

NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

Decolonial approaches to multidisciplinary supervision: A case extract

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ABSTRACT

This text offers a summary of experiences in multidisciplinary supervision with workers of public health and social care networks in Brazil. Based on the contributions of diagnostic reasoning offered by clinical knowledge and listening as a central element in a psychoanalytically oriented work, a space for supervision was proposed for workers in multiple areas of health and social care, seeking to think of ways of handling cases that go beyond institutional protocols and bureaucracies, and that from a decolonial perspective can propose transformative solutions to the reality of people assisted by public policies. The case of the child Theo is presented, based on the story of the educators of a service of care and strengthening of bonds for children from 3- to 14-years-old, in a peripheral and vulnerable territory of a big city in Brazil.

KEYWORDS: decolonial approaches; psychoanalysis; supervision; multidisciplinary; public policies

It was a supervision day, in a space made up of workers from different health and social work services, professionals from SUS (Unified Health System) and SUAS (Unified Social Assistance System), in Brazil. We came from a sequence of meetings in which we made brief exercises of clinical reasoning from the daily experiences of the workers: What is presented as a symptom? What information do we have about the case to think about the field of causes? In addition, from this correlation between cause and symptom, what could possible therapeutic treatments be? It was an interdisciplinary exercise, borrowing clinical reasoning and taking it 'out of the clinic' as a way of broadening the analytical capacity of professionals in health and social care networks.

The case manager was Laudelina, an educator who has been working in the same institution for more than seven years: an out-of-school service that is part of the Unified Social

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Assistance System (SUAS) in a city in the interior of the State of São Paulo, Brazil. The service is located in a peripheral and vulnerable area, made up of squats and of interest to the real estate market. Laudelina has a strong personality, a firm word, and an admirable ethical-political commitment. She does not submit to the logic of professional hierarchisation imposed by the institutions, which determines by salary and profession who has the right to issue opinions or verdicts. Thus, on a scale, doctors and judges, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and educators form the pyramid of knowledge within the social care and health networks, in which the staff dealing with cleaning are far from being understood as part of the teams. In SUAS, things get even worse when the hierarchy between services prevails. In these cases, the opinions of a medium complexity service—even if they have no material basis for an opinion—become the verdict on the person attended to in primary care services.

From the very first meeting of the training activities, Laudelina and her co-worker, Tito, listened with as much involvement as they spoke and showed an acute awareness of how public policies on violence operate. Laudelina spoke at a meeting where we were doing a reflection exercise based on the questions ‘when have I ever suffered any kind of discrimination?’ and ‘when have I ever discriminated against anyone?’ She told of the time she arrived at an institution for a job interview and asked the security guard at the entrance where the office was, who sent her to the inpatient ward, as if it were a voluntary hospitalisation. It was only when the psychologist called her after a while of waiting and asked her where her personal belongings were that she was able to make sense of the suspicion that she had been in the wrong place, and, hopefully, had cleared up the misunderstanding before she might have been admitted to the psychiatric ward. Laudelina defines herself as a woman of mixed skin.

Throughout Laudelina and Tito’s service supervision activities, we hear of the work of constant struggle and resistance aimed at caring for the children of the territory. In addition to dealing with the problems experienced by families and children on a daily basis, they still had to deal with a deafened social care network, which acts independently of the interests of the population and ‘destroys in one hour of conversation with the children’s family what took us three years to build’, as stated by a teammate in another supervision. Once, when questioned by a psychologist who referred her to the psychology ethics board to say that Laudelina’s management was wrong, she replied, ‘I am an educator and I don’t need advice to have ethics’.

It was in this spirit that we listened to the case that was being presented in supervision that day. They had decided to bring that case because they had already been trying to exercise clinical reasoning with other colleagues in the service for a few weeks to reflect on the management of that child’s case, considered by the team as the ‘chaos’ of the service.

Theo (or *Macumba*, a derogatory nickname from his family) was a boy of about 10 years old, and he had been frequenting the service with his siblings for a long time. Laudelina and

Tito then told us that the boy had the power to disrupt any activity in which he participates. Suddenly, he will fight with another child, both for competition and to protect someone else. He doesn't respect anyone on the team and calls them all kinds of rude names. At this point, we asked Laudelina not to be shy about saying the words that Theo said when he called her names, reminding her that signifiers matter. Most were words that referred to sexual matters that offended women.

Laudelina said everyone on the team lost patience with him, that he drove her crazy. However, she noticed that he was careful with his other teammates and his brother, when they weren't fighting. If someone gave him a piece of candy, he was quick to say, 'Do you have another one for me to give to my teammate too?' The child often asked to be held and claimed that no one wanted him. When he went to his grandmother's house, he would hear people say, 'Here comes Theo's macumba'.

