

**SOCIAL WORK WITH MIGRANTS:
CHALLENGES OF THE PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING OF
SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE RECEPTION SYSTEM**

***TRABAJO SOCIAL CON MIGRANTES:
RETOS PARA EL BIENESTAR PROFESIONAL DEL TRABAJO SOCIAL
EN EL SISTEMA DE ACOGIDA***

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Abstract

Introduction. The increasing presence of cultural diversity has become a prevalent aspect of social work in many EU countries. Although public services represent a relevant source of support for the inclusion process of immigrants, they also face several challenges in providing tailored and suitable health care to accommodate cultural variation and meet the diverse cross-cultural needs of immigrants. In this context, social work with immigrants is grounded in the principles of empathy and intercultural sensitivity. Social workers should value diversity and provide services that reflect an understanding of the diversity across cultures. However, given the heavy demands placed on them, coupled with increasingly diminishing resources, they often may experience psychological distress. **Methods.** Building on a multidisciplinary foundation, this study focuses on understanding the well-being condition of professionals operating in the migration sector by evidencing whether the levels of burnout (i.e., the experience of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficiency experienced at work because of chronic emotional and interpersonal stressor on the job) are associated with individuals' empathy and sensitivity to different cultures and background. In detail, participants were 38 social workers, aged between 30 and 60 years ($M = 39.63$, $SD = 11.22$), from Italy ($N = 8$), Spain ($N = 23$), and Sweden ($N = 7$). Participants responded using well-validated instruments across the three countries for assessing burnout, empathy, and intercultural sensitivity. **Results.** The analysis of variance revealed significant differences among social workers in Italy, Spain, and Sweden in terms of mental distance at work, interaction attentiveness when communicating with people from different backgrounds, and empathy. Beyond these differences, the findings of the profile analysis show that social workers with higher intercultural sensitivity and average levels of empathy generally report lower burnout symptoms across contexts. **Discussion and conclusions.** These results suggest that cultural sensitivity may be a protective factor against work-related stress across contexts, emphasizing the importance of fostering intercultural sensitivity through targeted training and support to enhance social workers' well-being and improve service delivery to migrant populations. The present study extends knowledge on the multifaceted mosaic of the everyday relationship between social workers and migration, promoting a greater understanding of professional perspectives from a multicultural perspective and the exchange of good practices between different territories and services.

Keywords: Well-being; Social work; Migrants; Occupational diseases; Empathy; Intercultural dialogue.

Resumen

Introducción. La creciente presencia de la diversidad cultural se ha convertido en un aspecto predominante del trabajo social en muchos países de la Unión Europea. Si bien los servicios públicos representan un apoyo importante para el proceso de inclusión de las personas inmigrantes, también se enfrentan a diversos retos a la hora de proporcionar una atención sanitaria personalizada y adecuada que se adapte a la diversidad cultural y satisfaga las diversas necesidades interculturales. En este contexto, el trabajo social con personas inmigrantes se basa en los conceptos de empatía y sensibilidad intercultural. El personal de trabajo social debe valorar la diversidad y ofrecer servicios que reflejen una comprensión de la diversidad intercultural. Sin embargo, dadas las elevadas exigencias a las que se ve sometido, junto con la escasez cada vez mayor de recursos, a menudo pueden experimentar malestar psicológico. **Métodos.** Con una base multidisciplinar, este estudio se centra en comprender el bienestar de profesionales que trabajan en el sector de las migraciones, evidenciando si los niveles de burnout (es decir, la experiencia de agotamiento, cinismo e ineficiencia experimentada en el trabajo debido a factores de estrés emocional e interpersonal crónicos) se asocian con la empatía y la sensibilidad de las personas hacia diferentes culturas y orígenes. En concreto, participaron 38 profesionales del trabajo social, de entre 30 y 60 años ($M = 39,63$; $DE = 11,22$), de Italia ($N = 8$), España ($N = 23$) y Suecia ($N = 7$), utilizando instrumentos validados en los tres países para evaluar el burnout, la empatía y la sensibilidad intercultural. **Resultados.** El análisis de varianza reveló diferencias significativas entre el personal profesional del trabajo social de Italia, España y Suecia en cuanto a la distancia mental en el trabajo, la atención al interactuar con personas de diferentes orígenes y la empatía. Más allá de estas diferencias, los hallazgos del análisis de perfiles muestran que profesionales del trabajo social con mayor sensibilidad intercultural y niveles promedio de empatía generalmente presentan síntomas de agotamiento menos frecuentes en todos los contextos. **Discusión y conclusiones.** Estos resultados sugieren que la sensibilidad cultural puede ser un factor protector contra el estrés laboral en todos los contextos, lo que enfatiza la importancia de fomentar la sensibilidad intercultural mediante capacitación y apoyo específicos para mejorar el bienestar del personal profesional del trabajo social y la prestación de servicios a las poblaciones migrantes. El presente estudio amplía el conocimiento sobre el mosaico multifacético de la relación cotidiana entre profesionales del trabajo social y la migración, promoviendo una mayor comprensión de las perspectivas profesionales desde una perspectiva multicultural y el intercambio de buenas prácticas entre diferentes territorios y servicios.

Palabras clave: Bienestar; Trabajo social; Migrante; Enfermedad profesional; Empatía; Diálogo intercultural.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Europe has experienced a marked increase in migratory flows, with the number of forcibly displaced individuals reaching 122.6 million by mid-2024, representing an 11.5% rise compared to 2023 (International Centre for Migration Policy Development [ICMPD], 2025). In response to this surge, many European nations have implemented increasingly restrictive border management policies, often characterized by a "politics of exhaustion" (Levine, 2024). These strategies aim to deter migration by imposing stringent conditions on migrants, ultimately prompting many to abandon their migration efforts and return to their countries of origin. Consequently, migrants are frequently confined to border areas, where they are subjected to forced detention, violent pushbacks, deportations, and various forms of mistreatment (Welander & Jaspars, 2022).

