

Intercultural competences and ethics in scientific research with refugee women: principles and challenges for an inclusive practice¹

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Abstract: The present study examines the importance of intercultural competences in scientific research with refugee women, with a particular emphasis on ethical and methodological frameworks, as well as the challenges involved in fostering inclusive research practices. The primary objective is to explore how developing intercultural competences enhances ethical, inclusive, and culturally sensitive research. A qualitative approach was employed, based on a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature, with a focus on intercultural competence models such as those proposed by Deardorff (2009) and Bennett (2013), whose pedagogical approaches underpin their application in the context of scientific research involving refugee women. Additionally, the study engages with theoretical perspectives on intercultural communication, the intercultural paradigm, intersectionality, and the ethics of representation, thus providing a critical lens through which to scrutinize the dynamics of power and representation. The analysis underscores the indispensable role that cultural adaptation and the development of intercultural competences play in surmounting communication barriers, establishing trust, and avoiding the perpetuation of stereotypes and inequalities. Theoretical models are shown to provide valuable tools for ethical and methodological adaptations in research involving ethnocultural populations, fostering an educational process that emphasizes the recognition and mitigation of power imbalances in researcher-participant interactions. In conclusion, incorporating intercultural competences into scientific research with refugee women is essential to ensuring the quality and relevance of research outcomes. This approach facilitates more accurate and contextually informed interpretations of participants' narratives and contributes to both advancing scientific knowledge and informing the development of well-informed public policies.

Keywords: cultural adaptation; intercultural competence models; intercultural paradigm; refugee women; scientific research.

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1 Introduction

We live in an era of unprecedented globalization, where interactions between diverse cultures have become an everyday reality. Contemporary migratory flows underscore the growing cultural diversity of host societies and the coexistence of multiple cultures and citizenships, highlighting the importance of intercultural competences and cultural diversity in human development (Ramos, 2013). Education, as a dynamic and cross-cutting process, plays a crucial role in fostering interculturality and laying the foundation for pluralistic and inclusive societies.

In the realm of scientific research, intercultural interaction is even more evident, given the collaborative, interdisciplinary, and global nature of scientific knowledge. In this context, effective communication and the interplay between teaching and learning across cultures are essential to fostering collective understanding and progress.

The challenge of intercultural communication becomes particularly acute in scientific research when engaging with vulnerable populations, such as certain migrant groups—particularly refugee women. This population faces multiple challenges, including psychological distress, physical hardships, material deprivation, and difficulties adapting to new environments. Additionally, they experience trauma, forced displacement, and various sociocultural, linguistic, and communicational barriers, which are further intensified by gender-related factors, as recognized by several authors (Ramos, N., 2009b, 2012; Ramos; Dias, 2020; Almeida, 2021; Padilla; França; Vieira, 2022; Sampaio, 2023) and international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In this context, developing and refining the ability to communicate effectively while respecting cultural differences is crucial for ensuring accurate data collection and research. It also plays a key role in establishing trust-based relationships and guaranteeing that research is conducted in an ethical, responsible, and culturally sensitive manner. Moreover, exploring and understanding how intercultural competences, as ongoing educational processes, can be acquired and applied to enhance the development of scientific research with refugee women is both a matter of methodological rigor and an ethical responsibility. Furthermore, scientific research involving intercultural realities has an intrinsic educational dimension, functioning as a process of reciprocal learning that fosters dialogue and facilitates mutual transformation between researchers and participants.

The primary goal of this study is to examine how the development of intercultural competences can foster ethical, inclusive research that is attuned to the cultural specificities of refugee women. To achieve this objective, a qualitative methodological approach based on a critical review of the scientific literature on this subject was adopted. This methodology was chosen because it allows for a thorough theoretical analysis and

interpretation of conceptual contributions relevant to the topic, enabling a comprehensive examination of the intersection between education and intercultural competences, research ethics, and working with populations susceptible to various forms of vulnerability and discrimination.

The theoretical foundation of this research primarily draws on models of intercultural competence, with particular emphasis on the frameworks proposed by Deardorff (2009) and Bennett (2013), whose theoretical and practical principles guide their application in research with refugee women. Additionally, the intercultural paradigm was incorporated as a complementary perspective, offering a conceptual, methodological, and ethical framework for understanding cultural diversity. This study also includes perspectives on intercultural communication and dialogue, intersectionality, and the ethics of representation, thereby enabling a critical analysis of power dynamics and representational issues in intercultural research. By exploring this topic, the analysis seeks to contribute to the fields of Education and Intercultural Relations, examining how best practices in research with refugee women can be further developed.

