



On ethnographic positions in the anthropology of health in South America

Sobre las posiciones etnográficas en la antropología de la salud en el sur de las Américas

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ABSTRACT Ethnographies on health issues in populations that live in conditions of poverty, inequality and segregation have proliferated over the last decades in South America. The aim of this article is to problematize – preliminarily – certain patterns in the positions and relations of ethnographers with respect to subjects and populations during their fieldwork and in the writing of study results. This paper examines the relationships between these ethnographic positions and the dominant theoretical perspectives in the region. In addition, this article explores briefly the resolution power as well as the sensibilities, theoretical maps, and meanings of such positions in light of power logics, symbolic economies, and diverse manners of accumulation by dispossession in this geographical area.

KEY WORDS Ethnographies; Researcher-Subject Relations; South America.

RESUMEN Las etnografías sobre problemas de salud en poblaciones que viven bajo condiciones de desigualdad, pobreza y segregación han proliferado en Sudamérica durante las últimas décadas. El objetivo de este trabajo consiste en problematizar, de forma preliminar, ciertos patrones en las relaciones y posiciones de los etnógrafos respecto de los sujetos y de las poblaciones, tanto en el trabajo de campo como en la escritura de los resultados. Analizando dichas posiciones, este artículo examina su relación con las orientaciones teóricas dominantes en la región. Además, explora, brevemente, los poderes de resolución, las sensibilidades, los mapas teóricos y de los sentidos de algunas posiciones a la luz de los desafíos de las lógicas de poder, las economías simbólicas y las diversas variantes de acumulación por desposesión dominantes en esta área geográfica.

PALABRAS CLAVES Etnografías; Relaciones Investigador-Sujeto; América del Sur.

INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic method has been a privileged object of critical analysis, genealogical revisions, theoretical development, epistemic inquiry, political involvement and esthetic mapping.^(1,2,3,4,5) As an inherent part in these developments, the ways of connecting, positioning and symbolizing the relationships among ethnographers and the individual and collective subjects, with whom ethnographers carry out the fieldwork and the writing of its results, have also been analyzed.^(6,7,8,9)

Ethnographic research on health problems in populations living under conditions of inequality, poverty and segregation has proliferated in South America during the last decades.^(10,11,12,13,14,15,16) This proliferation of ethnographies on discomforts, sufferings, ailment, illnesses, well-being, and health, generally carried out by anthropologists from Latin America, Europe or the USA, has already generated a more or less complex field of studies.

The aim of this work is to problematize, in a preliminary way, certain patterns in ethnographic relationships and positions with respect to subjects and populations with whom research on health problems is carried out in South America. The argument behind this exploration is twofold. On the one hand, the accumulation of ethnographies already enables the recognition of certain diversity in ethnographic positions and their links with the dominant theoretical-methodological orientations. However, although there is a certain articulation between ethnographic positions and theoretical-political perspectives, there is no necessary correspondence between both of them. On the other hand, the examination of this topic is neither an academic, genealogical or scholastic abstract exercise nor an exhaustive documentation of all the available research in this geographical region. Principally, it attempts to problematize the conditions of emergency and writing in relation to a different mode of existence, experience and life and of native voices about health problems, malaise and ailment, in light of certain positions taken by expert and lay people in segregated social sectors.

Far from being a late aftereffect of the academic criticisms of the ethnographic method of the eighties and nineties, this article focuses on the positions of ethnographic work and its relevance in the power of resolution, in sensitivities, in theoretical maps and meanings with respect to challenges before the logics of power, symbolic economies and various variants of accumulation by dominant dispossession in the region. In some way, it attempts to define a contour and an interrogation space in the field of anthropological fieldwork on malaise and ailment, which have different authors and background information.^(17,18,19,20,21)

Without considering a temporal and a linear historical sequence, or a stratigraphic structure of stages or phases, the presentation of these positions is organized in this work in accordance with the dominant theoretical orientations in anthropology of health and that are in practice in the region. Categorized through the notion of *turn*, the positions are included in theoretical equations in which experiential, epistemological, ontological and political dimensions are knotted. While some positions are presented as frozen, fixed and deterministic, others acquire relevance due to their complexity and flexibility to approach the specific problem under study. In these cases, the positions are likely to combine and/or succeed in the dynamics of fieldwork or ethnographic writing. In addition, their own design contains the indeterminacy and the uncertain future, which leaves a possibility open for the native actors themselves, outside of the models of understanding that also place them in an established way. The repertoire of positions included in this work, which does not seek to be exhaustive, includes the following equations: *the cultural turn*, *the economic-political turn*, *the epistemic-political turn*, *the political-cultural turn*, *the ontological turn*, and *the decolonial turn*.

