

The Discourse of Collective Affirmation about COVID-19 pandemic life experiences in the São Remo favela

Discurso Coletivo de Afirmação sobre vivências da pandemia de covid-19 na favela São Remo

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ABSTRACT This article introduces the Discourse of Collective Affirmation (DCA) as a participatory research tool, showcasing its application in understanding and documenting pandemic living experiences within a *favela*. The resulting DCA, composed of texts and photographs provided by residents, contextualizes the pandemic, illustrates community care practices, highlights challenges faced by children and adolescents, and examines the benefits and difficulties of living with other-than-human animals. By incorporating residents' texts and images into a discourse that they reviewed and approved, the process expanded the repertoire for understanding pandemic living experiences while facilitating the production of affirmative, informative, and advocacy-oriented material.

KEYWORDS Coronavirus infections. Community-based participatory research. Social vulnerability. Socioeconomic factors. Sociocultural territory.

RESUMO Este artigo apresenta o Discurso Coletivo de Afirmação (DCA) como ferramenta de pesquisa participativa, exemplificando seu uso para compreender e documentar vivências da pandemia numa favela. O DCA resultante, composto por textos e fotos dos moradores, contextualiza a pandemia, descreve a gestão do cuidado comunitário, identifica desafios particulares com relação a crianças e adolescentes, além de explorar benefícios e dificuldades do convívio com animais outros-que-humanos. A utilização de textos e imagens dos moradores, num discurso revisado e aprovado por eles, aumentou o repertório disponível para aprofundar o conhecimento das vivências da pandemia, além de permitir a produção de um material afirmativo, informativo e reivindicativo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Infecções por coronavírus. Pesquisa participativa baseada na comunidade. Vulnerabilidade social. Fatores socioeconômicos. Território sociocultural.



Introduction

Individuals who actively contribute to research without being listed as co-authors of academic publications play vital roles across various study stages, individually or in groups. Their involvement may include offering testimonies, providing biological materials, shaping research objectives, securing funding, and participating in all subsequent phases, from planning to the approval and dissemination of results. Participatory research does not encompass the entire spectrum of participation but aligns with the notion that research is conducted ‘with’ people, not ‘on’ them^{1,2}.

Even when participatory, research can reinforce prevailing power structures or promote affirmative and emancipatory processes. A notable approach that not only laid the groundwork for the participatory approach but also emphasized an emancipatory commitment, rooted in the Global South, is the Participatory Action Research (PAR). Developed in the 1970s by scholar-activists like sociologist Orlando Fals Borda³, PAR prioritizes both the process and practical outcomes. It goes beyond being a mere collection of techniques, standing out for its explicit political stance³. Rather than simply aiming to include or integrate marginalized groups into the dominant social order, PAR empowers these groups to challenge and transform that order based on their own goals, experiences, and knowledge³.

The Discourse of the Collective Subject (DCS) is a method that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches and aligns well with participatory research⁴. In this method, participants provide statements that are transformed into texts written in the first-person singular. These texts capture key ideas or expressions, accompanied by data on how many participants shared each view⁴. The purpose is to convey that the first-person singular pronoun ‘I’, in these texts, represents both an individual and a collective subject. While the words may come from one person only, they reflect the collective’s voice. To fully grasp this

duality, the texts must be interpreted using a theoretical framework that may not be easily understood by those unfamiliar with academic modes, especially those of social theory and social representations⁴.

This does not mean that the results of a DCS are unintelligible to a non-specialized audience, as the key expressions are usually presented in everyday language⁴. However, interpreting these statements as parts of the ‘collective subject’s discourse’ often requires academic expertise due to the interpretive complexity involved⁴.

The DCS is compatible ‘with’ but is not invariably a participatory research case as a survey already provides the necessary material to apply the methodology. In DCS, participation does not need to extend beyond the provision of testimonies.

