The Interpreters' Newsletter 2022 (27), 43-62
DOI: 10.13137/2421-714X/34391 ISSN 1591-4127 (print) ISSN 2421-714X (online)
https://www.openstarts.units.it/dspace/handle/10077/2119

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Italian mediation services: a focus on mediators' perceptions in Emilia-Romagna

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Abstract

Sharing the same physical and visual space with the other two participants in the interaction has traditionally been a standard working condition for Italian "mediators" – a profession that entails community interpreting, interlanguage and intercultural communication, and facilitating migrants' access to public services. This, however, was clearly impossible during the Covid-19 pandemic, when mediators worked mostly remotely. In order to investigate the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-19-related measures on the profession, an online survey was conducted with mediators working in the Emilia-Romagna region about the perceptions of their work during the pandemic. Respondents reported that during the Covid-19 pandemic mediation became more difficult and stressful than in pre-Covid-19 times. A thematic analysis of responses revealed that the main reasons for this were connected with remote mediation, especially with the lack of non-verbal contact that hindered empathy and limited mediators' agency.

Keywords

Mediation, *mediazione*, Covid-19, survey, remote interpreting, public service interpreting, community interpreting

* Although both authors shared article conceptualization, writing and revising, Ira Torresi is responsible for the Introduction and §1-3; Federica Ceccoli for §4-6.

Introduction

As all crises do, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of clear and effective communication between public service providers and their users, including those who do not speak the official national language (Federici 2021: 181). In Italy, professional communication services between public services and migrants are largely subsumed by the long-established practice of *mediazione*, which is the focus of this paper. A first caveat is in order here: we are aware that in Translation and Interpreting (T&I) Studies "mediation" increasingly recurs as a hypernym for both translation and interpreting. In particular, "intercultural mediation (IM) is a form of translatorial intervention which takes account of the impact of cultural distance *when translating or interpreting*" (Katan 2013: 84, our emphasis). Since we will be referring only to the Italian scene, in this paper we will use the term "mediation/mediazione" (which admittedly *does* entail both translating and interpreting). In the Italian context, this term refers to a practice that encompasses community/public service interpreting, intercultural and interlanguage communication, and facilitating migrants' access to public services. Section §1 expands more on this practice. §2 offers a short overview of the kind of impact that the remote mode might be expected to have on mediation, based on existing literature on remote interpreting (including during the Covid-19 pandemic). §3 outlines the aims and scope of our research, the results of which are discussed in §4-5 and in the Conclusions.

1. About mediation (as *mediazione*)

In Italy, interlanguage and intercultural communication services called *mediazione* were first introduced between the 1980s and the 1990s in public services because of the increase in immigration flows and the consequent need to provide linguistic support and promote the understanding of cultural differences (Favaro 2001). Despite its relatively long history, the practice of mediation is still extremely heterogeneous, and definitions of the mediator's role and tasks vary from one institution or region to another (Belpiede 2002).

The very terminology around mediation is fuzzy. While one more comprehensive version of the term is "interlinguistic and intercultural mediation" (Luatti 2011), the governments of the regions that have compiled a profile for this job[1] use the term "intercultural mediator", without any reference to the interlinguistic side of the practice. The government of the Emilia-Romagna region (the area where we conducted our study) describes the intercultural mediator as someone who "is able to identify and convey the needs of the foreign user, assist and facilitate his or her integration into the host country, carry out activities of interface between the user and the network of local services, and encourage actions aimed at the promotion of interculturality" (Regional Government

1 Only 13 regions out of 20 have done so (Barbieri *et al.* 2021: 7).

Decree no. 1371/2010[2]). Nonetheless, mediators in Emilia-Romagna are in fact "employed for interpreting" (Baraldi/Gavioli 2020: 177) – a job requirement that is probably subsumed implicitly under "convey[ing] the needs of the foreign user" and "activities of interface". Mediators are, however, not required to have any kind of education or training in T&I. In Emilia-Romagna, they may actually qualify for the job either through a special course (which does not include T&I) or through professional practice alone[3]. At any rate, the public administrations of Emilia-Romagna usually have contracts with agencies or cooperatives that provide mediation services – they do not hire individual mediators directly (Barbieri *et al.* 2021: 19).

