

## Prospects for Multicultural Encounters and Identification Processes - Insights from Case Studies among Migrants in Brazil



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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyses how multicultural encounters have shaped groupism processes and notions of identities among migrants in contemporary Brazil. To do that, the paper contextualises the particular sense of hybridity built in the Brazilian multiculturalism approach, and how it enabled certain encounters and senses of belonging beyond nationhood-oriented groupism and sometimes beyond ethnicity-oriented groupism. The paper brings insights from a fieldwork study held among a hundred migrants living in the two main charity shelters in Sao Paulo-Brazil, demonstrating how these individuals operate different senses of belonging through encounters according to different aims. It explains how they operate their belonging to migrant categories (and the vulnerabilities associated with it) for claiming for dignity, rights and access to basic services in Brazil. The paper also explains how these migrants operate other belongings beyond such migrant status and nationality categories (such as belongings related to gender, age, language, profession, religion, etc.) in other encounters with different aims and dynamics. Overall, the paper also aims to contribute to scrutinising the reified concept of 'group' which dominates mainstream literature, indicating how the perspective of encounters might allow us to identify more fluid and spontaneous categories which seem to better comprehend contemporary multicultural relations.

**KEYWORDS:** multiculturalism; migration; identities; nationhood; inclusion

### **INTRODUCTION: Groups and Identities in Multicultural Contexts**

It is possible to notice in contemporary Social Science works a tendency to analyse class, gender, nationality, etc. in terms of groups, but rarely to scrutinise the very concept of group itself, as highlighted by Brubaker (2002). Although these mainstream subjects are intertwined with the concept of group, group in its own right is often taken for granted and considered self-explanatory, thereby escaping further analysis. Moreover, when operating with the concept of groups in nationalism and ethnicity studies, there is an inclination to regard national and ethnic groups as tangible entities with specific interests and agency. Such tendency sees groups as if they were internally uniform and externally distinct entities, even portraying them as cohesive collective actors driven by shared objectives. Considering this, a core aim of this paper is to analyse the formation of groups in the context of migrants in contemporary Brazil, scrutinising the key encounters building these groups, and analysing the main intentions identified in these groupism processes. The key contribution of this paper is to expand the mainstream notions of multiculturalism through a further exploration of encounters, and to underline that encounters can be crucial for deepening migrants' recognition, interaction and participation in a society. The contributions in this direction derive from insightful findings of my fieldwork with focus groups and qualitative interviews with migrants living in a charity shelter in São Paulo-Brazil.

When identity barriers are too strict or exclusionary for an incoming migrant in the host place, these individuals cannot freely decide which of their identities to operate according to their needs and aims. Choosing this identity should not be a matter for State discretion according to nationality criteria, but an issue for the individual to decide. Priority must not be given to the person's legally inherited nationality, but to her reflection and choice about it, as Fry (2000), Cuche (2009) and Sansone (2003) underline. Here it is also important to keep in mind how the very concept of national identity and ideas about 'the nation' are not rigid entities - as Homi Bhabha (1990) highlights, since national identity itself is hybrid, ambivalent and unstable, negotiated between private interests and the public significance given to these interests. In this sense, migrants might alternate different belongings and loyalties in different circumstances, and might play with their plural identities according to their aims or the needs presented in social encounters (Cuche, 2009).

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It is particularly useful in this analysis to shift from identity to identification, from group as entities to group-making projects, as suggested by Brubaker (2003). Especially for migration literature it can be very useful to explore more often the lenses of encounters and Brubaker's concept of identification - processes of identifications being built and transformed through different encounters. Brubaker's view of identity as process rather than substance help us to understand the complexities of encounters and how individuals can actively use them to interact in a new context, reinforcing how ethnicities and nationalities are not entities in the world but rather perspectives of the world - ways of interpreting and experiencing the world. Insightful contributions for this discussion can be found in the Brazilian context regarding migrants' diversity. The approach to diversity and identities developed throughout Brazil's history raises new perspectives and possibilities to most of the traditional ideas of Multiculturalism.

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first explains how the framework of encounters can expand mainstream notions of multiculturalism, also surveying how multiculturalism has been constructed in Brazil and its particular potentialities for multiple encounters. It then expands this discussion in the second section, with insights from the fieldwork explaining how migrants in contemporary Brazil would operate their multiple identifications through different encounters. The third section explains how these migrants use some key encounters to pursue recognition, rights, dignity and access to basic services. The fourth (and final) part sums up the contributions of the paper, adds some final remarks and indicates how one can continue to deepen the reflections proposed in the paper.

