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Psychology Developing Societies 2010 22: 221
DOI: 10.1177/097133361002200202

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Psychology and Developing Societies
22(2) 221–247

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University of Allahabad
SAGE Publications
Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi, Singapore,
Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/097133361002200202
<http://pds.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

Three studies from the Brazilian experience are presented to exemplify particular ways for the researcher to relate with the poor and the living world of poverty. These are: (a) describing ways of living in poverty, (b) evaluating programmes to eradicate poverty and (c) intervening in a poor community as a participant observer. The first example illustrates the effort to build categories sensitive to the systemic, autopoietic dynamics of families living in poverty. In the second study, the authors discuss the impact and paradoxes of social interventions, considered from the standpoint of community voices. Finally, the article considers the different levels of meaning that constrain the dialogue between families and professional workers. These trends are discussed according to the dialogical models concerning the interplay of identity–alterity when it comes to the study of the living world of poverty, particularly Bibace’s partnership model.

Keywords

Partnership model, cultural psychology, developmental poetics

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Usually, research on poverty contexts and on the experience of being poor faces epistemological and methodological challenges, which require serious consideration. The Brazilian experience is no exception.

The most important of these challenges lies in the fact that poverty is studied by an outsider, who tries to develop measures and strategies designed to overcome the basic distancing that comes from not having the lived experience of being poor. This dilemma is not new: in the Middle Ages, Saint Bernard questioned whether it is possible to talk about being poor if one does not live in poverty (Mollat, 1986). In other words, the dilemma refers to the complex relationship between the *I* and the *Other*, between *Identity* and *Otherness* (Simão & Valsiner, 2007) and between *Insiders* and *Outsiders*.

The poor are usually envisaged and defined from a Euro-centric perspective, as different and unknown, exotic, and categorised into a view, likely to reduce humans to a *us* versus *them* classification. As Martins (2009, pp. 138–39) states, the development of contemporary societies is marked by distinct and not coincident historical dates, which are not related to underdevelopment but to differences that define either individual or group identities. However, it might be more accurate to show the *other* as a concrete person and favour an encounter. Immersion in the reality of living in poverty has an impact on the researcher him/herself. The encounter itself is a support and a tool for understanding, and offers the researcher an opportunity for reflexivity. He/she has to move towards a social commitment, both in the sense of technical intervention and production of knowledge. Perhaps the latter is the most difficult, as it requires a new epistemology.

The notion of *encounter* implies the possibility of the existence of the *other* as a whole. If dialogically considered, this alterity or *otherness* is itself constitutive; the identity of *I* depends on how the *other* is viewed. The person will enter into the relationship, not with the *other* who searches for him, but for the things that he/she can get from that person. This is the root of many well-meant but ineffective practices.

A reasonably comprehensive overview of living in poverty in Brazil has recently been done by Bastos and Rabinovich (2009), who collected studies conducted by scholars who had tried to develop a different perspective on poverty conditions and experiences. These studies display a

complex mosaic, revealing various, even paradoxical, trends and directions. It encompasses a diversity of modes of living in poverty, dense cultural realities and tremendous potential for generating change and novelty. The editors attempt to highlight what is absent, along the lines of the task proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004) in his *Sociology of Absences*. To make this diversity evident and move it in the present is also to bring out hope.

This article aims to pose questions concerning the possibility that research on poverty can make apparent what has remained hidden in the discourses on poverty so far. Three studies from the Brazilian experience are presented to exemplify specific ways for the researchers to relate with the poor and their lived experiences of poverty. These are: (a) describing ways of living in poverty, (b) evaluating poverty-eradication programmes and (c) intervening in a poor community as a participant observer.

Ways of Sharing: Developmental Trajectories of Families Living in Poverty

In this study we will describe and analyse the dreary lived experience of economically poor families according to a systemic, dynamic and semi-otic perspective.

Poverty as an Experience that Organises and Brings Meaning to Existence

Most of the people in Brazil live in poverty. “We are poor” is how many families describe themselves. It’s a living condition, a type of existence, a way of being in the world. Of course “poverty” has a broader social meaning which can be “seen and measured”: poor people live in peripheral neighbourhoods, are employed in occupations demanding minimal professional qualifications, have lower wages and less education and, in many cities, are predominantly black. We do not intend to offer a causal explanation, be it economical, social or political, for the existence of poverty. As Hundeide pointed out, in order to understand the impact of

poverty: “one needs to go beyond a purely economic analysis and instead focus on what it means to be poor in a certain cultural situation and context” (Hundeide, 1999, p. 143).

Our purpose is to understand poverty based on the way these families deal with what they significantly designate as “being poor”, a *significantly lived personal experience*—and not just as a variable. Poverty, as a social and economic phenomenon, has an intra- and inter-psychological existence that orients families’ and people’s actions in the face of physical privation and re-signifies their objectivity. The beliefs elaborated in this process belong inclusively to the individuals’ “internal” and “external” worlds and also to the family systems they belong to and actively build (Valsiner, 1998; Valsiner, 2007). To live the experience of poverty is the actual human phenomenon of “being a poor”.

