

DOSSIÊR

Perspectives on Indigenous Psychology in Brazil: ethical and epistemological challenges

Editor

Daniilo Silva Guimarães

Support

Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (Process nº 2018/16016-7).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interests.

Received

July 31, 2023

Version final

February 1, 2024

Approved

May 13, 2024

About the depressing universal: study of a case of Amerindian resistance to biomedical capture

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How to cite this article: Campos, M. C., & Bairrão, J. F. M. H. (2024). About the depressing universal: study of a case of Amerindian resistance to biomedical capture. *Estudos de Psicologia* (Campinas), 41, e230089. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0275202441e230089en>

Abstract

Objective

In the midst of assimilationist onslaughts, the Xavante determined the migration of children to Ribeirão Preto/SP, where they would grow and observe the white people. One of the recent protagonists of this migration experienced intense psychic suffering, diagnosed and treated by western medicine. He showed significant improvements; however, only when he finally returned to the village of origin he got completely rehabilitated. The objective of this work was to go beyond the canonical biomedical narrative, showing how the consideration of multiple forms of “translation” allows us to glimpse an indigenous phenomenon in its complexity.

Method

For this purpose, ten unstructured interviews conducted with this young indigenous individual and some of his main interlocutors in the urban environment (host family, schoolmates, religious space) were reviewed.

Results

Plural narratives have emerged that focus on what is experienced but it is suppressed by the universalizing biomedical discourse.

Conclusion

The youth experienced a process of negotiation between universes of meaning, whose synthesis culminated in enhancing the Xavante peoples self-assertion and appropriating their own voice, among others.

Keywords: Ethnopsychology; Health of indigenous peoples; Indigenous peoples; Mental health.

The postulate of the universality of scientific knowledge dates back to Aristotle and therefore to the Greek (white) Antiquity, being at the root of the traditional understanding of science. Rarely questioned within the scope of the so-called “natural” sciences, this assumption constituted a challenge to the scientific establishment of the so-called “human” sciences. In the case of psychology, there was often no hesitation in removing from its theoretical body the enormous diversity conception of the subject and disregarding the intrinsic dependence of its theoretical terms on its own history and culture, also linked to the linguistic matrices of its etyms.

On the other hand, resistance to this process is coeval with the emergence of the discipline, having been disseminated and reinvented throughout history in a multiplicity of terminologies, such as psychology of people, ethnopsychology, intercultural psychology, cultural psychology (several) and, more recently, in the so-called “indigenous psychologies”. These, within the framework of the anti-hegemonic tradition, highlight the necessary role of “natives” and their cultures in the establishment and development of ethnopsychological knowledge; opposing the presumption of universalism and related ethnocentrism.

Some authors have highlighted the fact that psychological science itself is ethnopsychology, as an indigenous psychology of culture (European and the white diaspora throughout North America) (Lutz, 1985). In the case of hegemonic Western science, Guimarães (2021) highlights the mythical roots of scientific knowledge in psychology, disguised behind the screen of intended and presumed universality. The ethnopsychological approach presupposes dialogue and, through the ethnopsychanalytic approach, prevents superimposing the voice of a commentator or analyst on the game of discursive interactions, reducing the volume of the theoretical voice over the case.

This article does not intend to resolve this complex theoretical challenge, but to draw attention to the effect that, in actual existences, impersonality or supposed diagnostic neutrality can have resonances in indigenous biographies, from cultural matrices other than those obtained from the universality of the Western psychological ethnoknowledge by using a case study of a young Xavante. The objective is, through the study of an episode of mental health of an indigenous person in a European context, to discuss the supposed harmlessness and/or usefulness of supposedly universal diagnostic categories, in this case represented by depression.

It is not a question of going into the merits of this diagnosis itself, but of examining the impact of its use, with a view, ultimately, at questioning the pretensions of psychological science to universality in the absence of dialogue and contextualization with a plurality of voices and authorships that should necessarily include the protagonism of indigenous psychologies.

Within a framework of continuous assimilationist attacks, the history of the Xavante people (the *A'uwê*) in relation to the surrounding society highlights the gradual attempts of a white expansion over their physical and symbolic territories, materially and immaterially. Contrary to the narrative that indigenous peoples remained defenseless to the attacks of white people, in this process. The Xavante demonstrated extreme ability to respond to them: they began to develop different relationship strategies with non-indigenous people, expending efforts towards a more systematic learning of their universe, with all the complexity inherent to that universe, and appropriating means so that the Xavantes could resume and strengthen their action capabilities. Historically, contiguity with the national structure was, therefore, combined with the maintenance and updating of their own ethnical cultural characteristics, essential to their perception as subjects, in addition to the significance of the progressive transformations underway, organization of strategies and actions established in response to these pressures and, therefore, to its structural preservation as a society (Gordon, 2014; Lopes da Silva, 1992).

