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"The team members were very tolerant": social interactional ideologies and power in an intercultural context

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Abstract: Speakers may resort to different inferences and expectations in intercultural encounters. These expectations are influenced by speakers' socialization processes in speech communities and networks, as well as by the local interactional demands and power dynamics in the communicative situation. While interactional sociolinguistic studies have unveiled intercultural mismatches in how contextualization asymmetries operate in the here-and-now of interaction, less attention has been given to speakers' normative expectations of good and bad social encounters, as reflected in retrospective accounts of interactional experiences. This article uses critical discursive psychology to examine social interactional ideologies, as German and Chinese students (home and exchange students, respectively) reflect on their experiences in a virtual intercultural game. As an analytical tool, we use the notion of "interpretative repertoires," i.e., culturally shared ways to construct generally recognizable versions of objects. Our analysis of reflection reports written by the game players shows repertoires addressing ideal behaviors and ideal group features, which tend to place the German students in a more favorable position than the Chinese students. We discuss how local and historical power dynamics are blended in the repertoires and point to the need to critically engage with the social interactional ideologies that exist – but often go unnoticed – in intercultural settings.

Abstract: Sprecher können in interkulturellen Begegnungen auf unterschiedliche Schlussfolgerungen und Erwartungen zurückgreifen. Diese Erwartungen werden sowohl durch die Sozialisationsprozesse der Sprecher in Sprachgemeinschaften und

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Netzwerken als auch durch die lokalen interaktionalen Anforderungen und Machtverhältnisse der kommunikativen Situation beeinflusst. Während interaktional-soziolinguistische Studien interkulturelle Missverständnisse aufgedeckt haben, wie Kontextualisierungsasymmetrien im Hier und Jetzt der Interaktion wirken, wurde weniger Aufmerksamkeit auf die normativen Erwartungen der Sprecher an gelungene und ungelungene soziale Begegnungen gelegt, wie sie in retrospektiven Berichten über Interaktionserfahrungen zum Ausdruck kommen. Dieser Artikel verwendet die kritische diskursive Psychologie, um soziale interaktionale Ideologien zu untersuchen, während deutsche und chinesische Studierende (Heim-und Austauschstudierende) über ihre Erfahrungen in einem virtuellen interkulturellen Spiel reflektieren. Als analytisches Werkzeug verwenden wir das Konzept der „interpretativen Repertoires", d. h. kulturell geteilte Weisen, allgemein erkennbare Versionen von Objekten zu konstruieren. Unsere Analyse der Reflexionsberichte der Spielteilnehmer zeigt Repertoires, die ideale Verhaltensweisen und ideale Gruppenmerkmale ansprechen, die dazu neigen, die deutschen Studierenden in eine günstigere Position zu bringen als die chinesischen Studierenden. Wir diskutieren, wie lokale und historische Machtverhältnisse in den Repertoires vermischt werden, und weisen auf die Notwendigkeit hin, sich kritisch mit den sozialen interaktionalen Ideologien auseinanderzusetzen, die in interkulturellen Kontexten existieren, aber oft unbemerkt bleiben.

Keywords: intercultural communication; ideological dilemmas; interpretative repertoire; power; social interactional ideologies

1 Introduction

Every one of us entertains some expectations and ideals of what social interaction will look like when it is *good*. These ideals are reflected, for example, in the ways in which we explicitly instruct our children to behave when interacting with others – that is, how they should listen to what others are saying, learn to wait for their own turn to speak, keep calm and constructive and not use aggressive and offensive language. These ideals are also reflected in the ways in which people construct their accounts of past interactional experiences, highlighting their successful or less successful features.

The ideals of social interaction become particularly pronounced in contexts of intercultural communication, as the ideals are likely to differ across communities. In the field of interactional sociolinguistics, particularly in the work by John Gumperz, mismatches in intercultural communication have been examined with reference to speakers relying on contextualization conventions learned in their primary socialization (Berger and Lückmann 1991 [1966]). The notion of contextualization conventions refers to verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal cues leading the hearer to assign certain

judgments of communicative intent to the speaker in the here and now of the encounter. However, as we will argue below, mismatches in intercultural communication can also occur on another level, as speakers account for their interactional experiences in retrospect and thereby implicitly distinguish ideal interactional behaviors from undesirable ones.

In this article, we examine asymmetries in speakers' underlying ideals of social interaction. Concretely, we investigate the interpretative repertoires that German and Chinese students – home and exchange students, respectively – draw on when accounting for their experiences of participating in an intercultural game. These repertoires point to the existence of multiple parallel "social interactional ideologies" and reveal, we argue, a hierarchy that places the German students participating in the intercultural game in point into a more favorable position than the Chinese ones.

In what follows, we will review the literature on social and intercultural interaction, which will lead us to introduce our key notion of *social interactional ideologies*. Thereafter, we will describe our participants and our dataset, which consists of students' written reflections on their interactional experiences in the virtual intercultural simulation game *Megacities* (Bolten 2015a), as well as our analytical approach, which is *critical discursive psychology* (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This is followed by our main findings showing the social interactional ideologies that underlie students' orientations to ideal behaviors and ideal group features in encounters, as well as the students' orientations to the relations between different ideals. Finally, we will suggest that these social interactional ideologies may exhibit hidden asymmetries which, in the specific context of the intercultural game in point, may promote certain perspectives while marginalizing others.

2 Social interactional ideologies

As we grow up as social beings, we experience different socialization trajectories and are exposed, on a daily basis, to normative expectations of what *good* and *bad* social interactional behaviors and encounters look like. Such ideals are further specified in various stocks of interactional knowledge (Peräkylä and Vehviläinen 2003) that professionals in various institutional contexts, such as medical, nursing, therapeutic, and counseling settings, seek to adhere to in their daily work. Most prevalently, however, the ideals of interaction are implicit in the interactional encounters themselves, in which any failure to satisfy the expectations of appropriate conduct runs the risk of becoming an accountable and sanctionable matter (Heritage 1984). Such ideals of social interaction are the air that we breathe – always there but difficult to grasp due to their invisibility. The invisibility of the ideals points to their ideological nature – something that we, in this article, seek to capture with the notion of *social interactional ideologies*.

While social interactional ideologies are likely to remain invisible in the course of the fleeting turn-by-turn exchanges of interaction, they can become more graspable and visible in the retrospective accounts of social events. This is the case specifically when the teller of the events has experienced them as somehow problematic. For example, a person may complain about a lunch conversation in which they have not been given the opportunity to say anything at all. In so doing, they invoke the notion of symmetrical participation as an ideal, which in this case has failed to be fulfilled. As famously demonstrated by Harold Garfinkel (1967) in his breaching experiments, when participants' implicit expectations of appropriate interactional conduct are violated, they are effectively brought to the fore.

