



On descriptions, rectifications, and scientific objectivity: methodological reflections from a research on sexual behavior and HIV/AIDS among men who have sex with men¹

Sobre descrições, retificações e objetividade científica: reflexões metodológicas a partir de uma pesquisa sobre condutas sexuais e HIV/aids entre homens com práticas homossexuais

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the positivity of knowledge produced by ethnographic approaches, based on the discussion on a research about men who have sex with men and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Considering that both explanatory and comprehensive methodologies are present, to a greater or less extent, in all investigations in human and social sciences, this essay proposes as false the opposition between both principles. It challenges the scientificity criteria of “scientific common sense” that use mathematics as demarcator. The text exemplifies how the critical description of the act of researching, and rectifying the obstacles to knowledge identified in the path itself grant objectivity to the resulting knowledge. The ethnographic differential of this essay consists of explaining the researchers’ field experience as a critical and analytical resource.

Keywords: Scientific Epistemology; Methodology; Humans and Social Sciences; Behavioral Survey; Ethnography.

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Resumo

Este ensaio reflete sobre a positividade de conhecimentos produzidos por abordagens etnográficas, a partir da discussão dos meandros de uma pesquisa sobre homens que se relacionam sexualmente com outros homens e vulnerabilidade ao HIV/aids. Propõe como falsa a oposição entre metodologias explicativas e compreensivas, uma vez que ambos os princípios estão presentes, em maior ou menor grau, em todas as investigações em ciências humanas e sociais. Nessa linha, põe em xeque critérios de cientificidade do “senso comum científico” que fazem o uso da matemática como o demarcador. Exemplifica como a descrição crítica do próprio ato de pesquisar e das retificações sobre os obstáculos ao conhecimento, identificados no próprio caminho, conferem objetividade aos conhecimentos produzidos. O diferencial etnográfico em relação a outras abordagens de ênfase compreensiva é a explicitação da própria experiência dos pesquisadores no campo como recurso crítico e analítico.

Palavras-chave: Epistemologia Científica; Metodologia; Ciências Humanas e Sociais; Inquérito Comportamental; Etnografia.

Introduction

The ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted.
(Geertz, 1987, p. 14).

This essay discusses the intricacies of an ethnographic research on the sexual behaviors of men who have sex with men (MSM), enabled through participant observation, biographical interviews, behavioral inquiry, thematic interviews, and document analysis. The possible strangeness that the behavioral inquiry (quantitative technique) may cause when thinking of an ethnographic study, will be the starting point for the reflections presented herein.

The act of researching, in a metaphor used by Rubens Alves (2006), is an exercise of capture. It demands us to forge our working tools so that, like the hooks and nets of an experienced fisherman, we catch only the desired fish: the empirical answers to our research questions.

Right from the start, knowing the world implies classifying and selecting (Wittgenstein, 2017). It is up to us, by means of our research tools (theories and techniques), to draw what interests us from the vastness of reality. As Clifford Geertz (1987) suggests, allowing the inscription of phenomena in a modality of record that enables intellectual operations by research teams, and mediating communication among those who make up the community of interested and legitimated people, in order to evaluate the knowledge produced (Latour, 2001).

In the humanities and social sciences (HSS), debates over the use of mathematics in research are apprehended from two ways of classifying what results from scientific work: the explanation and the understanding (Dilthey, 2002). The first notion is supportive to positivism and its premise of applying the same devices used in the natural sciences to the study of people and human collectivities (Giddens, 1998). In this field, the production of scientific knowledge takes place through carefully assembled apparatuses (for example, experiments and surveys) that enable testing the existence of relationships

among the elements (variables) that hypothetically contribute to a given phenomenon.

Resorting to statistics is a way to verify the existence of causal relationships or, at least, associations between these elements, in order to propose laws or explanations about the phenomenon. The use of statistics will imply the establishment of samples that, ideally, should be representative of the investigated universe, both numerically and in the ways of recruiting research volunteers, so that all cases have the same chance of participating in the research (Goode; Hatt, 1972).