In this connection, we can observe the expansion of the essential characteristics of the internal Xavante social and political organization in the framework of contact with the non-indigenous universe (Fernandes, 2012). Common to other people of the *Jê* linguistic trunk, the Xavante society is characterized by a sophisticated network of dualistic relationships, segmented into opposing and complementary split clans that, synchronously, oppose each other and establish alliances. In this way, the aim is to maintain a dynamic and harmonious tension in order to benefit the cohesion of the group, under the logic of “divide to add”, in which we do not exist without the other: “Xavante

does not exist alone” (Fernandes, 2012; Soares, 2008). The Xavante thus appear to have vast control over the subtle and risky game of mutually constitutive relationships between self and other, in order to keep “antagonisms in balance” (Gordon, 2014).

Within this context, the people in question began to engender migratory processes to urban centers in different regions of the country. Since the city is the locus of white people’s knowledge, a representation of their perspective, such processes of urban immersion would be configured as the most intensive and privileged points of experimentation and attempts to control this knowledge to have access to such a perspective (Nunes, 2010). The ability to obtain improvements through movements outside the natives’ village thus became an essential quality in determining the competence of a leader (Toral, 1986). From this perspective, chief Apöena, from the Pimentel Barbosa indigenous land, established contact and ties with a group of white people from Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo who were visiting the indigenous villages, at the end of the year 1950 and early 1951. Known as the “Brazilian capital of agribusiness”, the city of Ribeirão Preto is located in a region in the interior of the state of São Paulo originally inhabited by a large indigenous population composed of the Caiapós – and also the Xavante, belonging to the Macro-Jê linguistic trunk – who were decimated by the raids of the *bandeirantes* (colonial explorers) who laid the basis for the city subsequent foundation (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2013). Through attempts at agricultural expansion in other regions of the country that proved to be economically feasible, the trajectory of some Ribeirão Preto residents became intertwined with that of the Xavante in the Brazilian center-west, leaving aside formerly troubled relations between the peoples, and yielding a synergistic alliance of mutual respect.

Based on this proximity, the indigenous leader decided to send eight of his grandchildren, all male, to the group’s city of origin. The scope of their mission was the learning of the white language and culture under the sponsorship of non-indigenous families, who, by common agreement, were willing to look after the children and provide them with formal white education (Franca, 2006).

This policy has continued in recent times: In order to live and socialize in the white world, young Xavante people currently reside in the city of Ribeirão Preto, living with non-indigenous families. For the purposes of this article we chose to focus on one of these families, which received two generations of Xavante boys. The youngest of these Xavante, in his trajectory among non-indigenous people, developed a condition of intense suffering crossed by complementing or colliding discourses in an attempt to explain or correct it. Seeking to access the white perspective, to gain knowledge from the white people’s lenses, indigenous people end up being subject to these views, to interpretation by this specific conceptual system of ordering the world.

Through the case of the previously mentioned young man, this article intends to highlight how the consideration of multiple forms of “translation” allows us to glimpse an indigenous phenomenon in its complexity in a more effective way, as opposed to a universalizing perspective, in this case the usual psychiatric one. The problems involved in the translation between two symbolic universes are widely evident in the context of indigenous treatment in different health services permeated by the white people’s logic, as exemplified by Garnelo (2011) and Ferreira (2011). Therefore, it is believed that the approach to the case in relation to the different interpretations and translations that permeate it is an effective way of bringing contributions to this issue.

Method

Unstructured interviews were carried out with the main character in this case, besides his older brother who lived the same moving experience discussed and members of his white family, as

well as characters from his school environment. Furthermore, field immersions were carried out in a Spiritist Center attended by the young indigenous people in question and their white family, with the aim of understanding the insertion and symbolic specificity of the interviewee, in a framework of intercultural encounters and disagreements. All dialogues were established in the Ribeirão Preto region, an urban environment inhabited by young people.

Participants

In total, seven people were interviewed. Two young indigenous individuals, their “white mother”, two schoolmates and two participants in the spiritist center attended by their white family (chosen by the indigenous family, as they were considered similar to them) who, like the people attending the spiritist center, may be described as middle class, lower middle class. The majority of students at the private school attended by the two youth came from middle, upper-middle or even upper-class families (public servants, self-employed professionals, businesspeople).

