Research reports

Intercultural competence, xenophobia and discrimination: a critical analysis of the discourses of international academic exchange students from the perspective of global citizenship

Competências interculturais, xenofobia e discriminação: análise crítica de discursos de estudantes em intercâmbio acadêmico internacional na perspectiva da cidadania global

Fabiana Pinto de Almeida Bizarria[1]*, Márcia Zabdiele Moreira[2], Italo Cavalcante Aguiar[3], Kilvia Souza Ferreira[4], Lucas Alves do Nascimento[5]

[1]Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais (PUC Minas), Programa de Pós-graduação em Psicologia, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brasil
[2]Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), Faculdade de Economia, Administração, Atuária e Contabilidade (FEAAC), Programa de Pós-graduação em Administração e Controladoria (PPAC), Fortaleza, CE, Brasil
[3]Centro Universitário Christus (Unichristus), Coordenação de Mobilidade e Assuntos Internacionais (COMAI), Fortaleza,CE, Brasil
[4]Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), Faculdade de Economia, Administração, Atuária e Contabilidade (FEAAC), Programa de Pós-graduação em Administração Pública (PROFIAP), Fortaleza, CE, Brasil
[5]Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM), Centro de Ciências Exatas e da Natureza, Programa de Pós-graduação em Estatística e Modelagem Quantitativa de Dados, Santa Maria, RS, Brasil

Abstract

The research aimed to deepen understanding of intercultural skills in the path of interpersonal relationships that mobilize the training process considering critical social issues. To undertake critical discourse analysis, it presents a comprehensive qualitative approach and is supported by two focus groups, making it possible to understand three discursive contexts related to the issues: Brazilians, other 'Latinos', and Europeans. There is, then, the importance of the media, arts, literature, and even formal education in the stereotypical view of Brazil and Brazilians. It was observed that the criticism of the discourse about the decolonial approach reflects on the implicit racist expression of European students in relation to Brazil, analyzing national culture based on European reference values. The research contributes to the theme of intercultural skills to seek to expand the discussion of skills, abilities, knowledge, and attitudes to the dimension of interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: internationalization; higher education; decoloniality; critical discourse analysis.

Resumo

A pesquisa visou aprofundar compreensões sobre as competências interculturais no caminho das relações interpessoais que mobilizam o processo formativo, considerando problemáticas sociais críticas. No esforço de empreender análise crítica do discurso, se apresenta em abordagem qualitativa compreensiva e se apoia em dois grupos focais, sendo possível depreender três contextos discursivos relacionados às problemáticas: os brasileiros, os demais 'latinos' e os europeus. Têm-se, então, a importância da mídia, das artes, da literatura e até da educação formal, na visão estereotipada sobre o Brasil e sobre os brasileiros. Observou-se que a crítica ao discurso, com referência à abordagem decolonial, reflete sobre a implícita expressão racista de estudantes europeus em relação ao Brasil, analisando a cultura nacional com base nos valores de referência europeia. A pesquisa contribui com o tema competências interculturais, a fim de buscar ampliar a discussão das competências, das habilidades, dos conhecimentos e das atitudes, à dimensão das relações interpessoais.

Palavras-chave: internacionalização; ensino superior; decolonialidade; análise crítica do discurso..

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are responsible for professional education within the broader context of socioeconomic development. Given ongoing social transformations, they are increasingly expected to offer educational opportunities that address emerging changes, including intercultural, economic, and political dynamics (Duarte; Lima Júnior; Batista, 2007). The globalization process has further intensified interactions among people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Genkova et al., 2021).

Since the World Conferences on Higher Education in 1998 and 2009, the international dimension of higher education institutions (HEIs) has been a topic of discussion to align teaching, research, and outreach with international academic cooperation. These discussions underscore the importance of networks and the exchange of experiences in accelerating the socio-economic development of developing countries. In this regard, HEIs are expected to contribute to such transformations by promoting quality, governance, research, and innovation in higher education (Knight, 2014). Institutions are thus encouraged to establish exchange agreements to enhance their overall quality—particularly in teaching and research—as a means of fostering national development and improving quality of life (Bruner; Iannarelli, 2011).

The Paris Declaration (Nações Unidas, 2015) emphasizes that the primary goal of education, beyond the development of knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes and the incorporation of fundamental values, is to help young people become active members of society (Muckenberger; Miura, 2015). As intercultural contact situations increase, the need to develop intercultural competencies likewise grows (Genkova et al., 2021).

According to Burbano (2010), the strategic objectives of international academic cooperation include information exchange, the promotion of mobility, knowledge sharing on specific topics, the improvement of academic quality, and curriculum internationalization. These objectives aim to overcome regional and global asymmetries as reflected in the complex phenomenon of higher education internationalization. The expansion of academic mobility through international cooperation positions higher education institutions (HEIs) as a privileged field for research on social capital, reciprocity, and trust (Nahapiet; Ghoshal, 1998).

To deepen the understanding of international academic mobility, the contributions of Deardorff (2009, 2015a, 2015b, 2020)—one of the most widely cited researchers on Intercultural Competence (IC)—are particularly relevant, as demonstrated in the bibliometric study by Peng et al. (2020). Deardorff critically addresses the topic in light of contextual changes related to global citizenship, including "[…] challenging situations of increased xenophobia and discrimination in host countries" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 15). The author further suggests:

> What seems to be missing in all this is perhaps how we see others and how we see ourselves in relation to others […] The challenge for international educators is to explore how these principles of loving others translate into programs and practices (Deardorff, 2020, p. 16).

