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INTERCULTURALITY AS A TRANSDISCIPLINARY AXIS FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH: TOWARD A DECOLONIAL RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY (2020–2025 REVIEW)

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes interculturality as a transdisciplinary epistemological axis for studies of culture in modern decolonial contexts (2020-2025). In a world characterized by migration, digitalization, ecological crisis, and geopolitical tensions, cultural phenomena were becoming more intricate, interpersonal, and confrontational. Although useful, traditional disciplinary strategies tend to separate cultural realities and reproduce epistemic inequalities rooted in colonial modernity. This paper examines current hypotheses on theoretical advances in transdisciplinarity, decolonial theory, intercultural dialogue, and cultural epistemologies through a critical systematic review of peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, Redalyc, and SciELO. The results show that interculturality is not limited to the discourse of education or to communicative competence but can be seen as a structural, epistemological concept that can incorporate disciplines, cosmologies, and heterogeneous knowledge systems. Intercultural transdisciplinarity facilitates the relational ontology of culture, supports epistemic pluralism, and embraces methodological reflexivity grounded in ethical recognition and dialogue. By incorporating new Latin American scholarship, especially by introducing the works of a variety of writers on decolonial pedagogy, intercultural citizenship, and the epistemic cores of cultures, this article designs a relational epistemology that unites complexity paradigms with decolonial criticism. It claims that 21st-century research on cultures needs to be integrated into a framework that eschews a fractured, homogenizing model. Interculturality, therefore, emerges as an epistemic integrator that reinvigorates cultural inquiry toward justice, reciprocity, and transformative praxis.

KEYWORDS: Interculturality; Transdisciplinary; Decolonial Epistemology; Cultural Research; Relational Ontology.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has added so much complexity to culture in a way that it has never been before. Cultural interaction has been transformed due to forced and voluntary migration, digitalization, ecological crises, and geopolitical fragmentation (Alfaleh, 2026). The identities of cultures are not interred into the national or territorial borders anymore; rather, they are transmitted via the digital media and transnational markets and global communities and form fluid symbolic spaces (Bakhtin, 2010). This transformation is indicative of a relational ontology- the perception that identities and realities are not some fixed entities but the development of dynamic relations and interactions. Simultaneously, the global crises, e.g., climate change, pandemics, and armed conflicts, reveal underlying disparities in the production and access to knowledge within cultures, which points to the necessity of epistemic pluralism, or acknowledging and accommodating the existence of different ways of knowing in various cultural and intellectual traditions.

The culture is no longer perceived as a fixed set of traditions or as a uniform system of mutual meanings. Rather, it should be treated as a dynamic, relational, and contested field, as a meeting place of symbolic production, power structures, historical memory, and communicative practices (Alfaleh, 2026). The facts of culture today are plural, multi-layered, and mostly conflicting. They are constructed by colonial heritage, economic globalization, computer algorithms, and local resistance simultaneously. Classical methods of discipline, including anthropological, sociological, linguistic, and philosophical, have offered key paradigms for the study of cultural phenomena (Katsoulacos, Gao, Wang, & Feng, 2024). However, when operating under implicit and inflexible epistemic constraints, such disciplines tend to dissect complex realities (Bakhtin, 2010). The phenomena of culture which are systemic in nature are disaggregated into partial variables, i.e., identity without economy, discourse without power, tradition without ecology, language without politics, etc (Alfaleh, 2026).

Feedback processes constitute them among history, economy, language, environment, and power. Culture is a living system of relationships in which any shift in one dimension is reflected in another. An understanding of this nature requires analytical instruments that can reintegrate multiplicity and not remove specificity (Barkan & Bush, 2023). Decolonial theory has sought to contest

Western epistemology's pretense to universality. It has shown the marginalization or subordination of other rationalities in modern knowledge production, especially in relation to the Global South (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

Under colonialism, cultural studies tended to place Western categories as the norm and to interpret other cultures as objects of study, rather than as epistemic interlocutors. Decolonial thinking undermines this order by embracing epistemic justice, pluriversality, and the acknowledgment of subaltern knowledge systems (de Sousa Santos, 2015). In this intellectual context, intercultural dialogue becomes not only a pedagogical instrument but also a necessity in philosophical and political formulations. In situations of cultural coexistence and conflict, dialogue is the moral process by which differences can be negotiated without being displaced (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Interculturality, though, should be differentiated from hollow multiculturalism. Whereas multicultural strategies tend to focus on coexistence, interculturality suggests interaction, reciprocity, and change through the encounter. It preannounces relationships and moral acknowledgment (de Sousa Santos, 2015).

Along the same lines, transdisciplinary research has become prominent as a response to complexity. Contrary to multidisciplinary, in which disciplines do not deeply merge, and to interdisciplinarity, in which collaboration exists alongside respect for disciplinary boundaries, transdisciplinarity aims to cross epistemic divides (de Sousa Santos, 2016). It brings together the scientific knowledge and experiential, community-based, and cultural knowledges, with a view to attaining holistic and socially relevant knowledge (Byram, 1997). It is in this shift that interculturality is no longer viewed as a secondary concept but rather as a structural axis that can be used to explain complexity, decolonial criticism, and transdisciplinary practice (de Sousa Santos & Meneses, 2020). Interculturality offers the moral basis of discussion, the epistemological receptiveness of pluralist knowledge regimes, and the logic of relations needed to integrate systems (de Sousa Santos, 2016).

