# Between WhatsApp and the square of the "family": reports of a theoretical and methodological experience

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*Abstract:* This article reports the theoretical and methodological experience allowed by a research with the objective of understanding the processes of sociability among young people who formed a group named "família Os poderosos e as poderosas" (family The powerful men and women), who connected themselves through social networks and in the city squares of Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil. The generating question was: how these relations occur, their dislocations and ruptures from the convergence between the use of communication and information technologies and at the squares? The main methodological procedures used on this research were ethnography and netnography.

*Keywords:* youth; theory; methodology; ethnography; netnography.

*Resumo:* Este artigo reflete a experiência teórico-metodológica possibilitada pela pesquisa que teve como objetivo compreender os processos de sociabilidade entre jovens reunidos em torno do grupamento autodenominado "família Os poderosos e as poderosas" e que se conectavam por meio de redes sociais e nas praças da cidade de Fortaleza, Ceará, entre março e novembro de 2015. A questão geradora era: como se constituíam essas relações, seus deslocamentos e rupturas, a partir da convergência entre os usos de tecnologias de comunicação e informação e das praças? Para os fins da pesquisa, utilizou-se como procedimentos metodológicos principais a etnografia e a netnografia.

*Palavras-chave:* juventude; redes sociais; etnografia; netnografia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to report the theoretical and methodological experience allowed by a research named "The Family 'Os poderosos e as poderosas': youth pathways between WhatsApp and the square"[1].

Wright Mills argues that "transmitting a useful sense of method and theory to beginner students is only possible through conversation in which experienced thinkers exchange information on their working practices"[2]. Thus, we believe that exchanges are always welcome considering social research, especially if the "object" is the youth, a portion of the population, who as a construct, are characterized by their plurality and changeability.

Walter Jaide noted in the 1960's that young people presented "multiple attitudes" within the same generation, which led him to doubt the possibility of a "universal characteristic of a generation" that would level the empirically observed differences[3]. To access these multiplicities, we went to the field. Our objective was to understand how the sociability processes occurred among young people gathered around a group self-named as "family". They connected through social networks and in the city squares of lower class neighborhoods of Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil.

Our assumption was that the sociability spaces generated by both the city and the technologies were flows that were not a juxtaposition, but hybrids, some sort of "doubled networks" – multiplied, parallel and porous environments where intense exchanges occur[4].

We used ethnography as the methodological procedure to consider these spaces, which went beyond visiting the city squares, since it was used to follow the conversations on the environment of WhatsApp, which was systematically used by the members of the "família Os poderosos e as poderosas". The members admitted the researcher in the WhatsApp group chats in early 2015, performing a series of screenshots of the conversations established by the participants in these aggregative spaces.

This is the methodological adventure that will be reported in this article, always considering the experimental character of ethnographic research and that the experience of ethnography is always unique, thus, difficult to be standardized.

## 2. DECIDING THE FIELD WITHIN THE CITY

Cities provide experiences that happen in a unique and differentiated manner for each of its inhabitants and visitors. This experience is the result of individual choices, but by no means random. Magnani points that the relationship with the city is a result "of everyday routines, dictated by collective standards that regulate work, devotion, fun, and coexistence"[5].

Regarding youth, multiple studies were developed to comprehend their insertion in the urban environment, particularly, the importance of mass media

1. The research was developed by Amanda Nogueira, under the supervision of professor Alexander Barbalho, for her master's degree in Communication from the Universidade Federal do Ceará.

2. MILLS, Wright. **A imaginação sociológica**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1969, p. 211.

3. JAIDE, Walter. As ambiguidades do conceito de "geração". In: BRITTO, Sulamita de (Org.). **Sociologia da juventude II**: para uma sociologia diferencial. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1968. p. 15-28.

in this relationship. Thus, researchers created classifications created for this phenomenon, such as generation X and Y, culminating in what would be the emergence of a "digital generation" (generation Z). For Campos, this generation is composed by individuals "perfectly familiar with the codes and processes to manage the audiovisual information circulating in multiple networks"[6].