Collective discourses, be they instances of DCS or not, can be enriched by integrating other participatory methods, just as elements of DCS can be incorporated into other methods. One such complementary approach is photovoice, an ethnographic method that uses photographs taken by participants to spark dialogue. This dialogue seeks to uncover the underlying situations captured in the photographs, the participants’ roles in these contexts, and the feasibility of transforming these situations⁵. The critique of power dynamics and the creation of materials based on photographs as a way of supporting demands and emancipatory processes are often included in the use of photovoice methodology⁶. Collective discourses provide a way to give meaning to participatory photographs and other contributions from those involved in the research.

Participatory collective discourses (participation beyond providing testimonies) aimed at transforming marginalized living experiences are a source of knowledge and advocacy in line with the promotion of multispecies health. This is understood as a praxis that grounds actions on knowledge of the pathological effects of marginalization and co-produces knowledge based on actions against

marginalization, aimed at the flourishing of more-than-human well-living [*bem-viver*]⁷⁻⁹.

Agribusiness, extractivism, and, more generally, the primacy of capital over well-living [*bem-viver*] contribute to pandemic scenarios through the marginalization of multispecies collectives¹⁰. COVID-19, a case of zoonotic spillover, has involved multispecies collectives from its origin to the unfolding of the health emergency it triggered¹¹. If, on the one hand, Indigenous peoples and non-urbanized multispecies collectives suffer from the exacerbation of extractivism intensified by the political context of the pandemic, multispecies collectives in cities have not been left unscathed¹². Austerity policies worsened during the pandemic have exacerbated the growth of urban peripheries, leading to new informal occupations, and increasing precarious living conditions for humans and other animals¹². The Jardim São Remo *favela* community, located in the West Zone of the municipality of São Paulo, became involved in occupation processes, experienced precarization, and produced community responses to overcome the health emergency.

In this paper, Discourses of Collective Affirmation (DCA) are proposed not as a form of discourse analysis but as a method to facilitate participatory research within an approach inclined towards PAR. Its application is illustrated in conjunction with another method, the Photovoice method, to document living experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Jardim São Remo *favela*, in the municipality of São Paulo, from a multispecies health perspective.

Material e methods

Location

Jardim São Remo is a *favela* located in the west zone of São Paulo, near the Cidade Universitária Armando Salles de Oliveira,

in the Butantã campus of the University of São Paulo (USP)¹³. According to Grinover and Zuquim, the demand for labor to build the university attracted immigrants, mainly from the Northeast region of Brazil, who came to settle temporarily in the area where Jardim São Remo is now located¹⁴. After the construction was completed, the community remained in the area and has since endured the consequences of marginalization. Basic sanitation issues persist, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, an informal settlement emerged in Buracanã, a vacant lot in São Remo. The Circo Escola, the community's largest socio-cultural facility, which attended approximately 300 children during after-school hours, was closed due to structural problems and, as of the date of writing this article, it is still closed¹⁵. According to a census we conducted in São Remo, with a reference date of January 1, 2019, there were 8,457 people, 983 birds, 745 dogs, and 685 cats living in the community's households¹⁶. The presence of other animal species was reported by the residents, as well as conflicts with synanthropic animals (non-domestic animals adapted to living near humans)¹⁷. The ratio of animal companions to children was 1.56:1¹⁶.

Coparticipants

The Multispecies Health Network (Rede Saúde Multiespécie – Rede Same) at the USP was engaged in health promotion initiatives in São Remo when the COVID-19 pandemic led to a state of public emergency. During these efforts, a community representative raised concerns about how narratives of the pandemic were being shaped by those living outside the *favelas*, emphasizing the importance of amplifying the voices and demands of *favela* residents. In response, researchers from Rede Same and the Research Group on Peripheries at USP's Institute of Advanced Studies (nPeriferias-IEA) joined forces to co-create a collective narrative. They aimed to document São Remo's lived experiences

during the pandemic, explore the community's capacity for resilience and response, and gain a deeper understanding of how to address the needs of those navigating public health crises in marginalized territories like São Remo.