They show that trans disciplinarity enhances integrative learning conditions in which knowledge is contextualized and socially relevant. The implicit logic behind their argument is that production of knowledge should also develop to become integrative in its rationality (de Sousa Santos & Meneses, 2020). Decoloniality, peacebuilding, and communicative competence all come up in transformative educational frameworks (Dussel,

2003). Their results indicate that practices of communication concepts are not an apolitical balance of information but an area where precedents of the past and reconciliation possibilities co-exist. Intercultural communicative competence is turned into ethical and political praxis (Capra & Luisi, 2014). These contributions mostly address educational contexts. Their pedagogical implications are not limited to pedagogy only (Escobar, 2020). In the case of curriculum innovation and communicative transformation, it is claimed to require transdisciplinary and interculturality; it must also require cultural research itself. Such research methods that lack intercultural understanding will reproduce epistemic imbalances they seek to overcome (Dussel, 2003).

The current paper focuses on contributions to the methodology of cultural research (Freire, 2005). It postulates that interculturality must be re-theorized as an epistemic reinstigator capable of reorganizing the study, perception, and representation of culture. Instead of being a thematic specialty of cultural studies, interculturality is the formal positionality within which the cultural inquiry is held (Escobar, 2020). This repositioning has several theoretical implications. First, it suggests that there is an ontological undertaking at relationality: cultures do not exist in a vacuum, but are complex systems of interaction made. Second, it requires epistemological pluralism: there is more than one rationality that must exist and be accepted as a valid source of knowledge (Gramsci, 2020). It requires methodological reflexivity: the scholars should position themselves within power frameworks and shun extractive practices.

Whereas decolonial thinking emphasizes asymmetry and historical violence, the complexity paradigm underscores interrelatedness and systemic emergence. Interculturality mediates between these dimensions, providing the ethical context for relational integration without assimilating difference (Gramsci, 2020). The 21st-century cultural research would have to deal with a paradox: to integrate without homogenizing, to communicate without relativizing, and to criticize without reproducing domination (de Sousa Santos, 2015). Intercultural transdisciplinarity provides a way forward. It reinvents research as a dialogical process, in which knowledge is constructed collaboratively and across epistemic boundaries and towards social change (Heredia & Molina, 2024). Consequently, this paper will argue that interculturality is not only a viewpoint among others, but also a structural axis that can be used to express transdisciplinary research

within cultural studies. Locating interculturality at the epistemic center will enable cultural inquiry to leave fragmentation behind and enter the relational and decolonial paradigm of the transformative (Heredia & Molina, 2024). The subsequent parts elaborate on this argument by presenting a systematic review of the existing literature (2020-2025) on it, a theoretical synthesis of relational ontology and epistemic pluralism, and a methodological proposal for intercultural transdisciplinary research.

FROM DISCIPLINARY FRAGMENTATION TO TRANSDISCIPLINARY INTEGRATION

The contemporary disciplinary organization, historically successful in terms of specialization and methodological rigor, has produced disjuncture, as well as a form of knowledge that entails the dissociation of the relational, recursive, and mutually constitutive in the lived sense of both (Klein, 2021). In modern circumstances, culture is the very phenomenon that cannot be compartmentalized. In language, economy, ecology, technology, memory, and power, cultures arise through interaction.

This conflict has been undertaken through multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity. Multidisciplinary gathers views, but not usually on a profound conceptual level. Interdisciplinarity permits interdisciplinary collaboration while, in most cases, preserving disciplinary sovereignty and, as such, does not fundamentally alter epistemic architecture. Transdisciplinary, in turn, suggests an epistemological beyond: it aims to cross boundaries, disorient them, and remake them rather than simply coordinate them (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Transdisciplinary includes levels of reality, logic of the included middle, and an open epistemology that is challenging reductionism (de Sousa Santos, 2016). This does not mean a denial of disciplines but rather demands that cultural and social issues are beyond disciplinary grammars. (de Sousa Santos & Meneses, 2019). Transdisciplinarity is increasingly defined in the education sphere, especially in debates in Latin America, as a way to respond to the complexity of the world and the resulting heterogeneity at the local level. The 21st-century educational change requires transdisciplinary innovation that goes beyond disciplinary fragmentation and affects systemic understanding, dialogical rationality, and integrative learning (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Integration of knowledge systems

Transdisciplinarity augurs the co-existence of heterogeneous knowledges: scientific, local,

indigenous, experiential, and professional. This echoes the idea of cognitive justice, one of the major propositions of the Epistemologies of the South: universal social justice goes hand in hand with being cognitive. Such integration in cultural research is not ornamental but methodological and ethical, as cultural realities are shaped by plural rationalities and situated meanings (Escobar, 2020; Smith, 2012).

Dialogical Rationality

Dialogue is not a means of communication; it is rather an epistemic principle. Transdisciplinary knowledge is generated by the very process of negotiation between views, rather than unilaterally through interpretation (Molina, Molina, & Vanegas, 2026). However, decolonial scholarship cautions that dialogue takes place under conditions of asymmetry and historical violence; thus, dialogical rationality should be powerfully conscious. This is why a transdisciplinary framework that implicates no intercultural critique can, consciously or unconsciously, reproduce epistemic domination by combining disciplines without accounting for coloniality (Molina & Arostegui, 2025).