### **1- Encounters as a Framework to Expand Mainstream Notions of Multiculturalism**

To advance our reflections it is important to briefly survey here the key literature on multiculturalism and to propose to extend it by thinking multiculturalism through encounters. It is possible to identify three main patterns for migrants' inclusion that governments have followed or combined in different periods and sectors: differential, assimilationist and multiculturalist (Bommes, 2005; Guarnizo, Portes & Haller, 2003). The differential pattern tends to hinder migrants' possibilities to become national citizens, while the assimilationist pattern tends to grant citizenship only with the price of assimilation, and the multiculturalist pattern provides citizenship acknowledging migrants' cultural particularities. These are theoretical formal patterns that are not always mutually exclusive - as governments do not strictly follow just one guideline for all domains, and might adapt and combine distinct approaches according to the domain in question. Still, it is possible to identify key tendencies in policies according to these three main trends. In the multiculturalist pattern, a migrant can be granted equal rights without being expected to give up her identities which might be different to the host society, although there is an expectation for the migrant to conform to certain key values considered fundamental for the host society (for example human rights orientations; so-called 'democratic values' etc). Sweden and Canada have policies oriented by this approach in core periods of their contemporary history, as well as the United States in previous decades and the United Kingdom in more recent decades. Brazil's case is mostly aligned with the multiculturalist approach, although some of its characteristics extrapolate the traditional multiculturalist patterns of most of the experiences in the global North.

The Brazilian context presents important insights for multiculturalism discussions and the formation of national identities. Most of the native indigenous populations had been extremely harmed and almost entirely annihilated by Portuguese colonisation and its exploitation of natural resources and agricultural goods since early 16th century, followed by almost three centuries of the largest slavery of African descents, with Brazil being the last country to abolish slavery in 1888 and without efforts for compensation and socioeconomic inclusion for these populations (De Carvalho, 1989). Especially at the end of the 19th century after abolition, official policies for attracting migrant populations from Europe and Asia were implemented in Brazil aiming to populate the country with a whiter population to work as cheap labour in the growing industrial and rural sectors in the country (Schwarcz, 2013).

Millions of migrants were attracted from very different backgrounds and regions, and the State's core effort was to avoid distinguishing their backgrounds too much. The State strategy that built the so-called 'Brazilian identity' was initially oriented to assimilationist tones of 'forming the Brazilian identity' - but this identity was precisely constructed to be 'a melting pot', which later on would relate to multiculturalism approaches going way beyond nationality categories (Sansone, 2003). In this direction, Brazilian multiculturalism has permitted many migrants to reinforce other senses of belonging beyond their nationality and national-related ethnicities. Still, this has not overcome the deep social inequality and race exclusion in the country. The inclusion of new incomers beyond nationality and ethnicity criteria has been done not because Brazilian governments were well intentioned to embrace as much diversity as possible, but mostly because they aimed to avoid ethnic fragmentation which could lead to unrest and claims for recognition and autonomy in the formation of the

'new' nation (Schwarcz, 2013). Even so, this ended up constructing a particular scenario in Brazil where senses of identity were built through several other belongings beyond nationality, such as socioeconomic class, profession, religion etc. This still reflects nowadays - the sense of syncretism and hybridity is a recurrent issue in the fieldwork interviews which inspire this paper. Participants of this fieldwork frequently referred to multi-ethnic identities and practices, and saw Brazil as a place where they could operate this - though still being a place marked by serious socio-economic and racial inequalities.

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The cultural practices of migrants often present constant mutability and multi-ethnic features which extrapolate the traditional multicultural definitions. Such a 'post-ethnic' tendency among migrant groups was already highlighted in the 90s by authors such as Taylor (1994) and Pierucci (1999), but has gained even more force in recent years as some unsuccessful consequences of certain multiculturalist policies are more clearly felt. Multiculturalist policies presuppose a sense of social cohesion and ethnic homogeneity within groups that does not correspond to the dynamism and hybridity of social encounters in practice. Additionally, many multiculturalist policies do not encompass the inequalities among different groups when they interact. Boosting encounters of different cultural practices does not mean to believe that the groups operating these practices are all in equal positions in society. It is crucial to keep in mind that cultural encounters and cultural negotiations are not operated with equal social valuation. Practices related to oppressed groups have different impacts and values than those associated with dominant groups – and although they might interact and mutually transform each other, this does not necessarily remove the social hierarchies associated with them (Bosco, 2017). Likewise, when a historically oppressed group interacts more intensely with other groups this does not necessarily translate into enhancing its social position.