The Experience of Family Life as a Semiotic Phenomenon

The term “family” expresses the blend of biological and communal needs of the human species. The production and reproduction of the human experience at the bio-communal level consists of a daily building of convivial interaction networks that make our sociability effective and efficient (Samaja, 2000). As a unit of social production of everyday life, as a link between individual and social spheres, the family facilitates movement from one domain to the other. People constituting a family transit through many contexts, and the intimacy of the family context itself is invaded by messages which come from other contexts through means of mass communication, through the neighbourhood’s influence and through other forms of modern conviviality. In these social transactions, the individuals live their life trajectories within their families through shared meaning-making processes (Bastos, 2001).

When a shared system of meaning orients activities on a continuous temporal basis towards a repeated or recycled everyday action, a *routine activity* emerges. The process of production of routines occurs at two levels: (a) individual, where the routines, necessary for security and to give predictability to the individual’s ontogenetic actions, are part of a certain family system and (b) collective, where the routines are crucial to

the stability of various family systems sharing a communal life. In a particular family configuration, some beliefs and behaviours prevail, or are excluded or relinquished in favour of others. Therefore, these dynamic and relational conditions result in a *semiotic hegemony*. The prevalence of some signs over others constitutes complexes of signs. In these complexes, some signs orient the dynamics of the system, defining what is pertinent and convenient to the interactions among family members and, whether what takes place outside the family unit is to be rejected or conditionally included. Therefore, every family may be understood by identifying its hegemonic signs and its dynamic relations with signs that are not hegemonic (Almeida Filho, 2002).

Taking into account the fact that the family deals with an aggregate set of signs that perform the function of organising routines, it is convenient to call these semiotic settings *codes*, meaning they express *beliefs*, which articulately describe, explain, foretell or prescribe behaviours shared by the family during a certain period of time (Almeida Filho, 2002).

According to classic functional tendencies of family systems, the codes developed for the purpose of socialisation tend to succumb to other codes. Notwithstanding, the codes with such purpose, e.g., socialising for work, may or may not be useful to the codes which orient the interests of the dyads, triads and other forms of partnership among the agents of the family system. Thus, we have at least three types of distinct codes in interaction: codes for socialisation (C_s); codes for autonomy (C_a) and codes for partnership (C_p). The C_s code is immediately connected to the semiotic flow of a broader social network—neighbourhood, community, society—and is typically the input which the family itself produces. Acting in this way, the family reproduces or transforms broader social relations. C_a and C_p codes are more internal to family processes.

Each one of these codes may occupy a hegemonic position within a particular family. The definition of the hegemonic position derives from observing which of the codes orient the family dynamics. Methodologically, we use an approach based on Peirce (Nöth, 1999; Peirce, 1990; Santaella, 1998) to choose the three systems of signs of the hegemonic code. The relations among C_s , C_p and C_a codes, in a specific family system, are (according to the circumstances) established in such a way that one of them is mediating (or interpretatively signifying) the performance

of the others, which will assume the function of object or the object's foundation (signifier). The location of the code in the position of the interpreter changes the hegemonic code.

In actual daily situations, the codes alternate in the hegemonic position because the family organises itself according to different ways of sharing its functions. The category of analysis "ways of sharing" was proposed by Bastos as descriptions of the everyday collective experience shared by family groups, managed in order to include in the same analytic view a behavioural dimension (the practices reported or observed during field work); a cognitive dimension (the justification to include the child in these practices, from the adult's point of view) and the interactive context directly related to insertion in the family group (Bastos, 2001, p. 188).

Ways of sharing refer to: (a) the activities and their distribution in time and in the social space of the family, (b) current social practices and their distribution to family members and (c) beliefs justifying the social relationship as a concrete object (while it exists), or as an ideal object (which has already happened or will happen again). *Ways of sharing* describes how people, while occupying different positions in a family system, coordinate their actions in collective activities in order to build a quotidian structure for conviviality through their relations. Consequently, the family dynamics is constituted through a process wherein the ways of sharing specify which codes and beliefs are necessary and how they are articulated to coordinate people's actions and interactions, allowing them to organise their everyday life differently, using similar beliefs.

The changes regarding the family system's processes of transformation cannot be anticipated only through their identification in cultural, social and economic situations, even if they are extreme, as is the condition of poverty. They cannot be anticipated even through a more proximal technique, which identifies the different types of events triggering such changes. Very different events, such as the death of an important person in the family, or the head of the family being unemployed, or the premature pregnancy of a daughter and its practical and relational consequences or the oldest daughter leaving the house lead to deep transformations, precisely because of the semiotic inclusions and exclusions that people perform in taking the proximal and distal aspects as a primary resource with which they weave a web of senses, meanings and actions are coordinated by these signs. Ultimately they are the dynamic process of their cores.

To exemplify the family system's processes of transformation, let us consider the cases of transformations experienced by two families who participated in our study. The analysis highlights the use of signs (different kinds of codes) regulating transformations based on partnership or on autonomy.