The university research group comprised a diverse team: two white students—an undergraduate from an urban periphery and a middle-class master's student; a white professor; a black professor; and two brown professors (*morenos*), both migrants from Peru and Colombia, respectively. Two additional community leaders joined the community representative, mentioned earlier, and together they invited other São Remo residents to contribute to the collective narrative. In total, 15 residents participated (10 men), ranging in age from 19 to 68, with an average age of 38.5 years. Of the participants, 69% identified as mixed-race, 23% as Black, and 8% as white.

Gathering testimonies and photographs for the DCA

To ensure that the photographs were taken ethically and safely, the São Remo participants were sent text and audio messages with instructions via WhatsApp. This remote approach was adopted due to pandemic restrictions. The photos were the means used by São Remo participants to answer the following questions: (A) In your home, what protects you from catching COVID-19?; (B) In your home, what puts you most at risk of catching COVID-19?; (C) In your home, what has been most advantageous about living with animals during the pandemic?; (D) In your home, what has been most difficult about living with animals during the pandemic?; (E) What has made your animals suffer the most during the pandemic? Afterward, questions commonly used in photovoice surveys were asked: (A) What do you see here? (B) What is really happening here?; (C) How does this relate to our lives?; (D) Why does this situation exist?; (E) What can we do about it?¹⁸. Such a sequence of questions proved difficult to understand, and in most

cases, the answers were limited to the first two questions, even after attempts to explain them via text, audio, and phone calls. This happened even though the relevance and wording of the questions had been discussed with the community organizers beforehand. The answers to this second set of questions were recorded in audio and text. In photovoice methodology, this second set of questions can be asked collectively to discuss and reflect not only on the photos themselves but also on broader themes. Although the attempt was made in a WhatsApp group to make discussions easier, it did not prove viable because some participants did not want to speak out in a group that included neighbors with whom they had personal conflicts. Additionally, open-ended interviews were held with the three community organizers. These interviews focused on topics such as the occupation of the Buracanã area, the actions to raise and distribute donations, and the closure of Circo Escola.

Organizing, approving, and publicizing the DCA

Two participants from the university group transcribed the audio recordings and organized the texts and photographs based on the questions answered through photos and the themes discussed in the interviews with the community organizers. Three other members of the university group reviewed the resulting document and suggested modifications. After a series of five reviews, they arrived at a version that the group felt was the best way to present their opinions.

Based on this version, a personalized version was created for each São Remo participant, so that each one could see the full text, just with the photos they had taken. The photos taken by other participants were replaced by a blank space. Each participant from São Remo indicated whether there was any misinformation, any position they did not agree with, whether they agreed with the way their accounts and photographs were inserted into the text, and

whether the meaning given to the text was representative of their own experiences and those of other residents of the community. A final version was then created, incorporating all the feedback and the photographs authorized for inclusion in the collective narrative. This version received unanimous approval. The document was subsequently shared on the Rede Same webpage¹⁹, in an electronic repository²⁰, and on local social networks.

An effort was made to maintain the original stories. However, to enhance readability, the university participants made some adjustments to connect ideas, add terms implied by the context, and improve gender and number agreement across sentences from different records. These changes were marked in gray in the DCA to indicate the contributions made by the university participants to the narrative content. Everyone involved in creating the narrative was invited to appear explicitly and nominally as a co-author of the published document. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Arts, Sciences, and Humanities of the USP (CAAE: 37575020.8.0000.5390, opinion 4.293.144).

Results

The São Remo participants' review of the DCA initially proposed by the university participants led to some information being changed. One participant asked for one of her stories and two photos to be removed and, although she permitted other stories to be used, she also asked for her name not to be included in the file detailed in the published document. The DCA (version 5211531 filed in the repository²⁰) has 6,815 words, of which 669 (9.8%) are modifications made by university participants. The DCA has been divided into four main sections.