With the recent popularisation of the multiculturalist approach, there is a new reification of the notion of culture as if the maintenance of cultural singularity would be a key condition for an ethnic minority group to socially ascend. This would imply that cultural features are very important to define the social positioning of a group, while many other factors might count more strongly. Additionally, this view tends to consider the encounter between cultures as a mere contact of rigid blocks, while actually this encounter includes multiple negotiations among groups that are not internally homogeneous, and that might gather or separate according to the context (Cuche, 2009). We should not see an encounter as the interaction between two ontological stable entities of identities - instead, we should keep in mind that identity is not something prior to the encounter, but rather something that emerges from encounters, as proposed by Krishna (2015).

The lenses of encounters can be particularly useful because encounters tend to produce processes of *identification*, which is a more appropriate analytical tool in comparison to identity. The perspective of encounters can enrich existing accounts of multiculturalism. Within encounters different levels and notions of groupness happen - when encounters take place, groupness can be seen as events happening and developing, and not as rigid

Pre-existing entities interacting. Analysing encounters allows us to treat groupness as variable and contingent rather than given and fixed, allowing us to identify moments of collective solidarity and phases of cohesion without implicitly presuming strong levels of groupness as constant - precisely as recommended by Brubaker. Encounters can be moments when we see practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, commonsense knowledge, organisational routines and resources, discursive frames, institutionalised forms, political projects, contingent events and variable groupness - categories which are more fruitful for a deep analysis than the concept of group alone.

Contextualisation is a key step to understand cultural practices and therefore to understand multiculturalism itself - by investigating the context in which this concept emerged. It is crucial to consider the context in which the foundational ideas of multiculturalism were conceptualised, in order to identify the mindset and circumstances that it reflects. Multiculturalism gradually emerged as a stage of a modernity process that was already underway in Western rich countries (Seyferth, 2002). In many Latin American contexts, including Brazil, multiculturalism emerged in a different way. As Quijano (1989) describes, in much of the Latin American region, historical phases of modernity seem to accumulate rather than follow each other, presenting different stages of modernity at the same time. However, the theories most used in Latin America refer to countries where modernity, multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism have been more gradually asserted - such as countries of north-western Europe and the United States (Sansone, 2003). Especially in the Brazilian context, for all the historical constructions mentioned throughout this paper, the phenomena of universalism, racism, new particularisms and new citizenship often appear all together.

Furthermore, traditional multiculturalist approaches overlook the existence of potential ethnicities and non-manifested ethnicities - of many people living well without manifesting ethnic sentiments on a constant basis. Brazil has a strong multicultural aspect, which is not the same as being strictly and entirely multiculturalist – since 'multiculturalism' defines not a status but an ideology. Thus, it is possible to have multicultural practices without formal multicultural theories or even multicultural awareness. As Sansone sums up, 'multicultural aspects often take place autonomously, not necessarily theorising cultural traditions nor the maintenance of cultural diversity' (2003, p.550, free translation). Hybridity often happens in a cacophonous way, not in the intended and measurable form expected in multiculturalist lines (Pieterse, 2001).

Similarly, most multiculturalist traditions do not emphasise that ethnicity and ethnic group do not always develop together - and in this sense it is key to avoid the groupism tendency in the analysis, as warned by Brubaker. In many cases, a sense of ethnicity develops without a group or territory. In other contexts, notions of ethnicity might be operated only sporadically; while in other cases these notions might grow when the internal cohesion of a group is in crisis (Petit, 2007; Cuche, 2009). Ethnicities are increasingly intermittent and symbolic, not necessarily associated with a single community nor territory - and they are constantly relating to other identities (Appadurai, 1996; Castels, 1997; Jenkins, 1997).