The Coordinated Family: A "Resistant" Family Structure

The family being studied constituted of five members: a couple, Dilza and Luis, the former, a maid and a housewife and the latter, an unemployed plumber; Cristina (the elder daughter); Cristiane (Cristina's sister) and Alexandre (Cristina's son). Cristina owned a small business that produced clothing. The routines involved running the business, the timing of the production and the trips to buy fabric and other primary resources for the production and selling of the clothes. These activities structured and directed the family's everyday life. In this context, *working socialisation* (C_s) is the hegemonic semiotic code (*interpreter*). In this context, Cristiane, because she was considered competent, took care of Alexandre, and was increasingly assuming responsibilities and winning autonomy from her parents and freedom in the internal and external spaces of the house. The bankruptcy of the business marked the beginning of a series of changes which took place in the relationships among the family members.

The strategies used to bring about a new order entailed relational changes and redefined the content of the system of shared beliefs. Luis, the plumber, cooked and supervised the children's daily routines; Cristiane had her professional training anticipated (she enrolled in a sewing course); Dilza started to work the whole week as a maid. As for Alexandre, his autonomy was increasingly solidified. Dilza's family continued to be united around the parents' affection and intense dedication they all displayed towards each other. The centrality of Dilza's figure was again stressed: she was the one who made plans, managed and took upon herself most of the responsibilities.

The codes for making the children and adolescents more autonomous, as well as those for the partnerships, became more active. Cristiane was

preparing herself to start her own business. She was attending a training course for manicurists and hairdressers and was looking for an apprenticeship. She was practicing her new skills on her relatives at home. Since she was studying, she could no longer give the same attention to Alexandre. She was entering a transitional process that might be completed in face of her first job.

When Alexandre was two years old he played almost everyday pretending he was working, and he pretended to return home around the same time as the adults. When he was six, around the time the business went bankrupt, he started helping his uncle in the grocery store. His playing activity, which simulated the real situation, acquired a dimension of reality. Alexandre was learning basic mathematical operations. He was already a “young man, who took care of things, took showers and got ready without us having to tell him to do so” (Dilza). Alexandre’s increasing ability was visible and celebrated by the family. The positive way he acted in while facing the family adversities confirmed that his choice for work, as the central reference for the construction of a family identity, was the right choice. This code was evidently dependent on the past of his particular life histories and interpretations, lending continuity to the structuring system of beliefs. “Everybody works...everybody is in balance. That’s how I learned from my father since I was a little boy...one needs to acknowledge reality, so one does not starve” (Luis).

The conceptual developments on C_a and C_p codes (codes for *autonomy* and for *partnership* in the model previously described) coordinate Cristiane’s and Alexandre’s actions, including their actions towards those taking care of them. It happens through the codes for the value of work (or codes for socialisation) (C_s). The solidarity and autonomy they developed enabled them to succeed in facing another adversity.

Caring by Turn-Taking: A Family Structure in Disequilibrium

The family in our second example comprised Lourdes, her four children, Patricia, Pedro, Paulo, Paula and Lourdes’ husband, to whom they almost never referred in their conversation. Patricia did not receive much help

from her mother. Later on, she became a skilled housewife and “mother” to her brothers, developing a personal administrative system of the domestic environment.

The poverty of the family was aggravated by the lack of significant contribution from the husband to help support the family, which forced Lourdes to look for a job outside the house. When Patricia was seven, she took her mother’s place in the home. Both built a network of relationships that oriented the entire family system: not only the structuring of everyday life, but also the meanings which justified the roles and power assumed. The code of the partnership between the mother and the eldest daughter (C_p) took the position of the interpreter in the C_a-C_s relation: “I am the chief of the family, either when mommy’s at home, or when she’s not” (Patricia).

The pedagogic intentions, which were so common in the family’s ways of sharing its everyday life, were lighter on Patricia’s brothers and concentrated on her, orienting her brothers’ preparation towards adulthood. It happens with restrictions on a more autonomous development regarding their relations with their peers, as well as their professional and affective choices. Patricia did the chores, which she acknowledged should be shared by her brother. However, she said, “It’s best if I wash it myself, instead of giving it to him. It’s less troublesome”. This statement was in response to Paulo’s spontaneous initiative to wash his school uniform. Overall, Patricia’s opinion was that, even though her brothers eventually showed initiative and solidarity, they were “messy” and “don’t do anything right”. She had to “teach them how to fix what they’ve done wrong”. Patricia’s “superior ability” was validated by her mother when she named the boys’ room a “pigsty”, or when she referred to Paula saying, “She doesn’t know how to do anything”.

To sum up, this family’s typical code for socialisation generally consisted of beliefs in the specific abilities of each sex (Pedro and Paulo did not perform a certain task because they were men, and Paula because she was incompetent). The ideal model for the children was Patricia. This code specifies which beliefs and autonomous behaviours are admitted according to the code, which justifies the partnership between Lourdes and Patricia.