The lack of a univocal definition and terminology is related to the national legislative gap. Although the role of mediators was mentioned (but in no way defined) in the Italian legislation with the Turco-Napolitano law of 1998[4], later amended and abolished by the Bossi-Fini law of 2002, there is still no nationally recognized regulatory framework for this profession, but there are only regional and/or local regulations and/or guidelines of private bodies or agencies.

This legislative gap is also evident in the lack of a professional certification system and of a register of qualified professionals. The tasks performed by Italian mediators are indeed often equivalent to the functions covered by community or public service interpreters in other countries of the world. However, there is no mention of mediation, as such or as a version of community/public service interpreting, in the recently revised UNI standard 11591/2015. Nor can mediators join major national or local T&I's associations (Assointerpreti, AITI, ANITI, AIIC Italia, TradInFo), which do not include mediation among members' or candidates' professional categories[5]. Being excluded from T&I professional associations means that mediators do not have access to the certification and lifelong learning opportunities provided by such associations, some of which (including remote interpreting training, which will be relevant in the following) are specific for interpreting-related professions and may not be available elsewhere out of university training.

At the same time, in professional practice and despite scholarly work that argues otherwise (e.g. Falbo 2013), there is some perceived difference in terms of what is expected of mediators as opposed to what is expected of interpreters.

2 <http://sitiarcheologici.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Approfondimenti/approfondimento/Pagine/Mediazione/EmiliaRomagna_scheda.html> (viewed 9/4/22).

3 <https://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/urp/servizi-e-strumenti/domande-frequenti-faq/sociale/cittadini-stranieri/come-si-consegue-la-qualifica-di-mediatore-interculturale> (viewed 18/7/22).

4 <https://www1.interno.gov.it/mininterno/site/it/sezioni/servizi/old_servizi/legislazione/immigrazione/legislazione_200.html> (viewed 18/7/22).

5 <https://www.assointerpreti.it/diventa-socio/>; article 7 of <https://aiti.org/it/regolamento-ammissioni>; <https://www.aniti.it/requisiti-di-ammissione/>; <https://aiic.org/site/world/join/process/explained/prerequisites>; <https://www.tradinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Modulo-di-iscrizione-SOCIO-ORDINARIO.pdf>, all viewed on 19/2/22.

An interpreter is expected to have mainly linguistic and terminological competence and specific training in interpretation. Conversely, additionally to being proficient in their working languages, mediators are expected to have a thorough knowledge of cultures and competence in facilitating intercultural relationships (Gavioli 2009: 22-23). They are also supposed to foster migrants' integration and access to institutions (Rudvin/Spinzi 2014: 58), as well as opening the space for intercultural communication (Baraldi 2009) and "positive intercultural relations" (Baraldi 2015: 59).

Those expectations outline that the mediator's role is a particularly active one that entails a certain degree of agency, intended here as the ability and responsibility to independently choose the ways and contents of one's actions (Baraldi 2019). Not only do mediators facilitate communication with their translation and interpretation activities (which implies that they are in fact interpreters and translators), but they are also involved in clarifying cultural implicit elements, creating shared meanings and common ground (Tonioli 2016). Their activities additionally include coordinating the flow of information (Russo/Mack 2005; Gavioli 2009), which appears very similar to the interactional role of the dialogue interpreter described by Wadensjö (1998).

It seems, then, that even in the face of unclear legal and professional standards (or perhaps due to this lack of clarity), the expectations towards mediators in Italy include and perhaps exceed those that are held towards public service or community interpreters elsewhere in the world. In the following, then, we will intend mediation (the term traditionally used by the Italian public administration) as a *de facto* synonym with the profession internationally known as public service interpreting (PSI). In this respect, we agree with Merlini and Gatti (2015: 140) that "the schematic classification into typologies of behaviour proves to be rather ill-suited to an in-depth theoretical analysis of real-life interpreting practice"[6]. One example of a less schematic analysis of real-life practice is Delizée (2022), whose field observations of mediators' work in a French hospital during the Covid-19 crisis highlight the importance of mediators' agency in shaping not only the communication, but also the very social situation they engage in. We hope that our research will contribute to shed some more light on how mediators' (and interpreters') agency is perceived by mediators themselves, in particular at a time of crisis and in RI settings.

2. Covid-19, remote interpreting and mediation

The Italian Presidential Decree of March 9, 2020, marked the beginning of a period of general lockdown where physical movement was only possible for essential work. As a result, many of the community and public services for which mediators worked were provided online only. They included schools, social

6 Merlini and Gatti use the term "healthcare interpreting" to describe the work of *mediatori* (Merlini /Gatti 2015: 146), consistently with their critique of rigid notions of the interpreter's "role".

services, and public administration at large, excluding healthcare – telehealth was not systematically adopted in Italy. This meant that all mediation and interpreting services also needed to be provided mostly online, through remote interpreting (RI) tools.

