



Living on the edge of African dreams: new identities for African and African diaspora Caribbean students in Brazil

Vivendo na fronteira de sonhos africanos: novas identidades para estudantes africanos e caribenhos da diáspora afro-caribenha no Brasil

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Abstract: This article presents the results of a survey among African and Afro-Caribbean diaspora students in Brazil. They are participants of the federal PEC-G¹ program, which grants tuition-free undergraduate spots in Brazilian universities. Before starting their undergraduate programs, however, they come to UFBA for linguistic and cultural instruction for a period of 8 months. The survey and the discussion of the results encompass interviews with 25 students about their cultural experiences and their intercultural development over the initial period of 6 months. They present a complex interaction of an originally middle-class background with professional aspirations in their home countries to a lower social status in a country with a history of slavery and racism. Many stories illustrate the conflicts they experience and the coping mechanisms they develop to navigate a new environment in which they will be immersed for a long period (at least 4 more years) while retaining as much of their original affiliations and identity as possible, especially considering that they are expected to return to their home countries after graduation.

Keywords: Portuguese as a second language, identity and language acquisition, immersion and language learning, racism in Brazil.

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa com estudantes africanos e da diáspora afro-caribenha no Brasil. São participantes do PEC-G, um programa

¹ PEC-G, Programa Estudante Convênio de Graduação, Undergraduate Exchange Student Program.

do governo federal que oferece vagas em cursos de graduação gratuitamente em universidades brasileiras. Antes de começar a graduação, no entanto, eles vêm à UFBA para um curso de língua portuguesa e cultura por um período de 8 meses. A pesquisa e os resultados apresentados cobrem entrevistas com 25 estudantes sobre as suas experiências culturais e o seu desenvolvimento intercultural nos seus primeiros 6 meses. Aqui se revelam interações complexas entre sua situação social de classe média com ambições de ascensão social trazida dos países de origem em contraste com um status social diminuído em um país com uma história de escravidão e racismo. Muitos relatos ilustram os conflitos vivenciados e os mecanismos desenvolvidos para navegar um ambiente novo em que eles estarão por um longo período (no mínimo mais 4 anos) ao mesmo tempo em que conservam o máximo possível de suas afiliações e identidades, particularmente considerando que o programa prevê o seu retorno ao final da graduação.

Palavras-chave: português como segunda língua, identidade e aquisição linguística, imersão linguística, racismo no Brasil.

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1 Introduction²

Every year, the Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA), in Salvador, Brazil, receives about 30 students from over 20 African countries and a handful of African Diaspora students from English-speaking Caribbean nations. They seek mandatory Portuguese language instruction at UFBA for approximately 8 months before heading to other Brazilian cities to pursue their undergraduate studies, where they live for at least 4 more years until graduation.

Those international students arrive at UFBA under the federal PEC-G program, by which they are granted tuition-free spots at over 100 Brazilian universities. Either their home governments or they themselves must fund air travel and personal expenses while studying in Brazil. PEC-G is a 50-year old international cooperation program aimed at providing educational opportunities for students from countries where access to higher education is limited. It was originally designed to serve

² Ethics Committee approval CAAE: “Construindo projetos possíveis: itinerários formativos de jovens africanas/os não falantes de português no Programa Estudante Convênio de Graduação”, 91829418.9.0000.5505.

students from Cape Verde, Guine Bissau, and Sao Tome e Principe. Today, according to the Ministry of Education, about 75% of approximately 3000 students come from Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, and land directly at the university of their undergraduate degree. Around 10% come mostly from Latin America and may fulfill their language requirement in their home countries. The rest, around 15% who do not speak Portuguese and come mostly from non-Portuguese speaking countries in Africa, must first attend an intensive language course at 20 universities in Brazil – UFBA being one of them. In late October, they must pass the official language proficiency examination *Celpe-bras*³ before moving on to their undergraduate studies elsewhere. The students who come to Brazil for language instruction come from countries where the exam is not offered.

At UFBA, they are at the initial and most intense, critical stage of their very long stay in Brazil, at an also critical stage of their lives, as young adults. They are also under enormous pressure, having to pass the *Celpe-bras* exam in a mere 8 months. This chapter analyzes the experiences of these young African and Caribbean pre-undergraduate students as they try to adapt to life in Brazil and learn Portuguese, knowing they will spend the next few years in the new country.

Coming to Salvador, Bahia, these African and African Diaspora Caribbean students arrive at the most African city in Brazil, with a population between 70% and 90% of African Brazilians. The African presence in Salvador da Bahia is present in the bodies of its people, in the colorful headscarves on women's heads, in the *acarajé*⁴ stalls that occupy the city and infuse it in palm oil scent in the late afternoons, and *Candomblé*, the African religion that Brazilians share with other diaspora communities in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as with people in West Africa.

Salvador is also a stronghold of African pride and the Afro-Brazilian cultural-political movements. As such, several communities in the city project the social representations of ancestral Africa, as all

³ *Certificado de Proficiência em Língua Portuguesa para Estrangeiros*, Portuguese Language Proficiency Certificate for Foreigners.

⁴ Kidney-bean bun, which is deep fried in palm oil. It is cut in half and filled with *Caruru* (an okra-based paste) and *Vatapa* (a starchy paste made with several ingredients and palm oil), tomato and onion salad, and dried shrimp, also very common in parts of West Africa.

communities do. These, naturally, bear relative resemblance with the realities experienced by many present-day Africans. Also, as a former slave-based society, Salvador's racial relations are also the basis of the distribution of resources, privileges, and power.

In that sense, people in Salvador see in the bodies of these African students both myths of an ancestral Africa as well as the stereotypical places reserved to current African Brazilians, typically in the lower echelons of society. These are new roles for them, and they struggle to adapt to a new cultural background and a social order that may differ from their home experiences.

They also bring to Salvador their own dreams and expectations about life in a foreign country, adventures, adulthood, university, and their future in general. Not only that, they also carry the expectations of their families and friends, as well as from their national governments, which, in many cases, award them scholarships to enable them to pursue their studies in Brazil. In Salvador, they must confront their dreams with the reality of their experiences.

