

# The patterns of socio-cultural diversity: dialogues among Occupational Therapy, Africa and Ethnography

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**Abstract:** Academic research in social occupational therapy has presented an interface with the theme of Africa, from a cultural diversity perspective to emphasize the need to include new forms of research. This study proposes a panorama of the academic research in Brazil in the context of occupational therapy in different interfaces: human mobility, human rights, religiosity, children's cultures, gender, etc. This multiplicity reveals a perspective of appreciation of African themes. In this context, the concept of cultural diversity is presented as a perspective to expand the discussion of new views, decentralization of technical knowledge and new dialogues required for researchers and professionals. It was proposed to think, experience and produce new forms of research, themes and subjects that cover different ways of life, problems and issues that dialogue with the transformations of the contemporary world, which are also implications of social occupational therapy. Moreover, along with the ethnography and its research tools, one can think of multiple, unique and rich ways to do research. These aspects, in the present work, make interconnections with the diverse productions on Africa and occupational therapy, revealing the potentiality of these elements for the profession.

**Keywords:** *Social Occupational Therapy, Africa, Ethnography, Research, Sociocultural Diversity.*

## Pelos caminhos da diversidade sociocultural: diálogos entre Terapia Ocupacional, África e Etnografia

**Resumo:** A pesquisa acadêmica em terapia ocupacional social tem apresentado interface com a temática da África, numa perspectiva da diversidade cultural, para, então, enfatizar a necessidade de abarcar novas formas de pesquisas. Propomos um panorama da pesquisa acadêmica no Brasil no contexto da terapia ocupacional em diferentes interfaces: mobilidade humana, direitos humanos, religiosidade, culturas infantis, gênero etc. Essa multiplicidade revela uma perspectiva de valorização dos temas africanos. A partir daí, apresentamos o conceito de diversidade cultural enquanto perspectiva para a discussão de novos olhares, descentramentos do saber técnico e produção de novos diálogos necessários aos pesquisadores e profissionais. Propõe-se pensar, vivenciar e produzir novas formas de pesquisas, temáticas e assuntos que abarquem diferentes modos de vida, problemáticas e questões que dialoguem com as transformações do mundo contemporâneo e que também são implicações da terapia ocupacional social. Para tal, com a etnografia e as suas ferramentas de pesquisa, pode-se pensar em modos múltiplos, singulares e enriquecedores de se fazer pesquisa, modos esses que no presente trabalho fazem interconexões com as diversas produções sobre África e terapia ocupacional, revelando a potencialidade desses elementos para a profissão.

**Palavras-chave:** *Terapia Ocupacional Social, África, Etnografia, Pesquisa, Diversidade Sociocultural.*

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## 1 Introduction

Occupational social therapy has developed discussions, research themes and important publications from the perspective of several interfaces over the years and has been faced with contemporary dynamics in different contexts. This work deals with the issue of cultural diversity in the context of occupational therapy research in the theme of Brazil and Africa. Occupational therapists have been focusing on issues about public policies, lifestyles, children's cultures, feminine economy and protagonism, religiosity, mobility, among other themes, seeking to bring new reflections and points of view to the theme, and to overcome the discussion of the exotic and the traditional, reductionist and simplistic discussions that are often associated with Africa and African themes.

Thus, this article shows a brief overview of publications of occupational social therapy in the interface with the theme of Africa, and then it proposes a discussion of the need to broaden the eyes on new forms of research, practices and projects that dialogue with the valorization of cultures, different ways of life, and intrinsic needs of each group studied. The methodology used for the production of the article was a bibliographical review in the national journals of occupational therapy<sup>1</sup> available in electronic format and in the portal of theses and dissertations of the Coordination of Improvement of Higher Level Personnel (Capes), using the following keywords: "terapia ocupacional e África"; "terapia ocupacional and Africa"; "terapia ocupacional e migração"; "terapia ocupacional and migração"; "estudos africanos e terapia ocupacional". In addition, we also searched the annals of specific congresses of occupational therapy in Brazil available in digital media.

The article proposes a discussion about how the research tools of the ethnographic work have been enriching for the debate of the academic research in the social occupational therapy to the works and researches from the perspective of the cultural diversity.

## 2 History of Research in Occupational Therapy and Africa in Brazil

The theme of Africa and African migrations to Brazil has been getting space over recent years in the research and actions of occupational therapists<sup>2</sup>, with production of sources of reflection and theoretical

propositions in the production area in a partnership with Casa das Áfricas – Núcleo Amanar<sup>3</sup>. In recent years, Casa das Áfricas has been dedicated to studies and research on these interfaces of occupational therapy with Africa.