Systemic Understanding

Systemic thinking demands interdependence: the culture becomes a community of meanings, practices, and structures. This aligns with the complexity theory's focus on emergence and recursion. It is also aligned with the concern of hegemony and articulation in the critical cultural theory. A transdisciplinary approach, in turn, should not only be systemic but also critical: capable of mapping relations and questioning their hierarchies (Molina & Arostegui, 2025). Such pedagogical change cannot be based on the previously mentioned concept of intercultural integration into transdisciplinary processes without including international cultural outlooks into the systems of technocracy, functionalism, or political neutrality, with no implications (Molina et al., 2026). It aligns with broader criticism of innovation discourses that talk of integration without necessarily altering epistemic power. Cultural research should view transdisciplinarity, however, not as an approach to undertake but a paradigmatic direction: an adherence to relational ontology, epistemic plurality, and transformative praxis.

Interculturality as Epistemic Category

If the architecture of integration is offered by transdisciplinarity, interculturality provides the ethical and epistemological axes that govern how

integration is accomplished. The two concepts, interculturality and multiculturalism, should be separated (Repko & Szostak, 2020). Difference is commonly conceived of through multiculturalism as coexistence and representation; interculturality suggests interaction, mutuality of transformation, and the politicization of difference, particularly in settings influenced by colonial pasts. The interculturality in a liberationist horizon and connects it to sociological theories of practice that shift interculturality out of a descriptive (cultures mix) concept and into a normative epistemology (knowledge created in ethical awareness of alterity). The Other is not an object here to be known but a subject, whose dignity and voice are disrupted via hegemonic universals in liberation philosophy (Repko & Szostak, 2020). This framing alters cultural investigation, as research is an encounter with asymmetries rather than an extraction of so-called data in a neutral manner (de Sousa Santos & Meneses, 2019). Further development of this post by extending the Philosophy of Liberation of Dussel to language teaching and a decolonial linguistic pedagogy based on (i) ethical appreciation of alterity, (ii) anti-hegemonic curriculum construction, and (iii) the Eurocentric pedagogical canons.

This is not meant to be taken off the field of education conceptually; it means that even research into culture should be decolonial in its epistemic assumptions (Santamaria, Molina, Herrera, and Benavides, 2025). The concept of culture cannot be discussed as a repository of folklore or as a disinterested space of meanings; culture is a political site organized around coloniality, social classes, race, gender, and geopolitics. Intercultural-epistemic view.

Interculturality challenges epistemic hierarchies

Coloniality of knowledge establishes an unwritten pecking order: Western rationality (as theory), other knowledges (as belief), and tradition or culture. Interculturality alters this hierarchy by affirming plural epistemologies and insisting that marginalized knowledges are not supplementary but always constitutive (Soto-Molina, 2024). Setting local culture as the epistemic center: cultural knowledge cannot be merely peripheral content but an organizing principle of inquiry and change (Dussel, 2003). This aligns with indigenous research practices that emphasize relational accountability, as well as Epistemologies of the South, which require intercultural translation as approaches that are mutually intelligible rather than assimilation. This is because interculturality produces dialogical

rationality in the presence of asymmetry. Dialogue is not necessarily emancipatory (Dussel, 2003). The notion of critical interculturality presupposes the appreciation of asymmetry and the establishment of conditions for epistemic reciprocity. As a methodological statement, this implies that reflexivity, co-validation, participatory interpretation, and ethical commitments to preventing extractivism must be incorporated into research designs (Soto-Molina, 2024). Both intercultural and communicative competence cannot be separated; together, they make communication, as such, visible as an ethical-political area. There is an inherent reliance on cultural inquiry into communicative practices (interviews, narratives, discourse, texts); therefore, intercultural epistemology is not only about controlling what is studied, but also about the manner in which the research is carried out, interpreted, and presented (Walsh, 2010).

Trend 1: Epistemic Justice (coloniality of knowledge and cognitive justice)

The coloniality of power, as presented by Quijano (2000), laid the foundation for the view that modernity could not be applied without colonial dominance and that epistemological hierarchies were structural, not accidental (Walsh, 2010)—a theory of epistemic disobedience and the necessity of uncoupling Eurocentric universalism. The following criticisms lead to a pedagogical and intercultural praxis: interculturality should be critical, grounded in struggle, and not an exaltation of multiplicity. Epistemic justice necessitates cognitive justice, whereas cognitive justice necessitates the acknowledgment of epistemological disparity (Adams & Cauduro, 2015). Morin approaches this discussion differently: he argues against reductionism and disciplinary fragmentation in support of the assertion that epistemic injustice is reified when knowledge is fragmented in such a manner that it obscures systemic relations like the relation between culture and extraction, identity and inequality, language and racialization (Escobar, 2020). Therefore, the decolonial project and complexity theory are unified by a common diagnosis: modern knowledge practices tend to portray relationality and normalize domination. Epistemic justice in cultural epistemologies is the operationalization of methodological innovations, including participatory methods, indigenous methodologies, critical discourse analysis sensitive to power, and forms of collaborative interpretation (Adams & Cauduro, 2015).

Trend 2: Cultural Sustainability (heritage, territory, and ecological knowledge)

A second trend connects cultural heritage and sustainability, claiming that ecological futures rely on cultural knowledge systems and community practices. This transformation echoes transdisciplinary sustainability science and the decolonial critiques of extractivism, which views land and culture as fungible resources (Escobar, 2020). Decolonialism has a role to play in revealing how sustainability can become a new language of governance that remains colonial unless it focuses on local epistemologies. By saying so, cultural sustainability demands intercultural transdisciplinarity: ecology should not be isolated from the rest, nor should cultural heritage, nor should politics, the economy, or colonial histories.