In comprehensive studies, on the other hand, the intention to explain is left aside, because it is considered that human phenomena are crossed and constituted by a multidetermined historicity. All data collection should also consider human individualities that shape their behavior/responses according to emotions, thoughts, and wills. These elements would disturb the classical positivist modeling used to approach the objects of scientific knowledge, and the claims of finding laws for human phenomena. They require, at the very least, to put into perspective the results found through the classical explanatory-inspired research devices (Dilthey, 2002).

In the comprehensive field, the goal of studies is to deepen their descriptions, by observing the phenomena and their meanings for those who participate in them, identifying the elements that contribute to their emergence, and the links between them. In short, the issue of meaning, eminently human, is the main demarcator in the differentiation of how to handle with the research methods and techniques, because it is also the very demarcation of the study object (Dilthey, 2002).

Understanding will mean establishing interpretations about the main links identified between the elements. The claim of building a representative sample is almost always unattainable either in terms of numbers, or in the ways of reaching the research volunteers. It does not mean to say that calculation, and even statistics as an instrument of scientific work, is neglected. In our view, there is not necessarily an opposition between explanation and understanding. It might be more interesting to place them as principles that may be present in different

articulations of research techniques, rather than as monothetic categorical attributes.

Losing sight of the epistemological discussion itself, and turning to the debate about number, three positions partially look at method, fetishizing it (Bachelard, 2005) either positively or negatively as demarcators of scientificity in the “scientific common sense”. Some say that, in the absence of the statistical requirements to produce representative samples, and measure or test associations, comprehensive studies lack rigor and replication and, therefore, are unscientific. Others, supposedly more moderate, suggest that comprehensive studies are admissible as long as it is not possible to apply methods capable of producing explanations, or as a way to approach new and yet little known objects. There is also the view that, considering the ever-changing human phenomena, no law and/or explanation can be achieved. In this case, there is almost a denial or abandonment of reflecting on the possibilities that mathematics may offer for the analysis and representation of human phenomena. Even if we overcome this dispute, one question remains: is it possible to have convergent criteria about the scientificity of studies in face of a diversity of explanatory and comprehensive research methods and techniques in HSS?

Epistemologists and methodologists use several proposals to evaluate the scientificity (truth and/or objectivity) of scientific knowledge. We resume Gaston Bachelard’s (2005) proposal that focuses more on processes of knowledge construction than on research results. He proposes that common sense, first sensations and theories themselves may become obstacles to knowledge if, for whatever reason, they are fetishized, making them impermeable to the reflective thinking. He puts the very mathematics in this context, when it loses the ability to serve as an instrument for the process of knowing, as a universal language to manipulate and/or present data, and the numbers and equations are taken as an end to which everything must converge.

For Bachelard (2005), knowledge objectivity does not happen *a priori*, when a correct method is defined to investigate a given phenomenon, and the questions it raises. The objectivity of scientific knowledge comes from the action of analytically

facing the obstacles that arise throughout the process of knowing. He proposes scientific experience as an exercise of rectifying errors in the process, a reflection about the path, a methodological discussion where the simple presentation of research procedures is insufficient to ensure scientificity.

In our view, Bachelard's (2005) proposal allows us to leave the false dichotomy of "quali/quantitative" that has been established in HSS. Rather, it takes us to think over the different structures of collection, analysis, representation and interpretation (linguistic, mathematical, and graphic) of data present in research techniques. We need to reflect on how, in a given research, propositions are produced and become circulating referents, capable of representing and giving intelligibility to the chain of transformations that characterizes the process of scientific knowledge construction (Latour, 2001).

How we inscribe

The research began in January 2013, and is ongoing while this article is being drafted. Its universe of investigation is the sociability networks of MSM in the *Região Metropolitana do Recife* (RMR). At the time, the RMR was composed of 14 municipalities, with an estimated population in 2016 of 3,940,456 inhabitants. The RMR is located in Pernambuco, Northeast region of Brazil. Recife, the state capital, is the largest of the municipalities, with an estimate population of 1,625,583 individuals. It is home to the main commercial establishments and public sites of homosociability in the region.

