures, and migration experiences differ markedly (Bolten, 2020a; 2020b; Dunajeva & Górak-Sosnowska, 2023; Genkova et al., 2025; Yanqing, 2025).

This study responds to this gap by contextualizing Jürgen Bolten's model of intercultural competence within the specific organisational, institutional, and cultural realities of Polish

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social service professionals working with migrants, an endeavour that, to date, has not been systematically undertaken. To achieve this objective, the article addresses the following research questions: What constitutes professional competence in working with migrants? What individual competences do social service professionals mobilize? How do they define their social competence? What strategic competences are enacted in intercultural encounters? What is understood as integrative (intercultural) competence? Finally, what institutional factors shape the development of intercultural competence among social service professionals in their work with migrants?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Services in Work with Migrants

In this study, I draw on a broad understanding of social services, defined as a network of offices, organisations, non-governmental bodies, informal task groups, and individual actors interconnected through administrative structures, functional relations, or complementary arrangements. These entities, whether acting out of professional duty, voluntary engagement, or personal initiative, undertake activities aimed at restoring individuals' sense of self-worth, preventing social exclusion, and improving their capacity for functioning within society. Such actions, whether supportive, substitutive, protective, rehabilitative, or corrective, also include efforts to create macro-structural and environmental conditions necessary for these goals to be fulfilled (Porowski 1999, p. 270).

This broad definition is particularly relevant in the context of migration, as relocating to a new country often entails the sudden loss of established support networks. Working effectively with migrants requires multidisciplinary knowledge and close cooperation among diverse professionals (Malinowski-Rubio 2013; Świdzińska 2020). Bolten (2021, p. 173) notion that intercultural competence is actualised in "people's micro worlds hic et nunc." Bolten (2021, p. 173) reinforces the understanding of social services as a distinct professional micro world in which intercultural interactions take place (Bolten, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Following existing research on migration-related services, I define social services broadly to encompass civil servants, psychologists, social workers, staff of Foreigners' Integration Centres, career counsellors, teachers, intercultural assistants, and employees of non-governmental organisations. For this study, particular attention was directed toward civil servants working exclusively with foreigners, including staff of the Departments for Foreigners and administrative personnel serving international students (Żołędowski, 2010). These officials often constitute the first institutional point of contact for foreigners entering Polish institutional systems. Prior studies indicate that civil servants frequently lack sufficient foreign-language skills and demonstrate limited awareness of cultural differences influencing the functioning of organisations and institutions (Fazgalić, 2024; Malinowski-Rubio, 2013).

The second professional group included teachers and intercultural assistants. Efforts to adapt the Polish education system to migrant students began with Poland's accession to the European Union and involved implementing guidelines from international bodies such as the United Nations, UNICEF, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE (Błeszyńska, 2010). Although teachers may enhance their intercultural competence through training offered by local teacher improvement centres, UNHCR, or NGOs, participation remains voluntary despite longstanding evidence of need (Czerniejewska, 2013; Januszewska, 2010; Nikitorowicz, 2005; Tęgadziolska, Walczak & Wielecki, 2024). Since 2024, the role of intercultural assistants, professionals who communicate in the languages of foreign students and provide integration support to families and teaching staff, has been considerably strengthened (Kozakoszczak, 2024).

The third group comprises social workers responsible for delivering Individual Integration Programs for foreigners. These programmes, lasting up to twelve months, include financial assistance, support in navigating institutional procedures, specialist counselling, social work, and other measures designed to foster integration (Supreme Audit Office, 2015). Research indicates that, particularly in smaller communities, measures intended specifically for foreigners often become absorbed into routine social work despite the differing needs of Polish and foreign clients. As a result, cultural differences and migration experiences may be overlooked (Oliwa-Ciesielska, 2023; Ryabinska, 2015; Świdzińska, 2020; Sordyl-Lipnicka, 2025). The most recent migration strategy also envisages the establishment of Foreigners' Integration Centres, which will serve as sites of both integration support and intercultural training for social service professionals (Odzyskać Kontrolę. Zapewnić Bezpieczeństwo Kompleksowa i odpowiedzialna strategia migracyjna Polski na lata 2025–2030, 2024).

The final professional group involved in migrant integration includes career and psychological counsellors. Under Polish legislation, publicly funded career counselling is available to refugees and EU citizens; however, these services are not tailored to the specific linguistic and cultural needs of non-EU foreigners. Language barriers and cultural unfamiliarity often inhibit the effective uptake of counselling services. In contrast, career counsellors employed by NGOs are evaluated more positively, as their work targets migrants directly and their professional competencies are better aligned with migrants' needs (Supreme Audit Office, 2015). Psychological counsellors working with foreign clients must also account for cultural bias in diagnostic tools and ensure culturally appropriate assessment practices (Lago, 2006; Matsumoto & Juang, 2007; Palmer & Languani, 2008). Although children of foreign nationals are entitled to assessment in psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, school staff frequently express concerns about the linguistic and cultural competence of these professionals (Błeszyńska, 2010; Ostafińska-Molik & Olszewska-Gniadek, 2020). Among all groups, employees of non-governmental organisations dedicated to supporting migrants appear the best prepared, as research demonstrates their extensive knowledge of cultural differences and the psychological processes associated with migration (Popławska & Gać, 2021).

2.1. Intercultural Competence

Since the 1950s, numerous approaches to intercultural competence have been developed, reflecting different theoretical orientations and disciplinary traditions. These include additive models (Triandis, 1996), structural models (Chen & Starosta, 1998), processual or action-oriented models (Bolten, 2007), context-specific models (Torenc, 2007), universal models (Knapp & Knapp-Potthoff, 1990), educational models (Volkmann, 2002), and ethnographic models (Byram, 2000). The present study adopts Jürgen Bolten's action-oriented conceptualization of intercultural competence and adapts it to the professional context of Polish social services (Bolten 2010, p. 265-273, 281). Bolten's model emphasizes that intercultural competence is not an

abstract or static entity; rather, it is always enacted within specific cultural and situational conditions and emerges through the integration of multiple competence domains (Bolten 2010, p. 265-273, 281).