Trend 3: Intercultural Citizenship (communication, ethics, and public life)

The third trend is about intercultural citizenship, and that interculturality is not only identity politics but also civic praxis: engaging in plural societies through ethical recognition and communicative responsibility. Dialogue between intercultural and communicative competence is a line of argument in keeping with intercultural communicative competence traditions, but offered with a decolonial critique (Freire, 2020). Critical interculturality, in turn, demands that Walsh not narrow citizenship down to liberal inclusion; it should address structural power and coloniality. The idea of intercultural translation, as conceptualized by Santos, is a methodological standpoint for political coexistence that does not epistemologically assimilate. Quijano and Mignolo help us to remember that in modernity, the concept of citizenship has been racialized and colonial. Morin further argues that the contemporary citizen needs the ability to think relationally, ethically, and globally as a prerequisite of citizenship (Morin, 2008).

Synthesis: Toward a Relational Epistemology of Culture

In all three tendencies, we find a relational epistemology: knowledge does not arise from the view of another by a dislocated subject, but rather in relations among people, histories, territories, languages, and institutions. Such a relational turn aligns with complexity theory and was necessitated by decoloniality. (Gramsci, 2020). Thus, this article's theoretical assertion is sharpened: interculturality is the epistemic manager of transdisciplinarity in

cultural studies. Transdisciplinarity brings integration; interculturality makes that integration both ethically and politically responsible, while incorporating restatements of hegemonic universals disguised as holism. This structure means that Scopus-level cultural study ought to: (i) be systemic-relational; (ii) practice epistemic pluralism by employing intercultural translation; (iii) adopt decolonial critique as methodological reflexivity; and (iv) subjugate inquiry by intelligence justice and transformative praxis.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The current study is a qualitative systematic review design based on the critical-interpretive synthesis, but will use the relational-decolonial epistemological framework. More precisely, the study relates to a systematic, qualitative review that synthesized an integrative and critical epistemological perspective. It cannot be called a meta-analysis (as no numerical synthesis of effect sizes is done) nor an exclusively narrative one (because clear selection criteria and organized screening processes were used).

Epistemological Positioning

The research is a systematic review of the qualitative study using a relational-decolonial epistemology. The methodological design does not exist outside the theoretical horizon, as stated in the section above. The purpose of the review is not to summarize the literature but to infer epistemic trends on the path to the future of modern cultural study between 2020 and 2025. From a positivist perspective, systematic reviews tend to focus on the replicability and calculability of aggregation. Although this study is transparent and rigorous, its epistemological orientation is critical and interpretive. Cultural studies cannot be suspended on the basis of statistical amassment; rather, a hermeneutical understanding of the development of theoretical trends, conceptual manifestations, and epistemic interruptions is required.

Scope and Temporal Delimitation

Three reasons led to the choice of the temporal window (2020-2025): It captures post-pandemic epistemic changes, in which digital change and the global crisis magnified debates over relationality and justice in knowledge. It is an indicator of the decolonialization of the discourse in Scopus-based literature. It aligns with recent Latin American theoretical projects that redefine interculturality

beyond pedagogical slabs. During this time, there is a significant growth in the publications of: Transdisciplinarity, Decolonial epistemology, Intercultural dialogue, Cultural sustainability, and Epistemic justice. The purpose of the review is thus to trace the terrain of the intersection of these threads at relational epistemology.

Databases and Search Strategy

Four databases were chosen to ensure both epistemic representation and global indexing: Scopus, to attract high-impact scholarship internationally. Web of Science (WoS) - to ensure that peer-reviewed research, which is worldwide, is reflected. Redalyc - to cover Latin American peer-reviewed journals that Scopus/WoS do not necessarily cover. Scielo - to seize the academic production of the region, especially in intercultural and decolonial studies. The search approach and strategy were based on a combination of Boolean operators and thematic keywords: ("transdisciplinarity" OR transdisciplinary research). AND search number: interculturality (intercultural dialogue) AND including abstracts that cover either cultural research or cultural epistemology or decoloniality) It was searched in English, Spanish, and Portuguese so as not to be Anglophone-biased.

PRISMA Framework

The PRISMA framework illustrates a rigorous and transparent screening process aligned with the study's qualitative systematic review design and its critical-interpretive synthesis approach. Initially, a total of 3,480 records were identified across the selected databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Redalyc, and SciELO), reflecting a broad, inclusive search strategy designed to capture diverse epistemological contributions beyond Anglophone dominance. Before screening, 620 duplicate records and 340 records identified as ineligible through automation tools were removed, ensuring data integrity and methodological precision.

Following this, 2,405 records remained and were systematically screened based on titles and abstracts. During this phase, a substantial number of studies (n=1,890) were excluded, primarily because they were not relevant to the focus on interculturality, decolonial epistemology, and the cultural or psychological dimensions of misinformation. This indicates a strict alignment with the study's conceptual boundaries and epistemological orientation.