The fieldwork comprised six research phases that interconnect throughout the data collection. The **first phase** had participant observation as instrument, and lasted from the beginning of the research, in 2013, until February 2017. It should be highlighted that the choice of places was based on previous knowledge, since many of them had already been the object of ethnographic studies carried out in the research group where the project is placed. Throughout the research, the different data sources helped to identify other spaces, included as observed sites.

The **second phase** consisted of conducting, transcribing, and analyzing 25 interviews with a biographical focus on MSM, with ages ranging

from 18 to 38 years. Data analysis allowed a first understanding of the phenomena under investigation. It also offered elements to broaden the observation sites, adjust the behavioral inquiry instrument, and the interview script for the fourth work front, in order to deepen the investigation.

The **third phase** took place between January 2016 and February 2017, and consisted of performing a cross-sectional study that investigated the MSM population's sociodemographic profile, social markers, knowledge, attitudes, and practices about sexuality and sexual health, and perceived risk for HIV. An instrument with mostly closed questions was used, and applied individually with the help of an interviewer. The questionnaire was designed based on the instruments used in research on knowledge, attitudes and practices on sexuality and HIV/AIDS (Pascom; Arruda; Simão, 2011; Raxach *et al.*, 2007) and the results of previous phases (Rios *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). A total of 380 men with homosexual practices residing in the RMR, with ages ranging from 18 to 51 years, participated in the study.

The **fourth phase** consisted of conducting 24 interviews with MSM aged 18 to 51 years, respondents of the survey about the dynamics of the places of homosociability they used to go, and about alternative practices to those of public health to prevent the HIV.

In the **fifth phase** we resumed participant observations, starting in March 2019. We perceived changes in MSM's spaces of sociability and networks. We have also included documentary research on HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns in the RMR. Finally, in the **sixth phase** we resumed the interviews in order to continue investigating the dynamics of the places of homosociability, and alternative HIV risk management practices, considering the changes in HIV prevention policies. To date, 36 MSM of ages ranging from 18 to 38 have been interviewed.

This research has been conducted with many eyes, ears and hands, involving researchers at different levels of training. Interviews were conducted by undergraduate students of both genders. The inquiry was applied only by male students. Observations in the spaces of homosociability were carried out only by gay-identified men (one of the research

coordinators and some of the student-researchers). Master's and Doctorate's students were also involved, conducting theoretical and methodological training of undergraduate students, supervising fieldwork, and/or collaborating in the analyses.

From a theoretical point of view, the research understands MSM susceptibility to HIV and other harms in the light of vulnerability and Human Rights, making connections between social, programmatic and subjective aspects that cut across the sociocultural and intersubjective contexts of the research participants (Ayres, Paiva, Buchalla, 2012). Sexuality and gender are analyzed from feminist approaches (Rubin, 1975), conceived as sociocultural constructs that organize subjectivities and social practices. We think sexual entanglements and the uses of protective measures within a conceptual framework that seeks to approach the more somatic dimensions of sense-making processes. Inspired by Judith Butler (2003), we call the figurations of classifications as "body stylizations" (inherent to the operation of different social systems). They are social compositions, aesthetic results of the agency of bodily elements (physical constitution, gesture, clothing, adornment, accent, etc.). When someone is attached to a stylization by an imagetic configuration, senses (dispositions, meanings, values, emotions) are produced and will mediate actions (Rios et al., 2019a, 2019b; Rios, 2020).

Having presented the theoretical pillars, and the research data collection procedures, the discussion on instruments management may be deepened by resuming the paths actually taken in some of the research phases.

Narrow weave net

The process of researching is an act of reducing. In the scientific light, knowing the totality of human experiences is impossible. Research questions are simplification devices. Informed by a theory, they imply connecting elements (variables) of a given reality in order to produce anticipated answers (hypotheses or ideal types) so they may guide the research work, enabling the empirical exploitation of the phenomenon under study (Weber, 1997).

The hypotheses, as Karl Popper (2006) suggests, must have formulations that allow for their fallibility. The ideal working instruments for data collection and analysis are those that allow responding yes and no to the working questions. Some qualitative approaches, especially the ethnographic approaches, allow for a certain overflow of reality in relation to the research questions and hypotheses. Research protocols in these fields provide not only for ways of getting to hypotheses in terms of yes or no. The fieldwork often brings out new elements that add to the connections initially established, allowing new hypotheses to emerge during the research (Becker, 1997).