Before furthering this debate, it is necessary to revisit the concept of IC.

Barrow (2023) notes that there is no consensus among intercultural scholars on a single definition of intercultural competence (IC). However, Deardorff's (2009) framework, which highlights skills, knowledge, and attitudes, remains widely accepted. According to Deardorff (2009), communication is a central component in intercultural interactions. Clemente and Morosini (2021) note that the construct of "Intercultural Competence" encompasses a complex array of perspectives, particularly in studies conducted within the Brazilian context. Both "competence" and "interculturality", when considered individually, involve broad epistemological developments.

Deardorff (2015a) acknowledges significant advancements in the field, especially as IC is increasingly incorporated into the curricula of various academic and professional programs. This shift has been supported by studies demonstrating the influence of academic exchange experiences on the development of intercultural competencies. For example, Miettinen (2021) highlights how such experiences foster self-reflection and reflexivity both within and beyond students' countries of origin. Similarly, Pinto (2018) emphasizes that students perceive IC as

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a complex and multidimensional construct, stressing the need to develop attitudes (such as acceptance, respect, curiosity, and openness), knowledge (including cultural contexts, self-knowledge, and cultural self-awareness), and skills (such as observation and listening), following Deardorff's (2009) classification.

In this regard, the communicative process underlying interpersonal interactions is considered fundamental to the intercultural dimension. As Schröder (2023) explains, culture represents a reciprocal and conventionalized praxis of norms and behavioral patterns, ensuring communicative competence among its participants by providing plausibility, regularity, normality, and predictability.

Returning to Deardorff's (2020, p. 17) reflections, the debate on intercultural competencies, particularly concerning communication, presents a challenge for international educators to engage in deeper discussions about interpersonal relationships, "shared humanity", and "authentic community"—concepts that reinforce the imperative of "learning to live together".

That being said, this study aims to emphasize the importance of international academic cooperation within higher education institutions (HEIs) in fostering intercultural competencies, particularly in light of the socioeconomic transformations affecting educational processes and the pressing social challenges posed by xenophobia and discrimination. The research aims to deepen the understanding of these competencies within the context of interpersonal relationships, with the overarching goal of relearning how to live together, as advocated by Deardorff (2020).

Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is: How do students who have participated in international academic exchange programs develop intercultural competencies from the perspective of Global Citizenship? The specific objective is to analyze the discourses of both Brazilian and international students regarding the development of intercultural competencies during international academic exchange programs framed by the perspective of Global Citizenship. The research draws upon two focus group discussions conducted with students from diverse national backgrounds during a nationwide event held in Brazil, which brought together Brazilian students with exchange experience abroad and international students residing in Brazil.

This study seeks to contribute to the field of intercultural competencies by problematizing emerging discussions within international education, in line with the trajectory outlined by Deardorff (2009, 2015a, 2015b, 2020). The aim is to foster connections among competencies, skills, knowledge, and attitudes, with a focus on interpersonal relationships and addressing the impacts of xenophobia and discrimination on students. Ultimately, the study aspires to prepare students for the challenges of global citizenship and civic engagement (Horn; Hendel; Fry, 2012).

To this end, the discussion incorporates decolonial perspectives, recognizing, as Mignolo (2017) asserts, that coloniality is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality, nor can there be global modernities without global colonialities. In acknowledging Deardorff's (2020) openness to exploring how individuals perceive themselves and others within sociocultural analyses, particularly in relation to the challenges of making global citizenship more tangible—the present study echoes Deardorff's (2015a, p. 4) probing questions: "Intercultural—according to whom? On what basis? At what level? And what can we learn from each other?" and further, "To what end?"

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES IN ACADEMIC EXCHANGE

Within the conceptual landscape of Intercultural Competence (IC), Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) define IC as a set of skills that enable individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It involves multiple dimensions, including self-awareness, social interaction, and the creation of meaningful interactions. This differs, for instance, from the concept of cultural intelligence, which focuses on intercultural interactions categorized into the psychological dimensions of thinking, feeling, and acting (Genkova et al., 2021).

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Schelfhout et al. (2022) similarly define IC as the ability of individuals to behave effectively in intercultural situations. Dias, Zhu and Samaratunge (2020) describe IC as a multifaceted and complex concept that combines the knowledge and skills necessary for appropriate and effective performance when interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Schnabel et al. (2015) emphasize that IC guides behavioral orientation towards cultural diversity, encompassing components ranging from social competence (e.g., communication skills) and personal competence (e.g., learning skills) to methodological expertise (e.g., problem-solving competence). According to this perspective, IC is expected to help individuals navigate familiar, unfamiliar, or challenging situations. Bolten (2007) further reinforces that intercultural competence is inherently context-specific and action-oriented.

Fantini (2007), in a study on the topic, defines intercultural competence as a set of capacities that enable people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to interact effectively. His contribution emphasizes the intercultural experience, suggesting that engagement with an unfamiliar culture triggers changes in how individuals perceive the culture, its representatives, and diverse ways of acting and expressing oneself. Therefore, the development of intercultural competencies results from direct experiences with the intercultural dimension, shaped by the motives that bring people from different cultures into contact and the objectives they hope to achieve through these interactions. In addition to the commonly referenced IC dimensions—knowledge, attitudes, and skills—Fantini (2007) also introduces awareness as a core analytical component of Intercultural Competence (IC).