Within the complexity of the theoretical-practical-reflexive approaches of the actions of social occupational therapy, the focus of praxis has also been on "possibilities of action in contexts marked by differentiated cultural practices, multi-technical, religious and multiracial cohabitation" (BARROS; GALVANI, 2016, p. 102), in which

[...] several occupational therapists have been attentive to Africa's issues, whether through study or action works - and their relevance to broadening the worldview and the contribution of occupational therapy (BARROS; GALVANI, 2016, p. 102).

Together with interdisciplinary perspectives, the works emerge as a reference in the profession, with a focus on African knowledge, cultures and societies in rural, urban, religious, access to rights, migration and mobility, social, educational and cultural support practices, creating interconnections and possibilities of works between social occupational therapy and works in African contexts, as well as discussing Africa in Brazil (PIEROTE-SILVA et al., 2014; BARROS; GALVANI, 2016).

Based on these reflections and possibilities of actions, critical-reflexive works are produced within the scope of academic research in occupational therapy, involving not only specific issues of each population and society but different perceptions about an occupational therapy that at the same time has an ethnic, political and cultural diversity. In a historical perspective of the work developed in Brazil, Barros (2004) is a pioneer, with her doctoral thesis on "itineraries of madness in Dogon territory", in which she seeks interpretations of madness according to Dogon society opinion, a black society of West Africa. The author shows a set of stories of how society seeks to solve a situation of conflict and psychic disorders, which needs to be explained and treated in a way that is both singular and collective, cultural, plural and contextualized, opening a range of reflections and propositions about the performance in contexts and issues related to mental health and implications in individual and social life. From this work, the article entitled "Madness in Dogon society, Republic of Mali", published in the Journal of Occupational Therapy of the University of São Paulo (BARROS, 2002) was also originated.

Miki Sato carried out a survey on the presence of Africans in hostels in São Paulo in 2003 and 2004 where a significant increase was observed in the number of African immigrants in hostel situations. This document, which was later revised, was published in 2004, and also produced an article entitled “From Africa to Public hostels: Africans in the House of Migrants in São Paulo”, published in the Afro-Asiatic magazine (SATO; BARROS; SANTOS, 2007).

Between 2003 and 2005, Talita Vecchia worked with Denise Dias Barros on the project “the threads that unite us” in a partnership between Casa das Áfricas and the association Songho Dewe wo Dere, in a project to support the local weaver production of Dogon, valorization of the songhoy language, literacy, and training in audiovisual projects with young people and adults, arising from the demand of residents of the songho community. From 2005, with an association of local residents, there was the production of a booklet for enhancement of the local language, support for literacy, support for cultural and sports activities, support for youth organizations and local craft activities and audiovisual work (BARROS; GALVANI, 2016). In 2011, the debate is rekindled with the beginning of the African Circle<sup>4</sup>, which emerged in a context in which Brazil began to receive a significant number of African students through university exchanges, together with Casa das Áfricas and the sensitization of the perception of the Brazilian population and of the many immigrants who live in Brazil. With themes involving religious intolerance, racial discrimination and xenophobia in Brazil, this action was an exercise and project to “build a society more open to diversity and difference”, favoring

[...] spaces for debate on the diversity and on inclusion and participation policies. It is about creating spaces for differences to coexist and share the dynamics of the social process (BARROS; GALVANI, 2016, p. 104).

In the scope of post-graduate studies in occupational therapy in Brazil from 2012, Pingréwaoga Béma Abdoul Hadi Savadogo, from Burkina Faso, was an anthropologist who completed his master's degree (SAVADOGO, 2014) in Occupational Therapy by Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar)<sup>5</sup> on the subject of student mobilization of the Burkinabe youths to Mali.

In 2013, the occupational therapist Marina Di Napoli Pastore began her master's degree<sup>6</sup> on the theme of childhood, cultural dynamics and children's universes in a community on the outskirts of

Maputo, Mozambique, discussing perceptions about children, daily responsibilities and conceptualization of the term childhood, based on ethnography, contexts of socio-cultural diversity and work in occupational therapy, returning to studies in her doctoral research<sup>7</sup> in a discussion about children as producers of culture and children's knowledge in Mozambican communities. From this work, there was the production of a blog entitled “Moça de Bique”<sup>8</sup> and the academic articles “the culture of playing and child socialization: perceptions about being a child in a Mozambican community” (PASTORE; BARROS, 2015) and

[...] childhood and being a child in a Mozambican community: dynamics of socialization, cultures and children's universes from an ethnographic experience (PASTORE; BARROS, 2016).