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Moreover, in contemporary Brazil, claims based on multiculturalism often aim to request basic rights that should have been guaranteed to all citizens regardless of their identities. Most multiculturalist claims are operated in Brazil to try to acquire basic needs that policies are failing to address, as underlined by Kymlicka (2003). Multiculturalism has been operated in Brazil as a substitute to the notion of citizenship rights - and not as complementary to it, such as in most Northern contexts where multiculturalism became predominant. Multiculturalist claims are now seen as an alternative tool to fight for basic services and rights that are still not entirely accessible to the poorest groups in Brazil, who are mostly non-white (Grin, 2009). This tendency was clear in the fieldwork findings among contemporary migrants in the country.

In such contexts where an ethnic identity coincides with economic poverty, measures of positive discrimination can bring important contributions to tackle severe inequality. Thus, to provide more equal opportunities, it is still very important to promote measures for compensating social inequalities, as well as reparation actions to tackle historic racism. Nevertheless, the efforts in this direction should keep Brazilian specificities in mind, not applying standard models such as the multiculturalist lines dominant in the global North. Respecting such particularities can avoid the effect observed in certain programmes in France and in the USA that have strengthened the ethnic divisions they intended to combat, precisely by administratively constructing racial categories (Doytcheva, 2005). Thus, policies must take into consideration the classifications already used by the individuals in question. This includes understanding that individuals might consider themselves as belonging to various groups, depending on the context concerned – a circumstance frequently observed among the migrants interviewed in the fieldwork inspiring the following sections of this paper. Individuals might vary their classifications or even consider themselves as belonging to more than one ethnic group, as observed in several editions of the national census in Brazil (IBGE, 2008; 2010) - such as 32% considering themselves as both indigenous and black; 21% as both brown and white; 10% as both white and black; and many other cases with combined answers (IBGE, 2008). Such examples show that the variations of belongings and identities might escape the mosaic of ethnic groups expected in the classic multiculturalist approach.

Additionally, one should keep in mind that this ethnic identity might not necessarily be the main identity that the individual most values and claims for one self, and not necessarily one's core channel for experiencing social encounters and accessing rights and policies.

This context of multiculturalism developed in Brazil is particularly valuable for us to scrutinise our conceptual tools when analysing ethnicity and nation, presenting situations where groups are not built as bounded entities, but are rather clearly built in processual and dynamic terms through multiple encounters. It presents a context particularly fruitful for thinking of ethnicity and nation 'not in terms of substantial groups but in terms of practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organisational routines, institutional forms, political projects and contingent events', as underlined by Brubaker. It stimulates us to think about ethnicization and nationalisation as dynamic political, social, cultural, and psychological processes. Rather than focusing on a static 'group' as an entity, it invites us to view 'groupness' as a concept that varies within different contexts.

Overall, existing accounts of multiculturalism in Brazil can benefit from the perspective of 'encounters', as it provides more flexible lenses for analysing social interactions and more dynamic relations which cover the complexities of the settlement processes of migrants in a new host society. In this direction, Roger Brubaker's approach allows one to go not only beyond the concept of nationality as a core identity channel, but to go further and rethink the very concept of identity as a rigid entity. The dynamic and processual view of 'identification' as opposed to 'identity' can provide a more fertile field for discussing multiculturalism in Brazil - as well as advancing related discussions in other countries and contexts.

### **2- Key Identifications and Encounters Identified in the Fieldwork**

The findings of the fieldwork seemed aligned with the hybrid identities of Brazilian multiculturalism, and analysing these findings through the encounters lenses can be particularly useful. Brubaker's concept of identification also seems to cover fairly appropriately the senses of belongings identified in the fieldwork, as well as to bring useful perspectives to advance mainstream multiculturalism discussions. During the fieldwork interviews there was a frequent emphasis on cultural diversity as a core means for inclusion and general integration, since this facilitates interactions with local people through multiple channels - the possibility of having these multiple encounters was strongly valued by interviewees. This fieldwork was held for around a year between 2016 and 2017 in the two main charity shelters for newly arrived migrants facing vulnerability in Sao Paulo, the largest metropolis of Brazil. The research method included ethnographic observations, focus groups sessions and qualitative individual interviews with open ended and closed questions with 100 migrants living in these two temporary shelters called Centro de Referência e Atendimento para Imigrantes-CRAI and Missão Paz. The group observed and interviewed was composed of men and women from Latin America and Africa, arrived in Brazil for less than an year (most alone but a few with their children), in working age, most with high school educational level, in search for jobs and better socioeconomic conditions in this metropolis.

