Diversity management and immigrant workers in Italian organizations:
strengthening the research agenda through the suggestions of a study
in the Lombardy Region

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1. Introduction

Diversity management (henceforth: DM) is now institutionalized as an internationally well-known theoretical and practical approach to human resource management in organizations, aimed at promoting workplaces that can favour the expression of employees’ different identities and their valorization to the advantage of organizational performance. Since the early 2000s this perspective has gained remarkable visibility, at least rhetorically, even in Italy, although in more recent years several voices have begun to highlight a set of criticalities entailed by the development of the DM discourse in the country. For example, among the most relevant of these critical suggestions, we find the observation that there is a significant gap between proposed theories and their implementation (or reflection) in practice; and that more stress should be placed on the conditions by which the canonical models of DM, imported from the Anglo-Saxon – especially American – experience, can be effectively translated in the Italian distinctive context.

Given this scenario, a starting point for the paper is that in Italy, up to now, too meagre attention has been dedicated – in both research and organizational practice – to the issue of how the presence and contributions of foreign workers with a migratory background are or could be valorized to the advantage of the organizations employing them. Nevertheless, as a few exploratory studies have recently highlighted, there seems to be space for tackling such a challenge. The paper aims to strengthen this promising line of inquiry, by drawing on the provisional results of a field study that is being concluded in summer 2014 in the context of the Italian part of the project “DIVERSE – Diversity Improvement as a Viable Enrichment Resource for Society and Economy”, supported by the European Commission1.

This research is shedding light on diversity management initiatives towards immigrant human resources implemented by a group of organizations which are located in the region of Lombardy and differ with regard to size and sector. The picture that is emerging, albeit partial, already looks significant in several respects. Firstly, it enables to identify practices of inclusion and valorization of immigrant employees, which, to varying degrees, tend to generate benefits for foreign human resources themselves, the organizational performance and even the local community. In addition,

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1 Grant Agreement No. HOME/2012/EIFX/CA/CFP/4248 *30-CE-0586564/00-20. In this regard, the paper reflects the view only of the author, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
and perhaps even more significantly, we are led to discern how these DM practices are mainly sustained by an array of informal relational and cultural mechanisms of organizational life, which, however, sometimes combine fruitfully with the adoption of more structured and targeted DM interventions. From this standpoint, the indications that are stemming from the research seem to offer support to, and to delve further into, the conviction that an hypothetical “Italian way” to cross-cultural DM could be exactly based on the singular intertwining of some deliberate and formalized strategies and a set of entrenched or emerging socio-cultural dynamics.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, within an outline of the state of DM discourse in Italy, the need to promote a stream of research dedicated to the issue of the organizational valorization of immigrants’ human capital is argued and discussed briefly. Second, a description of the research project which the paper draws on is provided. The subsequent section dwells on the organizational experiences investigated and centers on a set of practices and conditions that (at this stage of the study) are emerging as crucial vehicles or facilitating factors in such organizational trajectories in cross-culture DM. Finally, some brief concluding remarks are presented.

2. Cross-culture diversity management in Italy, a neglected theme (whose time has come)

The emphasis on diversity in work organizations has become a powerful and pervasive discourse of our time and has spread into the corporate world, civil society, academic research, and among national and supranational public actors (first of all the European Union, as testified by a seminal study – or a sort of manifesto on the benefits of diversity – sponsored a decade ago by the EU Commission [2003]). In the overall debate on workplace diversity, the conceptual framework that has been mainly adopted is that of “diversity management” (henceforth: DM), originally developed in the domain of organizational analysis and management practice. By combining the ideas of the classical texts on the topic (e.g.: Cox 1993; Kandola and Fullerton 1994; Thomas 1990; Thomas and Ely 1996) with what suggested by the most recent international literature (e.g.: Bond 2008; Klarsfeld 2012; Primecz et al. 2011), DM can be defined as follows: a theoretical and practical approach to human resource management in organizations aimed at creating an inclusive work environment; i.e., a context capable of facilitating the expression of personnel’s different experiences and identities and of valorizing this potential to improve organizational performance.

Developed in the early ’90s in the United States and a little later in Europe (especially, for understandable historical and socio-cultural reasons, in the United Kingdom), since the beginning of the 2000s the DM perspective has taken hold also in the Italian context, with the growth of a recognizable stream of both academic and practice-oriented studies (e.g.: Bombelli 2003 and 2010; Cuomo and Mapelli 2007; Cocozza 2010; Mauri and Visconti 2004). This notwithstanding, as pointed out by Zanfri and Monaci’s (2014) recent reappraisal, in Italy the ongoing discourse on DM, while gaining increasing visibility, involves some relevant criticalities which renders it an opaque (and still relatively unexplored) field.
One of the major problems is the persistent gap between the espoused discourse on diversity, such as that displayed by organizational vision and mission statements or by consultants and public bodies’ recommendations, and the real consistency of the practices implemented to enhance and valorize diversity in the workplace; meaning by “practices” a wide array of actions which can range from recruitment mechanisms to training activities, from mentoring programs to the appraisal of managers’ performance, from the creation of roles formally devoted to diversity issues to work-life balance initiatives. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the now well-known research observatory given by the 2009-2012 surveys of Cranet (The Cranfield Network on International Human Resource Management)² put Italy, within the European landscape, in a secondary position but not among the lowest with regard to the degree of formalization of the diversity statement in the case of large firms³. On the other hand, in one of the very few Italian empirical studies about the use of DM practices Pezzillo Iacono and colleagues (2009) have documented a considerable disproportion between what was “exposed” and what was “acted” in a significant population of medium and large (and predominantly internationalized) Italian companies; that is, exactly the types of organizations best provided with requisites and resources for defining and carrying out DM policies. From this standpoint, while even for the American case someone has contended that “at best ‘best practices’ are best guesses” (Kalev et al. 2006: 590), when we take a close look at the Italian situation it seems somehow drastic but not inappropriate to share these authors’ conclusion according to which the discourse of DM, basically, represents a rhetoric.