Their presence in Salvador is no coincidence. UFBA defines how many PEC-G students it admits yearly for the Portuguese language course and their origin. It is currently the university in Brazil that receives the most students under the language phase of the program, nearly all from Africa and the Caribbean. Given the local history and demographic makeup, the university sees international students from Africa and the African diaspora as a priority. The idea is that it is important to establish a dialogue with people from regions which share a common history albeit from different perspectives under the umbrella of the university. In that sense, the Portuguese language course and their cultural training is centered on the premise of that cultural exchange as a basis for intercultural dialogue.

2 The Portuguese language course at UFBA

In 2014, the various tuition-free Portuguese language courses offered to international students were unified under the Profici-PFL (Portuguese as a Foreign Language) program at UFBA. It currently welcomes a total of around 100 international students year-round, mostly from West Africa, Western Europe, and Latin America. At UFBA they attend courses under several institutional programs: PEC-G, the Organization of American States (OAS) PAEC, semester abroad exchange

agreements with universities around the world, Fullbright Foundation language assistants, Fiocruz research assistants, and many others.

This article focuses exclusively on PEC-G students and their experiences, but they share their classes with undergraduate and graduate students from all over the world. This is an important element of the program, as I believe that they gain invaluable experience and insight from their contact from students from different countries and also with Brazilians, all at different stages of their university education. The main guidelines of the course are: ‘learning from diversity’, ‘learning to learn’, and ‘learning from real experiences’.

The Profici-PFL was designed as an experimental program and it undergoes frequent evaluation and redesign. It is currently taught by 4 undergraduate and graduate students under my coordination, with a student-centered, project-based, multi-level learning approach. Unlike traditional approaches in which students are divided by personal characteristics, ‘learning through diversity’ means that all students are grouped together, regardless of Portuguese language proficiency, country of origin, language(s) spoken, age, etc. Classes are as diverse as possible, with a mix of students from each background.

Fundamentally, the program aims at helping students to become independent learners. That means that they are led to go through gradually structured real-life experiences and reflect on them so that they learn to learn independently from the immersion situation. In that sense, they are led to seek interactions, build relationships, and always reflect on their experiences. In that process, they achieve linguistic proficiency and intercultural skills on their own, according to their individual learning styles and needs. My hope is that they then learn the strategies they need to continue to learn independently through their long stay in Brazil and afterwards.

That means that the course proposes projects, which offer a progression of real cultural and linguistic interactive experiences in the immersion environment. Students learn language and culture from interactions in their new environment, and ultimately succeed in building relationships. No books, tests, grammar and vocab, etc. The project is the class and the class is the project.

Projects are structured as preparation, execution, discussion, and reflection, in one-week cycles. In preparation, the structure of the project is presented and thoroughly discussed in class, with the necessary instructions and training – both linguistically and culturally. Then, there

is execution. Projects are long, complex, and time-consuming. They also present great variety, so that students are encouraged to explore, interact and have meaningful, varied experiences. Sometimes they are done individually, sometimes in pairs, and sometimes in groups. Finally, in discussion, they present the results of their project and talk about the experiences during execution. There is linguistic instruction, but intervention is always individual, contextualized, and focused on immediate and practical questions and difficulties.

Here are some examples of projects done in the first 8 weeks of 2016:

Treasure hunt
 My country, my history
 Field interviews on public services in Salvador
 My Brazilian friend
 Cooking fest
 Music and dance in Brazil and in my country
 Work and career
 Events and cultural life in Salvador
 Film
 My career and my sojourn in Brazil
 Traditional festivities

Projects present much variation, but, as an example, here is an outline of the first project (in line with STOLLER, 2006), “The Treasure Hunt”:

- Step 1 – Preparation: In-class activities about Salvador, its neighborhoods, public transportation; asking for directions, asking for help, asking prices;
- Step 2 – Execution: Students lay out a plan for covering the tasks in groups of 3. They visit 6 sites around the city by bus and take selfies at each one;
- Step 3 – Discussion: Students prepare a picture presentation of the neighborhoods they visited; they prepare a laundry list of difficulties and incidents; they present their experiences and discuss them in class;

Step 4 – Reflection: Finally, they write about any aspect of the experience on their blog.

Step 4 – Shows that students write a blog through the course, discussing their immersion experiences. They also keep a diary, which is a simpler, more formal task. In the diary, they take notes or write a paragraph about their linguistic and personal experiences. On Fridays, class is based on the discussions of the themes in their blogs and diaries.

One important aspect of ‘learning from diversity’ is that students are not divided by level of proficiency. As such, there is an expectation that they learn to work as a team, helping each other and learning in a diverse environment, as is the case in the real world. In that environment, students with a higher level of proficiency do more linguistically sophisticated projects. Students with a lower level of proficiency present projects at a simpler linguistic level. All learn something and they learn together as a team.

The main objective of the course is for students to develop their own individual learning strategies, to ‘learn to learn’. Some prefer more analytical, structured learning, most tend to be spontaneous and learn from everyday interactions and media, they ‘learn from real experiences’. Through observations and qualitative analysis of interviews with students, I have identified 5 stages in the development of language-learning strategies: resistance, exploration, formalization, specific-purposes, and independence, which will be outlined in more detail in a future article. These stages are based on and roughly coincide with Vande Berg’s stages in intercultural development, as described in Bennett (2012).

The Portuguese course at UFBA, therefore, establishes a very close between cultural exploration, personal interaction, and language learning. For that reason, understanding the experiences of the students in Salvador, which is guided by the language course, is an essential element in the success of the course and individual students.