These migrants were frequently interacting with people from their same country of origin but also much beyond that, through encounters based on other belongings and identities, such as being a woman, being young, speaking a certain language, having a similar professional aim. It was also noticeable how these multiple identity channels were often used as means for these migrants to

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claim for rights and to access policies for pursuing a better life in the new host place. The questionnaire had specific questions about interviewees' main ideas about Brazil before migrating, and many of them responded they used to strongly associate the country with a notion of diversity, indicating this as one of the main reasons for migrating there. When commenting on life after migrating to Brazil, they referred very often to distinct groups through which they access services and have meaningful encounters.

One of the things that interviewees highlighted as most important for living a good life was 'being respected'. When commenting about 'being respected', many participants emphasised the importance of having their identities respected. Many of them commented that they strongly value in their life in Brazil the respect received for their cultural features and habits, and the autonomy to decide how to deal with their identities. It is crucial to underline here that certain ethnic minorities in Brazil still face severe discrimination and exclusion - even so, its general scenario is different from other regions of the world with official persecution of ethnic minorities and formal prohibitions of certain cultural practices (IOM, 2016, UNHCR, 2014). Several interviewees declared they feel more able to express their ethnicity, religiosity and ancestry in Brazil than in the country of origin. Here it is important to keep in mind the parameter of comparison of each person, since her positive evaluation of a circumstance (like Brazil) might not mean an actual positive scenario, but only a slightly better situation compared with her previous context with severe conditions.

To deepen the analysis in this domain, interviewees were asked if they feel they were treated equally to Brazilians; differently but not in a negative way (for example with extra support for being in vulnerability or for having difficulties with language and documentation); or negatively discriminated (based on race, class and whichever characteristic they would mention). A surprisingly majority said they felt treated with equality - which cannot be simply interpreted as reflecting little discrimination in the country. It is plausible to imagine that perhaps these interviewees had not faced any discrimination because they had only spent few months in Brazil, or because they were not entirely familiar with the language and the local cultural practices sufficiently enough to understand discriminatory practices, or because most of them went directly to Sao Paulo, which presents a particular context with a more visible presence of migrants than smaller towns around the country.

At this dimension, it is core to underline that cases of explicit xenophobia have been increasing in contemporary Brazil (O Globo, 2022; G1, 2021; Politize, 2018; Carta Capital, 2017), especially with the increasingly tense and polarised political scenario during Bolsonaro's administration starting in 2019, after the fieldwork was held. Still, the perception and repercussion of these cases is often obscured by other headlines considered 'more urgent' to local political agendas or public discussion. Again, this positive view of Brazilian hospitality among interviewees might also relate to their comparison with portraits of other countries receiving way more migrants and reporting more frequent incidents of xenophobia. Following this, it is not plausible to say that there is less xenophobia in Brazil than in other regions of the world, it is only possible to say that the country has a smaller proportion of migrant influxes than other regions, and that other topics are often considered of higher priority and urgency in Brazilian news (ObMigra, 2020, CRAI, 2015). Proportionally to local populations, migrants are still not a sizable group in Brazil as in other countries - they account for less than 1% of the country's population (ObMigra, 2020; Policia Federal, 2017).

Additionally, although São Paulo city currently has the largest number of migrant influxes of Brazil, migrants are not so strongly visible within its 15-million people population, which is also much bigger than other Brazilian cities (IBGE, 2017). In places in Brazil where the current migrant presence is more visible to locals, cases of xenophobia have been increasingly denounced (G1, 2021, O Tempo, 2016; MigraMundo 2020; El Nacional, 2018).

In this domain, it is important to acknowledge that especially interviewees from black and indigenous descent answered that they did feel discriminated against in their social relations in Brazil. A relevant finding is that this is mostly noticed by individuals who were living in the country for a longer period. Reinforcements of this open and direct discrimination rose after the fieldwork especially with the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president (Espinoza & Brumat, 2018; MigraMundo, 2020). Even before being elected, Bolsonaro made alarming speeches referring to migrants in vulnerability and refugees as 'the scum' of the world, and he was known for serious racist speeches against indigenous and black populations which increased during his mandate until 2022 (Exame, 2016; MigraMundo, 2020).

Finally, interviewees who commented that they feel treated differently but not inferiorly associated it mainly with linguistic or cultural particularities that require special attention or support. Some also related it to a reaction to other factors beyond being a migrant - such as their economic status, lack of education or other social aspects (living far, not wearing a specific dress code, not having a fixed accommodation of their own, etc.). This reflects the common cycle of vulnerabilities that often affect individuals, in which different deprivations can accumulate and reinforce each other, as Preibisch, Dodd and Su (2016) underline.