This dyadic structure fell apart when Patricia left to live with an aunt in a distant city. The practical consequence of this disruption was that

previously dormant conflicts now multiplied. They came to the fore, increasing the difficulties in communication inside the group, and, consequently decreasing the group's ability to remain structured. Because of Patricia's absence, Lourdes, the mother, replaced Patricia with Paula, her "incompetent" sister. However, Paula did not replace Patricia efficiently, as she was not yet ready for that role. Lourdes then complained about her oldest daughter's absence, and how the work load could not be handled by Paula and her brothers. Lourdes understood that the transfer of responsibility should come with the ability to perform the required tasks. She then decided to leave her job and return to the role that was once hers and had only been temporarily entrusted to Patricia. The family's economic situation got worse. Paulo gave up his dream of attending medical school and started working in a slaughter house. Paula began trying to get a job, as she wanted to leave home as soon as possible. Her oldest brother had already started living with a woman in a distant district. Lourdes' husband, almost never mentioned in her interviews, still had two families. Patricia, although away from the family, kept in touch by writing. She was working at a supermarket in São Paulo and had given up her dream of becoming a teacher. She did not want to come back to the family.

The rupture of the Lourdes and Patricia dyad ended the source of power from which the codes and ways of sharing had emerged. Together, they had structured the family's everyday life. There was no hierarchy of activities anymore; the routines were no longer followed, forcing Lourdes to take care of the house by herself. The quality of interaction among the agents in the family became extremely precarious. The main concern was the children's attempts to end the situation wherein they were still financially dependent on their mother. The positions of power, which were very clear when Patricia was in charge, no longer existed; Lourdes did not assume Patricia's place. There was no longer a correlation of forces between her and her children that could instill order in the family system, or that could create conditions to build any semiotic hegemony. The previous beliefs about the ideal daughter, or about the abilities appropriate to each gender, lost their coordinating functions. In this context, after the disruption that ended the Patricia–Lourdes dyad, including the changes related to the ways of sharing everyday life, the basic code that had helped structure Lourdes' family completely lost its value. Lacking

this kind of symbolic reference, a group under such circumstances either has to produce a new code or stop existing as a group which has clearly defined borders.

Evaluating Social Programmes in Novos Alagados, Salvador, Bahia: Listening to the Community Voices

Novos Alagados is a slum located in Salvador's Railroad Suburb, known for its old "palafitas".¹ During the last decade, the district has gone through a great physical and social restructuring, due to a multi-dimensional programme executed by the state government and some internationally financed non-governmental organisations. The main purpose of this programme was to eradicate the "palafitas"; improve the district's housing; build residential buildings and develop facilities for social and recreational use, such as squares, sports courts, cycle tracks and roads along the sea coast; replant the mangrove and to prevent further construction of "palafitas". Following these structural changes, specific projects were undertaken to provide services in health and education sectors. Attempts were also made to generate employment and income (through forming of co-operatives, for instance).

The process of structural changes in the macro context, such as those which occurred in Novos Alagados, has led to repercussions for the inhabitants' developmental trajectories (children, adolescents and adults). The changes have also generated new forms of interaction with the outside environment and within the context.

The researchers (a team coordinated by the first author) were asked to conduct a qualitative evaluation of the impact of the project, from the standpoint of the community. The methodological strategies chosen throughout this process included focus groups and in-depth interviews with key participants. All participants were dwellers of the city and had benefited from the intervention project directly (as users of particular services) or indirectly (as in the overall condition of dwellers who benefit from a safer and healthier neighbourhood). Institutional actors were

also interviewed (many of them in their roles as both professionals and dwellers). Forty-nine persons, mainly women, participated in the focus groups discussions. These were divided into six different thematic meetings. The in-depth interviews were individually conducted with 12 key participants (six men, six women).

Use of qualitative strategies was required to understand changes which got triggered by social actions. This was necessary to apprehend the subjective dynamics which mediated the transformations. One can assume that there is no effective change if the voices of the men and women do not articulate them. Such strategies are also relevant to identify meaning-making processes involved in developmental trajectories of communities and individuals, and to understand how it is possible to create innovative methodologies to deal with poverty and also promote quality of life—as reflected in affective ambience, solidarity, relatedness and the ability to design and develop meaningful life experiences. Thus, broadly considered, quality of life requires agency in domains involving personal significance.

When evaluating participatory or collaborative models, as also empowerment studies, the researcher needs to emphasise the construction of an active and negotiated process in order to enhance participants' ability of critical reflection and capacity building (Wallerstein et al., 2002), going beyond such traditional parameters as accuracy, feasibility and utility. As Driskell et al. (2001, p. 89) assert, this type of understanding can only be gained through an inclusive and participatory evaluation: "For the processes to work, development aid agencies, governments and NGOs must learn how to support genuine processes of participation that build on people's strengths, in reality as well as in rhetoric".

In other words, in order to encompass a broader concept of the relationship between needs and satisfaction, research needs to be redirected towards the services under evaluation. In the field of health, for instance, needs are not merely biological: they are existential and human (love, friendship, moral action) and depend on the dynamics of relationships which are obtained at several levels of their social networks.

Therefore, the users of a community service build their evaluations based on subjective feelings of needs and satisfaction: both terms implying a much generalised meaning and cognitive and affective parameters set up by the comparison between the lived experience and the personal

criteria which define acceptable quality for a specific service or action. Throughout the evaluation of the study presented here, our main concern was making explicit the logic structure of participants' discourse and revealing the manner in which the participants perceived the impact of the project on their everyday lives.

