

**The Intercultural Sensitive Dimension: A Reflection upon the Narrative of Latin American Au Pairs.**



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**Santander de Quilichao**

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**APPROVAL****UNIVERSIDAD DEL CAUCA**

The Undersigned Committee of Human and Social Sciences School approves the project developed by María José Álvarez Escobar and Angie Daniela Larrahondo Aguilar entitled: **The Intercultural Sensitive Dimension: A Reflection upon the Narrative of Latin American Au Pairs.**

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## **Abstract**

Cultural exchange programs are seen as a popular opportunity in the educational field worldwide, since learning a new language, traveling around the world, exploring a culture other than one's own, and living in a natural environment in which language materializes allows individuals to become more sensitive interculturally. In this sense, we wanted to carry out a degree project in which we can point out the effects that a cultural exchange and immersion spaces bring on non-native speakers. Additionally, we wanted to show that non-formal learning and all those spaces outside the classroom play a relevant role when learning a language, since the non-native speaker is immersed in a natural linguistic context, benefiting himself with great results in the acquisition of a foreign language.

## **Resumen**

Los programas de intercambio cultural son vistos como una oportunidad popular ya que, aprender un nuevo idioma, viajar por el mundo, explorar una cultura diferente a la propia y vivir en un entorno natural en el cual un idioma se materializa, permite a los individuos volverse más sensibles en términos de interculturalidad. En este sentido, hemos querido realizar un trabajo de grado en el que podamos puntualizar los efectos que un intercambio cultural y los espacios de inmersión provocan en los hablantes no nativos. Adicionalmente, quisimos mostrar que el aprendizaje no formal y todos aquellos espacios fuera del aula juegan un papel relevante a la hora de aprender una lengua, ya que el hablante no nativo se encuentra inmerso en un contexto lingüístico natural beneficiándose así con grandes resultados en la adquisición de una lengua extranjera.

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## 1. Introduction

Living the same dream, we decided to undertake an intercultural exchange to the United States as Au Pairs in 2011, each one with different goals but with the same objective: to improve and acquire linguistic and communication skills in the host country. This was a dream full of challenges such as the language, food, culture, weather, etc., but it was also a stage in our lives that filled us with knowledge, bravery, and courage.

Our research, which is entitled "The Intercultural Sensitive Dimension: A Reflection upon the Narrative of Latin American Au Pairs", was born from a joint idea during a Christmas day in our exchange in the United States. On that day, we were sharing and thinking about what our return to Colombia would be like, we thought about resuming our studies and clearly we needed to have an idea for our graduation project, we were anxious and happy thinking about it.

We both agreed on how this exchange had improved and changed our lives, and how the manifold experiences lived as Au Pairs made part of a linguistic and cultural process that we wanted to understand better. We believed that through this project we could share and motivate the entire educational community since it would be based on real events of people living and facing the challenges of living in another country.

This research exercise was carried out under a qualitative narrative design which allowed us to learn about the experiences of 5 Latin American au pairs through a semi-structured interview that consisted of 24 questions which helped us to understand their life experiences regarding the intercultural sensitive dimension. The interview was based on the six skills established by Chen and Starotsa in the intercultural sensitive dimension: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgmental attitude.

This research paper gives details about the problem statement, the rationale, the research question, and the objectives that guided our inquiry. Also, it explains the methodological steps and the research instruments used to collect and analyze the information considering ethical issues. The data analysis was entitled *Going beyond the Latin American au pairs' Journey* and is organized into 6 sections (episodes) following the abilities of the intercultural sensitive dimension according to Chen and Starosta . This analysis combines the narrative of the anecdotes told by our participants and the reflection based on theoretical perspectives.

Finally, the research closes with the conclusions that summarize the main experiences lived by the 5 Latin American Au pairs in terms of the intercultural sensitive dimension and our own perspective of these lived experiences, giving some recommendations to encourage the Modern Languages Program, the teachers, and the students to keep studying this meaningful subject.

## 2. Problem statement

The acquisition of a foreign language in natural contexts refers to the subconscious processes whereby different competences and communication skills are developed. These acquisition processes occur in non-academic or informal instruction areas such as in a simple visit to the supermarket, watching television or an advertisement, in a routine conversation or in any daily activity. For this reason, when it refers to a context of natural acquisition, staying in the country of the target language becomes relevant.

According to Juan- Garau (2008), the benefits of staying abroad transcend the improvement of linguistic competence since it additionally supposes a life experience that promotes intercultural understanding. Hence, staying in the target language country involves learning in a real context that constitutes a key element in the acquisition of communication skills which are highly linked to a significant process of acquisition of the language.

Likewise, Juan- Garau (2008) claims that staying in the country of the target language provides a context of natural acquisition that facilitates interaction in the foreign language, often with native speakers and in situations of real use as well as in their cultural environment. Consequently, the sociocultural context not only contributes to developing knowledge and skills related to the use of the language but also different stories, experiences, and experiential knowledge which emphasize human interaction. These experiences make part of what is called communicative intercultural competence, according to Henriquez, Nogués, Martín, Carrillo (2012), the intercultural communicative competence is understood as the skills that the speaker utilize to get a communication full of efficacious and capable knowledge in an environment



multicultural, obtaining as result a transformation in the reciprocal relationships and reinforcement in the democratizes, cultural and coexistence spaces.

The communicative intercultural competence has three different dimensions: Intercultural competence, intercultural ability, and intercultural sensitivity. In this research we will focus on the sensitive intercultural dimension because it reflects and exposes each aspect that we want to present to the community through this research. It is focused on the personal emotions or the changes of feelings caused by people, situations, and environments of the participants, including abilities such as: self- esteem, open- mindedness, nonjudgmental attitudes, empathy, self- monitoring, and interaction involvement.

In this panorama, cultural exchange programs have become effective means of obtaining the desired language and communication skills, as is the case of immersion programs. According to *Centro Virtual Cervantes* (2021), immersion programs are defined as intensive periods of exposure to a foreign language by living within a community considered a natural setting. In the particular case of Latin America, there exists a company called Cultural Care that has had a lot of trajectories during the last 30 years, they have sent around 145.000 youths to the United States. The Au pair exchange program gives young people between 18 and 26 years the opportunity to travel to the United States with a visa for J-1exchange visitors for 12 or 24 months. During their stay as au pairs, these young people live with a host family, take classes at a local university or travel on weekends, and assist in the care of the family's children. In return, they have the possibility to make an immersion in the culture and language of the country of visit, collecting numerous life experiences regarding intercultural dimensions.

It is worth mentioning that according to the Au pair Latino program, the Au Pair program is one of the most popular, expanding to Latin America in such a way that more and more Latin Au Pairs are residing abroad.

As former participants of a cultural exchange like Au pairs and as students of the Bachelor program of Modern Languages, English and French, we consider that living in the target language place is relevant for our training as foreign language learners and future modern languages teachers. The experiences during this exchange program were not only relevant in terms of linguistic enrichment but also gave us a new understanding of intercultural awareness.

In the same way, It was pertinent to carry out this research project since considering what is established in the (PEP) regarding the intercultural competence, the academic program of modern languages in English, French focuses the gaze of intercultural communication on the exploration and investigation of the cultural contexts in which the language materializes, for which it is necessary for this academic program to implement methodologies that allow future language teacher to explore their own cultures and identities as well as the cultures and identities of others. Similarly, according to Altan (2018) developing intercultural sensitivity becomes more and more important at all levels of the education, especially for those who will teach other languages. Thus, as future teachers of other languages, it was relevant to carry out this educational project.

According to the previous studies revision, there was little research regarding the reflection about these exchange programs in terms of intercultural competence. We consider this reflection as necessary as it would explore the acquisition of a foreign language that goes beyond linguistic codes and reaches the roots of a more holistic consideration of this process. Listening to the

voices of the participants through a narrative approach will allow us to better describe, understand, and share the most relevant and realistic elements that this process involves.

Therefore, our research question is: *¿What are the most relevant experiences lived by Latin American Au pairs concerning the intercultural sensitivity dimension?*

### **3. Objectives**

#### **3.1. General objective**

- To analyze the most relevant experiences lived by five Latin American Au pairs concerning the intercultural sensitivity dimension.

#### **3.2. Specific objectives**

- To collect the narratives of five Latin American Au Pairs regarding the abilities of intercultural sensitivity dimension.
- To describe the process of acquisition of a foreign language in a natural context in terms of intercultural awareness.
- To enunciate the challenges of Latin-American Au pairs when participating in a cultural exchange program.

#### 4. Justification

Study abroad is now commonly viewed as one of the best ways to improve one's language skills (Kinging, 2008, as cited in Lida and Herder, 2019), that is why being an au pair has become not only in Colombia, but also across Latin America a popular and economical way of studying, exposing, and immersing oneself in a language within its natural context for its acquisition and improvement. Being in direct and daily contact with a language in its natural environment allows the development and improvement of communicative skills as well as overcoming shyness and achieving fluency when speaking an L2.

Considering that studying abroad implies that the learner is immersed in a new idiosyncrasy, context, and culture, the intercultural competence plays a major role in this process since the apprentice is exposed to social relationships with people from different backgrounds, traditions, and customs which build a strong relationship between language and culture. When talking about the acquisition of a foreign language, studies are commonly centered on linguistic skills, results of standardized tests and international rankings. Many times, the affective, holistic and sensitive implications of the process of contacting other cultures is left behind.

In this way, this qualitative research might be useful for foreign language learners as well as for the educational community interested in obtaining knowledge related to the processes of acquisition of a foreign language in natural contexts in relation to intercultural sensitivity dimension based on lived experiences of participants of an exchange program. With these narratives, it is expected to get meaningful insights about the experience of living in another country in terms of the development of the sensitive intercultural dimension, adding to the comprehension of the foreign languages acquisition beyond the linguistic codes.

In accordance with the pedagogical project of the B.A. in Modern Languages, English and French of Universidad del Cauca, the intercultural communication in the program focuses on the exploration and investigation of the cultural contexts in which the target language materializes that is why we consider it is of utmost importance to study intercultural competence focusing on the sensitive dimension since this dimension and its abilities ( self- esteem, open-mindedness, nonjudgmental attitudes, empathy, self- monitoring, and interaction involvement) is a wide and important part of the experiences and knowledge acquired by a foreign language learner. It is expected that this qualitative research provides elements to better understand the intercultural communication between the program and the way it is addressed from the classroom.

Finally, we consider that as researchers, teachers, and future graduates, this inquiry will help us to examine three main aspects: first, to obtain a broader understanding, comprehension, and interpretation about language; second, to build a theoretical reflection about the experiences lived as an Au Pair, and third, to expand our academic, social, and individual horizons about the pedagogical understanding of interculturality.

## 5. Previous Studies

Gabriela Marques-Schäfer, Danielle de Almeida Menezes, and Sonia Zyngier (2018) in their research project “ Assessing Intercultural Competence in Language Teacher Education” carry out this inquiry with the purpose of investigating the concept of intercultural competence from the perspective of 70 (51 female and 18 male) students of English and 32 students of German (26 female and 6 male) from a federal University in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Likewise, inquired how far the theoretical discussions and academic training over the years are impacting student’s perceptions regarding intercultural competence. Thus, with the aim of achieving the purpose and objective mentioned above, the first- and fourth-year undergraduates of English and German of this university answered a questionnaire in which their responses were compared to observe how they identify and define what characterizes intercultural competence.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections, the first part contained questions aimed at obtaining the profile of the students including issues related to the age, gender, English or German proficiency, studies, etc. The second part of this questionnaire was a role play in which the students pretended to be flight attendants applying for a job, they were asked to write down the intercultural competences that they considered necessary for this job and mention what strategies they would implement to develop them.

