CULTURAL COMPETENCE OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROFESSIONALS IN SERBIA AND CROATIA – INTER-COUNTRY COMPARISON

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The paper aims to analyse and compare the knowledge, attitudes and practices of social welfare employees in Serbia and Croatia when it comes to the domain of cultural competence. 101 participants from both countries participated in the research, the data were collected online, using a questionnaire developed for the purposes of this research. The main results of this research indicate a lack of application of the cultural competence principle when it comes to professionals in both countries, as well as a minimal involvement of institutions/organisations in dealing with this topic. At the end of the paper, the authors make recommendations in the direction of more proactive and culturally competent professionals in the field of social welfare in both countries.

Keywords: cultural competence, social welfare, professionals, development of cultural competences, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Croatia

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INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS –
CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND SOCIAL WELFARE

The problem of cultural competence (or as it is also called intercultural or cross-cultural competence) reflects the close connection between social welfare, social work and anthropology. Many social problems have their roots (directly or not) in culture, and it is not disputable that the practices of employees in social welfare depend on the understanding of other (different) cultures, and the skills of cultural competence are imposed as an indispensable tool in work (see Žganec & Miljenović, 2011; Škorić et al., 2015). The paper starts from the assumption that one of the main goals of employees in social welfare should be to notice, analyse and *understand* cultural differences and peculiarities, without automatic and non-critical evaluation. That is, in order for social welfare to become (more) ethical and anti-repressive, it is necessary to adopt a more constructive, coherent and reflective view of cultural competence. The development of cultural competence skills will also contribute to more dedicated practitioners who will be able to cope with the challenges in the modern world characterised by increasing diversity and intercultural tensions (Nadan, 2014).

Namely, there is no generally accepted definition of cultural competence. According to the *National Association of Social Workers* (NASW, 2001), the cultural competence of social welfare professionals includes systems and professionals who respectfully, effectively and efficiently respond to people of all cultures, classes, races, religions, status and other diversity factors in a way that recognises, affirms and values the individual, family, group and/or community and includes the following:

- Self-awareness of practitioners – awareness of one's own culture and cultural heritage, the ways in which one's own culture experience influences behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, values, decision-making in a personal, social and professional context,
– accepting and respecting the cultural heritage of other people and recognising that all cultures have specific strengths,
– efficient communication with users, knowledge of languages, appropriate use of translation services, adequate translation of various forms, scales, tests, information, instructions, verbal and non-verbal communication skills and culturally adapted treatment protocols,
– ongoing learning about the cultures of the users we provide services to,

– accepting and respecting cultural differences in a way that facilitates the ability of users and families to make decisions that fulfil their needs and beliefs,
– assuming that the beliefs and values of the users are unique and do not have to be the same as the beliefs of the professional worker,
– opposing the views that diversity is "wrong" or "bad",
– openness to cultural meetings and contacts,
– adaptation of services that are harmonised with the culture of the user and their values,
– taking responsibility for one's own education and training in the field of cultural competence, participation in conferences, round tables, studying professional literature, exchanging experiences with colleagues, observing cultural practices, etc.
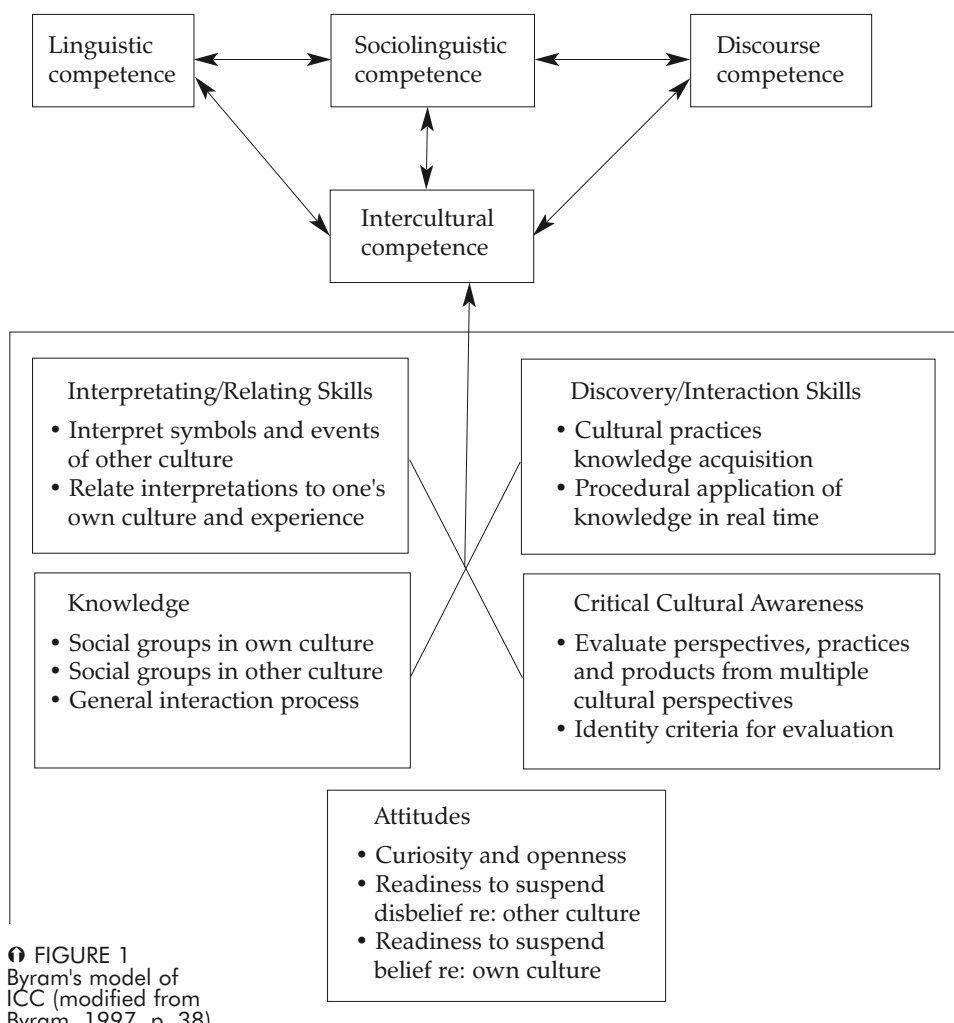
Cultural competence presupposes the ability to change perspectives, i.e. move, relativise and/or expand its own frame of reference. In other words, one's own (cultural) view of the world and way of life should not be seen as absolute, unique and unchangeable. Byram argues that: "If an individual knows about the ways in which their social identities have been acquired, that they are a prism through which other members of their group are perceived, and how they in turn perceive their interlocutors from another group, that awareness provides a basis for all successful interaction (Byram, 1997, p. 36)".