The model encompasses four partial competences, individual, social, professional, and strategic, unified by a centrally positioned action-oriented (intercultural) competence. Bolten (2010, p. 265) underscores that this central competence does not exist alongside the four partial competences but instead represents the synergistic outcome of their interdependent relationships: "competence for action is thus not merely a useful fifth competence existing alongside the other four, but the synergistic product of the interdependent relationship among these four fields of competence" (Bolten 2010, p. 140).

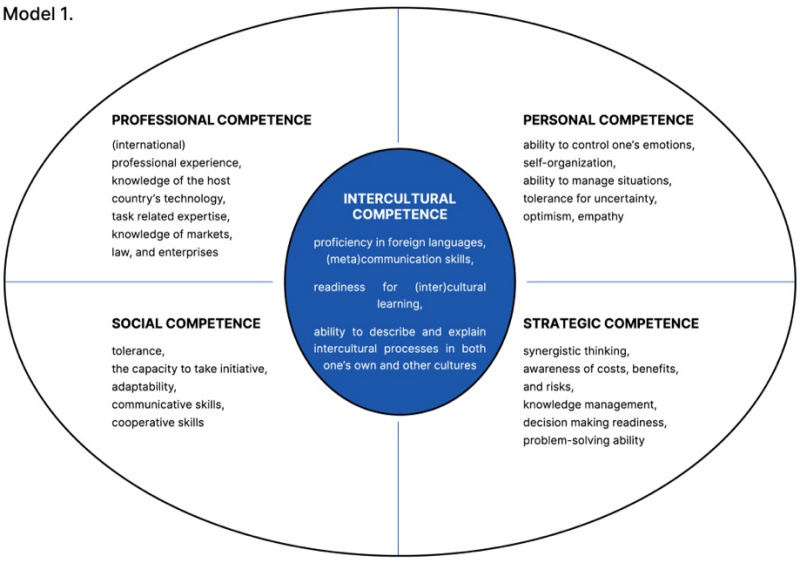

Figure 1: Jurgen Böltens Intercultural Competence. Source (Bolten, 2006).

Intercultural competence, therefore, is best understood as "the effective, comprehensive integration of individual, social, substantive [professional], and strategic actions within an intercultural context" (Bolten 2010, p. 141). Similarly, Bolten (2006) describes it as "the ability to apply individual, social, professional, and strategic partial competences, in optimal combinations, to intercultural contexts of action" (p. 141). From this perspective, intercultural competence is demonstrated when an individual can act effectively in altered or unfamiliar cultural settings by drawing flexibly on all partial competences (Bolten, 2005). This capacity is transferable, but not without challenges. Competences that are effective in one cultural environment may be perceived as inappropriate or ineffective in another. For example, "a German manager who employs a goal-oriented strategy to rapidly conclude a contract will be perceived differently in Thailand than in the United States" (Bolten 2007, p. 6).

These observations highlight the processual nature of intercultural competence. Rather than a fixed set of traits or skills, it is dynamically shaped by cultural, situational, and relational conditions. Bolten (2007, p. 20) characterizes intercultural competence as marked by process orientation, relationality, and relativity (Bolten 2007, p. 20). Its process orientation derives from its foundation in action; its relationality reflects the fact that meaning is co-constructed by interlocutors; and its relativity underscores the role of cultural context in defining what is considered competent behaviour.

Bolten (2007, p. 20) further argues that categories commonly regarded as universal, such as benevolence, compassion, or politeness, must be understood as culturally embedded abstractions. Their enactment varies across societies, often producing incompatible behavioural expectations and, consequently, intercultural misunderstandings (Bolten 2007, p. 20). For this reason, he advocates methodologies for researching intercultural competence that incorporate cultural, situational, and professional context factors (Bolten, 2007, 2010, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

A growing body of scholarship similarly emphasizes that existing conceptualizations of intercultural competence emerged primarily from Western European and American contexts. Central and Eastern European countries, shaped by different migration histories, institutional legacies, and cultural frameworks, provide distinct conditions under which intercultural competence is enacted and understood. Scholars argue that, in these regions, the concept requires contextualization to reflect local realities (Dunajeva & Górak-Sosnowska, 2023; Genkova, Schreiber, Bogdanova et al., 2025; Yanqing, 2025). The present research follows this approach by examining how Bolten's model (Bolten 2010, p 281) operates within the specific institutional and cultural environment of Polish social services.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Strategy and Methods

In order to achieve the stated research objectives, a qualitative research design was adopted. Qualitative approaches, with their focus on the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences and interactions within specific socio-cultural contexts, are particularly suitable for investigating complex, processual, and culturally embedded phenomena such as intercultural competence (Flick, 2010; Kubinowski, 2010; Kruger, 2007; Silverman, 2009).

Two main methods were employed: focus group interviews and individual problem-centered narrative interviews. Focus groups make it possible to observe how participants articulate their attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and behaviours in interaction

with others (Gawlik, 2012). They also help reveal habitus and the organisational, cultural, and political contexts in which professional practices are situated, which is why they are often recommended in research on cultural diversity and the functioning of professional communities (Barbour, 2011). In this study, findings from the focus groups were used to develop guidelines for subsequent problem-centered narrative interviews.

Data from both methods were then combined through triangulation (Kvale, 2012). The narrative interviews enabled a deeper exploration of the categories through which participants make sense of their everyday professional lives and their work with migrants, and thus constituted a natural continuation and refinement of the focus group phase (Chase, 2009). Taken together, these advantages indicate that focus groups and individual problem-centered interviews are appropriate and complementary methods for addressing the research questions posed in this study.

3.2. Sampling, Coding, Categorization, and Definition

Triangulation was employed not only at the level of methods but also as an overall research strategy to validate findings, expand and elaborate the data, and obtain complementary insights (Barbour, 2011). The principle of complementarity guided both sampling and analysis, ensuring that data from focus groups and individual interviews informed and enriched one another.

For the focus groups, a purposive sampling strategy was used, drawing on the criteria of critical cases and typical cases (Flick, 2010). Civil servants working with foreigners were invited to participate in exploratory focus groups. These professionals often constitute the main or even sole institutional contact point for migrants and frequently assume, de facto, the tasks of other, less visible professions. Including them in the exploratory phase, therefore, provided a broad vantage point on staff–foreigner interactions. The focus groups were designed to be homogeneous in terms of professional background: participants shared similar work experience, which facilitated the development of trust and supported productive group dynamics (Barbour, 2011).