Regarding the organization, classification and analysis of data, they used the Byram’s model in which five central dimensions (Savoir, savoir comprendre, savoir apprendre/faire, savoir être, savoir s’engager) were described. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively since the authors relied on Bryam’s model for the qualitative part and for the

quantitative part, they searched for the frequency of co-occurring words in all the answers provided by the participants.

As for the conclusions, the data showed that students of German had a tendency to relate intercultural competence with the word culture, countries and history; in contrast, English learners showed a tendency to associate intercultural competence with words such as person, candidate, student passenger, differences, and cultural diversity. Likewise, students of German rely on the course book as the main source of contact with the target culture and students of English tend to be more interested in actions or activities in which interculturality is promoted.

Finally, even though the participants are students of the same university, their perceptions or opinions seem to be based on diverse perspectives when they talk about intercultural competence; for the researchers, these differences are influenced by factors such as cultural, educational backgrounds, and their years as undergraduates.

Besides that, Juan Pablo Rodriguez Prieto in his research investigation “The long-term impact of a study abroad program in the acquisition of regional vocabulary incidentally” describes a quantitative study centered on measuring the acquisition of regional vocabulary of a group of 5 students of Spanish as foreign language after a semester of immersion in a university in Madrid, Spain. A survey was distributed among the students before, during and after the experience which results were contrasted with the control group that remained taking courses from the United States.

The author considers an immersion program as staying period in a foreign language country where students or participants live with volunteers or native language families who wish to learn



or exchange cultures. During this cohabitation the pupils and the natives carry out joint activities aimed at improving the communicative capacity of the pupils, thus making the practice of everything learned throughout the studies of English classes received by the students in their center's studies. Participation in immersion or exchange programs can enhance a range of extra-linguistic elements at the level of motivation, personal growth, and self-esteem about the ability to learn an L2.

It also mentioned that non-Spanish-speaking people have a great diversity when choosing a destination to reinforce or improve their learning of an L2, from Europe to the Caribbean, through the Andean, Mexico, etc., where lexicons and grammatical structures enriches the student with vocabulary, expressions, and cultural experiences that that are not part of a regular classroom practice and could be greatly enhanced in an exchange program.

Finally, the research concluded that students who participated in the exchange program improved their regional vocabulary in a range of 21% to 54.5% in the accuracy rate. The improvement of the students who came back from the program was not necessarily reflected in grammar aspects but in the appropriate use of regional vocabulary in fluent conversations of rich contextual backgrounds.

On the other hand, Yolanda Bustamante (2018) in her narrative research work with a qualitative approach "Challenges and experiences of foreign language teachers and learners through the Au Pair immersion program" states the analysis of the conceptions about the challenges and experiences that those who participate in the immersion programs go through, particularly in the case of participants of the Au Pair exchange program, who are not only students and graduates in

modern languages, but also those foreign language learners who are enrolled in any university degree.

This research work had as its main objective to narrate the stories and experiences of progress and challenges in regards to language fluency and cultural awareness acquisition of young Colombian foreign language teachers and learners, through the Au Pair program cultural immersion abroad and as its secondary objectives to identify the foreign language teachers and learners' learnings in regards to cultural awareness and sociolinguistic factors during their Au Pair program year; as well as to understand foreign language teachers and learners' progress in their language fluency during their Au Pair program year.

To carry out this research a sample of 4 participants were considered and their testimonies were collected relying on key words such as challenge, experiences, cultural awareness, sociolinguistic, progress in language and immersion. Semi-structured oral and written interviews in Spanish and Italian via email and skype were used as instruments and later encoded and analyzed using a system of data coding and data naming, categorization, developing of conceptual categories, and constant comparison.

Some relevant conclusions include: A) all interviewees and herself fully share the idea of finding the language exposure through communication with the context is a better tool than many other ways for learning a foreign language, especially the conventional one such as the classroom. B) The contact with locals brings up unexpected and meaningful experiences, in which the language needs to be used spontaneously. C) Cultural immersion in the sense that language exposure in its context is not just an adequate strategy, but also a needed one for language acquisition. D) The communicative skill is likely to be the most practiced and the skill that shows better results in

participants in a short time is listening. E) Learning a new language through immersion requires facing discomfort.

Moreover, Daniel Andrés Moreno Ospina and Flora María Torres Hurtado (2021) in their research investigation “Understanding Cultural Assimilation from Migrants Experiences” investigated the process of Cultural Assimilation of five migrants considering the human process of adaptation they lived through moving from one country to another. It is important to mention that they had to adapt to a new community during that process. In this research, they used a qualitative multiple case study that had as objective to be closer to the human perspectives and participants’ life stories. The data analysis chapter is entitled ‘The hidden Tales from Travelling Souls’ in which the researchers wanted to solve and understand some aspects behind the decision to migrate such as cultural identity, adaptation processes, uses of language, and experiences regarding the Cultural Assimilation in order to comprehend the migrants’ perspectives. It was concluded that a complex net of meaning is implied in the cultural assimilation process that is unique and singular and considers interculturality, bilingualism and biculturalism as key elements.

Lastly, Pedro Jose Torres Hurtado, Freider Favian Estacio Calzada, and Christian Johan Moreno Valencia in their research study “Analysis of the Intercultural Approach in the Practices of Teaching and Learning English and French as Foreign Languages in The Bachelor’s Degree of Modern Languages English, French of Universidad Del Cauca” analyze the importance of the intercultural approach to a bachelor’s degree in modern languages English and French, having as participants students and teachers of the bachelor’s degree in modern languages English and French in Santander de Quilichao regionalization.

According to the researchers, having an intercultural approach is crucial in the educative, social, political, and cultural society because it helps the development of skills that help the individual understand different ways of thinking and living, enhancing a global competence, and creating human beings able to adapt, speak, write and share in different spaces and context.

The University of Cauca has a lot of different interaction patterns because the students and teachers came from other regions of the country, having, as a result, a big diverse community, that's why was important for this research to understand the socio-cultural differences produced by changes in school places where the teacher takes the role of the intercultural mediator.

## 6. Contextual Framework

### 6.1. Universidad del Cauca

According to Castillo (2018), the contextual framework in a research project is the physical setting, temporary conditions, and general situation that describe the environment of a research work. Therefore, our research paper takes place at the Universidad del Cauca which is a public university located in the southwest of Colombia which has its main campus in the capital of the department of Cauca, the city of Popayan and regional headquarters in the north of Cauca in the towns of Miranda and Santander de Quilichao.

The B.A in Modern Languages English and French has a duration of ten semesters in which students not only learn about pedagogy, psycholinguistic, literature, etc. but also about intercultural communication in English and French. As per statistics of undergraduate student programs published by the office of planning and institutional development of the Universidad del Cauca; for the first academic semester of 2021, the B. A in Modern Languages English and French at the Santander de Quilichao campus has 215 students of which are male and 141 females. These students come from different departments of the country such as Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Nariño and from various areas as indigenous, afro-descendant, and mestizos therefore, intercultural competence is notoriously present in the interaction between these people who have diverse backgrounds.

Regarding the educational project of the B.A in Modern Languages English and French offered by the Universidad del Cauca, its mission is the professional and social development of the student through research that leads to the construction of specific, pedagogical, socio-economic, and humanistic knowledge making the student a creative and suitable human being. In

the same way, this academic program has as a vision the commitment to contribute to the educational development of the community by training educators in languages who are innovative, critical, and supportive.

## **6.2. Au pair program**

On the other hand, according to the Cultural Care Au pair agency, the word "Au pair" is a French term which means "on par" or "equal to", denoting living on an equal basis in a reciprocal, caring relationship between the host family and the children. The au pair program was founded in 1986 with the mission of providing the opportunity to young people between the ages of 18-26 to the USA on a J-1 Exchange Visitor Visa, and the vision to build a community of global families with the power to change the world through greater understanding. They do this by bringing au pairs into the homes and hearts of American families every day.

Both host families and young au pairs must pay a fee to the agency to participate in this exchange program. In addition, the host families must provide housing, provision, and a weekly payment to the Au pair; and Au pairs must pay for their legal procedures such as passport and visa, trips to the embassy of their country and travel expenses.

As well, for legal issues au pairs must work a maximum of 45 hours per week at any time and day; they are entitled to one and a half days off per week and two weeks of vacation during their year as au pairs. Also, Au pairs receive \$ 500 to fulfill their 3-credit academic requirement.

We consider that it is relevant to indicate that both of us participate in the United States Au pair exchange program with the Cultural Care agency during almost 2 years, having the opportunity to live in different states and socio-cultural environments such as California, Massachusetts, and

Texas where we were able to test, develop, and understand to some extent our intercultural sensitivity dimension.

### **6.3. Context of the participants**

To carry out this research five 5 Au pairs between 26 and 29 years old will be interviewed, who were chosen following three selection parameters: participants must be willing to participate in this research project, they must have participated in the Au pair exchange and must be Latin American. It is essential to mention that the original names of the participants will be modified according to ethical criteria.

Thus, the first participant is Karla who is from Panama, she is 29 years old, a professional in banking and finance, and was an au pair for a year and half. The second one, Camila, was born in Rio de Janeiro- Brazil, she is 25 years old, has a business administration degree, and has been an au pair since October 2020. The third participant, Alicia, from Tijuana-Mexico is 26 years old, a graduate in gastronomy who has been an au pair since January 2021. The fourth participant is Cristina from Costa Rica, she is 25 years old, a social worker by profession who has been an au pair since 2019. Finally, Alexa from Medellin- Colombia, she is 25 years old, a psychotherapist by profession and who was an Au pair for 2 years.

## 7. Conceptual Framework

### 7.1. Language learning and acquisition

In recent years, attempts have been made to define language learning and acquisition from many perspectives and theories; therefore, it is definitely relevant for us to clearly and precisely point out these two definitions; therefore, according to (Tarone 2007, as cited in Contreras and Chapeton, 2016) language learning is a social process that is achieved through interaction. As this process is something social, implies interaction as a key element (Malamah-Thomas 1991, as cited in Contreras and Chapeton, 2016); thus, language learning could be considered as a social, cooperative, and collaborative product which is an integral and multidirectional process since, the learner has the possibility of learning not only from the teacher but also from his partner or classmate.

Regarding language acquisition, Krashen (1981) states that language acquisition is very similar to the process children use in acquiring first and second languages. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language-- natural communication--in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. Consequently, language acquisition unlike learning, is an unconscious process in which according to Krashen (2021) the comprehensible input plays a fundamental role since the apprentice is given messages that he understands, in this way the apprentice is able to understand what is said and not how is said; In other words, the understanding of the message or the content of the statement is prioritized instead of the grammatical and syntactic structures. These two concepts are fundamentally important for our work since the experiences acquired by the



participants could be strongly influenced by the level of English learned and acquired previously or during their stay abroad.