Finally, the development of this argument and its analysis intends to broaden — and specify — the power of resolution of ethnographic production, and to clear some black boxes of the research process that have both consequences for the results and orientation

of this fieldwork, and broad implications for policies, actions and interventions of different order, scale and sense, in those populations of South America that have them as their object.

PROBLEMATIZING ETHNOGRAPHIC POSITIONS

The multiplication of perspectives, analysis and theoretical developments on the ethnographic method during the last decades has generated a fertile field for the determination of geologies, the revision of epistemic-political fundamentals and their integration into economic regimes, logic of power, and ways of writing and experiencing the writing. Unlike other notions and concepts of the ethnographic method of analysis, the notions of *position* and *positionality* have been marginal in this field of study.^(1,2,3,5,6,7,8)

Ethnographic positions – and their synonyms in terms of *positioning* –, understood as material and diverse versions within a repertoire that *positionality* draws together as an abstract noun, cannot be analyzed in isolation. Ethnographic positions are included in theoretical equations, which are systematized and categorized in the notion of *turn*. This notion ties up and refers to experiential, epistemological, ontological, power, geopolitical, and territorial dimensions as well as physical, genre, ethical, and esthetical dimensions. Firstly, ethnographic positions are represented by diverse and sexed bodies, which are marked and categorized by various names and symbols, as well as open to changes not only in daily life, but also within the various types of encounters typical of the development of fieldwork and writing. In classical ethnographic writing, not only the neutral masculine genre prevails, but the symbolic repertoire to address differences is extremely restricted. Therefore, the male neutral genre prevails in the writing of this work, since it attempts to indicate the orientation of these ethnographic discourses, which match the terms they themselves use.

However, the “x” is also included in those cases in which critical analysis requires a complexity of genres and categories, in order to indicate the restrictions of the neutral male for the approach of the otherness. This resource of combining grammatical genres to face certain issues expresses the discordance between the diversity of experiences and categorizations of human beings, their possibilities of transformation over time, and also indicates the multiplicity of (literary) genres of ethnographic discourse and academic languages. Secondly, and more subtly, ethnographic positions integrate other material aspects, such as body posture, being up to expectations, the perspective from somewhere, the feelings and appreciations, that is, not only the asymmetries, but also the partialities and impossibilities inherent to the fieldwork and, therefore, to the radical incompleteness of ethnographic writing.

In the problematization of ethnographic positions and positionality, something more than a series of oppositions converges; oppositions that mark the ethnographic analysis (subject-object, own-somebody else’s, one-multiple, the familiar-the strange, the same-the other, us-the others, collective authorship- individual authorship, mono-logical-dialogical). In addition, this problematization questions the processes that produce them, identify them and, in some cases, essentialize them, flexibilize them, and transform them (translation, mixture, freezing, misunderstanding, subalternization, evolution, delegation, attribution, transmutation, legitimacy, dialogue, and interlocution).

The importance of including the problem of positions, in particular, and positionality, in general, among ethnographers with the others, and the problem of native actors not only with ethnographers, but also with their own us and otherness, is related to the conditions of access to the knowledge of other ways of living and lived worlds as well as, and principally, to the emergency of native voices, their modes of existence, and their radical diversity. The bonds between the positions and the voices of others, in relation to their ways of being and living, are embodied

in the ways of listening, observing, understanding and also regulating, in the fieldwork and in the writing, the statutes of truth and legitimacy of words, actions, ways of living, and meaning of the populations themselves.

Both in the description in detail and in its theoretical problematization, the issue of positionality is clearly illustrated in ethnographic writing, specifically, through certain grammatical equations with a different level of specification and analysis. These writing formulas are expressed in the ways in which certain pre-positions are theorized and written: *of, on, with, in* (on behalf of or instead of), *by* (the others), among the main ones. Therefore, speaking of pre-positions in this work refers to two interconnected senses: a) the previous theoretical-methodological approach, that is, orientations already available, predetermined and marked by certainty; b) prepositions in the literal sense, that is, as a grammatical articulator.

The existence of a repertoire of positions already available, and with various degrees of flexibility and possibility of transformation over time, is made visible through a critical review of the fieldwork, methodological reflexivity, theoretical reflection, and recursiveness of ethnographies and discourses in the dominant modes of intelligibility in contemporary ethnographies. In addition, the confrontation with this heterogeneity becomes unavoidable in certain historical events and periods in which ethnographic work takes place (establishment of the colonial apparatus, decolonization, wars, social and political movements of resistance, rapid changes in the processes of accumulation, (re)distribution and dispossession, local and international migrations, and economic and political crises).