The above implies the thesis that cultural competence is a process of learning, thinking and professional development, that is, it requires time and lifelong learning. Namely, awareness of one's own strengths and limitations can broaden horizons and enrich intellectual resources and practical skills that might help in working with users (belonging to other cultures) (Wendy, 2013). UNESCO views cultural competence as a new type of literacy, which is just as important as reading, writing and/or arithmetic skills. The development of these competences facilitates relationships and interactions between people, creates more competent and adaptable practices and strives to respect the principles of social justice. Moreover, according to UNESCO, "cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are key levers for strengthening consensus on the universal foundation of human rights" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 27). Namely, the environment in which human rights are respected provides a fertile ground for intercultural dialogue and the understanding of cultural diversity. Nadan (2014) also draws attention to a very important idea, i.e. he believes that effective skills of cultural competence do not only in-

clude knowing the "other". Namely, knowing the "other" can put the knowledge of the self in the background, and that should be the *starting point* in building the skills of cultural competence. That is, reviewing, analysing, and knowing one's own culture can often have positive implications for understanding users who belong to another culture. The Council of Europe (2008) goes a step further and considers that the way social welfare institutions/organisations approach cultural differences also determines the nature of social services.

According to Bacote (1994), cultural competence involves four components: (1) *cultural awareness*, (2) *cultural knowledge*, (3) *cultural skills*, and (4) *cultural encounter*. Namely, cultural awareness includes processes during which practitioners should examine their biases and prejudices, i.e. to be primarily aware of their cultural background in order to be ready to work with members of minority cultures. Or as mentioned, cultural competence begins with the awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and practices and recognition that other people may have their own reality, that is, perception of the same, which may differ from ours. It also means that there are several ways to do the same thing the right way. The development of cultural knowledge and cultural skills is used for the purpose of conducting cultural assessments and providing culturally adequate services. Similarly, Byram (1997) conceptualised an ICC model he called intercultural learning. The aim of this process is to acquire competences related to attitudes and knowledge about another culture, as well as other general skills (interpretation, associating, critical thinking, etc.) that can lead to cultural competence. Also, his model deals with the processes of interaction, as well as the ability to interpret other cultures and connect with one's own. In relation to Bacote, Byram introduces the fifth component, i.e. *critical cultural consciousness*, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

When it comes to social welfare and social work, various authors have dealt with this topic (e.g. Boyle & Springer, 2001; Gray, 2003; Gray & Fook, 2004; Lum, 2005). Common to all of them is the idea that all professionals working in social welfare should be culturally competent, i.e. promote understanding between cultures and provide services that are culturally competent. Indeed, cultural competence is a prominent concept in social welfare, but the results of the research show that this concept has still not found a significant place when it comes to employees in the social welfare system within the territories of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia, which will be discussed in more detail under the subheading *Research Results*.