Given the length of the DCA and the word limit for this article, what follows is a brief presentation of each section of the DCA, together with selected excerpts where terms originally highlighted in gray are written in

italics. Readers interested in the full DCA can refer to it through the references provided in the previous paragraph.

In the first section, 'COVID-19: another blow among many', the pandemic is portrayed not as the greatest threat, but as just another hardship. It is not trivial, but its severity has been exacerbated and intensified by other compounding factors such as hunger, unemployment, lack of bathrooms, and inadequate housing. The government's neglect is attributed to the invisibility of peripheral communities and the disregard for their needs, situations that often hinder the adoption of recommended preventive measures. The emergence of the Buracanã occupation and the situation of the unhoused people are addressed as well as solidarity and mutual care to resist adversity. This section emphasizes the affirmative stances, the feeling of abandonment, and multispecies solidarity. Additionally, a photograph (*figure 1*) illustrates part of the Buracanã area, divided into square lots on uneven rubble surfaces, some with walls and roofs made of plastic, or even without plastic, simply marked by boundaries.

The reality of those who are outsiders to the favela is nowhere near the reality of those who are insiders; visiting is not the same as experiencing it, it is different! Just because someone goes to the favela and meets people from there does not mean they understand its reality. Experiencing it is different! You must live daily life there and see the needs and the victories of it; everyone is going through their situation²⁰⁽⁴⁾.

It is horrible to feel like nothing, [...] invisible, seeing all those mothers already there with children, dogs, with whatever is left, you know? In those tiny spaces, with no water, we must fetch water from in jugs to wash dishes and cook²⁰⁽⁶⁾.

We must stay strong out of love for those people in the occupation, and for the animals that are in there. We need a trap because there are a lot

of [...] animals. Like the possums that end up being dangerous and then they die [...] trying to defend a cub or because we invade their space. We understand them and we do not want to kill them²⁰⁽⁷⁾.

[...] we are not fighting just for ourselves, but also for others, we have learned to see others, to set aside our differences, and we have also learned to share [...] ²⁰⁽⁸⁾.

Figure 1. Photo of Buracanã, the occupied land in the São Remo *favela*, 2021



Source: Baquero¹⁶.

‘Community care management’ shows how mutual care was organized to collect and distribute donations of food and hygiene products and to encourage the prevention of transmission. The feeling of dependence and exhaustion after a year of the pandemic is reflected in the following statements.

This year, I believe that things are starting to get complicated for the residents, right? And we are already starting to mobilize, to ask for help because the cost of everything is high. There is no emergency aid, [...] it was not enough to support the entire population, you know?²⁰⁽¹³⁾.

In the section ‘Children and Adolescents of São Remo’, the anxiety generated by the media is highlighted, as it insists on preventive behaviors while peripheral realities become obstacles; the loss of cultural facilities; violence against children, and the violence witnessed by them attributed to more frequent intra-household living; concerns about children’s education and about their teachers, who are forced to expose themselves to the virus in face-to-face classes.

On this issue of restricting children at home, we just cannot do it. They are still on the streets today,

more on the streets than at home. And those who are at home are addicted to gaming²⁰⁽¹⁵⁾.

Some parents [...] were not used to children being at home all the time [...]. We have witnessed children being beaten up for doing silly things, trivial stuff, nothing serious enough to justify it²⁰⁽²⁰⁾.

Finally, in ‘multispecies families’ the accounts highlight the value of the companionship of other animals and concerns about abandonment, confinement, hunger, and violence. *Figure 2* shows the interior of a house where rice was the primary source of food for the woman and the dogs and cats living there. The rice, collected through donations, was stored in a cupboard and is what is on the plate on the floor, between the cupboard and the table.

Affection, companionship, time, and mental health became more valued with animals. Living with them has helped us to keep each other company, especially with the children living in our homes²⁰⁽²¹⁾.

With isolation, people end up getting more stressed and mistreating animals and humans too. They take it out on the fact that they cannot go out, [...] or because they were fired from their job, they take it out on animals, on people at home, this is happening a lot, you know?²⁰⁽²⁴⁾.