A second relevant point is that emphasized by an emergent critical line of inquiry inviting to frame DM in a perspective more sensitive to the distinctive institutional traits of the Italian reality (e.g.: Bombelli 2009; Visconti 2007). Such an attempt addresses the challenge of paying adequate attention to those conditions under which theoretical models and logics of design/implementation/evaluation of DM actions developed mainly in the North American experience can be translated in contexts which are dissimilar from it in social, cultural, economic and regulative terms⁴. Generally speaking, among the distinctive elements of the Italian institutional framework that can (or should be expected to) influence the diffusion of DM practices in the country, at least three key traits have to be spelled out: a) the predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises, which differ quite considerably from the type of organization at the heart of experiences and models of DM in the Anglo-Saxon world (i.e., the large and publicly-traded company); b) the logic of network management, through which – differently from the North American approach centered on the individual firm’s voluntary initiative and internal control instruments – personnel management policies are chiefly the result of relations and

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² http://www.cranet.org/home/.
³ Although it should be stressed that the presence of these written commitments to diversity is largely related to the sample component consisting of Italian subsidiaries of foreign multinationals.
⁴ Incidentally, this need to counter the risk of indifference to local variations of “diversity at work” also emerges from time to time in the international literature, finding an extreme but still emblematic expression in the comment by which nearly fifteen years ago Jones and colleagues (2000) regarded as “an ironic paradox that, as ‘managing diversity’ develops as a globalising vocabulary of difference, US cultural dominance may be reinforced by a US model of difference” (p. 364).
interdependences that extend beyond organizational boundaries and entail the participation of other stakeholders acting primarily at the level of local territories (employers’ associations, trade unions, government agencies, community groups, etc.); c) the absence of an articulated system of legal obligations that – along similar lines to Anglo-Saxon contexts – prescribe minimum quotas of employees hired from a significant range of social groups and minorities, although the Italian legal system provides for some measures based on principles of affirmative action\(^5\).

Within the landscape sketched above, the present paper revolves around the theme of cross-cultural management; that is, a research stance from which the kind of diversity at issue, and at the heart of the organizational practices observed, regards cultural differences related to national origin and ethnicity\(^6\) in the personnel composition.

It has immediately to be said that this focus does not deal with what usually goes by the label of “international dimensions of organizational behaviour” (Adler 1997) and “strategic international human resource management” (SIHRM, Schuler and Jackson 2007). This literature, now flourishing in the field of management studies, suggests that the pursuit of business strategies in globalized contexts of action requires and fosters processes of human capital development aimed at both the internationalization and the transnational integration of human resources, and particularly of middle/top managers and professionals equipped with key skills for the organization. In other words, this type of approach to “organizational multiculturalism”, now also popular in Italy, seems particularly suitable for grasping the case of large and structurally internationalized organizations and, typically, has led scholars to focus on those dynamics and problems that distinguish the management of the network of national subsidiaries within a multinational group.

Far less attention has been drawn, in Italian research, to how national and ethnic differences may affect collective life and performance in organizations which, while being not necessarily large neither included in transnational networks, employ non-native human resources; i.e., *a condition now increasingly frequent in Italy due mainly to the migration phenomenon and that, concretely, is best expressed through the case of organizations with a relevant presence of foreign workers from Third Countries subject to a strong migratory pressure*. Actually, the scarcity of studies in this domain reflects primarily a substantial lack, in the Italian experience, of organizational DM practices addressed specifically to the category of immigrant workers. We may also argue that, when considering this possible target group of DM initiatives, the aforementioned gap between the general rhetoric of DM and the reality of its practical application tends to reach a sort of maximum extension. In such regard, the data of Cranet I alluded to earlier clearly suggest how, with reference

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\(^5\) Particularly in two areas: the compulsory and targeted placement of disabled people in organizations with more than 15 employees, and women’s access to boardroom seats of a restricted typology of companies.

\(^6\) Thus, to be more accurate, the cross-culture theme is meant in a narrow sense here. As suggested by Cox and Beale (1997), this theme may play a broader role when applied to the various cultural influences (cognitive styles, values, conduct rules) that characterize social groups (e.g.: professional communities) from which organizational members can obtain significant materials for the construction of their identity.
to large organizations’ accounts about their adoption of DM practices oriented towards different groups of workers, in Italy the national-ethnic minorities are by far the most neglected category. Against this background, there is no shortage of elements that encourage crafting a more incisive agenda on the front of reflection and studies, as well as of change promotion in organizational practice, regarding cross-culture DM as defined above.