Procedures

The meetings were recorded through the continuous entry in a field diary, containing transcriptions of the conversations, observations (in addition to their visual dimension) impressions and sensations experienced. The ethnographic writing constituted the establishment of a second field, distinct but cohabitable with that experienced during data collection. The diary constitutes, from this perspective, a report of oneself crossed by the Other, through which one is able to promote an imaginative recreation of the effect of the field of study on the investigator in its concreteness (Strathern, 2014) and, consequently, a “re-affectation” of this effect on its author.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were based on the ethnopschoanalytic method that stands at the confluence between the psychoanalytic and ethnographic methods. The ethnopschoanalytic approach combines psychoanalysis and ethnography, in such a way that neither approach intends to have access to a real in itself, which opens up space to listen to other cosmologies. Psychoanalysis as it is applied here is just a methodological framework to listen to other worlds and different agencies of the modern-colonial costume, without superimposing one analytical voice on the other. The idea of the unconscious, taken seriously as a limitation to the monological and cognitive monopoly of any psychology, without the exception of the hegemonic ones, bans the use of psychology as a weapon for imposing a colonial and oppressive understanding of the world. Relationships and repetitions among the reports obtained were considered in the analysis, as well as free associations, implicit content and even silences when a content is not actually uttered. Considering the notions described above, and understanding that the signifier in psychoanalysis is what makes sense and not merely and exclusively something linked to verbal language (Bairrão, 2011); it is understood that thinking about the meanings of indigenous phenomena in their socio-cosmological specificities, paying attention to their different forms of expression and opening up to the different possibilities of “translation”, is a feasible exercise through the sustained listening of ethnopschoanalysis in its epistemological, anthropological and psychoanalytic bases. From this listening, the field builds a meaning for research and establishes a place for the researcher, which allows dealing with different universes, in order to overcome the translation of what is presented into meanings in the field (Bairrão, 2015).

Results and Discussion

The contents described here were obtained, above all, through contact with the young man targeted for the study, his indigenous brother and members of his white family, whose trajectories will be briefly explained for contextualization purposes.

V., the young man's "white grandmother", reports that she began contact with the Xavante in 1984 after watching an advertisement on television, in which members of the ethnic group broadcasted that they were looking for a family to shelter and be responsible for C., father of the two young boy son the move today. At that time, V. was newly married, was full of debt and didn't consider having children. Upon hearing the announcement (she never even saw it), however, she was overcome by a force that she believed to have been spiritual, and she immediately went to meet the Xavante. From the beginning, the spiritist perspective of V.'s vision of the events that followed is already evident, an important issue in understanding the contents that emerged throughout the interviews, as well as indicative of the relevance of the role that the Spiritist Center plays in the family attending there assumes in the establishment of interethnic relationships.

The older Xavante boy chose V. because she looked like them (physically, according to her). C. (father) had lived with the V.'s family for twenty years, usually returning to his indigenous village on all his school holidays. He graduated in nursing and returned to the village as arranged, applying the knowledge acquired in his training for the benefit of his people, until he died shortly afterwards of unknown causes. The fact seems to have immensely shaken V.'s family, who report it full of intense emotion, as well as the members of the village of origin, who had been awaiting his return for so long.

C. had left his first son, S, two and a half years old, and her mother, who was five months pregnant of their second son, who would also be called C. When the youngest of the two boys turned two and a half years old, the family became ill and sought treatment in Ribeirão Preto. V. welcomed them into her home for five years; then the mother returned to the village, leaving the boys. The story, therefore, produces its echoes until the present generation, in which the young sons follow the same path as their father. In the present study, we could hear the echo of this journey through the voices of S. and C. (son).

Through the interviews, we understood that C. experienced intense suffering during his stay in the city environment, going as far as self-mutilation and showing signs of suicidal ideation. In the city, he was referred to psychological and psychiatric care. The categorizations used in the description of this process by the Eurocentric medicine include the description of the occurrence of a "depressive condition", a "psychotic breakdown" and the possibility of a diagnosis of "borderline personality disorder". In this connection, he was treated via controlled medication and weekly psychological care.

The last follow up mentioned provided C. with a very different experience compared to that of other Xavantes in a suffering situation: according to him, indigenous people would keep their feelings more "to themselves, within", not sharing their anguish with anyone. The insertion of that Xavante individual into the indigenous society since childhood causes strength and courage, facing one's fears, controlling aggressiveness and balancing emotions to be valued. These dimensions are present in the surrounding regional environment (the harshness of the *cerrado* region), in the setting in which they live (the boys, when in the *Hö*, the single men's house, sleep on bamboo beds covered with a solid mat) and in the rituals they successively go through (consisting, mostly, of exercises of body strength and physical resistance) (Carrara, 2010). However, despite a different kind of assistance, C. stated that he did not appreciate the therapeutic support received.