3 Methodology

Every year the Ministry of Education sends us a different combination of students from different countries. In 2018, there were

students mostly from Ghana, Namibia, and Jamaica. There was also one from Kenya, one from Togo, and two from East Timor. For this chapter, I have conducted 30-minute interviews with 25 students: 11 from Ghana, 9 from Namibia, 4 from Jamaica, and 1 from Kenya. All PEC-G students were invited to participate in the study, but some were not interested or excluded from this survey (the East Timorese and a graduate student from Benin). I preferred to focus on English-speaking students from Africa or the African diaspora.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, employing methods of Critical Discourse Analysis, especially Van Dijk (1998, 2008) and psychosocial analysis, as in Camino *et al.* (2001), Ferreira (2002), Lima and Vala (2004), and Pereira *et al.* (2003). Other than trying to seem receptive and make students feel comfortable, I stuck to the questions and tried not to react to their responses. The script of the interviews varied slightly according to the responses, but all covered the following questions:

- 1) Name, age, country of origin, languages spoken, undergraduate program to be undertaken after the Portuguese course, PEC-G university after the Portuguese course, source of funding for stay in Brazil;
- 2) Where did you live in your home country? In what city? Did you live with your family?
- 3) Tell me about your family (family members and occupations).
- 4) How did you find out about PEC-G?
- 5) Did you also apply to other undergraduate programs in your country or abroad?
- 6) When you found out you were admitted, what preparation, if any, did you undertake (language and culture)?
- 7) Did you come directly to Salvador?
- 8) Where did you stay in your first few days? How did you find that place?
- 9) What was your first impression of the city?
- 10) Do you still live there? When did you move? How did you find the new place? Do you live with Brazilians or with other foreign students?

- 11) Today, after 6 months in Salvador, what do you think are the positive and negative aspects of life here?
- 12) Do you have Brazilian friends? How did you meet them? What social activities do you lead with them?
- 13) Do you feel at home in Salvador/Brazil?
- 14) Do you feel welcome in Brazil?
- 15) What do you think Brazilians think of you when they see you?
- 16) Do you think there is racism in Brazil?
- 17) Have you ever had any experiences with racism in Brazil?
- 18) What do you do when you want to improve your Portuguese?
- 19) Do you think course projects helped you in learning Portuguese?
- 20) Do you feel confident about your chances in the Celpe-bras exam?

Questions 18-20 are not directly pertinent to this chapter but were important as an evaluation of students' perception of the course and its results. Also, questions 16-17 were not initially part of the interview, but since all students brought up the issue of racism in the first 5 interviews and it revealed itself to be a key element of their experience in Brazil, I incorporated it into the script. In fact, the issue of racism was so salient that it guided my analysis of their understanding of the subtleties of Brazilian culture in Salvador and the local social order. As I describe below, the more elaborate their responses about racism, the more students also showed to be integrated into Brazilian culture and fluent in Portuguese.

Students were allowed to do the interview in either Portuguese or English, but all showed great pride in answering the questions in Portuguese. It is indeed a great accomplishment to be able to conduct a 30-minute interview of such complexity in a foreign language after just 6 months of study. Only two students asked to revert to English halfway into the talk. Of course, they all know me as the course coordinator, but they are very familiar to listening to me speaking in English, as I also recorded cultural training videos, which I distribute via YouTube.⁵ I also exchange emails with them initially in English and French.

The focus of the analysis was on aggregate content analysis. I tried to articulate the content of the responses as to how students

⁵ Videos are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/rgualda71>.

understood: (1) a perceived Brazilian social order; (2) their place in that order; (3) how they developed strategies to find a comfortable place in that order. Fundamentally, the idea of this study is to analyze how they perceive the issues of identity and otherness, and how to blend themselves into a new culture without losing their own sense of identity. In the discussions, 3 points were key in their perception of those issues: language, nationality, and race.

4 Some key concepts

Thus, the key concepts that are relevant to the discussion of the interviews, from a discourse perspective, are: identity, social groups, and racism. The first two are very closely related, while the latter is a more specific one, especially in the Brazilian context, where I show that racism is very distinct from other societies, such as South Africa or the United States.

In any given society, individuals associate themselves in groups, sharing cultural markers that contrast to other individuals who lack those markers. Lawler (2008) explains that some identity categories may be combined (gender and ethnicity, for example), but markers normally present a binary distinction (homosexual versus heterosexual) and are exclusive (2-3). Therefore, identity in the individual is revealed in layers of markers, corresponding to social groups.

In terms of identity, Jenkins (2008) suggests that sameness and difference are therefore dialectically opposed but are essentially two sides of the same phenomenon. The features that make two individuals recognize themselves as members of the same group are also the markers that differentiate them from individuals of a different group. Discussing similarity and difference, he posits that “neither makes sense without the other, and identification requires both” (p. 21). Consciously or not, identity occurs at the deepest affective and cognitive levels. In the case of the PEC-G students in Salvador, they always mention Portuguese proficiency, or lack thereof and skin color as key social markers, thus as factors of integration or differentiation in Brazilian society.

There is a distinction between identity and identification. Lawler (2008) states that: “identity needs to be understood not as belonging ‘within’ the individual person, but as produced between persons and within social relations” (p. 8), while Jenkins (2008) focuses on identification, a

process that comes from the outside. In our discussion here, identification is related to social categories (gender, ethnicity, age, kinship), in which the whole process is disorganized and unconscious, yet inevitable.

However, categorization is a social, discursive phenomenon, and it may evolve as conditions change, as is the case of PEC-G students in Salvador. Upon arrival, they perceive themselves as sharply distinct from Brazilians, and thus project a perception of otherness from Brazilians towards them. As they understand the subtle features shared in Brazilian society, its social categories, and a broader social order, they create strategies to integrate, and feel ‘at home’, ‘welcome’, indistinguishable from the locals.

At the same time, society also associates hierarchies within groups and individuals. Lawler (2008), thinking of identification as a social process that is imposed on the individual, contends that power is ever present in the assignment of identities and the prestige (hierarchy) that comes with it: “an identity is imposed and there is no ‘official’ space allowed where this may be contested or a different identity affirmed” (p. 145). This is a key element in the discussion of perceived racism, since without an accompanying sense of social status associated with race, racism is not realized as an oppressive force, but rather as a superficial folkloric marker without much consequence, as we discuss below.