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┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
│  Linguistic  │◄────►│Sociolinguistic│◄────►│  Discourse   │
│  competence  │      │  competence  │      │  competence  │
└──────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
                      ┌──────────────┐
                      │ Intercultural│
                      │  competence  │
                      └──────────────┘
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Interpretating/Relating Skills
- Interpret symbols and events of other culture
- Relate interpretations to one's own culture and experience

Discovery/Interaction Skills
- Cultural practices knowledge acquisition
- Procedural application of knowledge in real time

Knowledge
- Social groups in own culture
- Social groups in other culture
- General interaction process

Critical Cultural Awareness
- Evaluate perspectives, practices and products from multiple cultural perspectives
- Identity criteria for evaluation

Attitudes
- Curiosity and openness
- Readiness to suspend disbelief re: other culture
- Readiness to suspend belief re: own culture

◑ FIGURE 1
Byram's model of
ICC (modified from
Byram, 1997, p. 38)

A REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THE CONTEXT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

There are several studies on cultural competence in the Republic of Serbia, which mainly focus on theoretical concepts: *Guide to Culturally Competent Practice in Social Welfare* (Pokrajinski zavod za socijalnu zaštitu, n.d.), *Importance of Cultural Competence for Social Work* (Škorić et al., 2015), while there are no empirical or research papers (especially in the field of social welfare). On the other hand, globalisation and growing trends of various social problems affecting different cultural groups, and culturally competent services in the field of social welfare should not be a choice, but should be essential. That is, intercultural contacts have become an integral part of everyday life and cultural competence is becoming a necessary res-

ponse in all spheres. In this context, it is important to mention the *Law on Social Welfare* on the territory of the Republic of Serbia, which regulates the field of social welfare and defines it as "organised social activity of public interest aimed at providing assistance and empowerment for independent and productive life of individuals and families, prevention and elimination of the consequences of social exclusion" (Službeni glasnik RS, 2011). Also, in the part of the *Principles of Social Welfare*, the *Principle of Respect for the Integrity and Dignity of Beneficiaries* within Article 24 states that: "a beneficiary in accordance with the law has the right to social welfare based on social justice, responsibility, which is being given to him/her with respect to their physical and mental integrity, security, as well as with respect to their moral, cultural and religious beliefs in accordance with guaranteed human rights and freedoms". Similarly, the Principle of Prohibition of Discrimination in Article 25 states that: "discrimination against beneficiaries of social welfare on the grounds of race, sex, age, nationality, social origin, sexual orientation, religion, political, trade union or other affiliation, property status, culture, language, disability, nature of social exclusion or other personal characteristics is prohibited" (Službeni glasnik RS, 2011). It could be said that the above-mentioned principles are intrinsically related to the cultural competences of social welfare employees. That is, the lack of these competences can lead to disrespect for the integrity and dignity of users, which further (may) result in incompetent and/or lower quality services.

The Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, in the study programme Social Work, recognised the importance of educating future social workers in the field of cultural competence, and through the course *Cultural Competence and Intercultural Communication* prepares future professionals to work with culturally different users (Faculty of Philosophy, n.d.). Certainly, the establishment of innovative educational plans and programmes represents a starting point in the development of cultural competences of future professionals and opens up the opportunity for appropriate cultural interactions (through theoretical learning and practical activities in the field). On the other hand, cultural competence is more than formal education, so there would be various trainings, seminars, round tables, debates, etc. that should find their place when it comes to the context of social welfare so that professionals are (better) prepared for different intercultural encounters and more efficient practices.

The issue of cultural competence in the territory of the Republic of Croatia has been relatively poorly investigated in previous theoretical or research papers. Despite the existence of a slightly larger number of papers from the broader field of

multiculturalism that have appeared since the second half of the 1980s in the territory of former state (e.g. Klinar, 1986), considerable interest in the issue of cultural competence has emerged in the last fifteen years, especially in the field of primary and secondary education, since the results of the first research appeared and more broadly defined the concept of interculturality and cultural competence. Thus e.g. Ninčević (2009) discusses issues of intercultural education in a multicultural and plural society in a new European context. Buljubašić-Kuzmanović and Livazović (2010) examined how much social skills, as measures of desirable and socially competent behaviour, contain, explain and predict the intercultural competence of students from fifth to eighth grade of primary school, and Mlinarević et al. (2013) wrote about intercultural teacher education through a comparative review of intercultural education of Masters of Primary Education in Osijek and Subotica. In the field of social work and social welfare, the concept of cultural competence in Croatia has emerged since 2003, when a document of the National Association of Social Workers on cultural competence standards was translated into Croatian (NASW, 2001). After that, only in the work of Žganec and Miljenović (2011) regarding multiculturalism in social work, the issue of cultural competence has been reopened. In this paper, the authors, among other things, deal with the issue of operationalisation of the concept of cultural competence and give an overview of its key indicators and measuring instruments in the field of social work.

