

Solidarity economy and mental health: experience report of virtual practices

Economia solidária e saúde mental: relato de experiência de práticas virtuais

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ABSTRACT The connection between mental health and work has a long trajectory, often involving oppression and restriction of freedom. Seeking a new place of work for users of the Psychosocial Care Network (RAPS), the solidarity economy has been highlighted as a multiple possibility in the fight against the stigma, emphasizing people's autonomy and emancipation through solidarity and cooperativism. Thus, this article aims to bring an interprofessional experience report on a university extension project of Solidarity Economy in Mental Health. This is a descriptive work, developed based on participant observation and analyzed in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin and Paulo Freire. It is concluded that this project is of paramount importance in the construction of multiple knowledge, as it includes professionals in the plastic and performing arts, health, and artisans. Thus, the training practice of several actors contemplates a powerful action through art, culture, and work for a management that aims at social inclusion, critical reflection, and autonomy in the field of mental health.

KEYWORDS Mental health. Deinstitutionalization. Autonomy. Social inclusion.

RESUMO A conexão entre saúde mental e trabalho possui uma extensa trajetória, em muitos momentos implicando opressão e cerceamento da liberdade. Buscando um novo lugar do trabalho para usuários da Rede de Atenção Psicossocial (Raps), a economia solidária vem se destacando enquanto possibilidade múltipla no combate ao estigma, enfatizando a autonomia e a emancipação das pessoas por meio da solidariedade e do cooperativismo. Dessa forma, o presente artigo visa trazer um relato de experiência interprofissional sobre o projeto de extensão universitária de economia solidária e saúde mental. Trata-se de um trabalho descritivo, desenvolvido com base na observação participante e analisado à luz de Mikhail Bakhtin e Paulo Freire. Conclui-se que o presente projeto é de suma importância na construção de saberes múltiplos, visto que contempla profissionais das artes plásticas e cênicas, saúde e artesãos. Sendo assim, a prática formativa de diversos atores favorece um fazer potente por meio da arte, cultura e trabalho para uma gestão que objetiva a inclusão social, a reflexão crítica e a autonomia no campo da saúde mental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Saúde mental. Desinstitucionalização. Autonomia. Inclusão social.

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Introduction

University extension in Brazil is covered by the National Education's Guidelines and Bases Law (LDB), Law nº 9.394¹, and by the Guidelines for Extension in Brazilian Higher Education, Law nº 13.005², seeking to contemplate the processes of teaching, research and extension. The LDB highlights the importance of extension for higher education, as such practices corroborate knowledge between the different areas of knowledge. From this interlocution, it is possible to go beyond their area of training and skills, bringing new perspectives to a critical educational process and expanding university activities to community needs³.

Doing health as a collective practice has been increasingly discussed. In this sense, reflecting on the educational field in the training of future professionals, one realizes the importance of developing forms of articulation of knowledge, so that there is an interdisciplinarity of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity constitutes the bias of a contemporary critique of knowledge, debating on overcoming the separation of knowledge into increasingly specialized parts, leading to the difficulty of dialogue⁴. Interdisciplinarity emerges as a proposal for articulation between areas since it "produces a displacement in the original training of each of these areas, which generates a sharing, a space of contamination and composition"⁴⁽⁶⁴⁸⁾. That is, interdisciplinarity aims to aggregate diverse knowledge in the search for knowledge sharing, adding multiple perspectives to the challenge of knowledge production.

This experience report seeks to describe the interdisciplinary work in an extension project of the Institute of Collective Health of the Federal University of Bahia (ISC/UFBA) entitled Gerar Network of Solidarity Economy and Mental Health, located in Salvador/BA. The Gerar Network is based on the precepts of solidarity economy, aiming at the social inclusion through the work of people in psychological

distress who are users of the Psychosocial Care Network (RAPS). This action involves RAPS users, professors, undergraduate and graduate students and professionals from the most diverse areas. The report described here concerns the practice period of Gerar Virtual, between December 2020 and July 2021, developed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental health and work intersect at different times in their historical process. From the General Hospitals in Europe, in the mid-17th century, to the Santas Casas de Misericórdia in Brazil, in the 19th century, what was seen was a process of exclusion from the social environment of those who did not fit the standards of morality and reason of that time^{5,6}. The Brazilian context, for many decades, had in asylums a prominent executioner in the exclusionary practices of social undesirables. Hospice times were closely linked to work, given that it was believed that the reproduction of life through work was a form of treatment. Thus, in several Brazilian states, they created Agricultural Colonies as a therapeutic strategy, which endeavor to cure madness was opposed to the increasing number of inmates over time⁷.