## **7.2. Formal, non-formal and informal learning**

In terms of the processes of learning and acquiring a language, the types of education or learning that the individual receives play a significant role; for this reason, it is pertinent to indicate the existence of three different types of learning known as formal learning, non-formal learning, and informal learning. In accordance with, Eaton (2010) formal learning is intentional, organized and structured since it is usually arranged by institutions such as (high school or university) and it is guided by a curriculum or other type of formal program. In the same way, Eaton (2010) argues that non-formal learning may or may not be intentional or arranged by an institution; although it is usually organized in some way, in this kind of education there are no-formal credit granted such as in seminars, community council classes or workshops. Finally, Eaton (2010) claims that informal learning is never organized and it is often thought of as experiential and spontaneous as in the case of restaurants, supermarkets or on the street; In this sense, immersion programs specifically au pairs cultural immersion programs are part of informal education.

## **7.3. Immersion programs:**

The non-formal education programs include a variety of educational situations, like new experiences, distance learning, pre-produced courses, self-instructional, etc., having as result a renewal educational system that brings to the individual significant progress. The immersion programs are considered as a long or short time that the student spends abroad in the target

language country in which the main objective is to learn and participate in contexts that will improve and develop their language skills.

The purpose of these programs is to provide language education experiences that support academic and linguistic development while the learners increase their appreciation of their own and other cultures (Fortune & Tedick, 2003). At present we have many types of immersion programs around the world, in which there are a variety of ages where a lot of people have the opportunity to participate; sometimes these programs are to complement school-based languages. Consequently, language immersion programs consist of promoting the interaction of different cultural backgrounds, and this is not only about being bilingual but being biliterate as well, which means using both communicative and literacy skills (Silva, Martínez, Orozco & Ayala, 2018). The program Au Pair on which this research focuses, is part of the highly influential immersion programs in Latin America.

#### **7.4. The socio-cultural theory**

Likewise, any type of education or learning whether formal, non-formal or informal, implies human interaction or relationship for its development. In this way, learning a language is understood as being profoundly bound to social practices dependent on the learner's participation as a competent member in the language practices of a social group (Mondada and Dohlier, 2004, as cited by Sarem and Shirzadi, 2014). On this basis, Sarem and Shirzadi (2014) argue that the sociocultural approach has investigated the role of interaction in L2 acquisition and has emphasized how collaborative discourse construction leads to interaction.

In the same sense, in learning or acquisition of a language process, the interaction aspects such as internalization and globalization are influential. The internalization process refers to the

acceptance or incorporation of social and cultural issues through interaction. As stated by Aimin (2013) from sociocultural theory, internalization is a negotiated process that reorganizes the relationship of the individual to her or his social environment and generally carries it into future performance; so that, imitation is the most effective method to promote internalization in language acquisition.

On the other hand, according to Giddens (1990) globalization refers to the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. Considering the above, globalization involves changes in the way of perceiving aspects such as teaching, learning, the acquisition of a foreign language, culture, etc. and given that globalization with its new forms of communication helped narrow the existing communication gaps between several different communities and their cultures, it can be argued that there is a close relationship between globalization and intercultural competence. Thereby, Krajewski (2011) argues that in times of accelerating globalization, intercultural competence emerges as one of the most desirable graduate capabilities for those who are likely to work in international environments.

#### **7.5. Intercultural competence:**

Considering the above, the intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on the intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes of each individual (Deardorff, 2006). It allows one to transcend ethnocentrism in order to learn, understand and appreciate cultural differences, (Bennett, 2013; as cited in Chen & Starosta, 1997). Likewise, we can say that intercultural competence is used by speakers of a second language to carry out effective and adequate communication in daily

situations that are experienced in a society that has multiple cultures. One of the great advantages of this phenomenon is that it allows individuals to perform more easily at a social and work level, integrating themselves into minorities and thus promoting good communication in different cultural groups.

According with Arasaratnam (2016) intercultural communication competence is associated with qualities such as the ability to create empathy, active listening, positive attitude towards people from other cultures, motivation to interacting with people from other cultures, flexibility and willingness to learn from new experiences.

#### **7.6. Intercultural dimension:**

Intercultural competence is the key to effective communication in society, it brings us the solution and understanding to problems caused by an unknown culture, therefore it is also known for the ability to interact, communicate, help, and work with people of different cultural backgrounds, who have lived under different beliefs, experiences and values. In more recent research, intercultural competence was classified into three dimensions: sensitive, cognitive, and behavioral according to Chen & Starosta (1996). This project will be centered on the sensitive dimension.

#### **7.7. The intercultural sensitive dimension:**

The sensitive dimension focuses on personal feelings, emotions, and changes caused by environments, people, and thoughts. The sensitive intercultural dimension refers to the ability to understand the background of people, considering diversity as a right of each person or cultural group. Chen and Starosta (1996) considered six subcategories corresponding to the sensitive

dimension: self-concept, open-mindedness, nonjudgmental attitudes, empathy, self-monitoring, and interaction involvement.

Also, Bennett (2013) added to this theory that when an individual can recognize cultural differences existing in each group and develops the ability to assign similar meanings to experiences lived in that group in terms of empathy, he/she has a high degree of intercultural sensitivity.

According to (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). The intercultural sensitive dimension can be defined as “an individual’s ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication”.

### **7.8. Intercultural sensitivity scale**

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity scale (DMIS) was developed by Bennet in 1986 which explains how people react to cultural differences as defined in

Bennett (1986) the development model is divided into six “stages of development” and each stage represents a way of experiencing difference such as denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration of the difference.

Likewise, according to Bennet (1986) the first three (denial, defense, and minimization) are part of the ethnocentric stage; that means, the stage in which the individual considers his own culture or+ race superior to others, during the fourth stage (acceptance) is when the individual moves from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, and during the last two stages (adaptation and integration) is when the individual is fully situated in the stage of ethnorelativism; that is to say,

when he recognizes that no culture or race is superior to others. Lastly, the intercultural sensitivity scale will be useful for the creation of instruments and analysis of the experiences narrated by the participants in this research.

### **7.9. Intercultural Contact**

According to Kramsch and Uryu (2011) Intercultural contact refers to a state of affairs that occurs when people from different cultures come in touch with one another. Therefore, the intercultural contact occurs in places known as contact zones or social spaces in which disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.

The intercultural contact (also known as IC) frequently produces misunderstanding between individuals who are in contact zones due to cultural differences, backgrounds, social norms of the interlocutors, and their different ways of interpreting the other. Thus, according to Kramsch and Uryu (2011) to the extent that these intercultural contacts are conscious and voluntary, all these misunderstandings can be handled by the interlocutors when they come to understand themselves, the other, and their differences since, intercultural contact is an opportunity to question your own culture and open up to another's culture.

## 8. Methodological Framework

According to Denzin & Lincoln (2005) qualitative approaches involve the study, use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experiences, life stories, interviews, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe ordinary and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. This approach is known for being natural and interpretative as it focuses on understanding the human being showing a humanistic perspective of people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions. Given the objectives of this research project it will be subscribed within the qualitative approach since we will reflect upon the phenomenon of interest from the humanistic, sensitive, and unique perspective of the participants.

In the same line, Clandinin and Caine (2013) expressed that within the qualitative approach, the narrative inquiry is a relational research methodology that is mostly a way of understanding experiences over time and context. Moreover, this type of inquiry constitutes a way of recognizing, studying, and analyzing phenomena through the understanding of the stories and life-situations of individuals. Therefore, narrative inquiry allows not only an investigation close to the topic to be investigated, but also a close relationship between the researcher and the participants of the study. In this sense, the current study fits the narrative inquiry because it will permit the exploration of the experiences and challenges of Latin American au pairs regarding sensitive intercultural competence.

### **8.1. Research stages and Instruments**

The first stage of this project consisted of the bibliographic revision and the selection of the main concepts that constitute the core of the research. We focused on the authors that would help this investigation to be more consistent and also, we looked for some articles where our research was supported by real and serious research.

The second stage of this project was the selection of participants and design of the instrument, in this part we decided that our participants will be five Latin American women who participated in the cultural Au pair exchange, Alexa who is from Medellin Colombia, Cristina from Costa Rica, Carla from Panama, Camila from Brazil and Alisia from Mexico. To respect ethical considerations, an informed consent format was designed (Appendix 11.1).

A semi structured interview was designed as the main instrument of this research. The interview has ten questions that will help us to understand their life experiences regarding the intercultural sensitive competence. This type of interview is the most appropriate since it allows us to analyze, observe and document the data through a simple and flexible questionnaire that will be applied as a conversation. It must be emphasized that the questionnaire is just a guideline and new questions may appear during the interview depending on the participant's answers. The interview was designed regarding the six abilities established by Chen and Starotsa as essential in the intercultural sensitive dimension: self- concept, open- mindedness, nonjudgmental attitudes, empathy, self- monitoring, and interaction involvement (Appendix 11.2).

The third stage of this investigation corresponded to the application of the instruments; that is to say, conducting virtual semi-structured interviews through the zoom application for 45 minutes. These interviews were recorded and then these were transcribed and organized



chronologically in word documents. Prior to conducting these interviews, the informed consents were obtained, previously signed by the participants.

The final stage of this research study was data analysis in which an exhaustive study and review of the information collected during the interviews was carried out to later identify and interpret patterns, topics, similarities, or contrasts that allow categorization and discourse analysis that permitted us to reflect upon the most relevant life experiences lived by Latin American Au pairs regarding the intercultural sensitive dimension. The results of this study were shared and discussed with the participants. Finally, the conclusions and results of this research project were be socialized in public.

## 9. Going beyond the Latin American au pairs' Journey: Data analysis

The young adult participants in the Au pair exchange program have the possibility of living significant cultural experiences during their stay in the destination country. In this way, this research presents the most relevant experiences lived by 5 Latin American au pairs in terms of the intercultural sensitive dimension. In this chapter, we will analyze and reflect on Au pairs' experiences from different parts of Latin America such as Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Mexico, and Panama.

Prior to the data analysis, we must indicate that in order to protect the identity of our participants and for ethical purposes, the names of the interviewees were changed; consequently, throughout this analysis we will refer to Alexa from Colombia, Cristina from Costa Rica, Karla from Panama, Camila from Brazil, and Alicia from Mexico. Likewise, It is also important to keep in mind that even when most of these participants belong to the same exchange program and to the same Au pair agency, they do not know each other.

Moreover, although this writing follows a narrative structure, all the information provided in this data analysis is real and authentic, since it shows what was expressed by the participants during the semi-structured interviews which were recorded, transcribed, and codified. In addition, it is equally important to say that the skills raised by the authors Chen and Starosta (self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgmental attitude) will be presented as episodes in this narrative thread.

### **Self-esteem: Episode One**

According to Chen (1997), self-esteem is a perception of self-value or self-worth which is usually higher in a person who is culturally sensitive. In intercultural encounters where people

inevitably meet psychological stress when trying to complete their jobs and establish relationships with others, self-esteem becomes an important variable in the calculation of whether or not they can fulfill their needs. Seen in this way, when Au pairs are confronted with a completely new culture; their physical, racial, and ethnic characteristics, the tone and accent when speaking, the progress in developing their language skills, their fears, their insecurities, and their processes of personal transformation are key components of the skill that Chen and Starosta called self-esteem.