The first, needless to say, lies in the now seemingly paradoxical resistance to extending DM’s premises and purposes to a target group – that of foreign immigrant workers – that is increasingly represented in both the population and the workforce of the country. Indeed, this difficulty is not so inexplicable when we take into account a particular feature of the Italian context, consisting in its internal model of governance of migratory flows. As a whole, these policies have until now largely favoured the selective containment and control of migration intakes rather than focusing on the conditions of foreigners already present in Italy and employed (Zanfrini 2011). More than that, they have neglected to promote measures aimed at making immigrants’ potential a structural resource for the qualitative development of the national economy and society, in accordance with the “human capital model” depicted by the European Employment Strategy.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that some (sporadic) attempts have been made to apply the DM lenses to the social group of migrant workers. In this respect we may consider, for instance, what has been recently suggested by a qualitative field study (Monaci 2012) sponsored by ISMU Foundation and aimed to investigate the practices of recognition, integration and valorization of cross-cultural differences in a group of North-Italian organizations with a relevant presence of extra-EU immigrants. Within the limits inherent to its exploratory character, this research project documented several forms of organizational attention given to ethno-national diversity, which to a certain extent were richer than expected. Most importantly, though, it led into glimpsing a sort of recurring pattern in these practices of inclusivity, by which informal social dynamics and more formalized interventions coexisted and intermingled. In addition, consistently with what argued above about the need for a more nuanced sensibility – in theory and practice – to dimensions of institutional embeddedness, the study brought to light the role of a number of distinctive features of the Italian entrepreneurial system and of the socio-cultural fabric underpinning it in the development of cross-cultural DM actions like the one observed. Amongst these traits we may cite the firm’s interdependence with the surrounding territory and the unfolding of day-to-day organizational life around direct forms of mutual knowledge and interaction between people, both of which primarily connected to the quantitative and qualitative influence of the small and medium enterprise in Italy’s socio-historical development and current scenario.

As a whole, these insights, combined with other information provided by the limited Italian research on DM practices addressed to immigrant workers (e.g.: Visconti 2007), undoubtedly represent a

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7 Not surprisingly, the target group on which Italian enterprises declare to focus most are women. As for other EU countries, in France and Germany as well foreign immigrant workers represent the group least involved in DM interventions, whereas – again not unexpectedly – United Kingdom constitutes the context where this category obtains the most attention.
stimulus for exploring more in-depth the possible reality and the prospects of an “Italian way” to cross-culture DM in organizations.

3. Outline of the field research in the context of the UE-funded Project “DIVERSE”

With regard to the points set out above, the project which the paper hereinafter will draw on is producing a set of insightful indications. This is the international project “DIVERSE – Diversity Improvement as a Viable Enrichment Resource for Society and Economy”, supported and co-funded by the European Commission. The project, which started in late 2013 and will be completed in mid-2015, is coordinated by the Wowell Research Centre of the Catholic University of Milan and is being carried out by a network of 14 partners located in 10 EU nations.

The project overall goal is to investigate and simultaneously promote, in a group of local regions belonging to those countries, practices of valorization of the potential of “Third Country Nationals” (TCNs), by means of activities oriented to the following aims: a) favoring the valorization of TCNs’ formal, non formal and informal skills, knowledges and competences; b) enhancing awareness about the advantages entailed by DM practices addressed to TCN personnel for organizations, regardless of their sector of action (that is, for businesses as well as for public and non-profit organizations); c) supporting TCNs’ roles as active agents in the social and civic life of their hosting communities, with a special focus on their participation to non-profit volunteer organizations and with the objective of improving their capacity to offer significant contributions to public interest activities pursued by these organizations.

As Zanfrini explains at length in her introductory paper to this panel organized within the 11th IMISCOE Annual Conference, the main idea underlying this international project – and revealing its innovative character – is that the European model of immigrant integration needs to be “rejuvenated” by means of two long-term lines of reflection and action: on one hand, a re-orientation of the approach to immigrant work in accordance with the tenets of a real “human capital” perspective; on the other hand, based on the realization that so far the European model has placed too much emphasis on the economic and working dimensions of integration, the promotion of a change leading to stress also the civic and political dimensions of immigrants’ participation in the social life of receiving countries.

One of the central components of the project’s complex architecture consists in the realization of 100 organizational case histories on DM practices oriented towards TCN human resources. This activity concerns all the countries involved, in each of which 10 case histories are being carried out (and a final written report will available in autumn 2014) following a set of common guidelines that regard, in particular, two basic matters. The first deals with the criteria for selecting organizational cases for the study. From this standpoint, the selected organizations had to: a) be operating in the

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8 The readers can refer to this paper also for further details about the whole structure of the project (partners of the network, etc.).
profit, non-profit or public sectors; b) be located in the local region identified for each country involved; c) have developed significant inclusive practices addressed to TCN personnel (and – if possible – also with respect to other categories of difference, such as gender, etc.). The second aspect is methodological and concerns the use of a common check list, shared by all the national research teams, for fieldwork and the subsequent phase of data analysis (to this I am returning below).

Turning to the Italian part of this research on organizational cross-cultural practices, which is the relevant point here and currently is almost in its concluding phase, it has been conducted by a team from the WWell Research Centre of the Catholic University of Milan. Its preparation inevitably required to take into account some background data on immigrant labour in the country. In particular, it was necessary to start from the observation pointing out the high concentration – or, better, the tendential segregation – of foreigners from countries with a strong migration pressure in certain sectors and occupational areas (e.g.: construction, catering, healthcare and home care services) and in the low-mid levels of the organizational hierarchies, often with a considerable over-qualification of their educational and professional credentials in relation to the tasks they carry out. This horizontal and vertical concentration of immigrant labour, which occurs in other European countries as well (OECD 2009), is fuelled by, and at the same time favours, a collective propensity to represent the work of migrants in terms of “asymmetric complementarity” with native employment (Zanfrini 2011), as expressed by a sort of recurrent adage according to which “we need immigrants because they perform the jobs that we do not intend to do (any more)” (to paraphrase Zanfrini’s words).

The research thus started with a clear understanding of how the Italian case poses some problems for the attempt to place stress on the strategic reasons at the heart of DM canonical models of Anglo-Saxon origin; i.e., models that, even in the case of ethno-national differences, are primarily devised for the competitive enhancement of human resources performing significant roles in terms of formal responsibilities or professional tasks. This awareness, however, did not prevent from an explicit intent to gain useful insights on the incidence (or feasibility) of certain aspects emphasized by international research, with regard to a couple of issues:

- the consistency, in the organizations investigated, of actions directed at facilitating foreign employees’ job placement, integration with colleagues (Italians and people of other nationalities), quality of life (inside and outside the enterprise) and professional development;
- the capability of cross-cultural DM to concur to the creation of other values aside from potential benefits for foreign workers, and specifically to the improvement of organizational performance.