One key context in which actors may become heightenedly aware of the ideals of social interaction is intercultural communication. Intercultural situations have been characterized as involving unfamiliarity (Bolten 2015b [2007]). From a social constructionist perspective, individuals can be described as legitimate participants in groups ranging from activity-based gatherings – e.g., a book club – to imagined national communities – e.g., the Germans or the Chinese, with *cultures* of their own, i.e., conventionalized ways of thinking and acting that work as simple recipes for members' social lives (Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966]). Being in an intercultural situation means navigating all these contexts where the old *recipe* does not lead to the same results (Schütz 1944), since people in other cultures have their own recipes for navigating social life. Thus, through the analysis of interactions and interviews with key participants, Gumperz (1982, 1996) showed mismatches in so-called "inter-ethnic" communication and thereby revealed systematic power asymmetries which often go unnoticed by speakers themselves.

Interestingly, in laying out the basis for Interactional Sociolinguistics, Gumperz (1999) engaged with Garfinkel's ideas. Gumperz (1999: 456) acknowledged that Garfinkel's work provides evidence of sociocultural background knowledge in everyday life connected to a "deeply internalized, and for the most part unverbalized, sense of social order" (Gumperz 1999: 456). Yet, according to Gumperz, "apart from advocating that analysts resort to historical methods to trace how specific understandings come about so as to recover what types of knowledge are at work, Garfinkel gives no specifics of how interpretive processes work in everyday talk" (Gumperz 1999: 456). Thus, empirically unveiling how such processes work in everyday speech events involving speakers from different backgrounds has become the hallmark of Interactional Sociolinguistics (see e.g., Gumperz 1982, 2001; Rampton 2021). However, as Gumperz (1999: 463) himself acknowledged, speakers also rely on "ideologically based and contextually specific presuppositions about mutual rights and obligations" and "assumptions about individuals' personal characteristics." While these broader inferencing processes, learned largely through socialization in speech communities and networks, are considered in interactional sociolinguistic investigations, they have not been granted

systematic attention in the interactional sociolinguistic methodology. Even though they are expected to be unveiled from ethnographic work with the investigated group (e.g., by conducting interviews with key informants), there are no specific guidelines on how to derive culturally-based presuppositions – not immediately visible in the form of contextualization cues – from the collected data.[1]

We want to argue that those culturally-based presuppositions that inform the production and interpretation of people's interactional behaviors (and which we refer to as "social interactional ideologies") can be best examined through a fine-grained qualitative analysis of speakers' retrospective accounts of intercultural encounters. From this perspective, our work aligns with the research on language ideologies (Gal 2023) and ideologies of communication (Spitzmüller 2022). However, with our notion of "social interactional ideologies", we want to highlight that our target of inquiry is not limited to "language" or "communication" but extends to a broader range of phenomena, including embodied and tacit aspects of social conduct.

We maintain that a detailed analysis of social interactional ideologies that underlie and are implicit in people's ways of talking about intercultural social interaction can point to what otherwise remains in the shadows of interculturality – that is, power relations, hierarchies, and asymmetries – some of which embedded in the discourses of interculturality themselves. In general, power is deeply intertwined with ideals. Power is a *consequence* of social interactional ideals, as accountability demands are systematically directed at those who deviate from the ideals (Stevanovic 2023) and freedom from such demands is a defining feature of power (Lukes 1978: 639–640). Social interactional ideals are also an *outcome* of power, as it is social power that has shaped collective understandings of interactional ideals in long historical processes, prioritizing the interactional skills and strengths of some people and marginalizing those of others (Weiste et al. 2024). Such marginalization in turn leads to difficulties to make publicly sense of one's social experiences (on "hermeneutical marginalization", see Fricker 2007). Consideration of the social interactional ideologies that underlie intercultural communication thus becomes particularly relevant in this era, where many views about what constitutes "good" intercultural interaction have come to be treated as self-evident, and in which some problematic experiences can thus become unarticulable.

3 Methods

The intercultural game *Megacities,* created by the German interculturalist Jürgen Bolten (2015a), has been designed as an intercultural-training intervention to help

1 Some sociolinguists have claimed that Interactional Sociolinguistics has established itself as a set of principles rather than a distinctive research methodology (e.g., Rampton 2021: 13, Gal 2014).

players reflect upon and develop intercultural competencies. In the game, participants get together around the accomplishment of a joint project: the creation of a development plan for an abandoned area, called the *Wasteland* in the game. Upon the beginning of the game, each student is randomly allocated to a city surrounding the Wasteland. Each of the three surrounding cities are tasked with brainstorming ideas for the Wasteland and later negotiating with the remaining cities to try and come up with the best solutions for the Wasteland which will, in the long run, benefit all the three cities. Thus, the tasks in the game involve brainstorming, presenting ideas, negotiating, and making decisions.

The game has been adapted for research purposes and has been played three times over the video-conferencing application Zoom as part of a course on intercultural communication. The first game took place in the summer term of 2021 while the second and third games happened in the winter term of 2021–2022. Each game comprised five sessions of 2 h each distributed over a period of five weeks. As a result of the game sessions, a database has been compiled containing more than 50 h of video-mediated interactions as well as reflection reports by 73 participants. Participants in the three games that comprise our corpus were enrolled in European higher education institutions. Out of the 73 participants, 25 were Germans and 25 were Chinese (the remaining ones were from Finland, Italy, Switzerland, Ireland, Turkey, and the US). While the German participants were home students, the players from China were exchange students who were living in Germany at the time the game was implemented.

In general, the German participants were visibly more active than the Chinese students in the interactions in the game: they took the leadership within the groups, facilitated discussions, and negotiated ideas with the other groups. For this study, we focused on the reflections written by the German and the Chinese students, as those were the groups with the most representatives and also because participants themselves oriented to cross-cultural comparisons between these two imagined communities in several moments of the game (see e.g. Oliveira 2024) and in the reflection reports.[2] The language of the oral exchanges and the reports was English as a lingua franca.

The guiding questions for the reflection reports were provided to participants after the five sessions of the game. Those were the questions: (1) How do you feel about your participation in the intercultural game?, (2) What moved/impressed you the most,

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2 While our approach to intercultural communication acknowledges the methodological need to move beyond essentialist understandings of culture as ‘national culture’ (cf. Halualani and Nakayama 2010; Piller 2012, 2017), it also aligns with reflections that advise against overlooking those categories that appear to be relevant for the participants themselves (e.g., Schröder 2024; Tange and Jenks 2023; Wolf 2015).

personally and in the group?, (3) What situation/which moment broadened your knowledge/perspective?, (4) What do you personally take away from this experience (about yourself, about collaboration, about communication)? (5) Both your team and the whole group were very diverse: (5a) What differences and/or similarities did you observe?, and (5b) What are the advantages and disadvantages of differences and/or similarities for collaboration?, (6) What are the group's take-aways (in learning experiences), in your opinion?, and (7) What else would you like to share as feedback?

The reports submitted by the participants had different formats, from relatively short ones – providing rather short and neutral answers to each of the questions – to longer ones – comprising reflections upon the game, culture, and interculturality as well as examples of how some experiences in the game impacted the player's impressions of culture(s), and group dynamics among other topics. The reports were commonly written as texts, and not structured as separate answers to each of the questions. Mentions of national culture were frequently made, both in a positive and negative light; however, we deliberately chose not to include them in this article to avoid the risk of them being interpreted at face value.

