From epistemological violence to own epistemologies: narrative experiences with peripheral cis women, trans women and transvestite

Da violência epistemológica a epistemologias próprias: experiências de narrativas com mulheres cis periféricas, mulheres trans e travestis

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ABSTRACT This article presents an understanding of the problems faced by peripheral cis women, trans women, and transvestites in the construction of their own epistemologies in the field of sciences. For that, it is based on the field built by three doctoral theses, whose authors are the same as in this article. The theses, although they do not have the main focus of the present article, show, from the field constructed, that little knowledge about the trans, transvestite, and peripheral populations is produced by their members. From the re-reading of the material produced by the researchers, the existence of trenches is identified, which stand in the path taken by trans women, transvestites, and peripheral cis women to produce knowledge. The trenches are: survival, permanence at university, and the validation of knowledge produced by bodies and non-hegemonic existences. Finally, it discusses the existing mismatch between the current education policies and the experiences, indicating a fissure in health practices and in the comprehensive care of this population. In addition, we see violence and inequities in health that end up interfering in the communication and power of popular knowledge as a strategy of resistance and scientific knowledge, in contrast to hegemonic academic knowledge.

KEYWORDS Women. Community participation. Health education. School health services.

RESUMO *Este artigo apresenta compreensão de problemáticas enfrentadas por mulheres cis periféricas, mulheres trans e travestis na construção de epistemologias próprias no campo das ciências. Para tal, baseia-se no campo construído por três teses de doutorado, cujos autores são os mesmos deste artigo. As teses, embora não tenham como foco principal e central o mesmo do presente artigo, evidenciam, a partir do campo construído, que pouco conhecimento a respeito das populações trans, travesti e periférica é produzido por seus integrantes. Identifica-se, a partir da releitura do material produzido pelos pesquisadores, a existência de trincheiras, que se interpõem no caminho percorrido por mulheres trans, travestis e mulheres cis periféricas para produzir conhecimento. São elas: a própria sobrevivência, a permanência no ensino e a validação do conhecimento produzido por corpos e existências não hegemônicas. Discute-se, por fim, que há um descompasso entre as políticas de educação vigentes e as experiências vividas, indicando uma fissura em práticas de saúde e no cuidado integral dessa população. A isso, somam-se violências e iniquidades em saúde que acabam interferindo na comunicação e na potência do saber popular como estratégia de resistência e saber científico, contrapondo-se ao saber acadêmico hegemônico.*

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Introduction

Based on the authors' doctoral research, problems faced by peripheral cis women, trans women and transvestites that imply obstacles to the construction and production of their own epistemologies in the field of science are presented. Then, obstacles, or trenches, which mark the difficulty related to the topic, are identified.

The construction of subjectivity is called 'epistemology'[1]. How do peripheral cis women, trans women and transvestites become what they are? Epistemology is understood not as an irrefutable knowledge, but as an order of discourse. It permeates interested knowledge/power, appearing as a device to produce knowledge/power and violence, inspiring new modern pedagogical strategies.

As a result of this analysis, there are procedures for the individualization of bodies: observation, classification and analytical organization. The women studied here have their existences interfered by an order of the current discourse about them. When we point this out, we see that trans people and transvestites, for example, are not because they are; they are because there is a knowledge and a truth about them, a power that manages them – which can also be extracted from the dissidence that is pushed to the (geographic and symbolic) periphery.

The three theses discussed here are within the field of psychology, and their methodologies are related to philosophy, namely existential phenomenology (thesis 2 and 3) and Foucault's archaeogenealogical method (thesis 1). The first thesis is still in progress and aims to analyze the narratives of trans women and transvestites who have attended the Programa Transcidadania[2], in the light of Foucault's archaeogenealogical method. The second thesis, which is also being developed, investigates the experience of university students in staying at a public university. Part of this investigation is based on notes taken by the researcher about the experience of poor students in a public university.

The third thesis (already completed) aimed to understand how transvestites, trans women and trans men demand care actions, especially in the fields of health and education. A revision of practices in these fields is necessary, as there is a lack of public policies that come from the population involved. Although theses 2 and 3 encompass the experience of masculinities, in this article, we only sought to analyze the repertoire of peripheral cis women, trans women and transvestites, as they are of the topic of discussion.