At first sight, the self-esteem of Karla, Alicia, Camila, Cristina, and Alexa seems not to have been affected during their stay as an Au pair in the United States, since all of them stated that they did not feel forced to change aspects related to their appearance in order to fit into American society. But we could not say the same when talking about issues such as feeling rejected due to their places of origin, since although Karla, Alicia, Camila and Alexa stated that they had never felt rejected for reasons related to their ethnicity and skin color, quite the opposite was expressed by Cristina, a 25-year-old Costa Rican girl who said:

*Yo siento que cuando llegue acá, todo el mundo trataba al latino como la persona que hacía la tarea difícil y no podía hacer nada más que niñera, ama de casa o la que hace la limpieza; entonces si acá me sentí muy discriminada porque yo siento que te ven mal acá, te ven como de arriba hacia abajo.*

This feeling of social rejection caused by ethnic reasons and the place of origin that Cristina experienced constitutes one of the results of what we know as intercultural contact. Intercultural contact does not always involve positive experiences or adventures. According to

Kramsch and Uryu (2011), when we come into intercultural contact with people from other countries, backgrounds, and cultures, communication breakdown often arises.

These misunderstandings can affect our self-esteem to the point of being ashamed as in the case of Karla, a 29-year-old Panamanian girl who felt ridiculed for her accent when speaking in English since as expressed by her: *“con la primera familia sí tuve muchos problemas, entonces a veces cuando iba a decir las cosas a los niños o enseñarles algo no se le enseñaba correcto porque no sonaba como ella esperaba entonces ella siempre me estaba corrigiendo”*. Thus, some interactions between people from different cultures can end in misunderstandings which in turn affect our feelings and self-esteem.

These misunderstandings can also be surprising, as in the case of Alicia, a 26-year-old Mexican girl who narrated:

*Una vez estaba esperando el tren con mi host kid y estaban arrestando a una señora y mi host kid quedó como viendo a la señora y a los policías; la señora como tú qué me ves niño blanco estúpido y tu Colombian maid y yo así como que ¿Colombian maid ? I'm not even Colombian! porque yo le estaba diciendo Max stop staring y pues me escuchó hablando inglés y así como que shut up Colombian maid.*

Therefore, upon entering the so-called intercultural contact zones in which intercultural encounters are built, unexpected interactions can occur since not all intercultural encounters are premeditated by their agents. Intercultural contact not only generates encounters that result in misunderstandings, but also hurtful events such as what was experienced by Camila, a 25-year-old Brazilian girl who told us:

*I remember one thing with my second family, something about my accent. I was playing some kids' music on Alexa and she came (the oldest kid) and she locked Alexa for me and then she came again and said: "hey Alexa please don't talk with immigrants ever again", that day was really hard for me.*

So, during this journey, intercultural interactions can occur among people of different ages, and some of these encounters could result in the affectation of the self-esteem of the Au pairs. Not only Karla, Alicia or Camila experienced situations that made them feel ridiculed when speaking in English, but also Cristina who stated:

*Bueno cuando conocí a mi novio, su grupo de amigos, ellos comenzaron a decir que yo hablaba inglés como Bora, que es una película que te digo nunca la he visto pero como que comenzaron a hacer like that, o sea fun of me, a reírse de mí por mi acento y por la forma en la que yo hablaba, o sea yo como que no vi la película y no me importaba pero sí era todo el tiempo, siempre se reían de mí, uno de ellos era el que se reía de mí, hasta el día de hoy todavía lo veo y se ríe un poco de como yo hablo.*

Therefore, the same intercultural interaction can not only be comical, innocent or funny for someone, but also affect the self-esteem, mainly when stereotypes promoted by media affect the perception of other cultures. Being in constant intercultural contact with people who have upper-intermediate levels in English or are communicatively competent in the target language can generate certain feelings of stagnation or little progress, as in the case of Alexa, a 25-year-old Colombian girl who felt *"no poder como entablar una conversación con alguien que solo hablara inglés, por la falta de inglés entonces pues como que uno no podía conocer bien a la otra persona."* Or as the case of Cristina who felt out of place and even rejected due to her low

mastery of the language because *“me sentí como que no encajaba porque todos hablaban inglés y mi inglés era muy malo, entonces ahí me sentí mal porque de hecho nos costó hacer click y ellas no querían salir conmigo”*.

Not being able to utter a single word in the first days or months during our stay as Au pairs, not being able to start conversations with people who speak a language other than our own, or having to make incessant efforts to hold a conversation in a foreign language are common factors and daily issues during the journey of an Au pair, closely connected to trust in one's abilities, self-image and certainly, self-esteem.

Taking a journey to a longed-for country could be wonderful but terrifying at the same time and living with a host family could be awesome, but also disconcerting. The trip involves fear and insecurities -both elements that influence self-esteem.- which were not the exception in the journey of all these five Latin Americans Au pairs because they experienced fears related to loneliness, fear of ignoring aspects of language, insecurity to the uncertain, and fear of the unexplored; thus, in the words of Karla

*Como que el miedo de estar sola, el miedo que no conoces a nadie, no conoces el idioma al 100% y miedo a lo nuevo porque en realidad tú no sabes lo que te espera, vas a vivir con alguien que nunca visto, nunca has convivido en tu vida, entonces eso es difícil.*

For Alexa her greatest fear was related to *“no manejar completamente el idioma, no saber cocinar, nunca haber cuidado niños a fondo como compartiendo con ellos 24 horas al día, no saber manejar carro”*. Therefore, the fears and insecurities of these Au pairs may be related to individual activities and may be related to daily interactions with host families.

In the case of Cristina and Alicia, before embarking on their journey as Au pairs, they faced fears and insecurities related to the language and the language barrier; and Karla, for her part, faced the fear of being independent and making decisions for herself, so it is that we could say that prior to making this trip, these young Au pairs experienced feelings of fear when facing a language in its natural context, the insecurity of being alone in a strange country and living independently without a family that supports or contradicts their decisions.

After undertaking a journey as an Au pair and having experienced endless situations that directly or indirectly affect their personality and self-esteem, it is absolutely natural not to feel the same person that they were before the exchange; it is because of that, Karla's self-esteem underwent certain changes or transformation because according to her

*No me siento la misma persona, creo que he cambiado mucho, creo que esta experiencia aparte de que al inicio no fue tan buena...después tuve una muy buena experiencia con la siguiente familia y creo que me hizo madurar más rápido de lo que una persona madura normalmente.*

Thus, being in frequent contact with people from different backgrounds can produce transformations in the self-esteem of young Au pairs which are based on personal growth and maturity. Likewise, the self-esteem of Alicia, a 26-year-old Mexican girl, seems to have gone through changes during her stay as an Au pair since, during this time, she was faced with emotions such as happiness, unhappiness, and anxiety; and it is that in her words “*creo que antes era más feliz pero me sirvió para darme cuenta que en mi país lo tengo todo, tengo familia; estar aquí pues estoy bien, a gusto pero estoy ansiosa por regresar.*” Consequently, this journey as an Au pair can originate changes in personality and in turn in self-esteem, which are

oriented towards a reflection on happiness, individual well-being and identity. Also, Cristina feels that she went through changes in terms of her personality because in her words

*Me hice una persona diferente en el sentido de que antes era muy extrovertida, queriendo hablarle a todo el mundo y yo ya no soy así. Au Pair me cambió un poco en ese sentido porque la verdad cuando uno socializa con tantas personas se debe de ser muy cuidadoso, cuando yo llegué como Au Pair yo quería ser amiga de todo el mundo, hasta del vecino.*

Hence, socializing with people from different cultural backgrounds can impact aspects of Au pairs' self-esteem related to how they interact and relate with other people; given that, according to Kramsch and Uryu (2011) during these encounters in cultural spaces or contact zones, disparate cultures not only meet but also clash with each other ending in highly asymmetrical interactions in which there is a relationship of domination and subordination; that is to say that in this relationship of domination one cultural counterpart has more influence over the other. Au pairs had to face this disbalance that somehow tested their self-esteem and caused these feelings of fear and insecurity.

However, maturity, acquiring new skills, and improving previously acquired skills are also elements present during the Au pair experience. These skills belong to the survival kit of intercultural experience that allows them to face obstacles and grow. That is why Alexa states that *“maduré mucho ahora soy mucho más independiente, tengo habilidades nuevas, considero que mi nivel de inglés ahora es medio alto, ser au pair me ayudó a mejorar mi nivel de inglés.”* Therefore, it is not surprising that Alexa feels like a different person from the one who undertook



her journey as an Au pair, given the changes and transformations experienced during her stay in the cultural exchange.

Finally, facing aspects such as highly asymmetrical intercultural interactions, psychological stress, physical changes, new cultures, fears, new socialization dynamics, and contact zones with strongly marked subordination dynamics are aspects that transform the personalities and self-esteem of the Au pairs. Equally, it is also true that facing these intercultural situations, according to Chen and Starosta (1998), allows people to be able to deal with feelings such as alienation, frustration, and stress caused by ambiguous situations in the process of intercultural communication. Thus, Au pairs would be increasingly able to deal with conflicting or challenging intercultural situations, giving way to the exploration of their self-monitoring.

### **Self-monitoring: Episode two**

Self-control is a concept that can be described as the ability that people have to control themselves in different situations and places when they are facing intercultural interactions, leaving aside their behavior, words, and thoughts with the aim of adapting to different situations. It is worth highlighting the fact that most people do not have this ability or have it underdeveloped; that is why, in this episode, we will focus on the analysis of the self-monitoring in our participants considering their behavior in an intercultural context as au pairs.

According to Chen and Starosta (1998) “Self-monitoring is the ability to detect situational constraints in order to regulate and change one’s behavior for being competent in communication”. In this case, participants needed to establish successful communication with their host families, individuals who belonged to their social circle, and all those they encountered in daily life situations. Living in a house that is not yours, adapting yourself to a different culture,

and following rules even if you do not agree with them: these are some of the dilemmas that the Au pair participants must face during their residency in the United States.

In this sense, it is not entirely surprising that Camila from Brazil said “ *I always try to avoid and just listen and be quiet and always be like I agree with wherever they said because I don't want any awkward tension between us* ”. Being quiet and accepting things is a sample of the role that the Au pairs assumed in this intercultural exchange. Despite the fact that this is an exchange and the word *au pair* means being equal to equal, we can notice how the power relationship is present, and the boss, who in this case is the host family, will always be above the employee, the girls.

Changing habits as significant as stopping eating meat and starting a vegan life since the host family was vegan was one of the big changes that the participant made just to not cause any kind of disagreement with her host family. Cristina, the participant from Costa Rica, affirmed:

*Yo nunca decía no, a todo decía que sí, yo era de esas que, si me ponían cincuenta horas las hacía sin decir nada y siempre comí lo que ellos comieran la verdad, de hecho, mi primer host mom fue vegana y yo comí de la manera en la que ella comía, no me hacía falta la carne ni nada, por ejemplo.*

Evidently, Camila and Cristina decided that one of the best bridges of communication was to agree with their host families, even if they weren't feeling comfortable with their decisions or ways of thinking, the Au pairs just adapt themselves to avoid any kind of discussion. So that, when the participants mention that they always considered the host family's opinions first no matter what they thought and left behind everything that could make their experience uncomfortable, it clearly shows that as the concept of self-monitoring says, they were able to

control themselves by changing their conceptions in order to being competent in communication with the target culture.