Besides commenting on such encounters with Brazilians, interviewees commented about their social encounters more generally and it presented a remarkable variety of groups. During the focus groups and ethnographic observations one could notice frequent encounters of the shelters' residents from different countries - especially among residents with similar age, or of same gender, or among people speaking the same language. There were significant encounters of Congolese, Moroccan and Haitian residents through the bonds of the French language. The same pattern was noticeable among Latin Americans, related to their common language and to some shared cultural features in certain countries. It was remarkable that groups would naturally emerge among the youngest residents of the charity shelter and also among the oldest residents. The youngest residents would be gathering especially to listen

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to music, to play with their phones and to watch football together. The smaller group of people older than 50 years old would also spontaneously gather in the shelter halls during the mornings, sharing ideas about some news they read, or sharing advice on job search. On some weekdays, residents from very different countries would go together to a public facility for job search and job placement as they had similar professions or work plans. Another outstanding feature was the solidarity of women residents with those who were pregnant or had small children in the charity shelter, as well as their special support when a woman was ill.

In this sense, it is important to reinforce the freedom of a migrant to operate identities depending on the circumstances, according to the demands of different situations or to one's specific aims. Such identity flexibility can influence the social encounters of a person. These migrants were developing multiple encounters through several channels with Brazilians and with other migrants. In this domain, almost half of participants declared to have more encounters with Brazilians than with compatriots or other migrants. The main reasons they give for that is that they naturally need to interact with Brazilian staff when accessing services, looking for jobs and purchasing things outside the shelter, as well as the Brazilian staff of CRAI and Missão Paz charity shelters who coordinate their activities and provide them daily support. Many participants have also mentioned the importance of interacting with Brazilians to practise Portuguese, to learn more about local habits, and to get more informed about the local market. A quarter of the group declared they interact with similar frequency with Brazilians and compatriots, since they normally chat both with Brazilian staff and with co-residents of CRAI and Missão Paz during meals and common activities. Especially among participants from nationalities more largely present in São Paulo - such as Bolivians, Haitians and Nigerians, a frequently mentioned reason for talking mostly with compatriots was that they still did not know enough Portuguese, and that there were large groups of their compatriots to interact with in an easier way. Finally, ten interviewees declared that they have almost no social encounters, indicating an alarming isolation and loneliness which might affect their settlement dynamics as well as their mental health. The charity centres CRAI and Missão Paz provide psychological assistance especially for those with previous traumatic experience and for newly arrived residents, aiming to smooth such isolation.

Participants have also been asked about which social encounters they believe help the most in the settlement and social inclusion processes. Among those commenting that interactions with Brazilians were the most useful, the most frequent reasons related to Brazilians' capacity to teach local habits and to indicate jobs, as well as the possibility to talk in Portuguese. The most mentioned benefits from encounters with compatriots were the recommendation of specific services for migrants; the possibility to share aspirations and struggles as a migrant from similar background; having cultural similarities; having a common language; and smoothing homesickness about the country of origin. Such findings slightly differ from some studies addressing migrants facing vulnerability in contexts in the global North, which have shown a more significant interaction and importance of networks with compatriots (Guilmoto and Sandron, 2003; Hodgett & Clark, 2011; Petit, 2007). This could relate to the fact that the interviewees of this interviewed group in São Paulo were living in a charity shelter, which can be linked to a lack of previous networks in São Paulo that could have helped them with arrival, accommodation and basic support in their initial months. It could be the case that these individuals in particular would have a weaker tie with compatriot networks than migrants outside a charity shelter.

When asked if they feel socially included and integrated in Brazil, 78 interviewees answered positively and only 8 negatively, with the rest 14 providing answers in the middle, mainly justifying that it was still too early to judge. The most mentioned reasons for difficulties integrating were lack of knowledge of Portuguese and not having a job. Most of them declared that working would make them feel more participative and integrated in the new host society. These findings align with studies such as Guilmoto and Sandron (2003), Hodgett & Clark (2011) and Petit (2007), which have also revealed the importance of working and mastering the local language for a deeper sense of inclusion in the host community. Still, in these studies the general feelings of integration were much weaker than in this fieldwork findings, which presented surprisingly high satisfactions, probably related to the special care and attention they were receiving as residents of the charities where interviews were held.

