

## **Psychosocial Practices: Methodology, Epistemology and Ethics<sup>1</sup>**

### **Práticas Psicossociais: Metodologia, Epistemologia e Ética**

### **Prácticas Psicosociales: Metodología, Epistemología y Ética**

Marília Novais da Mata Machado<sup>2</sup>

#### **Abstract**

This work is aimed at discussing the psychosocial practices in which intervention and research are present and articulated. These practices are questioned as to their ability to generate/build psychological and social knowledge, to formulate theories, and to create methods and apparatus for action, research, self-assessment, and regulation, without losing sight of the ethical issues involved. The work asks whether practice creates psychosocial operators, that is, whether by means of its apparatus – attentive listening, free word, non-directivity, interview, among others, often in a real-life situation – it enables one to grasp the complexity of a phenomenon and to build a conceptual framework about it. It also inquires about the scientific criteria which ensure that production. As for ethics, the study evaluates the helping relationship implicated, warns against confusing practices with mission/ministry and suggests that, when it comes to intervention-research, ethics has the same importance as theory and method.

**Keywords:** Practices; Psychosocial operators; Production of knowledge; Ethics.

#### **Resumo**

O objetivo deste trabalho é o de discutir práticas psicossociais em que intervenção e pesquisa estão presentes e articuladas. Essas práticas são questionadas quanto à sua capacidade de gerar/construir conhecimento psicológico e social, formular teorias e criar métodos e dispositivos de ação, pesquisa, autoavaliação e regulação, sem perder de vista as questões éticas envolvidas. O trabalho indaga se a prática cria operadores psicossociais, isto é, se por meio de seus dispositivos – escuta atenta, palavra livre, não-diretividade, entrevista, entre outros, frequentemente numa situação de vida concreta – ela permite apreender a complexidade de um fenômeno e construir um aparato conceitual a respeito dele. Indaga, ainda, a respeito dos critérios de cientificidade que garantem essa produção. Quanto à ética, o estudo avalia a relação de ajuda implicada, adverte contra confundir práticas com missão/sacerdócio e sugere que, na pesquisa-intervenção, ética tem a mesma importância que teoria e método.

**Palavras-chave:** Práticas; Operadores psicossociais; Produção de conhecimento; Ética.

#### **Resumen**

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<sup>2</sup> Professora doutora pela Universidade de Paris Norte (Paris XIII). Foi professora titular na UFMG, pesquisadora visitante e professora senior na UFSJ.

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El objetivo de este trabajo es discutir las prácticas psicosociales en que la intervención y la investigación están presentes y articuladas. Estas prácticas son cuestionadas en cuanto a su capacidad para generar/construir conocimiento psicológico y social, para formular teorías y para crear métodos y dispositivos de acción, investigación, autoevaluación y regulación, sin perder de vista los aspectos éticos involucrados. El trabajo pregunta si la práctica crea operadores psicosociales, es decir, si mediante sus dispositivos – escucha atenta, palabra libre, no directividad, entrevista, entre otros, a menudo en una situación de la vida real – ella permite comprender la complejidad de un fenómeno y construir un marco conceptual al respecto. También se interesa por los criterios científicos que aseguran esa producción. En cuanto a la ética, el estudio evalúa la relación de ayuda implicada, advierte contra confundir prácticas con misión/ministerio y sugiere que, cuando se trata de investigación-intervención, la ética tiene la misma importancia que la teoría y el método.

**Keywords:** Prácticas; Operadores psicosociales; Producción de conocimiento; Ética.

In this work, it is argued that a set of techniques, apparatus, procedures, and exercises are constantly developed and used in psychosocial practices. In this area, issues related to the method of action are nearly solved, which aids in the solution of specific social problems. The theoretical field also moves forward, thanks to the intertwining of research, theory, and practice, carried out by methods of action such as institutional analysis, psycho-sociology, workshops, clinical social psychology, participatory research, intervention research, operational groups, schizoanalysis, etc.