Likewise, when assuming the role of Au pairs, our participants had to deal with the diverse ways in which parenting is understood, which could cause some cultural shock as in the case of Alexa who expressed that there were “*situaciones en las que no estaba de acuerdo con las órdenes que me daba la mamá, pero igual tenía que hacer lo que ella me pidiera*”. In Latin American culture, there are some rules or life perspectives that are taught from childhood such as the care and respect towards food. Wasting food is seen as a bad habit that can not be approved, that’s why Karla expressed:

*Una cosa que veo aquí que es normal es que, si el niño me dice que quiere cereal, le sirves cereal, y después dice no, quiero papas fritas entonces boto el cereal a la basura y le doy papas fritas y si dice no yo no quiero papas fritas, quiero creep cheese entonces boto todo y... entonces es diferente porque cuando tú crees que te inculcan que es importante terminar toda la comida o lo que tienes porque ¿costó no? Y creo que acá es como más, son más flexibles en ese aspecto y el niño puede comer lo que quiera.*

In these cases, the participants had to opt for having a neutral emotion and try to understand these cultural differences regarding daily habits and parenting, while self-monitoring their own perceptions. Equally, the Mexican girl noticed:

*Aquí los papás son como más desobligados y eso fue diferente para mí, aquí el niño desde los tres meses ya dormía solo sin su mamá en su cuarto solo y o sea mi sobrino apenas a los 3 años lo cambiaron de cuarto entonces eso si fue algo diferente para mí.*

Being an Au pair in the United States also means struggling each day with different cultures, new people, and different perspectives in terms of raising children. Our participants had a different upbringing since for Latin American families the punishments, the rules of behavior, the care for things and food are considered key elements when educating people. However, as they narrated, numerous times they did not agree with the things that the children did, even so they had to give up their belief about what was best to raise a child and adapt to what those parents wanted for their children.

Through the responses, it can be observed that the participants had to adapt to a new culture, implying house habits, customs, food, parenting methods, and daily habits. All the participants decided that the best thing they could do to have a good coexistence and create a solid relationship with their respective families was to agree with their thoughts or beliefs. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted that the fear of rejection or negative acts on the part of their host families was something that they always considered, since their stay in the host country could be at risk if the host family decided to cancel their match and they should return to their country of residence.

### **Episode three: Open-mindedness**

Being an open-minded person means being willing to accept other people, different cultures, opinions, beliefs, and ideas. It also implies being receptive to new ideas and being willing to experiment with new cultures. It is a very important characteristic to achieve good communication in intercultural situations or when being in contact zones. In other words, open-mindedness is the ability to listen and communicate without thinking about the differences between individuals from a sociocultural background different from oneself, even if we agree or

disagree with them. On that basis, in this episode, we will analyze and reflect on the experiences of these Au pairs regarding open-mindedness ability.

When a person travels to another country, they know that they have to open their mind to a new culture, in this case, the participant from Mexico had to live with a Jewish family with whom she experimented with special foods, festivals, and rituals. Alicia expressed:

*Entonces cuando el bebé nació hicieron como una ceremonia de circuncisión en la casa, en la sala y fue un momento para mí como chocante porque ver al bebé que lo estaba mutilando en la sala y pues ellos querían que yo estuviera ahí entonces dije okay tienes que abrir tu mente a otras religiones, otras costumbres y pues ahí yo estuve.*

Equally, Cristina had to face other kinds of things such as the lifestyles of her host mother, who didn't mind the nudity in front of other people while she was in communal areas in the house, Cristina recalled:

*Mi host mom le gustaba mucho andar desnuda, para ella es normal y varias veces la vi desnuda, a mí me costaba porque era mi jefe y yo decía como esta señora... pero para ellos eso era tan normal que yo tenía que hacerme lo que era normal para mí también.*

In both cases, Au pairs had to deal with conceptions of the body that are considered differently in their cultures of origin. Latin American countries tend to be conservative in these aspects due to the Catholic religion and its rituals that differ from other traditions. For our participants, it was also impressive since the Latin American culture instills in girls, above all, to sit well and not come out uncovered. Even when participants felt cultural shock regarding these episodes, they manage to be open-minded about the target culture's traditions or beliefs about rituals and corporeality.

Additionally, Camila from Brazil felt that the food was the hardest thing. She learned that North American culture is known for not having a lot of free time, and that's why they decided to prepare sandwiches as lunch. Camila had to learn to lead this lifestyle, she said:

*I have to open my mind because after spending almost 25 years of my life eating rice and beans every day, 2 times a day, then just to try out other food and just adapt myself to them, so that was a new thing for me.*

Also, in terms of raising children, the participants agreed that American parents are extremely permissive. In this case, Camila added ‘*the mom was like totally Montessori and that parenting style and always with positive approach, and the family was like kind of positive but whatever the kid want we will do it for her.*’ As well, Karla said “*a veces son muy flexibles y el respeto que tienen los niños hacia los mayores la verdad es muy poco*” Also Alexa expressed “*La percibo complicada y no creo que tengan un modo de crianza en realidad, creo que son permisivos*”. Anyway, the participants respected the ways in which the host parents were raising their children, even if they reflected on how distant they were from parenting at their own homes.

It has been evident that one of the most difficult aspects to deal with and that require open-mindedness skill, is related to family rituals and family ties. To live with strange people implies new perceptions of parenting, family time, and bonds. Sometimes these changes might feel like being uprooted from one's place and identity. Alicia, from Mexico, explained “*creo que lo más difícil es el estar lejos de tu familia, como pues las fechas importantes, en tu cumpleaños, Navidad y sólo tienes pues como ponerte fuerte y decir OK es temporal, voy a volver, es sólo un ratito*”.

In Latin American countries, most families are characterized by their union and their strong family ties, where the time shared as a family is one of the most important things, especially during celebrations. Camila added to this topic: *“I have to grow up because in Brazil I was supported by my family and everything that I need, my family was over there, so when I came to the USA, I realized that I was alone and of course, I had my friends and the host family, but you don't feel like you have enough support”*. In the same line with the term independence and the feeling of uprooting, Cristina mentioned:

*Mi mayor reto fue el no ser independiente del todo, ya que uno depende de la host family todo el tiempo entonces ese creo que fue el mayor reto y creo que nunca lo superé, por eso comencé terapia porque nunca lo superé y me afectaba mucho el no tener o no ser independiente y tener que depender de ellos absolutamente en todo.*

Two of the participants decided to look for extra help to improve some issues that the exchange left in themselves, in this case, Camila from Brazil expressed:

*I used to drink a lot to just kind of swallowing my feelings, but then I try to ( I was not getting a lot of sleep, I was not in my very stay of mine) so after a while I decided to start therapy and that have been helping me, I start almost a year ago that is real helpful, with therapy I can finally open my life.*

Bennett (1986) indicated that people sensitive to interculturality have a broad internalized concept of the world. It means that people who are sensitive to interculturality are open-minded, they are more adaptable to differences and they accept and understand the people as they are, taking into account that the world is pluralistic and that diversity is around the corner. Moreover, Chen & Starosta (1997) mentioned that cultural diversity in different settings calls for abilities to

adapt to the unfamiliar environment and to learn to work and live productively with people from different cultural backgrounds, which highlights the ability of intercultural sensitivity. Thanks to our participants, we have evidenced that intercultural sensitivity comes as a process that implies ups and downs, being open-minded but also drawing limits, appreciating our places of origin, and embracing the intense feeling of uprooting and loneliness.

#### **Episode four: Empathy**

Empathy makes us think first of the other, it is putting oneself in the shoes of another human being taking into account personal, cultural, and physical aspects. Certainly, the participants dream or imagine that the family and the host country possess this human characteristic that becomes an invaluable need when traveling to a new culture, therefore full understanding and respect for their different behaviors, culture, rituals, etc. are expected. In this way, empathy is crucial to achieving an intercultural experience through good relationships and communication.

Surprisingly, all the participants of the intercultural exchange agreed that food was one of the best bridges of communication and understanding. Preparing food, tasting different flavors, and even trying new recipes and ingredients created a solid and empathetic path during their lives as Au pairs in the United States. From this perspective, gastronomy is one of the best ways to understand cultures, habits, rituals, and traditions, as expressed by Alicia:

*Si la verdad siempre cocino, cuando llegó la pandemia y llegaron reglas de salir y no la verdad comencé a cocinar un montón y cada día a veces hacíamos comida panameña,*



*tajadas, empanadas, plátano dulce frito porque es lo que me encanta entonces sí tuve la oportunidad de compartir mi cultura*

Alicia experimented empathy with her family through the food, but also, we could notice that our participants show empathy to their host family food habits, for example when Alicia said: *“al principio comía a veces, pero ya después me acostumbré a comer lo que ellos comían y ahora a la final terminé siendo vegetariana también como ellos”*

In an intercultural Exchange as Au pair, people will think that empathy will always be present. However, sometimes it is the host culture that struggles with being empathetic. Cristina that expressed *‘Me pasa con mi novio, yo tengo muchas cosas y él le hace mucha burla, tú sabes que los latinos tenemos muchas creencias entonces hasta el día de hoy no las respeta ni las cree, él se burla y dice que no existe’*. In terms of having or not having empathy, we could observe how her North American boyfriend didn't show empathy for her beliefs and rituals.

Besides, to be an empathic person implies that the person feels interested in another human, but in the case of our participant Camila, she mentioned that when she arrived in the host country a lot of people did not have any idea about Brazil, and even they had stereotypes and caricatured her country of birth. Camila remembered:

*People ask me: do you have the internet in Brazil? That's the kind of thing I have to be tolerant of. You are from Brazil, you live in the jungle, you live with a monkey, these things really bother me, but I know most of the people who ask me that because they really didn't know, there was this person who asked me: why did you not speak Spanish?*

*I said that was because we were colonized by the Portuguese. I guess that would be just the lack of geography.*

Finally, according with the experiences that our participants had mentioned, is worth to say that in the Au pair's case, the girls have lived episodes where the people didn't use or feel empathy for their cultures and they don't even respect them, for example with the food, beliefs and traditions, on the other hand we observed how the girls in different cases made a lot of changes on their life just for fit into the new culture.

### **Interaction involvement: Episode Five**

Entering the intercultural contact zones implies the affectation in aspects related to human interaction. In this episode, we will focus on the analysis and reflection on the experiences of these Latin American Au pairs concerning interaction involvement. According to Chen (1997), interaction involvement is the ability of individuals to perceive the topic and situation that involves their conception of self and self-reward emphasizing people's sensitivity ability when they are in intercultural interaction, therefore, interaction involvement constitutes a fundamental piece in the human communication process.

Sending wrong messages, taking a message out of context, experiencing interesting events, prejudices, stereotypes, and cultural shock are not only aspects that constitute a fundamental part of the skill known as interaction involvement, but also elements that Au pairs face during their time in the host country when interacting in intercultural contact zones.