These authors collectively highlight that the behavioral dimension of IC, in relation to appropriate performance, prompts reflections on the underlying motives for actions and on the culturally constructed meanings of what is considered "appropriate". This aligns with Tamtik and Kirss (2016), who state that the internationalization of higher education has become a universal norm, actively shaped by institutional actors and promoted, adopted, and disseminated with cultural factors—such as language and social beliefs—playing a central role in the norm-building process. Wu and Zha (2018) also address destination countries and the driving forces behind higher education internationalization, classifying them as core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral countries within the global knowledge system. Furthermore, Yonezawa and Shimmi (2015) highlight the tension between the aspiration for a global or cosmopolitan profile and the desire to preserve national identity.

In this context, Zhang and Zhou's (2019) research adds to these discussions by emphasizing that the affective dimension refers to an individual's willingness to learn about and appreciate cultural differences; the cognitive dimension pertains to understanding cultural practices that shape individual interpretations and behaviors; and the behavioral dimension involves the skills necessary for effective engagement in intercultural interactions.

Before delving deeper into the theoretical framework for the present study's analytical objectives, it is crucial to revisit the contributions of Deardorff (2009, 2015a, 2015b, 2020), especially her 2020 reflections on xenophobia and discrimination within the context of international academic exchange.

Deardorff (2015a) notes the existence of multiple terms used to describe intercultural competence, including international competence, global citizenship, intercultural effectiveness, cultural intelligence, intercultural competence, and intercultural sensitivity, highlighting the need for terminological consensus. She underscores that, in higher education, the focus of IC discourse is on interactions among people from diverse backgrounds, unlike terms such as transcultural competence, international competence, and multicultural competence, which do not center on interpersonal interaction (Deardorff, 2015b).

Clemente and Morosini (2020), referencing Deardorff's (2009) conceptualization, observe that interviewees prefer a broader, more general definition of IC rather than one tied to specific aspects. In a similar vein, Huber and Reynolds (2014), while adapting Deardorff's (2009) work, continue to employ her widely accepted classification of IC into attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions. This classification, detailed by Deardorff (2009, 2015a, 2015b), encompasses (i) the ability to communicate in a second language; (ii) the ability to demonstrate awareness of equal opportunities and gender issues; (iii) the ability to research, process, and analyze information from various sources; (iv) the ability to work collaboratively

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in teams; (v) the ability to operate in international contexts; (vi) interpersonal interaction skills; (vii) the ability to act with social responsibility and civic awareness; (viii) appreciation for and respect toward diversity and multiculturalism; (ix) proficiency in using information and communication technologies; (x) adaptability; and (xi) the ability to engage in new situations and understand the cultures and customs of other countries.

Building on this conceptualization, Deardorff (2015a, 2015b) proposes a dynamic, process-oriented model comprising the following elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes. Internal outcomes are considered intrinsic to the individual, emerging from the integration of acquired attitudes, knowledge, and skills, and are essential for developing IC. Once internal outcomes are achieved, individuals become capable of broadening their perspectives to include others' viewpoints and responding appropriately to others' needs. External outcomes, in turn, represent the observable manifestations of this process, encompassing behavior and communication in intercultural contexts (Deardorff, 2009, 2015a, 2015b). According to Deardorff (2015a, 2015b), critical self-reflection is crucial for both the development and assessment of intercultural competence.

Attitudes are categorized into three key types: (i) respect, (ii) openness, and (iii) curiosity/discovery. Respect involves recognizing and valuing others, demonstrated through attentiveness and genuine interest. Openness and curiosity imply a willingness to take risks, become vulnerable, and step outside one's cultural comfort zone. According to Deardorff, these three attitudes are foundational for developing the knowledge and skills required to achieve intercultural competence.

Knowledge comprises (i) cultural self-awareness, which considers the extent to which other cultures shape an individual's identity and worldview; (ii) culture-specific knowledge, including an understanding of different worldviews; and (iii) sociolinguistic awareness.

Skills include actions such as observing, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating.

In discussing Deardorff's (2009, 2015b) process-oriented model, Clemente and Morosini (2020) emphasize that the author integrates contemporary theoretical discussions, referencing interculturality across conceptual, functional, critical, and relational dimensions.

Studies grounded in Deardorff's (2009, 2015b) model—including those by Miettinen (2021), Fantini (2020), and Barrow (2023)—highlight the need to advance both conceptual and experiential understandings of IC development. They particularly stress the importance of sharing personal experiences in intercultural contexts and emphasize the importance of communicative competence within these settings. This ongoing debate, aligned with Clemente and Morosini's (2020) discussions and with Deardorff's (2009, p. 258) recognition, underscores the necessity for continuous reassessment of definitions and evaluation methods: "Definitions and assessment methods need to be continually re-evaluated [...]. Research and practice need to remain current with ongoing studies and theoretical developments on this construct", as Deardorff (2020) also highlights when addressing the themes of xenophobia and discrimination.

Deardorff (2015a), in noting that the concept of "intercultural competence" has a 25-year history, emphasizes that the discussion remains ongoing and continues to attract broad global interest—not only in the educational sector but also in fields such as healthcare and human rights (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009). The author suggests that future studies could focus on "listening to other voices" when defining intercultural competence, with increased attention to Indigenous perspectives, analyses of context, identities, and lineages, and their implications for conceptual definitions. This includes critically examining notions of "universality" and incorporating a sense of "cultural humility" to avoid transforming the concept into "tools of neo-colonization" and imposing singular definitions on others. Deardorff further raises crucial questions: "What is the role of language in all this? [...]"—issues that will continue to emerge as humanity seeks ways to "learn to live together" in the 21st century (Deardorff, 2015a, p. 4).