Previous investigations using data from the *Megacities* game have leaned mostly on the analysis of the video-mediated interactions (e.g., Bolten and Berhault 2018; Oliveira 2024; Oliveira and Stevanovic 2024). While a few studies have been conducted that focused on the players' perceptions of the game as displayed in their reflection reports, they were based on content and thematic analyses (e.g. Conti et al. 2022; Stang and Zhao 2020).

In this study, our analytical approach draws from *critical discursive psychology* (CDP; e.g., Edley 2001; Edley and Wetherell 1997, 2001; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003; Reynolds et al. 2007; Wetherell 1998). Critical discursive psychology is a form of discourse analysis that bridges micro-level discursive psychology and macro-level post-structuralist discourse studies (Wetherell 1998). It follows the ideas of micro-social constructionism in assuming that language use does not simply reflect reality as it is but, essentially, constructs versions of that reality (Burr 2015). In our study, we use the analytic toolkit of critical discursive psychology to look systematically into participants' reflections on communicative situations to identify how language is used to construct the ideals of social interaction, as participants discuss their past experiences of interactions during the *Megacities* game. As the game is labeled as an "intercultural game" aimed at developing intercultural competencies, it is reasonable to assume that participants strive to present themselves as good students who are sensitive to cultural differences, demonstrating values associated with intercultural competence, such as openness, respect, and tolerance. At the same time, the players experienced challenges and problems which they might want to attribute to "cultural differences" circulating broadly in societal discourses. In our data set, both orientations – i.e., to "intercultural values" and "cultural differences" – were indeed observable across the dataset, pointing

to a certain dilemma experienced by the players when writing about their experiences during the game: while the task prompted them to give an honest account of their interactions, which may or may not include negative reactions to “cultural difference”, the overall notion of interculturality called for a more restrained approach in this regard, based on respect and tolerance.

Therefore, we found the CDP concepts of *interpretative repertoires* and *ideological dilemmas* especially useful for analyzing the data. Interpretative repertoires refer to culturally shared and established ways of language use that construct a certain, generally recognizable version of some object (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell 1998; Wetherell and Potter 1988, 1992). Interpretative repertoires involve “recognizable routines of connected arguments, explanations, evaluations and descriptions which often depend on familiar anecdotes, illustrations, tropes or clichés” (Wetherell 2006: 154). In other words, they are cultural resources for meaning making, and as such, part of a group’s cultural common sense (Edley 2001) or “lived ideology” (Billig et al. 1988). Interpretative repertoires are “relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world” (Edley 2001: 198), which are based on a range of linguistic resources that can be drawn upon in everyday social interactions. In addition to (spoken) everyday interactions, we maintain that interpretative repertoires can be likewise identified from (written) retrospective accounts, which in this case are *about* social interactional events and encounters. This is because all language use relies on cultural resources of meaning making and orientation to a need to make oneself intelligible through some conventionalized ways (e.g. Fairclough 1992).

These repertoires also invoke specific, and sometimes stigmatized, positions for the participants (e.g., Stevanovic et al. 2022), which highlights the ideological nature of repertoires: they are part of the existing social and moral order (Wetherell 2006, 2016). This lived ideology, in turn, has been argued to be dilemmatic by nature (Billig et al. 1988). Different ways of talking about things and events develop as opposing positions and may create ideological dilemmas that people reflect on and try to manage in their language use (Edley 2001). For instance, in a study focusing on interviews with Clubhouse members and staff in Finland, Mäntysaari et al. (2024) showed that participants’ opinions resort to 6 interpretative repertoires organized within 3 pairs of ideological dilemmas in relation to decision-making: participation versus efficiency; members’ passivity versus agency; and active resistance against power structures versus acceptance of power structures as partially necessary. Using CDP in an earlier study on young adults’ political participation in England, Condor and Gibson (2007) conducted conversational interviews and identified dilemmatic relations between active citizenship and liberal individualism.

Our analytic process started in a data-driven way guided by our goal of finding those interpretative repertoires on which the players draw when discussing their interactional experiences. We read the reports repeatedly, focusing on nuances and contradictions and searching for implicit patterns of language use that go beyond the mere content of the text. Our criterion for considering the possibility that a pattern constituted an interpretative repertoire was that it exhibited internal logic, coherence, and consistency. After our first extensive round of analysis, we had identified a total of 21 different repertoires. The number of repertoires used in each reflection report varied from two to nine, and we extracted the text segments related to each repertoire under a separate heading. In the next analytic rounds, we considered the repertoires critically as for their potential conceptual overlap, which led us to merge excerpts into fewer repertoire categories, and we finally grouped them into two sets: ideal behaviors, addressing social interactional ideologies around self and other, and ideal group, concerning the interactional dynamics in a group. At this point, we also further considered the inherent logic of each repertoire. As the repertoires were characterized by opposing content (such as the ideals of listening vs. being vocal), we structured them around pairs that reflected this contrast, which also allowed us to consider the possibility of dilemmatic relations between some of the repertoires. Finally, we went through the data extracts related to each repertoire, seeking to select those that represent the logic associated with each repertoire in a maximally condensed form. As some of the repertoires were more common among the Chinese students and others among the German students, we selected some of the data extracts to reflect these unequal distributions. In this article, we present the outcome of the analysis, organized with reference to the types of ideals associated with each repertoire pair.

In the following, we describe a set of interpretative repertoires, each of which rallying around a specific cultural ideal of social interaction. These ideals in turn are about how to behave in interaction and how the interactional dynamics of the group should be. As we will demonstrate in our analysis below, many of these ideals are contradictory in relation to each other, which raises the question about the existence of ideological dilemmas between them. As will be seen, we first take a more descriptive approach, and a full discussion of the possibility of hidden asymmetries in the German and Chinese students' use of repertoires will be taken up later in the text (Section 5).

4 Findings

The table below shows the interpretative repertoires identified from our dataset, as clustered into two groups: ideal behavior (Section 4.1) and ideal group (Section 4.2).