Misunderstandings due to incorrect use of vocabulary during a conversation are events that are

frequently experienced among people from different cultures, as in the case of Karla who felt that:

*A veces cometía errores que al he lo llamaba she, ponía los pronombres femeninos a alguien qué se pensaba que es masculino. Entonces creo que eso es algo a lo que me tuve que adaptar de preguntar que prefería, que pronombre prefería.*

Thus, in successful intercultural interaction, it is essential to recognize the other, their rights, and their preferences, as well as not assume information even if it is shown as obvious. All this facilitates human interaction in intercultural contexts and minimizes the probability of cultural clashes or misunderstandings when speaking in a foreign language.

Misunderstandings during intercultural interactions in love affairs can also be affected, as in the case of Alicia who said:

*Con mi novio ha sido complicado cómo pues él habla inglés y yo español, y a veces como que no me doy entender bien y hay malos entendidos por palabras o por cosas pequeñas, pero con mis host casi no porque hablo lo básico pero con mi novio sí.*

According to her, in order solve these misunderstandings, she had to resort to explanations of what she really meant or to ask for help: *“le explico, o sea trato de decir: quería decir esto me equivoqué, me puedes decir cómo, cómo me puedes enseñar cómo decir esta expresión y, sí, él es super paciente y trata como de enseñarme”*. Therefore, patience between both intercultural agents, the willingness to learn from one intercultural part, and the willingness to teach from the other one are shown as key issues to overcome these misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

Likewise, Cristina, has also experienced similar events with her sentimental partner, told us that:

*Todavía me sigue pasando más con mi novio y él solo se ríe, pero no he tenido problemas. Aun pronunció mal muchas palabras, yo a todo el mundo le digo que siempre viviré aquí como Sofía Vergara porque mi acento es muy fuerte.*

Then, some intercultural agents get used to experiencing these linguistic misunderstandings, in turn accepting the fact that they will always make mistakes when speaking in a foreign language during their intercultural interactions. As for slip of the tongue or the wrong messages during the cultural exchange, Alexa states that:

*Bueno pues en cuanto a eso sí pasó muchas veces, pero la otra persona siempre trataba como de ayudarme entonces la otra persona usaba por ejemplo el traductor para poder terminar lo que quería decir y que la información no se confundiera.*

In this case, technological applications such as translators were essential during the development of these intercultural interactions, as well as being involved in the interaction with others by being supportive and trying to help them when they make mistakes when speaking the foreign language. For her part, Camila told us:

*It was like a joke that I was playing with my host mom (in the second family) give me a vaping that has some vapo rub inside so help you don't be congested and I went hey that's cool, that would be good when Jacobo (her ex) come here so you can give one to him so he doesn't feel constipated. In Brazil when we say constipated is for staff noise, and she (host mom) starts laughing and she says I guess you mean congested and I say*

*no, constipated. That was really fun and then I realized that they use constipation only when they have problems down there and it's congested in the nose.*

In this sense, some linguistic misunderstandings may come from the use of false cognates, as in the case of the written and oral similarity that exists between the word *congested* in Portuguese and in English, which caused confusion in Camila, leading her to make a slip of the tongue. Likewise, misunderstandings in communication are not always embarrassing, ridiculous, or end in something negative. Some of them can become amusing for both cultural counterparts, as in the case of Camila and her host mom.

On the other hand, experiencing interesting events while exploring American traditions and customs as well as interacting with people from different cultural and social backgrounds entail anecdotes strongly linked to the ability of interaction involvement, as in the case of Karla who during her stay as an Au pair in Boston remembered that:

*Aquí la verdad fui a un museo y me pareció muy bonito conocer que los primeros migrantes vinieron porque creían en sus sueños, creían en un mundo diferente, querían venderles un mundo diferente a sus niños, entonces los que vinieron primero la verdad tuvieron un trabajo muy difícil para crear lo que ahora es Estados Unidos. Pero fue muy bonito conocer que ellos fueron inmigrantes que vinieron aquí con sueño y que han logrado mucho.*

So, the interesting experience that Karla claims to have lived when she was exploring Boston and its culture is associated with the connection that she finds between the history of those migrants and her own history, which not only corresponds to the ability of interaction

involvement, but also with self-esteem ability by involving aspects related to identity, self-recognition, and self-perception. Moreover, Alicia claimed that:

*Una vez fuimos a Sonoma una semana con ellos, y en una casa encerrados entonces pude ver cómo lo que lo que hacen más de cerca y, sí, totalmente fue interesante porque fue muy diferente lo que ellos estaban haciendo en su tiempo de vacaciones a lo que yo haría con mi familia en México, ¿sabes? Ellos sólo estaban relajados escuchando podcast, sentados casi no hablaban entre ellos y en mi cabeza era como de que si yo estuviera en México con mis primos estuviéramos bailando, en la alberca, eso me pareció muy interesante, como un poco aburrido era como mucha diferencia.*

Then, the event experienced by Alicia becomes interesting for her due to aspects associated with cultural differences and the various ways in which countries (Mexico and the United States) understand cultural and social issues such as vacations, fun, free time, family interactions, etc.

Celebrations, traditions, and holidays are cultural factors that mark the stay in a host country, which is why the interesting experience expressed by Camila refers to a traditional event in American culture, in her words:

*Something that I really enjoyed here was Christmas with my second family (the Christmas in 2021). I love Christmas and here it's magic because it's like in the movies. It was awesome. They had this tradition that everyone seat around the tree and opens the presents the next day.*

Likewise, Alexa experienced an interesting event related to typical celebrations since, according to her “*vivir la acción de gracias fue una experiencia muy bonita porque nosotros no*

*tenemos acá esa celebración y me parece muy lindo que dediquen un día sencillamente a dar gracias*". Having experienced this sort of typical American cultural celebration, such as Christmas and Thanksgiving, allowed both of them (Camila and Alexa) to enjoy traditional celebrations which are culturally significant, allowing them to enter into the social and cultural dynamics of that country.

However, not all the experiences cataloged as interesting by these young Au pairs are favorable or as optimistic as those expressed above, because according to what Cristina expressed, although most of the time her interactions were positive and she did not feel that any American was rude to her, there was a particular occasion in which "*en un tren en Nueva York a una judía le molestó mi tono de voz y me pidió que me cambiara de asiento, y le dije que no, que el tren era público*".

Considering the above, a simple encounter in a means of transportation between two cultural counterparts can show low tolerance when being involved in interactions with culturally different individuals. As well, the events experienced and expressed by Karla, Alicia, Camila, and Alexa can be considered educational, fun, and pleasant, unlike what Cristina experienced, which could be classified as a cultural clash.

Being constantly in intercultural contact zones encourages us to extend our vision of the world, the other, and their culture; which is why it is not unusual for agents participating in intercultural interactions to feel that their behavior changed the perceptions of North Americans about their country of origin. Karla, Alicia, and Alexa think that their attitudes modified those wrong ideas or misconceptions that their host families and other people in their social environment had about them and their culture. Seen this way, in the words of Karla

*Sí, la verdad sí, porque creo que para ambos, bueno yo decidí ser au pair y mis papás me decían que aquí hay bastante tiroteos y masacres, la gente lo toma así como que todas las personas de aquí están así e igual las personas tienden a decir que en Latinoamérica o los latinoamericanos somos así como aprovechadores, que no somos honestos, que somos así con él juega vivo y la verdad cuando llegas aquí a veces es un poco difícil cambiar el estereotipo pero con el tiempo y la relación que tienes con alguien con una persona de aquí se dan cuenta que no todo es así.*

Thus, the preconceptions about a culture can be reciprocal, that is, they are possessed by both cultural counterparts. As well as these perceptions and generalizations about a country or culture can be influenced or come from third parties such as parents.

Furthermore, Alicia indicated that:

*Yo creo que sí incluso en la familia con la que estoy siempre si van amigos a su casa y yo estoy ahí y le dicen como que ella es de México, super buena persona, es muy atenta, como que tratan de hablar bien de mi país, entonces creo que sí, creo que les he dejado un buen sabor de boca y una buena imagen de los mexicanos.*

Equally, Alexa saying that “*Sí claro, mostrarles la realidad de lo que es nuestro país cambió la idea de muchas personas, hacia mi ciudad Medellín sentí que tenían buenas referencias, pero del país antes no*”. Then, relating with cultural counterparts who assume empathic roles by interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, and people who understand the diversity that surrounds the world facilitates meetings in contact zones and fosters beneficial intercultural encounters for all cultural counterparts.



Intercultural human interactions also call into question and reaffirm preconceptions, stereotypes, or conceptions about a culture and a country. Due to the above, it is usual for Cristina to feel that her attitudes reaffirmed the conceptions of Americans about her and her country by saying:

*Nunca nadie me ha dicho nada malo de Costa Rica, entonces nunca he tenido inconvenientes, pero en general la percepción de ser latinos, ya que las personas piensan que somos bullosos y yo los soy y escucho música a todo volumen y en el carro es lo mismo. Yo creo que les reafirmé su pensamiento.*

It is neither uncommon for Camila to feel and express:

*Sometimes yes, sometimes no because I guess the lack of communication. Sometimes I'm have this communication things and they may think that I'm stupid but just like if much work for you to just talk and express yourself. It's some mostly for the way I communicate.*

Hence, when facing intercultural contact, the ability of interaction involvement comes into play which allows us to be more sensitive, attentive, and receptive, not only to our way of proceeding in different daily situations but also to how much that way of acting affects the other and their perceptions about us and our idiosyncrasies.

Finally, experiencing intercultural situations full of misunderstandings, interesting events, preconceptions, stereotypes, and idiosyncrasies, allows us to test our ability to interaction involvement because, according to Chen (1997), this ability is comprised of the capacity to perceive, respond, and be attentive when dealing with intercultural interactions.

In the same way, human attitudes when facing intercultural interactions play a great role in this type of interaction, since according to Kramsch and Uryu (2011) intercultural interactions can be handled appropriately as long as they are conscious and voluntary given that, all misunderstandings can be fixed by the interlocutors when they come to understand themselves, others, and their cultural differences.

### **Non-judgemental attitude: Episode Six**

Interacting with people from different cultural and social backgrounds entails dealing with events that involve our perceptions, attitudes, preconceptions, judgments, and stereotypes about another culture. Thus, an individual who faces encounters in which cultural diversity prevails must try to be an interculturally sensitive person; that is to say, an individual who interacts calmly and without rushing to conclusions about the other and their culture. That is why, in this episode, we will focus on the analysis and reflection on the experiences of these Latin American Au pairs concerning non-judgemental attitudes. According to Chen (1997) non-judgemental attitude refers to having an attitude that allows one to sincerely listen to others without deducing and inferring judgments during intercultural communication, so in intercultural interaction being non-judgemental tends to foster a feeling of enjoyment towards cultural differences.

Television, movies, social networks, and everything that is shown to us in the media influence the way in which we understand a country since all these elements constitute an important source of superficial information about a culture and its idiosyncrasies. That is why, it

is common that the ideas we have about someone, or something are based on how little that is shown on television, as in the case of Karla who said that:

*La visión que tenía de los estadounidenses era la que veía en las películas: fast food, fiestas. Como que comían mucho y que veían mucha televisión. Esa es la percepción que tenemos, pero más que todo es por todas las películas que vemos.*

Clearly, these perceptions can vary when entering the so-called contact zones and interacting directly with culture, as happened with Karla, who told us that “*Sí cambió, no todas las personas son así*” when we asked her about her current opinions about American culture.