The repertoire of ethnographic positions includes: speaking for others; translating the realities of others in their own terms; saying and writing what others cannot see and say – as if there were a place of transparency, free of illusion and errors – ; downgrading and silencing the local and subaltern practices and knowledge of the global south through the coloniality of Western models; revising the epistemic-political basis of the

authority about the ethnographic saying in relation to the suffering of others; replacing the realities experienced by certain populations with certain models and correct ways of unknowing or mis-understanding; giving and delegating ontological status to the others and to other-realities; speaking and writing as authors in dialogical or collective contexts of production of knowledge with others, among the main positions.

Although, in this work, the analysis of certain dominant positions is structured in terms of theoretical equations categorized in the notion of turn, there is not a necessary correspondence between these positions. That is, the positions have variations within the same theoretical orientation, and there is the case of dominant positions within different perspectives and theoretical genealogies, which resemble each other. In turn, this positionality is expressed in theoretical-literary formulas, in which these positions acquire consistency, materiality, coherence, and are, generally, frozen in ethnographic writing, which subtracts levels of reality, uncertainty and indetermination to the same collective and individual subjects about whom ethnographers speak and write. However, the analysis of positions leaves open the possibility of recording and analyzing logics of power, symbolic economies and potential transformations and multiple processes of development of ones and others, of ethnographers with respect to others, and of natives, addressed to their own othernesses, which do not always correspond to or are in dialogue with the us of the own ethnographers (the transformation of others into them; of others into us, of others into others for them; of them into not-us nor-them; of others of others without being us, among others).

The importance of this exploration for the complex field of healthcare ethnographies, especially in marginalized, segregated and dispossessed populations of the region, is subject to be summarized in three main dimensions. Firstly, ethnographic positions are marked by the ways of listening to, observing, putting into words, understanding, writing and regulating the statutes of truth and legitimacy of experiences of suffering, by local perspectives on expert systems and

ways of treating them by the social groups themselves. Secondly, the repertoire of ethnographers' positions is not only in dialogue with the dominant theoretical orientations in anthropology of health, but also with the logics of power and expert and inexpert symbolic economies dominating the approach to ailments in the region. Lastly, and due to the handmade and life-size nature of ethnography, its results provide a high level of detail and complexity about the daily life of segregated populations, with far-reaching consequences in the design of policies, programs and treatments as regards health problems.

The cultural turn

The first anthropologies and ethnographies about processes, practices and experiences on suffering and health were made under the system called *exoticist and primitivist*, and expressed the conceptual equation "science, magic and religion." Principally focused in Mexico, Colombia and Peru, and performed by US anthropologists, the repertoire of investigated topics has been the following: native therapies, traditional ailments, mental health, doctor-patient relationship in native, rural and, to a lesser extent, poor urban populations.^(2,22) The dominant and already classical critique of this ethnology, empiricist and primitivist, elaborated at the rhythm of the colonial regime and/or of coloniality, has established that otherness is "represented or invented," that is, it is a "fiction of imagination and of Western interests," without its own voice.⁽⁴⁾

Having as background some works by anthropologists subsidiary of specific biomedical projects in the first decades of the twentieth century, the emergence of different organizations (the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization, UNICEF, among others), in tune with the new paradigm of development generated after the Second World War, completely modified the scenery of health policies. Specifically, a wide repertoire of discourses, institutions and interventions emerged, aimed at

modifying the morbidity of those regions and countries included in the — recently categorized as — "third world," and it is still present in different programs and plans to date.⁽²³⁾ Including the borders as inherent features of this type of intervention, the frictions between Western and native biomedical models adopt particular epistemological and political characteristics. Thus, biomedical knowledge is considered *knowledge* legitimated by science and structured in the universal language of biology that represents transparently the reality — and the truth — of human body.

One of the dominant schemes of intervention during this stage was the so-called *health belief model*. As a variant of health-related preventive education, this model is based on an asymmetry between knowledge (scientific, real, true, and so on) and belief (erroneous and fake knowledge, but that is considered real), and it matches in certain contexts biomedicine and other traditional and local medicines. The interventions based on this orientation seek to transform the "erroneous" local beliefs about health and disease into true knowledge based on science; knowledge that was deemed as the basis for modifying the actions and practices of segregated populations. Among the different ailments and diseases included in this approach, the most representative case of this model of intervention has been the tuberculosis in indigenous populations.⁽²⁴⁾

According to Good,⁽²⁴⁾ the others, the collective and individual subjects, target of all these interventions, agree with or conform to the coordinates of subjectivistic utilitarianism. From this perspective, the others are modeled in terms of the *homo economicus occidental*, that is, subjects who should voluntarily and rationally seek to maximize profit, in this case, in terms of health. Following these coordinates, the actors that have "true information" should calculate — and quantify — costs and benefits for each of the options. This model has a simplistic and narrow conception of *culture*: a set of individualist, utilitarian and rationalist beliefs, which are the adaptive response to this problem.