The Logic of Planning is Not the Logic of Everyday Life

Listening to community voices requires openness, so that administrators and researchers can take into account the fact that questions and answers can follow different schema of logic. According to Bibace's partnership model, the researcher can never assume a particular trend concerning the answer to an item in a questionnaire or an interview: He/She must ask (Bibace, 1999; Dowds, Davis & Bibace, 1999).

The administrator's logic and that of the researcher can differ from the research participant's logic (logic of planning versus logic of needs). This point is well illustrated in this study when it comes to understanding the impact of the services and actions on the reality of children and adolescents in Novos Alagados.

Children were often mentioned as the main beneficiaries of the programme for different groups and interviewees. Some statements, however, signalled important issues involving the child's relationship with the new space—e.g., a possible increase in domestic violence—which went against the professionals' expectations.

Two important issues were positively viewed—health care and the promotion of development and the child's relationship with the space of the houses and urban areas, increasing security and freedom to explore the environment. Provided their children were supported by the programme, the remarks of the direct beneficiaries (parents) concerning the quality of services in education (the nursery and education centre) and health (COF) were always favourable, even among the dissenting voices. The following narratives support this observation:

Although I do not know anyone, and never have participated here, I see that people speak very well here; also the nursery children are well cared for.

It is a pity that you cannot have all the children here, all children who are underweight. They are doing a very good job in the project. (Mother 1, Focus Group on Health Service)

Me, thank God, I thank the Center very much. After the Center came out here, many children have recovered. And I do not even have anything to say, my children today are good children. When I speak they always obey and after the Center came it has become better, right? Because my children have found this place here [where they are cared for]. If this building had been here long before, many young people would not have died, particularly, many who were junkies, you know? The children need something to keep their minds occupied. They can also participate in sports, and see places in town with people here. I cannot pay the center for these things that God has sent to me and to us. It is a center that should never leave. (Mother 4, Focus Group on Educational Service)

Besides such positive evaluation, it is possible to identify other emphases in the mothers' speeches which could be heard as community voices. They asserted that all children in the neighbourhood deserve to be provided with the same quality as found in the project services. These services should be made permanent and assigned a preventive role. These ideas were not necessarily present in what was proposed by the administrators and researchers while designing the study.

In the above example, as also when members of the community engaged with other topics, the community voices heard showed a deep understanding of the connection between actions, which are proposed as emergent, circumstantial and provisory, and everyday life, which begs for continuity. Eradicating poverty is the life work of an entire society, involving all institutions, communities and actors. However, projects, such as these, while well meant, are planned to continue only for two, three, or at the most for ten years. Everyday logic, the logic of needs, requires being more comprehensive and ought to consider the complexity of life.

Some of the services introduced were very new in the community (nutritional orientation, for instance). In the focus groups' discussion, the discourse expressed an understanding which revealed the ongoing evaluation made by the community. It influenced the consequent reconfiguration in the way needs, satisfaction and quality of life are viewed.

Interventions can have Paradoxical Effects

Some of the transcripts indicate paradoxical effects of the improvements implemented by the project. Since it uses a multi-sectoral approach, the project included a huge pool of actions addressing housing and physical interventions in urban environment (laying down of new roads, providing connections to water and drainage, installation of public lighting systems, etc.). Allied to social interventions, these changes were perceived as improvements, which not only had a positive impact on the quality of life of the community, but also contributed to a decrease in chronic problems such as urban violence. Children also benefited from the general improvement in the community environment.

Nevertheless, some reports indicate that children, in this urbanisation process, also lost their freedom of walking and moving freely in the neighbourhood.

We also noted a decrease in engaging in intelligent activities by children. The children before the intervention were more active, more alive and had more vitality. Now we found them much more traumatised and troubled. When they lived in the tide, in the palafitas, they created their own toys. They lived their own life. Previously they would pick up shellfish and other seafood and cook it, and go to the neighbour's house whenever they wanted to and, thus, had much greater freedom of movement.

There was more open space in the palafitas. The boys ran over the bridges, they were by the sea. The new houses have restricted their world, you know? The mother puts a television there and they sit facing such a television, you know? (...) Children in the "palafitas" were very creative and they were not as aggressive as they are now. All this is due to this dramatic change. They are confined to a room. (Individual interview, woman, Community Leadership)

The same trend was positively viewed by another interviewee:

People who live in these houses when they are hit by rain, their children are no longer on the streets. They are no longer in the street without someone supervising them. (Individual interview, man, Institutional Actor)

Other reports highlight the fact that, although domestic injuries had decreased with the extinction of palafitas, the risk of children getting hit by cars, because of vehicular traffic on the new streets, had increased.

Some participants feel that the restricted size of houses promotes promiscuity and abuse:

When the social worker used to come to visit some large families, she used to say later: "But I do not know how it is possible. How do they sleep, six children, eight children in there?" And then we have all those cases of violence within the home. (Individual interview, Leadership)

There seems to be a specific type of violence that accompanies the changes brought about by urbanisation. The increase in domestic violence, which affects the games of childhood, presents new dangers to children. This aspect of violence, which appears in the accounts of different participants, may reflect a more general issue, not immediately associated with changes in housing and urban infrastructure. On one hand, this issue involves the change in social awareness about violence against children, which increases its social visibility. On the other hand, the passage from the palafitas in the tide, to the houses in the urban area, leads to a total restructuring of the way of life and may have an impact on interpersonal relationships within the family. This change might be seen as analogous to the passage from communal to societal styles, which comes with the urbanisation process.