The practice of social work and the entire social welfare system in the Republic of Croatia through its overall development has unfortunately failed to build clear standards for a culturally competent professional facilitator, which is evident in the lack of clear guidelines and any serious educational programmes on this topic. One of the possible reasons for this situation is the lack of sensitivity of the social welfare system to a number of specific issues that experts face in their work, and that are caused by excessive bureaucracy of the social welfare system, its centralisation and predominant focus on financial assistance to beneficiaries.

The social welfare system of the Republic of Croatia is regulated by the thorough Social Welfare Act from 2013 (Zakon o socijalnoj skrbi, *Official Gazette*, No 157/2013) and has undergone numerous amendments in the past 8 years. Under its key principles, the Law also mentions the principle of respect for human rights and the integrity of users, so Article 14 states that "rights in the social welfare system are ensured to the user with respect for human rights, physical and mental integrity, security and respect for ethical, cultural and religious beliefs". Also, one of the legal principles is the one on

the prohibition of discrimination, which also implies a ban on the basis of the cultural identity of the user. The Law on Social Work (Zakon o djelatnosti socijalnog rada, *Official Gazette,* No 16/2019) mentions among the numerous goals of social work "representation of vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups and removal of obstacles that people face in achieving their social security, building a socially righteous society based on humanism and human rights which enables a dignified life for all its members". It is evident that the issues of cultural differences, cultural sensitivity and competence in both of these laws are regulated only indirectly.

Issues of cultural competence in social work education in the Republic of Croatia are incorporated within various subjects such as ethics of social work, human rights, social work in the community, international social work and others. Also, within various lifelong learning programmes (especially summer schools for community development as well as programmes implemented within the Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik), the issues of multiculturalism and the development of cultural competence only periodically appear as topics. But all this seems far from a satisfactory level that would allow professionals to better understand the complex issues related to the cultural differences of their users needed to develop culturally sensitive professional practices and systematically develop the cultural competence of professionals working in the social welfare system.

If we consider the above-mentioned laws related to social welfare and social work, it can be concluded that the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia advocate social justice, social development and the prohibition of discrimination against certain (cultural) groups. However, part of the problem is related to legislative and institutional capacities, where the concept of cultural competence and its importance for quality and compatible social welfare services are not recognised (or at least not directly). On the other hand, it could be said that initial steps have been made in recognising the skills of cultural competence by higher education institutions as a valuable tool in working with culturally different individuals and groups. Accordingly, the chapter *Research Results* will present the degree of application of these principles in the practice of professionals, as well as in the construction of culturally adapted organisations and/or institutions.

Cultural competences cannot be acquired overnight, nor do they develop once and for all. As we mentioned, cultures are changing and constantly evolving, which further implies the thesis that cultural competences must remain flexible, i.e. adaptable to the context and background of the user. That is, it should not be assumed that all members of different cultures (or even the same) have the same values and attitudes.

It is important to emphasise that cultural competence does not only imply respect for different beliefs, attitudes, patterns of behaviour of our users, but also includes the reflection of these values in politics, administration and service delivery (see also Mays et al., 2002). In order to adopt a healthy and critical practice of professionals in social welfare, it is necessary to re-examine one's own beliefs and values, i.e. assumptions about the world, and to see if they correspond to professional goals. Precisely, encounters with people different from us might help us to reconsider our own attitudes, ways of thinking and behaving. On the other hand, the starting point for any human-oriented work, such as social work, psychology, social pedagogy etc., is that people have similar basic needs regardless of what culture they belong to, what their social background, ethnicity, religion, etc is. It is important to understand that the social action and behaviour of an individual is both *social* and *individual*, which means that it is the result of a multidimensional combination of a person's character, social factors, historical and cultural background (Stier, 2004; Bassey & Melluish, 2013). One of the problems is that social welfare institutions/organisations often tend to collectivise access to different cultural groups (Stier, 2004). That is, they view the users of one culture as a homogeneous group while neglecting the individualised approach. Take, for example, members of the Roma population, some of whom belong to the Kalderash, Sinti, Lyuli, Lovari, etc. groups, and are often perceived as a large cultural group with equal characteristics. Namely, this group is homogenised, but it can actually show huge cultural, physical and geographical differences. In addition, it is often forgotten that it is not only traditions, norms, values, patterns of behaviour and the like that affects the functioning of a member of a cultural group, but it is also the way in which that group is treated within a broader group (see also Dean, 2001). The challenge for social workers is to (i) see and value diversity in society, and especially diversity within seemingly homogeneous groups, as opposed to disregarding differences and transforming them into shortcomings and/or weaknesses.

