# Intercultural or post-cultural communication? Reflecting on mistakes

Guest post by Paola Giorgis

Some years ago, I worked with a total of about 350 refugees who, with the help of some radical activists, had become squatters, taking over an empty building which occupied almost an entire block. Most were from Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan; the majority were young men, a few women with children, and there were one or two couples with babies. A group of associations had gathered to offer help and, as an activist and volunteer in an association for human rights, I decided to participate. With the on-and-off support of the local Institutions (mainly town council and prefecture), the group of associations developed a project which had the goal of meeting basic needs – food, shelter, health care – and then organizing the integration of the refugees into the region through accommodation, language classes and vocational training courses. What I liked about this project was that its goal was not assistance, but rather creating a path to autonomy and independence. The first to be integrated were the women with their children, then the vulnerable males (young men with diseases or handicaps), and then all the rest. The project lasted for about one year, and at the end of that time, all the refugees were, more or less successfully, integrated and settled in the region.

Most of the activists, me included, had a regular job, so we had to organize shifts to bring food (which was offered by some associations involved in the project), to take women and children to hospital, to the lawyers who were following their cases, or to the communal baths, as the place where the refugees stayed had no water facilities.

As one can imagine, conditions were really hard. People were crowded into a small space, with no heating or electricity, they were frustrated and angry, and these conditions sometimes fueled fights, which we volunteers had to deal with – trying not to involve the police as much as we could, as they would have immediately evacuated the building.

I felt frustrated and angry myself, as I could not conceive how so many people could be left to live in such conditions in a so-called civilized western country. There were many political issues at stake, and things were not always easy within the different groups of volunteers and activists, as well as between the associations involved.

With no formal, or even informal, training, I found myself confronted with an asymmetrical intercultural context of relations involving all the sensitive issues of potential intercultural misunderstanding and conflict.

| issues at stake | volunteers | refugees |
| --- | --- | --- |
| role – issue of power | active (the 'givers'; the 'helpers') | passive (the 'receivers'; the 'helped') |
| gender | mostly female | mostly male |
| age | mostly middle-aged women | mostly young men |
| religion | mostly non-religious or atheist | mostly religious |
| language | mostly monolingual | mostly monolinguals (different languages than the volunteers) |

To manage each of these issues, cultural and linguistic mediators were involved, but things were not always easy for them either, as sometimes they were not accepted by their own community – when, for example, they belonged to a different ethnic group than the majority of their group – and it sometimes happened that we volunteers had to mediate between the groups and their own mediators.

In a few words, situation was very complex, I was totally unprepared to deal with it, and I made all of the possible mistakes.

First of all, as there were so many people, I perceived them as groups rather than individuals – on one floor were the Sudanese, on the other the Somali women, on the next the Somali men, etc. It was only little by little, and when people were less, that I could see and appreciate differences between them, but sometimes it was too late as they were about to leave. Another mistake was that, as they all had very basic needs, I was mainly focused on doing things – bringing food, taking them to hospital, etc. – rather than trying to get some time to simply be there, stay with them, and get to know them. That attitude contributed to creating fixed roles on both sides, and sometimes I felt frustrated as I had the impression I was perceived only as a problem-solving machine. Fixed roles also meant that I saw the refugees as people in need, which of course they were, but the fact was that I could only see one side of the coin, and I was not able to notice and relish their resources and skills, which of course were many – and which, again, I was able to see only later on in our relationship. Given that several issues were at stake simultaneously, I found it difficult to cope with them: being totally untrained for this context, I swung from an almost omnipotent attitude to a

sense of impotence, a fluctuation which caused frustration to me as well as to the refugees. The sense of guilt which derived from this fueled my sense of inadequacy, and only after a while was I able to replace it with a sense of responsibility able to trace good boundaries, which prevented both peaks and valleys and therefore offered greater stability to the refugees, and to myself too.

Though I made a lot of mistakes, some of the refugees were able to see beyond them (a good example of their resources and skills, by the way), and that brought about several episodes where true communication occurred. For example, one day an old wise man from Sudan invited me to have a coffee in a nearby café. As soon as we got out of the building, our roles blurred: I was no longer the person who provided food, and he was no longer a person in need, but we were just two people going to have a coffee together. In the café, we talked in English about our families, and exchanged comments and opinions about children's education. Another day, a woman invited me into her room – women rarely went out of the building, and when they did, it was to go to the doctor, or to the hospital for their kids. She offered to comb my hair; I sat down and she combed my hair in silence because I could not speak her language, nor she could speak mine. It was a precious moment of silent dialogue, as when another woman invited me to have tea in her room. We spent some time together drinking tea in silence, smiling to each other. And though there was actually not much to laugh about in general, it also happened that, with some of the refugees, we enjoyed a good laugh together – for example, we often laughed at my efforts to say some words in their language. Actually, we found out that trying to look at things, and ourselves, from a slightly different and, when possible, even humorous perspective was a good way to relieve tensions and stress, and to create connections.

We were painfully aware that this subversion of roles was only temporary, and that we would soon return to our highly asymmetrical conditions; yet, these moments created the opportunity for relationship and dialogue. I think these episodes occurred when (and because) we reciprocally put down our pre-established roles (in fact, when we decided, more or less consciously, to subvert them), and we were mutually open, curious, and generous. Then, are these attitudes – not taking people or people's roles for granted, openness, curiosity, generosity and a little sense of humor – the fundamental characteristics of good intercultural communication? I don't think these were episodes where intercultural communication occurred: we did not communicate so much between cultures as between individuals. Therefore, I now wonder: haven't we devoted too much attention to 'culture' in 'intercultural communication', and not enough to individuals as the primary protagonists, and on what can encourage (or hinder) communication between them – which does not necessarily have much to do with 'culture'? So, I ask myself whether it would be useful to critically consider intercultural communication itself, focusing more on what happens between individuals rather than between cultures. In sum: what if we try to think beyond cultures, and consider post-cultural communication as an option?

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