Regarding the structure, this study begins by examining questions related to intercultural communication and dialogue, reflecting on models of intercultural competences and the educational and teaching-learning processes that inform inclusive and ethically responsible research practices. It then explores the Intercultural Paradigm as a fundamental theoretical, practical, and ethical framework, considering the consequences of *intercultural incompetence*. The discussion further extends to the development of an ethics of representation, proposing methods and ethical principles based on the literature for conducting research with refugee women. Finally, the concluding remarks synthesize the theoretical and practical foundations discussed throughout the study.

2 Communication, Dialogue, and Models of Intercultural Competences

According to N. Ramos (2009a, p. 18, our translation), interculturality “[...] implies relationships, dialogue, and communication between different cultures, mediated by individuals and groups who embody these cultures in diverse intercultural contexts [...]”. In communication, every act of transmitting a message is embedded within a cultural framework governed by specific rules and codes. This dynamic can lead individuals from different cultural backgrounds to “attribute varied meanings to the same realities,” potentially resulting in conflicts or fostering ethnocentric attitudes (Ramos, N., 2001, p. 159-168, our translation).

Alsina (1999) defines intercultural communication as the interaction between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. More broadly, intercultural communication refers to the exchange of information and meaning between individuals or groups from distinct cul-

tural or social contexts. This field of study acknowledges cultural diversity as an asset, while also recognizing the challenges it poses for communication, given differences in language, gestures, social norms, and values. Intercultural dialogue, in turn, is a dynamic process centered on mutual understanding and respect, aiming to break down barriers and foster inclusion and social cohesion. It is essential to emphasize that achieving a truly horizontal “[...] dialogue with the Other requires more than mere tolerance or assimilation; genuine interaction and reciprocal transformation are necessary” (Brasil; Cabecinhas, 2019, p. 98, our translation). This process of mutual transformation is, at its core, an educational experience, fostering new perspectives and learning through interaction. In this regard, it is worth emphasizing that developing intercultural competences contributes to the construction of peaceful societies, the cultivation of harmonious interpersonal, intercultural, and intergroup relationships, and the promotion of intercultural coexistence and respect for otherness. Additionally, it plays a key role in reducing intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, and racism (Ramos, N., 2001, 2007, 2011, 2013).

Ramos N., (2015, p. 283, our translation) notes that intercultural competences “[...] promote reflection and the ability to apply attitudes and knowledge in intercultural relations, that is, in interactions with individuals from different cultures”. In fact, the development of these intercultural competences occurs through an ongoing process of learning and training, where theory and practice converge to create genuinely educational and transformative experiences. Education, therefore, extends beyond formal teaching environments and impacts all aspects of social life, playing a crucial role in acquiring and enhancing intercultural competences. It is through education, in its various forms, that individuals gain the skills and tools needed to understand, respect, and engage with cultural differences, fostering horizontal dialogue.

Deardorff (2009, p. 4-5) emphasizes the importance of developing these competences, as they are essential for promoting global cooperation, effective communication, strong diplomatic and international relations, as well as cultural and personal enrichment. Intercultural competences are described by Ramos N., (2015, p. 286, our translation) as “[...] a coherent set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies manifested in various situations—such as in services, organizations, or among professionals—that enable appropriate intervention in intercultural contexts.” In the same vein, Deardorff (2009, p. 7) explains that intercultural competences manifest in the effective and appropriate management of interactions between people who exhibit contrasting cognitive and emotional orientations, such as cultural identity, religious, and ethnic affiliations, among other categories. It is important to note that these competences should provide “conceptual and methodological tools” that enable one to “analyze situations and practices, enhance the ability to work with minority groups in different sectors, foster skills to integrate individual and cultural di-

iversity into theoretical and practical approaches,” and promote harmonious relationships (Ramos, N., 2014, p. 236, our translation).

Additionally, in the context of scientific research in intercultural and migratory settings, particularly with refugee women from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, intercultural communication and dialogue take on critical importance, as successful data collection and analysis—as well as relationships founded on mutual respect, trust, and empathy—depend on these competences.