According to what was mentioned above, this paper seeks to examine the extent to which professionals working in social welfare in the territories of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia are culturally sensitised to working with culturally diverse users. That is, to examining and analysing their knowledge, attitudes and practices they perform. As mentioned, the research starts from the assumption that cultural competence should be at the centre of all institutions/ organisations of social welfare and employed professionals, because only in that way the respect for human rights can be

ensured. On the other hand, this task is not easy at all, especially bearing in mind that users should be offered an individualised approach to various problems they face, be empathetic and at the same time professional, find a balance between closeness and optimal boundaries, flexibility and existing principles and laws.

METHODOLOGY

Research aim and hypotheses

In accordance with the problem and the research topic, the general aim of this paper is primarily to examine the extent to which culturally competent practice is present in the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia in the social welfare system. In addition, specific objectives include analysis of differences in the application of culturally competent practice, differences in attitudes and knowledge of culturally competent practice between these countries, as well as analysis of the impact of education of professionals and the sector in which they work on the application of culturally competent practice within the social welfare system.

Hypothesis 1: Based on data on the working method of employees in the social welfare system in the Republic of Serbia (Škorić et al., 2015) and the Republic of Croatia (Klinar, 1986; Žganec & Miljenović, 2011; Mlinarević et al., 2013), as well as legal regulations (Law on Social Welfare, *Official Gazette*, No 157/2013; Law on Social Work, *Official Gazette*, No 16/2019) it is expected that there are no statistically significant differences between professionals in Serbia and Croatia in terms of culturally competent practice.

Hypothesis 2: Based on available data on the education of professionals in the social protection system in both countries (Buljubašić-Kuzmanović & Livazović 2010, Mlinarević et al., 2013; Škorić et al., 2015), professionals in Serbia and Croatia are expected to have similar views and knowledge of culturally competent practice, since education on this topic is equally (un)available to them.

Hypothesis 3: Given the legal framework and regulations on direct work with beneficiaries in the social welfare system of both countries (Law on Social Welfare, *Official Gazette*, No 157/2013; Law on Social Work, *Official Gazette*, No 16/2019) it is expected that between professionals in Serbia and Croatia there are no statistically significant differences in the application of culturally competent practice at the level of institutions.

Hypothesis 4: If we take into account that professionals employed in the social welfare system have the same initial education, it is expected that there are no differences in the application of culturally competent practice between respondents working in different sectors (public, private, NGO).

Hypothesis 5: Respondents who have undergone a number of trainings related to culturally competent practice show better application of practice in direct work with users.

Sample

The research sample consisted of 202 respondents, 101 respondents from Serbia and 101 respondents from Croatia. There were 161 female and 41 male respondents. 156 respondents live in the city and 46 respondents live in villages or suburban areas. 1.00% of respondents completed doctoral studies, 35.60% of respondents completed master studies, 45.00% of respondents completed bachelor academic studies, 6.40% of respondents completed bachelor vocational studies, 11.40% of respondents completed high school and 0.60% of respondents completed elementary school. 69.31% of respondents are employed in the private sector, 19.62% are employed in civil society organisations, 14.12% are employed in private organisations, and 2.00% of respondents are employed in other organisations. 72 respondents are social workers, 37 respondents are other, 33 respondents are psychologists, 13 respondents are special pedagogues, 10 respondents are lawyers, 9 respondents are sociologists, 7 respondents are pedagogues, defectologist, teachers and nurses. 33.20% of the total number of respondents are between 40-49 years old, 31.71% are between 30-39 years old, 17.82% are between 18-29, 11.84% between 50-59 and 5.43% of the total number of respondents are 60 and over 60 years old. 28.17% of the total number of respondents have between one and five years of work experience, 19.34% have between five and ten years of work experience, 16.32% have more than twenty years of work experience, 13.84% have between ten and fifteen years of work experience, 12.89% have between fifteen and twenty years of work experience, and 9.44% of respondents have less than one year of work experience in social welfare.

Instruments and variables

For the purposes of the research, a questionnaire was made with 50 items: 43 items using a five-point Likert scale (1 – I totally disagree, 5 – I totally agree) and 7 items using multiple-choice questions. The scale includes indicators: attitudes about cultural competence, knowledge about cultural competence, and cultural competence practice of the institution. In addition, the questionnaire contains questions related to the obstacles that professionals encounter in working with users of other cultures, to the way professionals inform themselves about users of other cultures, as well as to the development of culturally competent practices.

The reliability coefficient of the scale (Cronbach's alpha) is 0.95, which indicates that the reliability of the scale is satisfactory.

Cultural competence – the variable is operationalised by a scale made for research purposes.

Attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence – the variable is operationalised with 10 items of the scale that refer to attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence.

Culturally competent practice – the variable is operationalised with 23 items related to individual cultural competent practice and 10 items related to the culturally competent practice of the institution.

Demographic variable – the country in which the respondents live.