RI was first adopted in community settings to meet the language needs in countries such as Australia (a pioneer in this area, with RI services established as early as in the 1970s to cater for minority language communities in non-urban areas) and the USA (in the 1980s) (Kelly 2008). In Italy, it was introduced only more recently. VEASYT[7] was the first company to introduce professional remote video-interpretation services in Italy in 2012, first in sign language and then in several verbal languages. Allowing for 30-minute interpreting slots, up to a maximum of 120 minutes, VEASYT appears specially tailored to the needs of community interpreting or mediation rather than the conference setting. Videoconferencing platforms, however, were never popular among Italian public administrations, and mediation continued to be largely practised with mediators and mediation users being present in the same room until the Covid-19 outbreak.

This does not mean that RI was not widely spread – conversely, it was rapidly gaining ground, in community interpreting (SHIFT 2017) and conference interpreting alike (Moser-Mercer 2003, 2005a, 2005b). Initially, interpreters appeared to see it as a threat rather than an opportunity (Gentile 2016: 276; Gentile 2021: 164-166). In terms of mediation as understood in the Italian context, the use of pre-pandemic remote mediation was certainly limited and mostly in the form of telephone mediation in the healthcare setting (Amato 2017). Conversely, in the Covid-19 era most mediation jobs took place online, on platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom or Microsoft Teams that allowed for what Braun (2015: 352) would define as three-way videoconferencing, with each participant including the mediator in separate locations.

This dramatic shift of setting and working conditions happened so abruptly that some mediators did not have the time (nor the opportunity, see §2) to train ahead for RI, nor did the public service providers have the time to train on how to best conduct online meetings (Bernardi/Gnani 2022: 65). Conversely, training seems to be a critical factor of RI success in pediatric therapy settings (Sultanić 2022: 96) and legal settings (AVIDICUS project, Braun 2016). According to Braun and Taylor (2012), in the first edition of AVIDICUS (2008-2011) video-mediated interpreting amplified terminology and turn management problems, as well as creating additional difficulties related to lack of eye contact and sound quality issues, and increasing interpreters' cognitive load, early signs of fatigue, and lack of empathy with their interlocutors. Such results largely confirmed those of the ViKiS project (Braun 2007) which analyzed videoconference interpreting in business settings. RI-related issues were effectively reduced in AVIDICUS-2 (2011-2013) by training both interpreters and police officers on the use of RI before its implementation, and by using high-quality equipment. These measures reduced the interpreters' perceived level of stress and the number of interpreting errors. Still, the interviews conducted during AVIDICUS-3 (2013-2016) with legal profes-

7 <https://www.veasyt.com/it/live.html> (viewed 30/3/22).

sionals, interpreters, and representatives of videoconferencing service providers revealed an insufficient awareness on the part of many legal and institutional representatives regarding the complexity of videoconferencing interpretation, and a lack of adequate training for interpreters (Braun *et al.* 2016).

The ViKiS and AVIDICUS projects have brought attention to the coordinating role of the dialogue interpreter, which is both amplified and hampered by RI. Interpreters were more frequently called upon to manage the interaction and this "led them to do more coordination than in traditional bilateral interpreting assignments" (Braun 2015: 362). This increased burden adds up to the "peculiar challenges of RI, which include the lack of contextual cues, difficulties with turn-taking, overlapping talk, deixis, and acoustic strain, to mention only a few" (Amato/Mack 2022: 469).

Having to resort to RI literally overnight, without training or notice at a time of global health crisis (a frightful and burdensome situation in itself), can only count as further aggravating factors. In fact, this abrupt shift seems to have had a heavy impact even on simultaneous interpreters, a category that may be perceived to be more familiar with working through headphones and being physically (although not emotionally) more separated from the interpreted interaction than mediators and dialogue interpreters. A survey conducted among professional simultaneous interpreters in 2021 highlighted a range of causes for interpreters' distress while performing RI, from acoustic problems leading to hearing loss, to feeling detached from the interpreted situation, pointing to loss of empathy (Ferri 2022).