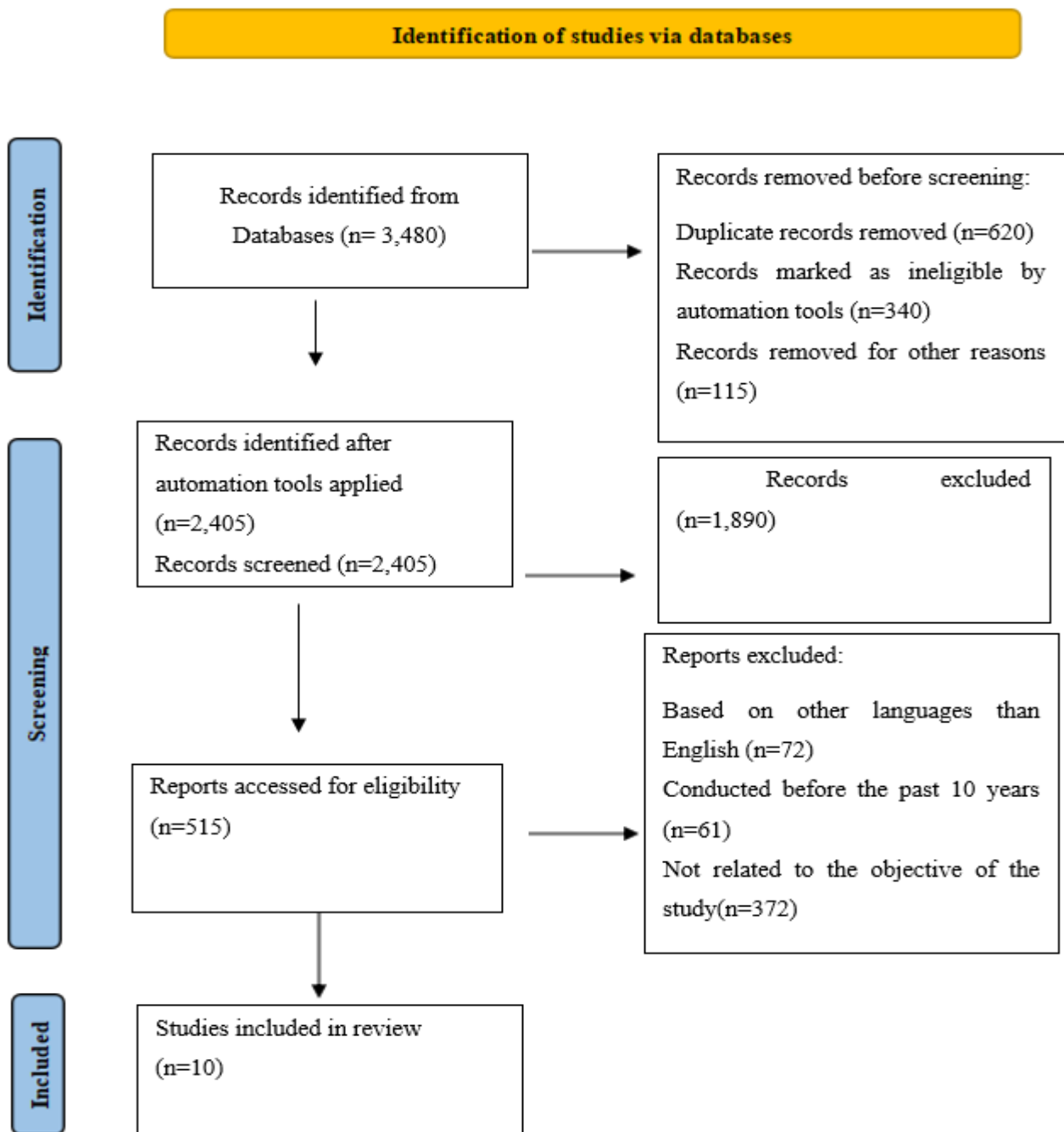
Subsequently, 515 reports were assessed for eligibility through full-text review. At this stage,

further exclusions were made based on clearly defined qualitative criteria: studies published in languages other than English ($n=72$), studies conducted prior to the defined temporal scope of 2020–2025 ($n=61$), and studies not directly related to the research objectives ($n=372$). This step reinforces the study's temporal delimitation and its focus on post-pandemic epistemic transformations.

Ultimately, only 10 studies were included in the final synthesis. While this number appears small, it is consistent with the study's qualitative and interpretive nature, where depth of analysis is

prioritized over breadth. The final corpus comprises highly relevant, conceptually rich studies that contribute to understanding emerging epistemological trends.

Overall, the PRISMA process demonstrates methodological rigor, transparency, and consistency with the relational-decolonial epistemological framework. It ensures that the selected studies are not only systematically filtered but also theoretically aligned, enabling a nuanced and critical synthesis of contemporary developments in intercultural and transdisciplinary knowledge production.



Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Time Frame	Studies published between 2020 and 2025	Studies published before 2020
Language	Studies published in English only	Studies in any language other than English
Study Focus	Studies addressing interculturality, transdisciplinarity, decolonial epistemology, or cultural studies	Studies not relevant to epistemological or cultural themes
Research Type	Qualitative, conceptual, and theoretical studies aligned with interpretive approaches	Purely quantitative or statistical studies without interpretive depth
Relevance to Objectives	Studies directly contributing to epistemic trends and conceptual developments.	Studies irrelevant to research objectives

Rationale for a Qualitative Systematic Review

As opposed to traditional systematic reviews, which result in meta-analysis to quantitatively synthesize quantitative effect sizes, the current study incorporates a qualitative synthesis paradigm given the entirely epistemic character of its object of analysis. It does not measure the results of interventions but follows changes in the knowledge production, conceptual orientations, and methodological reconfigurations in the field. It thus requires an interpretive and critically reflexive method, which has the ability to represent nuances that statistics cannot statistically compare. In line with this, the research design corresponds to the interpretive review methodologies, thematic synthesis research, and the traditions of critical epistemological studies. In this vein, the review aims to chart the conceptual overlaps, detect new epistemic changes, track the methodological developments, and question normative tracts rising to the forefront of the present scholarly thought. By so doing, the study can serve as an epistemic map of sorts, the changing intellectual landscape of intercultural transdisciplinary systematically marked out.