This challenging context is further complicated by the absence of comprehensive welfare systems and targeted immigration policies, which hinder social workers' ability to provide adequate care and support to migrant populations. Such deficiencies not only compromise the quality of services but also contribute to elevated levels of occupational stress and burnout among social work professionals (Tartakovsky & Baltiansky, 2022). To effectively address the multifaceted nature of migration, social workers must adopt a holistic, multi-level approach that reconciles local realities with global frameworks. This necessitates reinforcing institutional networks, engaging civil society, and fostering meaningful connections with migrant communities.

The political dimension of social work plays a pivotal role in confronting discriminatory policies and advocating for equitable access to essential services (Popescu & Libal, 2018). To promote long-term inclusion rather than temporary solutions, systemic reforms are imperative. Accordingly, training programs should extend beyond technical skill development to encompass critical awareness, enabling social workers to navigate ethical complexities and resist institutional pressures that may undermine their professional values (Dominelli, 2005; Kohli, 2006).

Despite these efforts, significant gaps persist within social service systems and broader societal structures in embracing diversity. Intercultural participatory frameworks emphasize the necessity for educational reforms that foster collective empowerment and promote sustainable futures (Di Rosa & Reich, 2022).

Italy's migration policies illustrate the tension between emergency-driven responses and the pursuit of long-term inclusive strategies. Reception systems often prioritize short-term solutions, leaving migrants vulnerable upon exiting hosting programs. Factors such as the physical isolation of reception centers and inadequate service provision exacerbate their marginalization, adversely affecting both individual well-being and social cohesion. Social workers operating in these contexts face complex ethical dilemmas and "loyalty conflicts" as they navigate competing institutional mandates (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006). The blurred boundaries between assistance and control further intensify these challenges, underscoring the need to reclaim a professional identity grounded in human rights and anti-oppressive practices (Lutz, 2010; Staub-Bernasconi, 2007). Although discretionary power affords some degree of professional autonomy, it also places practitioners in precarious positions, compelling them to balance institutional expectations with the needs of their clients (Ambrosini, 2021).

To equip social workers for these complex realities, training and professional development must prioritize intercultural competencies and reflective practices. While current educational programs increasingly address these areas, gaps remain in fostering a comprehensive understanding of migration's structural dimensions and the interplay between global and local dynamics. Bridging these gaps necessitates stronger links with international professional networks and the integration of global perspectives into local practice (Cohen-Emerique, 2017).

In the immigration reception system, social workers play a crucial role in supporting and protecting the rights and well-being of migrants in a foreign country, providing physical and psychological care, and seeking long-term solutions for their inclusion into the host country. Reception is a complex process that requires professionals to possess specific skills, sensitivity, and care for the needs of individuals, as well as a considerable capacity to use appropriate procedures. When well-managed, it can contribute to improving the quality of life for the most vulnerable individuals and promote a more inclusive and welcoming society (Di Rosa & Tumminelli, 2024).

The social worker's work is very demanding in terms of time, effort, emotional, and social impact. Social workers interact daily not only with the stories of vulnerability of migrants but also in creating well-being at a collective level with the population already present in the territory.

In the reception system, the well-being of migrants is therefore placed at the center of the work of the social worker, who is asked to adopt a person-centered model (Rogers, 1951), which emphasizes the individual's inherent value and capacity for self-directed growth. The model is grounded in a deep respect for the individual's subjective experience and focuses on creating an environment in which people can freely explore their feelings and thoughts.

1.1. A person-centered approach

In social work, the person-centered model, as a paradigm of care, requires the adoption of culturally sensitive interventions in order to respond adequately to the specific needs of migrants. To this end, the design of these actions must take into account aspects that are relevant to people from their cultural perspective, such as gender roles, family system, language, cultural and religious beliefs, sense of belonging to the group and community (Killian et al., 2017; Reboloso Pacheco et al., 2003). At the same time, the adoption of a person-centered model perspective should also consider the role of social workers as individuals, with their unique beliefs, competencies, attitudes, and behaviors that are constantly part of the care relationships. In fact, in the subject-to-subject reciprocity of the migrant-social worker relationship, from the social worker's point of view, the latter is required to be aware of his or her own feelings, to accept the migrant unconditionally, and to be empathetic towards his or her own feelings. Thus, according to this humanistic *approach*, the *migrant*-social worker relationship must be characterized by unconditional positive acceptance, genuineness, and empathy, which are considered fundamental attitudes in this relationship. These key conditions foster a professional relationship focused on the person's growth.

In general, empathy is the ability to understand, share, and respond sensitively to the emotions and feelings of others. It is a psychological process that enables someone to put themselves in another person's shoes, understanding what they are experiencing without necessarily judging them. The concept of empathy has been explored by various scholars throughout history. The first contributions were in the philosophical field, by two German philosophers: Edmund Husserl, who, at the beginning of the 20th century, introduced the term *Einfühlung* to refer to the ability to understand the internal experiences of others, and Theodor Lipps, who, expanding this idea and applying it to psychology, described empathy as the process by which a person perceives and shares the emotions of another.

Over the years, empathy has become increasingly crucial in interpersonal relationships, as it fosters mutual understanding and emotional support. Its development as a concept has been shaped by several disciplines, evolving from philosophical foundations to psychological and neuroscientific explorations, eventually becoming central not only in human connections and personal relationships but also in professional and organizational contexts.

Today, empathy is recognized as a multifaceted and dynamic construct, with ongoing research exploring its cultural variations. Empathy is increasingly seen as a key factor in promoting community, compassion, and social well-being, and in addition to its traditional facets (such as emotional, relational, affective, and cognitive), an intercultural empathy has been included, defined as the ability to perceive the world according to a culture or worldview different from one's own (Cabieses et al., 2021).