Going back to the fishing metaphor, the narrower weave nets catch a wider variety of marine animals indistinctly, while the wide weave nets are the most specialized, catching only larger animals, and fish of greater gastronomic interest. Ethnographers work with nets of very narrow wefts. The observation plan and field diary are instruments that vaguely concretize the questions and the previous yes/no answers. This, however, is not something bad.

A pertinent example was how the emergence of Covid-19 in 2019 could be investigated within the scope of our research, not demanding any changes to the research protocols. The only change was the shifting of most observations and interviews to the online dimension, already envisioned as a research site given its relevance to MSM sociability. The analysis of 16 interviews conducted during the first year of the pandemic allowed us to address important issues, such as meeting casual sexual partners who do not live in the same residence, and leisure sociability in interface with the use of social distancing measures, which could increase the circulation of the virus in society. It also made allowed establishing relationships with themes precious to our work, such as partner bonding, production of trust, and unconcern with modes of prevention (Rios et al., 2019b), present among MSM in both pandemics (Rios, 2021).

In addition, the objects of ethnography are always about subjects immersed in the totality that makes them up, where variables do not always have the possibility to control. In ethnography, immersion in a new reality enables and requires estrangement: a theoretical and methodological resource to make

possible the analysis of the object (Peirano, 2014). In the case of observations, after some time of fieldwork, where everything seems or should be apprehended as new - through technical resources - recurrences will emerge. This phenomenon also provokes in the researcher a feeling of closeness. In a somewhat more objective and pragmatic way, the pages of the field diary, the first step of inscription, are full of descriptions about the phenomena, and the identification of recurrences is only possible if we are able to count (Becker, 1997). A process that also involves testing the connections initially established, in contrast with the elements that were present: in what was most recurrent, and also in the rare events that, to some extent, stand out in the face of what is most repeated.

If the research involves interviews, the same procedure may be used when electing certain thematic or content analysis models (Minayo, 2012). In our case, for example, after the 25 interviews conducted in the second front of the fieldwork, the team came together and, in light of the research objectives, developed empirical responses based

on the many narratives collected. The initial conversation on data brought about major themes, raised to the status of axes and categories of analysis: 1) Opinions about: erotic positions, gender positions, and coming out; 2) Dispositions about erotic tastes with fixed and casual partners; 3) Practices that consisted of categorizing fragments of narrated scenes and experiences into two subcategories: life course, and erotic practices, and life course and performativity; 4) HIV/AIDS and prevention; 5) Stigmatization. The five axes were added with a sixth one, Axis 0, where sociodemographic data (age, race/color, sexual position, gender stylization, education, individual income, profession/occupation, religion) were allocated, allowing the identification of relations between social markers and the themes and sub-themes present in each category of analysis.

These axes, categories, and subcategories were organized in an analytical Excel chart, as shown in Chart 1, with axes 1 to 3, and their categories and subcategories. Next, the chart was inputted with fragments of the interviews that refer to the categories established.

Chart 1 - Fragment of the analysis chart

Opinions about (Axis 1)					Dispositions (Axis 2)		Practices (scenes, experiences) (Axis 3)			
Erotic positions			Gender position		Come out (voice, gesture, to be gay, to be a boy, to be pintosa, dress like a woman)		Erotic taste		Life course and erotic practices	Life course and performativity
Active	Passive	Versatile	Masculinized	Feminized	Discreet	Come out	Positive partner's attributes	Slutty	Performance	

The next step was to identify the “themes,” that is, the variations in positioning on a given subject, and to establish relationships with the markers of the sociodemographic framework, or with other categories. A process that involves actions of discerning, classifying and counting. As an example, we take an issue that is important in literature, and which points out that gender stylizations are organizing axes of homosexual sociability (Rubin, 1975; Fry, 1982; Parker, 2002).

We challenged our data: is there a relationship between gender stylizations and desire among MSM in the RMR?