In the wake of theses 1 and 3 about transvestite and transgender experiences, it is clear that the investigations evidenced about this population were produced by cisgender people, especially non-Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people. In these works, some research is based on the medical interest in surveys and findings of the body from a binary perspective on gender[3] (the male-female system), resulting in documents that 'inspect' the veracity of gender and formulate nosological 'sexual' categories[4].

Theoretical understanding of gender is part of the turning point in Brazilian studies[5,6]. Gender is an important social marker of difference and an analytical social category that permeates cultural, political and aesthetic spheres, being a driver and maintainer of survival and collective strengthening strategies.

This category is intertwined with other social markers of difference (race, sexual orientation, regionality and social class), which directs different points of view in understanding the issue in Brazil. Thus, this discussion starts to take – especially due to the intersections of the theses discussed – a possible direction of contesting the scientific rigor of generalization.

Regarding the production of knowledge about student permanence, with investigations published in the last 20 years in Brazil[7-13], only one of them was written by a young and peripheral cis woman[13]. The others were carried out by student assistance workers, mostly by social workers. Without necessarily

understanding that it is the same difficulty or the same obstacles, as a result, it is possible to see that neither peripheral young cis women who reach university, nor trans and transvestite women write about their own experiences.

Regarding works that discuss school dropout, which is understood as 'expulsion' from school – a topic to be discussed later –, the elaboration of empirical data that do not capture social markers of difference is also outlined. Research analyzed in the theses seem to respond much more to a bureaucratic and protocol order of the public sectors, as an institution, than to a demand characterized as a dialogue with the basic needs of school permanence of trans women and transvestite, for example.

Regarding university dropouts, on the other hand, lots of materials have already been produced[14], due to the demand from student movements, forums/bodies of federal public institutions. The Plano Nacional de Assistência Estudantil [National Student Assistance Plan (PNAES)][15] is the result of these claims[9,10]. This also happens in state universities: there is a financial incentive for poor students to remain studying, through the offer of financial aid or basic services[9-12], without considering 'how' they will keep studying. Are universities prepared to receive poor young people? Or would they be expelling them, as with trans and transvestite students?

By re-reading the theses, we found what we call trenches. 'Trench' means 'ditch', 'a hole dug into the ground'; 'a shelter for combatants'. It is a place where wars are fought, but it is also a place for protection during a fight.

To be able to elaborate epistemologies, following the metaphor of winning the battle, the combatants studied here must first survive, which is their first trench. The second trench has to do with permanence itself: surviving and accessing education does not guarantee their permanence. After surviving the previous stages, the last trench has two do with having the knowledge validated and recognized.

The dangerous facet of trench protection is related to the fact that female combatants may not survive: in poor health, they perish or are repelled from the school environment. Unlike what happens in a battle, war or power struggle, the trench in this case offers protection not in the present but in the future: by surviving, they can thrive. By thriving, they can ease the path for those who will come later on. Danger is part of the present, while protection belongs to the future.

Material and methods

The experience with narratives[16] was used as a resource, based on the re-reading and analysis of the three theses in question. Narratives will be understood as the possibility of setting into motion stories lived and witnessed in the course of the research[16,17]. Therefore, three instruments were used: in research 1, the experience in research/service with the trans and transvestite population was investigated; in research 2, the experience from the researcher's logbooks with peripheral cis women was discussed, and research 3 was based on experience reports in interviews with transgender people and transvestites. Thus, this discussion is based on the experience of the theses' authors, based on what it was possible to find in the field, that is, on their own experience with the material produced.

For the bibliographical survey, the three investigations were resumed. From the perspective of existential phenomenology, the map reading of the empirical material[18] was used. As an initial proposal, for each thesis, compass questions[19] were used, as follows:

1.   How do the processes of exclusion and expulsion of trans women from school take place, according to the participants in the Programa Transcidadania?

2.   How has been the students' experience of staying at the university?

3.   How has been the experience of trans-vestites and trans women regarding their corporeality, and what care experiences does this population require?