According to N. Ramos (2014, p. 236, our translation), developing “[...] intercultural competences in communication and interactions with individuals from other cultures [...]” requires recognizing the influence of cultural factors on behavior and cultivating “[...] *cultural awareness*” as a learning process that fosters the ability to view the world from the perspective of the Other. This teaching-learning process involves acknowledging and valuing differences while embracing pluralism.

More than three hundred models of intercultural competences have been developed to enhance cross-cultural interactions, each highlighting different subcomponents while sharing common foundational principles (Deardorff, 2009, p. 35). These models generally emphasize the importance of competences such as empathy, openness, and the ability to avoid judgments based on prejudice, with Deardorff (2009, p. 35) particularly emphasizing the principle of adaptability. In adaptive models, the very process of adaptability—or becoming adaptable—is viewed as a key indicator of competence, illustrating the shift from an ethnocentric perspective to an intercultural approach (Deardorff, 2009, p. 24).

These models suggest that in intercultural relations, when cultural differences exist between the parties involved, individuals from the dominant culture generally make less effort to adapt compared to individuals from non-dominant cultures. However, it is important to note that such imbalances can also occur within the same cultural group, particularly when the pressure to reach consensus on a specific issue outweighs the principle of solidarity. In fact, competence can be assessed both in terms of the ability to adapt within one’s own cultural group and in relation to other groups involved in the interaction (Deardorff, 2009, p. 25).

In the context of scientific research with refugee women, it is crucial to apply Deardorff’s (2009) Model of Intercultural Competence, which offers a framework encompassing attitudes (such as curiosity and openness), knowledge and understanding (of both oneself and the other culture), skills (such as observing, listening, interpreting, and evaluating), and desired outcomes (interculturally effective communication and behavior).

To these attitudes, Ramos N., (2014) adds competences and aptitudes to be developed:

Communicative and relational skills based on empathy, mutual respect, curiosity, open-mindedness, generosity, trust, and recognition of the Other, as well as adaptability, cultural awareness, self-reflection, and awareness of one's own prejudices, stereotypes, and discriminatory and racist attitudes, as well as those of other cultural groups (Ramos, N., 2014, p. 237, our translation).

Research with refugee women involves interactions between individuals from the host culture (researchers) and those from non-dominant cultures (participants), requiring researchers to adapt in order to address the inherent power imbalances in these interactions. This shift in perspective is critical for building trust, ensuring ethical data collection, and transitioning from an ethnocentric viewpoint to an intercultural approach. Following Deardorff's (2009) guidelines, it is vital that researchers recognize the need to make a conscious effort to adapt to the cultural needs of the participants, learn about their cultures, adjust language if necessary, apply appropriate research methods and techniques, and ensure that communication is bidirectional. Moreover, when working with groups of refugee women, researchers must be mindful of the internal dynamics and potential power imbalances within the group itself. This highlights the importance of flexible and adaptable approaches that enable all group members to express their perspectives, even when differences arise or when there is pressure to conform. Such an approach ensures that the research captures the full range of experiences, expectations, identities, and opinions of the participants.

It is also relevant to employ Bennett's (2013) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which comprises six stages. According to this model, at the highest level, the intercultural communicator is expected to be able to:

Recognize similarities and differences between the cultures involved; accept and respect differences; demonstrate a desire to learn more about the culture of the Other; exhibit empathy; demonstrate cultural pluralism; integrate the Other's forms of behavior and thought into their own ways of behaving and thinking; and view themselves from a dynamic perspective, in a state of constant development (Bastos, 2014, p. 36, our translation).

Bennett (2013) argues that an interculturally flexible individual, who adopts an adaptable posture, will significantly expand their behavioral "repertoire." In other words, they will develop the competences necessary to interact effectively and efficiently not only in their culture of origin but also in new cultural environments—a crucial skill not only for researchers but also for refugee women themselves. In fact, models such as those of Deardorff (2009) and Bennett (2013) suggest that these competences are acquired through informal intercultural education that values diversity and promotes dialogue between cultures.

The applicability and relevance of these models and competences in research with refugee women lie in their capacity to guide researchers in adapting their communicative

and methodological approaches, fostering inclusive and intercultural sensitive interactions, and enabling a deeper understanding of the narratives and experiences of these women. Indeed, the implementation of these models represents a bilateral educational process in which both researchers and participants simultaneously develop new competences through structured and reflective interaction.