We asked the 25 respondents in the second phase how they classified themselves in relation to gender, and the massive answer was “I am a man”. This answer would prevent the analysis of the relationship between body stylizations and other markers and themes - a necessary element to also explore the operation of the sex-gender

system in the setting of vulnerabilities to HIV, violence and suffering, important hypotheses of our research.

The ethnographic immersion, enabled by observations and the very intersubjective experience between interviewee and interviewer, allowed the team to carry out an interesting movement of analytical inscription of the participants' gender positions. The group reflected on native gender categories through the concept of body stylizations. In a first moment, *boy*² and *pintosa*³ emerged as the emic categories to classify men. Having gotten to these two ideal types, we classified the informants. The idea was, following Max Weber's (1997) suggestion, to use them as more pragmatic working hypotheses to tense the native discourse, and allow us to deepen our understanding of the meanings of gender categories and, if necessary, to fully or partially rebut the types. Masculinized and feminized entered the analysis grid as categories to be filled in with the informants' narrations. This allowed us to deepen the meanings of the native classification.

Based on the report of scenes about sexual partners, assigned to axis 2, we found that all respondents desired masculine men. However, the masculine men desired by the poor *pintosas* were not described in the same way as the *boys*. However, we only realized this when we asked ourselves about the partners of the *pintosas*. In other words, if femininity was object of erotic discredit by the *boys*, with whom did the *pintosas* effectively establish sexual partnerships?

The answer was right there, in the category "positive attributes of the partner". For example, on the line devoted to subject 1, Antonio, 38 years, *pintosa*, versatile plus active, in the casual subcategory, the following interview fragment was transcribed:

E: What kind of guy do you like? What is he like, the way he looks? A: Brunette E: Brunette? A: Yeah, brunette and potbellied. E: Really? Bellied? A: Yeah, I like it. E: Hair and so... Tall or short, whatever? A: No, whatever. E: Do you prefer thinner, fatter?

A: Chubbier, chubbier. With some belly. E: But you said you like man, not homosexual. So you'd rather he doesn't show it? A: No, no, no. Having sex with homosexual I don't like it no. But anal sex... I don't like it with homosexuals. Only with a 'cafuçu'. A guy that is cafuçu. E: How a cafuçu looks like? A: That's what a 'cafuçu' guy is like: "I do it with the fucking player!" E: Do with what? A: "I do it with the fucking player." When it's good, when is drunk, all a player.

Antonio had incomplete primary education and earned 730 reais (in 2015) as a general services assistant, indicators that appeared on the axis o, intended for sociodemographic categories, used for class attribution: poor. Still in the first row of the chart, the fragment categorized under "Gender position"/"Feminized" offered more information about the logic of erotic preferences:

*E: But have you ever been to nightclubs, that sort of thing? A: Yeah, the Metr pole, there in the city. A: but I didn't like it, I told my friends. E: You didn't like it, why? A: Because I know that everything there is homosexual, do you understand? So, if I'm homosexual, there's no woman with a woman? I don't think so, I, I won't stay with a homosexual because I'm not a dyke, you know what I mean? I like 'cafuçu', I really like men. I like to go out with men. What am I going to do in a club that I know is all faggots just like me? Then I don't like it because that's how it is: if there are two men living together, they are all faggots, because one helps the other. One gives the money, you see? The other also gives money to pay the rent, to pay the light bill, but I am different. I f*ck with them, you know, because they are really men. So, I don't like this mess. I just enjoy my part.*

Looking at several narrative fragments framed into the category "positive attributes of partners" of our analytical framework, we identified the presence of *cafuçu* as the type of man desired by the *pintosas* (Axis o/Gender Stylization), especially the

2 An Anglicism used to name men who perform masculinity (Rios, Paiva e Brignol, 2019).

3 Literally 'stains' that reveal and perform femininity (Rios, Paiva e Brignol, 2019).

poorer ones (Axis o/Education/Income/Occupation). These findings were made possible through non-statistical “association tests” pragmatically produced by the analytical instrument, and by very simple mathematical calculations. What Howard Becker (1997) called quasi-statistic, which has been used by field researchers during participant observations, and, in our case, also used in the thematic analysis of the interviews.