Building on the multiple dimensions presented by Deardorff (2015a, 2020), Rasmussen and Sieck (2015) draw on social psychology to explore the meanings associated with "seeing things from another person's point of view" or "putting oneself in someone else's shoes"—key

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elements in understanding IC. According to these authors, transformative change occurs when individuals progress from minimizing cultural differences to accepting them, with acceptance requiring the recognition and appreciation of alternative cultural frameworks for interpreting the world.

Phillips, Adams and Salter (2015, p. 366), drawing on liberation psychology and referencing Martín-Baró, argue that the decolonial approach mobilizes awareness of racism as identity-based oppression, offering strategies conducive to lasting well-being. The authors explain that "[...] interventions in psychological science often target the mentality and efficacy beliefs of oppressed people and groups as a recipe for health and well-being in situations of oppression".

Similarly, the studies by Miettinen (2021), Fantini (2020), and Barrow (2023), grounded in Deardorff's (2009, 2015b) models and further developed by Deardorff (2020) in addressing xenophobia and discrimination as critical social issues within IC theory, underscore the centrality of communication in the context of interpersonal relationships. Reflecting on the analyses by Phillips, Adams and Salter (2015), it becomes clear that conceptualizations of IC that emphasize adaptation may risk reinforcing the very dynamics that Deardorff (2020) warned could turn IC into a tool for recolonization.

According to the International Organization for Migration (Organização Internacional para as Migrações, 2009), the increase in international migration has led to a growing number of reports of harassment and xenophobia in host countries. Xenophobia is defined as an attitude, prejudice, or behavior that rejects, excludes, or diminishes people based on their perceived foreignness relative to a community, society, or national identity. Castro-Goméz and Grosfoguel (2007) contends that the decolonial option involves, among other things, the need to "learn to unlearn", given that many individuals have been conditioned by imperial and colonial rationalities that assert the superiority of specific identities while constructing others—racial, national, religious, sexual, gender-based—as inferior, effectively excluding them from normative frameworks.

In this light, Mignolo (2017) emphasizes that the European perception of Brazil as an "exotic" or "primitive" place is not merely a fleeting impression but a direct legacy of a long history of racialization that continues to shape contemporary representations. Mignolo (2008) further argues that political identity plays a crucial role in the decolonial option, as dismantling the racial and imperial construction of identity in the modern world requires the development of political theories and the organization of political actions rooted in identities historically shaped by imperial discourse.

Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel (2007) reveals how European knowledge production positions itself as universal and legitimate, relegating non-European cultures to a state of "non-being", thereby trapping them in subalternity and invisibility. This perspective sheds light on why Brazil is frequently reduced to simplifying stereotypes that erase its cultural complexity.

Souza et al. (2022) further illustrate these dynamics through examples of xenophobia in Europe, highlighting how language serves as a tool for differentiation—or, more precisely, inferiorization—by native populations. In Portugal, for example, Brazilian respondents reported being accused of not speaking "proper Portuguese". The Portuguese spoken in Portugal is regarded as the standard. At the same time, Brazilian Portuguese is often viewed as inferior and labeled as "Brazilian", implying a separate language rather than a national variety.

According to Phillips, Adams and Salter (2015, p. 376), social psychology within a decolonial framework should advance toward the "[...] recovery of historical memory and the development of critical consciousness", shifting from strategies that implicitly or explicitly promote adaptation to oppressive systems toward those focused on social transformation. As the authors state: "An adaptationist stance to oppressive realities may bring short-term benefits, but it is inimical to collective well-being". They argue that

> [...] decolonial responses seek not only to liberate marginalized communities from ongoing racist and colonial violence but also to free individuals in dominant communities from the forces that compel them to perpetuate (often unknowingly) forms of racist and colonial violence.

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The goal, therefore, is to build more sustainable forms of well-being. Rather than urging individuals to adapt to oppressive circumstances in the name of personal or social harmony, the emphasis must be on transforming social systems (Phillips; Adams; Salter, 2015, p. 376).

In the context of academic exchange, the colonial matrix that continues to shape social relations around culture obscures the meaning of adaptation, often framing it as an expectation of "appropriate behavior" in intercultural settings. Schröder (2023) also critiques this, highlighting how the pursuit of plausibility, regularity, normality, and predictability can reinforce such dynamics.

Valderrama-Núñez and Zolezzi-Gorziglia (2021, p. 2) add that emphasizing difference—or "diversity"—through the lens of stigma and self-stigma produces tangible effects on subjectivity, serving as "[...] *an expression of a society structured based on power relations*", which in turn fosters discrimination and social exclusion. They advocate for a deeper awareness of "*the effects of the onto-epistemic matrix of modernity present in our culture, institutions, and daily practices*", encouraging a broader understanding of our individual and collective existence and action. Such reflection can generate transformative practices that foster a dignified and respectful way of life for all.

Expanding the understanding of communication's central role in interpersonal relationships and its link to the definition of intercultural competence requires acknowledging the challenges posed by adaptationist expectations, recognizing stigmas, and addressing the social exclusion resulting from discrimination. As Lazaridou and Fernando (2022) observe, institutional racism—embedded within the structures, policies, and practices of our social and political institutions—demands a shift away from narrowly focusing on individual perpetrators and instead addressing the systemic inequalities racism produces. They call on socially engaged scholars not only to track racial and ethnic inequalities but also to confront the institutional mechanisms that sustain them.