Additionally, the Intercultural Paradigm, emerging in response to the increase and diversification of intercultural encounters, offers solid perspectives for intercultural intervention and research in various contexts and fields, from the social sciences to health and education (Ramos, N., 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015; Nunes; Ramos, 2018).

3 Intercultural Paradigm: Competences and Challenges in Scientific Research

Intercultural interactions present various challenges that require a new paradigm for research and intervention, referred to as the Intercultural Paradigm. This paradigm is essential for educational and training processes, emphasizing heterogeneity, plurality, and interdisciplinarity in scientific research, and it calls for a shift in methodology, epistemology, and ethics, based on three key aspects (Ramos, N., 2013, p. 352-353, our translation):

- 1) Conceptual: Cultural divergences are not seen as fixed and immutable traits, “but as dynamic and interactive entities” that mutually influence and define each other. The intercultural perspective offers an alternative way of examining cultural diversity—not as isolated and uniform units, “but as processes and interactions.”
- 2) Methodological: The intercultural approach is characterized by being inclusive, “multidimensional, and interdisciplinary,” with the goal of understanding the dynamics and complexity of social phenomena while simultaneously avoiding “categorization processes.” For researchers, this means familiarizing themselves with the social and cultural context in which they operate, understanding the representations that influence it, and adopting a reflective stance regarding both the culture of others and their own.
- 3) Ethical: The focus of the intercultural approach is not only on knowledge of diverse cultures but primarily on the interaction “between them and the Other,” which necessitates a decentralized posture. It involves reflecting on how to respect differences at the “individual, social, and cultural” levels, aiming to reduce tensions between the “universal and particular, the global and the local,” and adapting to the complexity and conflicts inherent to societal structures.

According to Ramos N., (2013, p. 352-353, our translation), reflecting on cultural diversity through the Intercultural Paradigm requires the development of several competences, including: individual competences that promote “harmonious social interactions,” en-

couraging a decentralizing stance that allows for the adaptation and relativization of norms, standards, and competences considered exclusive and universal, helping prevent “intolerance and discrimination”; intercultural competences—primarily “linguistic, communicative, and pedagogical”—that contribute to intercultural communication and awareness, as well as to “interculturally competent and inclusive practices and interventions”; and citizenship competences—essential for ensuring the “democratic functioning of societies and institutions”. In fact, these competences are essential for shaping informed citizens who can actively engage in multicultural societies and contribute to harmonious coexistence. Therefore, education for global citizenship, which aims to cultivate critical individuals committed to building a just and sustainable world, holds particular relevance in this context. It is important to note that failure to adhere to the outlined principles, as well as the failure to develop the key competences, has consequences—not only for researchers and their work but also for the participants involved.

Trimble, Pedersen, and Rodela (2004, p. 492-493) recommend using ‘interculturally competent’ instead of ‘culturally competent’ to highlight a focus on understanding intercultural skills, reflecting the growing interest in this area within research. When discussing intercultural competence in scientific research, it becomes clear that this concept extends beyond simple cultural adequacy and delves into understanding the specific contexts of the participants. This is particularly important when the group participating in the study is in a vulnerable situation, especially when facing the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities, as is the case with refugee women. The development of interculturally competent practices not only broadens the researcher’s understanding of cultural dynamics but also enhances their ability to identify and analyze the specific adversities and vulnerabilities faced by these women, contributing to the creation of contextualized knowledge.

An example of this argument can be found in a qualitative study that, through semi-structured and in-depth interviews, collected testimonies from nine women residing in Portugal due to forced migration—from Iraq (1), Syria (7), and Libya (1), aged between 20 and 32 years, with education levels ranging from secondary education (attending a degree) to a doctorate (Sampaio, 2023). The study revealed that the participants encountered various interrelated challenges stemming from the migration context and exacerbated by their gender, highlighting the specific integration obstacles they faced in Portugal. The participants, who settled in the country between 2015 and 2019—two as refugees and seven as students in an emergency situation for humanitarian reasons—described various reasons for migration. However, “[...] all reports show the predominance of feelings related to fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and stress, triggered by exposure to violence, direct and/or indirect threats to life, and insecurity” (Sampaio, 2023, p. 144, our translation). These wom-

en demonstrated, through the meanings they attribute to their experiences, the adversities faced by refugee women, namely:

Isolation and distance from family and social groups; access to employment commensurate with qualifications; lack of institutional support; poor housing conditions; linguistic difficulties and lack of opportunities for language learning; lack of knowledge about how to access health services; non-recognition of academic degrees; and discrimination (Sampaio, 2023, p. 143, our translation).