Animals are living beings, defenseless, they depend on people to get food, it is not fair to do this to them, especially since they are the best friends we have²⁰⁽²³⁾.

Figure 2. A photo of a house’s interior shows rice stored in a cupboard and served on a plate on the floor. There is a black dog near the plate at the bottom of the picture, the dog’s paws under the table, and a cat on them. São. Remo, 2021



Source: Baquero¹⁶.

Discussion

The DCA, developed through a dialogue between popular and academic knowledge, is a tool that supports the production of knowledge, reflection, and affirmative positioning. It enables the use of accessible and familiar language for those who share close ties with the experiences being discussed, emphasizing collective revision, approval, and authorship of the narrative. This approach diversifies knowledge production, offers other points of view, and makes it easier to reach new audiences, which can be decisive in reshaping the understanding and approach of marginalized conditions²¹. Furthermore, explicitly, and directly acknowledging the co-authorship of those who contribute experiential knowledge, rather than reducing them to mere informants or rendering them invisible through anonymity, is an act of epistemic justice²².

Carrying out a DCA with residents of the São Remo *favela* made it possible to collectively document the experiences of the pandemic in this *favela* in a transformative process for all participants. The alignment of the DCA with the PAR implies that the participants were not only the residents of São Remo – who, in addition to dealing with the daily challenges of the pandemic – organized themselves to commit to contributing to the documentation of this reality. The academic researchers were also participants, and their commitment was to supporting causes mobilized by the community. It was not a question of researchers and researched participants, or sources of information on the one side and epistemic authorities on the other.

Participation was not a one-way opening for non-academics to do more research tasks than usual. It was reciprocal and required shifts in several directions. Rather than demanding compliance with pre-established methodological scripts, academic researchers participated in the sensitive construction and application of procedures to support

peripheral pedagogies that produce knowledge and political acts from and against marginalization. For academic participation to be ‘sensitive’ means it can respond and adapt to the dynamics of the circumstances in which the research takes place, potentially resulting in the alteration or replacement of initially proposed methods²¹. This is how, from the initial proposal of a photovoice research project, the DCA ended up being produced.

The DCA invited non-academic participants to collectively decide on the content, the meaning assigned to the text by academic participants, and the representativeness of the content. It proved suitable for integrating methods like photovoice, which encourage reflection and affirmative positioning.

We, from the university, were more trained in systematizing procedures and writing texts. Additionally, research is part of our academic work. On the other hand, the São Remo participants were the only ones with experiential knowledge of the pandemic in the *favela* and their subsistence was the most demanding thing. Having other priorities and less familiarity with writing and preparing documents, the São Remo participants did not get involved in transcribing audio recordings, organizing the sequence of texts, or formatting the document. For this reason, we took on the task of producing the first version of the DCA document, and as a result, the organization and formatting reflected our choices. The fact that this version was revised and then unanimously approved led the São Remo participants to recognize themselves in the DCA. It also allowed them to discover one another. As one resident put it: “*I didn’t even know we knew all this, that we have so much to say! The thing is, that we don’t know how to write like that*”.

We achieve this collective recognition without using the first-person singular, which, in DCS, has the purpose of “producing, in the receiver, the effect of

a collective opinion”^{4,23}). The first-person singular in DCS is used to write ‘collective’ discourses issued by ‘individuals’; to tell collective stories; and to represent a subject who speaks personally (speaker, structuring structure) and conveys the contents of others (spoken, structured structure)^{4,23}. In fact, ‘we’ easily and intuitively serve these purposes, and it is unclear why the first-person singular would be the ‘natural’ regime of social representations⁴. On the other hand, the ‘collective subject’ is used as a theoretical device by the proponents of the DCS; as a subject “apparently paradoxical, since written in the first-person singular, but referring to a collective thought, which is sociologically possible”^{4,23}. The idea of such a ‘collective subject’ was unfamiliar to the participants from São Remo. In the words of one of them: “*Here, we are not ‘I’ – here it is ‘we’*”. Therefore, in the co-production of the DCA, we did not make it a requirement to use the first-person singular^{4,23}.