The relation of young people with their cellphone is an example of this. Such devices offer multiple functions and transform the path of young people in the city through differentiated consumption forms in their daily life. André Lemos names these devices as "mobile hybrids of multinetwork connection" which change "the social practices of informational mobility through the physical spaces of cities"[7]. The enormous variety of shapes and colors turns the device into a form of communication of the attitudes of young people.

Understanding that in a moment of information sharing and extended connectivity, accumulating "technological capital" is essential. This is one of the forms individuals can be distinguished in various fields, including socially[8]. When young people build a restless relationship with the urban environment, this environment becomes both the stage and the screen.

The first contact with the family was in this urban environment during the beginning of 2015, while walking around the city, mostly through the streets of Regional VI[9]. In fact, the researcher was already looking around, searching for a research "object". Thus, between June and August 2014 we visited the Boa Vista neighborhood, following the daily life of skateboarders due to their constant relationship with the streets in their use of the public spaces as a meeting environment (perception based on previous field research). While walking around we concluded that although they kept traditional behaviors such as sitting on sidewalks to chat with neighbors and family, they were transformed by use of the cellphone – even in the public space their attention was focused on exchanging information through the device[10]. On that moment we understood how much the social relations were diluted between the physical and the non-physical spaces[11].

However, on a Friday night in February 2015 we observed a gathering unlike anything we had seen until that moment at the Lago Jacarey city square, located on another neighborhood of the same regional. We saw a relevant social phenomenon occurring. Seeing so many young people dressed in matching shirts and constantly using their cellphones was strange for us. Especially since they were gathered at a space like that, listening to music being played from their cars, dancing, drinking and talking. We chose that as our research field, where we would have the ethnographic situation and experience.

## 3. THE ETHNOGRAPHIC EXERCISE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

Ethnography emerged as a privileged theoretical and methodological resource on the need to monitor this group that named themselves "família", "Os poderosos e as poderosas"[12].

4. CAMPOS, Ricardo. **Por que pintamos a cidade?**: uma abordagem etnográfica do graffiti urbano. Lisboa: Fim de Século, 2010; SILVEIRA, Fabrício Lopes. Outros grafites, outras topografias, outras medialidades. In: CAMPOS, Ricardo; BRIGHENTI, Andrea Mubi; SPINELLI, Luciano (Org.). **Uma cidade de imagens**: produções e consumos visuais em meio urbano. Lisboa: Mundos Sociais, 2011. p. 123-138. Para maior compreensão das relações entre juventude e redes sociais ver, entre outros: ALMEIDA, Maria Isabel Mendes; EUGENIO, Fernanda. O espaço real e o acúmulo que significa: uma nova gramática para se pensar o uso jovem da internet no Brasil. In: NICOLACI-DA-COSTA, Ana Maria (Org.) **Cabeças digitais**: o cotidiano na era da informação. São Paulo: Loyola, 2006. p. 49-80; BARBALHO, Alexandre. **A criação está no ar**: juventudes, política, cultura e mídia. Fortaleza: EdUECE, 2013; BRAGA, Adriana. Sociabilidades digitais e a reconfiguração das relações sociais. **Desigualdade & Diversidade**: Revista de Ciências Sociais da PUC-Rio, Rio de Janeiro, n. 9, p. 95-104, ago./dez. 2011; DIÓGENES, Glória. Signos urbanos juvenis: rotas da pixação no ciberespaço. **Cadernos de Campo**, São Paulo, v. 22, n. 22, p. 45-61, 2013; JANOTTI JÚNIOR, Jeder Silveira. Mídia, cultura juvenil e *rock and roll*: comunidades, tribos e grupamentos urbanos. In: BARBALHO, Alexandre; PAIVA, Raquel Paiva (Org.). **Comunicação e cultura das minorias**. São Paulo: Paulus, 2005. p. 80-102; RIFIOTIS, Teophilos. Duas ou três coisas sobre elas, as comunidades virtuais. In: RIFIOTIS, Theophilos, *et al*. (Org.). **Antropologia no ciberespaço**. Florianópolis: Editora UFSC, 2010.