Thus, the theoretical field of intercultural competencies in the context of academic exchange aligns with the concerns raised by Deardorff (2020) regarding xenophobia and discrimination. These phenomena emerge as consequences of stigma, self-stigma, and racial and ethnic exclusion, rooted in the onto-epistemic matrix of modernity. This field can be further developed through a critical exploration of how interactive processes are rendered intelligible, enhancing the affirmation of diverse ways of being and recognizing legitimate and intelligible cultural dynamics. Such a reconfiguration of "intercultural competencies" calls for embracing the plurality of ways of being and acting, fostering integration and positive internationalization experiences for both individuals and institutions.

By emphasizing forms of interaction and communication, the research seeks to address some of Deardorff's (2020) guiding questions: "*Intercultural—according to whom? On what basis? At what level? And what can we learn from each other?*" and "*To what end?*" This analysis critically examines the concept of "adequate performance" as a standard of expected behavior in intercultural contexts. Through this, the study aims to offer meaningful contributions to the broader discourse on Global Citizenship, as advocated by Deardorff (2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

To conduct a critical discourse analysis, this study adopted a comprehensive qualitative approach which, according to Minayo (2014), aims to deepen the understanding of relationships, representations, beliefs, perceptions, and opinions related to how individuals interpret their ways of living, how they construct their artifacts and self-identity, and how they feel and think—exploring the subjective aspects of social reality.

The research design involved organizing two focus group discussions during an online academic event, specifically a seminar on the internationalization of Higher Education Institutions. Participants included three Brazilian exchange students who had completed an international exchange program and eight international students who had undertaken an exchange in Brazil.

As detailed in Chart 1, a total of 25 exchange students were contacted in advance and invited to participate in the seminar and share their international exchange experiences; however,

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Chart 1. Profile of the Exchange Students Taking Part in the Focus Groups.

Name	Gender	Relationship with UFC	Country of Nationality	Exchange Program
A1	M	Graduate student	Germany	DAAD
A2	M	Undergraduate student	Germany	Bilateral agreement
A3	F	Graduate student	El Salvador	OAS
A4	F	Graduate student	Colombia	OAS
A5	F	Undergraduate student	Colombia	Bilateral agreement
A6	M	Graduate student	Peru	OAS
A7	F	Graduate student	Bolivia	OAS
A8	F	Undergraduate student	Germany	Bilateral agreement
A9	F	Graduate degree completed	Brazil	CAPES
A10	F	Graduate Degree Completed	Brazil	Bilateral Agreement
A11	M	Graduate Degree Completed	Brazil	CAPES

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

only 11 accepted the invitation. Data collection was therefore conducted through focus groups to discuss the development of intercultural competencies among the students during their international academic exchange experience.

Collis and Hussey (2005) explain that focus groups are used to collect data on the feelings and opinions of individuals involved in a shared situation. Under the guidance of a facilitator, participants are encouraged to discuss their views, reactions, and feelings about the topic at hand. In this study, the focus groups provided an opportunity to debate the topic of intercultural competencies, broadening the scope for dialogue and interaction around the theme. This approach contributed to a critical discussion aimed at problematizing discourses, particularly in light of the issues raised by Deardorff (2020), which suggest that contributions to the field should be grounded in a decolonial perspective.

The focus groups were conducted in two stages. The first group included two German students, one Salvadoran, one Bolivian, and one Colombian. The second group consisted of three Brazilian students, one Peruvian, one Colombian, and one German. All participants agreed that the discussions would take place in Portuguese. The sessions were guided by a semi-structured interview script developed under Deardorff's (2015a, 2015b) model.

Aligned with the qualitative research perspective, this study is also informed by a "[...] citizenship commitment to the people and themes being studied" (Minayo; Guerriero, 2014, p. 1105) and by the metaphor of the "quilt maker", emphasizing openness to representing and interpreting fragments to create a cohesive whole (Gondin; Lima, 2002).

Within this qualitative framework, the study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as suggested by Magalhães (2001), which is situated within the Social Theory of Discourse (STD). The theoretical foundations draw on thinkers such as Foucault, Althusser, Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Gramsci, and Roy Bhaskar, with Norman Fairclough serving as the principal reference. According to Mafra and Lobato (2017), CDA aligns with decolonial perspectives by focusing on power relations, domination, and hegemony and by treating language as constitutive of social discourse. Its goal is to explain how dialectical processes are shaped by power structures that perpetuate injustice and inequality while simultaneously exploring possibilities for social change and envisioning fairer, more democratic, and ecologically sustainable forms of social life (Chouliaraki; Fairclough, 2010).

A key point in Fairclough's (2001) work is the understanding that language is both socially shaped and socially constitutive—existing at the intersection of social determination (reproduction) and social action (creation). Building on this perspective, Fairclough (2005)

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proposes a model of "moderate social constructionism" grounded in critical realism, which he sees as a means of reconciling structure and agency through the mediation of social practices. Furthermore, Fairclough (2005) outlines that the critical focus of CDA involves analyzing how discourses emerge as new articulations of elements from existing discourses, how certain discourses become hegemonic through processes of dominance and consolidation, how these hegemonic discourses are recontextualized and disseminated across various social contexts; and how they are operationalized, manifesting in genres, identities, and discursive styles.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The critical analysis of the discourses from the focus group discussions conducted with exchange students was structured around thematic categories, drawing on the concept of "meaning units" identified during the transcript review process. This involved activating memories and emotional responses tied to the participants' experiences and reconnecting these with the theoretical and argumentative framework that underpins the study's research problem and analysis. Efforts were concentrated on addressing key social issues, particularly xenophobia, discrimination, and racism.