Here it is important to understand that the identity of a foreign student is not fully reinvented as if the past in their home country is completely forgotten. It is rather a blended identity, as they only partially adhere to local values, beliefs, and attitudes (as defined by VAN DIJK, 1998), negotiating the difficult combination of a home identity and a new identity within a new map of interrelated social groups and categories, which differs from what they know from home. As the process evolves and they integrate into the new society, often they also move away from their original identity, living in a blended state, neither in Africa nor in America, rather somewhere in the imaginary ocean between the two continents.

The point here is that being dark skinned in Soweto, Salvador, Accra, or Paris is not the same. The commonsense idea is one that *fetishizes* the body as an immutable, durable, unchangeable entity. The fetish of the body represents the belief that one is universally recognized by his essential and immutable self, identified in a material shell. Yet, the perception of what is dark or light skin changes according to each

society, and values, beliefs, and attitudes toward social categories, which may be defined in terms of race vary wildly from one society to another.

Van Dijk's (1998) argues from a multidisciplinary approach, which is based on a conceptual triangle of discourse, cognition, and society (p. 7). That triangle explains how social groups (society) are formed and managed discursively (discourse), while the perception as values, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals (cognition) are negotiated within groups. That process is dialogic and discursive in nature, standing in opposition to other groups which are also in dialogic discourse.

Van Dijk (1998) deals with organized groups, but his framework also applies to social categories, if one understands that then the process is unconscious and disorganized. It is also important to note that in the model, values, beliefs, and attitudes are articulated in discourse in terms of schemata, as built on a chain of topics (or themes) (p. 263-274). Thus, the job of the analyst is to reconstruct the relevant social categories that manifest themselves in the discourse as a correlated set of values, beliefs, and attitudes, which are articulated discursively in schemata.

This is where the perception of race becomes central. Sure, students understand that they initially are outsiders in Brazil, as any foreigner would be. As time passes, they become more and more integrated and indistinguishable from the locals (insiders), both culturally (especially in terms of visible icons, such as clothing and hairstyles) and linguistically (even if Portuguese proficiency is perceived to lag other markers).

Yet, they are fully aware that they arrive in a very diverse society, in which race is a fundamental marker. They are not just any other, they are a particular type of other, the African, and more consequentially, the black other. Interestingly, as they do not recognize racism as a fundamental marker in their own home countries, their perception, while very refined, is not accompanied by a sense of injustice or insult, even when they have personal experiences with racism, as discussed below.

Holanda (2015) is one of the pioneers in the topic of race in Brazil, having authored the classic 'Roots of Brazil' in 1936. The main argument in the book is that the Portuguese colonizers, being explorers, having come to Brazil without family members, and of a more adaptable culture, largely interbred with the local Amerindians and Africans they oppressed. As a basically agricultural and rural colonial enterprise with

close, yet strongly hierarchical relationships, the local culture was based on family and personal relations rather than mediated by law and the state.

As such, that very hierarchical society with extremely close daily family and personal ties had to develop mechanisms of attenuation, especially a paternalistic structure of exchanging personal favors and a pattern of cordial, highly affective interpersonal treatment. According to Holanda (2015), it is that perceived friendliness and personal attachment is the glue that kept together a system of extreme social stratification of groups of people living in extreme proximity, thus avoiding conflict. The basis of that complex hierarchical system is race, with a high degree of miscegenation, therefore, multiple intermediary loci.

That is a fundamentally different pattern of social organization than what is observed in places like the United States of America or South Africa under Apartheid. In those places, European colonizers of fundamentalist protestant beliefs emigrated to the new territories, not only with their families, but often with groups of people to establish the first colonial settlements. While the Portuguese dreamt of getting rich in the new world and coming back to Europe, the Dutch settled South Africa for good. The former had a very oppressive view of colonization, but desperately needed the locals and African slaves to explore the riches of the colonies, as well as to socialize, while the latter had no use for the natives. Their policies varied between complete segregation (Apartheid) and genocide, developing an ideology of racial purity. In everyday interactions, Apartheid was a system of explicit oppression, despise/hatred, and extreme segregation. The levels of social inequality in Brazil, the United States, and South Africa are quite similar, but here a highly hierarchical, racially based social structure came with a friendly face, soft words, close social interaction and ties, interpersonal empathy, and a smile.

Currents studies explore the nature of Brazilian racism and highlight some interesting modern developments. Lima and Vala (2004) confirm the typical Brazilian pattern of cordial racism. They also point out that in the last few decades, overt racism has declined sharply in the Americas and Europe, but new stereotypes of people of color have emerged. The discourse, which in the early 20th century stressed them as being dirty, lazy, superstitious, stupid, and criminal has shifted to a covert system of stereotypes: prone to the sports and arts, strong, joyful, exotic, poor, undereducated, unskilled, dependent on welfare, involved in criminal activities, with social, family, and personal problems. There is

also a strong belief that there is no more racism and that either individuals themselves bear the responsibility for not thriving in society, or that the social environment of poverty and moral deficiency hampers their fortunes.

Camino *et al.* (2001) further discuss the issue of covert racism, showing that a vast majority of Brazilians (89%) consider that there is racism in Brazil, but that they themselves are not racist. Meanwhile respondents sustained the new stereotypes of people of color, as prone to the sports and the arts, as well as active in less prestigious and less skilled occupations. Pereira *et al.* (2003) reach similar conclusions, showing that people rationalize racist attitudes with discourses related to social class and professional skill.

Discussing a long tradition of racism studies in Brazil, Guimaraes (2004) stresses how that affective attitude not only an oppressive social order, but also masked the very existence of racism as a fundamental element of the organization of Brazilian society and the distribution of privilege in the context of a capitalist, class-based society. In that sense, a unique form of social order ensues, that combines class and race, with cordiality as an element of attenuation.