Interpretative repertoires		
IDEAL BEHAVIOR		
Type of behavior in the here and now:	listening	being vocal
Distribution of engagement in time:	prepared contribution	spontaneous involvement
Stakes and goals of interaction:	task completion	affective participation
Sources of participation failure:	individual constraints	group influence
IDEAL GROUP		
Distribution of labor within the group:	complementary roles	equal participatory roles
The nature of direction within the group:	leadership as a gift	dominance as an obstacle
Group atmosphere:	group harmony	freedom to disagree
'Learnables':	learning from others	learning to deal with others

In Figure 1, we show the distribution of interpretative repertoires per group (Chinese students vs. German students). The raw quantities were normalized to fit a common and comparable scale.[3]

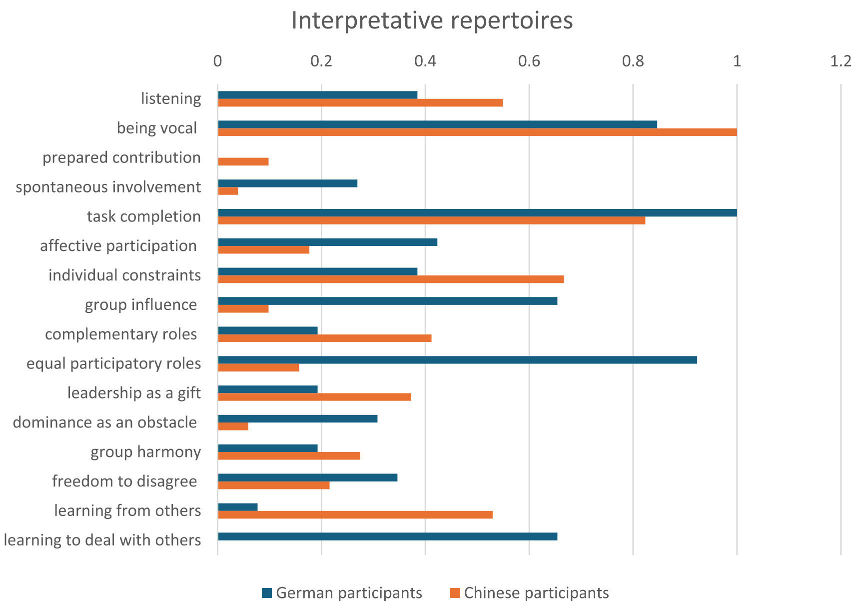

Figure 1: Interpretative repertoires identified in reports written by participants.

3 Normalization is the process to scale the data to a uniform range (0–1), allowing for direct comparison across groups irrespective of the magnitude of their original values. This approach enhances interpretability by ensuring that variations reflect relative differences rather than absolute magnitudes.

While the graph provides a glimpse of tendencies within the two groups, it is the qualitative analysis shown in the next sections that provides for an understanding of nuances identified in the dataset. The coming subsection revolves around players' repertoires dealing with ideal social interactional behavior. After that, we will look into repertoires of ideal groups.

4.1 Ideal behavior

The first set of interpretative repertoires that the students invoked and drew upon in their accounts of experiences of interactions during the *Megacities* game is centered around ideals of interactional behavior. More specifically, these ideals refer to the type of behavior in the here and now (*listening* vs. *being vocal*), distribution of engagement in time (*prepared contributions* vs. *spontaneous involvement*), stakes and goals of interaction (*task completion* vs. *affective participatory orientation*), and sources of participation failure (*individual constraints* vs. *group influence*). Next, we will discuss these four pairs of ideals one by one.

4.1.1 Type of behavior in the here and now: listening versus being vocal

A central social interaction skill, which necessitates both practice and deliberate effort, is *listening* (Bodie et al. 2013; Nemec et al. 2017). According to the interpretative repertoire that emphasizes the need of listening, this skill is not only about hearing what others say, but it also involves "seeing the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, sensing how it feels to the person, achieving his or her frame of reference about the subject being discussed" (Rogers and Roethlisberger 1991: 106). Listening thus constitutes a behavior that participants in ideal interactional encounters should be capable of doing.

This interpretative repertoire is often drawn upon in the written reflections of interactional experiences in the *Megacities* game, as shown in Figure 1. In Extract 1, a Chinese student connects the ideal of listening to the acquisition of *new ideas*, the drasticness of which is underlined by the affectively-loaded notion of listening opening up a *new world of ideas* – that is, a plethora of insights that one would otherwise remain ignorant about.

(1) (Chinese, P12G1)
*I always got **new ideas** by listening to what others had to say, and it was like I **opened up a new world of ideas** about how I could think about this issue.*

In Extract 2, a German student approaches the ideal of listening from the opposite perspective by describing those who do not listen as *stubborn* and *egocentric*.

Listening to others is a choice of taking *time to listen*. Instead of emphasizing the capacity of listening to boost learning, it is presented as a natural part of flexible and generous interactional behavior.

(2) (German, P03G2)
In these types of situations in the past I have negotiated with very ***stubborn and egocentric*** *people who might not have always* ***taken the time to listen*** *to others.*

The apparent opposite of listening is to contribute to social interaction by *being vocal*, which also constitutes a key feature of successful interactional encounters. According to the interpretative repertoire that emphasizes the need to be vocal in interaction, the mere act of speaking in a social situation is a sign of friendliness (Komaki et al. 1980) and leads to the reduction of social distance in terms of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). In addition, any fruitful group dialogue is based on the group members daring, and being able to, participate actively in the ongoing discussion – a goal that group facilitators in various contexts seek to reach through their specific interactional practices (e.g., Stevanovic et al. 2022).

In Extract 3, a German student orients to the ideal of being vocal by evaluating positively their interactional experiences, the essential feature of which was their own status of being *really engaged in conversation*. The student highlights the normative nature of such engagement by pointing to its critical role in constituting the conversation as *real* and by contrasting it to those conversations that *die* and have much *awkward silence*.

(3) (German, P26G1)
I got ***really engaged in conversation****, debating, and negotiating. This motivation I found necessary in order to allow for a conversation online that can resemble* ***real*** *conversations. In many classes,* ***conversations die*** *and there is a high percentage of* ***awkward silence****.*

The same ideal is also oriented to in Extract 4, in which a Chinese student describes themselves as falling short with respect to it and as a person who *should learn* to be more vocal.

(4) (Chinese, P19G1)
I ***should learn*** *to express my views more directly to a certain extent, specifically: by actively participating in expressing my views at each step of the discussion, rather than completing the task in silence and giving my opinion in a written form.*

Thus, the two interpretative repertoires that emphasized the need to listen, on the one hand, and to be vocal, on the other, were drawn upon in the written reflections by both the Chinese and the German students. These groups, however,

positioned themselves differently with respect to the two sides of the repertoire pair, as our qualitative analysis of the repertoires within this set reveals. Even when Figure 1 shows similar quantitative tendencies in both the German and the Chinese groups, our in-depth analysis shows how the positive descriptions of interactional experiences by the Chinese students specifically highlight the virtues and values of listening (Extract 1). In contrast, similarly positive descriptions by the German students emphasized the need of vocal engagement (Extract 3). Furthermore, while the non-satisfaction of the ideal with respect to listening was presented as a matter of (egocentric) choice (Extract 2), a failure not to be vocal enough was presented as a learnable – a challenge that necessitates continuous and conscious effort from the participants (Extract 4). While the use of these repertoires may be considered to align with East-West stereotypes, this is not the main point in our analysis. Instead, what is crucial are the ways in which the Chinese and German students positioned themselves with respect to these ideals, which implies a power asymmetry: Who already possesses the skills needed for the activity? Who needs to learn them?