It is easy to imagine that mediators, too, would experience RI as an increased cognitive burden and as a challenge to their active role, just like the dialogue interpreters involved in AVIDICUS and ViKiS, while struggling with acoustic problems and loss of empathy as much as the simultaneous interpreters surveyed by Ferri (*Ibid.*).

3. Aim and scope of the study, research design and methodological issues

In this study, we aim at answering one overarching research question: in which way(s), if any, have the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences (e.g. lockdowns, remote work, etc.) affected mediators' work?

This is complemented by two more detailed sub-questions:

How did the transition to *remote* mediation impact on mediators' working conditions and stress levels? And,

Did the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have an impact on how mediators exert their *agency*?

The research questions were further detailed into the online questionnaire whose English translation can be found in Appendix 1. The survey design included 31 questions. The first 10 questions were aimed at collecting socio-demographic information about mediators, while the remaining 21 were both multiple choice and open-ended questions, aimed at eliciting subjective responses on mediators' perceptions about their profession during the Covid-19 pandemic.

One methodological issue arose with reference to the wording we should adopt in the questionnaire for *agency*, as respondents may not have the necessary metalanguage to easily grasp what is meant by the specific English term *agency* that is used in academic circles. Due to the need to translate the term into Italian, we used the descriptive phrase *ruolo attivo* ("active role") in the questionnaire. We were aware that this would shift the focus of the research question from the specific notion of agency to the more general one of active participation (as an acknowledged speaker) in the mediated interaction, but we felt this wording would be easier to grasp for our respondents, who had no way of asking for clarification while answering the questionnaire. It is worth mentioning again that, due to the gaps in the professionalization of mediation discussed in §1, mediators do not necessarily receive formal higher education in mediation, T&I or intercultural communication.

For data to be internally consistent, we limited our scope to mediators working for mediation agencies in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, a region in northern Italy. This meant that respondents could be expected to share comparable working contexts in terms of legal and administrative framework, working conditions, broader social context, and so on. Seven mediation agencies located in six different cities (Reggio Emilia, Modena, Bologna, Forlì, Ravenna and Ferrara) were contacted by e-mail and asked to distribute the link to the anonymous survey (via Google Forms) to their pool of mediators. The online survey remained open for eight weeks between February and March 2022, and 27 mediators responded in this timeframe. The response rate cannot be established, as we do not have information on the number of mediators who were contacted by each agency[8].

The socio-demographic data of the sample (first 10 questions) is presented in §4. The answers to the remaining 21 questions were coded and qualitatively analyzed by means of thematic analysis jointly by the two authors, based on the original responses in Italian. The most recurrent themes that emerged are described in the sub-sections of §5, and exemplified by excerpts of the original responses translated into English by the authors.

4. Socio-demographic data

The 27 mediators who completed the online survey were between 20 and 64 years of age at the time of the survey (Table 1) and lived in 18 distinct locations across the Emilia-Romagna region. 5 of them (18.5%) were born in Italy, while 22 (81.5%) were born abroad.

8 As mentioned in §1, in Emilia-Romagna only agencies and cooperatives are in contact with the freelance mediators they hire, and there is no public list of professionals that can be consulted.

Age range	No. of respondents	%
20-24	1	3.7%
25-29	0	0%
30-34	10	37%
35-39	4	14.8%
40-44	4	14.8%
45-49	1	3.7%
50-60	6	22.2%
Over 60	1	3.7%

Table 1. Age of respondents (total = 27)

The breakdown by country of birth (Table 2) is comparable to both data collected by the Regional administration among mediators (Barbieri *et al.* 2021: 35) and that of the general population of immigrants living in Emilia-Romagna[9].

County of birth	No. of respondents	%
Italy	5	18.5%
Morocco	4	14.8%
China	3	11.1%
Albania	2	7.4%
Nigeria	2	7.4%
Pakistan	2	7.4%
Turkey	1	3.7%
'Abroad'	1	3.7%
Ghana	1	3.7%
Ivory Coast	1	3.7%
Libya	1	3.7%
Romania	1	3.7%
Tunisia	1	3.7%
Moldova	1	3.7%
Egypt	1	3.7%

Table 2. Countries of origin of respondents (total = 27)

The data relating to the time of residence in Italy (Table 3) show that the mediators who were not born in Italy are long-term migrants, who moved to Italy more than 15 years before the time of the survey (20 respondents, i.e. 90.9% of

9 <https://www.tuttitalia.it/emilia-romagna/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri-2021/> (visited 5/8/22).

the sub-sample of 22 foreign-born mediators), or at least 10 years prior to the survey (2 respondents, or 9.1% of the foreign-born mediators).