Obviously, it is not all about counting. The stage considered noblest in qualitative research - interpretation, the attribution of meanings to the data analyzed - is only possible because, somehow, the trends of the field have been dimensioned, after analytical reduction, and the establishment of connections between the variables/social markers. In other words, identifying emic categories, classifying the interview fragments, and counting. This process allowed us to reach some conclusions, which were presented for evaluation by the academic community (meetings and publications) (Rios et al., 2019a, 2019b), and were resumed to be tested and deepened again in the remaining stages of the research (Rios et al., 2018; Rios, Paiva, and Brignol, 2019; Rios, 2021).

Broad weave net

It should be noted that carrying out a quantitative survey through the application of a questionnaire is not just about marking questions, inserting the answers in a database, and performing the statistical analyses with the aid of software. Choices need to be made about the sample **composition** and the **questions** to be used, and the more they are based on theoretical reflections about the field, the more likely the study will deepen knowledge about the realities investigated (Goode; Hatt, 1972).

In the case of **sample composition**, it is important to stress that we have investigated the sexual behavior of a population that, because of stigma and discrimination, is publicly invisible and, as such, difficult to express in randomized population studies. We were seeking for a resource that would allow the expression of the heterogeneity of MSM sociability networks, beyond its most visible population - accessed in observations and informal

conversations, almost always with identified gay men in commercial establishments such as nightclubs, bars and saunas.

Some strategies are used for sample construction with hard-to-reach populations, such as snowball, time-location sampling, and targeted sampling. Nevertheless, to some extent they bring biases to the sample: the snowball technique tends to focus on people with very similar profiles; time-location sampling tends to select only those participants who are visible; and targeted sampling may overestimate the participation in the population of subgroups identified in previous qualitative research when it comes to delimiting the number of respondents for each stratum. A fourth option is the chain-referral. It has been used whenever the sample universe of the population of interest is part of a network (Valente, 2010).

A method that follows this principle is that of respondent-driven sampling (RDS) (Heckthorn, 2002). Widely used in large multicenter studies with so-called hard-to-reach and key populations for HIV infection (drug users, MSM, sex workers, and transgender people), the RDS was built based on research about social networks. These have pointed out that in large populations, it takes approximately six intermediaries to associate individuals with other members of the society. It is proposed, then, that through multiple referral waves, one may cover a given population, capturing its diversity of social markers.

The RDS sample uses a dual incentive system (from peers and financial) that would play a key role in attracting people who do not feel encouraged to participate in surveys. When preparing the study, the team did not have an expert in this technique and, although it inspired some of the sample composition design elements, we chose not to meet the analysis conditions in this model. Considering the budget limits, no financial compensation was offered to the participants, either for responding or for referring new potential respondents. We have neither included any question that would allow us to dimension the participants' personal network of homosociability, crucial to make weightings in the RDS statistical treatment.

What we produced was a slightly more sophisticated form of chain sampling, starting from networks started among residents of six municipalities in the RMR, ensuring the expansion of heterogeneity. We have also used coding that allowed us to mark the places of each participant on the chains. Residents of the six RMR municipalities with the highest detection rates for AIDS in the Northeast were recruited (BRASIL, 2013). To start the chains, volunteers/seeds were located through the researchers' networks of relationships. When these volunteers/seeds were willing to be interviewed, they were also asked to indicate other possible volunteers, and so on. We then had the following sample distribution: Recife I with 43 (11.32%) respondents, Recife II with 125 (32.89%), Cabo de Santo Agostinho I with 2 (0.53%), Cabo de Santo Agostinho II with 24 (6.32%), Ipojuca with 8 (2.11%), Olinda I with 54 (14.21%), Olinda II with 92 (24.21%), Jaboatão dos Guararapes I with 1 (0.26%), Jaboatão dos Guararapes II with 18 (4.74%), and Igarassu I with 13 (3.42%).

Initially, the limit of three people referred by each participant was foreseen. However, considering the high number of refusals (surely because there was no financial incentive), we expanded the indications by interviewees to up to seven individuals. At the time of the interview, the names and cell phone/Whatsapp contacts of the nominees were requested, and it was up to the interviewers to contact them. We also requested interviewees to contact their nominees to facilitate the researcher's approach (which did not always occur). In some cases, the participant personally took the interviewer to the residence of the new volunteer; in other cases, because of the number of refusals, the interviewer would contact the interviewees again to ask for new nominees.