Racism, then, is not only an attitude from whites towards blacks, but a shared set of values, beliefs, and attitudes, by which all prize and strive for whiteness. Lima and Vala (2004) and Camino *et al.* (2001) show how ambiguous self-classification can be, as people of color use different terms to describe themselves, often preferring to pass as whites or to self-describe with intermediate terms rather than 'black' or African Brazilian, a strategy not shared by whites. In that context, Ferreira (2002) points out the importance of Afro-Brazilian activism as a means to recreate and prize a local African identity, fostering a sense of pride and political action.

5 The experiences of African and Afro-Caribbean students in Salvador

25 students were selected for this study, all between the ages of 18 and 26, of which 11 are male and 14 are female. They are all English speakers, but all speak other regional languages or Jamaican patois. The largest group is that of 11 students from Ghana. There are also 9 Namibians, 3 Jamaicans, and 1 Kenyan.⁶ Among them, 5 students (two

⁶ In several sections of this chapter, I will not refer to the Kenyan student to preserve their anonymity.

from Namibia, two from Ghana, and 1 from Jamaica) have previously studied at the undergraduate level but decided to come to Brazil through the PEC-G program.

5.1 A professional, middle-class perspective

In their interviews, students revealed that their parents led professional, middle-class careers in their home countries. They either own small businesses or have careers in the public or private sectors that require a university degree. Seeking one is a common feature in their families, in both their parents' generation as among their siblings. So is going abroad for an education; in fact, 4 had siblings living in Brazil, of which 3 are participants in the PEC-G as well.

Among the reasons for choosing to come to Brazil for their education, students mentioned already having a family member here, the quality of higher education in Brazil being superior to their home country, financial reasons, as PEC-G is a tuition-free program (Namibians also receive a stipend from their national government to study abroad), and an interest in learning a new language and/or experience other cultures. So, while these students share a solidly middle-class status, they are not rich and financial considerations do matter.

In that context, a university diploma is the key to maintaining/improving social status and being granted prized opportunities at home and abroad. The careers they have chosen bear evidence of that: Engineering, Architecture, Business Management, Tourism, Medicine, Nursing, International Relations, Physiotherapy, Biomedicine, and Biochemistry. That helps explain why UFBA has never experienced any attrition, and that students, while being young and inexperienced, prize their education and are highly motivated.

The professional, middle-class perspective is an important feature in their perception of the host country and of their experiences, although there are variations based on their nationalities. In general, students view a foreign university diploma as an important asset in their pursuit of social status and value indicators of Western-style urban living, development, and prosperity.

In that sense, students feel glad when their expectations of Brazil being a more developed country than their own are met as well as feel disappointed when confronted with the opposite situation. So, when asked about their first impressions of Salvador, Jamaicans generally mentioned

the weather as a negative (too hot and humid) and the beaches as a positive. In general, they said that they thought the city is very beautiful, especially the coastal areas.

The Namibians and the Ghanaians mostly found housing through two senior African students in Salvador. Initially going to a working-class neighborhood near the city center, all the Namibians mentioned they were saddened by the slums they saw and they quickly sought new accommodations. Ghanaians mentioned that the city is very large and modern, with lots of high-rises. They often mention that the city is clean and students of all nationalities praised public services – especially public transportation, but also healthcare and education – to the surprise of many Brazilians.

While Namibians state that they later got used to poverty in Brazil and it did not affect their generally positive view of the host country, the unanimous negative aspect of Brazilian life for all students in the study is crime and violence, with scattered comments about graffiti, protests/demonstrations, noise, and drug/cigarette consumption. One student witnessed a police chase in front of her home, having even heard a gunshot during the event. Two others were pickpocketed themselves. Of course, all students are in daily contact, and all knew those stories. Several students stated that they were afraid in some situations (at night, walking by themselves), reflecting fears that ordinary Brazilians also hold about public spaces.

Their professional, middle class perspective is very important in understanding students' experience in Brazil. On the one hand, it explains the strong commitment to the PEC-G program and their studies, especially their focus on passing the Portuguese language exam. It also shapes their social relationships, which, as presented below, are based on institutions that cater to people in their social strata – church, university, the mall, the gym, etc.

It also has a strong influence on how they perceive the central issue of racial relations in Brazil, as I discuss below. On the one hand, they realize the lower social status of African Brazilians in Salvador. On the other, they strive to retain/improve their own social status as university students. They also have a relative acceptance of racism, since it is a new feature in their lives, unlike African Brazilians, who must deal with it for their entire lives. As foreigners, they also are relatively uncommitted to Brazilian life and culture, and therefore, may be less affected by social conflicts in the host country.

5.2 Social life

Social life is a central element in the outcome of immersion programs, especially at UFBA. If students do not feel integrated, supported, and happy, how can they possibly devote themselves to learning Portuguese? Also, if they do not actively participate in Brazilian life, have rich interactions, and build relationships with Brazilians, how can they possibly effectively learn Portuguese in such a short time? So, as described above, several class projects aim at helping students overcome their fears and explore the city, the university and social life in general. Students also receive cultural training and support through online videos, face-to-face sessions, and programs, such as tandem sessions, tutorials, etc.

In fact, as is typical in an immersion situation, students who early on take the plunge and actively seek a variety of interactions and relationships with locals tend to do much better linguistically. Most students eventually find a housing situation that involves either living with a Brazilian family or sharing an apartment with other students (some or all Brazilian), except for 3. Those 3 expressed regret for not having sought to live with locals. In general, by their own accounts, students who live with Brazilians exclusively do better. And students who move into a home with Brazilians early do better.

All students highlight emphatically that Brazilians are surprisingly, exceedingly friendly and helpful. 3 Jamaican students even mentioned that they are too friendly, referring to close physical contact (especially hugging and kissing on the cheeks as a form of greeting). As one student from Ghana put it “you can always count on Brazilians to help you out, regardless of the situation”. Tales of helpful strangers abound, from giving directions to riding to the hospital on a bus with a sick student. Several students stated that they spend part of the day studying on campus, and when they have questions, they often sought help from unknown Brazilian students, who tutored them on the spot for extended periods of time (up to two hours).