Similarly, Camila who stated:

*My perception about the culture was pretty much like the movie (80s movies), so it was pretty much only that I saw on the tv, I never had experienced someone who comes here. It was about everything that I saw in the movies and it's pretty much the same.*

Although Camila's preconceptions about Americans are very similar to the reality that she faced when experiencing cultural exchange, there are also other issues that were unknown to her such as the fact that according to her, in the United States “*everyone is busy all the time, that is my perception. They have everything going and everyone is always planning or doing something. In general, it is pretty much the same*”. Hence, not having interacted directly with a culture, only knowing the story that it tells us through movies and reflecting on a culture from the image that is shown to us on TV could provide us with an incomplete or erroneous idea of what a country and its customs are. Likewise, it is highly usual to have preconceptions about a population and their behavior concerning the way in which they enjoy their festivities; as Alicia

put it saying “*pensaba que eran como más loquitos que les gustaba mucho la fiesta, pero llegando aquí no, o sea cero; sólo eso*”.

Nevertheless, these opinions or thoughts about a population are not necessarily static or fixed and on the contrary they can change with the interaction, as experienced by Alicia who said “*ahora siento que son unas personas que están muy enfocadas en el ámbito laboral, que les importa mucho su trabajo, que les preocupa mucho su dinero, que se preocupan del retiro desde muy temprana edad*”. Seen this way, coming face to face with culture can modify and expand our previously acquired ideas about a country and its citizens.

Furthermore, Cristina 's preconceptions were related to the food and eating habits of these individuals, for which she argued that “*creía que comían muy mal, solo chatarra y me di cuenta que no. Las host families comían bien, pero a veces también comían fast food*”. In this sense, a person's conduct or how we suppose an individual behaves can be generalized to the point of becoming first in the conception of a community and later the stereotype about an entire country.

Even though Cristina's preconceptions were not entirely accurate, having lived with the Americans and their culture made her take a clear and precise position regarding them since she stated:

*No me gustaría haber nacido aquí ni tener esta cultura, la verdad es que son personas o la mayoría cero expresivas, tu no ves ese amor o pasión como nosotros. La verdad no cambio por nada mi cultura y me siento muy orgullosa. Les falta amor y pasión y por eso son locos y matan a tanta gente.*

Considering the above, Cristina could be somewhat affected by what Bennett called the ethnocentric state (between the stages of defense and minimization); a state in which the

individual thinks about the world from their own reality or from the inherent characteristics of their own culture.

Feeling judged by prejudices, stereotypes, or preconceived ideas related to Au pairs' home country and cultures is a phenomenon that varies due to the particular experiences lived during their stay in the cultural exchange program. That is why, intercultural interactions in the contact zones can result in events such as that expressed by Cristina, who with total conviction, told us that she did not feel judged during her experience in America, or as in the case of Karla, who stated:

*Ehh, no la verdad directamente nunca sentí eso, creo que cuando vienes como Au pair a veces es difícil porque vienes con personas que estudian, que tienen el dinero para pagar una Au pair, no estás como rodeada de eso en muchos casos.*

In this way, from Karla's perspective, recognizing diversity in other people, education level, and money are seen as the reason or explanation for not having experienced prejudice associated with their country of origin. Similarly, Alicia claimed:

*No, jamás sólo que se han hecho comentarios como que México es muy peligroso, el narcotráfico. Pero no siento que lo hagan como juzgándome sólo como preguntándome y lo entiendo porque son cosas que salen como en las noticias, sólo es curiosidad pero no juzgada.*

In the same way, Alexa told us that “*Siento que no era tanto juzgada, sino que era curiosidad, sentían mucha curiosidad si era verdad lo que se dice alrededor del mundo sobre nosotros, sobre el consumo de drogas, delincuencia y pobreza*”. In this respect, for Alicia and Alexa, the comments and appreciations about their home country are because of the curiosity

generated by the media and the news which influence how people around the world think about a country and its culture. Conversely, Camila argued that:

*Usually when I'm talking with people mostly online and they go like: hey you are Brazilian, so I may have big butts and big boobs, walking around naked. All these things about Brazilian culture stereotypes, I didn't have with the family, but mostly people outside this Au pair bubble. They said you may know how to dance samba, you are Brazilian, so you are supposed to know.*

In accordance with the foregoing, it can be indicated that Camila faced stereotypes connected to the shape of her body and how Brazilian women are supposed to look, as well as cultural stereotypes associated with music and dance. It is considered pertinent to indicate that having these misconceptions about Camila was mostly present in people outside her environment or her life as an Au pair.

Being in a cultural exchange as an Au pair allows us to determine if our conceptions concerning a person, their behavior, and their culture are truthful or erroneous, as it happened to Karla who in terms of ideas about Americans prior to her journey as an Au pair said that: *“si he visto que aquí hay bastantes restaurantes de comidas rápidas, bastantes de frozen food que en mi vida había visto en Panamá. Entonces si tienen tendencia de que todo lo consumible tiene que ser de una manera más fácil”*. Similarly, Karla recognized that some of those opinions or preconceptions about Americans and their culture proved to be stereotypes when she said:

*Por ejemplo, con la familia con la que vivía eran vegetarianos y se cuidaban mucho lo que comían, estaban muy pendientes cuáles eran los ejercicios que tenían que hacer, las vitaminas que tenían que tomar. La verdad estaban muy al pendiente de su salud,*

*entonces esas fueron cosas que también puede adaptar a lo que es mi estilo de vida ahora y que entendí con ellos.*

In view of the foregoing, sometimes what we perceive a country, its inhabitants, and its culture may be a partial or fragmented social reality given that, while it is true that sometimes what we believe about a society is not entirely false, those beliefs could be just experienced by a small group of individuals; whereby, it is nothing more than an incomplete truth and not an absolute phenomenon which the entire population faces.

Meanwhile, Alicia, dealt with experiences which enabled her to reaffirm opinions and conceptions that she had about Americans by corroborating “*que forman familias muy jóvenes, qué desde muy chiquitos desde los 25 ya tienen un trabajo super estable y ya se casan. Eso yo lo sabía y estando aquí lo mega comprobé*”. Just as some of Alicia's ideas about Americans turned out to be true, others were just misconceptions, inasmuch as according to her:

*Por los alimentos qué ya sabes que comen puro McDonald 's, fast food; la familia con lo que yo trabajo la mamá siempre cocina, es bien dedicada, ella limpia su casa y yo pensaba que contrataban siempre gente que limpiara y no, ellos limpien su casa. Incluso teniendo el dinero para tener alguien que limpie o cocinarles, ella lo hace entonces creo que eso fue erróneo de mi parte pensar que le pagaban a cualquier persona para hacer todo.*

Thus, the frequent interactions in the intercultural contact zones allow us to rectify erroneous ideas about a group of people, vindicate cultural misconceptions about the host

country, and reaffirm those opinions that were obtained prior to undertaking an intercultural journey.

In the same vein, Camila found out that in relation to her knowledge about American culture there were certain correct ideas provided by the movies regarding the traditions and beliefs of the Americans, as well as some wrong ideas about their celebrations and lifestyles; That is why Camila told us that:

*About Thanksgiving, all the food that they had (turkey) was a big shock because that was like I'm living in an American movie. Everyone is happy, and the food... it's not a stereotype, but it's something that I was wondering if was true or not.*

Nevertheless, not everything that is shown in the movies is a faithful copy of the sociocultural reality of a country or tells the exact story of what Americans experience in their daily lives since, for her, there is a huge difference between what is seen in movies and real life about parties. In Camila's words:

*About the party, in movies you always see the big parties and they have parties all the time, sometimes go to the bar and it's cool, we go to the bar and clubs but everything closes at 2 am, after 2 am you can't find anything else to do in the city.*

Then, facing intercultural interactions not only favors knowing how to differentiate between what we see on television and what people really experience in their day to day but also favors understanding that cinema is an element that allows us to get superficially to the host country's culture and that this same tool could help spread sociocultural stereotypes concerning a country and its inhabitants.



In a similar sense, prior to her adventure as an Au pair, Cristina had ideas and opinions about Americans, their behavior, and being little emotional which were real; she commented “*lo fríos que eran... y lo confirmé llegando acá*”. Similarly, Cristina had conceptions about Americans which were wrong since, she “*creía que todos olían muy feo y me equivoqué. pensé que todos eran iguales y pensaba que todos eran cochinos*”.

On this basis, two main issues can be evidenced: taking our own culture and ourselves as a reference could contribute to classifying others as sympathetic or not; and, prior to dealing with intercultural interaction, people may have preconceptions which could be stereotypes or misconceptions.

From Alexa's experience, she also realized that she had appreciations about Americans that turned out to be similar to reality because for her, Americans “*son personas muy desorganizadas, tanto con las cosas como también en su presentación personal*”, opinion that she was able to reaffirm during her stay as an Au pair. In turn, Alexa expressed about American people “*tenía el prejuicio de que eran personas amargadas. solitarias y de mala clase, y no resultó así, son personas muy amables. Y lo que sí resultó siendo cierto es que son personas muy desorganizadas*”. Seen in this way, intercultural encounters not only enable us to recognize that the other is different from oneself by knowing characteristics of their personality such as being organized or not, but also facilitate us recognizing parts of our deepest conceptions by revealing our own prejudices.

Finally, according to Kramsch and Uryu (2011), becoming aware of intercultural contact and being present voluntarily during intercultural encounters facilitates coping with the differences between counterparts. Then, even when facing intercultural interactions with critical

attitudes, stereotypes, misconceptions, and fleeting conclusions about others and their culture, this is not a determinant in the intercultural interactions of Au pairs; given that, when people have an intentional participation, a responsible role, and become aware of the interaction between people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, areas or spaces of balance are created which function as mediators during these encounters in the contact zones in order to facilitate the understanding of the different counterparts.

## 10. Conclusions

Frequently, participating in intercultural contact zones and being part of an immersion program in which Au pairs are supposed to interact with people from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, promotes experiencing events and situations that end up becoming the most relevant anecdotes experienced by these five Latin American Au pairs in terms of the intercultural sensitive dimension. These experiences included situations such as celebrating totally new traditions, participating in religious rituals, modifying their diet and lifestyle, or suffering changes in their personalities by becoming less extroverted, among other situations.

A significant proportion of these intercultural experiences can be stated as challenges or defiant experiences because, during their journey as Au pairs, they faced events such as dealing with different conceptions and responsibilities about how to educate children even when they are not mothers, facing situations of discrimination and intolerance in public transportation, or living with their host parents/bosses in the same place where they work without clearly delimiting the spaces in which they develop each activity.

In this sense, when collecting and analyzing the narratives of these five Latin American Au pairs during their cultural exchange, we were allowed to visualize that these young Au pairs faced different stages (denial, acceptance, adaptation, and integration) of the host culture which not only allowed them to test their intercultural dimension and their skills (self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgmental attitudes) but also facing daily situations that facilitated the acquisition of English in its natural context.

These language acquisition processes during their stay as an au pair occurred mainly for reasons such as communication misunderstandings, wanting to start conversations with English-

speaking people, and wanting to expand their social circles. This improvement in their foreign language skills occurred in mostly informal spaces or contexts such as during socialization with their romantic partners, in interaction with their host parents, connecting with other Au pairs or during the time that they took care of their host kids.