When these realities are not properly understood, there is a high risk of compromising both data collection and analysis, hindering the establishment of trust between researchers and participants, and exacerbating existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. The lack of an intercultural approach, which includes contextualization, can lead to the reinforcement of power asymmetries and prejudices that perpetuate the marginalization of these populations.

Social researchers aim to understand social phenomena by exploring how participants perceive and interpret the world around them. According to Pina-Cabral (2007), researchers must socially detach themselves in order to re-contextualize within the field they are investigating. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Pierre Bourdieu's work challenges the notion that researchers should maintain distance from the studied context, arguing instead that they can conduct ethnographic studies within their own cultural setting, fostering a closer connection to the people and situations under study (Wacquant, 2006). In fact, this proximity reduces the risk of *symbolic violence* occurring and encourages a deeper and more contextualized understanding of the lives and perspectives of the participants (Wacquant, 2006). It is important to note that "[...] the most disempowered participants are the most vulnerable to being subjected to symbolic violence through research " (Block; Warr; Gibbs; Riggs, 2013, p. 71).

Therefore, applying theories in research contexts requires the development of intercultural competence and sensitivity, which involve the incorporation of fundamental elements, such as understanding, appreciation, flexibility, and perhaps most crucially, disposition—since without conscious and genuine willingness, it is unlikely that intercultural competence will be effectively developed (Trimble; Pedersen; Rodela, 2009, p. 493). Indeed, evidence indicates that the non-acquisition of intercultural competences by researchers, that is, *intercultural incompetence*, entails considerable psychological, emotional, physical, ecological, and financial consequences, a phenomenon that is largely disregarded (Trimble; Pedersen; Rodela, 2004, p. 493).

The complexity and potential risks, described in the literature, arising from participatory fieldwork with ethnocultural populations, highlight the importance of conducting prior research that gathers information to create a context that respects and aligns with the per-

spectives of these populations. It is thus fundamental, in this process, to develop and apply research values and methods that are sensitive to the traditions and ways of life of the community in question (Trimble; Pedersen; Rodela, 2004, p. 494-495).

In a study on participatory health research with refugee, asylum-seeking, and migrant women in high-income countries (Vazquez Corona; Hazfiarini; Vaughan; Block; Bohren, 2024), it is emphasized that participatory research represents an inclusive paradigm that brings together approaches focused on the active participation and involvement of the people/communities expected to benefit. This methodology, by directly integrating the knowledge of those who experience the investigated theme, promotes a bilateral educational process. Furthermore, it favors a more accurate and culturally sensitive interpretation of the results, offering essential validity and congruence for studies involving specific contexts and experiences (Vazquez Corona; Hazfiarini; Vaughan; Block; Bohren, 2024, p. 1-2). In what is, according to the authors, “[...] the first scoping review synthesizing the types of participatory health research approaches and methods used specifically with women from migrant backgrounds throughout the different stages of research in high incomes countries” (Vazquez Corona; Hazfiarini; Vaughan; Block; Bohren, 2024, p. 8), it is argued that participatory research should aim to balance power relations between participants and researchers.

For this involvement to take place, building trust is essential, especially given that research involving ethnocultural populations has become increasingly challenging and complex. This phenomenon stems from a history marked by researchers’ failure to uphold ethical standards and demonstrate intercultural competence (Trimble; Pedersen; Rodela, 2009, p. 495). In relation to this observation, Trimble, Pedersen, and Rodela (2004, p. 495-496) present cases involving African-American men from Macon, Georgia, and the Havasupai tribe of American Indians in Arizona, as examples of insensitive and ethically reprehensible approaches that left lasting psychological scars on the participants. The authors explain how *intercultural incompetence*, misconduct, and ethical violations in these investigations resulted in considerable financial costs, as well as personal consequences for the participants – which were not properly acknowledged or addressed – including the onset of trauma, frustration, and loss of trust due to the mismanagement of these investigations. Furthermore, the harm caused by the lack of intercultural competences extends beyond the participants, impacting other researchers who aim to work with ethnocultural communities. These researchers often have to invest considerable time and effort into building close relationships and developing trust (Trimble; Pedersen; Rodela, 2009, p. 496).