Despite all the support received in the city framework, the young man only achieved a significant improvement of his health condition when he decided to permanently return to the village. Before doing so, it is important to point out here the existence of the first and most widespread form of meaning of the process experienced by C. in the urban environment: that of psychiatry guided by the biomedical model.

The biomedical perspective is supported by a universalizing perspective of reality, the result of the development of Greek thinking incorporated by the Western tradition in the major fronts of progression of its thought – philosophy, Christian religion and science (Marcondes, 2009). In this connection, the idea of mental health emerges as an asset to be obtained in a totally corrective direction of what would be considered pathological, in a process of reification of subjective perspectives (symptoms) disregarding the cultural and biographical trajectories of the person in pain (Ferreira, 201; Izaguirre, 2011). The acceptance of universalizing psychiatric categories thus produces a standardized medical practice, nullifying specificities. In the case addressed, it was decided to assign diagnoses, prescribe medications and generalize psychological practice, without considering the sociocultural particularities of the case.

Thus the assimilationist onslaught initially mentioned in this paper, anticipating a certain conception of being and the world and aiming to annihilate those that do not correspond, is perpetuated in other nuances, with new guises. Seeger et al. (1987, p. 4, our translation) discuss the issue applied to the area of anthropological knowledge, but this can be extended to many other sciences concerning human issues:

Because it is basic and central, the conception of what a human being is, we, Westerners, entertain tends to be projected at some level onto the societies we study, with the result that native notions about the person come to be considered as “ideology”, while our unanalyzed preconceptions (*sic*) will form the basis of “scientific” theories.

It is important to highlight that, during the interviews, C. never referred to his health condition expressly as the result of depression, using expressions such as “that thing I had” or “my problem” when mentioning it. Considering the traditional Xavante conception that the act of naming is to enable the existence of a thing, with creation being incomplete without the speech (Lopes da Silva, 2014), the refusal to refer to the white biomedical categorization may signal a care for language that also translates a means of political and cultural resistance to a colonizing form of knowledge.

The conceptions and treatments of the biomedical model produce effects on our illnesses also because this is how our reality is structured: academicism and scientism can be read as the equivalents of the collective myth in Western society. It is worth questioning, then, what would be the effectiveness of the symbols that constitute this myth on an individual who is not inserted into this logic or, in the case discussed here, who finds himself moving between the diversity of these systems.

Furthermore, the white universe is also a multifaceted kaleidoscope. Like some others living in the experience engendered by the Xavante strategy, C. attended a Spiritist Center together with his white family in the Ribeirão Preto region. The Spiritist House in question differs from the others due to the recurrent use of metaphors and symbols of nature in its activities. Through these symbolic correspondences, natural concepts, such as vegetation, climate and topography, symbolize psychological processes such as identity, learning, feelings and behaviors (Jorge, 2020). Affinity with the elements of nature seems to have facilitated a rapprochement between the two groups.

The spiritist discourse originating from this system is enunciated mainly by V. – as previously mentioned, the young man’s “white grandmother”, who had also received his father years before

in order to implement the Xavante strategy – when dealing with the suffering experienced by his indigenous grandson:

That's what we say about being truly in tune with the planning, right? So why did he have this? Because he was "out" of his planning process. So, the strength of reincarnation planning does this. This was a test, because he was taking very strong medication. (V., the young's man white grandmother)

Reincarnation planning refers to the spiritist principle in which the spirit itself or another more advanced in matters of morality and knowledge outlines his plan for life – involving scopes and trials – as a reincarnator, predicting only the main events that may occur in the physical world and connecting to the consequences of partial free will (since nothing occurs without God's permission) (Rocha, 2020). Within this perspective, in addition to the mission designated by the Xavante, the young man would be part of an even greater perspective, referring to the line he must follow towards his spiritual evolution.

Other factors were included in this equation throughout C.'s trajectory, encompassing systems that provided rapprochements with the indigenous worldview. In this sense, the young person's entry into an anthroposophical educational institution was confirmed; this is a pedagogical current that presents parallels with Xavante¹ learning in that it promotes an appreciation and close approximation with nature, developing activities aimed at the integration between man and environment – based on a perception of these systems as coordinated and composing an organized, non-hierarchical system – and the inclusion of the corporeal-sensory dimension in learning, in empirical and stimulating activities in the dimension of doing, thinking and feeling (Oliveira, 2006).