Time of residence	No. of respondents	%
More than 15 years	20	90.9%
10-15 years	2	9.1%

Table 3. Time of residence in Italy of foreign-born respondents (total = 22)

When asked how they would define their profession, 22 participants (81.5%) described themselves as "cultural and language mediators", 3 (11.1%) as "cultural mediators", 1 (3.7%) as a "language mediator", and 1 (3.7%) as an "interpreter". By adopting the definition "cultural and language mediators", most of them emphasize the importance of both the linguistic and cultural sides of the practice and do not align with the terminology used by the Emilia-Romagna region (§1, Barbieri *et al.* 2021) that only mentions the intercultural aspect.

Definition	No. of respondents	%
Cultural and language mediator	22	81.5%
Cultural mediator	3	11.1%
Interpreter	1	3.7%
Language mediator	1	3.7%

Table 4. Respondents' definition of their job (total = 27)

As shown in Table 5, most respondents had considerable working experience as mediators/PSI. This suggests that they had started their professional career long before Covid-19 measures (including RI) set in, and may have noticed any changes that such measures brought in the professional practice.

Experience as mediator	No. of respondents	%
More than 14 years	10	37%
10-14 years	3	11.1%
5-9 years	7	25.9%
0-4 years	7	25.9%

Table 5. Number of years worked as a mediator/PSI (total = 27)

As to the settings in which they worked as mediators (a question that allowed for multiple choices and also for a free description under the option "Other"), schools were mentioned by 17 (62.9%); hospitals by 20 (74.1%); police stations, courthouses, and social services by 4 (14.8%) each; and shelters and prisons by 2 (7.4%) each. The variety of working settings mentioned by most respondents, as well as the positioning of the question as the last socio-demographic item in the questionnaire,

suggests that the answers to questions 11-32, detailed in §5, were not referred to any one specific setting, but to respondents' working experience as a whole.

5. Analysis and discussion of mediators' perceptions of Covid-19 impact on their professional practice

Answers to questions 11-31 were analyzed by means of thematic analysis. The most recurrent themes are arranged in this section following the two exploratory research questions outlined in §3. Therefore, §5.1 investigates the impact of the transition to remote mediation on mediators' working conditions and stress levels; while §5.2 deals with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on how mediators exert their agency (worded as "active role") in the interaction.

5.1 Transition to remote mediation

5.1.1 Previous RI experience, equipment, training

26 mediators out of 27 (96.3%) reported working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic, and for 15 of them (a slight majority, 55.6%) this was a new mode of mediation since they had never worked remotely before (while the remaining 12, or 44.4%, had already practised remote mediation). The majority of the respondents (23 out of 27, 85.2%) indicated that they had the adequate equipment to work remotely, while the 4 participants (14.8%) who did not have the necessary equipment said that the tools they would need were a business mobile phone (other than their personal one), a good internet connection, a computer, and a headset.

Additionally, 18 respondents (66.7%) would have liked or would still like (at the time of the survey) to take a remote mediation training course. The primary areas of interest for further training were the following: i) computer and technology skills (especially related to the newest applications and platforms used to hold remote meetings); ii) how to be prepared and the best mediation strategies when working remotely; iii) psychological issues related to both working remotely and during a world health crisis.

5.1.2 RI-induced change in mediation techniques and strategies

14 mediators (51.9%) did not perceive any change in the mediation techniques and strategies they usually adopt even after the transition to remote mediation, whereas 13 mediators (48.1%) did report a change.

A thematic analysis identified one main category of causes of those changes, namely the frequent absence of nonverbal communication in remote mediations (without or with poor video connection). This absence resulted in a mode of mediation that was more reliant on written material that could be consulted offline,

as reported in Excerpt 1, or in a kind of interpreting that was perceived as a mere interlinguistic transfer of verbal elements ("translation", as in Excerpt 2)[10].

> 1. They [my mediation techniques and strategies] have changed in that they [mediations] were online rather than in-person, so there were no *extralinguistic and contextual elements, no direct relation and sometimes no eye contact* (when the families did not turn their webcams on, for instance). However, it was possible to send translated material, give them time to read it, and reschedule the meeting. It was much more informal.