Overall, most fieldwork findings seem to reinforce the importance of identity flexibility for encounters, and the particular stimulation that the Brazilian context presents for migrants in this direction. Such possibility to interact with several groups beyond national or ethnic belongings is crucial to pursue an actual sense of multiculturalism that respects individual liberties to operate one's identities. The identity hybridity developed in Brazil seems to stimulate such encounters through different groups. These multiple identifications were also frequently used by these migrants to claim rights and services destined to multiple groups to which they consider themselves to belong. Such individuals organically develop encounters with these different groups to achieve specific goals or to claim for specific things.

### **3- Rights Claims through Different Identifications and Encounters**

National and ethnic frames are seen as increasingly relevant and legitimate nowadays, being strategically used by individuals to pursue clan, clique or class interests, as highlighted by Brubaker (2002). The Brazilian contemporary scenario for migrants and asylum seekers present a particularly significant context for this. A key particularity about the Brazilian context is that its asylum system allows an unusual flexibility for migrants to claim rights, basic services and assistance from the State despite nationality criteria. Within the Brazilian asylum system, every migrant has the right to request asylum without a preliminary external judgement

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about its eligibility. All judgement about one's case and request is done only at further stages of the asylum process (with law professionals analysing it according to international and national regulations), so nothing refrains any migrant to apply for asylum in the first place. Another particularity of Brazilian legislation is that, while migrants are waiting for their asylum request to be judged (which normally takes several months and even years), they are given a provisional document which allows them to access the main public services and State support as any national citizen (Waldely, Virgens & Almeida, 2014; Severo, 2015). Given this particular scenario, migrants facing vulnerability in Brazil have increasingly used this asylum path to remain documented in the country until they find a formal occupation that would grant them a visa (IOM, 2017). This context gives an interesting illustration of groupism processes with strategic aims - where this newly formed group of asylum seekers is not reified as a given entity but as the result of a dynamic process with certain expectations.

A significant part of these asylum claimants acknowledge that they would not qualify as refugees according to formal international law - since many of them are not coming from a war zone nor escaping direct persecution, neither presenting the main reasons indicated in the official Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (UNHCR, 2014, IOM, 2017). Still, these individuals did leave serious socioeconomic deprivation in their places of origin and are facing poverty and vulnerability in the new host society. The encounters of these migrants with the authorities operating asylum processes in Brazil have sparked a new identification of these migrants - and the encounter of these migrants with others in similar situations reinforces this groupism process. This group unites individuals from very different nationalities and ethnicities but who share a common sense of identification and belonging associated with their migration and vulnerability status as well as with their aims in the new host society and their sense of entitlement for rights and dignity regardless where.

It is important to acknowledge that these ineligible requests have been flooding the limited asylum system in Brazil and consequently delaying support for clearly eligible cases, which demand urgent asylum status to access due protection (IOM, 2017). Nevertheless, it is also crucial to understand that such requests present legitimate claims for minimum conditions for a decent life, in line with the human rights to which every person should be entitled, regardless of nationality. In this dimension, the legal and social channels existing in the Brazilian multiculturalism structure provide almost a substitute for citizenship rights, allowing migrants to claim for such rights with this sense of belonging to a group in vulnerability - and at the same time as part of the widest group of human beings who should all be entitled to a decent living. These migrants from different nationalities having a similar vulnerability get together to claim for specific support to their common/shared fragile situation, whereas they also base this claim on the dignity which should be provided to every human being - reinforcing their belonging to a broader human group. The encounters of such migrants in activist actions to demand rights have reinforced these blended senses of belongings which come up in many narratives of the interviewees of the fieldwork.