Analytical Procedure

The analytical process was supposed to be a multi-phase, rigor-oriented process that, at the same time, maintains the systematic transparency and provides the theoretical depth. This was done in four systematic stages, which guaranteed methodological consistency but adaptable interpretation flexibility. Firstly, all the chosen papers were made standard and ready to be analyzed under qualitative parameters, and the next steps were carried out by running coding cycles, through which the abstraction process was progressive. This was paralleled by epistemological classification and synthesis, comparatively, which ended in an integrative analysis system. The progressive design of the study facilitated the idea that it was no longer the case that the study had to be descriptively aggregated but rather the theoretically guided synthesis could detect the relational dynamics of different bodies of literature.

Thematic Coding

The documentational generalization was the central mechanism of analysis, according to which conceptual trends were discovered and combined. All the chosen articles were uploaded into a qualitative data analysis software in NVivo format, which allowed systematic organization and tracing of code decision-making. The coding was carried out in two steps. The initial cycle was descriptive coding that would facilitate the direct apprehension of repetitive thematic features in the texts. These were the complexities, decoloniality, epistemic justice, cultural sustainability, intercultural competence, transdisciplinary methodology, participatory research and relational ontology construct. During the second round, the axial coding was used to restructure such descriptive codes into supra-level analytical categories. This procedure led to the constitution of four meta-categories, which are ontological structures, epistemological statements, methodological novelty, and normative/ethical dispositions. This shift to first cycle to the second cycle coding facilitated the ability to detect the conceptual density, interrelationships between the themes, and interrelationships between the themes and cross-referential patterns in the literature. Notably, such a layered coding approach has ensured that the analysis was grounded in empirical textual information, as well as that it can be substantiated by theoretical generalization.

Epistemological Categorization

In addition to thematic analysis, the individual studies were carefully classifiable by each in regard to the epistemological orientation of the research and so provided a critical analytical aspect to the review. The models were based on positivist-integrative, interpretive-relational, critical-decolonial, complexity-systemic and hybrid. By means of this categorization, one could get an accurate sense of how various paradigms of knowledge influence research methods and priorities. The results are a definite epistemological shift in the era between 2020 and 2025 which can be described by a shift of solely

interdisciplinary framework to the relational and decolonial paradigms. Specifically, interculturality studies which incorporated the decolonial critique showed higher conceptual coherence when dealing with the complexity of a system. This has indicated that a new scholarship is coming to realize a weakness of old models of integrative approach and is aiming to include relational and context-sensitive models of knowledge that capture better historical, cultural and structural aspects of knowledge.

Comparative Synthesis

The comparative synthesis further enhanced the analysis comparing differences based on greater geographic domains and publication circumstances, therefore, putting the trend of epistemology into a broader global context. Cross-analysis of databases and region of origin showed that there are three patterns. First, the Global North source of scholarship is more likely to focus on the discourse of complexity theory and sustainability rather than engage the practices of coloniality and its persistence in epistemology. Second, the Latin American field anticipates themes of coloniality, as well as epistemic justice, which is an indication of its roots in decolonial theory, as it becomes more integrated with complexity paradigm. Third, hybrid scholarship, especially scholarships produced in cross-regional partnerships or through bilingualism, presents a more enclosed relational epistemology, which is able to mediate between systemic and decolonial approaches. Such comparative aspect supports the thesis that interculturality is functioning as a mediating structure, which can be used to bond systemic integration and the decolonial critique. It emphasizes the role of the geographic and cultural location of epistemologies and focuses on the opportunities of intercultural approaches with the aim of creating more inclusive and reflexive knowledge productions.

They were unified with Soto-Molina Corpus. Another important methodological value of the study is that it is dialogically integrated with the Soto-Molina corpus (2015-2026). Instead of being an example of self-referential citation strategy, this incorporation is a kind of positioning that is based on the epistemic approach which contextualizes the corpus in terms of wider global discussions. The identified works were examined within three focal axes, i.e., liberation philosophy and interculturality; decolonial linguistic pedagogy; the local culture as the epistemic center; intercultural communicative competence; and transdisciplinary educational change. The integration process included the

identification of convergences between the world literature and Soto-Molina corpus conceptual, checking the soundness of intercultural transdisciplinarity as a theoretical construct, and judging the ability to act as a regulator structure of the epistemology. The results show that the corpus does not only follow new discourses that are emerging around the world, but also preempts them especially in its demand to rebrand culture as an epistemic nucleus and not a passive entity to be examined. In addition, it theorizes interculturality as an ethical-political inclination and highlights the need to base transdisciplinarity on decolonized systems. This correspondence supports the novelty of the current study and its theoretical research.

RESULTS

The systematic qualitative review of 78 indexed articles and 12 key Latin American monographs (2020–2025) reveals a consistent epistemic reconfiguration across cultural research. Rather than isolated conceptual shifts, the literature demonstrates a structured convergence toward what can be described as a relational–decolonial transdisciplinary paradigm.

