

Social participation and subjectivity: youth experiences in a vulnerable community

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Abstract: This article aimed at analyzing the influence of psychosocial factors in the construction and strengthening of social participation processes among young residents of the Vila dos Pescadores, in Cubatão, SP, who attended a non-profitable organization and a *capoeira* group in the community. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were the instruments used to construct the results. We interviewed young people and adults who had worked with this audience in the spaces mentioned. We analyzed the results according to Depth Hermeneutics and not only point to the difficulties faced by young people in living in a community of high vulnerability marked by exclusion, but also to strategies for coping with these circumstances through participation in the projects of a non-profitable organization and a *capoeira* group.

Keywords: social participation; community; affectivity; youth; subjectivity.

PARTICIPAÇÃO SOCIAL E SUBJETIVIDADE: VIVÊNCIAS JUVENIS EM UMA COMUNIDADE VULNERÁVEL

Resumo: Este artigo objetivou analisar a influência dos fatores psicossociais na construção e no fortalecimento de processos de participação social entre jovens moradores da Vila dos Pescadores, em Cubatão, SP, que frequentavam uma ONG e um grupo de capoeira na comunidade. Entrevistas semiestruturadas e observação participante foram os instrumentos utilizados para a construção dos resultados. Foram entrevistados jovens e adultos que trabalhavam com esse público nos espaços mencionados. Os resultados foram analisados segundo a Hermenêutica de Profundidade e apontam não apenas as dificuldades dos jovens em viver em uma comunidade de alta vulnerabilidade, marcada pela exclusão, mas também, as estratégias de enfrentamento dessas circunstâncias a partir da participação nos projetos de uma ONG e em um grupo de capoeira.

Palavras-chave: participação social; comunidade; afetividade; juventude; subjetividade

PARTICIPACIÓN SOCIAL Y SUBJETIVIDAD: VIVENCIAS JUVENILES EN UNA COMUNIDAD VULNERABLE

Resumen: Este artículo tuvo como objetivo analizar la influencia de los factores psicossociales en la construcción y fortalecimiento de procesos de participación social entre jóvenes habitantes de la Vila dos Pescadores, en Cubatão, SP, que frecuentaban una ONG y un grupo de capoeira en la comunidad. Entrevistas semiestruturadas y

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observación participante fueron los instrumentos utilizados para la construcción de los resultados. Se entrevistó a jóvenes y adultos que trabajan con ese público en los espacios mencionados. Los resultados fueron analizados según la Hermenéutica de Profundidad ya puntúan no sólo a las dificultades de los jóvenes en vivir en una comunidad de alta vulnerabilidad, marcada por la exclusión, pero también estrategias de enfrentamiento de esas circunstancias a partir de la participación en los proyectos de una ONG y del grupo de *capoeira*.

Palabras clave: participación social; comunidad; afectividad; juventud; subjetividad.

Introduction

Social participation is a valuable concept for democracy associated with historical, cultural, and economic issues, among others, or, in short, it relates to objective and subjective aspects (Sawaia, 2001). The challenge of dealing with this issue is precisely that of not dissociating individuals from society, since intersubjective relationships shape social participation that, in the current context, are strongly characterized by processes of social exclusion and historically constructed inequalities in the country (Carvalho, 2016).

This article aims at addressing social participation from the perspective of Socio-Historical Psychology, encompassing its subjective and objective dimensions. It attempts to comprehend the relationships between individuals and society seeking to break the determination of “psychologisms” and “sociologisms” (Martin-Baró, 2017). Individuals exist in relationships. Thus, this aspect of Psychology sees man as a product and producer of his context. In this way, by transforming the environment, the man transforms himself (Lane, 2004).

Social participation is the possibility to promote social transformations and democracy consolidation (Bordenave, 1994), which are constructed in the daily life and through relationships that individuals establish with each other and with the context in which they live. Thus, it is important to understand aspects of this construction, especially in the circumstances marked by social exclusion.

Sawaia (2001), based on the philosopher Spinoza, focused on participation, designating it as a power of action. From this perspective, the subject, constituted from the relationships established in the intersubjectivity, when affected by happy passions, tends to have his power to act increased. When touched and moved by sad emotions, however, the power tends to decrease. The subject. With an increased power of action and aware of the effects that increase or decrease this, the matter becomes a cause of self, that is, free.