Although the development of these interventions that reproduce the linear model *knowledge-information-actions-welfare-health* was questioned from theoretical, ideological and methodological perspectives, it has constituted a low cost and short-term orientation that, by avoiding the structural, economic, political and social conditions, has produced – even to date – a new repertoire of poorly formulated problems, which end up focusing the attention and health research on certain issues.

The systematic failure of these interventions, based on the transformation of beliefs into knowledge in the others, produced the demand and integration of anthropologists to improve such interventions. In this way, and under these demands – which were specific at the beginning, and then systematic since the postwar period – , the US medical anthropology was developed as a contemporaneous discipline anchored in Latin America. These perspectives provide empiric basis to clarify the native knowledge, categorized as *traditional culture beliefs*. Therefore, medical anthropology is consolidated by questioning the model of public health and international intervention, through the renewed notions of *culture*, although – still continuing – with the dualism between universal biology of disease, and native explanations of particular ailments. In accordance with this perspective, although the others, the natives, are far from scientific canons, they have practices that correspond to certain rationalities, logics, and even empiric knowledge pertaining to ethnomedicine. Translating foreign inequalities and diversities into familiar dualisms, from the others – even though with a certain lack of or flaw in knowledge – into an us, ethnographers are not only positioned as sort of arbitrators who delegate and grant different levels of legitimacy, rationality and statues of truth to the different native knowledge and practices, but they also include a repertoire of thoughts *about* and *of* others, both romanticized and normative, which make predication, an evaluation describing their beliefs, knowledge, practices and efficiency, their main activity modeled in relation to anthropology of health.

The guarantee – and legitimacy – of this ethnographic arbitration, which hides through the specular veil that translates knowledge and the others into familiar terms, is given in the implicit transcultural universality of scientific biology, a heritage lined with Western science, though shared by humanity. This is the key to reading, which is anchored in certain reality and truth. Ignorance of this key to reading by other societies places it in a position of inequality-other, which enables the objectifying predication of “them” and their “other-medicines.”

The economic-political turn

Other dominant approaches to the health problems of the countries and regions of South America are those developed within the framework of political economy in its different versions (Marxist, post-Marxist, Gramscian, dependency theory, global system).^(10,25,26,27,28) The historical, colonial, political and economic processes of contemporary capitalism give shape to the patterns of relationships, experiences, and their senses. Unlike models of cultural beliefs about health-disease-care processes, these approaches work through a modelling process of experiences and realities, at a level and scale that turns specific contexts into deductible or subsumable cases in their reading to structural, macro social and even global systems.

One of the most relevant modalities in health studies in Latin America has been elaborated through the notion of hegemony. In its different versions, hegemony makes the inclusion of the analysis of representations possible, not as productions of culturally particular networks of symbols, signs and senses, but as the constitution of ideologies, which disguise dominant power and economic logics, naturalize and guarantee the established order. In the case of medical anthropology, on the one hand, the notion of hegemony enables the recognition, at the same time, of inequality, segregation, and violation of rights; and, on the other, it also enables the recognition of the ways

in which individual and collective subjects themselves, without knowing it, adhere to the representations, practices and emotions that produce their own oppression and subjection. In turn, hegemonic practices and representations are appropriate for practices and knowledge of subaltern groups in resistance movements. From this perspective, biomedical and expert knowledge and languages on ailment and diseases are misleading representations used to distort the social origins of a disease. Ahistoricity, biologism, medicalization, naturalization and psychologization are the processes by means of which these expert ways of understanding and categorizing start integrating the common sense of certain populations, blurring the commercial exploitation, privatization and individuation that Capitalism imposes on discomforts and ailments. Inequality, poverty, exploitation and chronic unemployment produced by neoliberal and globalized capitalism are to blame for the patterns of mortality in these populations. In addition, the reification of these processes, relationships and social experiences – in terms of anatomies and biological diseases – disguises and blurs social sources and adds new discomforts and ailments. Biomedical hegemony produces both un-awareness of the social origins of a disease, and a “forced” adherence to its explanatory models and its ways of treating them.