Procedure

The questionnaires were sent in online form to the e-mail address of the institutions/organisations of social welfare in Serbia and Croatia. Contacts of institutions/organisations were found on the official websites of the Ministries and other relevant sources (such as publication of the NGO sector about their services in the territories of the above-mentioned countries) as well as personal sources. The next step included sending the questionnaire to the addresses of professional (co)workers. Data were collected in the period from October to December 2020. The collected data were processed in the SPSS 21.0 statistical package.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of the *t*-test for independent samples show that there is a significant difference in culturally competent practice between respondents from Serbia and Croatia (Table 2). Respondents from Serbia achieving higher scores on the scale compared to respondents from Croatia (Table 1).

⮞ TABLE 1
Culturally competent practice in Serbia and Croatia

	M	*SD*
Serbia	156.53	24.42
Croatia	145.84	26.91

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				Mean difference	t-test		
	F	*P*	*M1*	*M2*		*t*	*df*	*p*
Culturally competent practice	2.45	0.12	156.53	145.84	10.74	2.97	98	0.00

⮔ TABLE 2
Differences in culturally competent practice between Serbia and Croatia

* *M1* – Mean of Serbia, *M2* – Mean of Croatia

Table 3 shows the *t-test results for the independent samples.* The results indicate that respondents from Serbia differ sig-

nificantly from respondents from Croatia when it comes to the attitude: "Prejudice is a learned behaviour that can be eliminated by increased contact and understanding of different cultural groups" and the statement regarding knowledge: "Cultural competence is the ability to think, behave and communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures", "Cultural competence is a process that involves ongoing work on oneself throughout one's life", "Cultural self-awareness is recognised as an important factor in evaluating and planning customer service" and "Cultural self-awareness can be viewed as the foundation of communication" (Attachment 1), with respondents from Serbia agreeing to a greater extent with the given statements in relation to respondents from Croatia.

⟳ TABLE 3
Differences in knowledge and attitudes about cultural competence between Serbia and Croatia

Number of item	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				Mean difference	t-test		
	F	P	M1	M2		t	df	p
1.	0.97	0.34	4.17	4.08	0.09	0.75	200	0.46
2.	0.12	0.73	4.31	4.25	0.67	0.62	200	0.56
3.	2.47	0.12	4.03	3.09	0.12	0.84	200	0.40
4.	0.42	0.51	4.44	4.15	0.29	2.34	200	0.02
5.	5.93	0.02	3.62	3.73	-0.10	-0.77	200	0.44
6.	5.20	0.02	4.51	4.13	0.39	3.08	200	0.00
7.	5.33	0.02	4.53	4.15	0.38	2.92	200	0.01
8.	0.90	0.76	4.15	3.73	0.42	2.73	200	0.01
9.	0.20	0.66	4.10	3.78	0.32	2.44	200	0.02
10.	0.32	0.58	4.27	4.16	0.11	0.82	200	0.42

* M1 – Mean of Serbia, M2 – Mean of Croatia

Table 4 shows the results of the t-test which show that there are statistically significant differences between respondents from Serbia and Croatia when it comes to individual practices of professionals, while Table 5 shows the results of differences when it comes to institutions/organisations of social welfare in territories of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia. The results show that the respondents from Serbia largely agree with the given statements, i.e., that they possess the expressed attitudes and knowledge to a greater extent.

The results of the two-factor analysis of variance show that there are no significant differences between respondents from Serbia and Croatia in relation to the sector the professionals work in (public, private, NGO) when it comes to the total score on the scale of culturally competent practice (Table 6).

When it comes to attending educational training aimed at developing cultural competence, the analysis of the results indicates that there are statistically significant differences between respondents from Serbia and Croatia (Table 7).

Number of item	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		M1	M2	Mean difference	t-test		
	F	P				t	df	p
11.	0.78	0.37	4.39	4.05	0.34	2.48	200	0.01
12.	2.60	0.10	4.32	4.15	0.25	1.35	200	0.17
13.	0.23	0.63	3.03	3.04	-0.01	-0.07	200	0.96
14.	4.18	0.04	4.44	4.07	0.37	2.95	200	0.01
15.	3.05	0.08	4.63	4.28	0.37	3.08	200	0.01
16.	15.02	0.00	4.30	3.92	0.38	2.63	200	0.01
17.	1.33	0.25	3.97	3.86	0.11	0.71	200	0.47
18.	0.09	0.77	3.89	3.78	0.11	0.73	200	0.46
19.	0.02	0.87	4.28	3.99	0.20	2.39	200	0.02
20.	0.23	0.63	4.43	4.09	0.34	2.87	200	0.01
21.	1.59	0.21	4.47	4.04	0.41	3.48	200	0.00
22.	1.25	0.26	4.38	4.12	0.26	2.04	200	0.04
23.	1.11	0.29	4.25	3.94	0.31	2.16	200	0.03
24.	0.55	0.47	3.87	3.49	0.39	2.48	200	0.02
25.	0.32	0.57	4.08	3.86	0.39	2.66	200	0.01
26.	0.00	0.98	3.49	3.31	0.17	0.99	200	0.32
27.	3.38	0.07	3.50	3.36	0.15	0.94	200	0.35
28.	1.37	0.24	4.17	3.79	0.41	2.64	200	0.01
29.	0.39	0.53	4.41	4.06	0.36	2.52	200	0.01
30.	1.27	0.26	1.51	1.85	-0.37	-2.31	200	0.02
31.	6.56	0.01	1.77	1.74	-0.02	-0.13	200	0.89
32.	0.15	0.69	2.30	2.32	-0.03	-0.17	200	0.87
33.	4.04	0.05	3.11	2.82	0.29	1.48	200	0.14