As questionnaires were applied, some difficulties were encountered. One of them was to identify seeds to start building networks in smaller municipalities. Likewise, there were difficulties for the seeds in these municipalities to indicate new subjects, and for the nominees to accept being interviewed. The team noticed that the three obstacles converged on the issue of stigmatization in relation to the fact of someone (the interviewee or the nominee)

being identified as a person engaged in homosexual practices. As Richard Parker (2002) suggests, this has greater weight in small towns. In this sense, the team observed that even in Recife and Olinda (whose networks had no major problems in being initiated and expanded), subjects tended to refer gay-identified individuals. This was noticed at times when the interviewee talked about who to refer. Many times they said that "so-and-so wouldn't be good enough to be indicated", usually followed by comments related to the fact that they didn't want people to know that he/she (the so-and-so) had homosexual practices.

From sampling to the research instrument, reflections on its production and the qualities of the data captured are fundamental to the success of the interpretative work. As aforementioned the questionnaire closes the possibility of answers, preventing novelty from appearing. In producing the survey questions we decided to use more "universal" categories to capture how people classified themselves from a gender perspective, operationalized by the question "In relation to your way of being and expressing the self, how do you perceive yourself?" The answers were: masculine, effeminate, "I don't know" and "I don't want to answer". The decision for these answers and not for the native *boy*, *cafuçu* and *pintosa* categories was because we worked with the perspective of reaching networks of men who do not necessarily go to commercial establishments of the gay community, where they might not make sense.

We were surprised at the 44.8% of respondents who chose "I don't know", while masculine and effeminate had, respectively, 23.3% and 31.8%. The methodological approaches in HSS applied to health typically speak of methodological triangulation, where different technical devices of data collection are used to address the phenomenon investigated (Gomes et al., 2010). In ethnographic production, triangulation is a *sine qua non* condition for scientific production. The major differential in relation to other triangulation perspectives is the way in which researchers' own personal experience during data collection is used to understand the phenomenon. We will exemplify the importance of this form of triangulation to

understand the large percentage of choices for the “I don’t know” category.

When the survey was applied, Patricio (fictitious name) commented that he “didn’t know” whether to classify himself as effeminate or masculine, because, from a distance and for a person who doesn’t know him, his physical appearance and mannerisms would not indicate “*pinta*” (femininity traits). However, talking to him (gay accent and gesturing), one could classify him as effeminate. Paulão (fictitious name), a resident of a low-income neighborhood (one of the contexts of the participant observation) and survey respondent, also claimed to “not know” how to classify himself. He has a girlfriend and, just like his “corner colleagues”, he is known to be a “*pegador*” (always available and building opportunities to have sex with the women in the neighborhood). At the time the questionnaire was applied, he reported being a sex professional and, when talking about the gay sauna where he “works out,” he started using an accent and gesture that, in the interviewer’s eyes, referred to the category “*pinta*” (Rios et al., 2018).

The above responses are in tune with the recurrent mention, in biographical narratives, to strategies to escape the effects of stigmatization of homosexualities, trying to configure masculinity in public performances, expressed in terms such as “discretion”, “makeup”, “mask”, and others. Thus, based on these indicators from the observations and interviews we suggested that the category “I don’t know” would be an expression of phenomena related to the epistemology of the closet (Sedgwick, 2007). We also hypothesized that gender stylizations would be significantly associated with violence, discrimination, and psychological suffering, effects of stigmatization.

The statistical analysis showed that although effeminate people suffer more violence and discrimination, those who chose “I don’t know” experience more psychological suffering. A phenomenon that we relate to the high subjective costs in staying protected from the stigmatization of homosexualities, which is refreshed whenever a MSM acts with femininity (Rios et al., 2018).

Final remarks

Situating ourselves, an enervating business that is only partially successful, is what ethnographic research as a personal experience is all about.
(Geertz, 1987, p. 10).