Research 1 arises from evidence of research 3, which had been approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) with Human Beings under opinion number CAAE: 79045917.1.0000.5561. Research 2 was not submitted to the CEP, since it starts from the researcher's logbooks, even though it is known that neutrality in contact with the field is impossible.

Results and discussion

First trench: how to inhabit existence, if existing is (often) dying?

Dear reader, I hope that we have a deal from the beginning, as my weak ship is sinking. Could you give a hand to this fearless and unknown navigator? Could you help me swim and not drop the boat in the middle of nowhere? I am not going to talk about peace and, much less, about brotherhood. I will talk about trenches, wars, struggles and confrontations that appear so that we can stay alive.

When I was an undergraduate, I heard the term 'gender identity' in studies of sexuality in education[5]. At first, I was confused, but when it came to trans women and the perverse processes of exclusion that they suffer socially, I started to feel something that I did not understand or know how to deal with.

Every time we talked about the processes of violence/stigma that these women suffer or have suffered in their school career, it was as if blood were oozing from my pores. When advancing in the discipline, I realized that history was made through the eyes of the other, the stranger, the foreigner. There was already a socio-historical analysis being announced in the education of these people,

especially in the path followed by trans women in basic education.

In January 2015, the Programa Transcidadania was launched in the city of São Paulo and it aims to raise the level of education of trans women, transvestites and trans men expelled from school at regular age. This program was within the management goals of the then mayor Fernando Haddad[2]. One of the responses to the goal was the creation of the Policy Coordination for LGBTI, of the Secretariat of Human Rights and Citizenship of the City of São Paulo.

It is from the life stories of transvestites and trans women in this program that one tries to understand the socio-historical crossings of their paths, sharing popular knowledge that dialogues with the possibility of scientific knowledge. This movement is necessary and fundamental, as we come to understand that the appearance and permanence of these people, as subjects, at school, occur amid the revolution of their bodies, as a political space for their existence, inciting epistemologies supported by the knowledge of experience.

Thesis 1 agrees/converges with thesis 2 in many aspects, as it understands that the markers of difference are sometimes confusing and end up showing pains that are difficult to be felt and understood. Reading the experience of a white trans woman will bring a distinct narrative from that of a black trans woman, for example, as race deepens inequalities and needs (especially in the Brazilian population), and even crosses the abysses between what is understood by social class and what experience arises from this tangle.

Regarding the survival of the peripheral population, the data are not as alarming as those specifically referring to trans and transvestite women, although they are still worrying. Data provided by the Brazilian Ministry of Health's Mortality Information System (SIM) indicate 68,242 deaths of adolescents and young adults, aged between 10 and 29 years old, between 2000 and 2006 in Greater São Paulo. Of these, 36% are women and 10%

are identified as brown or black[20]. Although the highest number of deaths is in the population that identifies themselves as white (57.49%), one can conclude that the causes of death in the group of young black and brown people are related to violence in the suburbs of São Paulo[21].

Young black and brown people are the main victims of death due to aggression or violence, infectious, parasitic or circulatory-associated diseases, in addition to external causes[22]. This is due to the precarious conditions to which this population is subjected: lack of basic education infrastructure, access to health and safe leisure options, reflecting in inconstancy in (cis and trans) women's health and education.

The 'Dossiê Retratos das Desigualdades de Gênero e Raça' (Dossier Portraits of Gender and Race Inequalities)[21], in 2018, pointed out that about 70% of recipients of the 'Bolsa Família' are headed by black people. The income of black women in Brazil is the lowest compared to other categories. White women receive, on average, R$ 957.00, while black women receive R$ 544.40. The data do not reveal whether these women are cis or trans – a problem in research that dialogues with social inequalities –, showing the lack of systematization of data that capture specific indexes to think about strategies in public policies.

In turn, the unemployment rate of black women is higher compared to that of white women. Black women have an unemployment rate of 12.5% (of the total number of unemployed Brazilians), while that of white women is 9.2%. About 26.8% of households in favelas are headed by black women, while 12.8% are headed by white women. Regarding education, the average number of school years for the black women aged 16 or over is 7.8 years. White women study almost 2 years more: 9.7 years of schooling on average[21]. The data do not cover the disruption of education for the trans population, with indices that demarcate not only school expulsion, but also fearless violent action on their non-normative experiences[2,5].