4.1.2 Distribution of engagement in time: prepared contributions versus spontaneous involvement

While group members are expected to get engaged in the tasks and activities of the group, determining the distribution of that engagement in time is another matter. According to one interpretative repertoire, which was drawn upon only by the Chinese students in our data, high-quality interaction necessitates *prepared contributions* (see Figure 1). This ideal may be seen in Extract 5, in which a Chinese student accounts for a need of *writing down* and *thinking* with reference to such preparation leading to a smoother self-expression.

(5) (Chinese, P01G2)
But I get some sense of participation during the groupwork, we always write down our views and ideas for a commend[4] *theme. It's* ***writing down*** *after* ***thinking****, so it will be* ***much smoother to express with others****.*

Also in Extract 6, there is a linkage between thinking and speaking but here the need for preparation is accounted for with reference to a *fear* of saying something that is *not correct*. In stating that they *still lack* sufficient capacity to express themselves, the student constructs the problem as temporary – something that they expect will be solved over time.

4 We assume this is a transfer from the German adjective commend (in English, coming), as the Chinese exchange student was also learning German at the time of the data collection.

(6) (Chinese, P12G2)
I still lack *this positive expression. I always have a little* ***fear*** *that what I say is* ***not correct*** *and will not be recognized by everyone. So I always spend a lot of time* ***thinking*** *about what I want to say* ***before I speak****.*

In contrast to the Chinese students, the German participants drew on an interpretative repertoire that emphasized the need of spontaneous involvement in the here-and-now of the encounter (see Figure 1). In Extract 7, a failure to participate is associated with the conversation lacking in *inspiring* and *personal* characteristics, which simultaneously underlines the desirability of such characteristics.

(7) (German, P03G1)
Very little participation of some of my fellow students which made an ***inspiring*** *and* ***personal exchange*** *quite difficult.*

Extract 8 draws upon the same idea, while also exhibiting strong moral undertones: not only should people have *felt more encouraged to talk* but they should also have overcome their indifference and *at least* tried, instead of letting *everybody else* do the job. In invoking the difficult role of the moderator as someone who would need *to force* these people to talk, the problem is clearly cast as something that could – in principle – be solved in the here-and-now of the encounter.

(8) (German, P35G1)
People should have ***felt more encouraged*** *to talk and* ***at least try*** *to collaborate with others in order* ***not to let everybody else doing the job****. It is true that it could have been the moderator's job, however my opinion about it is that the moderator should only ask if there is someone else who wants to join the conversation and it's not his/her duty* ***to force*** *someone to talk.*

In the two interpretative repertoires discussed above, the ideals of prepared contributions and spontaneous involvement were not treated as symmetrical. In addition to these ideals being unequally distributed between the Chinese and the German students, there was a difference in how the writers of these reflection texts positioned themselves and their fellow students in relation to these ideals. The German participants presented the ideal of spontaneous involvement as something with respect to which others had failed, underlining the moral nature of that failure and thus also the unquestionability of the ideal (Extracts 7 & 8). The Chinese students, in contrast, presented the need for preparation, not as an end in itself, but as a precondition for smooth (Extract 5) or correct (Extract 6) self-expression, which a sufficiently skillful person could, in principle, achieve also without prior preparation.

4.1.3 Stakes and goals of interaction: task completion versus affective participation

Participants' implicit stakes and goals are a significant part of the invisible context of social interaction. It is these stakes and goals that also determine the criteria based on which participants may retrospectively evaluate an interactional encounter as having been a success or a failure. While the classical social-psychological approach has distinguished between the task-oriented and socio-emotional leadership in small groups (e.g., Burke 1967), it also appears that interactional encounters as a whole may be evaluated with criteria that have to do with the group either reaching their practical goals or creating a pleasant socio-emotional atmosphere. In a similar vein, in relation to intercultural communication, it has been argued that interactional goals can be more transactional or relational in nature (e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2009).

Here, we show that the two distinct orientations to the stakes and goals of interaction are also reflected in two different interpretative repertoires that people use when accounting for their past interactional experiences. First, the interpretative repertoire of *task completion* could be observed in the written reflections of both Chinese and German students, as shown in Figure 1. In Extract 9, a Chinese student has previously reflected on differences between the members of the group, now casting this difference as *superficial*. The superficiality is then highlighted with reference to what is important: that the participants have *the same goal*, which involves their collaboration in solving *the various tasks* of the group. The existence of this goal is presupposed in the structure of the sentence.

(9) (Chinese, P09G1)
The difference between active and passive seems ***superficial*** *to me. The important thing is that we all have* ***the same goal*** *of successfully solving every problem that exists which is* ***the various tasks****.*

In Extract 10, a German student is oriented to the repertoire of task completion from an opposite perspective, suggesting that large differences between the members of the group might *make an agreement impossible*. Also here the need *to find a common solution* is built in as a presupposition of the sentence – it might take *a lot of energy and time*, but the goal itself is not to be questioned.

(10) (German, P13G1)
The disadvantage of working with a very heterogeneous group is that it takes ***a lot of energy and time to find a common solution****. It is exhausting to work in such a large group with different personalities, different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In the worst case, it can even lead to major misunderstandings or disagreements that cause participants to completely shut themselves off and* ***make an agreement impossible****.*

Similar to the repertoire of task completion, also the repertoire of *affective participation*, reflective of the socio-emotional orientation, could be observed in both data sets. In Extract 11, a German student also refers to a good group atmosphere that they have *enjoyed*. Here, however, the key to the *good mood* is the lack of seriousness with regard to *the contents of the game* – that is, to the specific tasks that the group is expected to carry out.

(11) (German, P01G3)
*We had a good mood and **didn't take it too serious**. I **enjoyed** that quite a lot. On the flip side, we didn't identify as much with **the contents of the game** and were not as much "into it".*

In Extract 12, a Chinese student praises the members of their group for their tolerant, encouraging, and appreciative behaviors.

(12) (Chinese, P12G2)
*The team members were very **tolerant**. Throughout the discussion, they **only encouraged** and **never complained**.*

While the two interpretative repertoires surrounding task completion and affective participation could thus be found in both data sets (see Figure 1), the Chinese and German students described these ideals in somewhat different ways. In the German descriptions, the two repertoires constitute an ideological dilemma: diversity, which, in the context of intercultural training, is otherwise to be embraced, is presented as a threat to task orientation (Extract 10), while task completion is, 'on the flipside', also seen to get compromised when the group is having fun (Extract 11). In the Chinese descriptions, in contrast, these repertoires were not similarly set in opposition to each other. In their account, it is the task-orientation that effectively enables successful collaboration (Extract 9), which is also fostered where there is a positive, encouraging and tolerance-based atmosphere (Extract 12).

At the same time, however, it should be noted that the notion of 'tolerance' in intercultural communication, which circulates in mass media and general public discourse, already in itself implies hierarchies, power relations, and fundamental a non-acceptance of diversity (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998). Thus, in praising the tolerant behavior of their team members (Extract 12), the Chinese student also implicitly stresses their superiority.