Three distinct discursive contexts emerged, each reflecting different perspectives on these issues: Brazilians, other Latin Americans, and Europeans. Based on this categorization, both explicit and implicit expressions within the students' narratives were critically examined as reflections of problematic social practices, consistent with the view of discourse as social practice. It is worth noting that Latin American and European students were discussing their exchange experiences in Brazil, particularly in the city of Fortaleza, Ceará. This geographical reference was apparent in several of the students' statements.

The dissemination shaped participants' perceptions—or lack thereof—involving information about countries and cities. This highlights the role of media, the arts, literature, and even formal education in constructing and perpetuating stereotypical views of Brazil and Brazilians. Such representations were evident both in the information participants had previously accessed and in noticeable gaps in knowledge. For instance, exchange student A2, a German national, mentioned having studied the history of Portugal but not Brazil.

Regarding dissemination, references to the "cliché Brazil" were frequent—characterized by images of football, beaches, samba, carnival, and bossa nova. Moreover, Brazil was often viewed as being synonymous with São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Minas Gerais, reinforcing Mignolo's (2017) observation of the European perception of Brazil as an "exotic" or "primitive" place.

This point is illustrated in the following excerpt from exchange student A2:

> *In Frankfurt, at university, we only learned about the history of Portugal and nothing about Brazil. Intentionally, I also chose not to learn anything about Brazil, so I could be surprised when I arrived here. It's been very interesting for me, I think. I didn't have many expectations, so I guess I wasn't shocked. It's interesting; I see what's here, but I don't judge it.* (Exchange student A2).

Further reinforcing this, exchange student A8, also from Germany, stated:

> *In my case, it was a prejudice we had. In my mind, there was the Brazil of Rio de Janeiro and the Brazil of São Paulo, and I thought all of Brazil would be like that. I didn't know about the differences between the South and the North. I also didn't know about the differences between the coast and the interior* [...] (Exchange student A8).

Such representations of the "cliché Brazil" led to surprise and critical reflections regarding the diversity of the country's regions—especially the Northeast, which is not limited to beaches but includes major urban centers like Fortaleza. These "preconceptions" also gave rise to linguistic challenges, including issues of accents and dialectal variation.

Tamtik and Kirss (2016), for example, discuss the central role of cultural factors such as language and social beliefs in shaping the norms that guide internationalization processes. These factors influence expectations and intended outcomes, which, according to Wu and Zha

(2018), are reflected in the classification of countries as core, peripheral, or semi-peripheral within the global knowledge system. This classification impacts how countries and their cultures are portrayed and perceived. In peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, such as Brazil, tensions often arise between the desire to project a global or cosmopolitan identity and the need to preserve national identity.

The complexity of issues surrounding "competencies" and "interculturality", as highlighted by Clemente and Morosini (2021), stems from critical reflections on norms and behavioral patterns related to adapting to new contexts. This involves the mobilization of "functional" behaviors in response to new realities, often linked to the performance expectations associated with intercultural competencies. This view aligns with the work of Dias, Zhu and Samaratunge (2020), Schelfhout et al. (2022), and Schröder (2023), who approach IC as a behaviorally oriented concept, as does Schnabel et al. (2015).

Regarding social inequalities and the narratives around generated expectations, concerns about safety in Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil, were a recurring theme—particularly among students from other Latin American countries and Europe. International students in Brazil frequently described how violence-related insecurity restricted their sense of freedom and mobility. This issue also intersected with language challenges, as students recognized that "linguistic mobility" posed additional hurdles alongside other cultural adjustments, such as changes in daily habits (mobility and time management), food (gastronomy), and leisure activities (interpersonal relationships).

The issue of safety and freedom was especially evident in the following account from exchange student A4, a Colombian national:

> I was shocked when I arrived here. I said: it's not much like what I thought it would be [...] everyone says to you: 'Don't go out alone, don't walk alone.' I see that some Brazilians take the bus or get an Uber for a three or four-block trip because they don't want to walk; they're afraid. (Exchange student A4).

The behavioral dimension of intercultural competence, as discussed here, draws on Deardorff (2015a, 2020) and highlights the need for a deeper analysis, as suggested by Rasmussen and Sieck (2015). These authors argue that intercultural change processes tend to reinforce cultural frames of reference in two distinct ways: either by interpreting the other—the culturally different individual—through the lens of the dominant cultural logic or by genuinely engaging with the other in an attempt to understand their cultural frame of reference. In doing so, individuals begin to interpret the world through new, often marginalized, peripheral, developing, or so-called Third World lenses.

Discourses around difference, hierarchy, and consequently, discrimination and related problems were evident in the statements of exchange student A3 from El Salvador, who articulated a clearer understanding of the center-periphery dynamic based on his experiences in Brazil. References to difference were often implicit among European students, stemming from a lack of familiarity—or rather, a lack of intelligibility—regarding the kinds of differences that others embody, not only linguistically but also in their ways of being and living. This unfamiliarity was further reinforced by stereotypical representations and informational gaps that positioned Brazil and Brazilians—and Northeastern Brazilians in particular—as exotic and strange. Such a process aligns with dominant modes of cultural thinking, validated by both society and science, as well as by cultural values that frame how "the other" is perceived and appreciated.