Participants for the narrative interviews were also selected purposively, according to the criteria of sensitive cases and maximum variation (Flick, 2010). This approach ensured that the narrative material complemented the focus group data and broadened the understanding of how different social service professions engage with migrants. Recruitment proceeded iteratively during the research process and was oriented toward achieving theoretical saturation (Flick, 2010).

The collected data were analysed using a coding procedure conceptualised as triangulation embedded within a hermeneutic spiral (Gadamer, 1993). The coding process followed nine stages: (1) description (development of descriptive codes), (2) analysis (formulation of analytical codes), (3) categorization (identification of categories), (4) comparative analysis (development of comparative codes), (5) elaboration of guidelines for narrative interviews, (6) triangulation codes (expanding, reinforcing, and supplementing the codes and categories identified in the focus groups), (7) definition of the categories constituting intercultural competence, and (8) formulation of recommendations. The overall process is illustrated in the figure below.

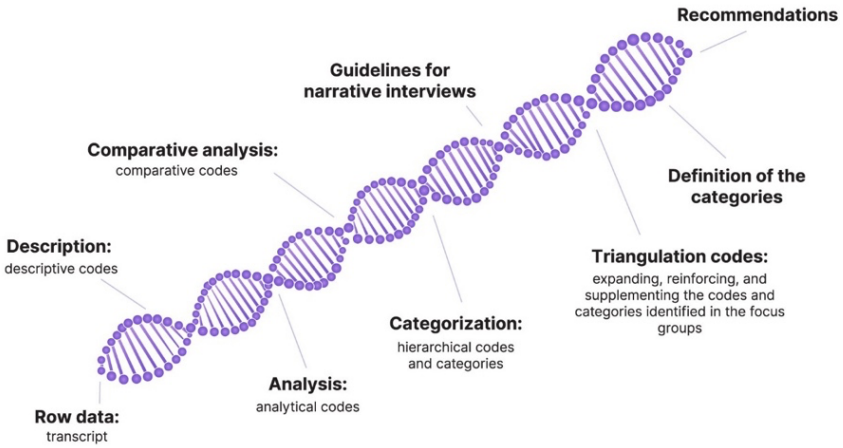

Figure 2: Triangulation - Hermeneutic Spiral. The spiral was constructed for the research presented in the article. Source: By the author.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Professional Competence

Bolten defines professional (substantive) competence as "factual knowledge within the domain of tasks, familiarity with technical infrastructure, professional experience, etc." (Bolten 2007, p. 19). Such knowledge can be effectively applied under altered cultural conditions, through "transfer to specific cultural contexts, for example, the ability to communicate expertise while considering other cultures, differences in socialization, and variations in education and work systems" (Bolten 2006, pp. 1-16). International professional competence includes (international) professional experience, knowledge of the host country's technology, and task-related expertise (Bolten 2006, pp. 1-16). By adapting the model for the realities of Polish social service practice, (international) professional experience was redefined as experience in working with people, while knowledge of markets, law, and enterprises was reformulated as familiarity with law, organizational structures, and their operation. Participants additionally identified two new categories: task proficiency and engagement in task performance.

4.1.1. Task Proficiency

Findings indicate that the respondents conceptualize proficiency in two ways. First, they associate proficiency with craftsmanship derived from accumulated professional experience, which facilitates the transfer of knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired within a monocultural context into working with foreigners. Second, they understand proficiency as routine, which results in diminished cultural sensitivity and institutional discrimination, insofar as apply identical practices to foreigners and Polish clients despite differing circumstances and needs (Green, 1982). They justify this by claiming that they treat foreign clients relying on proven methods. This reflects habitus: namely, a set of schemes and norms acquired in the course of professional socialization that guide patterns of action (Wacquant, 2005). professionals

4.1.2. Engagement In Task Performance

The category of "engagement in task performance" was introduced into the model by respondents. Their accounts suggest that what most supports their ability to work effectively with foreigners is their commitment to working with people. This commitment renders them more inclined to seek new solutions and fosters other forms of engagement: effective engagement, which involves exceeding established goals and generating added value; task-based engagement, which consists of devoting more time to tasks of personal interest; and affective engagement, which refers to emotional involvement in task performance. In doing so, they act as social change agents who introduce new approaches to working with foreigners. At times, however, supervisors and team members disapprove, as their initiatives clash with an organizational culture resistant to change (Evans, 2008).

4.1.3. Experience In Working With People

Another category added to the model is experience in working with people. Respondents view this experience as a resource that allows them to move beyond basic tasks and seek solutions for the non-standard situation of a foreign client. Yet, some display signs of cultural encapsulation (Green, 1982): they view the client's situation exclusively through their own cultural and social norms. An illustration of this is provided by a female social service professional engaged with refugees, who states:

I've been in this job for fifteen years, and I've seen a lot. Refugees really aren't any different from Polish clients. They just don't know the language well at first, but they learn fast. They come in and say, in broken Polish: Madam, I can't pay my gas and electricity bills. But the Polish client who was here just before said exactly the same thing. I have a hundred clients, and I have to treat them all fairly, which means the same. I can't treat refugees any differently from Polish clients.

The respondent quoted here demonstrates aversive racism, manifested in a disregard for the impact of cultural, religious, and racial differences on client work, coupled with an interpretation of the principle of equality that paradoxically undermines the very groups it is intended to protect (Evans, 2008).

4.1.4. Familiarity With Law, Organizational Structures, And Their Operation

The next category, familiarity with law, organizational structures, and their operation, constitutes a component of Bolten's original model (Bolten 2006, pp. 138-143). A major challenge in working with foreigners consists of conflicts arising from cultural differences in expectations about how the organization operates. Respondents observe that Polish educational and administrative culture is collectivist. Schools and public institutions often fail to adopt an individualized approach to students and clients. Power distance in Polish institutions is higher than in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon cultures, but lower than in Vietnamese culture. Some respondents interpret these differences not as objective cultural distinctions but rather as signs of clients' and students' misconduct, a perception that often results in conflict (Chen, 2006; Fong, 2004; Hayden, 2002; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2007; Wojciechowski, 2009).