Also, the occupational therapist Valdir Pierote Silva on the subject of African migration in the city of São Paulo, developed his research<sup>9</sup> between 2013 and 2014 on the violation of human rights that afflicted the African immigrants in São Paulo, in a discussion about public policies, migration African and human rights guarantee, focused on acting on the assistance desk of the City's Municipal Human Rights Commission. This research originated the text “the contemporary African migration to the city of São Paulo: guarantee of rights, public policies, and diversity” (PIEROTE-SILVA, 2014).

Finally, the occupational therapist Miki Sato developed in the academic master's degree (SATO, 2017)<sup>10</sup>, a research on the economic role of African migrant women in the city of São Paulo. Through ethnographic research, she followed the narratives of African women who migrated to the state capital and developed some kind of economic activity, proposing a discussion of these experiences as a production of meaning, emancipation, intercultural dialogue and collective assemblages. This research resulted in the article “Culture, mobility and human rights: reflections on occupational social therapy in the context of the municipal policy for immigrant population”, published in the Brazilian *Cadernos de Terapia Ocupacional* (SATO; BARROS, 2016).

From this interdisciplinary perspective, the Amanar Núcleo and the Metuia Project (USP) has led different study initiatives, university extension, training and debates on human mobility, cultural diversity, arts and African migration in São Paulo in the culture, education and human rights are since 2011. From 2016, this partnership has gained new contours, conducting research, extension courses,

university extension and academic production with the Metuia/Occupational Therapy Project of the Nucleus of the Federal University of São Paulo<sup>11</sup>. The work has been based on the need for discussion and projects to address the issue of difference, diversity, the fight against racism and the affirmation of human rights, based on the recognition of multicultural values (GALVANI et al., 2015; TANGERINO et al., 2015).

Research in occupational therapy, methodologies, practices and interconnection with Africa bring a demand in theoretical-practical reflection, especially to studies and practices developed in the actions of social occupational therapy, in which it is necessary to construct an epistemological path open to dialogue with historical and anthropological research, to rethink and open paths to work that is cultural, social, multiple, diverse, contextualized, historical and political.

The present panorama brings us the challenge of creating new proposals that embrace new cultures, new ways of life, rearrangements, religiosities, aesthetics and pluralistic works, in which it is necessary to accompany the cultural diversity intrinsic to contemporary issues, proposing an attentive, open dialogue and in a constant movement, with a methodology that also dialogues with the presented questions and with ways of doing that bring to the scene the Other, the cultures and the means of production from an “inside and close” point of view (MAGNANI, 2002).

### 3 Cultural Diversity and Ethnography: Tracking Paths in Occupational Social Therapy

Among the principles and official declarations of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) diversity and culture, human rights, human displacement, and disaster risks are highlighted, among others. The WFOT reinforces the need for respect and consideration of values, beliefs, cultural diversity, together with social, psychological, biological, economic, political and spiritual aspects of each individual and their social participation (WORLD..., 2014). The challenge of working in these different cultural contexts is emphasized and it proposes strategies for working on the roles of daily life, occupational performance and community activities, as well as incorporating these principles into professional practice, education and research (WORLD..., 2014).

With culture, WFOT has worked out the definition that it is not only a system of shared ideas and concepts, rules and meanings that permeate and are expressed in the ways in which human beings live but also in the way it is contextualized historically and socially, and ethnically, racially, politically and environmentally, not being static, evolving and changing over time and space, in which, as technicians, we only access “the tip of the iceberg”, or what we are allowed to access (WORLD..., 2009, our translation).

Among ethical-methodological concerns, we consider a reading based on the notion of human rights in line with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (ORGANIZAÇÃO..., 2009), which advocates the access to cultural life in the community, to the arts and to scientific progress as one of the fundamental rights. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) establishes that cultural diversity is right, for the common heritage of humanity and cultural pluralism, and it is a development factor (ORGANIZAÇÃO..., 2002). Still, from the point of view of human rights, Boaventura Souza Santos (1997) points out that it is only through historical and intercultural dialogue that we can think of new possibilities for emancipatory demands:

In the case of an intercultural dialogue, the exchange is not only between different knowledge but also between different cultures, that is, between different and largely immeasurable universes of meaning (SANTOS, 1997, p. 23).