All but two students state that they feel at home in Salvador, even as a total of 4 said that they sometimes feel homesick. Several mentioned that they did not like Brazilian food (bland). All said that they feel welcome in Brazil, with 5 Ghanaians and 1 Jamaican believing that the cultures were very similar. The strongly African ethnic and cultural makeup of Salvador and general diversity were pointed out as a positive.

When asked if they have Brazilian friends, only 3 (one for each nationality) said that they had only a few or none. The vast majority have built relationships with other students, 3 were very close to families, and one became very good friends with a university staff member. They meet their friends in a variety of settings: pre-arranged tandem sessions, the university campus (waiting in line, the student restaurant, the library, just walking around and greeting people...), neighbors, the beach, soccer groups, the mall, social networks (especially facebook), the gym, and church.

In fact, all students attend Evangelical churches (Jamaicans less enthusiastically than Africans), and most point it as one of the central aspects of their social interaction with Brazilians and social integration in the host country. Through church, they make friends, meet families with whom they keep in touch for celebrations and festivities, find accommodations (with other students or families). Several students also volunteer at church or attend bible study groups.

While students praise locals for being very friendly and helpful, 3 students mentioned that they declined approaches by Brazilians to socialize “to focus on the test”. That answer is puzzling for two reasons. First, as intensively as they may study, it is very unlikely that they have no “time” to go out and socialize occasionally. Also, socializing with Brazilians is probably the best way to integrate in the new country and learn Portuguese.

In general, it seems that students have a hard time building deeper relationships with Brazilians. It is true that they resort to strangers for help and support, but their contact with locals seem superficial and occasional – once-weekly church activities, once-weekly soccer matches, once-weekly tandem sessions, and so on. Their best friends and confidants seem to be fellow PEC-G students. Many students heeded my advice to live with Brazilians, but all but 3 live jointly with Brazilians and other PEC-G students. None of them mentioned their Brazilian roommates when asked about their friends or social life, meaning that their contact at home is probably superficial and that they rather relate more closely to their countrymates at home.

Maybe because of the personal face-to-face setting of the interviews and my position of authority, no student mentioned dating in Brazil. In fact, several African students stated with amusement that Brazilians at university date very freely, without interference from their

families and with no intention to marry – “just for fun”. But, in fact, not dating at that age in Brazil may restrict social life, because romantic relationships are an important topic of conversation and a driver of social interaction (going out, meeting people, gossip, etc.).

Also, probably because of conservative social views, no student commented on the very salient issue of LGBTQ. That is a widely discussed issue nationally and in the Portuguese language course. Same-sex marriage has been legal since 2013, soap operas on television always portray a couple of LGBTQ characters (openly displaying affection), and transsexual models were featured in the 2016 Rio Olympics opening ceremony and were the topic of Sao Paulo fashion week, just to name a few examples. More importantly, LGBTQ students at the university are very visible and widely supported by the university community.

In short, their conservative moral views and excessive focus on the exam as much as religion and family as the focal points of social life are limiting factors in building deeper relationships with Brazilians, either romantic or friendly. Those are deep cultural differences that are difficult to bridge, especially in the short period of six months, which is when interviews took place. Also, students plan to and are supposed to return to their home countries after graduation, so that they have a long-term commitment to Brazil, but it is still temporary. Therefore, it makes sense to resist change in deeper cultural norms, especially regarding such an important aspect of life as social relationships.

5.3 Being a foreigner in Brazil

People in Salvador are used to foreigners. As one of the main tourist destinations in the country, there is a steady stream of visitors from all over the world, but mainly from neighboring countries and Europe. There are also small immigrant communities, mostly from Argentina, Western Europe, and China. People from Africa and the Caribbean are rare. In that sense, PEC-G students do not meet other countrymates during their stay here other than each other and the program in its many editions is the only source of people from those countries.

Here there are many factors at play. First, Brazilians may be a little indifferent to foreigners. The element of surprise and curiosity, so common in less visited places, may not be present. However, since students come from nations that are generally underrepresented in the

local foreign population, there may be at least some degree of curiosity. Finally, locals generally deal with visitors from hegemonic countries (Europe), a factor that usually sparks their interest. Students from African and Caribbean nations do not have that advantage and may be overlooked. On the other hand, the strong African Brazilian heritage in Salvador should certainly work toward making Brazilians feel closer to them.

In fact, students report that interest in their home countries varies quite substantially. According to them, in interactions with Brazilians, most people ask them about their experience in Brazil, why they are here, what they are doing here, how they like it, and generally comment on this being a good experience for them. That is a clearly hegemonic position in that instance of intercultural contact.

Many Brazilians, in the perception of the African students, ask them about their home countries, particularly about its location, languages, religion, food, and culture, in general. But some traditional media discourses and stereotypes arise on occasion, and were reported in the interview with humor, such as the belief that Africa is one country, questions about war, poverty, disease (Ebola and AIDS), Boko Haram, and wildlife.

There were also unusual instances of Brazilians asking whether there are busses, cars, television, huts, and even cake (!) in Africa. Some asked how the student arrived in Brazil (as in the mode of transportation). In general, Ghanaians and Namibians stated that Brazilians generally do not know much about their countries, rather think that Africa is a country or refer to Tanzania or South Africa. Jamaicans are usually met with references to Bob Marley, Usain Bolt, and marijuana. Besides the usual questions about language, culture, and food, Brazilians have asked them about its location in Africa.

Clearly, those are clear indications that Brazilians have much to learn from contact with students from Africa and the Caribbean, especially considering the historical Atlantic ties of the people. In fact, most students said that the Brazilians they met have expressed the wish to visit their home countries, but that it would be very expensive to do so. Well, one can learn from the foreigners who are already here, too, and the Portuguese program is trying to establish contacts with different programs at the university and society at large, which would be beneficial to both students and locals.