4.1.5. Technological Knowledge

In the final category of professional competence, technological knowledge, the respondents are aware of the connection between organizational culture and the way information technology is processed, the need to employ such technologies in working with migrants, and the challenges migrants face in learning to navigate the technological environment of a foreign country.

4.2. Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is often conceptualized as the capacity to synthesize and describe phenomena, analyze and diagnose them, formulate and operationalize goals, plan, and implement action plans in an effective manner (Konecki, 2000). It encompasses such categories as awareness of costs, benefits, and risks; synergistic thinking; knowledge management; decision-making readiness; and problem-solving ability. Respondents did not introduce any new categories into this competence.

4.2.1. Awareness of Costs, Benefits, And Risks

Findings suggest that awareness of costs, benefits, and risks constitutes one of the fundamental competencies required for working with migrants. Most respondents, however, reported anxiety engendered by the absence of such awareness. This is reflected in the words of one teacher:

A twelve-year-old boy from Vietnam came to our school. We had no idea how to help him. We were afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. If we tried to take the initiative and made an error, there would be consequences for us. So, in the end, we backed off. In the classroom, he was" invisible." We didn't pay attention to him because we were afraid. There's no center with advisors to turn to in such situations. Information is missing, and actions are not coordinated.

Many respondents, particularly those working with refugees, risk experiencing culture shock and secondary traumatization. This affects their decision-making readiness, as described in that category (Kownacka, Piegat-Kaczmaryczk, Rejmer-Ronowicz, & Smoter, 2007). Faced with inconsistent regulations on foreigners and poor coordination in related activities, the respondents adopt a strategy they describe as "functional passivity in a dysfunctional system": avoiding bold actions in order to avoid errors.

4.2.2. Knowledge Management

4.2.3. Management And Problem-Solving Capability

This also affects knowledge management and problem-solving capability. A lawyer defending foreigners in deportation proceedings complains that the inconsistency of regulations results in officials interpreting them differently. To avoid mistakes, civil servants send precisely the same template decision to multiple foreigners. Since decision-makers lack coherence and a consistent strategy, the work of social service professionals becomes disorganized. The new migration strategy introduced the role of intercultural assistant, an individual serving as an intermediary between educational staff and refugee students and their families. This decision, however, was not consistently accompanied by tangible measures (Kozakoszczak, 2024). An intercultural assistant at a preschool for Ukrainian refugee children explains that she and other teachers from her city took part in training for intercultural assistants throughout the year, but her city did not allocate money to employ any of them. The same is true in many other cities in Poland, which is a loss of human capital. She works as an assistant because her foundation managed to obtain a one-time grant from the Taiwanese government for this position.

4.2.4. Synergistic Thinking

A positive finding, however, is that most respondents are aware of the need for synergistic thinking. Synergy is the cooperation of components within a complex system that produces beneficial functional and structural changes which none of the individual elements could produce on its own" (Uchmiast, 2008, p.111) Benedict argues that complex systems, including organizations, institutions, and associations, hold considerable potential for synergy, which is activated through interactions among their constituent elements (Benedict, 1970). Respondents recognize this and advocate cooperation among institutions and organizations working with migrants in order to improve coordination and develop new best practices.

4.3. Personal Competence

Personal competence is defined as a person's distinctive combination of traits - personality, knowledge, skills, and experience- that shape the manner in which they perform their professional tasks (Cardy & Selvarajan, 2006). It establishes other competences and defines both the individual's limitations and the potential for their growth (Kherunian, 2013). This research expanded this competence by including categories significant to social service professionals working with migrants in Poland. The expanded competence encompasses self-control, tolerance for uncertainty, openness, optimism, readiness for (inter)cultural learning, empathy, and patience.

4.3.1. Patience

Respondents introduced patience into the model. They understand it as the need to repeatedly explain cultural basics, the perseverance required for mutual understanding, and the persistence needed when working with clients more demanding than the average Polish client. Patience is strongly connected with the next category: empathy.

4.3.2. Empathy

Empathy may be subdivided into cognitive, the capacity to adopt another person's way of thinking and to perceive reality from their perspective, and emotional, the ability to share and feel another person's emotions. Studies show that empathy is more readily experienced toward individuals who resemble us (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 1997). If empathy is perceiving another person's situation as though one were that person, then it is necessary to discern both how we differ from and how we resemble that individual. Cultures vary in labeling emotions and in the rules shaping how emotions are experienced and expressed. Thus, when communicating our feelings, we should not assume that we know what the other person feels solely based on our limited knowledge of emotions. Similar limitations apply to cognitive empathy. Some situations elicit the same emotions across all cultures, others are experienced in divergent ways depending on the culture (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). The problems mentioned above also pertain to the research participants. The respondent notes that achieving a deeper understanding of foreigners requires transcending one's own experiences and cognitive schemas. A Ukrainian integration coordinator from the emerging Center for the Integration of Foreigners, which had previously assisted refugees from Ukraine, recounts how she instructed her Polish colleagues in moving beyond such cognitive schemas.

We, Ukrainian women, have been working at the center since the very first day it opened, and we've witnessed how our Polish colleagues react to cultural differences in family models. When we were conducting interviews, and it turned out that a woman wasn't working but was raising children at home, our Polish colleagues found this pathological. In Ukraine, it is normal for a mother to be a housewife and raise children. It is your husband who works. For Poles, if a woman doesn't work, she's seen as lazy. And we had to explain to our colleagues that, for us, this behavior is completely normal. These mothers need time to switch to the Polish lifestyle.

The respondent provided her colleagues with a lesson in cultural empathy grounded in difference, understood as the capacity to transcend one's own frameworks and view circumstances from the cultural perspective of migrant clients. Not all respondents, however, demonstrated this kind of empathy. A female social service professional engaged with Chechen families shared an example of how the lack of cultural empathy led one family to end cooperation:

We really felt for the Chechen women and wanted to help them. They were so young, having babies year after year, so dependent on their husbands. To us, as independent, working women, they seemed miserable. So we tried to help one of them by confronting her husband, telling him he should use protection or else his wife would wear herself out from so many pregnancies. The couple saw this as an insult and ended cooperation with us.