> 2. All the *non-verbal and paraverbal language was missing*. So, it was *more of a translation than mediation* proper.

5.1.3 Advantages, difficulties and stress connected with RI

The transition to remote mediation appears to have had some advantages, such as saving on travel time and money (mentioned by 5 respondents, 18.5%) and staying safe from the virus (reported by 1, 3.7%).

However, negative consequences in terms of increased difficulty and stress were mentioned more frequently, and respondents expanded more on the reasons causing them.

One commonly mentioned drawback of RI was working from home. Many of our respondents were not equipped to work from home and had to do so without being able to isolate themselves from their children and family, who were also at home. This caused noise and distractions that undermined the mediators' concentration. In addition, the instability of the internet connection added to the stress and tension.

> 3. [...] The workplace! *Mediation work relies on listening and observation, so one needs to stay focused, which is not possible if one is at home with her children!* [...] Facemasks! Having to meet someone across a screen is already complicated, *if people wear facemasks, understanding what they say is twice as complicated for me*.

> 4. Faulty connections – *so stressful!*

Another reason that made the mediators' work more stressful and challenging was the feeling of worry and anxiety of the other two parties involved in the mediation, the migrant families and the Italian service providers (Excerpt 5). Apparently, such worry and anxiety are perceived to hamper effective communication and to make mediation more tiring and burdensome, as detailed in Excerpts 6 and 7.

> 5. Yes, the situation was *stressful* [there were] *fears, anxieties*, being far from one's country. Changing one's social life and relations.

10 In all the excerpts displayed in this paper, italics is used to emphasize the most relevant passages.

6. It did have an impact, *work got more difficult because of the worries, the diffidence*, and also because of the *tension* that one feels verbally.

7. *Everybody was worried, doctors were stressed, patients scared.* It's much more *burdensome*. I have to explain many times.

Additional and less recurrent reasons, which were also mentioned by single respondents, appear worthy of mention here because they outline difficulties that are specific to the Covid-19 pandemic.

One is the time constraint imposed by encounters taking place on remote platforms. When meeting in presence, the appointment time can be more easily negotiated (at least in the Italian culture). Conversely, having to remain within an allotted time apparently leaves less leeway for a real cultural encounter (Excerpt 8):

8. Yes because the mediator *is not given the time to explain* and to make it possible for the two cultures to merge.

Another reason why RI was perceived as more stressful by one respondent was the feeling of responsibility attached to translating legal documents with healthcare consequences (the several Prime Minister's Decrees). It should be mentioned that during the Conte government, such decrees were a major topic and source of key information across all public administrations, including social and educational settings where legal and medical discourses that put so much at stake for the mediator might have been less common in pre-Covid-19 times. It should also be highlighted that the same respondent who mentioned this responsibility as a burden also connected it with an aspect that stems directly from the mediator's agency, intended as the possibility and responsibility of changing the social situation s/he engages in – creating hope and trust while translating the particulars of a global health crisis (Excerpt 9):

9. *More responsibility* to convey what the DPCM (Prime Minister's decree) says and *create hope and trust.*

5.2 Mediators' agency during the Covid-19 pandemic

Over the past 20 years, the mediator's active participation in the interaction as an acknowledged participant with conversational power has been increasingly examined in the international literature (Wadensjö 1998; Angelelli 2004; Mason/Ren 2012). Often, this concept has been expanded as to include agency, intended as the mediator's/interpreter's active choice of his/her course of action that can change the outcome of the conversation and the surrounding social situation (Baraldi/Gavioli 2012; Baraldi 2019; Delizée 2022). Items 22 to 25 of the survey sought to investigate mediators' perceptions about their own agency and active participation in the interactions they mediate when working during an emergency such as a world health crisis. For the metalinguistic concerns outlined in §3, one generic Italian wording was used to subsume both concepts, *ruolo attivo*

(active role). In order to establish firmer common ground about what was intended by "mediator's active role", respondents were asked to define what the phrase meant to them.

The answers were varied, but can be categorized into two main themes: i) facilitating communication by eliminating not only linguistic but also cultural barriers; and ii) encouraging and maintaining the human relationship with the migrant family. Interestingly, these representations of a mediator's *active* role are very similar to the mediator's role *per se* (§1), suggesting that in the professionals' minds, mediating normally goes beyond mere interlinguistic transfer.