This pattern echoes Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel's (2007) critique of how European knowledge systems position themselves as universal and legitimate, relegating non-European cultures to spaces of subalternity and invisibility.

Many of these themes are evident in the following excerpt from interviewee A3:

> I think what I also expected was the Brazil of Rio de Janeiro because of what they—maybe— show on TV, in movies, in documentaries, and sometimes even more. Also, based on my experience with Brazilians, I remember that, for example, they would emphasize Minas Gerais a lot [...] because you have these strong distinctions: Northeasterners, people from the South, from the Center... So, I started to learn about that. And regarding safety, as the

other interviewee mentioned—how people say, 'Oh, you can't go out, you can't walk alone in the street like that'—well, in my country, it's like that too (Interviewee A3).

As Clemente and Morosini (2020) argue, interculturality must be examined through conceptual, functional, critical, and relational dimensions. Given the specific focus of this research, the **relational dimension** becomes central to understanding xenophobia, discrimination, and racism, especially when intercultural competence is linked to tools of neo-colonization (Deardorff, 2015a). An **adaptationist stance**, typically tied to the behavioral dimension, fails to fully address the dynamics of oppression in which the Self–Other relationship is mediated by hierarchically valued cultural conceptions—such as center versus periphery or civilized versus barbaric.

Intercultural competencies also develop through the confrontation and overcoming of challenges during international exchange experiences. As exchange student A6 observed: "*It added a lot to me culturally because there were many challenges and difficulties that I managed to overcome—both academic and cultural ones*". Exchange student A4 reinforced this: "*Your worldview expands; cultural differences become clear because when you leave your home and go to a new place where you have to do everything on your own, you grow*".

In this context, difference tends to be diluted into mere "coexistence with difference" without being problematized in light of the effects of the onto-epistemic matrix of modernity embedded in our culture, institutions, and daily practices (Valderrama-Núñez; Zolezzi-Gorziglia, 2021). This, in turn, legitimizes historically institutionalized forms of racism (Lazaridou; Fernando, 2022).

This reflection is illustrated in the statement from exchange student A1, a German national, who said: "*Europe has a past; Brazil has a future*". For countries positioned at the margins of global society, development, and intellectual circulation—often stereotyped as Third World nations with a history of colonial exploitation and political and cultural dependence—this evokes a dark past marked by epistemicides in the name of civilization. Revisiting the past, in this case, entails reviving fragmented historical narratives—what history textbooks still often portray as the "discovery of Brazil". What remains for such nations is the construction of a new future, built through alternative reference points and the creation of new historical meanings.

Regarding the experiences of Brazilian students abroad, there is an explicit acknowledgment of hierarchically constructed difference, as discussed in the decolonial literature. Brazilians in Portugal, for instance, are perceived and treated as linguistically and culturally different—often positioned as marginal, underdeveloped, or even uncivilized. This perception is reflected in the discourse surrounding Brazilian women, frequently portrayed as coming to Portugal to "steal husbands", as recounted by exchange student A4: "*I went to a beauty salon, and when the woman realized I was Brazilian, she told me that I had come to dance at night. She said I was part of the group that comes here to dance and steal other people's husbands*" (Exchange student A4).

Prejudice against Brazilians also emerges in the narrative of exchange student A9:

> *There are many challenges in adapting. When I was in Portugal, I was welcomed, but there was definitely a kind of prejudice—as if we were second class for not being European. I didn't go there for an undergraduate degree; I already had my profession, but I felt the cultural shock in how South Americans and Europeans are treated differently* (Exchange student A9).

Deepening this critical discourse analysis through a decolonial lens, the study also reflects on the meaning behind the "dream of studying in Europe" expressed by many Brazilians—rather than pursuing opportunities in other countries of the Global South. This "dream" often surfaces in how Brazilians react to discrimination in Europe, whether through resignation or by confronting their subaltern position—sometimes resulting in disillusionment in the face of violence rooted in racism and xenophobia.

This point is illustrated in the testimony of exchange student A1:

> *After ten years, I felt the need to study again, and I wanted a PhD with an international certificate [...] I faced some difficulties [...] I really struggled with the differences between Brazilian Portuguese and European Portuguese. My supervisor even translated my texts into European Portuguese sometimes* (Exchange student A1).

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In parallel, the narratives of Latin American exchange students reveal not just linguistic but also cultural affinity. These students expressed a strong appreciation for cultural diversity, seeing it as a reference point for integration and adaptation during their exchange experiences. As exchange student A2 put it: "*I feel a little like I'm from Ceará*".

The concept of "culture shock" emerged in these narratives not as a single, significant event but as a series of small, daily shocks. Notably, interculturality was not portrayed merely through functional or instrumental interactions (such as receiving help with documentation or bureaucratic tasks) but rather through genuine openness to the other, as consistently seen in the narratives from Latin American students. The daily "mixing" brought about by intercultural experiences led to shifts in habits and identity, exemplified by one student's comment: "*I missed tapioca*".

Exchange student A7, a Bolivian national residing in Honduras, emphasized the value of cultural similarities over differences, reflecting how cultural proximity often served as a bridge in navigating the exchange experience.

> *Yeah, the food, too. For example, the baião... I loved the baiao! I think that, maybe because Colombia is closer to Brazil, our food is a bit more similar, like she mentioned. In my country, Honduras, in Central America, it's also somewhat similar. We eat beans, like you do, and rice, but we don't have the variety of beans you have here.* [...] *Our cuisine is more similar to Mexico's*. [...].