In the narratives below, two women, who have been living in the neighbourhood since the beginning, present their thoughts about the recent increase of violence within families and in the streets:

W1: Yes...I believe that [the situation] has changed. In my view I believe that it has changed...Before, there were...these stories, but it was rare. And today we hear, often we hear...talk someone raped an eight-year-old. The uncle...the father...is nonsense... (Individual interview, Early Resident).

W2: Look, the violence has decreased, but, on the other hand, it has not because of the kind of things that happen in front of many children. There are many children playing in the street, and a car comes and hits one of them. They hit the children, have no respect. And also the shots. I don't think the situations have changed. They [the police] are doing the same thing. They don't respect anyone who is around. They want to chase a

thief or a drug dealer and (...) don't care about the people who live here. That is why it happens that a child gets shot (Individual interview, Early Resident).

When narrating dramatic situations, a feeling of hopelessness and the lack of availability of social support is evident. There is no mention of the project this time, and the trust among the neighbours and in the community breaks down.

We only have God to save us, and in certain moments we say "My Lord, my Father; we only have you, Father..." and we leave everything and ourselves in His hands. My children even, and my grandchildren, are all young, girls and boys. I worry when they go out. I don't know what can happen to them I just leave it in God's hands, He will take them and bring them back. How many have lost their lives on the beach. The murderers dragged them to the beach to do bad things and kill...We live in a world of cruelty...The people have no love.... This is horrible. (Individual interview, Early Resident)

The Collective Memory of the Community Interacts with the Social Interventions

In the focus groups, through the interviews, and especially in the discourse of leaders and early residents, there is a reference made to the history of community organisation, the beginning of the social interventions 10 years ago. From the participants' perspective, this community initiative had prepared the ground, in the 1980s, for the arrival of the social projects (especially when linked to NGOs).

All the people came because of the organization that the community had, before the projects started. That is, in fact all the work that was developed there [referring to a particular association in the neighborhood] drew the attention of NGOs. Novos Alagados turned suddenly into a hub, everyone wanted to come and work here, because something was working well here. This BOOM happened because for twenty years we had been fighting for water, light...the whole process favoured the arrival of the projects. (Individual interview, Community Leadership)

However, when asked if the community still fights for improvements, an old resident said:

Today the community still has the will to fight. You only need a group to lead and give us strength [she refers to the need for leadership. Note that institutional actors who conduct the project are not seen as leaders]. (...) But we want to fight to improve the conditions even more, to help...we just need to have one person to guide us, to take the lead. (Individual interview, Early Resident)

Another point, which shows that different perspectives are used in the relationship between the project and the community, is related to the high expectations generated throughout this entire process, called by some interviewees as the community history of struggles and battles.

They spent twenty years fighting to put an end to the palafitas and start living in the landfill. Thus, it has been a struggle for many years. So they had, let's say, a certain level of hope. The project brings them this reality, no more palafitas, or houses on the landfill. But when the houses are not found to be what they had in mind during those twenty years, they lose hope. (Individual interview, Leadership)

There is possibly a gap here which is relevant to consider. The community had struggled for changes for a long time. Then the NGOs and other social projects came, but from outside the community. The connection between their struggle and the results is not immediately seen; maybe it is absent. There is a paradoxical reaction as agency seems to be subordinated to an initiative from the outside: The project is the main actor, not the community or its leaders. This particular relationship is the root cause of tensions reported by institutional actors and beneficiaries. The words currently employed by the participants, as shown in the narratives above, are not neutral, but reveal their different perspectives—for instance, when residents and institutional actors talk of safety for the children. The actors involved are the professionals and managers in the project and the beneficiaries are the targets, but not agents of change. Yet the discourse prevalent in the project emphasises partnership, and one of the goals is precisely to enhance the community's autonomy and initiative.

The missing link, sometimes invisible, is the history of the community, its earlier initiatives and experience encoded in its memory.

The people of Novos Alagados are keen to preserve their cultural traditions, which they have inherited in part from their provincial origin. These practices have long favoured spontaneous community organisation and establishing roots in the neighbourhood. In this context, people are asked to do their part, revealing a sense of participation and commitment to the community which is weak when it comes to compliance with the interventions. In other words, the voices narrating this history of struggle and community organisation sound proud. On the other hand, the voices narrating the improvements brought by the project are satisfied, but not proud.

In contemporary Brazil, however, there is a decrease in community participation that can be explained, no doubt, within a more general, historical and political framework. This is the immediate consequence of an increase of a welfare pattern, connected to individual demands for services that can follow a path detrimental to community development. An example of this is the parents who register their child in various projects. They wait to pick the one project “that gives more”. One of the leaders concludes:

So it is a process that is being installed; instead of making the family, women, community grow, there is a process of creating dependency and parasites. But there are also those people who keep their dignity, saying: “I only ask for help when I need; if I can handle it myself I don’t ask, do not like to ask”. It is a different position. There used to be more sharing among the people in the community. For example, if the neighbour had flour and the other did not, she would give flour to her. But the neighbour when she goes out on Monday she would return that cup of flour. (...) Thus, what we saw was always a very proud community who liked working hard for living. Everyone struggled.