According to Rogers (1951), empathy sets the base for embracing the person-centered framework because it allows professionals to correctly perceive the internal frame of reference of the other person, with its meanings and emotions, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing this “as if” state. When the person feels listened to, creating a relationship of mutual and reciprocal cooperation becomes easier.

Although professionals' well-being is crucial for the correct adoption of person-centered approach, little attention has been paid to the distress of social workers themselves who, in their daily work, are involved in a constant request for closeness and attention towards the conditions of vulnerability and experiences of suffering of migrants which can, in turn, trigger stress and emotional distress in professionals (Adriaenssens et al., 2015; Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2021) and may undermine their empathic and culturally appropriate responses in the migrant-social worker relationship. Thus, a deeper understanding of the relationships between social workers' distress, empathy, and culturally appropriate responses is needed to address the specific needs of migrants in professional relationships.

1.2. Burnout, intercultural sensitivity and empathy in social workers

Burnout is defined as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress and characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (World Health Organization, 2019).

Over the past decades, burnout has become a widespread concern in the workplace, particularly within the social services sector. A recent meta-analysis conducted across seven countries estimated the prevalence of burnout among social workers at 20%, underscoring that nearly half of workers in the social service system experience burnout at some point during their careers (Giménez-Bertomeu et al., 2024). In fact, while extensive research has established the link between burnout and numerous adverse outcomes, including depression and anxiety (Koutsimani et al., 2019), reduced life satisfaction, increased turnover intentions, and sleep disturbances (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015), social workers face unique vulnerabilities. The demanding nature of the social workers' profession often entails emotionally taxing environments, constrained resources, relatively modest compensation, and ethical dilemmas (Gómez-García et al., 2020; Hussein, 2018; Lloyd et al., 2002; Vîrgă et al., 2020) that puts social workers at high risk of burnout (Kim & Stoner, 2008).

Although social workers working with immigrant clients have been identified as being at risk for experiencing burnout due to their difficult working conditions (Gómez-García et al., 2020), some previous studies have identified individual characteristics or factors that may intervene in protecting social workers from developing burnout symptoms (Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2021). For instance, some authors demonstrated that social workers who have more positive attitudes toward the immigrant culture, and so a higher intercultural competence, choose more culturally appropriate and, therefore, probably more effective professional interventions, which, in turn, lead to a higher sense of personal accomplishment and fewer burnout symptoms (Tartakovsky & Baltiansky, 2022). Similarly, other studies have found that the ability to empathize with others, particularly one's client, was an essential skill in preventing or reducing burnout symptoms among social workers (Wagaman et al., 2015).

Regarding intercultural competence, and specifically in the socio-demographic context of Europe characterized by migration-related diversity, social workers are required to deliver culturally competent and sensitive services to diverse service users. In fact, both international and national guidelines stress the importance of the cultural competence paradigm (Sue et al., 2015) outlining social workers' responsibilities in working competently with culturally diverse people.

Among studies in this line of research, Chen and Starosta (2000) formulated a theoretical model of intercultural competence comprised of three conceptual dimensions: intercultural awareness (i.e., cognitive dimension), intercultural sensitivity (i.e., affective

dimension), and intercultural adroitness (i.e., behavioral component). According to the authors, the ability to understand cultural norms that influence one's thoughts and behavior (i.e., intercultural awareness) and the ability to achieve communication goals in intercultural interactions (i.e., intercultural adroitness) are enhanced by the ability to develop intercultural sensitivity. In other words, intercultural sensitivity, defined as "an individual's ability to develop positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 6), has been considered as a main dimension and a prerequisite of intercultural competence across different studies (Dong et al., 2008; Foronda, 2008). In fact, intercultural sensitivity has been found to correlate with effective communication and satisfaction, as well as with reduced ethnocentrism, improved cross-cultural adjustment, more accurate cross-cultural perceptions, increased social satisfaction, and lower levels of occupational stress and burnout (Dong et al., 2008; Foronda, 2008; Tartakovsky & Baltiansky, 2022).

Moreover, empathy has been found to play a pivotal role in supporting social workers' adjustment and well-being in the workplace, particularly in the context of relationship building (Wagaman et al., 2015). In fact, the ability to understand clients' needs, emotions, and circumstances has been considered the basis for a humane client-centered method in general practice (Mercer & Reynolds, 2002) and as a strategy for buffering against the negative effects of compassion fatigue or burnout (Derksen et al., 2013). Especially in the context of working with immigrant populations, empathy enables social workers to better understand and resonate with the emotional states of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby facilitating positive intercultural relations and enhancing intercultural sensitivity (Jami et al., 2024).

Although interpersonal sensitivity and empathy are recognized as important factors in social work (Gijón & Morata, 2023), there is little research that specifically evaluates the relationship between burnout symptoms and intercultural sensitivity and empathy among social workers working with migrants in Europe. As mentioned above, social workers in this context often face significant emotional demands due to the complexity of migrants' needs, exposure to traumatic stories, and the challenges of navigating diverse cultural and legal systems. High levels of empathy and intercultural sensitivity can enhance the quality of support provided, but may also increase vulnerability to emotional exhaustion. Understanding the nuanced role of intercultural sensitivity and empathy in mitigating burnout is essential for developing targeted interventions that

promote the well-being of social workers and improve the quality of services delivered to migrant populations.