The social service professionals failed to respect the core values of Chechen culture, such as large families and the private nature of intimate relations. This example illustrates that the desire to assist alone is not sufficient to achieve a genuine communicative breakthrough in relations with people from different cultural backgrounds. To conduct a culturally sensitive conversation, one needs knowledge of how to communicate effectively in different cultural contexts (Green, 1982).

4.3.3. Readiness For (Inter)Cultural Learning

This connects with the following category: readiness for (inter)cultural learning: an encounter with another culture that involves a reflective attitude toward both one's own and the other culture as well as a toward how they interact (Breitenbach, 1979); "the readiness to approach intercultural situations as opportunities for learning rather than as unavoidable evils" (Bolten, 2006, p. 138). For respondents, this signifies being willing to learn from foreigners, to adopt a reflective distance toward Polish culture and reality, and to sustain the motivation to expand the knowledge and skills required for working with foreigners.

4.3.4. Optimism Toward Working With Migrants

Another category is optimism toward working with migrants. Professionals who possess optimism in task performance, when confronted with difficult or unusual situations, do not succumb to obstacles but persevere in seeking constructive solutions to problems. Respondents note that this skill proves particularly useful in working with migrants, where atypical situations and higher-level challenges are common. Some value working with migrants for precisely this reason, confirming that it makes their work more stimulating and less monotonous. These individuals demonstrate self-direction, openness to diversity, and the capacity to maintain a positive orientation toward migrants despite the challenges inherent in working with them. This is especially true for professionals working in NGOs. Conversely, civil servants expressed uncertainty about their ability to uphold high standards in working with migrants, citing poor coordination and systemic barriers.

4.3.5. Openness

The next category is openness. Respondents themselves added it to the model. In the Big Five theory, openness to experience may be understood as a disposition toward seeking life experiences, attributing positive meaning to them, exhibiting tolerance for novelty and cognitive curiosity, demonstrating creative imagination, receptivity to emotional states, intellectual inquisitiveness, and a readiness to reflect on social, political, and religious values (McCrae & Costa, 2005). Administrative staff in the focus group, who work with international students, noted that openness does not necessarily correlate with cultural knowledge. One may possess extensive knowledge about other cultures yet refrain from interacting with their representatives. A female civil servant from the Office for Foreigners, a practicing Buddhist, recounts assisting Tibetans and Vietnamese individuals who frequented a Buddhist temple. She befriended them and visits Vietnamese eateries just to talk with people working there. She emphasizes that these experiences enhance her understanding of the individuals she works with in the office. Studies by D'Ardenne and Mahtani support that an employee's extraprofessional social network friends, neighbors, and acquaintances from other cultures can facilitate a deeper understanding of foreign clients (2008). This enables the employees to approach emerging challenges from perspectives other than their own professional culture, which positions them as the experts presumed to know better than the foreign client (Green, 1982).

The same official notes that civil servants often do not adopt this approach toward migrants: "They are not open and tend to look down on foreigners. That comes from fear, which leads to mistrust. They don't know much about foreigners, so they fall back on stereotypes." This fear may be interpreted as an expression of uncertainty avoidance, a phenomenon inherently embedded in intercultural relations. Uncertainty arises from unfamiliarity with the foreign culture and from concerns about being unable to predict the behavior of the other side. Fear may be alleviated by openness to learning and by moving beyond unreflective, schema-driven judgments, an approach that facilitates understanding of the other party's behavior and, ultimately, fosters a sense of security (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988). Achieving this would require civil servants to relinquish the belief that openness to Polish culture is the sole responsibility of migrants, regarded as guests. They must develop their own skills for working with people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

4.3.6. Tolerance of Uncertainty

This issue is linked to the subsequent category, tolerance of uncertainty, which is a crucial factor in interpersonal communication. Individuals with low tolerance for uncertainty perceive the presence of individuals who are difficult to categorize as a threat to their own identity (self-categorization). This can lead them to adopt defensive responses, including xenophobic behaviors. From the perspective of intergroup communication, tolerance of uncertainty is regarded as part of a tradition transmitted through social institutions. An individual's orientation toward uncertainty is inadvertently absorbed from their cultural environment (Hofstede, Hofstede, 2007). Respondents often grappled with the dilemma of whether to interpret certain behaviors of migrants, regarded as inappropriate in Polish culture, as products of cultural difference or as intentional impoliteness. Rather than forming instant judgments, some respondents seek to verify the foreigner's intentions by making them aware of the cultural norms observed in Poland. These are individuals characterized by a high tolerance for uncertainty. By contrast, professionals who, when confronted with this dilemma, fail to explore the foreigner's intentions and immediately resort to stereotypical judgments may be characterized as having a low tolerance for uncertainty. Furthermore, respondents with personal migration experience note that Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian organizational culture, classified by Hofstede & Hofstede (2007) as low uncertainty avoidance cultures, demonstrate greater effectiveness in managing uncertainty than Polish culture.

4.3.7. Self-Control

Next category - self-control – is defined by respondents as a combination of categories from Bolten's model: the ability to control one's emotions, self-organization, and the ability to manage situations (Bolten, 2006, p. 138-143). The conducted research demonstrates that the respondents exhibit such manifestations of self-control as the regulation of their own emotions and behaviors, as well as those of foreigners, in challenging situations. At the same time, some professionals were found to struggle with managing their own anxiety triggered by cultural differences, which resulted in the repression of cultural differences as a significant element of the relationship with the foreigner.

4.4. Social Competence

According to Bolten (2007, p. 6), social competence in intercultural settings refers to the ability to transform the competence gained in a monocultural social context so that it can be effectively enacted in multicultural environments. For the researcher, social competence, thus conceived, encompasses tolerance, the capacity to take initiative, adaptability, and both communicative

and cooperative skills (Bolten 2006). As a result of contextualization, the model was expanded to encompass the categories of respect for others and the ability to teach foreigners the local culture.