From the post-World War II period onwards, psychiatric conduct and practices began to be questioned due to constant violations of human rights. Thus, several movements emerged in search of humanized practices. In Brazil, linked to the struggle for health as a right of the people, in the 1970s, the anti-asylum movement gained strength and the review of the care model for those considered insane became an imperative⁸. An important process in the consolidation of the Brazilian Psychiatric Reform took place in 1989, based on Bill No. 3,657/89, which proposed the regulation of the rights of people in psychological distress in the care process and a logic of substituting asylums for territorial-based assistance resources⁹.

Even with the expansion of territorial-based services, programs and projects that aim to implement the deinstitutionalization process,

it was seen that it was necessary to broaden the look at the needs of users, mainly, in the context of the articulation between health and work¹⁰. With regard to social, political and economic inclusion, the junction between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labor and Employment was seen as an important perspective through the solidarity economy. With the support of the now extinct National Secretariat for the Solidarity Economy, the 1st National Workshop on Income Generation and Work Experiences for Users of Mental Health Services was held in 2004, representing a milestone in encouraging solidary cooperativism in the field of mental health. This alliance was signed through Interministerial Ordinance No. 353, of 2005, which guides mental health and solidarity economy as a policy, bringing incentives for training, mapping and building networks to mobilize the field¹¹.

The work based on the solidarity economy seeks the emancipation of people, their well-being in the production and expression of meanings through art and social inclusion through work in the territory. Singer defines the solidarity economy as a sustainable and social current centered on collective productivity and fair and cooperative division, being an “organized response to exclusion by the market, on the part of those who do not want a society driven by competition”¹²⁽¹¹⁾. That is, through solidarity, ways of producing, exchanging and creating spaces without exclusion are built. However, for the effective consolidation of these projects, public policies and social participation are necessary¹⁰.

In this sense, Gerar Network emerged in 2014, still without a physical location, using assigned spaces for its activities. It was in 2018 that House Gerar was inaugurated, provided by UFBA, which now includes a store, spaces for workshops, collective meetings and cultural activities. The actions are always built by the most diverse social actors, understanding the importance of the breadth of knowledge in the construction of the solidarity economy. Such actions are carried out

through self-management, always seeking to understand the needs in promoting a space of reception and anti-asylum resistance.

Although there are, in the most diverse forms, solidarity economy and mental health initiatives in Brazil, it is essential to highlight the resistance that is established in the quest to keep them active, considering the growing attempts to dismantle and the setbacks experienced in the country in terms of solidarity economy and mental health^{12,13}.

Methodology

This experience report seeks to expose and reflect on the interdisciplinary action that permeated the actions of the Gerar Virtual university extension project, of the Gerar Network of Solidarity Economy and Mental Health, located in the city of Salvador/BA, carried out from December 2020 to July 2021. During this period, the project’s activities were all carried out virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Weekly meetings were held to plan and discuss activities among the team, a fortnightly study group, weekly virtual workshops and participation in 9 activities outside the project, such as events and meetings with other actors. The team consisted of 6 RAPS users who acted as monitoring workers, 3 extension students and 7 professionals from different areas. During the project, 5 virtual workshops were held with weekly classes, allocating a total of 55 students, 4 lives with solidarity economy projects in other states of Brazil, 1 meeting with 8 local initiatives, among other complementary activities that will be described below.

The research turns to a descriptive study with a qualitative approach about the actions carried out in the period described above. Considering language a fundamental aspect of the present study, a qualitative nature was chosen because it “works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes”¹⁹⁽²¹⁾, therefore, this

methodology is necessary when approaching phenomena that are quite specific and deal with singularities of the social context. The study is developed based on the documentary analysis of 8 reports, 7 monthly and 1 final, weekly participant observation and 28 field diaries.