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9 The research team is coordinated by this author (project coordinator of DIVERSE for Italy), with the supervision of Laura Zanfrini (international project manager). It includes Licia Allegretta, Giovanni Castiglioni, Emma Garavaglia, Davide Lampugnani, Elena Scippa and Giulio Cesare Tersalvi as field researchers and case history writers; assistant tasks are carried out by Francesca Mungiardi and Annavittoria Sarli.
For fieldwork ten organizations operating in the Lombardy region were chosen, which – as reported by a number of “privileged witnesses” – displayed an already-existing commitment to the inclusion of immigrant workers. Besides this requirement, there was a second criterion for the selection of the case studies; namely, the heterogeneity of these organizations in two respects: i) size variety, so as to examine the situations of both small-to-medium organizations and large ones in terms of the number of employees; ii) sector variety, with the inclusion of organizations operating in different domains of activity and firstly that were representative of each of the distinctive segments given by the profit, non-profit and public sectors. The final set of chosen organizations consisted of:

- a large enterprise (in food services);
- a large cooperative business (in warehouse and handling services);
- three small enterprises (in metal carpentry, catering, and consultancy and recruiting services);
- a large public healthcare organization (in residential and outpatient health services for the elderly);
- a provincial office of a national trade union;
- a large non-profit foundation (in health rehabilitative services);
- a medium-sized non-profit social cooperative (in prevention and care services for mental health and housing hardship);
- a medium-sized non-profit organization (in the field of internet blogging communication).

From a methodological point of view, the case histories were carried out using a qualitative approach. This choice was considered as the most appropriate for exploring the ways in which ethno-national differences are perceived and “treated” in personnel management and more generally in organizational life. This kind of approach seems to be especially suited for grasping not only overt actions and outcomes but also interpretations and expectations, as well as possible tensions, arising from the presence and the practice of cross-culture diversity. As suggested by a robust literature (usually under the label of “case-study research”; e.g.: Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2009), the main strength of this research strategy lies in the multiplicity of data sources used, which allows an a sort of “all around” analysis of the specific organizational reality observed.

Accordingly, field data were produced from documentary materials and semi-structured interviews (4 to 6 for each case study), as well as informal conversations, with organizational members. The interviewees were both foreigners and Italians; they were from different hierarchical levels and, especially for medium and large organizations, from various functions. In addition, as the opportunity arose, direct observations were made of the “scene of the site” during visits to the organizations. The check list used in fieldwork as well as in the interpretation phase related to seven central thematic areas: 1) organization profile (basic information contextualizing organizational activity and commitment to DM); 2) organizational demography (composition of personnel with a particular focus on TCNs’ presence and roles); 3) organizational culture and climate (social, cultural and ethical dimensions underpinning organizational life and action); 4) human resource management practices (recruitment and training processes, forms of career and professional
development, etc.); 5) emergent perceptions about socio-cultural diversity at work (with specific respect to TCNs’ presence); 6) DM actions and initiatives (aimed at recognizing diversity in general and, especially, addressed to TCN human resources); 7) outcomes and impacts of cross-culture DM practices.

4. Some promising preliminary findings

As said, the research on organizational practices of cross-culture DM, included in the Italian part of the DIVERSE Project, is presently at a very advanced stage. At the moment of this writing, five out of ten case histories have been completed, that is, empirically carried out and reported; three have been carried out in their empirical part and are now in the closing phases of reporting; as for the two remaining cases, finally, fieldwork has just ended and the writing process is about to start.

In this section, I will draw on the five completed case histories with the purpose of highlighting some relevant points that are emerging from the research. Obviously, these indications are to be intended as provisional and open to further adjustments, since they take into account a partial segment of the whole group of organizations investigated and, moreover, leave out of consideration – aside from one case – the business organizations included in the sample. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that the following discussion, within the limits mentioned above, may offer some insightful suggestions not only about the current “state of the art” of the study but also with a view of orienting and strengthening the agenda of the present (and meagre) research on cross-cultural DM in Italy.

4.1 A glance at the considered organizations

Firstly, it appears to be necessary to sketch a profile of the organizations involved and of their engagement in DM practices.

The small enterprise in consultancy and recruiting services.

It was founded a few years ago with the main purpose of assisting firms willing to expand into foreign markets, in the recruitment of multicultural personnel. The mission envisaged by the founders also includes, explicitly, the “social goal” of valorizing second generation immigrants as ideal human resources to be selected for client-firms. Four aspects of this organization’s functioning are worth remarking: i) the extremely lean and flexible structure, with a group of members who (while performing autonomous roles in other businesses) interact continuously, also for planning purposes, with an operating staff composed of three professionals; ii) the fact that two of these employees are young people of foreign origin, hired on the assumption – confirmed by outcomes – that their multicultural skills are essential to the success of the business; iii) the involvement of immigrant communities and associations as areas of recruitment of candidates for selection; iv) the
innovative character not only of the organizational form but also of the recruitment channels, through an extensive use of social networks for the identification of candidates. Betting on the development in the near future of this pioneering market niche, and in light of the expected growth in activity, the organization is now planning to increase the degree of structuration of its tasks and processes, through a diversification of the offer (e.g.: training courses in multiculturalism and export topics), an expansion of its professional staff and of personnel management practices, and the formation of a network of “ambassadors” for managing relationships with partner immigrant associations.