Listening to the Community Voice in Carmo, São Paulo: Stories That the Health Agents Did Not Hear

Carmo is a rural area located 25 km away from the centre of the city of São Roque. It belongs to the municipality, which is situated in the state of São Paulo, 60 km from São Paulo city, the biggest town in Brazil. The town is gradually losing its rural way of life and potential for generating

jobs in the area. It is becoming an urban appendix (Rabinovich, 2009). The inhabitants, who once used to be labourers and agricultural workers, have now become gardeners and bricklayers. The women, who used to work in the fields, have become maids and housewives. Nevertheless, the place still continues to appear rural as it is without shops, services and entertainment. It is like a village connected to the city by a dirt road. Many jobs are offered by an elegant condominium complex, which is located in the vicinity. Although officially recognised as a remnant community of *quilombo* (hiding place of runaway slaves) in 2001, the process of communal organisation, which was once alive, was interrupted because it was not possible for the community to organise an association of neighbourhood residents. None of the dwellers wished to take on the task and the responsibilities of presidency.

We report here two cases in which the researcher (the second author) collected information based on participant observation; ethnographic description; collection of documentation in journals, official sources, cartographic documents, photographs and drawings of the site and the dwellings, as well as conducted semi-structured and informal interviews over a period of five years. Regular participation in the Family Health Program (FHP) occurred for one year. We will highlight the lack of dialogue between the staff of the FHP and the people to whom the programme is addressed.

The FHP was introduced in Brazil in 1994, initially as a health programme. It gradually acquired the status of a reorganisation strategy for primary healthcare delivery across the country.

The program's operational procedures are driven by the paradigm of health promotion. The following aspects are worth noting: an emphasis on working in multi-disciplinary teams (each FHP team is made up of one doctor, one nurse, one dentist—who usually operate across two teams—one nursing assistant and six community health workers); an increase in educational activities; providing incentives for community participation based on the principal of dual responsibility; relevant attempts to reach out to the community and an identification with the needs of the population. (Trad, 2009, p. 374)

Each FHP team is responsible for 700–1,000 families, performing activities such as home visits, which foster preventive health measures and promote family health.

In Case 1, called “Absence of Cleanliness”, during a home visit, FHP agents pointed out several observed risks to health, e.g., presence of faeces close to cooking, nest of rats inside the sofa in the living room, contaminated well and lack of personal cleanliness. The whole house was in a very poor condition, as also were the family members. The wife of the family head had died of alcohol ingestion. One of the daughters, who was now married and lived next door had then got pregnant and had tried to kill her baby. One of the grandchildren was found to be mentally impaired.

As a consequence of the FHP agents’ remarks, the owner of the house felt persecuted and accused, refusing to establish any dialogue with the agents. He accused the FHP agents of not taking him and his rights into consideration and told them that he had always supported himself and his family. When the FHP agents offered him a new sofa as a gift, he refused and claimed he could buy one himself as he had always done. He became really furious, and the whole FHP team became rather insecure in his presence. However, his basic argument shows that he is aware of his right to define his “place”, even when it does not match the point of view of the health agents. Interaction, between the family and the FHP agents, is rendered impossible by emotional stress. Therefore, the absence of emotional and instrumental support prevents him from improving his capacity to cope with difficulties.

Case 2—called “A Child with Malnutrition”—is about a mother, who does not accept the FHP nurse’s advice about how to feed her malnourished child. The family is considered indigent. They are newcomers and live in a kind of “favela”, along the railroad tracks. Soon after the visit of the FHP agents, the father was arrested on a robbery charge.

The FHP nurse suggests several ways to improve the child’s nutritional balance. To every suggestion made by her, the mother provides a counter argument to point out how the suggestion of the nurse was impossible to implement. Her main argument was that she had no money to buy food. However, when the nurse suggests that she could use the traditional cotton diapers instead of the paper diapers she mentioned she was using, which are quite expensive in Brazil, and, thus, save some money to buy food, the mother argued back that to wash cotton diapers she will need soap and that soap was very expensive. The mother accused her daughter of not eating and reported that even when she beats her, the girl still refuses to eat.

We can deduce that the historically constructed mental schemata of this mother made her expect to receive only material support from FHP or from any other agency. On its part, FHP agents try to protect the child. However, FHP efforts do not engage the mother in a supportive and collaborative transaction. Because of this, the mother does not focus on what she is really receiving. As a consequence, the planned intervention does not succeed. What lessons are drawn from the two cases described above?

Case 1 demonstrates that the consequence of having rights is not necessarily connected to an awareness of the meaning of these rights.

Case 2 illustrates that “learned deprivation” where one is looking only for material support precludes receiving any other kind of support. Learned deprivation leads them to “ask” for help when they need it, in the short term, without paving the way for preventive health care.