1.3. The context of the present study

Based on the aforementioned premises, this empirical study aims to describe the pattern of relationships between burnout, intercultural sensitivity, and empathy among social workers operating in the migration sector in Italy, Spain, and Sweden. The three countries differ significantly in their welfare systems for migrants (Di Rosa et al., 2023). In Italy, the welfare system combines reception structures (e.g., hotspots, first reception centers) with local facilities that provide access to universal services. The reception system is structured into two levels: initial reception, which occurs immediately after arrival, aims to provide medical care, identification, and first aid; and secondary reception, which consists of local projects promoting social inclusion, as well as other services (e.g., access to education and employment). Municipal social services are responsible for assisting resident immigrants, providing both universalistic services for the entire population and specialized services tailored to migrants. However, access to these services often depends on legal status, leading to differentiated experiences of inclusion. Social workers play a central role as mediators, coordinating between institutions, migrants, and the local community, supporting inclusion while also managing cultural and social differences, particularly for vulnerable populations such as unaccompanied minors. Recent political changes, such as the *Decreto-Legge 4 ottobre 2018, n. 113*, known as *Decreto di Sicurezza*, have increasingly framed migration as a matter of national security, limiting the scope of inclusion-oriented interventions and reducing the role of social services in facilitating inclusion. In Spain, the welfare system is grounded on solidarity and universality values, encompassing education, healthcare, housing, employment, social security, and social services. Social services aim to promote equal opportunities, protect human rights, and enhance the quality of life for the most vulnerable individuals, including migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The system is decentralized: autonomous communities have exclusive competence over social services, adapting programs and resources to local needs, while state-level services provide complementary support in areas such as dependency care. At the local level, municipalities manage basic social services, coordinating with third-sector organizations, including NGOs. Social services for migrants include reception and accommodation, guidance and counselling, access to healthcare, education, vocational

training, and social and cultural inclusion programs. Services are designed to facilitate adaptation and inclusion processes. In Sweden, the welfare system has historically oscillated between inclusion and exclusion in response to human mobility. Initially focused on the internal poor population, the system expanded in the post-war period to include refugees and migrants, often classifying them through the lens of social disability to facilitate inclusion into labor and social systems. However, since the 1980s, social rights for migrants have increasingly been restricted, and human mobility is often criminalized. Consequently, social welfare institutions now provide limited support, particularly for newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers. Municipal social services remain responsible for unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups, giving guardianship, housing, education, and inclusion support. Nevertheless, the reduction of state-provided services has increased the reliance on civil society and third-sector organizations, which play a critical role in offering assistance to migrants excluded from formal welfare support. Overall, these three countries demonstrate diverse approaches to migrant welfare, underscoring the critical role of social workers in facilitating access to services and promoting social inclusion.

Thus, the present empirical study is threefold:

1. Illustrate differences or similarities across the three countries involved (Italy, Spain, and Sweden) in levels of burnout, intercultural sensitivity, and empathy.
2. Identify subgroups of social workers in each context that reported a higher vulnerability to burnout.
3. Describe the pattern of intercultural sensitivity and empathy across the identified subgroups of social workers with high or low vulnerability to burnout.

2. Methods

Given the small sample size and the non-probability sampling method, this quantitative study is explorative in nature and uses descriptive statistics within a cross-sectional design. This methodological choice allows for the systematic analysis of data at a single point in time, facilitating the identification of patterns and variations among individuals. By relying on well-validated questionnaires, the study ensures consistency in data collection, enabling meaningful comparisons across different groups. This

approach is particularly useful for capturing both commonalities and distinctions among participants, providing a comprehensive snapshot of the variables under investigation.

2.1. *Participants*

The study involved 38 social workers employed in social services from Italy ($N = 8$), Spain ($N = 23$), and Sweden ($N = 7$) using a non-probability sampling method, in which social workers operating in the migration field were involved based on their accessibility and availability to participate in the study. In Italy, all participants were women aged between 30 and 60 years ($M = 39.63$, $SD = 11.22$). Their experience in the migration sector ranged from 3 months to 20 years ($M = 6.28$ years, $SD = 6.46$). In Spain, the sample included 20 women and 3 men, aged between 25 and 60 years ($M = 44.22$, $SD = 10.17$). Their experience in the migration sector ranged from 1 to 30 years ($M = 13.50$, $SD = 9.92$). In Sweden, the group consisted of 6 women and 1 man, aged between 28 and 53 years ($M = 41.72$, $SD = 9.48$). They had between 2 and 10 years of experience in the migration sector ($M = 7.14$ years, $SD = 3.18$). The prevalence of female social workers aligns with the gender distribution, which shows a very low percentage of male social workers in all three countries. Regarding the type of employment, in Italy, the majority of respondents (87.5%) work in the public sector, while 12.5% work for both the public and third sector. In Spain, 23.7% work in the public sector, 34.2% in the third sector, while the remaining 42.1% did not report the type of employment. In Sweden, 85.7% of respondents reported working in the public sector, while 14.3% in the third sector. Regarding the role in the organization, in Italy, the majority (50.0%) were coordinators, 25.0% were contact persons, and 25.0% were staff members. In Spain, the majority of respondents were staff members (82.6%), 13.0% reported being coordinators, and 4.3% reported being directors of the organization. In Sweden, the majority (57.1%) were staff members, 14.3% were coordinators, 14.3% were contact persons, and 14.3% did not report this information.

2.2. *Procedure*

E-mails containing the informed consent form and the link to complete the questionnaires were sent to the coordinators of each workplace. In Italy, the emails were distributed by the principal of the Municipality of Palermo's immigration services. In Spain, they were circulated by the coordinators of the municipality of Granada, the *Red-Acoge* organization in Madrid, and the project manager of the *Global-ANSWER* project.

In Sweden, colleagues from the universities involved in the *Global-ANSWER* network shared emails with migration services.

Data collection took place between December 2023 and November 2024 through the electronic platform Qualtrics, which ensures data protection and anonymity in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and the Council of 27 April 2016. Participation was voluntary, and no personal information was included in the dataset. The online survey was completed independently by each social worker and took approximately 20 minutes.