The repertoire of ethnographic positions with the others and their ways of understanding, treating and symbolizing ailments and suffering includes, as something inherent in the relationship, the *ideological veil* that distances the social groups themselves from their own experiences, practices and realities. That is, ethnographers are also in a privileged position regarding ideologies and naturalizations, as they are the ones that locate experiences and knowledge in their social statutes of legitimacy and truth (hegemonic, subaltern, resistance, among others). The others’ knowledge and practices are immersed in a hegemonic net of speeches and knowledge, whose objective is control, domination and medicalization. For the native and subaltern voices to raise, it is necessary to undergo a

long process of confrontation, which involves exposing and putting the real material and social life conditions in the spotlight.

This orientation, in its different variants, turns ethnographies and their results into particular cases, by which general macrosocial processes are expressed. Thus, the experiences, words and voices of the very individual and collective subjects are dissolved and blurred before the strictness of structural economic and political processes, ideological naturalization, and somatization in the form of malaise and ailment, as a type of silent and corporal resistance under oppressive conditions. Occasionally, classic models are sought, such as fake conscience, fake beliefs and bad faith, which distort knowledge and confuse subjects about their real conditions of oppression and subjection.

In writing, the pre-positions *about* and *of* become the articulations that enable the investigation and characterization of macro social processes that create from the others and their lifestyles places of hegemonic re-production, and marginalize subaltern knowledge and practices that are to the scale of real life conditions and of the social origins of their malaise and ailments. Among the main paradigmatic cases, we find hunger and malnutrition, problematic consumption of substances, and the differential distribution of mortality by regions, countries and social classes.

The epistemic-political turn

With the so-called crisis of representation of ethnographic authority, the questioning was not only focused on the subject-object relationships, but also on the language-reality relationships, culture-nature relationships, and other residual dualisms of Western epistemology.^(4,8) Unlike the political and economic perspective, this turn means the questioning of the notion of ideology. According to some authors, ideology suggests, by its definition itself, the existence of a clear knowledge, free from illusion and error.⁽²⁹⁾

The different arguments concerning the classic ethnographic crisis rotate between two poles: an epistemic pole and a political pole.

On the one hand, we have the criticism of classic ethnography related to the privilege of the vision and scopic description, the dominance of certain dominant profiles of the cultural others, which excludes the illogical and diverse in the ethnographic context. To reach this effect, the relational and dialogic matter is translated into a monological text, whose critical revision fostered the experimentation in ethnographic writing. The emphasis in epistemology also corresponds to the interrogation about the conditions of possibilities of knowledge of others. The critical history of anthropology shows a tendency toward the cultural projection of different versions of the us on the others, and in their transformation into different versions of the same things, the familiar things. This endeavor then integrates the *exoticization* of the Western world, the *estrangement* from the familiar things and the attempt to de-essentialize the (non-Western) others, us, the knowledge and the realities in the ethnographic development.

On the other hand, these conditions take place under colonial, postcolonial or neocolonial regimes of global capitalism. However, the problems of genre and of belonging to the very culture under study are – relatively – relegated to the development of ethnographic policies. That is, the processes of deconstruction of ethnographic authority had to experiment, in turn, a combination of questionings and revisions that are present even today.

Contrary to the previous perspectives, to problematize the ways of bonding, making them comprehensible and writing *about* and *of* the others turns into the neuralgic center of the different perspectives included in this approach. In addition, certain notions turned into the center of this equation: *some, us, the others, the natives, the familiar, the strange, the otherness, the projection, the specular imaginaries, the othernesses of the Western world, the epistemological and political conditions and assumptions of these operations, the difficulties to access to the others and their knowledge, the literary experimentation, the rupture of the monological canons toward the dialogical or multilogical*

ones, the revision and criticism of cultural comparison and translation, among the key notions. Therefore, the use of pre-positions in ethnographic writing turns not only into a theoretical issue, but also into an issue of problematization and experimentation in writing: *with, in dialogue, instead of*, even in other means of expression (images, photo-ethnographies, and son on).⁽¹⁸⁾

In anthropological and ethnographic health-related research works in countries of South America, a multiplicity of orientations and research groups that include, or that are based on these perspectives, have taken place. Diverse themes have been included within this orientation: the review of the epistemological grounds of biomedicine, of other medicines that do not match the coordinates of Western scientificity, and their links with the ways of production of sufferings in the daily life of certain populations.^(29,30,31,32) The epistemological review of the grounds of biomedicine questions biology as true and empiric reality, accessible by a technical and transparent language, and expressed in the approach to anatomy as the only universal truth of the human body. Within a vast repertoire of theoretical orientations (from hermeneutics to more clearly poststructuralists), the processes of medicalization, somatization, corporization, psychologization and socialization have enlightened the epistemological assumptions of biomedicine, and have given rise not only to research works categorized as social studies of science, but also to new versions of critical medical anthropology, which include the analysis of narratives.^(31,33) One of the paradigmatic cases of this type of analysis is the critical study on expert, inexpert, institutional, and informal care in the region.^(34,35)