Being in a cultural exchange as an Au pair, facing asymmetrical intercultural relationships, suffering psychological stress, and constantly facing challenging situations implied a transformation in the personality of these five Au pairs as well as the development of their sensitive abilities; that is why, the self-esteem (which can be explained as the way in which they perceive and recognize themselves) ended up being influenced by external situations such as physical appearance, ethnic and racial characteristics, or more internal issues such as tone and accent when speaking English, fears or insecurities. In this sense, the young Latin American Au pairs experienced personal growth and changes in their personality as in their maturity and independence.

Coming into contact with people who came from different social and cultural realities caused these young Au pairs to appeal to their sensitive ability of self-monitoring or self-control, being able not only to detect situational restrictions but also to control themselves when dealing with intercultural interactions. Thus, by monitoring themselves, they mainly monitored their opinions, ideas, and behaviors when interacting with host families in matters such as always agreeing with the opinion of their host parents or keeping silent when it was not essential for them to speak; all these in order to have a competent communication and a successful coexistence. This self-monitoring allowed these Latin American Au pairs to adapt to new

concepts and different ways of understanding the world and put their sensitive open-mindedness skills to the test.

Undertaking a journey as an Au pair and getting involved in intercultural contact zones entailed that these young examined their sensitive ability of open-mindedness, having to open their minds to new cultures and being receptive to emerging experiences. Being open-minded during these encounters with people from different cultural and social backgrounds allowed these Au pairs to become more interculturally sensitive individuals, that is, people who are capable not only of understanding, but also of accepting the other and their cultural diversities; in such a way, putting to test their sensitive ability of empathy.

For these Latin American Au pairs, being immersed in interactions strongly marked by cultural differences which involved experiencing for the first time rituals such as Jewish circumcision, typical American celebrations such as Thanksgiving, and living with styles of food such as *kosher* and vegetarian diet, allowed them to felt empathy and getting themselves into the shoes of their host families, sentimental partners, and friends, recognizing the diversity that exists in all of them, their cultures, and their idiosyncrasies.

The sensitive ability of interaction involvement played a relevant role during their interaction process, since when these Au pairs entered spaces of intercultural contact where they frequently related to people who not only had cultures and idiosyncrasies different from their own but also spoke a different language, allowed them to be aware of their own thoughts and feelings about others, as well as being aware of the message that they emitted to the other and the possible meanings that the other received.

Participating in a cultural immersion and exchange program in the United States involves interacting with people from different countries who may have ideas contrary to your own; That is why, when Latin American Au pairs experienced culturally diverse encounters, they in turn dealt with events where their own opinions, preconceptions, judgments, and stereotypes about Americans and their culture were exposed. Even with the existence of those misconceptions, stereotypes, and some hasty conclusions about American culture, the Latin American Au pairs had high intercultural sensitivity and faced these intercultural encounters in a voluntary and conscious way which facilitated the interaction between both cultural counterparts.

From our own experiences as former Au pairs, we also faced transformations in our sensitive ability of self-esteem since, at the end of our journey through the United States, we felt more autonomous, self-sufficient, less insecure when speaking English, and we had the feeling of having grown not only personally but also professionally.

Likewise, we constantly self-control and monitor ourselves during our interventions in the intercultural contact zones, especially with our host family in order to have a successful exchange experience and healthy socialization relationships. We recognized that they were not only our host parents, but also our direct bosses who left their children in our care.

During our stay in the intercultural exchange, we also felt that our sensitive ability of open-mindedness and empathy were tested, not only by experiencing new traditions, facing opinions so contrary to ours, or by experiencing atypical celebrations, but also when coexisting daily with a homoparental couple or living with a family with extreme right political ideologies; which in both cases were totally new events and contrary to everything we were used to know.

To our mind, having faced a pandemic while we were Au pairs has been one of the biggest challenges of our experience in the cultural exchange, as well as the moment where we had the chance to be empathetic, getting ourselves in the shoes of our host families, and putting their needs above our own, in aspects such as when we avoided going out so as not to worry them unnecessarily, when we worked long hours because their children did not have school or extracurricular activities, or even when we were in the middle of a cultural exchange which intended us to immerse ourselves in the American culture, we avoided taking our face-to-face classes or going to places where there was a crowd of people.

Finally, from our own experience as former Au pairs and in our frequent conversations about the cultural exchange and immersion program, we always conclude that we do not feel the same people who undertook their journey as Au pairs, since we feel that this experience transformed us to such an extent that it is precisely from these changes and intercultural encounters that the initial idea of this research was born.

## 11. Recommendations

To create more spaces such as conversational clubs, coffee tables, and debate rooms in which students can improve aspects related to pronunciation, diction, oral expressions, and phonetics.

To generate an intercultural exchange experiences club where apprentices who have been in intercultural exchanges can share their anecdotes motivating other students to practice their language skills and experience cultural exchanges.

To create intercultural contact zones where learners have the opportunity of experiencing intercultural interactions and developing their intercultural sensitivities skills.

The Universidad del Cauca should contribute to the creation or make more accessible agreements, so students of this modern languages degree program can experience an intercultural exchange with the aim of improving their language skills.

To be open to carrying out qualitative investigations with a narrative approach whereby the human side of people could be more appreciated and valued by reflecting on individuals' experiences which could help the whole education community.

To contemplate the option of creating English and French national or regional camps in order to interact with people from different cultures and social backgrounds and intensify the use of a foreign language.



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## 13. Appendixes

### 13.1. Informed Consent

#### Consentimiento informado



Yo \_\_\_\_\_ declaro que he sido informada e invitada a participar en la investigación denominada “*The Intercultural Sensitive Dimension: A Reflection upon the Narrative of Latin American Au Pairs*” (La dimensión afectiva intercultural: una reflexión sobre la narrativa de las Au pairs latinoamericanas) . Entiendo que este estudio busca reflexionar acerca de las experiencias más relevantes vividas por las Au pairs latinoamericanas en cuanto a la competencia intercultural afectiva y sé que mi participación se llevará a cabo mediante video llamadas haciendo uso de la aplicación Zoom y consistirá en 2 entrevistas de alrededor de 45 minutos.

Se me ha explicado que las entrevistas serán grabadas y usadas únicamente con fines académicos, del mismo modo se me ha informado que los datos suministrados serán confidenciales y que los nombres de los participantes serán modificados por cuestiones de confidencialidad y privacidad, esto significa que la identidad de las participantes y sus respuestas no podrán ser conocidas por otras personas ni tampoco ser identificadas en la fase de publicación de resultados.

Estoy en conocimiento que los datos no me serán entregados y que no habrá retribución económica por la participación en este estudio, sé que esta información podrá beneficiar de manera indirecta y por lo tanto tiene un beneficio para la sociedad dada la investigación que se está llevando a cabo.

Asimismo, sé que puedo negar la participación o retirarme en cualquier etapa de la Investigación, sin expresión de causa ni consecuencias negativas para mí.

Acepto voluntariamente participar en este estudio y he recibido una copia del presente documento.

Firma participante: \_\_\_\_\_

Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_

### 13.2. Semi-structured interview

Concept	Questions
<p><b>Self-esteem</b> Chen and Starosta (1998) "People not only establish a sense of self-value and self-worth, but also are more able to deal with the feeling of alienation, frustration, and stress caused by the ambiguous situation in the process of intercultural communication"</p>	<p>¿Durante su estancia como Au pair, se sintió rechazada por sus características físicas- raciales, étnicas o procedencia latina?</p> <p>¿Se sintió presionada a cambiar su aspecto físico para lograr encajar en la cultura americana?</p> <p>Nombre una situación en la que se sintió ridiculizada debido a su acento al hablar en inglés.</p> <p>Menciona alguna ocasión donde sintió poco progreso debido a sus habilidades en el idioma, lo social o cultural en relación con otra Au pair o persona de su círculo social.</p> <p>¿Cuáles fueron los miedos o inseguridades que tuvo que enfrentar antes de salir de viaje?</p> <p>¿Se siente usted la misma persona que era antes del intercambio? ¿Por qué?</p>
<p><b>Self-Monitoring</b> Chen and Starosta(1998) "The ability to detect situational constraints in order to regulate and change one's behavior for being competent in communication".</p>	<p>Durante su convivencia con la familia de acogida, ¿cómo lidió con las diferentes concepciones culturales para lograr una convivencia sana y una comunicación idónea?</p> <p>Nombra una situación, anécdota o evento en el que sintió que su comportamiento o pensamiento cambiaron con el objetivo de tener una comunicación competente.</p>
<p><b>Open-Mindedness</b> Chen and Starosta (1998) "People are willing to explain themselves and accept their counterparts' explanation in the intercultural interaction"</p>	<p>Mencione un ejemplo donde tuvo que abrir su mente frente a algo totalmente inusual o nuevo para usted o su cultura.</p> <p>Le gustaría volver a experimentar algún otro programa de inmersión. ¿Por qué?</p> <p>¿Cuál fue el mayor reto que vivió durante su</p>

	<p>estancia como Au pair? ¿Cómo lo supero?</p> <p>¿Cómo percibe la forma de crianza de la cultura estadounidense?</p>
<p><b>Empathy</b> (Gardner 1962, as cited in Chen and Starosta, 1998) "Ability to step into one's culturally different counterparts' mind to develop the same thoughts and emotions in interaction".</p>	<p>¿En alguna oportunidad específica mostró su cultura y sus costumbres a la comunidad estadounidense?</p> <p>Mencione algún momento, historia o evento durante su estancia como Au pair donde sintió poca tolerancia o respeto hacia usted o su cultura.</p> <p>¿Cuál fue la diferencia cultural más grande que encontró en los Estados Unidos? ¿Cómo lidió con esas diferencias?</p> <p>Cuéntenos sobre los procesos de adaptación a su nueva vida en cuanto a las celebraciones, tradiciones y comidas.</p>
<p><b>Interaction Involvement</b> (Cegala, 1984 as cited in Chen and Starosta 1998) "The person tends to be more responsive, attentive and perceptive that enables them to better understand messages and take appropriate turns in intercultural interaction".</p>	<p>Mencione algún episodio donde emitió un mensaje erróneo durante una conversación con una persona de otra cultura. ¿Cómo lo solucionó?</p> <p>Mencione un suceso interesante que experimentó durante la exploración e interacción con la cultura americana o alguna visita al supermercado, fiesta o restaurante.</p> <p>¿Cree usted que su forma de ser o sus actitudes pudieron cambiar esos prejuicios o la percepción de los estadounidenses frente a la cultura de su país de origen?</p>
<p><b>Non- Judgmental attitudes</b> Chen and Starosta (1998) This ability reflects the quality of a sensitive person by allowing oneself to sincerely listen to one's cultural counterparts, instead of jumping into conclusion without sufficient information.</p>	<p>Cuéntenos sobre las ideas o percepciones que tenía de los americanos y su cultura antes de su estancia como Au pair.</p> <p>¿Cuál es su pensamiento ahora respecto a la cultura estadounidense?</p> <p>¿Se sintió juzgada por prejuicios relacionados con su país de origen?</p>



	<p>Mencione un ejemplo donde sus juicios o estereotipos sobre los americanos y su cultura resultaron verídicos.</p> <p>Mencione un ejemplo donde sus concepciones sobre los americanos y su cultura resultaron juicios o estereotipos.</p>
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