The collected data were organized in two moments. At first, the actions will be described as networking and exchange, virtual workshops and Gerar Network on the internet. In the second moment, the analysis will be carried out through the categories praxis in Freire and dialogism in Bakhtin. We emphasize that the names of the participating subjects have been modified, guaranteeing their anonymity.

Data analysis was based on critical reflection on the discursive and pedagogical practices guided by the perspective of Bakhtin¹⁵ and Freire^{16,17}. It is noteworthy that the authors currently work or worked directly on the project, so that close and distant experiences¹⁸ were intertwined throughout fieldwork and data analysis. In the light of Bakhtin¹⁵, the analysis discusses human processes, seeking to understand the world in which they are inserted, their experiences, feelings and everything that surrounds them. Another conception used for analysis is that of Freire's critical pedagogy¹⁶, bringing the importance of reflecting on dialogue as a critical-problematizing process that is essential in the pedagogical process, as "witnessing openness to others, curious availability to life, to its challenges are necessary knowledge for educational practice"¹⁶⁽¹³²⁻¹³³⁾.

Results and discussion

The Gerar Virtual Project

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adapt to sanitary measures, Gerar Network was faced with the challenge of adapting its practices and developing new

actions that addressed the needs arising from its social context, in view of possible communication difficulties, as a significant part of the people who work at Gerar are socially vulnerable.

The Gerar Network develops its actions in dialogue with the actors that circulate its space, contributing with needs and ideas that boost the autonomy of the subjects. Following the precepts of the solidarity economy, the project administration is based democratically through self-management. Decisions are discussed in assemblies, as well as information about the possibilities of developing actions are worked with the group of actors who propose to actively participate in the construction of activities and resolution of demands. According to Singer:

[...] self-management requires an additional effort from the workers in the solidary company: in addition to fulfilling the tasks assigned to them, each one of them has to worry about the general problems of the company¹²⁽¹⁹⁾.

Then comes the Gerar Virtual, developed between December 2020 and July 2021, and carrying out actions guided by its workers in conjunction with the needs listed by RAPS in Salvador. It had 16 workers: 6 RAPS users (embroider, mosaicists, seamstresses and weaver), 3 extension students (interdisciplinary baccalaureate in health, nursing and interdisciplinary baccalaureate in arts) and 7 technicians (university professor, plastic artist, two psychologists, filmmaker, secretary and seamstress). The composition of the team was constituted in an interdisciplinary way precisely because of the assumption of an expanded vision in the field of health, more particularly in mental health, with all its specificities in the area of health that deals with the production of subjectivity, creativity, anti-stigmatization actions and social inclusion of marginalized people. Interdisciplinarity is seen in several experiences in health and education, taking into account that, through

discussions, critical analysis and creation of ideas emerge¹⁷.

Aiming to promote the articulation and exchange of ideas in the field of mental health, there were some activities in Gerar Virtual that aimed to cross the project space. Lives were broadcast on Gerar Network's social networks with the participation of initiatives from other parts of the country, which made it possible to learn about new experiences, exchange knowledge and strengthen the network itself. The Gerar Virtual team also participated in regional, national and international events, taking their experiences to other places. Seeking to re-establish the link with the RAPS income generation initiatives, a virtual meeting called Reconnecting the network was held, aiming to understand how the initiatives were dealing with the pandemic and to collectively think about ways to stay active. To continue this articulation, the WhatsApp® group was reactivated as a space for exchanging information and monitoring the activities carried out in the spaces. Solidarity economy, being an important form of social construction, can and should also occupy multiple spaces as a possibility of collective construction; and considering its aspect as a citizen power, it brings male and female workers to a place of protagonism²⁰.

Another important aspect to be highlighted concerns the importance of the teaching-learning process during extension work, which is why a fortnightly study group was created to discuss topics related to mental health and solidarity economy based on articles and book chapters. Linking the theoretical discussion to such complex practices is essential for the development of a critical analysis of actions; to this end, the discussions provoke the extension workers to deal with adversities, seek new knowledge and experience professional practices³.