The provincial office of a national trade union.
Deriving from a tradition in unionism started at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and strongly rooted in its territory (27 decentralized offices in the province, a consolidated network of relationships with local institutions and associations), the organization is based on the contribution of members, officials and delegates for a total of 110 people, including seven immigrants from Third Countries. Organizational life and action are deeply influenced by a range of values – in particular, the principles of associative democracy and social justice – which are set out by statutory rules and expressed, firstly, in a set of anti-discrimination norms ensuring equitable representation of women, people aged under 35 and immigrants in the elected management committees. Among its many activities of worker representation and service, in the last twenty years the organization has started and established a path of innovation related, initially, to the necessity of responding to the needs of the “new” users given by immigrant workers. This has resulted in the establishment of an internal immigrant office (now coordinated by a TCN), the use of TCNs as officials with representative roles in enterprise bargaining, and the formation of a transversal organizational unit – which is also participated by volunteers and external stakeholders – with functions of planning and coordination of cultural and educational activities aimed at improving immigrant inclusion and valorization in the territory. This last initiative reflects, in fact, a broader objective in the present phase, that is, promoting (both inside and outside the organization) the transition from a “labour approach” to a wider socio-cultural approach towards the migration phenomenon and integration processes within an increasingly multi-ethnic local community. In this respect, currently the organization, on the one hand, pursues bargaining strategies oriented to an extension of labour rights to the vast majority of workers (rather than based on contingent conditions of specific worker groups); on the other hand, it proposes itself as a kind of “open reflective laboratory”. Finally, at least two significant aspects emerge that characterize the use and action of TCN personnel: a largely informal and pragmatic system of human resource management (e.g.: recruiting activities carried out directly in enterprises in order to identify potential delegates whose traits appear to be consistent with the organization's culture); and the presence of basically symbolic forms of incentive, through which the motivation and involvement of foreign personnel (as, incidentally, of the other members) are fuelled by the daily surrounding recognition of their contribution.
The medium-sized non-profit social cooperative.

Founded in the early 1990s, the cooperative employs 81 workers including 7 TCNs and operates in health and social services, especially in the fields of mental health, social exclusion and housing hardship. Two aspects are pivotal to frame the current strategies and modes of action of the organization, as well as its approach to foreign collaborators. The first is structural in character and lies in the fact that the cooperative’s main external stakeholders are public local actors, on behalf of whom it furnishes a substantial part of its services on the basis of agreements. A fundamental condition linked to this strong relationship with the public sector is that the recruitment of workers and their employment in projects is primarily dependent on the education degrees and qualifications they formally hold, which therefore represent a bureaucratic constraint for collaborating with public institutions. Secondly, the ordinary organizational activity and management takes place in a culturally “thick” context, where the influence of the guiding principles of the cooperative movement (mutuality, solidarity, promotion of the community interests) has been reinforced by the development over time of values such as those of “respect for/empowerment of the uniqueness of any person” (codified in the statute) and the “principle of sharing” in both internal relations (e.g.: the choice of candidates for career advancement) and external ones (e.g.: building projects participated, as much as possible, by users). As a whole, this has an impact on the ways the cooperative deals with ethno-national diversity which is complex and, in some regards, ambivalent. On the one hand, the institutional dimension turns out to be both a limiting factor, since in some cases it prevents the valorization of skills that are not formally recognized (leading to overqualification), and an enabling factor, because through credentialization it permits access not only to job positions but to professional opportunities in the management of services as well. On the other hand, the distinctive organization’s vocation for dealing with individual differences, which (almost necessarily) drives care work relationships with users, is “naturally” translated within the context of internal interactions; favoured, in this, by the overall heterogeneity of personnel (from the standpoint of life experience, cultural background, etc.) and, probably, even by a sort of self-selection mechanism enacted by those people who decide to relate – as members or interlocutors – with an organization that copes with particularly critical situation. On such grounds, although some reflection is now growing about the need for a more structured human resource management, the organization has so far never found it necessary to adopt formal programs or procedures addressed specifically to the management of foreign personnel. What can be found are mostly forms of contingent support offered on a case-by-case basis to meet some possible emergent needs (advances of pay, redistribution of holiday periods, etc.). In other words, the employment of immigrant resources and the ability to obtain from them commitment and innovations to the advantage of collective activity is not underpinned by a targeted reflection or strategy, rather it seems to fit coherently into a global and “normal” inclusive approach.
The large public healthcare organization.