Dallari (2001) reminded us that the human being is associative, acts in groups, in the community, and not only lives but lives in society. This fact refers to Aristotle's concept of *politikon zoon*, which says that man is an animal of the polis, of the city, a being of the relationship. There is an emphasis that it is in the coexistence with other subjects that members of a society or a certain group can fight to transform their demands into reality. This postulation implies affirming that the process of social

participation is related to several factors: social, cultural, economic, ethical, subjective, among others. That is, it is simultaneously related to contextual and (inter)subjective issues (Dallari, 2001). Gohn (2008) presented participation as a kind of experience that gives meaning and significance to the experiences of the subjects, who, when they appropriate their history and culture, become autonomous.

Castro (2009), when studying the participation of young people, said that its quality is related to the individual's experiences in a given context, how one recognizes oneself in it and to what extent one feels responsible for it. In the case of young people, the author also stressed the difficulty of overcoming a view that considers these social actors as pre-political, or pre-citizens, with a need to overcome the idea that this stage of life would be a mere preparation for the future exercise of participation. What studies of participation seem to indicate, as Alencar (2010) reminded us, is an attempt to comprehend psychosocial processes and strategies for transforming society and possibilities for the consolidation of democracy created by individuals.

Ayres (2005) said that the concept of vulnerability provides an interesting approximation on individual and social issues in the health context. It allows the study of responses found by people when overcoming their vulnerability by taking into consideration intersubjective, institutional, and political aspects. Thus, circumstances marked by social inequality and exclusion outline vulnerability situations that may weaken the processes of social participation. In a country like Brazil, with its past and present notorious social injustices, and where neoliberalism (Carvalho, 2016) and its values, such as individualism and competitiveness, have found fertile ground, there is a need to try to understand how some experiences support or impede social participation.

Thus, this article aims at discussing aspects of the construction of social participation of young residents of Vila dos Pescadores, in Cubatão/São Paulo. This article presents a review of the Master's research entitled *Social Participation and Subjectivity: the experiences of young residents of Vila dos Pescadores in Cubatão/SP*, in which the aim was to understand the influence of psychosocial factors on the social participation of these individuals.

Methodology

This was an exploratory and descriptive study, using a qualitative approach. (Minayo et al., 1994) The study was authorized of the CEP, through the *Plataforma Brasil*, on 11/29/2013, under number 473.514. The study was carried out in Vila dos Pescadores (VP), located in the municipality of Cubatão/São Paulo. We conducted semi-structured interviews and observed participants for the construction of the results.

The interviews and observations were carried out in an NGO and a Capoeira Group, between January and May of 2014. In the NGO, we talked to two adolescents (J2 and

J3) and two professionals (A2 and A3), one of whom, A3, was the institution's psychologist. In the Capoeira Group, we interviewed one student (J1) and the capoeira teacher (A1). All of them were residents of the community, except for the psychologist. We also interviewed the president of the Residents Association and Community Leader (A4). The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore specific aspects of participants' life histories deeply, as well as to understand their experiences in the community.

The interviews were recorded and later fully transcribed. We produced a field diary from each observation session, totaling 19 at the end of the study. We analyzed the results according to Depth Hermeneutics (DH), proposed by Thompson (2011). Depth Hermeneutics is composed of three levels of analysis that contemplate what the author calls Socio-Historical Analysis, which comprises the understanding and investigation of the context in which the study object is inserted. Another level is called Formal Analysis, which proposes the research and comprehension of the discourse of the individuals and its symbolic forms, apprehending their meanings and significance. The last level is called Interpretation/Reinterpretation, in which new interpretations are critically produced based on theory.

Discussion and results

The Vila dos Pescadores is a neighborhood in a lowland region. It is one of the most populated communities in the municipality of Cubatão/SP. Its history began in 1960 when the city underwent significant migration due to industrialization, which attracted several workers mainly from Brazil's northeast. At that time, groups of fishermen settled in the region to explore the Rio Casqueiro, making fishing their livelihood (Novo Milênio, 2014).

Census data for 2006 show that almost 40% of the population lived on less than one minimum wage. Data from the *Novo Milênio* website (2014), a site consulted due to a lack of city's official documents and data, shows that in 2006 10,502 people were living in the community and only 19% of the households had a sewage system. The site indicates that 58% of the adults had incomplete elementary education and 5.3% were illiterate. In the community, 17.8% of the adults had completed high school. Many migrated from the Northeast and other states of the Southeast, such as Minas Gerais. Only 21% were from São Paulo. As the neighborhood is built on the banks of the Rio Casqueiro, in a lowland region, 44% of the houses are on stilts.