◑ TABLE 4
Differences in the cultural competence in the practice of professionals

* *M1 – Mean of Serbia, M2 – Mean of Croatia*

◑ TABLE 5
Differences in the cultural competence in the practice of institutions

On the other hand, the results show that professionals do not attend various forms of training sufficiently, regardless of whether they are from Serbia or Croatia, because over 80.00% of respondents have never attended trainings when it comes to improving cultural competences.

Number of item	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		M1	M2	Mean difference	t-test		
	F	P				t	df	p
34.	7.81	0.01	4.07	3.83	0.24	1.35	200	0.18
35.	0.26	0.61	2.39	1.94	0.45	2.48	200	0.02
36.	0.01	0.97	3.44	2.97	0.47	2.17	200	0.03
37.	10.37	0.00	3.72	3.43	0.29	2.10	200	0.03
38.	0.01	0.92	3.16	2.83	0.33	1.55	200	0.12
39.	4.18	0.04	3.35	2.82	0.53	2.71	200	0.04
40.	0.60	0.44	3.77	3.38	0.39	2.05	200	0.01
41.	0.60	0.44	3.66	2.99	0.67	3.34	200	0.00
42.	0.01	0.92	4.07	3.55	0.52	2.71	200	0.01
43.	7.81	0.01	4.07	3.61	0.46	2.48	200	0.01

* *M1 – Mean of Serbia, M2 – Mean of Croatia*

	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F	Df	p	η^2
State	351.04	351.04	0.53	1	0.47	0.30
Work sector	3064.86	1021.62	1.56	3	0.20	0.23
State* Work sector	1928.79	642.93	0.97	3	0.41	0.15

	Educational trainings		
	1-2	2-5	More then 5
Serbia	21.80%	58.60%	19.60%
Croatia	84.1%	11.90%	4.00%

$$\chi^2 = 3.57 \ (df = 1, \ p \leq 0.05)$$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Various authors (e.g. Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005) share the view that (cultural) diversity might be positive. Through encounters and contacts with other cultures, it is possible to overcome prejudices and stereotypes, learn something new and/or expand/modify the current view of the world. In short, professionals are becoming more sensitive towards different perspectives and behaviours. When it comes to this research, professionals in the field of social welfare, regardless of whether they are from the territory of the Republic of Serbia or the Republic of Croatia, tend to collect data on users who are members of other cultures indirectly, i.e. through the exchange of experiences with colleagues and through reading of Internet sites and portals. Based on that, it can be concluded that professionals use secondary sources of information when it comes to culturally different users. Such a result may be a consequence of the lack of resources in the form of the number of employees, i.e. the large volume of work per professional, which is unequivocally indicated by the research result when it comes to both countries. On the other hand, Stier argues, it is precisely direct contact with other cultures that is the starting point in the development of cultural competence (Stier, 2004). That is, differences in cultural, racial, or sexual orientation do not pose themselves a problem, but rather prejudices, discrimination, and other forms of oppression, so cultural competence skills should be a valuable tool for social care professionals (Dean, 2001). One important research (Lum, 2005) speaks in favour of the fact that the understanding of the cultural context by professional workers leads to better services and in the long run to better integration of different cultures and/or cultural groups into society, while preserving one's own cultural identity.

If we look at the results of research related to professional training programmes in the field of cultural competence, in the Republic of Serbia there is a slightly higher level of attendance of trainings in comparison with professionals from the territory of the Republic of Croatia. However, in both cases, the largest percentage of respondents have never attended training programmes dealing with cultural competence. In this regard, the main obstacles in working with users perceived as significant by professionals were examined. Institutionalised discrimination, lack of cooperation with other relevant institutions/organisations, insufficient number of trainings, lack of time and small number of employees in relation to the scope and complexity of work, lack of interest of the institution/organisation for continuous support in acquiring adequate knowledge and skills are just some of the obstacles considered as significant (to a greater or lesser extent) by professionals in the territories of both states. On the other hand, respondents agree that more training and different types of training would significantly contribute to making them feel more competent in providing different services to users from other cultures. Similarly, Rasmussen argues, different trainings on cultural competence can help professionals avoid inadequate and premature conclusions made on the basis of cultural differences (Rasmussen, 2007). The results of the research also show that the services of translators in the territory of both countries are often missing in institutions/organisations, which can negatively affect the professional-user relationship. Namely, research (Chand, 2005) that dealt with the importance of language in the application of culturally competent practice in social welfare and health strongly argues that translation and interpretation services are (the first) important step in helping potential users access certain services. Otherwise, there are difficulties in understanding the dynamics of user behaviour and misunderstanding of his/her cultural context, which can further affect the provision of quality service.