The organization has a long and distinguished history, started in the 14th century, in assistance to the territory population and today is a center of excellence in Lombardy, particularly in health care for the elderly through the provision of diagnostic, treatment and rehabilitation services. Remaining faithful to its tradition (its current top management openly alludes to “a social mission in the community”), in the face of recent national sector reforms the organization has chosen to remain a public body, although subject to a number of private law rules (e.g., regarding the system of economic accounting). The organization operates through four units located in two different towns, three of which have very close relationships with the local context and other public institutions. In its structure, which is quite complex for the articulation of both management and executive roles, nearly 1,300 employees are employed; 89 of them are foreigners, including 64 TCNs, who have been recruited in part through a partnership with an external cooperative. In addition to the reference to a public function (intended in its broadest, not just legal, sense), the value system of the organization stresses the “centrality of the person”, starting with a commitment to the comprehensive care of individuals and families who use its services; such cultural orientations are formalized in a code of ethics that has been recently written by means of the involvement of several working groups representing the whole staff. Along with a set of structured processes of personnel management (recruitment by public competition, coaching for newcomers, continuing training, performance evaluation), we find the presence of an informal positive climate based on direct communication and personal relationships regardless of professional and hierarchical distinctions. All this concurs to provide “normal” situations of mutual exchange and recognition that appear to be pivotal for the (high) level of job motivation and satisfaction among employees. As for immigrant workers, in the first place they have the opportunity to benefit from the advantages associated with a number of practices which, in general, take place in the organization. This is particularly the case of the regular meetings held within each department (as occasions of both dialogue and conflict management), the constant availability of training opportunities (with the subsequent possibility to obtain positions of higher responsibility), and – as noted – a supportive cultural and relational climate. Furthermore, three areas of engagement emerge which specifically regard foreign workers: a) the agreement with a training school for nurses in Albania, concluded in early 2000s to cope with difficulties in finding national applicants for this professional position, which resulted in the hiring of almost thirty Albanian nurses thanks also to the organization’s direct efforts in additional training and in the process of obtaining equivalence of degrees and qualifications; b) interventions for meeting particular needs expressed by workers with respect to shift scheduling and leave plans; c) an action-research project recently carried out with the aim of mapping the demographic and professional characteristics of foreign staff (including physicians and care workers), highlighting different conceptions of care practices and identifying critical issues and possible solutions. Although several interesting points have emerged (e.g., regarding different approaches to the elderly and to end-of-life practices), which are often already discussed in everyday work, the project has not had an organizational impact in terms of more targeted policies.
Presumably, in the near future the modalities of a possible movement of this type will represent a crucial point for this organization’s trajectory in the domain of DM.

The medium-sized non-profit organization.
Strictly speaking, this is not an autonomous organization, but rather a non-profit editorial initiative in the context of a cooperative business operating in the communication field. The “group” was formed in 2007 by two Italians and a nucleus of six young second generation TCNs with the aim of focusing on second generation’s life in Italy and valorizing these profiles to the benefit of the country. Today it consists of an editorial staff of about 50 collaborators of 19 different nationalities and aged between 16-34 years old, coordinated by an Italian director and a foreign project manager; they are remunerated on the basis of their written contributions and, prevalently, also have other jobs. In its development, the group has specialized in internet blogging communication, enjoying good success (testified by the attention of national and foreign media). The “core business” is given by the posting of ideas and opinions of the collaborators, who then respond to comments from a growing audience of readers. The initiative has contributed to the creation of a network of numerous stakeholders revolving around the world of immigration (cultural mediators, academics, professionals in multi-ethnic marketing, etc.); in a sense, for their recurrent participation in the discussions, many of them may be considered to be additional members of the editorial staff. The organizational structure is quite simple, largely even virtual since interaction and internal communication are mainly internet-based. Nevertheless, the regular editorial meetings, which are often brainstorming sessions, have a key role for utilizing the (natural) internal diversity as an asset in discussion and decision-making. By representing the purpose itself of the group and imbuing its methods of action, the principles of diversity are therefore at the heart of a sort of idiosyncratic culture. The intent to create collective debates by giving voice to “new citizens” who live in two worlds simultaneously (and who like to point out interesting or contradictory aspects of such worlds) is also expressed by a set of written rules to be followed in conceiving and preparing texts. These are guidelines aimed at promoting the use of a common non-rhetorical and unconventional (if not provocative) style; among them, besides freedom of expression (and to disagree), one finds the recommendation to avoid moralizing platitudes and the risk of being labelled “ideological”. The group is characterized by some practices of personnel management, although in basic forms, given the kind of work relationship with editors; for example, through training opportunities provided by the parent-organization. Finally, worth mentioning are two valorizing effects of this initiative, both of which linked to the remarkable visibility it has gained: the former consists in benefits for collaborators, who have not rarely used this experience as a springboard for a parallel career in the editorial offices of magazines and newspapers; the latter is represented by a specific contribution to the promotion of cross-cultural diversity in Italian society, brought about through staff members’ participation in television and radio broadcasts devoted to multiculturalism and second generation immigrants.
4.2 The emerging (provisional) picture: a variety of practices and impacts

Albeit in its conciseness, what outlined above leads into glimpsing three general underlying patterns that characterize cross-culture DM practices in the group of the considered organizations. In the first, attention to ethno-national diversity is a sort of implicit premise of collective action, that is, something entailed, although not necessarily “displayed”, by the value platform of the organization (the non-profit social cooperative). In the second case, DM practices addressed to foreigners emerge primarily as a mode or means of action for dealing more effectively with a set of challenges posed by organizational reality (the healthcare organization, with respect to both the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of its users and the necessity of facing recruiting problems). In the third situation, cross-cultural diversity is as such the goal towards which organizational conducts and strategies are aimed, be it framed within a mission emphasizing civic and cultural objectives (the non-profit group in communication) or pursuing innovative solutions for business clients (the consulting firm). Indeed, these modalities may also tend to intermingle, as paradigmatically shown by the trade union office, where the focus on internal diversity is – so to say – a starting point, a tool and an end simultaneously.

At the basis of these organizations’ engagement in the field of diversity we find a prevailing role of informality and evolutive conducts; i.e., cross-culture DM has emerged primarily as something that “is done” and that is closely related to the evolution and ongoing experiences of the organization, rather than as a well-defined area to be connected to a system of planned and formalized interventions. As it will be underlined, in this evolutive dimension a key influence is played by self-propulsive factors that, in some way, refer to the development of distinctive cultural traits; but an important role is played also by factors related to outside social dynamics, such as an increased possibility of finding the required formal qualifications within the immigrant labour supply (the healthcare organization). The evolutive character of the practices observed, often – to cite a recurring statement in interviews – based on “the use of common sense” in dealing with the specific needs and opportunities involved by the cultural heterogeneity of human resources, is clearly visible even in those settings where diversity has been more openly “sought” and/or “thematized”. This occurs in the case of the union office, where several foreign members have been assigned relevant positions of responsibility and projects are carried out for promoting diversity in and around the organization, as well as of the healthcare organization, whose recent action-research initiative might be considered as an early attempt at knowledge management in the diversity domain.