2.3. Instruments

To ensure the conceptual and cultural equivalence of the measures used in this study, the research team adopted well-validated questionnaires available in Italian for Italy, Spanish for Spain, and English for Sweden. Each country's research team then carefully reviewed the proposed instruments, assessing their accuracy, clarity, and relevance within the specific cultural and linguistic contexts. This process aimed to preserve the original meaning of the items while adapting them to each setting in an appropriate way. Any discrepancies or ambiguities were discussed and resolved collaboratively to maintain consistency across the different language versions. The details about the instruments used are provided below.

Regarding intercultural sensitivity, a brief version of 15 items (Wang & Zhou, 2016) of the intercultural sensitivity scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000) was used to test participants' levels of sensitivity to different cultures. The scale encompasses five dimensions of intercultural sensitivity: (1) interaction engagement (e.g., I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures), (2) respect of cultural differences (e.g., I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures. *reverse score*), (3) interaction confidence (e.g., I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures), (4) interaction enjoyment (e.g., I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures. *reverse score*), and (5) interaction attentiveness (e.g., I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction). Responses to each item were obtained using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1= "Strongly disagree" to 5= "Strongly agree".

Regarding empathy, four items of the prosocial behavior scale for adults (Luengo Kanacri et al., 2021) were used to assess the frequency with which participants feel

empathy toward others in need (e.g., I am empathic with those who are in need). Items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “never/almost never” to 5 = “always/almost always”.

Regarding the burnout dimension, burnout core symptoms were assessed by the 23 item *Burnout Assessment Tool* (BAT) (Consiglio et al., 2021; Schaufeli et al., 2020). This measure captures the frequency with which participants experience four core burnout symptoms at work on a 1=never to 5=always scale, as follows: exhaustion (8 items, e.g., At work, I feel mentally exhausted), mental distance (5 items, e.g., At work, I do not think much about what I am doing and I function on autopilot), cognitive impairment (5 items, e.g., At work, I have trouble staying focused), and emotional impairment (5 items, e.g., At work, I feel unable to control my emotions).

2.4. Data Analysis

Regarding the data analytic approach, we conducted a series of descriptive analyses, including Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) on the collected measures. To compare the Italian, Spanish, and Swedish contexts, we performed a series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine whether there were significant differences in intercultural sensitivity, empathy, and burnout characteristics across countries. To explore variations in burnout symptoms among social workers, we categorized participants into high- and low-burnout groups based on the 50th percentile of the overall burnout mean score. This allowed us to identify individuals experiencing higher levels of burnout compared to their colleagues. Finally, we conducted a profile analysis of intercultural sensitivity and empathy within the high- and low-burnout groups. All analyses were performed using the *Statistical Package for Social Science* (SPSS) version 23.0.

3. Results

3.1. Differences across the three countries involved (Italy, Spain, and Sweden) in levels of burnout, intercultural sensitivity, and empathy

From a cross-context perspective, we examined whether Italian, Spanish, and Swedish social workers differ in burnout symptoms, as well as in intercultural sensitivity and empathy as considered protective factors against burnout. In sum, ANOVA revealed

no significant differences in exhaustion, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment, interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, and interaction enjoyment. However, significant differences emerged in mental distance [$F(2, 37) = 11.98, p < .001$], interaction attentiveness [$F(2, 37) = 11.02, p < .001$], and empathy [$F(2, 37) = 4.88, p < .01$].

ANOVA's results evidenced that social workers in Spain report greater mental exhaustion and depletion at the end of the workday ($\mu = 2.28, SD = 0.47$) compared to their colleagues in Italy ($\mu = 1.40, SD = 0.34$) and Sweden ($\mu = 1.69, SD = 0.59$), indicating that social workers in Spain are at a higher risk of experiencing low enthusiasm for their jobs, acting mechanically with little reflection, exhibiting increased indifference toward their work, and feeling skeptical about the meaningful impact of their role. Regarding intercultural sensitivity, although across the considered contexts (Italy, Spain, and Sweden), all social workers reported medium-to-high levels, our results indicated that social workers in Italy ($\mu = 3.88, SD = 0.93$) and Spain ($\mu = 4.15, SD = 0.54$) were higher in interaction attentiveness compared with social workers respondents in Sweden ($\mu = 2.86, SD = 0.54$). These differences in interaction attentiveness suggest that respondents in Sweden reported a slightly lower ability to pay close attention and fully understand the meaning of messages during interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, whereas those in Italy and Spain are more attuned to cultural nuances and better equipped to engage in effective and meaningful cross-cultural communication. Regarding empathy, participants in Italy ($\mu = 4.25, SD = 0.63$) and Spain ($\mu = 3.90, SD = 0.56$) reported a higher tendency in empathizing with others in difficulties compared with respondents in Sweden ($\mu = 3.36, SD = 0.45$), suggesting that social workers in Italy and Spain seem to be more attuned to recognizing others' struggles, even when not directly communicated, and can easily put themselves in others' shoes compared to their colleagues in Sweden.

3.2. Subgroups of social workers based on vulnerability to burnout in Italy, Spain, and Sweden

Among the respondents to our survey, we identified subgroups of social workers who reported high levels of burnout symptoms. As a first step, Table 1 summarizes sociodemographic and job-related variables, comparing the high-burnout and low-burnout groups in each country. Overall, the two groups share similar sociodemographic and job-related characteristics. However, a pattern emerges: in Italy and Spain, older

social workers are more vulnerable to burnout symptoms, whereas in Sweden, younger professionals are more affected than their low-burnout counterparts.