Such approaches, paradoxically, seemed to make C. feel even more distant from his indigenous people, as he began to appropriate traditional Xavante cultural elements while visiting his Indigenous Land during the vacation period. It was after a school-sponsored trip to the Petar caves that the young man decided, for the first time, to return to his home village, as reported by N., a classmate:

We went to the caves and there were caves with trees and such, and to walk in most of the caves we just used a headlamp. It was a moment when we were very in touch, like that. Leaning a lot on rocks, in caves, going inside, even with clothes getting wet and so on, I could see that... I could at least notice that he did it very normally, you know, enjoying doing it. But on the trip, he didn't say anything about the tribe, nothing. When we came back from the trip, two days after everyone was going to class and so on, he began missing classes.

After a few days, C. came to the classroom saying that the trip had reminded him a lot of home, of his mother, and that was why he had chosen to leave. He returned to Ribeirão Preto shortly afterwards and, after another semester, he reiterated his decision. Close to this second moment of return, the young man had gone through an important process inherent to Xavante men, consisting of several rituals that determined the transformation and entry into adult life. In C.'s case, this process symbolized not only a change in his age group, but in his self-image and conception of being: he had found his A'uwe spirit, discovered, in fact, a Xavante.

He had participated in the culminating ritual of this entire journey, the piercing of ears, an event that marks the transition of a certain age group from the status of young individual to adult condition, a complete man. Ear piercing represents the power of transformation characteristic of Xavante society, as adolescents become people with socially defined roles in the community, soon becoming nominators, parents and with the ability to participate in the political life of the village

¹ As Fernandes (2013) regarding the importance of the corporeal dimension in the Xavante's learning and Carrara (2002) about the relation with nature in the educational processes of these people.

(Fernandes, 2010a). The ritual in question is preceded by seclusion in the *Hö*, the house of single men; this seclusion lasts approximately five years, and by *Wate'wa*, a ceremony lasting approximately one month, in which young people remain performing movements in the water for almost the entire time, sometimes stopping to rest and eat specific foods. C. says that he managed to participate in *Wate'wa* calmly and he believed that he did not have any additional difficulty compared to the others; he enhanced that he could get out of the water to rest whenever he wanted.

As discussed initially, Xavante cosmopraxis focuses on an openness to the other, in order to transform the Other into the Self, rather than its inverse (Fernandes, 2010a; 2010b; 2015). From this assumption, it can be inferred that C.'s public and ritual sphere in the city is completely different, compared to that found in the village. C. dwells among white people, in the white people's universe, following their daily lives and their rules. But considering the ideas described above, it is possible to infer that C.'s experiences in the city involves, to a certain extent, this transformation of the Other into Self. C. does not, in this way, stop experiencing his public and ritual life when in the city, but you can do so in order to "translate" this experience from Xavante cosmology. In any case, this transformation can be costly, especially if we consider that along with this transposition come all the obligations, duties, demands on oneself and others, inherent to the public life in the village.

In the same way that young Xavante, through rituals that require sturdy physical conditions, resistance and muscle tone, such as those mentioned previously, dedicate themselves to the development of a warrior and hunter body, that is, an adult body; C., possibly re-semanticizing this transition from childhood to adulthood, aimed to obtain better performance and grades in his school assessments and, therefore, demanded too much. In other words, instead of a strong body, he was developing his intellectual strengths.

In this connection, in his experience in the city, C. has his external sphere highlighted and underlined: considering the representation of this by the public and ritual sphere, by name, by kinship (Fernandes, 2015), one can attest to the fact that the young person, being the son of leaders, has a strong burden attached to these conditions, and along with it the responsibilities, commitments and duties, which are carried over into his city life. He must fulfill what is expected, after all, from a son of leaders; fulfill his "mission" while in contact with the white world.

The young man also said that when he went to the village before, he felt a little bored, complaining that he did not have many activities to occupy himself with, and highlighting that in the daily life of the village, each person determines his/her time to do their activities. On these occasions, he had even asked to return to Ribeirão Preto. This scenario is contrasted with the city life, which he presents as full of schedules, deadlines, "rush" and pressure. Also taking his own time, C. (son) reports the contrast found in his original environment:

It's a bit loose there, everyone does... their own time, their own time. Like... like... there the men, like, go hunting. They go in the morning, stay there until... until the afternoon, return late... at sunset. Just like a woman, she takes clothes to wash, washes them in the river, a lot. He doesn't care about the time. She... she doesn't care. She washes slowly, in her own time. Until... an hour, a certain time.