The political-cultural turn

One of the results of the epistemic-political turn, besides the stampede toward innovation in fieldwork and writing styles, was to try to avoid turning anthropology into both a theoretical, literary task, and a sub-discipline dependent on sociology. One way to resolve

this dilemma was to search for certain continuity with ethnographic research works in urban areas under the relational and procedural perspective of the social matter according to Pierre Bourdieu.^(36,37)

Far from centering this discussion – and the critique – on the notion of culture, the central notions of Bourdieu's theoretical framework (practice, *habitus*, discourse, strategies, and so on) made the documentation and the analysis of complex urban problems possible, without subsuming them completely to the coordinates of sociology and history. Seeking to break with the dualisms and dichotomies of traditional epistemology, his relational approach enabled the determination of tensions, inequalities, contradictions and partialities in the social field, and their relation to the logics of violence and the ways of production of social suffering.

Furthermore, the notions of *mis-understanding* and *un-awareness* provide intelligibility to the complexity of the processes of domination and production of symbolic violence. Specifically, Bourdieu has noted the participation of the very social actors in the domination that restrains them, through an adaptation of cognitive structures and structures of social reality that favors their un-awareness and naturalization. In turn, the – collective – misunderstanding organizes moral economies under the appearance of free and selfless exchange, which are, fundamentally, social ways of obligation and subjection.⁽³⁶⁾

This turn toward the heart of knowledge within the logics of power and domination, however, places ethnographers in a complex position: it sends them back to a type of arbitration regarding the levels of un-awareness, of the statute of knowledge and of the degree of understanding of the very social actors over their own experiences and practices. Cognitive structures and their capture by domination processes turn misunderstandings and confusion into a consequence of the logics of power, which have a statute of reality that only the ethnographer is able to see and elucidate, given that, in a way, the ethnographer can be outside of them.

In sum, Bourdieu's theoretical framework not only offers a *ready-to-use symbolic equation* to reveal this model of domination in different

regions and areas of daily life, but, in addition, the cognitive structures and the *habitus* provide a real anchor for solving the tensions and contradictions that encourages people to talk about what the others are un-aware of. That is, the others are unaware, and this unawareness is anchored to cognitive and corporal structures.

Nevertheless, when trying to understand how the others mis-understand and are un-aware of the processes in which they participate and by which they are oppressed, ethnographic positions step in and reproduce this pattern of knowledge. From this perspective, somehow, the native experiences and categorizations of suffering and malaise are jeopardized by these processes of mis-understanding and being un-aware that confuse and make, in a way, the presence of others, of ethnographers in this case, necessary to reveal them. As regards writing, pre-positions are focused on those like *about* and *of*, which advocate for other practices and knowledge; thus establishing a distance between the results of the participating observation and those descriptions, narratives and perspectives of the very social actors, which are always stained and distorted by the processes that the theoretical framework makes intelligible. One of the paradigmatic cases of this perspective is the suffering associated to violence(s).⁽³⁸⁾

The ontological turn

When confronting the epistemological-political orientation as a paternal and narcissist way out, that is, more focused on anthropologists than on the subjects and societies we are working with, the ontological turn upholds that anthropologies are versions of indigenous practices and knowledge. Following other anthropological traditions, to be specific, French Deleuzian (post)structuralism, British anthropology and Amerindian studies in Brazil, perspectivism forces the orientation toward ontological determination of *the otherness of the other*: the ontological self-determination of the other.^(39,40,41)

Ontological delegation, that is, placing on others the source and agency of representations,

and defining the ontological self-determination, has abandoned the questioning of ethnographic authority. Epistemological divisions turn into ontological, borderlines become more permeable, and the transitions between worlds multiply. Based on certain and particular others, relatively with no contact with Western societies, ontological analysis reviews the ways of reading the objects of ethnographic studies (culture, cosmologies, among other objects), and the ways of translating these objects into other languages (production relations, power inequality, among other languages).

Perspectivism includes hybrid formation, as a result of the recursive process of the Western ethno-anthropological orientation and Amerindian orientations. It suggests the notion of *controlled equivocation* as an approach to perspectivism that supposes a constant epistemology and a variable ontology. For this reason, the version of the translation that becomes relevant tries to avoid focusing on those homonyms that do not refer to the same things. Instead of talking about error in the ways of seeing different things similarly, Viveiros talks about equivocation, which is liable to being controlled with the coordinates of perspectivism.