This scenario also reminds us about Brubaker's highlight about how ethnicity and nationality are above all a cognitive phenomenon, a way of interpreting the world - and that, as such, it works through categories and category-based common sense knowledge (Brubaker, 2002, p.184). 'Ethnic categories shape institutional as well as informal cognition and recognition. (...) They not only structure perception and interpretation in the ebb and flow of everyday interaction but channel conduct through official classifications and organisational routines. Thus ethnic (and other) categories may be used to allocate rights, regulate actions, distribute benefits and burdens, construct category-specific institutions' (p.184). This seems to be precisely how such migrants have been behaving in the context analysed in Brazil. Additionally, this also helps us to not only assert that ethnicity and nationhood are constructed, but to see *how* they are constructed, noticing 'how and when people identify themselves, perceive others, experience the world and interpret their predicaments in racial, ethnic or national terms rather than other terms', as underlined by Brubaker, (p.175). The context analysed here help us understand how some encounters can lead to groupness which can solidify in some situations while remaining only latent in others. As Brubaker highlights, 'declining curves of groupness have not been studied systematically (...) once ratcheted up to a high level, groupness does not remain there out of inertia. If not sustained at high levels through specific social and cognitive mechanisms, it will tend to decline, as everyday interests reassert themselves (2002, p.177). This tendency was noticeable in the fieldwork, with observed individuals building groups in encounters associated with migrant status, nationality and ethnicity when this was relevant and useful (for instance for the asylum request to guarantee rights and support, as explained), but not necessarily remaining with this strong group belonging once other necessities, interests or aims appeared.

In this direction, interviewees strongly valued the possibility of accessing public services and socialising through various channels beyond their migrant status and nationality. Many interviewees praised the possibility to access policies in Brazil not uniquely through the mediation of associations for migrants' assistance. For instance, participants who were pregnant or had small children underlined the importance of the activities for maternity support promoted in public clinics for both Brazilian and migrant mothers together. Similarly, young interviewees praised the public services providing technical training for both Brazilian and migrant young people together. By embracing this right to access services and participate in social life through varied groups, the person can play with multiple identities as they find suitable according to the context. Such identity flexibility is key to promote the social inclusion of migrants in a new host society, therefore policy making should strongly consider this. We should keep in mind that these

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individuals do not have needs and aspirations related solely to their migration status and nationality, but to all the further aspects of their identity and their situation, such as their gender, age, race, work, studies, interests etc. Thus, besides specific programmes destined to migrants to address the particular needs of this group, it is also key for policies to stimulate these migrant beneficiaries to develop encounters in further groups.

### 4- Final Remarks and Key Contributions

The paper analysed how groupism processes happen during multiple encounters of migrants in Sao Paulo, and demonstrated how the perspective of encounters (and the dynamic identifications which happen during them) seems more appropriate for this analysis rather than a perspective through set identities operating rigid relations through groups. In this direction, the paper also demonstrated how dominant multiculturalism discussions can benefit from further exploring non-mainstream contexts such as Brazil's construction of Multiculturalism, as it brings fruitful elements of hybridism and flexibility to the analysis.

Starting the analysis by groups, one tends to search what groups demand or desire, how they conceive themselves and the others, and how they behave in relation to other groups, as Brubaker warned and as we avoided doing in this paper. Analysis through this substantialist concept of groups lead us to naturally attribute identity, agency and desires to groups. By contrast, analysing the categories spontaneously developed during encounters, as done in this paper, leads us to explore processes and relations rather than reified substances. This allows us to see how such categories are used by individuals to channel and organise processes, and to identify situations where these categories get institutionalised (potentially starting to being seen as groups). By doing so, this paper has tried to not presume the relation between categories and groups as it is commonly done in mainstream literature - by contrast, it has tried to distinguish them and to analyse the levels of groupness associated with certain categories in the migration context observed. Such an angle can show us ways in which nationhood and ethnicity can exist and operate without the existence of national or ethnic groups as substantial entities, following and deepening Brubaker's advice.

Moreover, the paper has underlined how important it is to enable migrants to socialise and access services through different groups, so that they can operate their multiple identities, engage in groups or create groups, and develop various encounters, all according to what they find suitable in each context. Initiatives in this direction can stimulate migrants to participate in the new host society through various categories with whom they share elements (beyond national or ethnic groups only), and enable them to have encounters through other categories to which they might want to belong. For policy making and social initiatives, this means for instance promoting awareness among migrant women about services provided for female care in general, or keeping young migrants informed about activities available for the general young public in the city, or informing migrants of a certain professional sector about job vacancies in this sector, etc. Such a flexibility is core for enabling the encounters of these individuals to reflect the multiplicity of their dynamic and fluid identities.

Overall, the paper contributed to a further scrutiny of the reified concept of 'group' dominant in mainstream literature; to propose a more comprehensive analysis through the perspective of categories spontaneously emerging from autonomous encounters; to expand the notions of identities in migration contexts beyond nationhood and ethnicity; and to suggest policy orientations which enable encounters to happen through multiple senses of identities and belongings.

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