Table 1

Sociodemographic and job-related variables are distributed in the high vs. low burnout group in Italy, Spain, and Sweden

	Italy		Spain		Sweden	
	Low Burnout group	High Burnout group	Low Burnout group	High Burnout group	Low Burnout group	High Burnout group
N	5	3	12	11	3	4
M_{age} (SD)	37.80 (9.83)	42.67 (15.01)	42.58 (11.40)	46.00 (8.83)	49.67 (4.16)	35.75 (7.59)
Gender (% of Women)	100%	100%	91.70%	81.80%	100%	25%
Mean (SD) of work hours per day	8.4 (12.18)	7.67 (0.57)	7.02 (1.64)	7.44 (1.01)	8.00 (0.00)	6.25 (3.50)
Mean (SD) of years working with migrants	6.25 (8.27)	6.33 (3.05)	13.54 (9.63)	13.45 (10.70)	9.67 (0.58)	5.25 (2.99)

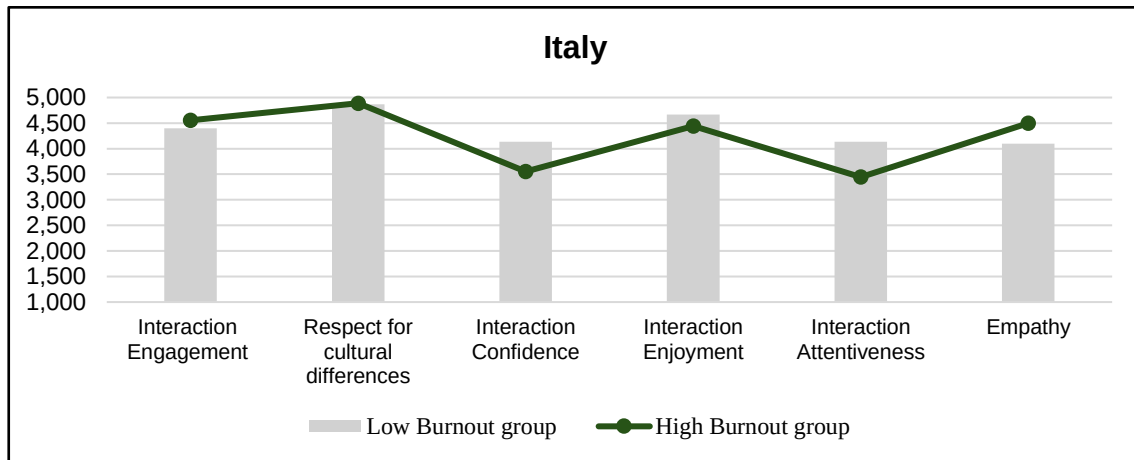
3.3. Patterns of intercultural sensitivity and empathy across the identified subgroups of social workers with high or low vulnerability to burnout

To explore whether levels of intercultural sensitivity and empathy differ between high- and low-burnout groups, we conducted a series of profile analyses in each country involved in the study.

Regarding Italy, as shown in Figure 1, profile analysis revealed that social workers with high burnout levels tend to engage more in interactions and exhibit greater empathy compared to those with low burnout levels. However, they feel less confident when interacting with individuals from different backgrounds, and they are less attentive during interactions, suggesting that while emotional engagement remains, burnout may impair cognitive and attentional components of intercultural competence.

Figure 1

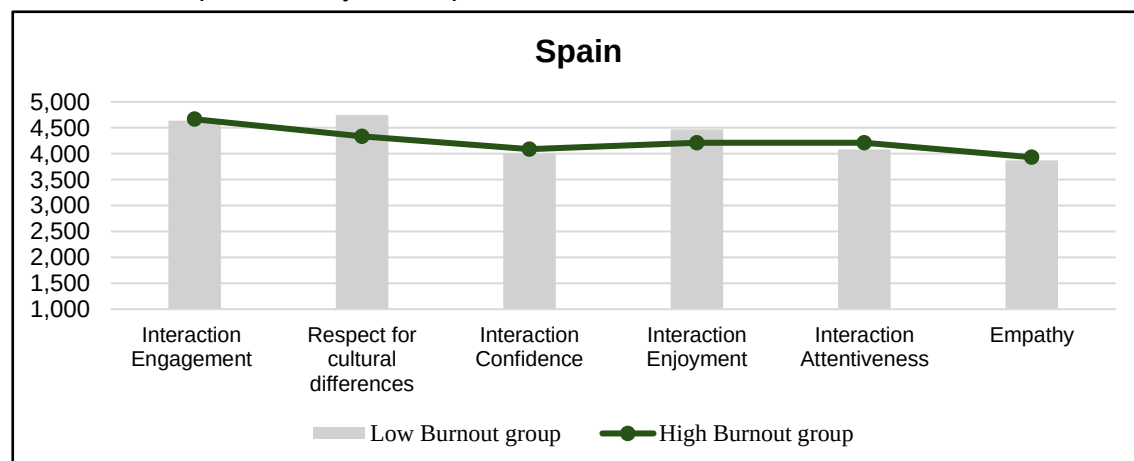
Results of the profile analysis in Italy



Regarding Spain, as shown in Figure 2, social workers with high burnout levels, compared to those with lower burnout, showed less respect for cultural differences and experienced lower interaction enjoyment, indicating that higher burnout may undermine intercultural sensitivity and reduce the quality of professional engagement with migrant populations, by impairing both the emotional and cognitive abilities necessary for effective cross-cultural interactions.