We have identified the first trench: survival itself on the periphery, on the margin of the society. The need to bring health closer to the field of education is pointed out, considering the intersectionality of dissident experiences. The periphery itself offers dangerous protection, which is the trench – always about to collapse. For both trans women or transvestite and those from the periphery, the possibility of developing science in Brazil is a distant dream or desire.

Surviving the indices is not enough. It is still necessary to overcome the abyss of education and income, seeking to build conditions to focus on studies, which is essential to reach the academic world. There are combatants in this battle who do not go beyond this point, even with public policies dedicated to mitigating inequalities.

Second trench: the violent permanence in the space that expels – consequences for mental health

Taking the Programa Transcidadania as a public policy, we can say that this construction took place by practicing with this population, because in 2015 there was no official data (as well as today) on the existence of these lives [although the Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transexuais (National Association of Transvestites and Transsexuals) – Antra – reports some data on this population, especially on violence, pointing out that, from 2008 to 2020, the average is 122.5 murders per year 23].

There are no official data on school dropout/expulsion of the trans and transvestite population. However, a study[2] points out that 98% of the population attended in the first 2 years of the 'Programa Transcidadania' showed reports on expulsion from school since the age of eleven.

Most high school students in Brazil are in public schools, totaling around 85%[24]. The fact that access to basic education has been considered a universal right[25] and that public policies are intended to expand education networks positively impact access. The expansion,

however, cannot guarantee the quality of education or the quantity of resources. According to the 'Síntese dos Indicadores Sociais'[26], between 2012 and 2017, only 36% of students from public schools had access to university. Of those who come from private education, 79.2% entered the university.

Regarding access to public universities, the situation is complicated. As an example, in 2016, around 34.6% of newcomers to the University of São Paulo (USP) came from the public schools[24]. Most of these students come from private schools, and in some courses, they are the overwhelming majority. Of the students from public schools, 34.6% are not evenly distributed among the institutes of the university.

Being different, not mastering content that colleagues easily master, not understanding exactly what teachers mean by the words they use are the results found in thesis 2. Below, from the logbooks, we present the statement of a black cis woman, an undergraduate student, from the outskirts of São Paulo, as an illustration of her suffering/illness.

Flor (fictitious name) sought individual assistance on psychological duty[27], as she thought there was something wrong with her. She began talking about the difficulty she was having with the Statistics discipline, which is mandatory in the social sciences course. She said she could not learn, feeling that it 'wasn't meant for her'. When asked about her studies, she describes an impossible routine:

Endless hours of study, no breaks even to eat; studying more than breathing, studying more than living, until you get tired, and you don't remember anything.

That was the main complaint: not being able to remember what she had studied. So, I figured something was wrong.

Digging a little bit deeper, Flor narrated her experience as a student in public schools since she was little and how much her teachers encouraged her:

They used to say that she was actually very intelligent and capable, that she should try to achieve more than what would be common in the periphery where she lived.

At home, she did not receive the support she had in school – and not because her parents were not loving and caring. It turns out that the reality of higher education was far from home: her mother was a cleaner and her father was a bricklayer. *"Neither of them could understand what it was like to choose to study social sciences at a public university. What was that for?".*

At Flor's house, no one understood or could appropriately support her in her studies. Nobody there knew how to study 'academically'. The repertoire built in the public school was not enough either; and, from the best student at school and in all her classes, Flor started to consider herself *"the worst"* one. I did not understand the reason for that, after all, *"nothing had changed"*.

In conversations, we understood that everything had changed: from *"this place was not for me"*, Flor started to say: *"Everything here tells me that I don't belong in here"*. Black and from the periphery, in a mostly white class, she was different from her peers who *"drove Citröens"*. She did not understand when her teachers mentioned *"that important museum in France"*. Everything there really did not make her feel like she belonged to that place.