However, there are growing challenges to be faced by the practitioners, concerning the epistemological statute and the evaluation of the psychosocial practices. It must be remembered that the *epistemological, theoretical, and ethical* issues aren't specific of the area in question, but they reflect tensions within the scientific thought, with the coexistence of divergent and often conflicting positions related to knowledge production, to theorizing, and to ethical safeguards.

Regarding the *evaluation of the practices*, there is the serious issue of protocol, *i.e.*, the registration of results and findings. These issues are discussed here, resulting in the proposed use of the analysis of discourse to support observations, records, analyses, and theorizing in the field of psychosocial practices.

In the Brazilian Academy, there is an increasing demand for the inseparability of teaching, research, and extension – the latter including psychosocial practices – which makes it necessary and urgent to discuss the social place, the operationalization, the epistemology, the methodology, and the evaluation involved in the extension work, a kind of "ugly duckling" in higher education institutions (HEIs), which barely disguise their allocation to a secondary role.

In the everyday institutional practice, the extension work is usually relegated to a lower position, as it can be seen, for example, in the fact that an undergraduate scientific scholarship had, until recently, a higher value than an extension scholarship. Regarding public policies of evaluation concerning new or small private HEIs, one cannot expect to find extension work in them nor is it still required of them. But, in fact, HEIs are evaluated according to the criterion of inseparability that, despite not being mandatory, at least explicitly, is a dimension that corresponds to 30 % of points on the Instrument for External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions of Sinaes (National System of Evaluation of the Higher Education).

Within another context, that of scientific publications, the practices have also been relegated to a secondary level. Engaged research works, resulting directly from a personal or social malaise care, is anything but welcome. Editors require, for example, in the name of preserving the privacy of subjects, the exclusion in the papers of their personal names, their group, their community, or the city in which the practice was conducted, *i.e.*, publishers require the exclusion of important information about the context within which the work was done and request the deletion of the name of true co-authors of the results, who often would like to receive credit for their participation.

It is as if the academic imagination preferred: (a) the results obtained under laboratory control to those obtained in real situations, with individuals or groups in their everyday lives, (b) pure research, supposedly neutral, to an applied one, (c) the establishment of relations of cause and effect to a dialectical understanding, (d) the position of exteriority / objectivity of the researcher to the analysis of political, institutional, personal, and emotional involvement of the researcher with his object, (e) the establishment of universal

determinations to the study of contingent events, (f) descriptions of simple structures to complex descriptions, (g) quantitative data to qualitative information, (h) representative samples allowing generalizations to studies of single cases (Machado, 2002).

Even the research teams that advocate for comprehensive, dialectical, phenomenological, complex, psychoanalytic, clinical, or contingent methodology take time to conceive a design which is different from that of establishing causal relationships of influence or effect of A on B or the difference between A and B. The positivist scientific imagery predominates, requiring prior hypothesis formulation and preview of results, in addition to the classical principles of objectivity, experimentation, representativeness, clarity, and accuracy. None of this supports the psychosocial practices, which are usually single cases permeated with opaque and/or multi-meaningful statements.

The intention here is not to reverse the relationship between the positivist and the comprehensive positions (whatever name we give to these two magmatic currents that go within science), but to examine how it is possible to show that psychosocial practices also help (a lot) in the construction of psychological knowledge. It is argued that basic epistemological, theoretical, ethical, and methodological issues are developed, some of which resolved. There are not good evaluation procedures yet, and especially no establishment of protocols for the practices.

It is hard for a single protocol to solve all ethical, epistemological, and methodological issues involved. The suggestion here is quite modest: to consider the appropriateness of the use of discourse analysis for evaluating some psychosocial practices.

## Epistemological issues

The *epistemological analysis* suggests that the psychosocial practices, given the fact that they occur in real-life situations, act as analyzers of the classical scientific procedures. They do not run the risk of the positive research of confusing fact and artifact in such a way that artifact causes the result, creating a phenomenon or extorting an evidence (Stengers, 1990).