Therefore, the bond between the ethnographer and populations is marked by a mix-up, given that the others, the otherness of the natives, does not match ethnographers, nor the otherness of the latter. The symbolic economy of perspectivism places *the others* before *me*, and the others' thoughts must be prioritized over ours in translation. Far from being an empiric and contingent communicational issue, for Viveiros equivocation is a category inherent to the anthropological project of *cultural translation*, which turns misunderstandings into its central content. The ontological turn supposes a vision of *politics as inherent to the decolonization of thought*, to the "virtual futures that may be."⁽⁴¹⁾

Furthermore, with the purpose of breaking dualisms, perspectivism assumes a complex repertoire of transformations and translations. On the one hand, *interspecific perspectivism*, which multiplies the points of view and, on the other, *multinaturalism*, in which natures

diversify, but cultures do not. These other ontologies – in this case, the Amerindian – are not only different from Western ontologies, but, within them, the Other of the other does not match the Other of the self. This technology of the otherness turns ethnographic differences into the center of interest; specifically, it is interested in the difference within persons and things, rather than between them.

Before nature, in terms of its status of universal and fixed reference for comparison, has been questioned through the ontological turn, medical anthropology had already deactivated, questioned and abandoned Western biology as the only reference for transcultural analysis of malaises and diseases. In addition, by focusing on the ethnographies of the Amazon – and the Andes –, this approach takes ethnographies back to their indigenous contexts, and with a repertoire of reviewed and sophisticated notions in the genealogy of classic approaches.

The ethnographer, in this case, is presented as an *ontological diplomat and negotiator* between diverse worlds and real perspectives. Before these general formulations, however, the constitutive ontological delegation of these ethnographies includes characteristic prepositions, not only about the others, but as *ways of being of the others*, *on the others*. Furthermore, and having the decolonization of thought as a core idea, it is considered that the theoretical-political positions regarding the native peoples and the new extractivisms are paternalistic, and that they transform the agencies into beings under the multinaturalism regime.⁽⁴²⁾ The paradigmatic case of this orientation and the complex exercise of the translation is *shamanism*.

The decolonial turn

In continuity and interaction with the subaltern, postcolonial and global South studies, we find the theoretical and critical developments denominated *decolonial*. Bringing together arguments from different authors and disciplines (philosophy, history, sociology and anthropology), the modernity/coloniality project proposed a particular historicity of

the South Atlantic and South America, which would be able to revisit not only the notions of *third world* and *development*, but the very notion of *Latin America*.^(43,44)

With the change made by traditional perspectives about the ways of production and legitimation of knowledge of other subaltern perspectives, and even when questioning the notion of “third world” and the colonial ways of production of knowledge about others, their knowledge and practices, this positioning also questions the poststructural approach, which makes this knowledge something transparent and of immediate access (with no ideological barriers) for the subaltern and oppressed people.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Unlike the economic-political perspective, the decolonial turn has a specific conceptual framework about the ways in which the global geopolitical distribution includes in its agenda the epistemological, cognitive and translational questioning of the colonial regime, capitalism, modernity and *coloniality*. This program includes the decolonization of epistemology, dominant and patriarchal cognitive processes and knowledge, which are keys to the constitution of the hegemony of the modernity/coloniality project in the South Atlantic. From this perspective, epistemology is not only not universal, but it is geographically marked in its history and in its characteristics.^(42,45)

Therefore, the *decolonial turn* is part of the so-called *south epistemologies*, which match the elaboration of questionings to global capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchal structures. This perspective fosters the multiplicity of epistemologies and the acknowledgment of the diversity of knowledge. Not only the universality and legitimacy of Western science is reviewed, but also Western critical theories (marxism, post-marxism, among other theories). From this perspective, epistemologies are marked geopolitically in their historicity. Coloniality consists in the sub-alternation of the knowledge and culture of oppressed and excluded groups that necessarily accompany colonialism and modernity, which continues at present with globalization.

In the global south, theories and intelligibility are an intrinsic part of daily life.