Figure 2

Results of the profile analysis in Spain

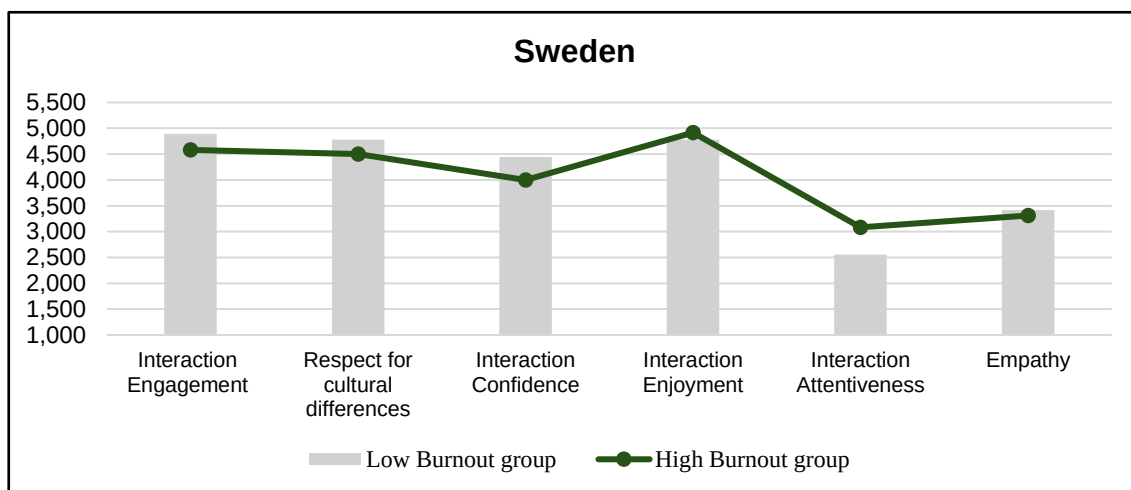


Finally, regarding Sweden, the results of the profile analysis showed that social workers with high levels of burnout, compared to their colleagues who reported lower levels of burnout, are less engaged, respectful, confident, and empathic during their interactions with individuals from different backgrounds. In contrast, they showed higher levels of attentiveness and enjoyment during the interactions, suggesting that burnout

may selectively affect specific dimensions of intercultural competence, impairing emotional and cognitive engagement while preserving some motivational or experiential facets (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Results of the profile analysis in Sweden



4. Discussion

Empirical evidence conducted in social care contexts has stressed the importance of workers' well-being for organizational efficiency and for sustaining good practices at work (Taris & Schaufeli, 2018). In the present study, starting from a multidisciplinary and multi-professional contribution, we focused on understanding the well-being condition of social workers operating in the migration sector by evidencing whether levels of burnout (i.e., the experience of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficiency experienced at work because of job chronic emotional and interpersonal stress) are associated with social workers' sensitivity to different cultures and backgrounds.

First, in line with a recent meta-analysis (Giménez-Bertomeu et al., 2024), results evidenced that approximately half of the respondents reported high levels of burnout symptoms, particularly in Spain. As evidenced by previous studies (Adriaenssens et al., 2015; Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2021), social workers in the migration sector are daily exposed to closeness and caring toward vulnerable conditions and suffering experiences of migrants that, in turn, may trigger professionals' stress and emotional discomfort. When not appropriately managed, intensive stress can impair social workers' capability to deliver culturally competent and sensitive services, which can negatively affect the

professional-client relationship. In fact, our data seem to highlight the need to improve the well-being conditions of social workers in Spain, as higher levels of burnout in this context have been linked to lower job and life satisfaction, as well as reduced effectiveness in responding to professional demands (Ariza Toledano & Ruiz-Olivares, 2024). Thus, the significantly higher levels of mental distance observed among Spanish social workers suggest that organizations should implement interventions to address burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, the differences in responses across respondents from different countries (Italy, Spain, and Sweden) identified in our study suggest that systemic and cultural factors may contribute to the higher mental distance in Spain compared to Italy and Sweden. Differences in welfare systems, job expectations, and organizational support structures could help explain the variations in burnout levels (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2020). One plausible explanation can be found by reasoning about how social workers are prepared for their roles with migrants. In Italy, the social workers surveyed were specifically employed in organizations dedicated to supporting migrants. In contrast, most social workers in Spain worked in broader social services that included, but were not limited to, migrant support. This difference in specialization may lead Spanish social workers to face challenges in care relationships for which they were not specifically trained. Enhancing organizational support and further exploring the motivations behind social workers' engagement with migrants could provide deeper insights into these disparities.

Besides, differences among respondents in the three countries emerged. These need consideration because respondents in Sweden reported a lower ability to pay close attention and fully understand the meaning of messages during interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds. Compared to their colleagues in Sweden, social workers in Italy and Spain are more attuned to cultural nuances and better equipped to engage in effective and meaningful cross-cultural communication. Lower abilities to communicate attentively with migrants may make them less effective in implementing a person-centered approach (Killian et al., 2017; Reboloso Pacheco et al., 2003). The attentiveness component during interactions with migrants is essential for a deeper understanding of their needs and for developing common projects that benefit them (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we found that respondents in Italy and Spain reported higher levels of empathy compared with those in Sweden. Although these results align with previous

cross-national findings (Chopik et al., 2017), this finding may assume different meanings in the context of social work. Empathy is an essential component for using a person-centered approach (Rogers, 1951) in professional-client relationships. From the relationship perspective, social workers' empathy predisposes them to better understand and resonate with the emotional states of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby facilitating intercultural sensitivity (Jami et al., 2024) and the adoption of a person-centered approach. From the well-being of professionals, empathy results in a protective factor that promotes social workers' adjustment and well-being in the workplace, thereby reducing their risk of experiencing burnout symptoms (Derksen et al., 2013).

Second, regarding the identification of subgroups of social workers in each context that reported a higher vulnerability to burnout and the pattern of intercultural sensitivity and empathy across subgroups, our findings evidenced an impairment in social workers' perception of their intercultural sensitivity when facing job-related chronic emotional and interpersonal stress. As stated above, for an effective care relationship with migrants, it is essential to use culturally appropriate competencies. For example, one competence that is lacking when burnout is high concerns the confidence that social workers have during interactions with people of different backgrounds. Confidence in one's capabilities is the core of human agency, which allows individuals to orchestrate effective actions to achieve desired outcomes, motivates engagement in activities, and encourages persistence in the face of challenges. Thus, reduced confidence during interactions may undermine social workers' ability to communicate effectively, support clients, and perceive cross-cultural cues accurately (Foronda, 2008), ultimately leading to increased stress and burnout.