This said, a variety of practices of integration and valorization of immigrant human resources emerge. These include, firstly, forms of practical support aimed at assisting foreign workers in tackling a number of basic needs (e.g., long leave periods). In a sense, these elementary and even contingent – since they are usually implemented on a case-by-case basis – practices have to be seen

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10 In line with this primarily pragmatic orientation, interviews revealed that within the organizations studied knowledge of the ideas underpinning the theoretical and public debate on “diversity at work” (not to say the very notion of DM) is largely absent.
as assuming a meaning that is more relevant than what it might appear. In fact, these actions are
decisive in promoting individual conditions of serenity and productivity at work, which are
prerequisites for facilitating the expression of employees’ attitudes and potential. Furthermore,
notwithstanding their practical and not formally regulated character, such basic interventions
somehow imply a redefinition of the organization’s commitment toward its persons, through which
the conventional function of “employer” tends to extend to a broader support role on the border
between work and personal life. But, in addition, we find also formal – and, more often, informal –
actions directed toward:

a) the communication and socialization of inclusiveness-oriented organizational cultures (e.g.: by
   statutes or codes of conduct and the creation of multi-ethnic teams);
b) the reshaping of some personnel management mechanisms through, for example, advancement
   opportunities for people in low-level job positions (in a case, as an opportunity stemming from
   continuing training), and the ensuring of forms of flexibility in working hours;
c) in some organizations (the union office, the consulting firm and the editorial “group”), and
   leaving aside their mission’s inherent commitment to diversity, the explicit pursuit of
   organizational performance goals by means of cultural pluralism in personnel (e.g., through the
   placement of foreign personnel in important positions or, tout court, by using the staff
   multicultural composition as the key resource for “getting the business done”).

Also, in the part so far carried out, the study has brought to light a number of “virtuous” effects
related to the presence, and especially the management, of immigrant workers. These impacts are
firstly to the advantage of two actors.
The first is given by foreign human resources, who can get benefits regarding work placement, the
availability of tools for handling problems related to their migrant condition (and, more widely, for
improving the quality of their family life), the chance to see their contributions and skills on the job
recognized and thus opportunities for professional development and/or career advancement11. The
other party gaining benefits from cross-culture diversity (and DM processes) are the organizations
investigated, which – on average – seem to have variously achieved performance advantages
(though not always explicitly sought) with respect to personnel motivation and retention, the
interaction with heterogeneous clients/users, and sometimes (e.g., the social cooperative) the ability
to find solutions to specific operational problems.

In addition, albeit the fieldwork plan has not included interviews with external stakeholders, it is
reasonable to assume that the distinctive diversity practices of these organizations are generating
positive effects on the surrounding social context and communities. In general, since – as known –
the empowerment of immigrant workers constitutes a primary vehicle for the full realization of
citizenship rights in multi-ethnic societies, these practices are likely to be contributing to current
processes of social integration and cohesion in the territories involved; and, in the two-three cases

11 More broadly, it is possible to detect benefits also for the Italian personnel of these organizations, especially related to
the opportunity to develop experience (and competencies) within multi-ethnic and multinational relational contexts.
where the tenets of diversity are directly incorporated in the organizational “institutional” mission, this social contribution overlaps, more profoundly, with a function of cultural dissemination, education and awareness-raising. Furthermore, particularly to the extent to which mechanisms valorizing foreign personnel’s potential are in action, we may also recognize a role in the development of a local community’s human capital.

4.3 Three underlying and facilitating mechanisms

Drawing also on what outlined in the preceding two sub-sections, in this final part of the paper I will concisely identify and introduce three distinctive mechanisms that, to varying degrees and often in non-explicit ways, seem to sustain or at least facilitate these organizations’ trajectories in the sphere of (cross-culture) DM.

Internal (ethical) cultures as self-propulsive factors

In most of the cases studied, shared conceptions and values exist, which: a) have become routinized (or, for the more recently founded organizations, are in the process of being institutionalized) through the “natural” history of the organization and the development of its “traditions”; b) revolve around tenets and basic assumptions that can be related to the principles of inclusiveness. In other terms, among those evolutive elements that – as noted before – appear to contribute to DM endeavours, a pivotal role is played by the gradual development of socially oriented value systems which are consistent with the ethical options posed and required by diversity as such (i.e., regardless of instrumental considerations referred to technical and economic issues or even regardless of an explicit commitment to multicultural diversity – as in the case of the social cooperative).

Two observations are to be made here. First, although in some cases (e.g.: the consulting and the editorial organizations) these self-propulsive factors of a value-based and ethical nature are tightly linked with strong convictions held by the founder and/or the founding group, they are fuelled by processes of internal dissemination and sharing-of-meaning in the organization. And it is mainly through this channel, together with the positive feedback on organizational services and “style of action” coming from external stakeholders, that in several of our organizations these socially significant options have been strengthened after the start-up phase. The second aspect worth noting is that the organizational cultural platform underpinning the exercise of distinctive “collective” competences often include directly an orientation towards experimentation (e.g.: the two organizations just mentioned and, to certain respects, the union office); this implies a basic propensity to innovation which turns out to be enabling with regard to openness to situations and opportunities involving diversity.

Incidentally, this is in line with approaches (e.g.: Alvesson, 2003) that criticize the reductionist view of “cultural engineering”, which maintains that an organizational culture can be shaped unilaterally from above.
Opening-up to, and incorporation of, the context

In the experiences studied we find an emerging pattern of interdependence between these organizations and their external context. At a general level, this is visible in their constant interaction with stakeholders in the territory, based on the sense of belonging to distinctive local communities and the “pressure” to participate to their evolution.