Therefore, different levels of meanings constrain the dialogue taking place between families and professional workers. To put things in place—to order them—means to control, having and showing (demonstrating) that one has power. In Brazilian history, poor people had no power. These failures of communication were understood as consequences of as yet ongoing socio-historical processes, where the position of the population as clients is related to an authoritarian Public Policy. There has been no popular participation by people as decision makers in health issues. The population has no voice in such matters. This is as Boaventura Sousa Santos (1995) calls “epistemicide”, i.e., the murder of the capacity to think for oneself.

So, the individual self may not always be understood as a product of a pluralistic and multi-voiced system because of “epistemicide”—the hegemonic power blocking pluralistic knowledge. It may not allow some voices to even surface.

Conclusion

We have tried in this article to exemplify with three studies, all distinct in nature, that it is possible for researchers, whether using traditional research strategies or not, to learn from the experienced reality of poverty.

It is a matter of letting oneself be affected by the encounter with the *other*, and continuously learning to refine one's way of observing and taking into account the entire time. This is consistent with what Bibace (1999) recommends in his partnership model, which asserts that we just cannot assume. We have to ask. So, we need to consider otherness, so as to guarantee the space for another point of view, which can be out of reach with conventional research tools. The diverse perspective can be contrary to the question being posed.

We are not suggesting that we should consider the *other* as a different species. Not at all! As Jaan Valsiner (2009) reflects concerning research on poverty, in his foreword to Bastos and Rabinovich's work on the developmental poetics of these cultural realities, there is some "resulting wisdom [that] could innovate our understanding of the Others in living conditions very far from ours, which are nevertheless humanly very similar" (p. xii).

Considering otherness is, indeed, a matter related to a theory of truth, in the sense assumed by Bibace: it is necessary not only for a comprehensive approach to reality, but also for refining perceptual (thus, methodological) tools, always provisory and limited, in order to overcome the seemingly inescapable gap between the phenomenon in its literal occurrence in the objective world and the human capacity, to comprehend it.

The researcher's particular position, in the encounter with the research participants, establishes how far he/she will be able to dialogically consider the other's experience and perspective. It will also affect how much he/she will be able to read on the borders, in the in-between spaces, perhaps far from the initial codes and strategies designed at the beginning of a particular research project. The examples that we have taken up in this article were chosen because they illustrate different positions concerning the researcher's encounter with a foreign reality. Even though the authors share concerns towards studying poverty, the diversity of situations can be taken as a basis for elaborating on the complex I-Other relationship in research contexts. In the first study, Almeida Filho and Bastos (2009) take the family system as a unit capable of auto-organisation. The researcher's main role is to describe its intrinsic dynamics and the everyday logic by which the system is oriented.

The second example, retrieved from Bastos, Trad, Nunes & Alcântara (2005), analyses what happens when it comes to the role of an expert in

evaluation, who, while listening to the standpoint of the community, is hired by the institutions that support the very project under evaluation. The present analysis goes back to the transcripts and takes a new approach to them, reflexively considering the researcher–participant relationship.

In the third situation, Rabinovich analyses her experience as a participant observer, following the Family Health Team during its everyday activities in the community. Her identity, in this example, was not connected to the institution. Neither was she representing the community. It is remarkable how the presence of voices explicitly confronts the outsider—in this case, the agents of a governmental community health project—and affirms the community's beliefs and practices for health care. It is important to remark that, in the last two examples, two relevant and even innovative projects are considered. They deserve attention and careful evaluation, as they represent effective possibilities of change and demonstrate that it is possible to modify social structure in order to have a better quality of life and to overcome social inequality and misery. Here, we discuss the researcher's particular ways of participating and relating with the research participants and their everyday reality. The intervention is also a way of gaining knowledge about paradoxes and blind spots, which are unavoidable in such a complex relationship. They should be taken as opportunities for learning and for redirecting action, including the way in which research is implemented. Social and institutional initiatives for reducing poverty are required, even if welfarist. However, managers and researchers should be able to properly read paradoxical conditions and effects inherent in the encounter that takes place between cultural diversities—the *I* and the *Other*.

This perspective could optimise the chances for identifying the critical link which merits concentration, so that an effective adhesion of the community to the actions could take place. The examples discussed here point to a very important critical link. The history and collective memory of the community must be effectively examined and considered. This consideration implies openness towards reading beyond the conventional register. That is, for instance, one needs to consider oral tradition, cultural practices, everyday contexts and cultural tools for survival which have been valued by people over generations. Besides, the recognition of the history and memories that usually precede and transcend the span of a research project or social intervention and the encounter with the community and its actors must be valued by itself, as it happens in a living

world, in the here-and-now context. A last point concerns the ability to listen. *Listening to Culture* is how Chaudhary (2004) characterises her own work with families in India. This is the challenge in researching on poverty: to listen in so true a way that it is possible to admit that the research participants, the interviewees, might even have a better view of the reality under scrutiny than the researchers have. This might be a consequence of the limited perspectives on the dimension of time (the temporal limits of a research or intervention project) versus the comprehensive and more integrated perspective assumed by persons who take into account the whole duration of life. Listening goes far beyond a technical meeting before initiating social actions. Listening to the poor is an active process of learning, through which the researcher finally assumes that he/she is a research participant as well.

Note

1. The houses in the Novos Alagados district used to be “palafitas”, which are tide dwelling, lacustrine huts built on wooden piles.

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