Identifying this issue, Flor understood the problem and, knowing that there was nothing wrong with her, but with the place that was not prepared to receive her, she was able to make a choice: from the search to build a repertoire to make that place hers, too, she wanted to continue at university. That was at stake when she searched for care: staying at the university.

Many students sought care for this reason: *"I'm dumb"*, *"there's something wrong with me because I don't learn"*, *"I don't understand what the teacher says"* (thesis 2). From our perspective, two main issues arise. The first one is related to the construction of 'school failure'[28,29].

This is how one can call the process by which the student is fully responsible for school difficulties[28]. The responsibility of the educational institution, study conditions, housing or family participation in this process are disregarded. It does not consider the tiring and long commute and its impact on school performance, nor the shorter study time (in addition to a daily job that is often unrelated to the field of study). The easily identifiable differences in relation to classmates are also disregarded: skin color, vacation trips, knowing which museum is *"over there in France"*; and, because of all that, following the topic taught during classes is another barrier.

As the students attended narrate, it is as if they are playing a 'hot potato' game when they are asked to speak. As they do not feel as they belong to the space, they no longer volunteer, because they think that they 'would have nothing to add'. As in the game, in which it is necessary to pass the 'potato' straight ahead to avoid getting burn, Flor and other students speak as quickly as possible so as not to be noticed. Thus, they continued very lonely, carrying the burden of failure on their shoulders.

The second issue perceived is that the university is an environment that expels. Although there are student permanence programs in state and federal institutions, which aim to offer minimum conditions of student permanence in public universities for the poorest and most peripheral population[9-13], there is no guarantee of this permanence, since there is no transformation of the environment to receive this population.

With compromised mental health, physically worn out by commuting and exhausting hours of study, the trench of permanence in education is, with great difficulty, supported and surpassed. When combatants perish, it is considered as school dropout, rather than school 'expulsion'. They are not the ones who choose to drop out. They are invited to leave. We ask: how can they, in this sense, come to produce epistemologies?

When we think of public universities as a place for the development of excellent scientific knowledge, in addition to directing interventional practices in communities and services, it is possible to ask: do peripheral women, trans women and transvestites fit in this 'excellence' project?

In an attempt to favor inclusion, student permanence programs prepare specific notices. If, on the one hand, such 'affirmative' actions make a difference in the access of this population, on the other hand, they do not guarantee the quality of this permanence[13]: money does not solve the violence in a space that expels.

If it is only 'winning' all of this that this portion of the population can develop knowledge, facing daily trenches ranging from precarious displacement to university permanence, we consider urgent spaces for this knowledge to constitute possibilities to circumvent social problems and develop social science. Then, we ask: would the possibility of this writing be the premise to continue and try to 'jump the trench' as the 'effort to remain'?

Third trench: scientific knowledge as epistemological violence

At this point, we start with analyses of how trans identities started to be read by the scientific approval[3,4,6,30]. It is suggested that scientific knowledge, coming especially from medical professionals who segment the body, circumscribe symptoms and characterize the pathology, "it is not aimed at understanding the fissures, the differences, the overlapping exclusions of subjects who were always outside the project of nation"[6(48)], producing epistemological violence.

What knowledge is produced, for what purpose, at the service of whom and what demands are urgently needed from this 'characterization of knowledge'? Theoretical force fields of classical sciences seek veracity of discourses that categorize people as subjects or subject to someone, in addition to fostering the control and definition of paradigms[31].

Scientific knowledge delegates the status of science as a property, concerned with the legitimacy of techniques and theories that would enhance 'knowledge for the people', and not 'knowledge with the people'. This validation of scientific knowledge, linked to epistemologies that stem from positivist ideals, encloses practices and deprives communities and minority groups of their own cultural histories and rights, especially in minorities such as transvestites, trans women and peripheral cis women.

The knowledge shown by these groups signals the fragility of sciences – in particular, those that establish a dialogue with public health and education – breaking the modulation of response patterns for specific behaviors and causal explanations arising from social determinants.

Therefore, we will consider Fernanda's narrative (fictitious name, thesis 3), to better understand how 'people's knowledge' sets margins that escape the scientific discourse:

> The knowledge that is built within the [trans] group is greater than the external... doctors, nurses may have this academic knowledge, but they [transvestites and trans women] invade even the academic knowledge.