Block, Warr, Gibbs, and Riggs (2013, p. 71-84) explore the ethical and methodological challenges inherent in research with young refugees, highlighting: power imbalances between researchers and participants; issues related to informed consent, given participants’ unfamiliarity with research processes, language barriers, and the fact that the very concept

of informed consent may not easily translate across different cultural contexts (Block; Warr; Gibbs; Riggs, 2013, p. 72-79); the vulnerable nature of young refugees, with traumatic experiences and disrupted social networks making them particularly susceptible to harm (Block; Warr; Gibbs; Riggs, 2013, p. 69-77); and finally, the use of standardized research methods that may not be appropriate or valid when working with young refugees (Block; Warr; Gibbs; Riggs, 2013, p. 69, 71-84).

In their study, Block, Warr, Gibbs, and Riggs (2013) proposed strategies to address these challenges in research with young refugees, including the strategic integration of research activities into a psychosocial support program, which allowed young people to discuss their feelings and normalize their experiences with professional support (p. 77-78). The informed consent process was also adapted: instead of requesting signatures before data collection, the researchers emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and explained, in clear and accessible English, the objectives of the study and the use of data, taking into account the participants' developing language proficiency (Block; Warr; Gibbs; Riggs, 2013, p. 79-81). Formal consent was then requested after the activities were completed, allowing the young participants to make an informed decision about their involvement in the research (Block; Warr; Gibbs; Riggs, 2013, p. 80-81).

Block, Warr, Gibbs, and Riggs (2013, p. 71-84) emphasize the importance of ethical reflexivity in research with young refugees, arguing that academic rigor does not stem from neutrality but rather from the ability to recognize and respond to the ethical complexities that arise throughout the research process. By carefully adapting methods, ensuring genuinely meaningful informed consent, and strategically integrating research activities, the authors illustrate how research can maintain high ethical and methodological standards while also delivering tangible benefits to participants (Block, Warr, Gibbs; Riggs, 2013, p. 84-85).

Given the above, it is clear that a fundamental method in research and intervention with ethnocultural populations, including refugee women, is collaboration. This collaborative approach fosters a strong bond between communities and the scientific community, promoting a mutual learning process that encourages behaviors that respect the unique sociocultural realities of ethnic groups and supports ethical representation practices.

4 Ethics of Representation: intercultural methods and principles

Women in forced migration contexts, particularly Muslim women, face challenges that go beyond typical integration difficulties and often experience discrimination in Western host countries due to their religious and ethnocultural identity (Sampaio, 2023).

This discrimination can take the form of “[...] stereotypes, prejudices, and misperceptions[...]” and occur across various domains— “[...] social, institutional, academic, and pro-

fessional [...]—leading to profoundly negative experiences that may heighten acculturative stress and/or contribute to the development of post-traumatic symptoms among the affected women (Sampaio, 2023, p. 146, our translation).

Given this, it is essential to recognize the psychosocial impact of these stigmas. It should be noted that in the aforementioned study, “[...] the most painful adversity encountered in the host country and reported by the participants was the discrimination they faced as Muslim women” (Sampaio, 2023, p. 146, our translation). This was reflected in their adaptive strategies, with two women modifying their clothing for self-protection, while a third interviewee chose to limit social interaction—strategies aimed at avoiding further experiences of discrimination (Sampaio, 2023, p. 146). These difficult choices demonstrate the resilience of the women interviewed as they navigate a challenging environment and societal pressures, emphasizing their adaptability, which should be recognized and valued in scientific research.

Behar’s study (1992), which examines the construction of a participant’s life history, emphasizes the vital role of establishing a connection between the researcher and the participant in order to gather detailed life history information, as demonstrated in the development of Esperanza’s life story through informal conversations. It is interesting to note that Behar (1992) reflects on class and privilege and, in addressing feminist critiques of ethnography—particularly the argument that a fully feminist ethnography is impossible due to the inherent separations between the women conducting the research and the women they engage with in the study—seeks to contribute to an ethnography that acknowledges and addresses these asymmetries. While Behar recognizes her privileged position as the author who is able to publish the story, she also emphasizes the importance of respecting Esperanza’s wishes and agency. This process of narrative construction fosters a mutual learning opportunity, in which researchers and participants gain new understandings and perspectives through dialogue.