4.1.4 Sources of participation failure: individual constraints versus group influence

As participation may be considered as a self-evidently shared ideal by all the players of the intercultural game, a failure to satisfy this ideal becomes an accountable matter.

However, when reflecting upon such failures for their own part, their accounts drew from two distinct interpretative repertoires. According to the first repertoire, the failure was a result of the *individual constraints* of the participants – a lack of skills in speaking (Extract 13) and expression (Extract 14), according to some Chinese students.

(13) (Chinese, P07G2)
I am a relatively introverted person who is ***not good at speaking****.*

(14) (Chinese, P19G2)
Some people are ***better at expressing*** *their ideas and some are not.*

This repertoire was also resorted to by German students, even though the individual constraint was portrayed as a potentially remediable issue (Extract 15).

(15) (German, P02G1)
I am a ***person who first needs a certain amount of time to adjust to new people****. Unfortunately, this time was prolonged for me by the Corona-conditioned distance teaching, which is* ***why my strengths were not used so well*** *during the game.*

In contrast, the German players often accounted for their patterns of participation with reference to *group influence* – the atmosphere within the group (Extract 16) and the actions and mindset of other group members (Extract 17).

(16) (German, P08G3)
My participation therefore went up and down and highly ***depended on the discussion's atmosphere****.*

(17) (German, P08G3)
However, ***humorous moments created by the open minded members*** *of our team* ***helped me to relax*** *and get rid of speaking blockades.*

The two interpretative repertoires point to two quite opposite sources of participation failure: self and others. The focus on individual constraints as a reason for participation failure by the Chinese students embodies a call for people to accept different levels of participation as a natural part of life. In contrast, the focus on group influence undermines the need for such acceptance of difference but, instead, underlines the responsibility of all group members to contribute to the relaxing atmosphere in the group.

4.2 Ideal group

The second set of interpretative repertoires that the players used in their accounts of experiences of interactions during the game is related to ideals of group dynamics and

formation. Four characteristics were invoked: the distribution of labor within the group (*complementary* vs. *equal participatory roles*); the nature of direction within the group (*leadership as a gift* vs. *dominance as an obstacle*); the group atmosphere (*group harmony* vs. *freedom to disagree*); and the 'learnables' (*learning from others* vs. *learning to deal with others*). In the following, we describe these interpretative repertoires in detail.

4.2.1 Distribution of labor within the group: complementary versus equal participatory roles

The intercultural communication literature, and especially its critical strands, is oriented towards true dialogue. However, the notion of 'dialogue' is rather abstract and can be associated with various more precise ideas regarding the optimal distribution of labor within a group. According to the Western literature on intercultural communication, the realization of this ideal presupposes the rejection of hierarchies as a necessary step to reaching the fusion of participants' horizons of meaning (Gadamer 2004 [1973]) in an intercultural exchange, but less is known about (a) what the rejection of hierarchies concretely entails and (b) whether the ideal is shared by members of all cultures.

In our data set, we could identify two distinct interpretative repertoires that suggested a specific ideal distribution of labor within a group. The Chinese players generally showed an orientation to an ideal of *complementary participatory roles*, as shown in Extract 18, in which each individual would ideally understand their strengths and choose tasks that best facilitate the reaching of common goals.

(18) (Chinese, P18G2)
In my opinion, each member should define ***their own abilities and tasks*** *clearly, communicate each problem and* ***move forward towards the common goals****, so as to effectively* ***cooperate****.*

In Extract 19, understanding one's strengths is further described as contributing to the maximally effective completion of the group's task.

(19) (Chinese, P15G1)
In ***collaborative work****, we should first* ***find out where we are good at****. For example, some people are better at time management, some people are good at making reports, and some people are better at doing text work to record group members' ideas. So the most important thing is to find out what we can do* ***so that the task can be completed faster****.*

While the Chinese participants displayed an orientation to the ideal of *complementary participatory roles*, the German participants, in contrast, highlighted the ideal of *equal*

participatory roles, as unequivocally shown in Figure 1. In Extract 20, the student creates a linkage between equal participation and taking responsibility for the group results.

(20) (German, P03G1)
It would have been more beneficial for the collaboration if everyone had ***participated equally*** *and* ***felt responsible*** *for the results.*

In Extract 21, a German student casts unequal participatory roles self-evidently as an *unfortunate* event, which could be *prevented* in the future by coming up with a regulatory system in the game according to which the speaking time is distributed equally. The student's proposal is thus underpinned by an unquestionable assumption that unequal speaking rates are non-desirable and to be avoided.

(21) German, P22G1
Unfortunately*, only the same people were speaking for the most part.* ***In order to prevent that****, I would assign speaking time to everyone.*

While both Chinese and German students emphasized the importance of functional group work and the need for the group members to find a way to contribute to the tasks of the group, they described the ideal distribution of labor within a group in orientation to two different interpretative repertoires that stand in a contrasting relation to each other. The texts of the German students presuppose that ideal group work consists of equal levels of participation, which is congruent with ideals found in the intercultural communication literature – a desideratum – of hierarchy-free dialogic participation (e.g. Conti 2020). The reflections of the Chinese students, in contrast, oriented to the ideal of individuals choosing the most effective ways in which they could contribute to the common goal of the team. This in turn entails the possibility for the organization of the different roles to include hierarchical elements.

4.2.2 The nature of direction within the group: leadership as a gift versus dominance as an obstacle

A group role with an inherent hierarchical element is that of the leader. Consistent with the prior discussion concerning the interpretative repertoires about the ideal distribution of labor within the group, we also found interpretative repertoires related to the nature of direction within the group. First, the Chinese students tended to support the leader's role, conceptualizing *leadership as a gift.* In Extract 22, the student calls attention to the crucial importance of leadership in a group so as to prevent chaos.

(22) (Chinese, P07G1)
As a group we ***need several good leaders*** *to hold the whole meeting, which is* ***very important, otherwise there will be chaos*** *situations.*

In Extract 23, the capacity to lead a team is additionally cast as something that is worth being *impressed* about. At the same time, good leadership is separated from the notion of *being bossy*. While the possibility of authoritarian leadership is thus treated as something non-desirable, the situations within the group are evaluated as being void of anything like that.

(23) (Chinese, P18G3)
I was ***impressed*** *by some student's ability to* ***lead the discussion without being bossy****.*

In the German group, in contrast, the focus was placed on *dominance as an obstacle* to functioning group work. In Extract 24, such dominance is described as a person being *too loud* and talkative.

(24) (German, P01G3)
At times I was ***too loud and dominant in speaking*** *and might have shied others away from participating.*

In Extract 25, the non-desirable aspects of dominance are reflected in the student describing themselves as having managed to *hold themselves back* from it so as to give others space to participate.