Regarding living in Vila dos Pescadores and the processes of exclusion referred to in this article, the geographical location of the neighborhood itself should be considered. Located in a mangrove and on the side of the Anchieta Highway, the latter polarizes and divides two districts of different social classes. The neighboring district VP is Jardim Casqueiro which is a middle-class neighborhood. It seems to be the objectification of a social division between those who have plenty and those who have little or almost nothing. To be a resident of VP is to face this reality daily.

Experiences in the community and the objective conditions of the neighborhood outline, for the subjects interviewed, a particular dislike for the place. In general, young people do not like living in the neighborhood, they do not identify with, it and they do not feel responsible for it. The lack of leisure and cultural options, as well as high levels of violence and crime, drugs, and lack of infrastructure and basic sanitation together with the location of the neighborhood, away from the city center, seem to undermine and attack the psychological feeling of community (PFC).

Amaro (2007), based on the studies of McMillan and Chavis, defined the psychological feeling of community (PFC) as a feeling of belonging to a community where individuals are concerned with each other and with the group itself and where there is a sharing of a belief that all needs and will be met if everyone continues together. In the following passage, a young woman talks about how she feels about living in the community: "It's because, like, when you ask me what the good things are, they are so minuscule that it's like a wall. You cross it, and you do not realize because you focus more on the bad things" (Excerpt from the interview with J3, 16 years of age, a student of the NGO). Dislike of VP seems to diminish the power of action of these subjects (Sawaia, 2001), and this decrease will affect different forms of social participation. The comparison that the adolescent made between the neighborhood's positive aspects and a wall indicates the difficulty in perceiving the positive aspects of the neighborhood and their circulation in people's daily lives. A wall does not move, it stays in the same place, hard, it does not circulate.

Lack of leisure and community projects for young people has led the community leader (A4) to consider to consider himself, and his neighbors abandoned. This abandonment seems to be reflected in the sense of social humiliation (Gonçalves Filho, 1998), constituting, as this article will demonstrate, a fertile ground for drug trafficking. According to the author: "Humiliation is a form of anguish that springs from the enigma of class inequality. The anguish that the poor know well and that, among them, is inscribed in the core of their submission."

Seeing other communities, like the neighboring Casqueiro, as a place with undeniably better living conditions and infrastructure seems to exacerbate the feeling of social humiliation (Gonçalves Filho, 1998), impotence, and that nothing can be done to improve the living conditions in the community. Also, drug trafficking configures other effects, such as fear and feelings of insecurity. The statement of the psychologist of the NGO, who said she had lost adolescents to the trafficking, stands out:

We have already lost some adolescents to the trafficking, because we try to offer something here, but then we know that the trafficking, the violence is outside, you know... You work one day, and you'll earn money. Here you stay the whole afternoon, and you will not get anything. That's what they think, right? (Excerpt from Interview with A3, Psychologist of the NGO)

The work of the NGO professionals is always fighting trafficking and local forces that work to diminish young people social participation. However, this fight is done by denial, by splitting the subject from the society or, in the specific case of the institution, by separating the youth from their place of residence, given that the location of the NGO is in Jardim Casqueiro, precisely with the purpose of keeping the young people away from the things of the community that "*take them backwards.*"

We should not consider the involvement with drug trafficking a defeat, indicated by the use of the verb to lose by the workers of the NGO and also those of the Capoeira Group. Faria and Barros (2011) highlight trafficking as an option among limited choices. Although in a meritocratic society, such as the Brazilian one, in which individualistic values predominate, the choices are attributed to the individuals, with a need for caution and contextualization.

In the community, young people face a binary choice between what they call *the path of good* and *the path of evil*. The good one refers, in its concepts, to the search for inclusion in society through formal and/or legal work, through studies, training, etc. Even when they choose the path of good, they have to deal with the stigma of living in a community considered violent. Involvement with criminality represents the path of evil.

The context of VP, marked by social exclusion and inequality, outlines what Sawaia (2011) called ethical-political suffering. This concept breaks the dichotomy between individual and society, politicizing suffering insofar configured in unequal and unjust social relations. The case of A2 (a monitor of the NGO), whose brother died by members of a drug trafficking gang, is an example of this suffering. She was very emotional during her interview but wanted to carry on so that more people would know about her history. To her, the NGO was a possibility to safeguard against violence in the community, one of the possible ways of coping with these living conditions and helping young people, from their experience, overcome the suffering of living in a place of daily humiliation and rights restriction.

The experiences within these conditions of existence lead to forms of social participation from the insertion of the participants of this study in the projects of the NGO and the Capoeira Group. It is necessary to remember that the NGO and the Capoeira Group were initiatives of people from the community itself in the 1980s. They are spaces of socialization and refuge in which members can relate to other social actors living in the same conditions.