Being a foreigner is often uncomfortable, as it distances one from the local population. But it may also be comforting to the extent that one does not need to confront unpleasant cultural phenomena – I am not from here, so I do not need to learn the language, eat the food, interact with them, act and be like them. In that sense, foreignness is to some extent a measure of social integration.

When asked how they thought they were perceived by Brazilians, 7 students declared that they think most locals realize that they are foreigners, either by their physical appearance (being tall or having a darker skin tone), clothes, or by the way they carry themselves. It is important to note that Brazil is a very diverse country, and students generally dress in generic Western clothes (jeans and T-shirt), so that objectively they may all pass for Brazilians. That perception most likely reflects their self-image and their feeling as foreigners than the perception of Brazilians themselves. In any case, most students (19) either say that they have always passed for Brazilian or now do, unless when they speak with locals, who then realize that they have a foreign accent.

In that sense, it is important to notice that students build their identity based mostly on their home country, which is understandable, since interviews took place only after 6 months in Brazil. They also place importance on their language proficiency levels, which is the reason why they are in Salvador in the first place. It is interesting that the question was ‘how do you think Brazilians perceive you?’, which could have led to different answers (student, man/woman...), but rather was met with the issue of foreigner versus Brazilian. And only in 2 cases did students say that individuals actually asked them if they were foreigners before any linguistic interaction. Many Brazilians were also indifferent to the fact that the student is foreigner, and the conversations revolved around their circumstances in Brazil or other topics. In that sense, being a foreigner is more important to some students as a matter of their identity and the degree in which they feel integrated in Brazil rather than people’s perceptions of them.

5.4 Meeting racism in Brazil

As discussed in section 4 of this chapter, race is a central element in the Brazilian social order, and people cannot ignore it. For PEC-G students, it is usually their first encounter with racism. Not that there is

social stratification in their home countries and distribution of privilege according to social group, but usually not based on race. Also, many students associate racism with South African Apartheid, which is different from what is observed in Brazil. That is certainly the case of Namibians, who are very close and connected to South Africa, but it is also mentioned as a reference by some Ghanaian students. For Jamaicans, it is similar, since they are familiar with the situation in the United States, which in many ways historically resembled Apartheid (open racism) but may be viewed currently as more akin to Brazil's veiled racism.

As mentioned above, 5 Ghanaians and 1 Jamaican stated that diversity is a positive aspect of life in Brazil. Students move to other parts of the country after the Portuguese course, and several pointed out that they preferred to stay in Salvador because of the ethnic and cultural makeup of the city, one even asking me to intervene with the Ministry of Education to relocate his assignment (that is not legally possible). They confided that they were apprehensive about going to other parts of Brazil, where there are fewer African Brazilians, believing that there may be higher levels of racism there.

In general, 7 female students (1 from Jamaica, 2 from Ghana, and 4 from Namibia) plainly declared that they did not think there is racism in Brazil and that they never witnessed any situations that they could describe as racist. 9 students believe there is racism in Brazil but have no personal experience with it, mainly quoting reports from their colleagues, and 10 students had direct experiences that they interpreted as racist.

Here it is important to note that I am not disqualifying or questioning their experiences as racist, but since there was never an epithet or an obvious racist remark (as may be the case of racist encounters) and I was not a witness to the event, there might be other factors at play. In any case, they are all plausible. What it is important, however, is that they feel that the way they were treated was racially motivated because that shapes their self-image, their perception of Brazil, and the relationship that they build with Brazilian culture and Brazilians.

Most students who do not perceive any racism did not elaborate on their remarks. But one student from Ghana said that Brazil is a country of great opportunity. In her words, "there are lots of scholarships for Brazilians, university is free, even I as a foreigner have a scholarship, if people do not take advantage of these opportunities it is because they do not want to study".

Female students (3) usually do not perceive racism as much as their male counterparts, but they all feel afraid of violence and crime. One Jamaican student said that shopkeepers at the mall watch her and follow her around, believing she is going to steal merchandise. One student from Ghana, said that once in church, a lady who was sitting next to her changed seats. Another, said she cannot tell precisely, but she thinks people “look at you differently”. Finally, one Ghanaian said that a stylist at a hair salon was criticizing her hair in Portuguese thinking she would not understand. She complained with the owner, who said she would talk to her employee.

For male students (6), racist encounters are more frequent and often involve other people’s perception of safety. One student reported that his friend (who was not interviewed) was not allowed to enter the student restaurant at the university because he lacked the proper documentation. Another said that while waiting to be helped in a Bank that used an electronic line (clients pick a number that is showed on a screen), a white lady without a number went ahead of him. 3 students told about events in which as they were walking by themselves on the street females crossed to the other side with no apparent reason. And 3 students had the experience of being stopped by police and frisked, one said it happened to him twice in one day.

One student mentioned that police officers in their neighborhood got used to them and the stop and frisk occurrences ceased. Another mentioned that the police officer later in the day came to talk to him and explained he was compelled to search him for weapons or drugs. According to the student, they became friendly and chat frequently. For all of them, the experience of being stopped by heavily armed police officers is shocking and they generally said that after they noticed that the students were foreigners, officers’ attitude changed.

Those stories of racism also often came with attenuation (i.e., for instance ‘it was ok’), hedging (for example, ‘I don’t know...’), and were rationalized (‘I understand why’). Especially when talking about their encounters with the police, male students often said that they understand that there is a lot of crime in Brazil and security is the priority, so that is why they are stopped. 2 even said that, in their words, they “understood that blacks commit more crimes than whites, so that is why they are stopped by the police”. Several students also mentioned South Africa as a counterexample as to why Brazilians are not (as) racist.

Many students expressed that there is racism, but not much, and that there probably is more racism in areas of Brazil (the south) where there is a lower proportion of African Brazilians (which they have never been to, or only very shortly). And all the students who believe there is some racism talk about a ‘general feeling’. An interesting aspect about the perception of racism is that students probably discussed it among themselves, as many students told stories about what happened to their colleagues. I heard the hair salon story by 4 students who did not witness it, and all the students who think there is racism mentioned stop and frisk encounters their friends had with the police.