Significant examples of point i) are given in Excerpt 10 (through a metaphor that aptly summarizes the mediator's role as a facilitator) and Excerpt 11:

> 10. The role of the mediator is *like mayonnaise in a sandwich, it softens and decreases the barriers* between the service provider and the family [...]

> 11. To me it's the ability to *collect cultural information/data and being able to decipher it and at the same time process it* in such a way it can be understood by all those involved in the mediation, so as to create an *interaction channel*.

As anticipated in point ii) above, in addition to the ability to remove linguistic and cultural barriers, the mediator's active role was associated with the ability to create a human relationship with the parties involved, a trait that has been acknowledged as an important part of mediation, especially in healthcare settings (Merlini/Gatti 2015). In the following Excerpts 12 to 16, we have emphasized the key words that refer to that ability – listening, empathy, trust, helping and welcoming the other (see also Excerpt 8 above):

> 12. *Being physically there*, *welcoming*, *empathizing* with those who are in the minority situation and group.

> 13. *Human relationship* of *communicating* with and *understanding* the other *in a relation of help*.

> 14. *Listening* and *presence*, creating *trust*.

> 15. I think the [mediator's] active role is *being part of the other's life, of their history* in the moment when you are mediating.

> 16. Trying to *help* people understand in the clearest and most active way possible, I try my best and put people *at ease*, *so they do not feel embarrassed at trying to make themselves understood*.

> 17. Identifying people's needs, stress management, *contextualization*, *explicitation*, active communication, *trust-building*, *listening*. *Patience*.

Table 6 summarizes and contrasts the answers to two closed questions on how the respondents' role was perceived from not very active to very active before and after the outbreak of Covid-19. An evident loss of activity appears to have been perceived.

	Pre-Covid-19	During Covid-19
Not very active	0	7 (25.9%)
Active	12 (44.4%)	9 (33.3%)
Very active	15 (55.6%)	11 (40.7%)

Table 6. Active/Non-active self-perceived role (total = 27)

When asked about the reason for this change in perception, some mediators associated a less active role to the necessary shift to remote mediation. In their opinion, the distance eliminated the possibility of establishing a closer relationship with the parties involved (Excerpt 18). Sometimes, the other parties' resistance against the remote mode offered less leeway to exert an active role (Excerpt 19). This partly contrasts with Excerpt 20, where the same reason (providers' and families' resistance to use new technology) led to the mediator having to take on an even more active role in order to bridge a wider gap:

> 18. Telephone mediations are *cold and fast*.
>
> 19. *Not all service providers or families accept the remote mode*, for privacy reasons and out of habit.
>
> 20. [...] *some people could not use the various platforms well*, some did not know how to behave in a remote mediation, some did not understand, *so I had to adjust to each and every new situation* using a different method and strategy.

Other open-ended questions that did not explicitly foreground the notion of an active role also yielded responses that implied mediators' perceptions of their agency. Sometimes these highlighted the silver linings of RI given the circumstances, as in Excerpts 21 and 22:

> 21. The opportunity of *preserving some contact*, despite distancing and the lockdown. Being able to experiment with a new working methodology.
>
> 22. *Being still able to solve people's problems is a good thing anyway*.

Other respondents, conversely, point mainly to the difficulty in maintaining a relationship of trust and empathy, which, as we have seen above, is a crucial aspect of mediators' self-perceived active role. This is apparent in Excerpts 23-27. Interestingly, some mediators seem to think that when one strips mediation of that active and empathetic role, what is left is translation or (just) interpreting, clearly, and questionably, intended here as a merely interlinguistic practice:

> 23. The *DISTANCE* with people! My profession consists in a part of essential work that is NON VERBAL observation, which allows me to collect data that are important to create a relation of *trust and empathy* [...].
>
> 24. We no longer had the space to create a relation of *trust*, families were more *detached*.

25. The *human aspect went missing*. It was *more [working as] a translator than a mediator*.

26. It was a lot different, yes, everybody behind a screen. Some with facemasks, some without. We *missed the human interaction, and everything that is cultural mediation*.

27. Yes, of course the atmosphere is different, it has become *just language interpretation*. We are all more *mechanical*...

All in all, it seems that most of our respondents perceived a decline in their agency or active role during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was mainly related to a loss of non-verbal contact due to RI and Covid-19 prevention measures. This in turn hampered empathy and trust-building, which our respondents recurrently mentioned as unequivocally positive components of agency.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we carried out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results of an online survey completed by 27 mediators from the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy. The aim was to investigate mediators' perceived impact of Covid-19 and Covid-19-related measures on mediation services. The results confirmed that professional mediators perceived a detrimental effect on their work due to pandemic-related changes.