In the work of Vazquez Corona, Hazfiarini, Vaughan, Block, and Bohren (2024, p. 7-8), which examines participatory research approaches on health issues with migrant women in high-income countries through a scoping review, the authors note that although community involvement is present in most stages of research, the direct involvement of migrant women is often mediated by community organizations, which can substitute for active participation in study decisions and planning. This limitation may be justifiable, but as the authors point out, it runs the risk of perpetuating oppressive dynamics by restricting participants’ autonomy. Thus, the authors propose more inclusive participatory approaches, such as feminist action research, which prioritize the direct presence of women in all phases of the study and suggest that any ethical or scientific reasons for limiting their participation in certain stages

should be explicitly documented, ensuring greater transparency and sensitivity to context (Vazquez Corona; Hazfiarini; Vaughan; Block; Bohren, 2024, p. 8).

Therefore, given the above considerations, it is crucial for researchers to be aware of the risks associated with reinforcing prejudices and perpetuating subordinate roles. In this context, it is essential to reference authors like Spivak (1998) and Mohanty (1984) to deepen the understanding of the research topic. According to these authors, it is vital to ensure that women, particularly those in vulnerable contexts, have agency over their own narratives, avoiding contributions to the victimization and homogenization of this population while emphasizing the meanings they attribute to their experiences, as well as their modes of resistance, resilience, and reinvention. Spivak (1998) emphasizes that, beyond the urgency of creating space and conditions for historically marginalized groups to be heard—which is a democratic responsibility—intellectuals also have the political and ethical duty to give them a voice and advocate on their behalf. It is, however, imperative to adopt an ethics of representation that reflects the historical dynamics of subordination and power imbalances in intercultural relations, rejecting attitudes of paternalism and benevolence (Spivak, 1998; Bebiano, 2012). This ethical approach in scientific research is, in itself, a transformative educational process, requiring researchers to continually and critically reflect on their own practices and assumptions. It also demands a shift in the paradigm applied to studies on historically marginalized groups, particularly women, where the researcher redefines the notion of *studying the subaltern* into *learning from the subaltern*. This effort contributes to the establishment of an educational philosophy that fosters democratic behaviors and habits, creating spaces for mutual learning while recognizing and amplifying historically marginalized voices (Spivak, 1998; Gayatri Spivak, 2008).

Recognizing the risks of reinforcing prejudices and subordinate roles highlights the necessity of research approaches that enable refugee women to tell their own stories. To achieve this, it is crucial to create safe and empathetic spaces where their voices are heard and valued, thus fulfilling an ethical and democratic responsibility. By embracing intercultural competences and valuing otherness, researchers can move beyond a detached observer stance to become collaborators and learners in a reciprocal learning process. This approach fosters a dialogical educational practice that contributes to a research paradigm rooted in autonomy and promotes a more accurate understanding of intercultural experiences and the contexts that shape them. Thus, in research with ethnocultural groups, and specifically with refugee women, alongside the ethics of representation and the intercultural competences already identified, it is essential to adopt additional ethical principles.

According to Trimble, Pedersen, and Rodela (2009, p. 497), three fundamental ethical dimensions are essential in conducting research that respects intercultural sensitivity: applying an intercultural approach to assess the risks and benefits associated with the

research; establishing trust and obtaining informed consent, explicitly defining disclosure and confidentiality policies; and committing to active participation within the community and engaging with participants, while maintaining a high level of sensitivity to different cultures. It is equally crucial that researchers share research findings in ways that are meaningful and useful for participants and acquire essential skills to develop culturally sensitive and reliable assessment tools (Trimble; Pedersen; Rodela, 2009, p. 497). Developing culturally appropriate tools and methods not only provides a significant learning opportunity for both researchers and participants but also creates a space where academic and experiential knowledge intersect and enrich one another.

Informed consent is the cornerstone of this approach, ensuring that participants are fully aware of the research objectives, the procedures involved, how their privacy and identity will be protected, the potential risks and benefits, and their freedom to participate or withdraw at any time. Valuing the dignity and autonomy of participants means recognizing and respecting their life experiences, ensuring that they are engaged as active participants rather than treated merely as *research subjects*.