In fact, a fear of the scientist, as pointed out by Stengers (1990), is that the research design itself causes the result. The pure scientist is subject to a "nightmare", the artifact: "If we may say that he mistook a fact with an artifact, we can say that he extorted a testimony. [...] If the experimental conditions by themselves create the phenomenon, the fact has no value." (Stengers, 1990, p. 87). This philosopher, historian of science and chemist, suspects that this occurs in the case of the Skinner box, in which the mouse has no choice but to press the lever, leading to contaminated results provoked by the experimental design.

For her, the pure scientists, to reach the scientific fact, purify the causes, control variables, and eliminate interferences on the object, causing the phenomenon to speak only one language and to accept a single interpretation. Those who work in a real situation, in order to grasp the phenomena in their complexity, create operators. That happened to Freud with hypnosis. When he leaves it, because he is persuaded that it brings false memories and does not eliminate resistance, and when he replaces it with the analytic scene, he has already created an important conceptual framework in which knowledge production, research, and therapeutic practice make cures possible and explain the failures of therapy (Stengers, 1990, p. 127).

Pêcheux, a French philosopher and discourse analyst, writing under the pseudonym of Herbert, suggests effects

from the scientific schooling apparatus similar to the production of facts provoked by artifacts and compares them with the "theoretical adventure" of a science building that leads to unknown paths in which missteps are not excluded (Herbert, 1972, p. 30).

By examining the classic Social Psychology, it can be argued that the thoughtless obedience to Milgram's subjects (1969), the errors induced by peer pressure in the experiments of Ash (1967) and also the answers given by children to the democratic and authoritarian climates described by Lewin (1948), for example, are the effects of the scientific artifact or of the school apparatus.

The practitioners, on their turn, working in a real situation, create operators that lead to unknown paths (though also not free from mistakes). With their work, they always break with everyday life and therefore their results are not known *a priori* nor are easily anticipated in terms of hypotheses.

The researcher and his practice are hardly the only ones responsible for the results obtained because the participants have voice and action, due to the characteristics of the practice, initiated from a demand, aimed at emancipation, developed with conversations and analysis.

As an operator, the practice allows observation and definition of an object, and, without confusing fact and artifact, produces credible evidence of the psychosocial truth. Working with concrete, living subjects that express themselves freely, the psychosocial practice creates "purified" and intelligible facts, using the expression of Stengers (1990), and facilitates the emergence of non-predetermined meanings.

### Theoretical issues

From a theoretical point of view, since the formulations of Lewin in the mid-1900's to recent theories about groups, an

important path was covered, deriving from psychosocial practices. For example, Psychosociology, inspired by psychoanalysis, develops itself "as a grid of theoretical reading and as a method or technique of intervention" (Lévy, 2010, p. 131). Its main issue, upon applying psychoanalytic concepts to social issues, is to avoid the risks of getting "shortened representations and unreasonable or wrong interpretations, because it does not place sufficient emphasis on the social, cultural, historical, or economic dimensions which require its own disciplinary approaches" (Lévy, 2010, p. 133). From a clinical practice for dealing with social groups, organizations, institutions, and communities, Psychosociology achieves new concepts such as social defense system and imaginary representations. The involvement or implication of the researcher and subjectivity enter the analysis, in a process which is very different from the search for objectivity of the positivist standpoint.

Pioneered by Freud, Psychosociology builds up another concept of scientific work which "corresponds to a representation of the desired changes as a work of deconstruction of representations and previous certainties" (Lévy, 2010, p. 137).

Thus, central to the creation of practice and theory is the issue of *change*. In this respect, Lévy (2010, p 106) asks:

How to decipher a process that resembles the poetic creation or invention and which, by definition, escapes comprehension, from which we can only talk after it is completed and which is necessarily reified by observation or analysis? [...] It is relatively easy to represent and describe states, but a process cannot be represented, because it escapes every attempt to be seized and only exposes itself through its manifestations.