(25) (German, P07G3)
I feel I was active, but I managed well to ***hold myself back*** *when necessary and possible to* ***allow for others*** *to share their thoughts and* ***make their contributions****.*

While both Chinese and German students were oriented to the possibility that a group can be led in ways that hamper the optimal functioning of the group, their accounts draw from two distinct interpretative repertoires. In the interpretative repertoire used by the Chinese students, leadership was cast as a specific skill possessed by some group members who are then entitled to use it to the benefit of the whole group. In the interpretative repertoire used by the German students, then again, the focus was on dominance as something like a bad habit to be curbed – a rule with reference to which all members of the group are positioned equally.

4.2.3 Group atmosphere: group harmony versus freedom to disagree

The group atmosphere is also a matter of ideals reflected in interpretative repertoires. The first repertoire, which was drawn upon by Chinese and German students, is centered around *group harmony*. In Extract 26, a student praises the *unity and cohesion* in their group – a state of affairs that is presented not only as a matter of efficient group

functioning but also as something of affective significance to the student (*what moved me most*).

(26) (Chinese, P16G1)
What moved me most *was that* ***everyone in the group was very united****. During the discussion, we would assign work, but some tasks were really difficult. At this time, everyone would discuss and solve them together. This showed me the* ***unity and cohesion*** *of the group. Everyone contributed their own thoughts in the group discussion, and the final success is inseparable from everyone's efforts.*

In Extract 27, the ideal of group harmony is presupposed, as the player discusses the *disadvantages* of culturally heterogeneous groups, in which *different opinions* can lead to *discussions and even conflicts*.

(27) (Chinese, P01G1)
The ***disadvantages*** *are that if you have different opinions, it can lead to* ***discussions and even conflicts****.*

The second repertoire, also used by both Chinese and German students, highlighted *freedom to disagree* as a feature that characterizes ideal group atmosphere. In Extract 28, a German student complains that their group fell short in critical discussion and started to express disagreement with each other's ideas relatively late in the group process. In this way, they underline the unquestionability of freedom to disagree and portray it as an ideal for a group.

(28) (German, P15G2)
We were often ***not able to critically discuss*** *topics because* ***we all agreed with one another.*** *Only when deciding what the wasteland should be like in the whole group we started to discuss and have pro and contra arguments on topics.*

In Extract 29, a Chinese student takes an explicitly critical stance towards the ideal of group harmony, which – as they have now allegedly learned – is *totally wrong*. In referring to this ideal as *this "peace and love" minds*, the student treats the ideal as commonly known and cherished.

(29) (Chinese, P07G1)
After this game I find out that ***this "peace and love" minds*** *is* ***totally wrong****, because the process of negotiation is one of the most important parts in our life.*

The interpretative repertoires of group harmony and freedom to disagree seems to constitute an ideological dilemma for some of the Chinese participants: agreement

for the sake of maintaining group harmony and disagreement for the sake of open and critical negotiation seem to be mutually exclusive. Such an orientation can be best seen in Extract 29, in which a Chinese student emphasized the need for freedom to disagree while simultaneously orienting to the self-evidence of the ideal of group harmony. In the reflections of the German students, in contrast, no ideological dilemma between the two repertoires was visible. Instead, freedom to disagree as an ideal was presented as self-evident.

4.2.4 'Learnables': learning from others versus learning to deal with others

The engagement in the game is faced by players as a task with the pedagogical aim of increasing their intercultural competence. In other words, the game is a matter of intercultural *learning*. However, the precise contents and mechanisms of learning are a matter of interpretation, which becomes visible when people reflect on their learning experiences.

In our dataset, participants' reflections of intercultural learning drew from two distinct interpretative repertoires. First, the Chinese students typically drew on the repertoire that was centered around the notion of *learning from others*. Extracts 30 and 31 highlight the ideal of people expanding their ways of looking at things when considering them from the perspective of others.

(30) (Chinese, P16G1)
I personally think that group cooperation ***has taught me*** *how to sort out the opinions of others,* ***learn from each other's*** *strengths, and* ***increase my own learning experience****. By absorbing and accepting the opinions of others,* ***I can develop myself better****.*

(31) (Chinese, P11G1)
I need to understand each other *and* ***listen to other people's ideas****, and I need to pay attention to every question that is asked.* ***I need to be able to understand*** *the general way of thinking of people from different cultures and to analyse issues* ***from their point of view****.*

The German students also displayed orientation to difference as a feature to be cherished. However, compared to the Chinese students, the German participants focused less on personal growth and more on the notion of difference leading to new ideas and concepts in general – something that can be seen in both Extracts 32 and 33 below. In addition, as exemplified at the end of Extract 33, the German students reflected on their learning experiences by using an interpretative repertoire in which the focus was not on learning *from* others but learning *to deal* with others.

(32) (German, P06G1)
*The differences have the advantage that one will naturally be confronted with new situations for which **individual solutions have to be found**. The learning effect is therefore very high here.*

(33) (German, P13G1)
*This can lead to great **new ideas and concepts** that can only be achieved by mixing different views, perspectives and skills. You can also think of it as intercultural **training, learning how to deal with people from different cultures** in a group.*

The 'learnables' introduced here are very different. While the repertoire in Excerpts 30 and 31 highlights the substantial insights of others as worth learning from, the repertoire of learning to deal with others casts the same 'others' as a social challenge to be overcome through learning (Excerpts 32 and 33). While difference is acknowledged and valued as a source of learning in both repertoires, in the latter, an individual person is invited to embrace the difference from a meta perspective – to learn about it, instead of learning from it directly.

5 Discussion

In this article, we used critical discursive psychology to examine German and Chinese students' written reflections of their interactional experiences playing the virtual intercultural simulation game *Megacities*. We identified a set of interpretative repertoires, each of which rallying around a specific ideal of social interaction. These ideals have to do with behaviors in encounters and group features, which were organized in pairs with a contrasting relation between the two repertoires within a pair. The repertoires of ideal behavior had to do with the type of behavior in the here and now (*listening* vs. *being vocal*), distribution of engagement in time (*prepared contributions* vs. *spontaneous involvement*), stakes and goals of interaction (*task completion* vs. *affective participation*), and sources of participation failure (*individual constraints* vs. *group influence*). The repertoires of ideal group dynamics were related to the distribution of labor within the group (*complementary* vs. *equal participatory roles*), the nature of direction within the group (*leadership as a gift* vs. *dominance as an obstacle*), group atmosphere (*group harmony* vs. *freedom to disagree*), and the kinds of takeaways that participants got from the game (*learning from others* vs. *learning to deal with others*). While most of these repertoires may be assumed to be known and recognizable to all the participants in our data, still, the extent to, and the ways in which different groups of participants actually draw on specific repertoires in their reflections were shown to differ. In our analysis, we could observe such variation to take three forms:

First, there were trending differences in the relative prevalence of certain repertoires between the Chinese and the German students. This was specifically the case for the repertoires having to do with the *distribution of engagement in time*, the *distribution of labor within the group*, the *nature of direction within the group*, and the *sources of participation failure*. The Chinese students emphasized the ideals of *prepared contributions*, *complementary participatory roles*, *leadership as a gift*, and *individual constraints*. These ideals serve to legitimize and embody an appeal for others, not only to tolerate silence and a lack of participation by some participants in interactional encounters but also to accept interactional asymmetries and heterogeneity as a natural part of (good) interaction. In contrast, the German students emphasized the ideals of *spontaneous involvement*, *equal participatory roles*, *dominance as an obstacle*, and *group influence*. These ideals invite people in intercultural contexts not only to participate more actively but also to participate in more symmetric and homogeneous ways.