It is equally essential to be aware of the scientific, political, and social factors that shape definitions of concepts such as ethnicity and culture to underscore the diversity that exists within the same group. This perspective aligns with Brah's (2006) thesis, which rejects the rigid categorization of identities, arguing that such a simplistic view reinforces patterns of subordination and marginalization.

Furthermore, in research involving migrant women, especially in contexts of forced migration, it is important to adopt an intersectional approach, as coined by Crenshaw (1991), which considers how various aspects of identity intersect to shape experiences. This approach proves to be a crucial analytical tool for understanding the multiple layers of vulnerability that these women face and their impact on lived experiences (Sampaio, 2023; Padilla; França; Vieira, 2022; Ramos; Dias, 2020). In fact, the interplay of factors such as "gender, migrant status, language, religion, ethnocultural identity, and socioeconomic status" exacerbates adaptation difficulties, shaping their migratory path and overall experience (Sampaio, 2023, p. 133, our translation). Therefore, intersectionality serves as a theoretical framework that enables researchers to recognize and analyze various forms of discrimination, enriching scientific knowledge in an ethical and comprehensive manner. This perspective is crucial for uncovering patterns of exclusion and marginalization, facilitating research that values distinct identities and lived realities. Research in intercultural contexts provides a unique opportunity to expand epistemological perspectives and challenge conventional paradigms, transforming the research process into a valuable educational environment where researchers and participants collaboratively cultivate new knowledge, perspectives, and intercultural skills. Moreover, culturally sensitive approaches are fundamental for respecting cultural

norms and potential sensitivities of participants, helping to prevent the imposition of one culture's values or practices on another.

5 Final Considerations

The primary aim of this study was to examine how enhancing intercultural competences can support ethical and inclusive research that respects the cultural specificities of refugee women. The analysis highlighted the crucial role of intercultural competences in research conducted in intercultural contexts, particularly with refugee women, emphasizing them as indispensable tools for overcoming communication barriers, fostering trust, and ensuring an ethical and culturally sensitive investigative process. These competences play a pivotal educational role by promoting transformative learning for both researchers and participants, contributing to the development of inclusive pedagogical and social practices, as well as advancing education for citizenship. Although models such as those of Deardorff (2009) and Bennett (2013) provide a solid theoretical basis, the need to adapt them to the specific challenges faced by refugee women—who encounter unique and complex circumstances—was observed.

The analysis reinforces the need for ongoing cultural adaptation by researchers, who must remain open and flexible, adopting a *self-displacing* and *self-reflective* stance—that is, the ability to understand the world from the participants' perspective. This approach helps mitigate the risks of *symbolic violence* and intercultural missteps, which can lead to inaccurate data analysis, reinforce mistrust and vulnerabilities, and perpetuate prejudices and power imbalances.

In this regard, the importance of an epistemological, methodological, and ethical repositioning—rooted in the Intercultural Paradigm and the development of intercultural, personal, and civic competences—must be emphasized (Ramos, N., 2001, 2007, 2009a, 2011, 2013). These competences extend beyond the realm of research, reinforcing intercultural education as an essential dimension that fosters learning, equipping researchers, educators, and communities to engage with diversity in an ethical and inclusive manner. Indeed, this skill set, cultivated through a continuous and reflective educational process and complemented by an intersectional approach, proves critical in facilitating access to participants—often hindered by language barriers, mistrust, or cultural and communicative misunderstandings.

When discussing the challenges of researching refugee women, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of collaboration and participatory methods. Continuous ethical reflection requires researchers to critically examine their own perspectives, values, and biases that could influence the research. The reflective and collaborative approach aims to create

an inclusive practice that respects participants' autonomy and provides a nuanced understanding of their experiences. This approach should be grounded in an ethics of representation that values participants' narratives and voices, preventing their portrayal solely as victims or as a homogeneous group.

Additionally, intercultural research with vulnerable populations demands heightened ethical principles: risk-benefit assessment, the establishment of trust-based relationships, properly tailored and implemented informed consent, and active participation. These ethical principles strengthen the connection between researchers and participants, safeguarding participants' dignity and rights while ensuring data confidentiality.

In conclusion, interculturally competent research has the potential to generate meaningful outcomes by contextualizing and honoring the interpretations women assign to their experiences, thereby directly contributing to the formulation of appropriate and effective public policies. This approach promotes ethical, responsible, and socially relevant scientific production that addresses the real needs of this population, creating a transformative educational process for all involved.

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