In addition to the positive changes that have occurred with the concept of cultural competence, which have been previously elaborated, it is not disputable that this concept is often controversial, i.e., it is the subject of various debates. One of the biggest objections relates to the word "cultural" which can indeed imply a multitude of different meanings, while competence can be highly context-dependent and mainly implies a set of skills and/or knowledge that professionals can acquire (Danso, 2018). In addition, when it comes to competences, it is also about the hierarchy of power and privileges between groups. Or in short, who sets the measures, standards or criteria when it comes to cultural competence?

In other words, is the dominant culture positioned as a normative reference point? Does being a part of the dominant culture then infuse the values of superiority in relation to others (cultures) and do we in that way strengthen the mentality of "us and them"? The main argument for the above is the question of how one can be competent in one's (other's) culture? (See also Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). Some authors (e.g. Abrams & Moio, 2009) go even a step further arguing that the model of cultural competence is largely ineffective and (un)intentionally promotes various forms of discrimination. As an alternative, they suggest *cultural humility*, which emphasises the acquisition of knowledge and ignores privileges (Danso, 2018). Cultural humility focuses on shifting the emphasis from our past experience to the value of the practice of listening to and accepting the values and attitudes of other people (or cultures). It takes a position of ignorance and a willingness to work with users without condemnation – freeing professionals from the expectation of being "cultural experts".

However, the issues of cultural competence are an important part of newly created Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (IFSW, IASSW, 2020). Among the numerous determinants that are mentioned as key in the education of future social work professionals, it is emphasised that "the curriculum should reflect the needs, values and cultures of the relevant populations and should be based on human rights principles and the pursuit of justice". The aspect is further emphasised by the statement that "social work in context refers to the broader knowledge that is required in order to critically understand the political, socio-legal, cultural and historical forces that have shaped social work". Finally, it is appealed that education should provide "the knowledge of how traditions, culture, beliefs, religions and customs influence human development across the lifespan, including how these might constitute resources and/or obstacles to growth".

Based on the analysis of cultural competence at the individual level, it can be noticed that the participants mostly have positive attitudes towards cultural differences and it seems that the participants understand the importance of understanding other cultures. On the other hand, when it comes to the corpus of responses that referred to the negative aspects, the following one was singled out: "My prejudices cause me to provide services of lower quality" because a large number of participants from both countries agreed with this statement. This statement certainly represents a result that speaks of room for improving the cultural competences of employees in the social welfare system, as well as the lack of additional

training programmes on this topic. This is supported by the result that social welfare institutions/organisations, as perceived by the participants, are not interested in professional development of employees, as well as for any type of intersectoral cooperation that would result in more culturally competent professionals in the field of social welfare. In this regard, participants from the Republic of Croatia show greater dissatisfaction when it comes to the above activities of institutions/organisations.

Finally, a large number of participants believe that cultural competence plays an important role in the social welfare system, but on the other hand, there is a certain discrepancy between positive individual attitudes and capacities of institutions/organisations that are negatively assessed in terms of supporting the development of cultural competence. The research is important because it generates the need to create new types of formal and non-formal education in the field of cultural competence in the territories of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia for better understanding of users and drawing the attention of the general public to this issue.

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Kulturalna kompetentnost stručnjaka u sustavima socijalne skrbi u Srbiji i Hrvatskoj – međudržavna usporedba

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Cilj je rada analizirati i usporediti znanja, stavove i prakse stručnjaka u socijalnoj skrbi Republike Srbije i Republike Hrvatske na području kulturalne kompetentnosti. U istraživanju je sudjelovao po 101 sudionik iz obje države, a podaci su prikupljeni online, upotrebom upitnika konstruiranog za potrebe ovog istraživanja. Rezultati upućuju na nedostatak

primjene principa kulturalne kompetentnosti kada su u pitanju stručni radnici u obje države, kao i ograničen angažman ustanova/organizacija u bavljenju ovom tematikom. Autori na kraju daju preporuke u smjeru poticanja proaktivnijih i kulturalno kompetentnijih stručnjaka u sustavima socijalne skrbi ovih država.

Ključne riječi: kulturalna kompetentnost, socijalna skrb, stručnjaci, razvoj kulturalnih kompetencija, Republika Srbija, Republika Hrvatska