Second, there were differences in the typical ways in which the German and the Chinese students positioned themselves with reference to the ideals of the repertoires.[5] This was the case for the repertoires having to do with *type of behavior in the here and now,* and *group atmosphere*. While the Chinese students often oriented to the ideals of *listening*, and *group harmony* as default ones and the German students to the ideals of *being vocal*, and *freedom to disagree*, some of these Chinese students' orientations were actually about refuting the ideals associated with their own cultural group (see, e.g., Extracts 4 and 29). The German students, in contrast, oriented to the ideal of freedom to disagree as a self-evident one – something that does not even need to be argued for, let alone refuted (see Extracts 28).

The same is the case for ideals around leadership and participatory roles in the *nature of direction* and the *distribution of labor within the group*: the ways in which the German students orient to some of the repertoires as obvious and undeniable – such as *dominance as an obstacle* (see Extract 25) – contrast strongly with how the Chinese students display their admiration of the capacities of leadership by the German players for example, by highlighting their tolerance (see Extract 12).

Considering the ideal of *complementary participatory roles*, however, the implication is that the Chinese students in the game could have other capacities which might be just as valuable for effective teamwork. However, in treating non-dominance and homogeneity in participation rates as pre-conditions for successful group interaction (see Extract 21), the German students refrain from acknowledging other roles,

5 For this reason, it is important to be cautious about what quantification alone – such as the one depicted in Figure 1 – can tell; while the figures provide a glance into the identified categories, we maintain that it is the qualitative analysis of interpretative repertoires that is able to show the different kinds of subject positionings within each interpretative repertoire.

practices, and skills needed in a team. In presenting themselves as the ones who will need to curb themselves to allow the Chinese students to participate more (see Extract 25), the German students also position themselves as the powerful ones: they are the ones to take care of the weaker, instead of just accepting the fellow players as they are. Observations such as these point to an implicit hierarchy between the ideals emphasized by the Chinese and the German students – a situation in which the ideals held by the German players come across as superior to the ones favored by the Chinese students.

Third, and finally, we may certainly assume that, in the context of an 'intercultural game' such as *Megacities*, participants are often oriented towards cultural differences (Conti et al. 2022), which may impact the interpretative repertoires that are used to account for the experiences of such encounters. However, the interpretative repertoires typically deployed by the Chinese and the German students could indeed take quite different positions toward such differences *per se*. This was apparent in the pair of interpretative repertoires having to do with *stakes and goals of interaction*. While the repertoires of *task completion* and *affective participation* were used by both the Chinese and the German students, in the German descriptions, task completion was presented as being potentially threatened by diversity. In other words, while for the Chinese players diversity is presented as key to effective group work, for the German participants, diversity gets in the way when practical goals need to be achieved. Such opposite orientations toward difference were most apparent in the interpretative repertoires of *learnables*, in which the Chinese students emphasize intercultural settings as a site for *learning from others* and the German students highlight the possibilities of *learning to deal with others*. In these repertoires, the role of the Cultural Other is a source of insight and a social-interactional challenge, respectively.

In this study, we attempted to shed light on social interactional ideologies which play a role in assessments Chinese and German students make of an intercultural intervention. At the same time, as we promote this argument, we are also acutely aware of the reflexive paradox of our study *de facto* contributing to maintaining the stereotypical East-West binary, as we have reiterated participants' orientations to East-West stereotypes in our analysis. Our aim, however, was to contribute to interactional sociolinguistic studies by proposing a systematic approach for the investigation of social interactional ideologies in retrospective descriptions of intercultural encounters based on critical discursive psychology (e.g., Edley 2001; Edley and Wetherell 1997, 2001; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003; Reynolds et al. 2007; Wetherell 1998). Our focus was not on patterns of communication *per se* but various ideals of social interaction associated with distinct interpretative repertoires. Although the approach can point to trending differences in the relative prevalence of certain repertoires between different cultural groups, this is not the main point in the analysis. Instead, the main idea is that all cultures entail multiple co-existing repertoires, the relations between which can

sometimes be ideologically dilemmatic (Billig et al. 1988; Edley 2001). The analysis of people's orientations to such contrasting co-existing repertoires in turn sheds light not only on the ideals *per se* but on the *hierarchies* between them. This happens when people either explicitly emphasize the superiority of certain ideals over others or implicitly presuppose this superiority, for example, by acknowledging their own failure to live up to these ideals or by complaining about other people falling short with respect to them. Hierarchies emerge as a function of the *positions* that different repertoires offer for different groups of people in both long-standing discourses and situated practices. Thus, just like language ideologies, social interactional ideologies are shown to underlie politically positioned evaluations of practices (see Gal 2023).

Since the Chinese students in our dataset were exchange students in Germany at the time of data collection, the social interactional ideologies identified are embedded not only in the historically evolved discourses and stereotypes around national cultures but also in the power asymmetries deriving from home versus exchange student relations. The Chinese students were confronted with the reality of having to adapt to the host society, not only in relation to educational practices but also to various administrative, social, and political structures. Additionally, the game was developed by a German intercultural studies scholar and follows Western pedagogical principles and trends, which may have implicitly placed the German players in our dataset in a more favorable position.

Thus, we argue that social interactional ideologies may be embedded in both historical and local power dynamics, which simultaneously shape group practices. In our dataset, this interplay of the historical and the local was manifested in the pressure of accountability that fell more strongly on the Chinese exchange students than on the home students from Germany. In the students' accounts, national cultural categories were blended with morally loaded descriptions of individual and group interactional behavior, with the opposing interpretative repertoires and their underlying social interactional ideologies placing accountability demands systematically on those who deviated from the existing ideals (Stevanovic 2023). Thus, based on our analysis, we argue that even interventions aimed at promoting intercultural competencies are not resistant to such implicit workings of power. Instead, it will be important to examine the discourses of interculturality embedded in such intercultural interventions to gain a more precise understanding of how their underlying social interactional ideologies position different groups of individuals.

In this article, we have applied critical discursive psychology to the study of intercultural mismatches, which has been a traditional target of studies in interactional sociolinguistics. By invoking the notion of social interactional ideologies, we have sought to shed light on how talk about past social events may reflect hidden asymmetries and power relations, which can marginalize certain ways of making sense of social life, while prioritizing others. In the context of this study, such

asymmetries have been suggested to be an inherent part of contemporary discourses of interculturality (but see Monceri 2022; R'boul 2021 for critical reflections on interculturality). From this perspective, we also hope that our study can pave the way for future critical studies on language use – specifically in contexts in which our cultural understandings of what constitutes good and bad behavior tend to appear self-evident.

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