4.4.1. Tolerance

The first category of this competence is tolerance. Bolten (2006, pp.139) characterizes it as the endeavor to comprehend and elucidate the reasons why others overstep the boundaries we regard as acceptable. Tolerance is achieved by viewing the act of transgressing such boundaries from the perspective of the transgressor (Bolten, 2006, pp. 138-139). One of the respondents' strengths lies in their awareness of both what tolerance entails and of what limits their own tolerance may have. The respondents describe tolerance as an attitude that does not emerge spontaneously but requires deliberate effort and reflection. It does not entail abandoning one's own convictions or refraining from expressing them; rather, it involves acknowledging that others have the right to hold different views. For the respondents, the limits of tolerance are defined by harm caused to another person. Similar definitions of tolerance can be found in the scholarly literature (Nikitorowicz, 2005). Civil servants participating in the focus groups admit that they are more inclined to exhibit tolerance of cultural diversity in the public sphere, while acceptance of individuals from distant cultural backgrounds in the private domain (family and social life) proves to be more challenging. By contrast, participants in the individual interviews provide numerous examples indicating that foreigners encounter not only intolerance but also racism in the public sphere, an issue the respondents emphatically condemn.

4.4.2. Collaborate In A Team of Specialists

Another category of social competence is the ability to collaborate in a team of specialists. In Bolten's original model (Bolten, 2006, p. 138-143), this category was formulated simply as the ability to cooperate; the respondents, however, refined it by stressing the importance of collaboration among professionals from different fields who work with migrants. Numerous researchers likewise stress that cooperation among professionals from different fields in working with culturally diverse individuals is essential for the development of new best practices. They also emphasize the importance of involving representatives of migrant communities in such cooperation, as doing so enables migrants to overcome cultural mistrust toward host-country institutions (Constantine & Sue, 2005; D'Ardenne & Machtani, 2008; Majda, Zalewska-Puchała, & Ogórek-Tęcza, 2010; Malinowski-Rubio, 2013; Samantrai, 2004). Almost all respondents recognize this need. Only a psychologist from a psychological-pedagogical counseling center and a social service professional from a Municipal Family Assistance Center admit that they do not use interpreters in their work with foreigners and see no need to do so, as most migrants in Poland come from post-Soviet countries and speak Russian, a language that the staff themselves also studied at school.

The aforementioned respondents fail to recognize that such proficiency, often in a language that is not native to the migrants themselves, is insufficient for conducting an accurate pedagogical diagnosis or undertaking social work (D'Ardenne & Machtani, 2008). The remaining respondents argue that the absence of coordination among institutions working with migrants limits effectiveness, whereas enhanced coordination would considerably improve their cooperation. It is equally important to recognize the establishment of interdisciplinary teams within the emerging Centers for the Integration of Foreigners and the Centers for Assistance to Migrants and Refugees (the former belonging to the public sector, the latter being a nationwide non-governmental organization). These teams include not only social service professionals and vocational and legal advisors from Poland, many of whom have personal migration experience, but also psychologists and integration counselors originating, for example, from Ukraine, Belarus, or Chechnya. Staff members from Ukraine reported that their background enabled them to reach Ukrainian war refugees more easily and to foster their trust in Polish institutions.

4.4.3. Respect For Others

The following category, respect for others, was added to the model by the respondents. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union enshrine respect for every individual, including the rights to dignity, freedom of movement and choice of residence, to seek asylum in cases of persecution, freedom of conscience and religion, and respect for cultural traditions. These documents emphasize that particular respect should be accorded to individuals occupying disadvantaged social positions (Puzynina, 2013). The respondents demonstrate respect toward foreigners who find themselves in particularly disadvantaged circumstances, such as those in detention or experiencing homelessness. Director of a homeless shelter that receives foreigners remarks that the qualities most essential to his work are "tolerance, respect, and the willingness to assist another human being. After all, it is always a person, whether a Pole, a Brazilian, or a Russian." When asked, however, whether this respect also extends to the culture of the homeless foreigner, the director of the homeless shelter explains that, in his work, culture is of little relevance, as his focus lies in rescuing and meeting the most basic human needs.

A significant proportion of respondents emphasize that foreigners, when engaging with Polish public social services, occupy a doubly disadvantaged position: both as guests in relation to hosts and as clients in relation to officials. Many respondents report experiences of discrimination and a lack of respect for the culture of non-EU foreigners within public services (except Ukrainians and Belarusians, who are regarded as coming from culturally proximate countries). For instance, a lawyer representing foreigners in deportation cases reported situations in which Border Guard Detention Centres failed to respect detainees' religious dietary requirements failed to respect detainees' religious dietary requirements. Nevertheless, despite such concerns, most respondents emphasize that respecting another human being necessarily includes respecting their culture.

4.4.4. Ability To Teach Foreigners About The Local Culture

Another category added to the model is the ability to teach foreigners about the local culture. Rowena Fong argues that professionals need to recognize when the values of two cultures differ, communicate these differences to clients, and adopt approaches that do not clash with clients' cultural values while at the same time facilitating their integration into the culture of the host country (Samantrai, 2004). The respondents distinguish between two forms of this process: teaching the rules of life in Poland during official interactions (as noted by public officials participating in the focus groups, for whom contact with foreigners is episodic), and organized instruction in Polish culture and everyday realities (a perspective relevant to teachers, psychologists, social workers, career counselors, employees of non-governmental organizations, and staff of Centers for the Integration of Foreigners, all of whom are involved throughout the process of integration).

4.4.5. Communication Skills

Teaching foreigners the local culture effectively also requires the skills found in the next category, namely, communication skills. In intercultural communication, participants face uncertainty over whether the signals they send and receive are interpreted correctly (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). Many aspects of intercultural communication have already been addressed in the previously discussed categories. Still, two issues warrant particular attention. The first is the widespread use of untrained interpreters by officials, employment agents, and. Such interpreters may be unable to adequately translate complex legal matters. Their involvement carries risks such as misunderstanding the interpreter's role, providing inaccurate translations, or, in small migrant communities, misusing information gained through interpretation (D'Ardenne & Mahtani, 2008). A clear strength is that the vast majority of respondents recognize the importance of cultural codes in intercultural communication. They particularly emphasize the risk that body language or tone of voice may be misinterpreted by speakers of the same language who come from different countries (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007).