In some circumstances, we find an even more relevant tendency to bring the experiences, needs, and competences of a series of context stakeholders “directly into” strategies and processes for the creation of services, with decisive effects on the capacity to carry out organizational activities successfully. This occurs visibly for the activities of the editorial group and the consulting firm, through their ordinary interdependence, respectively, with participants in blogging communication and with client businesses and immigrant associations. Here, this advanced type of networking – which in the former case entails a sort of constant reinvention of organizational boundaries – is undoubtedly favoured by innovative organizational forms (whose hybrid and flexible character is naturally open to crossing borders and cross-fertilization), let alone the pervasive use of digital technologies by a staff of young (and TCN) people.

This, again, seems to have important consequences for organizational attention to personnel diversity, in a twofold sense: first, because through continuous exchanges with external stakeholders specific opportunities for recognizing, acquiring and valorizing different human resources may be generated; second, because (as for the social cooperative), we may expect the development of a (virtuous) process of mutual strengthening between dealing with stakeholder diversity and the internal practice of diversity.

Citizenship processes within the organization

As noted, almost all our organizations are characterized by an internal climate that is based on respect for individual needs (and rights) and on collaborative relational models. This trait has evidently a positive impact on the quality of life in the workplace, a condition from which also the immigrant staff benefits. Delving into the issue, we may also go so far as to say that in most cases there are formal and (especially) informal processes of “internal organizational citizenship”, a concept which refers to mechanisms of involvement and participation of human resources in the tasks and priorities pursued by the organization (Podsakoff et al., 2000).

The presence of high levels of commitment and proactive behaviours by personnel is probably favoured by these organizations’ distinctive and engaging cultural identities, as well as – as reported by several immigrant interviewees – by the opportunity of having direct and continuous relationships with users. For our purposes, however, what appears to be crucial is represented by two implications. On the one hand, in fact, immigrant employee engagement generates specific “symbolic” benefits for these collaborators: in the words used directly by some respondents, their

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13 This leads us to look at the organization’s activity sector as an important “situational” factor permitting worker involvement in activities to play a pivotal role as a mechanism with rewarding and valorizing effects for TCNs.
satisfaction stems from the “perception of the usefulness of one’s work” and from the social recognition that one obtains “when colleagues, bosses and users make you realize that your effort is valuable for them”. On the other hand, exactly by engendering and sustaining this personal “passion” and “emotional connection to tasks” (these are other expressions collected in fieldwork), the majority of these organizations are able to mobilize key intangible assets for their goals and to the advantage of their performance.

5. Some concluding remarks

As repeatedly clarified, this paper has discussed only the partial results of the research on cross-culture DM practices included in the Italian part of the DIVERSE project. The main limitation entailed by this incompleteness has been the lack of opportunity, aside from one case, to dwell on what is emerging from the study, now being concluded, on practices implemented by the business organizations comprised within the group of the ten organizations selected; that is, right the type of organization which so far has been the prevailing subject of analysis in international research on DM.

On the other hand, if it is true that most of the cases providing the basis for my previous discussion is composed of non-profit organizations, it should also be added that this focus has allowed highlighting some points which are, in themselves, of particular interest. Especially, it leads into recognizing a potential inherent in this sector with respect to the possibility and ability to implement DM practices, which, up to now, has been substantially neglected in international literature. In the light of what emerged from these case-histories, it is necessary, in my view, to delve into the idea that these kinds of organization may have a set of resources, for the internal and – no less important! – external valorization of ethno-national diversity (and of other categories of difference), which is naturally “inscribed” into their organizational forms (often oriented to an innovation open to stakeholder participation) as well as in their objectives and cultures, and hence in the ordinary work practices deriving from them.

Returning, finally, to the issues dealt with at the beginning of the paper, which concern the distinctive (and difficult) process of diffusion of DM-oriented awareness and practices in the Italian context, two interesting points are suggested by the research. The first – reflecting, if you want, the win-win logic underlying DM canonical models – lies in the real presence of mechanisms capable of generating value not only for foreign personnel (in terms of work integration, quality of life and even professional opportunities), but also to the advantage of organizational performance (e.g., for developing commitment toward collective goals and for managing key relationships with culturally heterogeneous clients or users) and, as far as is possible to glimpse, of surrounding local communities.

Secondly, our provisional findings throw light on the influence of a set of relational, and prevalently informal, mechanisms of organizational life as an essential driver for the consolidation of DM
practices and their continuity over time. Among such “natural” conditions of the organization’s evolution, a pivotal role is played by the development of socially oriented value systems. This notwithstanding, it was also possible to distinguish, sometimes very clearly (albeit at an initial or experimental stage), several more formal or “systematic” aspects that current international research identifies (or recommends) as crucial components of a “strategic” DM practice. Thus, what is particularly worth emphasizing here is the fact that the practices of inclusion and valorization of the foreign component enacted in some of these organizations (like the union office and the healthcare organization) tend to be sustained by the intertwining and mutual supporting of both emerging social processes and more deliberate and targeted actions.

Obviously, this opens up to what will be indicated by the case histories regarding business organizations that are going to be added, and which, presumably, will lend support to the conviction that the development of an “Italian way to DM” would – or should – involve more explicit forms of design, codification and monitoring of practices, but so as not to jeopardize their (chiefly informal) relational and cultural foundations.

Taking such considerations as a starting point, it is conceivable that the present work (let alone the whole study it has drawn on) may offer some insightful suggestions for strengthening current Italian research on cross-cultural DM.

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