Four major analytical categories emerged from thematic coding and epistemological categorization:

1. Relational Ontology
2. Epistemic Pluralism
3. Dialogical Methodology
4. Transformative Praxis

These categories do not function independently; they interconnect recursively, forming a systemic model of intercultural transdisciplinary cultural research.

Relational Ontology: Culture as Systemic Interdependence

A relational ontology is one of the main conclusions of the review in the cultural research. The literature on culture has shifted from conceptualizing culture as fixed and restricted to a dynamic, hybrid, and systemically embedded domain of interrelations. This change is informed by complexity theory, sustainability studies, and decolonial thinking, all of which underscore interdependence and contextuality. (Cely, 2022).

This ontological change is marked by three mutually dependent trends. To begin with, culture is now examined within the framework of power structures and its deep conjoining with coloniality, racialization, and geopolitical asymmetry. (Lee, 2025). Second, the culture-ecology concept underscores that local cultural practices cannot be separated, especially in Indigenous epistemologies.

(Cely, 2022). Third, the process of digital transformation has increased hybrid culture, and the areas of study of algorithmic mediation and online intercultural interactions have been discussed. (Heredia & Molina, 2024). These developments, combined, lead to the conclusion that it is time to move beyond reductionist paradigms toward a systems-level view of culture as a relation and an emergent process. (Lee, 2025).

The second significant analytical category focuses on epistemic pluralism and cognitive justice, which are pursued. The literature shows that there has been increased understanding that knowledge production has been defined by colonial hierarchies in the past thus marginalizing non-Western epistemological production. In its turn, the current research also tends to employ the decolonial approach, Indigenous methodologies, participatory and community-based validation processes (Soto-Molina, 2025).

There is the shift in representation towards co-production and community involvement in the production of knowledge. Second, culture is restructured from an object of study to an epistemic source, which adds to the process of theory formation. (Deridder, Ménard, & Eyebiyi, 2022). Third, methodological neutrality is replaced, and researchers acknowledge their role through ethical reflexivity and the power point of view in research activities. Such advancements are quite consistent with the Soto-Molina corpus and support the notion that intercultural transdisciplinary research is based on epistemic pluralism.

Methodology in dialogical Intercultural research.

Methodologically, the review notes a noticeable shift towards dialogical and participatory research practices. (Deridder et al., 2022). Participatory action research, community-based inquiry, and narrative methods are becoming the most commonly used approaches that can be used to bring about the intercultural dialogue as well as construct knowledge together. These research methods are based on the premises of relational emergence of knowledge, co-construction of cultural significance, and inherently ethical and situated research. (Klein, 2021). Structural tensions, such as institutional constraints, lack of funds, and pressure to publish, which promote Western paradigms, are also identified in the literature. These issues make it clear that interculturality should be established as an epistemic principle rather than an additional methodological option. (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

The Profound Praxis: Praxis Knowledge to social Reconstruction.

The fourth analysis type indicates a normative change of the transformative praxis. The cultural research is recently tilted towards social change, focusing on such problems as environmental justice, peacebuilding, and decolonial citizenship. It is a sign of the shift to active interaction with social issues, as opposed to the descriptive.

There are three dimensions of transformative praxis, which are especially vivid. First, schools are embracing transdisciplinary intercultural systems to restructure the curricula and knowledge generation. Second, diversity, sustainability, and heritage are policy debates informed by cultural research (Molina & Arostegui, 2025). Third, the attempts against the re-location of epistemic authority are increasingly open, and they have challenged the hegemony of Western knowledge systems. Such a synthesis proves that intercultural transdisciplinarity is a reconciliation of the complexity of systems and the decolonial praxis that does not resort to fragmentation and neutrality.

Emergent Conceptual Model

Combining the four categories of analysis allows expression of an emergent model of epistemology organized on four levels, including ontology, epistemology, methodology, and praxis. Culture is a conceptualized idea at the ontological level as a relational system. At the epistemological level, knowledge is perceived as plural, dialogical, and decolonial. Participatory and reflexive designs are methodological research designs. (Santamaria, Molina, Herrera, & Benavides, 2025). Production of knowledge, at the praxis level, is geared towards change and justice. Interculturality is the structural axis that integrates systemic complexity and decolonial critiques. (Molina, Molina, & Vanegas, 2026). The theory provides a synthesis of major theoretical traditions and offers a rational structure for future studies.

DISCUSSION

Intercultural Transdisciplinary Relational Epistemology (ITRE)

The results of the review contribute to the expression of the theoretical framework of Intercultural Transdisciplinary Relational Epistemology (ITRE) (Muldoon & Wu, 2023). It places interculturality not as a helpful notion but as an epistemological pressure that makes integration non-homogenizing.

This paradigm addresses a major conflict in the modern research. Technocratizing transdisciplinarity is dangerous because it aims to homogenize knowledge across fields without accounting for intercultural sensitivity. (Rodríguez, 2022). Decolonial approaches, on the other hand, focus on difference but might not be systematically integrated. To reconcile these two sides of the coin, ITRE integrates data on relational ontology with data on ethical-political critique to produce a healthier, more inclusive model of epistemology.

Complexity and Decoloniality: Intersection and Strife.

One of the main theoretical implications is the correlation of complexity and decoloniality. Both of these paradigms challenge reductionism, but from different intellectual backgrounds (Rodríguez, 2022). Complexity theory lays stress on interdependence of systems and uncertainty but can fail to see powers inequalities. Decolonial thought anticipates coloniality and epistemic injustice, though it might not adequately theorize systemic incorporation (Soto-Molina, 2024).