As he was appropriating the indigenous universe, C. says that, during his daily school life, he woke up at 5:00 in the morning (earlier than necessary) to be able to do things calmly, in his own time, inserted in a society that does not comply with this dimension, by always accelerating it or trying to control it. The schedules, the "commitment", are explained by himself and his older brother as one of the biggest difficulties in living in the white universe. The elimination of such regulators, which, in a certain way, limit and put pressure on young people's lifestyles, could be an important factor in reversing the situation. The experience of the Xavante time is now seen as positive by

the young man, who dedicates himself to activities such as weeding, which he greatly appreciates, without any other worries. Returning to the symbolic relationships involved, the proximity between some points of the two worldviews involved – Xavante and anthroposophic – may have, on the other hand, further highlighted their divergences during this process.

Another important element in C.'s trajectory occurs right from its conception: the attribution of names. According to the young man himself, choosing his name to be the same as his father's, would have been the result of V.'s desire, as a gesture of affection for V.'s deceased son. By being introduced to the language through the process of giving names, the young man was hence inserted into a network of signifiers connected to the Xavante existential context, inserted in a certain discursive content (Mariani, 2014), especially associated with the remarkable memory of his father, both for his people and the white family that welcomed them both. Its proper name, therefore, carries with it multiple effects of meaning, transformable according to the laws of association pertinent to the two universes in which the subject moves, having the capacity to evoke different meanings in those with whom it interrelates (Silva et al., 2017) and, as a result, with himself.

Regarding the tradition of the Xavante naming system, the practice of being bestowed names from ancestors by the new generations of men is common, an inheritance transmitted through pre-existing kinship ties. The living and the dead are placed in opposition, without ceasing to exist a continuity and communication between them, in which the names would be means and products. The Xavante male naming system, therefore, emphasizes rather than an identification, the continuity between the generations involved (Lopes da Silva, 2014). In this sense, there is possibly a certain structural mismatch between the Xavante logic of naming and that which supported V.'s desire, each implying different repercussions on the young man's experience.

V. reports that she sometimes receives spiritual communications from C. (father), within a spiritist logic that, therefore, makes the father present at all times in the family's daily life – whether through the spirit or through the name, transmitted to C, (son). This is in opposition to the Xavante logic, according to which life and death must remain distinct and distant – which actually prevents them from pronouncing the name of recently deceased loved ones, as this could bring them back to life, making it difficult for them to reach the village of the dead (Lopes da Silva, 2014) – the naming of C. in the white people logic brings these two dimensions together, in the service of embodying a memory, an identification, more than a continuity.

In yet another framework, the figure of C. (father) is intertwined with a network of meanings perpetuated and disseminated within his community. According to V., many individuals from the villages of origin fell deeply ill after his death, and did not recover, at least, until the time of his testimony. In this connection, the issue of "depression" appears as a collective issue in Xavante villages faced with the death of loved ones. In the case of C. (father), the commotion was such that, on the day of the incident, there were attempts to invade the hospital where he was being treated, refrained by the mediation of V.

The framework that follows C.'s birth and his nomination can have direct implications on C.'s experience, especially with regard to the mission assigned to him, the same one drawn for his father in the past: to live among white people. The expectations that already exist in the youngsters assigned to this task have already been reported by C.'s older brother, S.:

No, but actually there is a little burden. Because you study, you come to the city, because all the people who are chiefs there, today, are people who came to study. He studied here in the city and they went there. So there's a little bit of burden because they expect us to help.

In the case of C., above all, beyond common expectations, there is the strength of the deceased's memory enhanced by the identity of the name, which permeates his constitution as a subject since before his birth. The implications of these echoes in his experience of distancing himself from his people and repeating his father's trajectory can give rise to many anxieties which is an identification with a contrasting desire for differentiation, for the protagonism of his own voice. We can also think of the emphasis given by the Amerindian societies to the notion of the individual taken by his collective side, in a complementary and reactive relationship to the social reality (Seeger et al., 1987). This dimension was also explored by Carrara (2010) among the Xavante with regard to an individual feeling that is also collective, based on the physical axis and, therefore, a feeling experienced and expressed in the body. The expression of C.'s pain for the self-injury and cuttings can be related to this collective pain to which he is linked through his people and name, in a way of experiencing it that is only superficially confused with the mourning for the dead experienced in white people's logic, more specifically of the spiritists, centered on individual reincarnation planning.

Extrapolating the issue of collective pain, C.'s moving experience in its entirety can further be seen as a test of response to the questions of his people that motivated the mission of his moving to the city, regarding the complexity of the negotiations between the two worlds at the threshold of the white people's universe, which imposes on the indigenous people their extinction or recreation. The entanglement of the universes involved and certain anxieties that arise from this relationship are embodied in the young man's trajectory, but they also concern the entire population.