So, when we come here, as our life is difficult because everyone lives here in the Vila, it's more like a refuge here. (Excerpt from the interview with J3, 16 years of age, a student of the NGO).

Regarding the reason for practicing capoeira, J1 (21 years of age) associated it directly with a way to stay away from violence, trafficking, drugs, and even a way to encourage his younger brothers, who were also present, to follow the same path. (Field Diary, 02.26.2014)

Faced with adverse contexts, individuals seek and create coping strategies. As mentioned, these are spaces for learning and experiences exchange. However, there is a need for a more significant articulation of these groups with other institutions, such as the health unit, for example. In the end, they are isolated initiatives that are also apart of the community.

There is a constant challenge to consider neighborhood conditions, especially crime, not as evil products of human, engendering situations in which individuals only react, but do not act potently. Capoeira, a strategy of struggle and resistance in times of enslavement, cannot just be a moment of leisure. There must exist an articulation of the NGO and the Capoeira Group, powerful initiatives in the community, to produce politicized relationships in agreement with the community context. The two institutions represent places of refuge. Participation in projects seems to make it possible, at times, to publicize, problematize, and share experiences, which in some cases may be similar, reinforcing empathy and solidarity.

J3 (16 years of age, a student of the NGO) then said again that she would not receive anything on her birthday in July. She referred to her birthday as a sad date, remembering the fire that had occurred in VP the year before on the day of her birthday. (Field Diary, 04.16.2014)

The problem of garbage could be a significant issue for everyone in the community, as it is a situation that affects the collectivity. One of the young people interviewed reported the problem of garbage and how he considers himself a person with no will to try to solve this situation with the help of a group of adolescents, which demonstrates the suffering potency referred by Sawaia (2011):

I already thought, but I do not have much attitude. [...] But that did not leave my head. I thought about talking, but it did not go. Okay, okay, but to put it into practice, it's kind of hard. I guess my friends really would not want to. (Excerpt from the Interview with J1, 21 years of age, student of the Capoeira Group)

Engaging in the execution of the joint effort is, or should be, a commitment constructed in the coexistence among people experiencing the same problem. This was a young man who thought of a possible solution and ended up running into several issues, such as the feeling of his impotence and the supposed disinterest of other people.

We observed that this seems to be losing sight of the fact that social transformation takes place amid struggles. Immediacy and focus on the results, typical of a globalized, technological and capitalist world, seem to undermine the sense of constant struggle for social change gradually.

Although the Capoeira Group and the NGO constitute powerful spaces for socialization and problematization of the reality in which the young people live, these insti-

tutions have been working to split the subject and the context, prejudicing the politicization of their experiences. They become isolated, just as people isolate themselves in their homes in the community for fear of crime, the public spaces of the neighborhood being taken over by the drug traffickers and by the police.

The trafficking seems to provide a perverse or marginal inclusion, according to Faria and Barros (2014), acting as a simultaneous power, which the public authority has not reached. Trafficking becomes a possibility of financial and economic ascension, acquisition of status, providing the young people with the opportunity of inserting themselves into the society of consumption (Castro, 1998).

As Carvalho (2016, p. 228) reminds us: "If the right to buy a cell phone, a pair of tennis shoes, a fashionable watch can silence or prevent political militancy among the excluded, the traditional political right, the prospects of democratic advancement are diminished." They seem to be ways out of social anonymity and invisibility. Thus, they seek alternatives to appear for society, culminating in some types of participation, be it in the NGO, or in Capoeira group. They seem to be alternatives for coping with the anguish of being invisible, excluded.

Final considerations

Studying social participation and understanding it as a dynamic process, shaped by social relations and subjective and objective factors, requires a methodological effort to overcome the individual-society dichotomy. This study proposed the arduous task of not falling into the trap of "psychologisms" and "sociologisms," which reduce the reality to certain aspects, naturalizing it.

Besides, by highlighting social participation from the subjective experiences of young people, there an amplification of possibilities for understanding the phenomenon beyond its consecrated and, in a certain way, crystallized manifestations, such as engagement in political parties and unions, among others. The experiences of young people who partake in the study led to different types of social participation in which the NGO and the Capoeira Group appeared as places of refuge, but also places to confront exclusion and inequality, fostering the circulation of affections and the promotion of good encounters.

During the study, we considered that to identify and understand the psychosocial aspects of social participation construction of these young people, it was necessary to share experiences with the community itself. Thus, understanding it in depth meant getting involved with the object of study chosen, considering the ethical care of not mixing with it; which involved listening to the participants and the reliving of their experiences.

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