5. MAGNANI, José Guilherme Cantor. A rua e a evolução da sociabilidade. **Cadernos de História de São Paulo**, São Paulo, n. 2, jan./dez. 1993, p. 13.

6. CAMPOS, Ricardo. Identidade, imagem e representação na metrópole. In: CAMPOS, Ricardo; BRIGHENTI, Andrea Mubi; Spinelli, Luciano. **Uma cidade de imagens**: produções e consumos visuais em meio urbano. Lisboa: Mundos Sociais, 2011, p. 25.

7. LEMOS, André. Comunicação e práticas sociais no espaço urbano: as características dos dispositivos híbridos móveis de conexão multirrede (DHMCM). In: ANTOUN, Henrique (Org.). **Web 2.0**: participação e vigilância na era da comunicação distribuída. Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2008, p. 51.

8. ROCHA, Everardo; PEREIRA, Cláudia. Sociabilidade e novas tecnologias: os significados do consumo entre os jovens. In: BARBOSA, Marialva; MORAIS, Oswaldo J. (Org.). **Comunicação, cultura e juventude**. São Paulo: Intercom, 2010.

9. A cidade de Fortaleza é dividida administrativamente em seis "regionais". A Regional VI é a maior delas, situada ao sul da cidade e composta por 27 bairros com diferentes perfis sociais, desde os habitados por famílias da classe média até aqueles com alguns dos mais baixos IDH da cidade.

10. BARBALHO; Alexandre; OLIVEIRA, Amanda Nogueira. Sociabilidades juvenis e o usos de dispositivos móveis na cidade. In: BARBALHO, Alexandre; MARÔPO, Lidia (Org.). **Infância, juventude e mídia**: olhares luso-brasileiros. Fortaleza: UECE, 2015. p. 181-193.

Since our research field was also the cyberspace, we used a specific form of ethnography, virtual or netnography. This is a methodological procedure to investigate interactions mediated and located in multiple places through the insertion of the researcher in the spaces existing on the internet[13].

The cyberspace is not an environment detached from face to face relations, therefore, we could combine the two spheres of activity (online and offline), conceived as supportive strategies, adding to and depending on the other, acting as "doubled networks".

The need to use netnography as a research procedure in communication environments was also due to the quickly changing character of our societies. Margulis points that "parts of the city are given different meanings by different generations, they give them different uses or understand and experience them in new ways, since each new generation has different social patterns of perception and appreciation"[14].

Therefore, ethnographic research was used to understand these transformations within the social grouping. When using ethnography, we understood that the researcher is an inextricable part in understanding the meanings and the actions of the essential subjects of the research. James Clifford claims that ethnographic practice should be understood "not as the experience and interpretation of 'another' reality circumscribed, but as a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and often more, conscient and politically significant subjects"[15].

In fact, one of the strongest characteristics of ethnographic research is its dialogic character on the field. The researcher will never be "a fly on the wall", paralyzed amid the flurry of events, acting only as an observer[16]. Being an ethnographer is the opposite of being inert. From the first moment the researcher is present, engaging in the everyday life of the subjects of his/her research.

This dimension of ethnographic participation was one of our greater concerns in this research, how to approach and the later bond established with the "família Os poderosos e as poderosas". How to fit in the collective? How to be accepted, participate of the moments and of the weekly meetings? How to make our presence intervene as little as possible in the daily life of this group? Later we found that those questionings were "naive", since our insertion in the group would interfere in it, regardless of how we did it.