Also, in occupational therapy - as a field - different identities need to co-exist. The cohabitation of identities here is the refusal of flattening to discourse and to single thinking. If we accept such a reading, we will agree that there is also a requirement for the occupational therapist to be able to work on problems that arise from the paradoxes of a society marked by inequalities (BARROS; ALMEIDA; VECCHIA, 2007, p. 133).

The theme of Africa has been a field of study and research of a group of Brazilian occupational therapists concerned with migrations, diasporas, African vulnerabilities in Brazil and the African continent, as well as with cultural, intellectual, artistic and other experiences by them and, most of the time, denied in the academic world. From different perspectives, it is proposed a diversity of themes and perspectives that emphasize the plurality and perspectives of socio-cultural diversity.

It is not a matter of conceiving the occupational therapist as one who establishes programs of action from the top of his technical knowledge since there are mutual misunderstandings that need to be diminished to define action programs in occupational therapy. It is imperative to establish a dialogue, which means that occupational therapist and user need to learn... In action, it is necessary for the technician to know how to reshape his own knowledge, to know how to transact in relationships of social and cultural otherness (BARROS, 2004, p. 95).

Cultural diversity becomes an ethical imperative in research, understanding that the different experiences, histories, and knowledge of both the researcher and the interlocutors can be shared in relationships of exchange and overcoming the logic of unilateral research. In the dialogue with the propositions of occupational social therapy, the concept of dialogue and process is fundamental for this reflection in the context of teaching and research (BARROS, 2004). Paulo Freire (2003) contributes to the reflection of the concept of dialogue, which consists of praxis and the way in which man transforms the world, where "to exist, humanly, is to pronounce the world, is to modify it". For the author, it is only in the dialogical relationship that the practice of freedom is concretized. In the context of the research, it is necessary to establish a decentering view of technical knowledge, of otherness and openness to new ways of being in the field.

Starting from the dimension of culture, we have another axis that organizes the reflections and methodologies of action and construction of knowledge in occupational therapy. It is necessary to transcend reflection beyond a reductionist views and full of stereotypes. Achille Mbembe, a researcher, historian and political scientist from Cameroon, brings elements to this discussion, on the need for further search and insertion of the themes in Africa, with a critical reflection on the false existence of a single and simplistic African identity and the need for overcoming the logic of equality and neurosis by victimization, the possibility of diverse cultural forms within the same humanity and within a relationship of otherness (MBEMBE, 2001).

Research on African themes has allowed decentering to new ways of looking at and shifting research to subjects, groups, and communities with multiple and plural knowledge and practices, in a dimension that also seeks dialogue, exchanges and experiences shared with the field. As a methodology that captures the diverse nuances and interfaces of cultural diversity,

we understand that ethnography is a valuable resource in the field, which can dialogue with occupational therapy, since it allows a "closer and inside view" (MAGNANI, 2002). It is possible to think that tools of ethnographic work can not only subsidize research, making it richer, more pluralistic and in a dialogical relationship between the researcher and the lived field, but to bring to professional practice new ways of making and thinking about possibilities of cohabitations of worlds and differences.

Ethnography as a methodology of several research has been developed over the years by anthropology, but it is a challenge also to other areas, such as sociology, history and, equally, for occupational therapy, emphatically in the social field. Magnani (2002) points out that:

Since the first inroads into the field, anthropology has been developing and putting into practice a series of strategies, concepts and models that, despite numerous reviews, critiques, and re-readings (maybe even thanks to this continuous monitoring required by the specificity of each research) it constitutes a repertoire capable of inspiring and grounding approaches to new objects and current issues (MAGNANI, 2002, p. 11).

The ethnography (GEERTZ, 1989; GONÇALVES et al., 2012; OLIVEIRA, 2000) provides field research tools that dialogue with the reflections proposed by social occupational therapy for the work carried out from the perspective of cultural diversity. There is a possibility of dialogue, ethnographic exercise, accompaniments and experiences in the daily situations of the people or groups studied, the sharing of experiences, the construction of a relational field, the relationship of otherness and dialogue. They are multiple ways of doing, and being in the field that are in discussion lines in research. The methodology requires a relational work between the researcher and his collaborators, in which to enter into relationship with the Other, the meeting and the ways of deconstructing the different moments of this process, encompassing theoretical difficulties and the learning of specific techniques and reflections are presented from a perspective permeated by the present sociocultural diversity.