The pandemic emergency affected the other-than-human animals in the São Remo community, and this was yet another aspect made invisible by stereotypical discourses about what *favelas* are and what happens in them, often imagined as places inhabited solely by humans, especially criminals^{9,24}. Multispecies care and conflicts shaped experiences during the pandemic, and the DCA has shown interspecies relationships and emotional bonds that both amplified and alleviated the effects of the health emergency. For those facing economic hardship, the ability to provide food and care for their animals, which depend on access to services and material resources, diminishes. In some cases, the psychological pressure and violence experienced by humans are transferred to their animals through behaviors that stress or harm them. On the other hand, mutual care helps to mitigate psychological pressure and fosters, at least among humans, a sense of responsibility that encourages community actions. Although not explicitly mentioned in the DCA, there were community initiatives

to collect donations, primarily food for cats and dogs. Solidarity and actions aimed at the common good were more-than-human.

The PAR seeks the well-being of the most marginalized collectives (which translates into the deconstruction of marginalization), and in this research, the multispecies configuration of the São Remo collective was not ignored. The residents who contributed with statements and photos for the DCA showed empathy and solidarity with their animals, and we, as academic researchers, mobilized ourselves to better understand and give visibility to the situation of these animals through the DCA as well as engaging in food donation efforts for them. These animals experienced the pandemic and influenced the experiences of those who spoke about them or photographed them. Thus, the participation of these individuals in the DCA reflected the participation of their animals in shaping the pandemic experiences.

Synanthropic animals also played a part in the pandemic experiences, and although there was some concern for the well-being of certain species, such as opossums, the main worry centered on issues arising from contact with rats, scorpions, and mosquitoes. However, it is worth noting that urban lifestyles aligned with the well-being of humans and the animals and plants they directly care for are also relatively beneficial for some of the synanthropic species most associated with zoonoses and venomous incidents. This is because such conditions create less favorable environments for their reproduction, resulting in fewer individuals suffering due to the application of population control methods. Nevertheless, what constitutes an environmental improvement in terms of cleanliness and greater biodiversity is also a relative situation as new forms of relationships between species bring with them new tensions. Thus, the promotion of multispecies health is a situational process that often involves trading one set of problems for another, making the quality of these exchanges a critical factor.

Conclusions

The DCA, developed through a dialogue between popular and academic knowledge, is a tool that helps to produce knowledge, reflections, and affirmative stances. It proves particularly effective when the content of the discourse expresses the lived experiences of marginalized individuals who may not be familiar with textual production but actively participate in community processes and aim to guide them with affirmative, informative, and advocacy-oriented documents. The DCA on the pandemic experiences in São Remo highlighted situations that, while generally common to *favelas*, require specific responses to address the configuration they take in São Remo. It reinforced that health emergencies, such as COVID-19, even though it is a disease with pandemic transmission among humans only, it is still a multispecies health issue.

Collaborators

Baquero OS (0000-0003-2695-7946)* contributed to designing the research, conducting interviews, revising the DCA, and writing and revising the manuscript. Faria JA (0000-0002-5821-2706)* contributed to designing and guiding the photovoice, organizing the DCA, and writing and revising the manuscript. Silva SCA (0000-0002-3560-1864)* contributed to the conception and guidance of the photovoice, organization of the DCA, and writing and revising the manuscript. Barrientos DMS (0000-0003-1562-0598)* contributed to conceiving the photovoice, revising the DCA, and writing and revising the manuscript. Germani ACCG (0000-0002-7409-915X)* contributed to the conception of the photovoice, revision of the DCA, and writing and revising the manuscript. Santos GA (0000-0003-4408-2119)* contributed to writing and revising the manuscript. ■

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