Thus, we can characterize ethnography as "a task that assumes patient and continuous work, after which, or at some point, the scattered elements are arranged to create a meaning, even if unexpected"[17]. This unexpected character is obtained from the proximity of the researcher with the group studied, through the bonds created and the strengthening of them during the research.

However, we must understand that the observation of the actions and sensitive productions of the social actors and actresses must be detached, even if the research results cause some form of intervention in the group studied. The observation must be balanced between "outside and by far" and "inside and nearby". This balance is needed due to the existing limit, which is not

always very clear, between the involvement of the researcher as a narrator or even as a cultural translator of attitudes and of the researcher as a person interacting with the group.

## 4. ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE: BETWEEN THE CELLPHONE AND THE CITY SQUARE

The field journal was one of the most used instruments to achieve this balance, synthesizing the facts we dealt with, our daily impressions, the feelings involved and the questions that have arisen during the whole process. The action of registering in the journal cannot be understood as something simple, especially when it establishes the uninterrupted and committed exercise of listening, which creates a channel of attention between the researcher and the researched group. Producing field reports is an intense process of understanding situations, and there is no model to be followed. Latour highlights that "if a given group simply exists, then it is invisible and there is nothing to be said about it. This groups leaves no trace and therefore does not generate any information; if the group is visible and acting, new and interesting data will be created from it"[18].

Interviews were also used, they gave us an individualized understanding of the meanings of the group. This can be named one of the splits of ethnographic practice, when reflective writing began to emerge. The need to understand what was said and not said became more and more frequent over time, creating a form of interpretive writing.

The research occurred from when we got to know the "family" in March 2015 to November of the same year, during this period we collected a significant amount of data. There were about ten months of intense participation, evidenced by the continuous use of the cellphone and by going to the meetings of the family. Thus, the research locations were the WhatsApp group chats, in which we were inserted, and the city squares where the weekly meetings of the family occurred. We note that all participants with whom we had contact knew the reason for our active participation in the "family".

During the research we participated of five group chats of this "family" on WhatsApp, two of them were deleted by the group. Most of the time we participated of three groups: the general group, composed by all members, the *bonde feminino* (female tram)[19], composed by the members who identify themselves with this gender, including trans women, and the leader-only group (*diretoria*), composed by those who organize the "family", Figures 1 to 3 show these groups.

When joining these groups our proposition was to absorb information – images, photographs, audios and other records – to facilitate our understanding of the family. The data collection was performed primarily through screenshots and sending images by email to an email created for the research.

Initially we sent the conversations by email using a function available on the application (WhatsApp). However, this method created notepad files, which

11. SIBILIA, Paula. **O homem pós-orgânico**: corpo, subjetividade e tecnologias digitais. Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 2002.

12. Nome fictício dado pelos pesquisadores. A noção êmica de "família" não considera consanguinidade e laços parentais, mas se refere a vínculos de diferentes naturezas. Como forma de reconhecimento de si e do outro, a noção está mais próxima das de amizade, ajuda mútua e solidariedade (SOUZA, Luciana Karine; GAUER, Gustavo. Uma história do conceito de amizade. In: HUTZ, Claudio Simon; SOUZA, Luciana Karine de (Org.). **Amizade em contexto**: desenvolvimento e cultura. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 2012. p. 41-63). Não há somente a família "Os poderosos e as poderosas". Obtivemos conhecimento da existência de pelo menos quinze outras no âmbito da Regional VI, onde ocorreu a pesquisa, e cerca de vinte grupamentos em outras localidades.

13. POLIVANOV, Beatriz. Etnografia virtual, netnografia ou apenas etnografia?: implicações dos conceitos. **Esferas**, Brasília, ano 2, n. 3, p. 61-71, jul./dez. 2013; RIFIOTIS, Teophilos. Duas ou três coisas sobre elas, as comunidades virtuais, op. cit.

14. MARGULIS, Mario. **Sociologia de la cultura**: conceptos y problemas. Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2009, p. 91.