Although each author quoted and discussed has different theoretical-methodological perspectives, they propose multiple readings and tools for the discussion of ways of research, which are also thought in occupational therapy and have been used in the theoretical-methodological studies and studies developed mainly by occupational therapists

in the social field, supporting the reflection of the ethnographic exercise in occupational therapy, the possibilities of intercultural dialogues, processes of participation and reflection in research, mediation with the ethnographic field, among other discussions.

Although Paulo Freire does not have a specific discussion in ethnography, he gives us tools for reflection on the dialogic relationship, the established relationship process and the knowledge and experiences of each one in this process. In this dialogical process, in which there is a construction of knowledge within horizontal relationships between the people involved and in their relationships with the world: "Men educate themselves in the transformation of the world" (FREIRE, 2003), the knowledge of all is valued. In Freire's theory, knowledge emerges in a relational process and from the breakdown of the "culture of silence" to participation in the construction of one's personal destiny and the suppression of colonialism. Thus, knowledge is made within contexts and scenarios that give it original, diverse and cultural characteristics.

Ethnography has allowed the production of practices in the research and critical-reflexive thoughts produced in occupational therapy whose perspective of sociocultural diversity is not only present but also occurs in scenarios often marked by exclusions and deprivations of access to social and cultural goods and rights, as is the case of African migrations and the studies mentioned, such as the denial of a childhood, feminism, the right to education and mobility, the intelligibility and intellectual production of Africans, among others. To open the way to these questions, so present today and that also permeate the practices of occupational therapy in Brazil, there should be a political, of resistance and struggle action.

## 4 Final Considerations

Thus, to think of occupational therapy and Africa research in the perspective of cultural diversity, with ethnography as a methodology, is to question the decentralization of technical knowledge, to allow sensitive listening to the other, to open possibilities for different ways of living imbricated in the cultural diversity.

The different tools of ethnographic have subsidized social occupational therapy to construct new paths that dialogue with the discussion of the concept of cultural diversity and its implications. This work emphasizes that the debate about the African theme in occupational therapy, from this perspective, is

possible and necessary, bringing new dialogues with the field.

It is proposed here a reflection on social occupational therapy and the thematic of Africa, reinforcing the importance of African societies, in their various interfaces - religious, cultural, gender, childhood, mobility, human rights, among others - signaling to a debate that enables intercultural dialogues and broadens the horizons, as research, projects or actions. The perspective of the research in occupational therapy, in the dimension adopted in this work, aims to strengthen the paths already traced and to open new horizons so the debates on Africa become more and more potentialized.

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## Authors' Contributions

Both authors also contributed to the text design, data organization, discussion, writing, review and approved the final version of the text.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional; Revista de Terapia Ocupacional da Universidade de São Paulo; Revista Interinstitucional Brasileira de Terapia Ocupacional.

<sup>2</sup> Such as the studies of Barros (2004), Sato, Barros and Santos (2007), Bahi et al. (2008), Pastore (2015), Pierote-Silva (2014), Sato and Barros (2016).

<sup>3</sup> The Núcleo AMANAR is a collective focused on research, training, and promotion of cultural and artistic activities related to the African continent.

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- <sup>4</sup> Circles talks about intellectual productions of students, researchers and African artists in Brazil, organized by the Casa das Áfricas.
- <sup>5</sup> Federal University of São Carlos. Post-Graduation Program in Occupational Therapy. Master's degree in Occupational Therapy. Line 2: Social networks and vulnerabilities.
- <sup>6</sup> Completed in 2015 with the title "Yes! I'm a child! Dynamics of socialization and children's universes in a Mozambican community". PPGTO-UFSCar.
- <sup>7</sup> Started in 2016 and expected its completion by 2020. PPGTO \_ UFSCar.
- <sup>8</sup> <http://serestrangeiromulungu.blogspot.com.br>.
- <sup>9</sup> Specialization in Occupational Therapy: intervention and perspectives of innovations of the practice of the Department of Physical Therapy, Speech Therapy and Occupational Therapy of the University of São Paulo. Specific nucleus: occupational therapy with an emphasis on social care.
- <sup>10</sup> PPGTO – UFSCar.
- <sup>11</sup> Interinstitutional nucleus of studies, formation, and actions for the citizenship of children, adolescents and adults in processes of social support networks rupture, currently with four nuclei: University of São Paulo, Federal University of Espírito Santo, Federal University of São Paulo and Federal University of São Carlos.