Moreover, as extensively reported in the introduction, empathy is a key component for implementing an appropriate person-centered approach. Our results highlight the differential role that empathy plays in each country. In particular, social workers with high burnout in Italy tend to be more empathetic compared to their colleagues with low levels of burnout, whereas social workers in Sweden reported a lower tendency to be empathetic compared to other contexts. Overall, the results evidenced that respondents in Italy with high levels of burnout tend to be highly emotionally involved during their interactions with migrants. However, as evidenced by previous studies (Kinman & Grant, 2020), an intense emotional commitment of social workers in their relationships with clients, if not properly managed, may result in greater mental exhaustion. Moreover, low

confidence during interactions with people from different backgrounds may reflect insufficient training in intercultural competencies that, in turn, increases the risk of job-related stress. Finally, the lower attentiveness during the interactions in the high burnout group, compared with the low burnout group, may be a result of mental exhaustion associated with burnout. In fact, burnout can undermine individuals' focus and effective communication at work.

Regarding the results of respondents in Spain, it might be that these results evidenced the challenges posed by the work conditions in Spain (Verde-Diego et al., 2021). Given the general tendency of social services in Spain to work with a wide range of clients and not to be specifically focused on migrants, engaging with a wide range of clients may limit the time and resources for in-depth training in intercultural competence, thereby increasing their burnout and undermining their tendency to cultivate their capacity for a genuine acceptance of others' opinions. This, in turn, may also reflect the feeling of sorrow during the interaction. Facing a variety of complex cases may reduce the available time to build meaningful relationships with clients, decreasing the enjoyment of interactions. This reduction in the quality of interactions may increase the risk of burnout among social workers in Spain.

Regarding respondents in Sweden, the differences across dimensions of intercultural sensitivity in the high burnout group are particularly relevant. In fact, despite high levels of burnout, these social workers showed greater attention and enjoyment in intercultural interactions. This may indicate an attempt to compensate for emotional difficulties by focusing on the positive aspects of interactions, as well as a strategy to maintain a sense of professional efficacy despite burnout. However, looking at these results and as evidenced by previous studies (Maddock, 2023), it seems essential that Swedish social service organizations provide effective training for cultivating emotional and intercultural competencies for their social workers in the migration sector to reduce their risk of burnout and, in turn, improve the quality of interactions with clients from different backgrounds.

Ultimately, our findings align with previous research indicating that, in Mediterranean countries, older social workers face greater job-related stress due to heavier workloads and limited access to human and financial resources (Mor Barak et al., 2016). Conversely, in Northern European countries, well-developed welfare systems provide older professionals with a better work-life balance (Anttonen & Karsio, 2016). However, younger social workers in these countries may struggle with adapting to the

pressures of workload in a highly standardized sector, which increases their risk of experiencing professional stress.

Although the present study was exploratory in nature and offer new insights in the mosaic of professional well-being in the migration sector, we should note that our study has the limitation of the small sample of social workers involved in each country. This limitation makes it difficult to generalize results to the entire population of social workers. However, the results offer a snapshot of their working conditions by highlighting some emerging issues in social work applied to the migration sector, specifically how social workers manage their emotional workload and perceive their intercultural competencies at work.

In summary, this study has evidenced the importance of monitoring and addressing burnout conditions among social workers in the migration sector in each specific context. We suggest that fostering the interpersonal and intercultural competencies of social workers operating in the migration sector can consequently enhance the appropriateness of their approaches and improve their well-being conditions over time.

5. Conclusions

The present study contributes to the current literature on social workers' well-being at work by preliminarily showing that empathy and intercultural sensitivity facets may play differential roles based on individual and cultural differences in working with people from a migration background.

Since burnout is associated with diminished enthusiasm, increased indifference, and a weakened sense of professional purpose, these findings underscore the critical need for targeted interventions to mitigate burnout among social workers. Such interventions should emphasize workplace policies that promote emotional resilience, engagement, and job satisfaction.

At the same time, our findings suggest the importance of tailoring interventions to country-specific needs. In Italy, it seems crucial to design training programs that foster intercultural confidence, provide coping strategies for managing emotional stress, and offer supervision and psychological support to prevent burnout among professionals who are most emotionally involved. Strategies such as emotional debriefing and peer support could help balance the emotional load (Klingemann et al., 2024). Moreover, it is important

to promote self-care practices and adaptive coping strategies (e.g., through mindfulness and boundary management) to maintain the balance between empathy and personal well-being (Karabinski et al., 2021). In Spain, the social service system should prioritize intercultural training while also ensuring effective workload management. In Sweden, interventions should focus on younger professionals by fostering empowerment strategies, such as interpersonal skills training and confidence-building in one's role. This approach aligns with the Council of the European Union's (2016) recommendations for developing intercultural skills in undergraduate and graduate courses for the new generation of professionals in social work.

Based on these premises, it is essential to develop and implement regular intervention programs to increase confidence during the interactions of social workers with migrants, for example, by using tools that enhance mastery experiences (e.g., role-playing) and modeling (e.g., video), which have been demonstrated to have efficacy in fostering individuals' confidence in their abilities.

Implementing training programs on intercultural skills, providing additional resources for achieving mastery experiences in intercultural communication, and ensuring adequate organizational support can improve the quality of service provided and reduce the risk of burnout among social workers.

Therefore, it is crucial to continue monitoring the well-being condition of professionals operating in the migration sector. Social services organizations should offer systematic spaces of dialogue and active listening, which set the base for reflecting on one's emotional states at work and how these emotional states affect the effectiveness of the care process with migrants. These spaces, in turn, ultimately improve the quality of care they provide to vulnerable populations.

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