4.5. Intercultural Competence

At the core of Bolten's model lies integrative (intercultural) competence, defined by the integration of the remaining four competences, the transfer of competences from a monocultural to a multicultural context, and the continual re-actualization of its categories in every new cultural context (Bolten 2010, p 281). As a result of contextualization, the model of intercultural competence for social service professionals was expanded to include polycentrism, proficiency in foreign languages, an understanding of the psychological and social processes associated with migration, and the ability to describe and explain intercultural processes in both one's own and other cultures.

4.5.1. Polycentrism

Bolten (2006, p. 139) describes polycentrism as "*an attempt to interpret key actions not from the standpoint of one's own cultural experience; the recognition of the autonomy of other cultures; and the readiness to relativize judgments concerning cultural specificities*". In professional competence, polycentrism is reflected, for instance, in some respondents' awareness of cultural differences related to how institutions operate. Within strategic competence, it is evident, *inter alia*, in the ability to perceive work with foreigners in terms of the benefits, costs, and risks it entails. In the domain of individual competence, it is expressed as culturally sensitive empathy; in the domain of social competence, as tolerance.

4.5.2. Proficiency In Foreign Languages

For social service professionals working with foreigners, proficiency in foreign languages, accompanied by familiarity with cultural codes and effective collaboration with interpreters, constitutes a core skill. Within strategic competence, this category is evident, for instance, in the ability, observed among some respondents, to locate interpreters for less commonly spoken languages. Within individual competence, it may involve an awareness that effective communication in a foreign language requires culturally sensitive empathy. Within social competence, it is manifested in the ability to employ different varieties of English when communicating with people from diverse countries.

4.5.3. Knowledge Of Psychological Processes Associated With Migration

Social service professionals working with foreigners should be aware of the specific challenges associated with migration, including culture shock, the dynamics of migrant family life, and both professional and social issues (Kubitsky, 2012; Sporakovsky, 1993). Familiarity with these processes is manifested in strategic competence, for example, through an awareness of the need for synergistic cooperation among various specialists working with foreigners. Professional competence encompasses, among other aspects, the awareness of the adaptive challenges that migrants face in a new country. Individual competence is manifested, *inter alia*, in the ability to preserve an optimistic stance toward working with migrants, even when the work is particularly demanding. Social competence, in turn, is articulated, for instance, in the acknowledgment of tolerance as a prerequisite for engaging with foreigners.

4.5.4. Describing And Elucidating Intercultural Processes In One's Own and Other Cultures

Being aware of how the cultures of the client and the social service professional may affect their relationship is considered one of the central aspects of intercultural (integrative) competence (Bolten, 2006; Piegat-Kaczmarczyk, 2007). Strategic competence is reflected, *inter alia*, in an awareness of the need for synergy in working with migrants. Professional competence entails recognizing that proficiency in performing tasks in a monocultural context facilitates their execution in multicultural settings (transfer competence). Individual competence is seen, *inter alia*, in openness to intercultural encounters. Social competence, by contrast, is realized, for instance, in the ability to introduce foreigners to Polish culture.

4.6. Institutional and Organizational Conditions Shaping Intercultural Competence

Numerous scholars highlight the importance of the institutional, social, and political context for the development and practice of intercultural competence among social service professionals working with migrants. Colin Lago underscores the role of historical and political processes in fostering discrimination and racism within institutions (2006). Rowena Fong introduces the concept of culturally competent contextual social work, which is grounded in an ecological model encompassing the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. The model considers the political and cultural contexts of the host country and the migrants' homeland (Fong 2004, p. 1-16). Lenninger proposes a model of interculturally competent work with migrants that incorporates political, legal, and social conditions (Majda, Zalewska-Puchała, & Ogórek-Tęcza, 2010, p. 15). Bolten likewise asserts that intercultural competence is actualized within a specific socio-cultural context (Bolten, 2011, p. 3-10). For contextualization, and on the basis of the conducted research, a contextual variable was incorporated into Bolten's original model: institutional and organizational conditions of intercultural competence (Bolten, 2006, pp. 39-43).

4.6.1. Work In A Neglected Area

The first realization for considering context is that it may be termed working in a neglected area. Most respondents complain of the absence of strategy and coordination in migration policy, whether at the macro-, meso-, or micro-level. Representatives of various social service professions identify problems such as inconsistencies in regulations governing work with foreigners

or the absence of essential legal frameworks. Consequently, measures designed to frequently support foreigners have no clear place in the system. This may stem from the fact that, for many years, no broader debate on migration policy took place in Poland, and it was only the mass influx of war refugees from Ukraine that catalyzed to development of a strategy (Łodziński, Szonert, 2023).

4.6.2. The Social Service Professional As A Representative of Authority

Many respondents observe that relationships between social services and foreigners are characterized by a double asymmetry. First, they are shaped by the service provider–client dynamic. Second, they reflect the asymmetry between host and guest. This problem is particularly evident in the public service sector. Some respondents observe that Polish organizational culture is marked by high power distance. Consequently, public service professionals often see little reason to adapt to foreigners (for instance, by cultivating their own intercultural competence) and instead place the burden of adaptation entirely on the migrant.

4.6.3. Intercultural Competence Within A Rigid System

Most respondents observe that Polish organizational culture is characterized by a relatively high degree of power distance, collectivism, and low tolerance for uncertainty (Hofstede, Hofstede, 2007). These characteristics constrain both individualized and innovative responses to cultural differences as well as to the challenges encountered in working with foreigners. In this context, some employees attempt to move beyond existing frameworks and independently seek support for their clients, while others choose to ignore the role of cultural differences in their work. The lack of institutional flexibility toward cultural diversity is a common theme in respondents' accounts. Crucially, the development of intercultural competence can occur only within institutional systems that are open to multiculturalism (Constantine & Sue, 2005).

4.6.4. The Social Service Professional As Advocate For Foreigners And Agent of Social Change

Given the circumstances described above, some respondents assume the role of social change agents and advocate for foreigners, seeking to promote institutional reform, a stance observed even among those employed in the public sector. An illustrative example is a lawyer defending migrants in deportation proceedings who succeeded in changing the interpretation of regulations at the provincial level. Such efforts are crucial, as migrants in Poland lack political representation, and their participation in public life is limited to founding non-governmental organizations, which exert only limited influence on institutional and policy change. No one should be excluded from access to public services, and the responsibility of social service professionals in their dealings with migrants is to deliver the highest possible standard of service, regardless of the client's background (Malinowski–Rubio, 2013).