The epicenter of the difficulty in assessing the psychosocial practice and in creating a protocol to record its results is precisely the issue of *change*, although this

problem is not a prerogative of social sciences. As an example, Atlan (1979), a biophysicist, thoroughly discusses the difficulty in observing the cell, for its structure is only revealed when it is dead and its changing operation is only described when it is being decomposed.

The objects of psychosocial practices – affections, desires, feelings, attributions of meaning, fantasies, symbolization, representations – are also unstable processes, always moving, never directly observable. Even the "most seemingly well-structured organization is always in process, to the point of making and unmaking itself: it is a place of permanent tension and conflict between the base and the top, between the center and periphery, and within each one of them" (Lévy 2010, p. 39).

However, in the psychosocial practices, the processes often manifest and express themselves through speeches. They are objects of enunciation throughout the practices, which have already been observed by Freud with regard to the analytical scene:

Nothing happens in a psychoanalytic treatment beyond an exchange of words between patient and analyst. The patient talks about their past experiences and their current impressions, complains and recognizes his wishes and emotional impulses. The doctor listens, seeks to guide the thought processes of the patient, encourages, directs his attention, gives him explanations and observes the reactions of understanding or reject that himself – the analyst – rises in the patient. (Freud, 1976, p. 29)

Similarly, in the psychosocial practice, there occurs an exchange of words, conversations, speeches. It is the territory of the discourse, a concept which, according to Trask (2006, p 84), refers to any piece of writing or speech. It is on the analysis of this discourse that the construction of an evaluation protocol for assessing a psychosocial practice is proposed.

## **Ethical issues**

As for *ethics*, for projects defined as "research", there are elaborated protocols that explicitly limit the procedures in order to avoid damage and get beneficial results to human subjects, and there are ethics committees. Indeed, those procedures and committees tend, on one hand, to standardize methods in order to make the research appraisable by external agents. On the other hand, as they make the researchers objects of distrust by the committees, they restrict their confidence and creativity. Sometimes ethics and respect to the established standards are confused, as if in only one act they were able to assure a scientific character to the research and the care with respondents, experimental subjects, and informants.

The issue is thornier with regard to the psychosocial practices: it is difficult to establish strict standards. When these practices aim not only to solve problems, but also to produce knowledge and create methods of action, there is still a long way to go, since they cannot overlook processes of subjectivity, constructions of subjectivities, and unforeseen situations of collaboration and co-participation.

A good analysis of the ethical issue of psychosocial practices is found in Lévy (2010, p. 219-238), who questions the ethics of aid, warns against the confusion between practice and mission or priesthood, and suggests that for the psychosocial practices, ethical issues are as important as the theoretical and methodological ones.

## **Methodological issues: the construction of a protocol**

Just as psychoanalysis was built on an ongoing convergence of clinical work, observations, reflections, formulation of hypotheses, theorizing, and reformulations of the analytical method – each new theory

impacting the practice and each new observation in the therapeutic scene impacting the theory –, the psychosocial practices and the theories built about them feed each other, in an increasingly complex and diverse construction, as illustrated by operative groups, psychosociology, workshops, cartography, etc.

Meanwhile, more and more apparatus of discourse analysis appear. It is possible to make use of these developments in order to establish a protocol capable of evidencing the occurrence of the change process in a psychosocial practice. Its "results" come in the form of speech which can be studied with meticulous attention to the context and with the procedures and markers of discourse analysis.

In a way, this was done by Giust-Desprairies (2001), in a psychosocial intervention performed in a small company specialized in pre-manufactured parts. Called in a situation of hardship and malaise that followed a change in the company hierarchy, her intervention consisted primarily of listening to the director of production and his three managers, in individual interviews and group sessions. Gradually, their speeches showed the director of production's resistance to the new situation and his authoritarian and rigid way of exercising his power. However, in a work of personal analysis, the director realized that his physical discomforts were not directly linked to the problems with the three managers, as he had previously supposed, but to their own difficulties in the new situation. Their managers were also able to analyze their dependence on the director, their feelings of guilt and low self-esteem.