It is noteworthy that students positioned themselves in a dual situation, that of being very concerned about crime and at the same time victims of racism, especially police encounters. Often, they told their stories lightly, and countered them with attenuation, hedging, rationalization, or by saying how friendly and helpful Brazilians are. Several students also deny that there is racism at all.

To a degree, they are foreigners. Racism as they experience it in Brazil is new, so they do not carry the trauma of a lifelong series of encounters with it, as African Brazilians do. Also, they are trying to adjust to a new culture, which is never going to be fully theirs, even if they are going to live in Brazil for an extended period. In that sense, they keep a distance, knowing that the situation is temporary, which certainly makes conflict more manageable. Many stories ended with “and then they heard us speaking English and realized we were foreigners”.

Finally, there is also the issue of the professional, middle class perspective. Not only they do not recognize these experiences from home, but they come from a place of relative privilege. Some accounts included “then they realized that I am a student”. In fact, one student said he perceived more racism in the beginning when “they walked in large groups” or “without a backpack”, which, to him, denotes that he is a student. Those lines both reaffirm their difference from African Brazilians and their social status as university students (in opposition to criminals).

At the same time, racism in Brazil, as discussed in section 4, is subtle. It is often in the realm of perception and second-hand stories, and very strongly correlated with opportunity and privilege. Not having a clearly discriminatory encounter does not mean that society is not racist (1) in the way people treat each other, (2) in the way opportunity and privilege is distributed, (3) in the way it is organized.

In most cases in Brazil, as discussed in the literature, racism is correlated with social class and attenuated with mild-mannered, friendly attitudes, or ‘racism with a smile, a kiss, and a hug’. As students see themselves in a position of relative privilege (from their social status at home) and distance (as foreigners), and having the reference of Apartheid in South Africa, they often see racism in Brazil as benign and tend to dismiss or excuse it. They are, after all, not victims of racism to the extent that poor African Brazilians are. Besides, that is also the attitude of many Brazilians, which only reveals that they are sensitive to the discourses that permeate society around them.

6 Conclusions

Analyzing the experiences of PEC-G students in Salvador is important to understand their experience in the immersion situation that we provide them. It is essential so that adjustments can be made to the language program, so that they will adjust more quickly and deeply to life in their host country. In fact, many changes have been made for the 2019 class. The PEC-G students arrived one month earlier than previously and had a 4-week preparation course before being merged with arriving students from other programs. They also had a twice weekly class on specific topics centered on social issues (racism, women’s issues, LGBT in Brazil, etc.) and social interactions with Brazilians.

The analysis also offers important parallels to the experiences of students from other parts of the world, revealing what is universal about the foreign student experience here and what is specific to a subset of African and Caribbean students. It is also interesting as a parallel to the experience of African and Caribbean (Haitians) refugees and immigrants, that started arriving in Brazil in the last few years. It is likely that the numbers of foreign students, refugees, and immigrants in Brazil will increase in the future, so different agents from the public sector, civil society, and academia must engage in the issues that pertain them.

As to the research questions students discuss: (1) a perceived Brazilian social order; (2) their place in that order; (3) how they developed strategies to find a comfortable place in that order. In that sense, they present themselves and their identities in the duality of sameness and difference under the markers of language, nationality, and race. Integration in a new language/culture is always tense and involves

negotiating different values, beliefs, attitudes, and artifacts. Students have multiple interactions with Brazilians and certainly understand the social hierarchies that permeate those social markers and try to elaborate their discourse as to position themselves in more advantageous positions.

In the case of the class that was analyzed in this chapter, some issues in their interviews come to the fore. First, their social status in their home countries, which is largely maintained in Brazil, since they are in a university environment, supported by different institutional programs. They are aware of their social status and strive to maintain/improve it, which supports their values, beliefs, and attitudes.

They universally manage to build a safety base and a broad social network, integrating themselves in Brazilian life. That involves the university and its integration programs, church, friends, roommates, sports, and other social activities. However, at least up to the 6-month mark, their relationships with Brazilians are generally scattered and superficial, even if they see themselves as happy, at home in Salvador, and adjusted, with the occasional bout of homesickness and complaints about minor details of everyday life.

Their worldview, by which social life has a strong focus in family and church, and by avoiding dating Brazilians, distances themselves from fuller integration. In that sense, their temporary (albeit long term) status promotes accommodation in their situation as foreign observers also limits their integration and is difficult to tackle from an institutional viewpoint.

Their status as representatives of smaller peripheral countries in a hegemonic culture also limits the interest that Brazilians have in them and their cultures, despite the very strong historical bonds that exist between Africa, Brazil, and the Caribbean. That is regrettable, as both Brazilians and the students themselves would greatly benefit from a closer and more qualified contact with each other. In that sense, the university is trying to mediate avenues for academic dialogue, which would be an enormous benefit to Brazil and specifically to the broader society in Salvador in particular, as the country already devotes significant resources to the PEC-G program and these foreign students are already here. It would also greatly benefit students in their integration process in the country.

Finally, there is the difficult issue of racism. Students become sensitive to the issue during their stay here, most likely as a result of

discourses that circulate in society around them and certainly due to their personal experiences. While there are clear instances that illustrate racial discrimination in their accounts, students generally dismiss and rationalize them because of different factors.

First, as foreigners they are not full stakeholders in Brazilian societies and its problems. As long as they can be managed, move along. Second, not having been systematically discriminated their whole lives and protected by their middle-class social status and present situation as students, it is easy to see how racism only affects them in relative terms, particularly in the absence of open, offensive encounters on a systematic basis. The ever-present reference of brutal segregation in the pre-Civil Rights Southern United States or Apartheid South Africa makes the more veiled instances of racism in Brazil not seem as bad. Especially because of their everyday interactions with ordinary Brazilians, genuinely perceived as very friendly and helpful.

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