Theorizing participates, then, in the ways of living and surviving of the people of these regions. By including, generally, the notion of hegemony – and counter-hegemony –, the diversity of orientations and authors within the decolonial paradigm integrates power inequality and interactions within its own development. It goes back to a variation of *culturalism*, which understands the ecology of the diverse knowledge including the need for intercultural and dialogical translation. This core position of translation matches the search for mutual and dialogical intelligibility between cultures in a project called counter-hegemonic, ecologic, indigenist, feminist, and of other social movements.⁽⁴³⁾

The paradigmatic case that these perspectives assume is the orientation of *intercultural health*.^(46,47) The intercultural approach in different areas (education, security, and so on) has a long and complex genealogy in South American countries. However, as it fosters a dialogical paradigm, some of its first versions had a dualist and oppositional structure, and suffered from certain ingenuity in their formulation. This first version of interculturality has been subject to multiple critiques and reviews, even among those who have theoretically and ideologically adhered to and reproduced this perspective during their first developments. Specifically, the – ambiguous and vague – notion of culture has traditionally been more useful for domination than for liberation and, as it did not consider the economic and geopolitical dynamics, this notion has attracted most of the critiques. Therefore, critical interculturality questions the dualist, culturalist, wishful and reproductive nature of the order established by the classic functionalist and relational intercultural perspective. Unlike this, critical interculturality includes power and economy inequalities, and the dialogical structuring is accomplished by subaltern groups in their diversity, which include the ethnic, epistemic, territorial and genre dimensions.⁽⁴⁸⁾

In the same way, classic intercultural perspective, in relation to health, includes a dialogical structuring that, at times, reproduces a set of dualisms: biomedicine and traditional

knowledge from local, Western, and native people. They also placed these other medicines in a subordinated and complementary position within biomedicine, such as empiricist traditions of ethnomedicine.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Within the decolonial intercultural perspective, there exists an explicit review of the dominant temptation of “talking in the name of others,” “saying in the name of others,” on behalf of others, provided that this is a contingent and relational situation because we are the others of the “others.” According to Mignolo,⁽⁴³⁾ the conditions of possibility of intercultural dialogue include not only the collective ways of producing knowledge, but the possibility of considering ourselves as the others of the others. According to the principal authors of this orientation, instead of investigating others, or studying certain problems of others, the decolonial approach states that it consists in studying problems *with* the others, which supposes a modification in the ways of interacting with the individual and collective subjects of the research works.

CLOSING WORDS

This brief journey through some ethnographic positions in the dominion of medical anthropology in South America not only includes its systematization through the great theoretical orientations about this field of research, but it also integrates the complex relationships between orientations and positions. That is, while certain positions prevail in particular orientations, some positions can be found in different perspectives at the same time and, within the same orientation, more than one alternate position may be included.

Regarding the repertoire of positions of ethnographers in the fieldwork and in ethnographic writing, we can outline the following: a) experiences, practices and perspectives, whose peculiarity is located in a lower grade of what is already known, what belongs to one, the same, and intelligibility is achieved through the translation of the strange into the familiar, which

works as universal measurement, scale and reference; b) experiences molded by inequality and poverty, and questioned in their status of truth and legitimacy, that the very subjects are not able to completely elucidate due to the ideological naturalization, given the hegemony of Western biomedicine and the economic and political processes of capitalism; c) triggers that shoot – mainly or exclusively – self and/or specular projections, images and questions, in a tone of Western epistemological and political traditions; d) part involved in the domination processes that restrain and immerse them in un-awareness or mis-understanding of their own life conditions, due to their naturalization in the common sense; e) beings and territories whose existence and ontological agency are delegated and given ontologically, and which seek to return to the others (humans, animals, even places) the otherness without reducing it to or subsuming it into the familiar and the same; f) collective subjects, individuals and territories whose knowledge and subjectivities have been plundered, denied and silenced by some type of epistemicide, based on the hegemony of the episteme and Western thought, which demands the transformation of this structure of coloniality toward an intercultural dialogue in conditions of greater economic and social wellbeing and equality.

Finally, the repertoire of ethnographic positions, briefly examined in accordance with theoretical, economic, political, epistemological and ontological mapping, opens multiple questions about some conditions of ethnographic works that would otherwise go unnoticed and would only be reproduced. Among these questions, there are three that stand out: in the first place, the analysis of ethnographies and, specifically, of ethnographic positions, prevents anyone from avoiding the emergency conditions of the relationships with others in the development of fieldwork. Far from the naturalization of these bonds, from the constant effort in the presentation of these as a development of growing and linear acceptance and integration in the daily life of the others, by categorizing the difficulties found in the research work in terms of obstacles, the critical review on ethnographic positions makes their problematization in its

complexity necessary, including as well the forcing, artificialities and asymmetries that go through them. In the second place, with this exploration, the question about the expectations and models of ethnographic relationship – more or less implicit – in the academic environment opens, which impose certain positions in fieldwork and in writing, and demonstrate to have accomplished,

for example, intimacy, profoundness and knowledge of the others. And last, but not least, there is also the question about the ways in which ethnographic positions match certain sensitivity concerning the inequality, suffering and ailment of others, the processes by which they are reproduced, amplified and crystallized in the bonds in fieldwork and in ethnographic texts.

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