15. CLIFFORD, James. **A experiência etnográfica**: antropologia e literatura no século XX. Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ, 2002, p. 43.

16. EMERSON, Robert M.; FRETZ, Rachel I.; SHAW, Linda L. Notas de campo na pesquisa etnográfica. **Tendências**: Caderno de Ciências Sociais, Crato/CE, n. 7, p. 355-383, 2013.

made our understanding of the relationships established difficult, since the emojis were replaced by several little squares.



**Figure 1:** General group chat of the "família Os poderosos e as poderosas"



**Figure 2:** Women-only group chat of the family



**Figure 3:** Leader-only (*diretoria*) group chat of the "família Os poderosos e as poderosas"

Source: screenshots by Amanda Nogueira.

The emojis, also called "little faces" (*carinhas*) by some participants, established other meanings to the text. This is what we can name as a return to a form of transcribed orality. Among the slangs created by components of the "family", we observed how much the oral marks of communication were present. Words were written the same way as they spoke. Phrasal constructions in text messages were more similar to orality than to written representation.

Transcribed orality used in chat applications, such as WhatsApp, is performed from the linking of different forms of textual resources. Completely understanding the previously established message is not always possible, as can be seen in Figures 4 to 6. From this understanding that we started to screenshot and save the images in folders separated by category:

We went to nearly all weekly meetings organized by the family to accompany the data from WhatsApp and to understand if those relationships also occurred in the city square. Figures 7 and 8 show some of these moments.

Among the profusion of young people participating in both WhatsApp groups and of the meetings at the squares, we felt the need to perform interviews to understand even better each social actor and actress participating in this process. We kept a close relationship with about twenty young people, which generated seven interviews. We focused our conversations with young people who actively participated in the meetings, while also using the cellphone as an interactive environment. They were participants that went to practically every meeting at the squares and who also shared their thoughts on WhatsApp.

17. MAGNANI, José Guilherme Cantor. **Da periferia ao centro**: trajetórias de pesquisa em antropologia urbana. São Paulo: Terceiro Nome, 2012.

18. LATOUR, Bruno. **Reagregando o social**: uma introdução à teoria do ator-rede. Salvador: EdUFBA, 2012, p. 54.

19. Termo que denota a proximidade com algumas nomenclaturas utilizadas pelo *funk* carioca, mas ressignificado pela família ao ser utilizado como sinônimo de ajuntamento de galeras independentemente de qualquer corrente musical.

**Figure 4:** Start of dialogue in the women-only group chat. Group 1.

**Figure 5:** Continuation of the dialogue in the women-only group chat. Group 1.

**Figure 6:** Dialogue in the general group chat of the família poderosa. Group 2.

*Source: screenshots by Amanda Nogueira.*



**Figure 7:** Record of one of the meetings of the family at the Praça do Alecrim.

**Figure 8:** Car prepared to play music which was always present, being an intense factor.

*Source: photos by Amanda Nogueira.*

We opted for semi-structured interviews and semi-directive questions, which allowed us to discuss controversial points we encountered during our monitoring of the family on the field. We followed a minimum of standardization on the interviews, to the compare answers of different participants later.

We decided to have face to face conversations with the participants, despite working in digital environments. This was also a request from some of them. We had to visit some of them at home for some interviews, thus, getting to know their reality more closely. As previously discussed, we had no fear that this proximity could "derail" the process. On the contrary, we believe that the how we talked to them made allowed us to access these personal and "family" narratives.

We also registered several moments that we met and accompanied the "family" in videos and photographs. All the empirical material revealed who were these young people and how we participated of each moment, as well as allowed us to understand more clearly the relational forms woven.

Finally, we note that all images recorded – screenshots, photographs, images to divulge the meetings shared through WhatsApp – were carefully chosen, making all participants anonymous through small bars in their names, faces, bodies and phone numbers. We asked each interviewee to suggest other name for themselves, to be designated on the research. We also chose a different name for the family.

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