It is also through the collective that an activity considered extremely important for improving C.'s situation is carried out. At one point, several dwellings in her mother's village, including hers, caught fire due to the windy season, which spread embers to the straw roofs. Almost everything was lost in the accident including his medicines. After the event, they built a small hut with the help of the family and the young man explained in detail the process of building a house along the lines of the village. He says it was a very tiring but satisfying process, as he learned how to build a cabin, where wood is used, requiring other skills, which made him happy. V. returned to the case in another interview, and said she was sure that the fact that C. worked hard on rebuilding his dwelling was very important in his recovery, in "coming out of this moment of depression". According to her, it was an occasion in which she believes that C. felt useful, worked hard, was committed, and was able to "really blend in" with the other members of the village. Regarding Xavante dwellings, Lopes da Silva (1983, p. 55, our translation) discusses:

The Xavante house is, finally, the locus of reproduction par excellence - and, in this sense, it seems to share a basic characteristic with other houses, of many other people. It is the space of rest, comfort and intimacy; of food and energy replenishment; of affection and children. It is in the house, for a few moments without the presence of men, that children are born. Supported by other beloved and experienced women, a woman delivers in a squatting position her baby. And it is on the dirt floor of the hut, at the point where the sun hits first in the morning, that she buries the placenta and the blood, thus sealing her commitment to this space that is hers and with her life.

The last sentence highlights the form of appropriation and territorial bond by the Xavante expressed in their microcosmology. The house is, therefore, loaded with meaning for the history of C., both for the activities it hosts in the daily life of the village (mainly with regard to family relationships), and for translating the connection with the territory, an issue so important in the young person's trajectory. In this cycle of destruction through fire and reconstruction of the dwellings, death and rebirth, C. can, together with his people, build his new home, a place that he can recognize as belonging to him.

The innovative strategy engendered by the Xavante as a form of resistance, perpetuation and renewal involves exceptionally complex ways of being in the world, of existing and of being with others. We can observe in Amerindian societies, in which the interior and identity are hierarchically encompassed by exteriority and difference (Viveiros de Castro, 1992), an emphasis on the importance of otherness in the construction of their being and their perspective. In the case of the Xavante, openness to the other is intrinsically linked to the construction of their cosmopraxis: when faced with events and knowledge external to the Xavante ontological context, a movement is made in which their cosmological, mythical and historical explanations turn to this exteriority, encompassing it and positioning it in perspective of itself, rather than in opposition to itself. The explanatory systems, in this way, merge, generating a new cosmology, still Xavante, now renewed in a process analogous to a reality “shamanization” (Fernandes, 2010a; 2010b; 2015).

In this sense, Carneiro da Cunha (1999, p. 227, our translation), speaking about the issue of translation in the shamanism phenomenon, describes it as going beyond the scope of simple ordering, a tidying task of “keeping the new in old drawers”. It is rather a reshuffling, an arrangement of symbols and codes in resonance, yielding a new meaning, beyond the notion of an absolute system of meaning to which all languages (in the present case not treated as strictly referring to the verbal) converge.

Traditional conceptual instruments are used to bring together more than one point of view, with the shaman, in contact with disjointed and alternative worlds, having the possibility of envisioning multiple discourses, putting himself in perspective (Carneiro da Cunha, 1999). Similarly, indigenous people living in urban environments, especially those experiencing movement between the city and their respective villages of origin, in contact with physically and culturally disparate worlds, can have their actions produced and understood from a point of view resulting from these conceptual systems.

Furthermore, it is believed that this process of “shamanization” would in turn be subject to the design of “xavantization”, that is, the production of the effects of being Xavante. Through such a process, a reinterpretation and reconcatenation is fostered in terms of a logic, of the perpetuation of “being Xavante”, in an attempt to ensure that the changes and adaptations that occur are not subordinated to the white people’s desire for universalism and annexation.

In this way, with the aim of preserving a space of Xavante identity beyond the phenomenal surface of adaptations, the action of “translation” is directed towards the assimilation of the “white reality” instituted by the white civilizational desire, in order to be swallowed by the being Xavante. The process described is in line with the syntax of indigenous reality: the preservation of a way of becoming one’s own that is also oriented towards becoming another.

If there is any universalizing perspective in psychology, it will certainly not be found in the direction of generalizing previously configured and supposedly transcultural diagnostic and clinical categories (Fernandes & Calegare, 2018). Although these confrontations mobilize not only “empirical individuals, they also reverberate social memories, stereotypes, remorse, prejudices, attractions, fears, fascinations and vertigo that go beyond their limited individuality and short life cycle” (Macedo & Bairrão, p. 94, our translation), the theoretical, methodological and practical propositions of Psychology need to be reviewed and redone in close collaboration with indigenous communities and people (Guimarães, 2021).