4.6.5. Contextualized Intercultural Competence of Social Service Professionals

This research enabled the adaptation of J. Bolten's model of intercultural competence to the context of Polish social service professionals engaged with migrants (Bolten 2006, p.39-43). The contextualized model is presented in Figure 2. The research led to the introduction of new categories and a contextual variable into the model. Within professional competence, the additional elements include "Proficiency in task performance," "Commitment to tasks," and "Experience in working with people." Individual competence was extended to include: "Patience," "Openness," and "Self-control." Social competence was broadened to cover: Respect for others, "Ability to teach foreigners the local culture," and "Ability to work with a team of specialists." Integrative (intercultural) competence draws additionally on "Knowledge of psychological and social processes associated with migration." A new contextual variable emerged: "Institutional conditions shaping the intercultural competence of social service professionals," which encompassed: "Work in a neglected area," "The social service professional as a representative of authority," "Intercultural competence in a rigid system," and "The social service professional as advocate for foreigners and agent of social change."

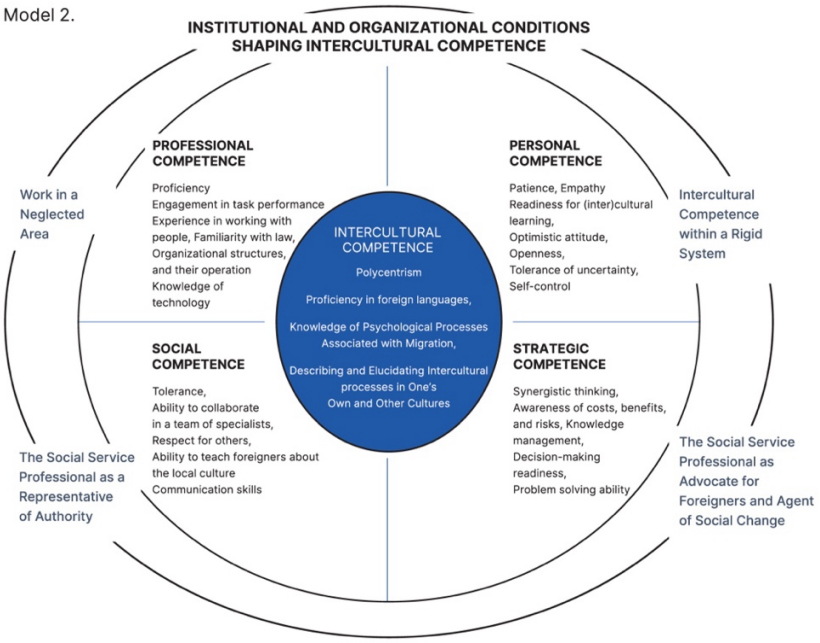

Figure 3: Contextualized Model Of Intercultural Competence. It was first presented in the work Anna Linka (2019), Intercultural competence of social service workers [*Intercultural Competence of Social Services Professionals*], University of Szczecin Press, p. 379. The model shown in this article is an updated version adapted to the situation of 2025.

5. Recommendations and Future Research

The findings of this research give rise to several recommendations for strengthening intercultural competence among social service professionals in Poland. First, comprehensive intercultural education should be prioritised, with particular emphasis on the psychological and social processes that underpin intercultural relations. Such training should also include opportunities to develop foreign language proficiency, as linguistic preparation remains a key factor in effective communication with migrant clients. With respect to professional competence, targeted training is needed on cultural differences in organisational functioning and on strategies for preventing institutional discrimination and racism. Strengthening social competence requires closer interdisciplinary collaboration among professionals to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, enhance coordination, and promote the development of good practices. This should be complemented by systematic training in intercultural communication, including effective cooperation with interpreters.

In the domain of strategic competence, social service professionals would benefit from training that helps them recognise and harness the potential of cultural diversity and migratory experience, while also equipping them to respond more effectively to the challenges associated with working with migrants and refugees. For individual competence, education should focus on managing fear of cultural difference, cultivating culturally sensitive empathy, and developing empathy grounded in an appreciation of cultural diversity.

Regarding the contextual variable "institutional and organisational conditions shaping intercultural competence," there is a clear need for improved coordination among institutions and organisations supporting foreigners, as well as better information exchange within and across these structures. Strengthening the role of professionals who act as agents of social change is equally important, and greater involvement of frontline staff in decision-making processes would contribute to more responsive and coherent institutional practices.

At the time of writing, Centers for the Integration of Foreigners are being established across Poland, and their remit is likely to include training professionals who work with migrants. This creates an important opportunity for systematic capacity building. Future research should reassess the competencies of social service professionals after such training programmes are implemented, to evaluate their impact and identify areas requiring further improvement. The findings presented in this study may be of particular value to these emerging institutions and to all professionals involved in the integration of migrants.

6. Conclusions and Limitations of the Research

This study provided answers to the research questions outlined in the introduction by identifying the categories through which social service professionals conceptualise intercultural competence and by contextualising Bolten's model within the organisational and cultural environment of Polish social services (Bolten, 2006, pp. 138-143). These aims were best served by qualitative methods, which enabled an in-depth and context-sensitive exploration of the phenomenon. As with all qualitative research, the findings do not claim statistical representativeness. Instead, they offer an analytically rich account of how intercultural competence is understood and enacted by professionals working with migrants. Nevertheless, several dimensions of the model developed here could be operationalised in future quantitative studies to generate a more representative picture of the competencies of social service staff across Poland.

The issue investigated in this study has gained particular significance in light of the rise of refugee and economic migration to Poland in the last decade. Although Poland has historically lacked a coherent migration and integration strategy, recent developments, including the 2024 publication of *Regaining Control. Ensuring Security. Migration Strategy for 2025–2030* and the establishment of Foreigners' Integration Centres represent important steps toward institutionalising integration policy (Bankowicz, Pawlak & Łukasiewicz, 2025). The perspectives of social service professionals, as reflected in this study, offer valuable insights that can inform these ongoing policy developments and contribute to the creation of more culturally responsive and effective institutional structures.

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