Macumba is a term associated with Afro-Brazilian cults and the practices carried out within these cults. Initially the word 'macumba' described a percussion instrument of African origin and a 'macumbeiro' was the individual who played this instrument. The prejudices spread by Christianity mean that macumba is mistakenly understood as sorcery, magic, an offering to the devil, and the term used to refer to bad things.

A few weeks ago, Theo came in with a cut on his foot and said his mother had sent him to the service to have it treated. The staff became angry—'that wasn't nursing'—and started saying 'how could his mother not even take care of the cut on her son's foot?' Using the clinical thinking resources she had learned, Laudelina began to wonder why that scene bothered her and the rest of the staff so much, as from time-to-time other children would ask for a band-aid, gas, or bandages because they had hurt themselves on the soccer field in front of the restroom.

Laudelina listened and realised that the presence of the mother at the scene was a major disruptive factor that prevented the team from dealing with a simple bandage. Together with Tito and another colleague, they began to listen to how the service's 'mother ideal' affected the way problems were handled. It was the first step in repositioning themselves, taking a different interest in the mother and listening to her. It was a turning point.

Instead of focusing on the mother who 'did not appear in the service', who 'did not fulfil her obligations as a mother', Laudelina decided to talk to her on the phone, with a willingness to listen. Why was the child called Theo Macumba? What was this nickname for a boy understood as chaos? Right at the beginning of the call, she heard the fights in the house between the siblings, of whom there were seven. We were able to think together about this oversight: What was it like to be a woman, with seven children, who had a relationship with a man who was not their father? What were the narratives about that woman in the family, in the community? Could it be that Theo's nonsensical swearing was related to things he heard at home? About his mother?

In conversations with her mother, Laudelina could hear about Theo Macumba, the disorder, the chaos. Additionally, given time to listen to her, she could hear the mother say, 'he looks like me'. With Laudelina, the mother was able to talk about both Theo and herself. The child who is not only rude, who swears, but also the one who shares the candy he has, who gives away his clothes to other children who have less than he does, and who cares about his neighbour.

We speak then of the possibility of subverting the team's reading of the mother's 'neglect' to think that the service can function as a place of reference for Theo and his mother, who cannot count on other support structures, such as the children's father, for example, since her husband does not participate in the upbringing of her children. The mother and her children are neglected by the father, of whom there is no news. The mother moves from the position of being neglectful to one of seeking support for a task she cannot do alone. She needs to be able to rely on primary care services and the whole support network, and Theo, a child, not only needs to be able to rely on them, but is much more dependent than she is on education and care policies to develop. In that service, a service of coexistence and strengthening of bonds, Theo would find the possibility of establishing secure ties, even for conflict.

Laudelina then related another scene, in which they both entered one of the service's offices and Theo started throwing all the papers in the air, until Laudelina said they would have to call the cleaning lady. When Theo realised that the action would not be against her, but against a third party, he immediately picked up all the papers. Laudelina's hypotheses about the boy's concerns for those close to him were confirmed and pointed to an excellent prognosis.

The problem now, and why we took the case to supervision, is that Theo wants to come every day to the service, and it is not possible, he can only come once, because of the shifts we have to do to comply with the pandemic guidelines. I have talked to the management to have him come twice, the coordination team has authorised it, but is it fair to the other children? What do we do?

Together we were able to elucidate on the figure of the father, the paternal function, the relationship of the law in the constitution of the child and how that space seemed to act as an edge and contour to support Theo's body in its relationship with others. Was the service the space to explore the limits? If so, how was it to be situated? As a rigid, can't-do law, or through other perspectives of law, as a bond, marked more by solidarity and less by authoritarianism. Theo came to the service reflecting the anomie of the many people live in his territory—highly vulnerable, neglected by the State, and lacking public policies really aimed at transforming the local reality. Theo, like his territory, constituted by occupations and in permanent dispute with the great business capital of the region, has no contours or borders. He arrived externalising his discomfort, as so many 'disorderly' children do. A discomfort that belongs to everyone, including the team that questioned its own limits within

the network and the territory and felt annoyed by the bureaucracies. Like Theo, they wanted to launch protocols into the air, denouncing cynicism, what does not work, and what is designed not to work in public social care policies.

We thus point to the importance of building contours rather than forcing obedience. 'Theo is a partner', we said. We were able to orient the perspective that the service should be for the users, in this case the children, and not against them. We pointed out to Laudelina how the conflicts she told us about since her arrival had to do with her ethic of working for and by the children, and not for the state: 'Theo is your partner'.

We also wondered if the mother's earlier demands might not be related to putting the service in the place of the father, the place of the provider. We did not get very far with that, leaving everyone to engage with psychoanalytic theory in his or her own way, respecting the developmental times of each person, and always being careful not to fall into alien interpretations. It is up to each person to decide how they want to connect with psychoanalysis and with a deeper study of their metapsychology. What we seek to guarantee as supervisors is a minimum structure of thought so that ideas and affections can circulate in favour of listening to the users and overcoming the forms of relationship imposed by capitalism.