This narrative is located where power urges: from the support of discourses/knowledge that come from the status of publicity. Such discourses are possible thanks to the articulation of knowledge produced by their own unique experiences, via the appropriation of this power that emanates from relationships and which, many times, do not find a place in public health services or in schools. In other words, access to scientific knowledge is for whom? To whom and where are these speeches directed?

We also follow this perspective through the experience of Joyce (fictitious name, thesis 3), who talks about how the knowledge of transvestites goes beyond knowledge about anatomy and medical science, when she says:

"I took hormones the way girls normally take them. One passes to the other, one applies to the other... and it's like that! Just like that".

Joyce and Fernanda communicate the knowledge gained at the margin that is centralized by the character of continuity of stories, the existence of resistance-bodies, indicating politics via "the arduous task of keeping [bodies] alive"[32(134)]. It is legitimized by the knowledge of the experience, pointing to a common space/community. This knowledge is also characterized as an educational action[5], if we come to understand that the communicability of a group's experience reflects, symbolically and concretely, in the construction and maintenance of shared knowledge, demarcating its own epistemologies.

As mentioned before, there are countless trenches that (cis or trans) women and transvestites find on their path towards staying. Here, we question whether, in addition to staying at school/university, we could also talk about staying in a 'healthy state', or rather, in life situations that communicate health potentiality.

Regarding this, Fernanda says: *"When I entered university, it became easier because I had knowledge... I have acquired knowledge there"*. Here, the term 'when' signals the breaking of the normality established by those who think about science as a possibility, not a guarantee. It is understood that science is developed by and in the academy and that knowledge built is always about something that often escapes the usual and common[33,34].

With these narratives, we find that the perspectives that sciences have been assuming are not responsible for a social commitment, as they are not committed to returning to their subjects. The knowledge that one 'has' (as possession) assumes a violent break, considering the uniqueness of the struggles that permeate gender, body, social class, regionality and race. We believe that as long as public health and (public) education do not build spaces to guarantee rights and to continue knowledge – also because theories give professionals an

attempt at a practical 'approximation' –, they will remain distant from their public, providing a break in the original meaning of health and education[35].

Final considerations

A mismatch in the ways of producing science in Brazil is noticed when the incorporation of peripheral cis women, trans women and transvestites, especially with regard to care practices in health and education. One notices that neither young peripheral cis women, who reach university, nor trans and transvestite women write about their own experiences, as pointed out by the three theses analyzed here. There is also a lack of material and immaterial investment for student/university permanence, which would provide the foundation for the epistemological and technological innovation of (cis and trans) women and transvestites.

Even though there is an improvement in economic incentives, in the field of education, there is insufficiency when we are talking about minority/peripheral populations – especially because such experiences are marked by profound materializations, such as violence and inequities in health.

In addition to this, there is a lack of communication of knowledge produced by the population/community itself, paying attention to the singularities that emanate from people/a field, which characterizes that, despite being situated in a macro field, it reveals itself as singular, far from generalizations to other fields and experiences. In this sense, it is inferred that the State not only annihilates lives but also produces, from hegemonic knowledge, the inequality of knowledge from an epistemic north deeply rooted in biopower.

Experiences in public health, education, social assistance and human rights services have demonstrated the complex disparity found among peripheral cis women, transvestites and transsexuals, when compared to other populations that are not part of these groups.

Other viewpoints are needed from the State, as well as specifically from health and education institutions. If the trans and transvestite population is not even considered to exist, how can it come to produce epistemology? If the population of peripheral cis women with difficulty arrives and remains at university, how can they produce knowledge? Without taking actions regarding the trenches, the battle will go on; and knowledge about these two groups will continue to be carried out by third parties, guaranteeing the perpetuation of exclusion.

Collaborators

Chohfi LMS (0000-0003-0552-7517)*, Melo JB (0000-0003-3076-1217)* and Souza PA (0000-0001-6728-2004)* have contributed equally to the preparation of this manuscript. ∎

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