This was mainly due to the transition from in-person to remote mediation, which the professionals perceived mainly as more difficult and stressful (in line with conference interpreters: Gentile 2021; Amato/Mack 2022: 469; Ferri 2022). There were two main reasons for this: firstly, mediators had to deal with the feelings of increased worry, anxiety and stress of the two other parties involved, i.e. the migrant families and the Italian public service providers; and secondly, the limited availability of non-verbal communication in the remote mode hampered mediators' agency, glossed as "active role" in our questionnaire. Mediators reported playing a less active role because they could not establish and maintain the same level of listening, empathy, and trustful and supportive relationships that they had in presence before the pandemic.

Furthermore, although the mediators agreed that technology allowed them to continue working at a time when they could not travel or even leave their homes due to Covid-19 prevention measures, they did not always have good internet connection and it was not easy to use the digital platforms for remote mediation without any prior training.

Even though we acknowledge the limited size of the sample of respondents, we believe that the results can provide some insight into Italian mediators' perceptions of their profession during the Covid-19 pandemic. These findings may have implications for the training and professional development of mediators. Ongoing training that allows mediators to become familiar with new working conditions and understand what strategies to adopt to coordinate an online meeting with remote mediation would be as crucial as it is for all dialogue inter-

preters (Braun 2016). This would imply giving mediators the same opportunities for professional development that interpreters and translators enjoy through their professional associations.

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Appendix 1

English translation of the questionnaire

1. Where do you live? (City)
2. Where were you born? (Country)
3. If you were not born in Italy, how long have you been living in Italy?
4. What is your highest level of education?
(high school – university degree – PhD)
5. What are your working languages?
6. How would you define your profession?
(cultural mediator, linguistic-cultural mediator, linguistic mediator, interpreter)
7. How long have you been working as a mediator/interpreter?
(0-4 years, 5-9 years, 10-14 years, 14+ years)
8. Do you have other jobs?
(yes/no)
9. If you have other jobs, which ones?
10. In which settings do you work as a mediator/interpreter?
(school, hospital, police, courtroom, other)
11. During the COVID-19 pandemic, did you have to work remotely?
(yes/no)
12. Had you ever mediated/interpreted remotely before?
(yes/no)
13. Do/did you have the right equipment to mediate/interpret remotely (e.g., computer, headphones, etc)?
(yes/no)
14. If not, what do/did you miss?
15. Which was the hardest part of your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
16. Please describe any positive aspects of your work during the COVID-19 pandemic.
17. Has your relationship with migrant families changed while mediating/interpreting for them during the COVID-19 pandemic?
18. Has your relationship with Italian public service providers (teachers, doctors etc.) changed while mediating/interpreting for them during the COVID-19 pandemic?
19. Can you tell us if the atmosphere of the meetings which you mediated during the pandemic was different than usual (e.g., teachers/doctors were more or less friendly, families/patients were more or less friendly/worried) and if this had an impact on your work?
20. Do you feel your mediation techniques and strategies have changed during the pandemic?
(yes/no)

21. If you feel your mediation techniques and strategies have changed, how?

22. What does the expression "mediator's active role" mean to you?

23. How active do you usually consider your role as a mediator in the interaction?

(very active, active, little active)

24. During the COVID-19 pandemic, how active was your role as a mediator in the interaction?

(very active, active, little active)

25. If you answered that your active role as a mediator has changed during the pandemic, can you describe what particular aspects of it changed, and how?

26. Would you like or would you have liked to attend a training course about remote mediation/interpreting?

(yes/no)

27. If so, which aspects would you like to tackle during the training course?

28. Which one of the following phrases best describes the mediator's/interpreter's role?

(language expert, cultural expert, communication facilitator, word-for-word translator, advocate for migrant families)

29. Would you like to add any comment to your previous answer?

30. Which cultural aspects make mediation/interpreting situations difficult?

(culture-bound terms and phrases including dialects and slang, differences in cultural habits and behavioural patterns including social/cultural rituals, meaning of gestures, others)

31. During the COVID-19 pandemic, was it difficult to manage the cultural aspects that you mentioned in the previous answer, especially if you worked remotely?

32. Please leave your email address if you wish to be contacted again by the researchers for an interview. Thank you!