What Giust-Desprairies (2001) notes is precisely the change in the discourse that shows the director's speech becoming independent from the managers', his former workers'. He does not complain more about them, but makes plans for the future and thinks of new inventions. The

speeches of the managers also change, revealing new ways to play their roles and demands for training and professional qualification. This allowed the author to theorize about the link between the internal logics of individuals and of organizations and to discuss the importance of access to subjectivity for organizational change.

This example of a psychosocial intervention had a happy ending, which does not always occur. Psychosocial practices are usually interrupted and succumb to the resistance of the subjects involved, and seem to end prematurely, giving the feeling of achieving opposite results to the ones expected or having been completely innocuous. But as each practice and each analysis are unique, as each one makes use of particular actions, apparatus, or methods, they end up generating different polyphonic discourses which constitute rich material, not only for the *in situ* analysis, but also, transformed into text, images and sounds, to feed the *protocol* that registers practices, and collaborate to evaluate them, and produce new knowledge from them.

### **Final suggestions for evaluating recorded practices**

The research of recorded practices asks for inquiring about the theories and methods that underlie them, and, in particular, about their ability to produce knowledge ethically. It calls for the construction of corpora covering the practices to be read adopting the view that to analyze a discourse is to articulate text (written material) and context (the historical, social, economic, geographical and linguistic determinants).

The reading of the corpora is designed to grasp the techniques, theories, epistemology, and methodology used, as well as ethical considerations observed in the practices. Where necessary and appropriate, it is possible to use markers of discourse analysis to answer emerging

questions of text and context. Considerations found in Cirfip (2011), Dubost (1987), Laperrière (1910), Lévy (2003, 2010), Machado (2004) and Stengers (1990) suggest the questions listed below, which help in these analyses:

1) What techniques, apparatus, procedures, exercises and methods are used in the practice? Is it based on a demand of the persons involved? If so, within which context does the demand appear? What themes are developed? Are they problems to solve? Are they underlying symptoms of real problems? Are they analyzers? What happens in the consultant/social group relation? Is the practice guided by the consultant? Is self-government adopted by the client collective? Are analyses of implication or counter-transference made?

2) What theoretical frameworks are adopted? What conceptual apparatus is used? What is the object of the practice? What meaning does the practitioner give to the notion of change (development, growth, modernization, adaptation/adjustment, evolution, reducing discomfort, awareness, conflict resolution)? What theories of society and human nature cross the practice (functionalist, interactionist, Marxist, constructivist, institutionalist, psychoanalytic, social analytic, psychosocial, schizoanalytic, other)?

3) What knowledge is produced? Does practice operate as an analyzer? Does practice "extract" evidence and take fact for artifact? What operators are used? Are results independent from the artifact? Does the practitioner have a project of production of knowledge or did he conceive himself as an engineer, expert in management, believing in the efficacy of his technique, unconcerned, then, with the research? What is the role of subjectivity (of the consultant, and of the participants) in the practice?

4) How are the objects of study empirically observed? Are interpretations made? What is the place occupied by research in the

psychosocial practice? What is the notion of theory and of research adopted? How is the context within which the practice occurs described? Which topological data are presented? Is a field journal kept? How are the procedures recorded? Are forms of objectification of the procedures adopted? Do consultants seek distance? How do they deal with the implication? Do they use group work for analyzing their practices? Do they adopt discussion sessions with pairs? Do they search intersubjective consensus? Is objective information looked for? Is the social group's history known? Is there a search for triangulation? Is a thick description adopted? How do the consultants reach the conclusions (by means of an inductive approach, a deductive approach)? Are interpretations confronted with the set of empirical observations? Is the record of observations made in an accurate, consistent, and exhaustive form? Are the results shown sparingly? Are possibilities of generalization of the results evaluated?

5) From an ethical point of view, how does the social practice help the social group? To whom is this help directed? In whose name is it made? Supported in which ethics?

These questions may allow the description of each practice according to the rules that singularly govern and regulate it. For each, only the specifically pertinent and related questions may be answered. Analyses on the language made with the use of discourse markers complete the description.

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