Intercultural competencies, arising from investments in internationalization driven by globalization dynamics and socio-economic progress and contributing to social development (Genkova et al., 2021; Bruner; Iannarelli, 2011), are often framed as benchmarks of excellence that are difficult to question critically. However, Zhang and Zhou (2019) highlight the role of "affectivity" in fostering a willingness to learn about and appreciate cultural differences—an aspect reflected in the narratives of the "other Latinos". For these students, the relationship with Brazilians is marked by a sense of "closeness", which stems from the shared historical positioning of these countries within the Global South, shaping group identity and promoting a horizontalized, non-stranger view of the other.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The development of intercultural competencies arises from the lived experiences of exchange students as they engage with the intercultural dimension—driven by the cultural differences between their country of origin and the host country where the exchange takes place. This was evident in the analysis of participants' narratives.

International academic exchange programs offer opportunities for developing these competencies through direct contact with cultures different from one's own, with the primary aim of pursuing academic studies abroad. In their pursuit of educational and professional growth, exchange students encounter new experiences and firsthand exposure to cultural diversity. However, in their expectation of interacting appropriately and effectively with people and cultural environments distinct from their own, students may face significant challenges related to xenophobia, discrimination, and racism.

In such contexts, exchange students are confronted with situational challenges where various forms of discrimination toward international students can cause emotional distress and suffering. These experiences often undermine the affective dimension of the exchange experience, dampening students' initial motivation to learn from and appreciate cultural differences between their home country and their chosen host country. The cognitive dimension of the exchange, intended to foster understanding of cultural practices and help students interpret and adapt to a new environment, relies on technical competencies such as language proficiency and knowledge of the host country's social norms and behaviors. However, when this formal knowledge encounters the unpredictability of everyday life, and students face discrimination as foreigners, additional competencies become essential. Without them, their exchange experience risks being diminished or even entirely derailed due to a lack of cultural humility on the part of host-country nationals.

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Rather than expecting individuals to passively adapt to oppressive and discriminatory circumstances—simply because they are foreigners—institutional and socio-cultural transformations should be encouraged and prioritized as pathways toward personal and social peace and harmony. The critical discourse analysis conducted here, framed within a decolonial approach, underscores how implicit forms of racism among European students are often projected onto Brazil, with the country's culture being analyzed through a Eurocentric lens. This perpetuates representations of the "cliché Brazil" or, conversely, an "unknown Brazil".

Psychology, particularly through decolonial perspectives, could play a valuable role in expanding the discussion on intercultural competencies by problematizing identity-based oppression experienced by nations in the Global South. This discussion must also address the affective dimensions and asymmetrical power relations inherent in such contexts, considering the broader implications of xenophobia, discrimination, and racism, as highlighted by Deardorff (2020). Furthermore, this debate invites reflection on how, in the name of interculturality and linguistic mobility aimed at development, other mechanisms of oppression may be inadvertently reinforced—such as the global academic and scientific systems that define knowledge excellence through metrics like research productivity rankings, often privileging certain regions over others.

Moving forward, fostering both affective and cognitive openness toward the Other—ensuring the intelligibility and legitimacy of diverse cultures—may help realize what Deardorff (2020) describes as "shared humanity" or "authentic community". This would strengthen the collective capacity to "learn to live together", aligning with the principles of global citizenship and civic engagement aimed at collective well-being.

This trajectory also touches on the mental health and well-being of exchange students, as the degree of openness in intercultural interactions can foster new narratives as forms of social practice, contributing to institutional change. As Valderrama-Núñez and Zolezzi-Gorziglia (2021) suggest, stigmas linked to cultural differences—and their manifestations in xenophobia, discrimination, and racism—could become the focus of targeted interventions aimed at constructing new frameworks for understanding interculturality. Such interventions could mobilize individuals, groups, and institutions to (re)acknowledge and strengthen the cultural identities of Global South countries. This endeavor demands interdisciplinary dialogue and transformative praxis.

Among the limitations of this study was the difficulty in accessing exchange students and the delayed responses to participation invitations for the focus groups, which ultimately reduced the number of participants from the initially planned sample. Additionally, among the European participants, only students of German nationality took part.

For future research, we recommend expanding the diversity of participants by including students from all five continents or conducting comparative studies between two continents with a broader range of nationalities.

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Authors contribution

Fabiana Pinto de Almeida Bizarria: Study's conceptualization, Definition of the title, Research problem, and initial objectives, Development of the theoretical framework and methodology, Conducted data collection through focus groups, Contributed to parts of the final considerations, Performed an

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overall review of the article. Márcia Zabdiele Moreira: Study's conceptualization, the Definition of the title, Research problem, and initial objectives, Participated in the development of the theoretical framework and methodology, Conducted data collection through focus groups, Contributed to parts of the final considerations and performed an overall review of the article. Kilvia Souza Ferreira: Study's conceptualization and initial research objectives, Participated in the development of the theoretical framework, Conducted data collection through focus groups, Performed an overall review of the article. Italo Cavalcante Aguiar: Contributed to the study's conceptualization, the research problem, and initial objectives, Responsible for identifying and selecting participant profiles, Participated in the development of the theoretical framework and methodology, Conducted data collection through focus groups, performed data processing and transcription, Contributed to the analysis of the results. Lucas Alves do Nascimento: Contributed to the study's conceptualization, the research problem, and initial objectives, Conducted data collection through focus groups, Performed data processing and transcription, Contributed to the final revision of the article.

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