Thinking about the service-environment and Theo-companion, we discussed the possibility of a game in which he would be invited to 'join the team as a member'. That way, the other three days he would help in welcoming the other children instead of being welcomed, occupying a role that was already his in the peer dynamics: a caretaker role. 'Do macumba together', I said, summoning the signifier to re-signify the word. Another coordinator resorted to land epistemologies and said: '*Erê* welcomes. Gives consultations. *Erê* is an *exu-mirim*, a line of flight, a life drive that needs a contour, a lap. *Exu* is the owner of the crossroads. And every entity needs an *ekedi*. The *ekedi* is the one who takes care of the orisha while it incorporates, who takes charge, who directs everything. Theo is *erê* and he is *ekedi*. He needs contour and he gives contour'. Together with Theo, we proposed to the team to recover and re-signify the 'macumba' outside the prejudices imposed by Christianity, studying other epistemologies and cosmovisions.

Based on the tasks that the child could help with in relation to the demands of the service, we thought together:

Theo is also someone who listens. You could organise tasks related to what he hears. He hears that people are hungry, so you could organise a garden, for example, to produce food to be used in the service meals, and he could be in charge of planting, watering, and harvesting. Be, in this way, the keeper of the garden. In this way he will be able to strengthen the bond, but without it being a place of privilege in relation to the other children, as it will also be a place of responsibility.

A month after this supervision, in another meeting, Laudelina and Tito talked about Theo again. They continued to supervise each other with others on the team and to think about management strategies. They recounted how Theo had found a way to ask for edges by saying, 'Are you going to take me to the upstairs room?'—a place he had sometimes been invited to go so he could chat with Laudelina or Tito whenever he did chaotic things. What might have been heard as fear of being scolded came to be understood as a desire to be taken to that place where he would be alone, would be listened to, and could distinguish between him and the other children, and between him and his siblings.

The 'upstairs room', the place where the educators took some children to talk when it was necessary to get them out of the mess, also served as an outline for other children. One of them, upon entering the room with Tito, sat in the chair, asked him for two minutes, closed his eyes with his hands together and after a while opened his eyes saying, 'that's it, I've aligned the chakras', and went back to the playground to participate in the activity he had previously been unable to bond with. Tito did not have to do anything more than accompany him on his journey.

The bond between Theo and Laudelina grew stronger. In the library he chose a book called *Pererê*, which told the story of Saci, a Brazilian folkloric character, who is black, has only one leg, and does a lot of naughty things. Laudelina read to him about Saci's characteristics, telling him about his tricks and 'whirlwinds'. Theo, who could not yet read or write, asked how to spell and then they drew the letters on the floor together. Laudelina suggested that they write a letter to the Saci, which was hung on a tree and answered by another educator, at Laudelina's request. 'People say the Saci doesn't exist', Theo told Laudelina, who replied, 'I have seen the Saci. Have you seen the Saci?' 'I've seen it too. But they say it's bad', replied Theo. During supervision we were able to talk about the importance of scenes like this to denaturalise racism and other forms of discrimination, explaining in the child's language the associations between being bad and being black in Brazilian society. Theo asked: 'Why am I neither black nor white? Take a picture of me so we can see my colour'. Theo asked to write Saci on the floor—Theo asked to inscribe his colour in the world.

Laudelina and Tito were excited to tell us the news. They were thrilled with the possibility of their own work. They laughed and told stories about the adventures of Theo Macumba and Theo Saci. Laudelina sighed, 'We couldn't handle two Theos'. Tito exclaimed: 'There are not two Theos, but there are John, Paul, etc.'. Everyone burst out laughing, and then we were able to talk about these manoeuvres of the social welfare and education services to turn children into one thing, an amalgam, the mafia, preventing them from existing as singular subjects.

A few weeks later, Laudelina told us that Theo had asked to learn to write. He wanted to go back to school. He asked Laudelina to get him a notebook and decorate the cover because he wanted to do 'that thing that people write about their lives'.

—You want to write a diary?

—Yes, I want to write a diary.

—But you don't know how to write yet, so how are you going to do it?

—I ask other people to help me write for me while I'm still learning. I tell them what I want to write and they write it. You help me, and then there's my neighbour.

Theo has not only progressed in his literacy; he has invited the world to become literate with him. He is a community articulator. He used to say he wanted to collect cans. Now he says he wants to be an educator like Laudelina. Necessary identifications to give way to desire.

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Anna Turriani is a multi-artist and researcher at the intersections between body, land, memory, arts, psychoanalysis, humanities, and social theory. She is a psychologist, with a Master's and Doctorate in science from the University of São Paulo, Brazil. She is undertaking her post doctorate in the Faculty of Psychology at the Universidad Michoacana of San Nicolás de Hidalgo (UMSNH), Mexico, and is coordinator of the Aldeia da Folha Cultural Center in Conchas, Brazil.