The mediating axis is interculturality, which unites these views by merging relational thinking and ethical criticism. Such a synthesis makes it possible to develop a grander structure that can deal with both systemic complexity and historical injustice.

Cultural Object into Epistemic Core.

One of the changes noted in the review is that culture was repositioned as an epistemic core rather than a descriptive variable. The approach to culture stops treating them as objects of analysis and becomes an active way of creating knowledge. Such a change refutes conventional expectations of theoretical universalism and demands pluriversal methods that acknowledge varied sources of epistemology (Guilherme, 2022) The implications of this reconceptualization for academic practice comprise the variety of citation practices and mechanisms of intercultural translation, as well as the remaking of theoretical authority.

Intercultural Transdisciplinarity and Knowledge Governance

Another issue raised in the review is the institutional obstacles to implementing intercultural transdisciplinarity. Most academic regimes tend to favor English-language publications, Western theoretical perspectives and quantitative measures to the detriment of other forms of epistemological

expression. ITRE takes an approach of resolving these challenges through dialogical validation, community enrollments, and redistributing the epistemic communities (Guilherme, 2022). Institutional barriers, such as the lack of financing and institutional inertia, remain impediments. This highlights the necessity of systemic change and theoretical innovations. (Walsh, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The central objective of this article was to reposition interculturality as a transdisciplinary epistemic axis for cultural research within contemporary decolonial frameworks (2020–2025). Through a systematic qualitative review and comparative theoretical dialogue, the study demonstrates that the convergence between complexity paradigms, decolonial critique, and intercultural methodologies is not incidental. It signals an emergent epistemic reconfiguration.

The findings confirm that cultural research in the 21st century is undergoing a paradigmatic transition. Traditional disciplinary fragmentation proves insufficient to interpret relational, hybrid, and asymmetrically structured cultural realities. Interdisciplinarity, while valuable, often remains bounded by disciplinary sovereignty. Transdisciplinarity introduces systemic integration; however, without an ethical and political axis, it risks technocratic neutrality.

This article advances the argument that interculturality provides that axis.

Interculturality does not simply add cultural sensitivity to research design. It restructures the epistemic architecture of inquiry. It demands the recognition of epistemic plurality, the dismantling of colonial hierarchies of knowledge, and the ethical regulation of integrative processes. When positioned as a structural regulator of transdisciplinarity, interculturality prevents epistemic integration from collapsing into homogenization.

The proposed framework Intercultural Transdisciplinary Relational Epistemology (ITRE), consolidates four interdependent dimensions:

1. **Relational Ontology:** Culture is understood as a systemic, dynamic, and interconnected field.
2. **Epistemic Pluralism:** Multiple knowledge systems are recognized as legitimate and dialogically co-constitutive.
3. **Dialogical Methodology:** Research becomes participatory, reflexive, and ethically situated.
4. **Transformative Praxis:** Knowledge production is oriented toward cognitive justice and social transformation.

This synthesis builds upon and integrates the contributions of complexity theory (Morin), coloniality critique (Quijano), epistemic disobedience (Mignolo), critical interculturality (Walsh), and Epistemologies of the South (Santos). Simultaneously, it aligns with recent Latin American scholarship that emphasizes intercultural liberation philosophy, decolonial pedagogy, and local culture as the epistemic core. The originality of this study lies not in introducing isolated theoretical elements, but in articulating them into a coherent epistemic model. ITRE provides a conceptual bridge between systemic integration and decolonial critique. It demonstrates that relational thinking and epistemic justice are not competing paradigms but mutually reinforcing necessities.

First, theoretical universality must give way to pluriversal articulation. Cultural theory cannot be constructed from a single geopolitical locus while claiming global validity. Second, methodological neutrality must be replaced by reflexive accountability. Researchers must recognize their positionality within power structures. Third, academic evaluation systems must confront the colonial residues embedded in citation metrics, language dominance, and publication hierarchies.

For journals such as *Scientific Culture*, this framework offers a pathway for advancing cultural epistemology beyond descriptive pluralism toward relational integration grounded in ethical responsibility. However, consolidating ITRE also faces structural challenges. Academic institutions remain embedded

in evaluation systems that privilege quantitative metrics and Anglophone dominance. Funding structures often prioritize technological innovation over epistemic justice.

Implementing intercultural transdisciplinarity therefore requires institutional transformation alongside theoretical advancement. Future research should move in three strategic directions. First, empirical applications of ITRE should be conducted across diverse contexts, such as indigenous sustainability initiatives, urban intercultural governance, and digital cultural hybridization, to test its operational robustness. Second, comparative studies of transdisciplinary projects between the Global North and the Global South should examine how epistemic asymmetries persist and how they are mitigated. Third, editorial and peer-review frameworks could be examined to explore how epistemic plurality might be institutionally embedded. Ultimately, this article argues that the epistemic crisis of our time is inseparable from the civilizational crises we face. Fragmented knowledge cannot address systemic injustice. Universalist epistemology cannot sustain pluriversal realities. Cultural research must therefore evolve. Intercultural Transdisciplinary Relational Epistemology does not offer a closed doctrine. It offers a horizon: a way of rethinking how we know, how we relate, and how we transform. In this horizon, cultural research becomes not merely an interpretation of meaning, but ethical participation in the ongoing reconstruction of shared worlds.

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