It is necessary to bear in mind that “an effectively transformative and progressive psychology must retreat its interventions to the very plane of things and events, not just remaining at the level of their historical and psychic meaning” (Bairrão, 2017, p. 55, our translation), under penalty of falling

short of the required ontological level. In this connection, regardless of intentions, the results of interventions can become deleterious, to the extent that “when there is no dialogue with native psychological ethno-theories [...] the indigenous individual is deprived of his/her understanding of themselves and the world they inhabit and are thus destroyed at the core of their being (Bairrão, 2017, p. 53, our translation). In the struggle to reverse this situation, psychology has the fundamental role of seeking to build dialogues to produce references that include indigenous people participation, recognizing them as subjects of their own history.

Final Considerations

The case at hand highlights four crucial points for the advent and constitution of indigenous perspectives in psychology: the necessary indigenous role in filtering the linguistic and diagnostic processes to which it is subjected; the performative and political dimension of the supposedly technical and neutral language in psychology; the pseudo-naturalism of diagnostic categories, which cannot move unscathed between different realities; and the (intrinsically political) dimension, more ontological than psychological, in which such clashes take place. At issue are not merely subjective contents, but actually lived worlds, diverse worldviews, which in the case of indigenous frameworks, as our interlocutors never quit reminding us, involve beyond bodies and subjectivity, for example, territorialities.

The Xavante strategy, created many years ago and carried out to our days, directs young people to a type of “social experiment”. Similarly, it can be thought of as a kind of “reverse ethnography”, an experience in which the indigenous individual immerses himself deeply in the surrounding society to have the possibility of learning, knowing and experiencing it. A research work to which they dedicate their lives, a radical immersion that goes beyond mere survival and which, therefore, causes even more intense disturbances in the “investigator’s” contact with the other reality that he begins to experience. These are different disturbances for each of them, which are expressed in their trajectories, emotions and even in their bodies.

The present study is thus built on a confluence between ethnographies, an ethnography that focuses on a “reverse ethnography”. It consists of an attempt to translate the translation issues faced by the young person addressed. Given these intertwining and entanglements, unveiling translation issues and their limits can be a nebulous exercise in the construction of the investigation itself, facing the risk of plastering indigenous speech within our conceptions and interpretations and, possibly, in the young people case, located on the transition line between a multifaceted white universe and Xavante cosmology.

As we intended to expose in this article, the assumption of a universalizing perspective to deal with this complexity raises different risks of capturing the indigenous Other, superimposing one of the voices that makes up this encounter over the other in a new form of assimilationism. There is an infinite number of perspectives through which these interactions between indigenous peoples and white people can be approached. We must anticipate those that take into account their specificities – the regimes of subjectivation of that ethnic group, their model of society and the sociocosmology inherent to them. In a case like this, still permeated by multiple symbolic horizons, the construction of a look at the phenomenon that makes efforts to stitch together all the pieces involved tends to produce a much richer and more fertile fabric, which does justice to its complexity.

C.’s improvement is described by medicine as an impressive exception (given the rapid recovery from a serious condition, despite the loss of medicines in the fire); by his white grandmother

as a result of protection from the “good spirits”; by their own accounts as the withdrawal of a Western temporal and external logic to return to the indigenous experience at its core. Would it be appropriate to choose a hegemonic reading, self-sufficient in explaining the phenomenon, the most correct among the others? On the contrary, the most prudent attitude seems to allow all these voices to resound, to allow the continuous reverberation of these enunciations as they are proposed, so that, more than attributing meanings, we listen to them.

In the effort spent in this article, to provoke the emergence of all these different voices, we also seek to reconstruct the path presented through the eyes of the “reverse anthropologist” who is the young Xavante, immersed in these same voices. Voices of a multicultural color that sometimes clash, sometimes converge, going beyond the usual and historical conflagration of their meetings. They spur conflicts, but they allow alliances and solidify bonds. The young Xavante receives these voices, filters them, ponders them, receives their impact. He does not, however, drift among them, subjugated to their designs. He is the protagonist of his story and should be treated as such.

Above all, when dealing with issues related to mental health – with such relevant implications and commonly so permeated by the universalizing Eurocentric discourse – the consideration of these nuances is highlighted as relevant for a critical professional exercise, encompassing the interlocutors in their sociocultural specificities and capable of contributing effectively to their individual and collective trajectories.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the interviewees and to all the members of the Ethnopsychology Laboratory of the Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras de Ribeirão Preto of the Universidade de São Paulo.

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