Throughout this paper, our argument has been that counts, establishments of connections, and assignments of meaning will be present in the many research techniques used in HSS, regardless of whether they are located as qualitative or quantitative; explanatory or comprehensive.

Taking Alves’ (2006) metaphor to discuss research instruments, we reclassified the research techniques in HSS using the image of fishing nets, which helped us to move away from the fetishization of mathematics. Narrower weave nets, such as participant observation and biographical interviewing, let novelties be expressed more easily. However, we show how, from an intermediate fishing net (the analytical framework), we “caught” the *cafuçu*, lost in the first throw of the cast net.

More open weave nets, like the questionnaire, limited the possibility of having the new expressed, but allowed us to verify the amplitude, estimate the recurrence of categories and behaviors identified. The questionnaire’s effectiveness, however, depended on the results of interviews and observations, so that the design of questions and answers produced webs of nets responsive to what we wanted to “fish”.

Techniques such as the questionnaire are criticized for using dichotomy to do the analytical work, and for hyper-simplifying reality. In the case at hand, the high percentage of choices for the category “I don’t know” led us to go through the entire data and results referential chain again, breathing new life to the theoretical questionings regarding the porosity of the gender binary models, based on the male and female pair.

What grants scientificity to this methodological way of operating is not the possibility of replicating the research and obtaining the same results, updated in presenting in the method section of scientific articles the “cold” step by step of procedures. Nor is it the use

of statistical tests of association to “prove” that the alleged “fragile” inferences built on the connections between themes and markers in the content analysis of the “qualitative” data are sustained, even when confronted with the “proof of the numbers”.

In our understanding, the positivity of the knowledge offered for peer review is achieved by making clear the entire data referential chain, results, and interpretations (Latour, 2001) and the rectifications made along the way (Bachelard, 2005). In fact, that is why we only used examples already presented to the academic community through publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Articles in which the methodological discussion was happening throughout the text, from the constructions of objects in introductions, methodological operationalizations of concepts in the method sections, and procedures for rectifications and interpretations in the results and discussion sections. We do not just present the “cake recipe” or method, but the “ace in the hole”, whether these have been mistakes, successes, or adjustments in the process of knowledge production.

In summary, scientific objectivity will be configured in the elaboration of scientific documents where readers are not only convinced of the conclusions reached by researchers, but that also have the elements to reach different conclusions. A form of evaluating scientificity that is close to both Pooper’s (2006) and Bachelard’s (2005) criteria of scientificity.

We rank our way of operating research as ethnographic, and take as a motto for the production of this text the strangeness about the use of survey as a mode of data collection. We would like to point out that, since ethnographic studies in “simple societies”, counts have been present in inventories and censuses involving, for example, the discovery of mathematical algorithms that represent the complex kinship systems (cf. Rivers, 1991).

We would like to suggest that a ethnographic study is not characterized by the data collection techniques, but by the way in which we operate with them. Ethnographic studies will not stop reducing, but will put the reduction back into perspective with the sociocultural totality,

and the singularities of researchers and researched individuals. In the words of Geertz (1987), it will require researchers to place themselves in the process of understanding conceptual structures and presenting, in each case studied, the role of culture in human life. Knowledge about a given object is always singular, in the sense that it is “that small part of it that our informants can lead us to understand” (Geertz, 1987, p. 14) and, therefore, requires circumstantiality.

Resuming the analyses of our project, from back to front, the analytical and interpretive process of the statistical tests was carried out producing dialogue between data from interviews and observations, including observations of participant of the very process of applying questionnaires, always placing the presence of the researcher who effectively collected data as a condition of analytical-interpretative production.

It is worth remembering that this movement also includes the procedure used by interviewers to classify, based on what they learned about the native logic of operating with gender, their interlocutors in the interview. A process in which products of collection and analysis techniques are being checked in their relation to each step, and that should always allow returning to the records, producing new analyses and interpretations, increasingly thickening descriptions.

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Authors' contributions

Rios carried out the conceptual design of the project, and of the coordination of phases 1, 2 and 3 of the research. Adrião collaborated with the first author in the coordination of phases 4, 5 and 6 of the fieldwork. They both worked together in the drafting of this article.

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