Training actions, especially artisan practices, are one of the main pillars at Gerar Network. However, as a result of social distancing, it was necessary to review the ways of offering

the workshops. For the development of the new format of the workshops, working groups were created to establish new practices. The articulation of the interdisciplinary team was fundamental in this construction, highlighting the participation of RAPS users – as team members – as essential in this construction, given the scope of ideas and notes regarding facilities and difficulties in possible practices. In this formulation, the importance of dialogue in the construction of practices is perceived, making the most of all the potential arising from the most diverse spaces of knowledge and in the deployment of practices that seek to encompass the maximum number of people, considering the emancipatory role of the solidarity economy. Bearing in mind the historical relationship of work as a therapeutic practice, spaces other than those encompassed by the tutelary nature are fundamental in building a possibility of inclusion through work for mental health users. Therefore, spaces for training, production, solitary care and aimed at the emancipation of subjects are needed, seeking in them all their potential²⁰.

Weaving, sewing, *fluxico*, painting and virtual environment workshops were offered. It is important to highlight that students in the art workshops received the materials needed to make the pieces. Each workshop had its own WhatsApp® group, through which video classes were sent weekly, and also served as a dialogical space – considering that, through the groups, students exchanged information, doubts, discussions of various topics, as well as it was a space for sharing care with others and for sociability, especially given the isolation imposed by the pandemic.

The weaving workshop had 4 students and aimed to develop creativity through the transformation of threads into fabrics with different designs, which were later transformed into various pieces. Through the video classes, it was possible to demonstrate the complete production of the pieces, complementing with the history of weaving. The sewing workshop was an important welcoming space for the

14 students who participated; and, through video classes, cutting and sewing techniques were developed, rescuing the cultural heritage and the production of various garments. The already consolidated *fluxico* workshop, which has been offered for some years and which had 7 participants at this stage, aimed at the development and/or improvement of the *fluxico* technique for creating creative pieces, as well as a cultural rescue of the technique. The painting workshop aimed to stimulate the creativity and artistic productivity of the 10 students who participated in it and who painted several pictures. Finally, the virtual environment workshop was a proposal that arose from the demand of RAPS users regarding the difficulty of digital insertion for communication in the face of the social distance of the pandemic, formulating classes from the main means of digital communication today, which were: WhatsApp®, Instagram®, Facebook® and Zoom®.

The products made during the workshops were part of the new Gerar Network line, consisting of clothing, accessories and decor. The allocation of sales values and their division were discussed with the participants, aiming at a fair and egalitarian way in decision-making and in the distribution of goods.

An important way of reaching out to people, not only those who are part of the Gerar Network, but also other subjects who may know and get closer, was through social media. In addition to information on activities and actions, an attempt was made to discuss topics relevant to the field of mental health and solidarity economy. Thus, the visibility of the Gerar Network in the virtual environment was significantly increased. Another important step was the construction of the Gerar Network website, which aimed to compile its history through photographic memories, videos and booklets, thus promoting the reunion with important moments of its construction. The virtual store was also an important milestone linked to the website, offering the various products produced in the

workshops and experiencing a new format for commercializing them.

Freirean praxis and Bakhtinian dialogism as possibilities for a critical understanding

From documental analysis, participant observation and field diaries, we sought to bring the potentialities and difficulties through their narratives, about Gerar Virtual, through the meanings that permeated the experience as construction, participation and realization of workers, as well as the students of the workshops. The encounter between mental health and solidarity economy is established through a series of collective proposals, considering that both provoke being in the world in the face of its diversity of beliefs and cultures, aiming at social change towards a more just and solidary way. It is from the transforming praxis, conceived in action-reflection, in the way the subject understands the world around him and the established practice, that the possibility of liberating education emerges¹⁶.

Understanding the historical moment experienced is considered essential in understanding this experience report. To this end, it is necessary to encompass the importance of the Gerar Network in the context of RAPS users' lives, perceiving this space as an emancipatory, empowering and social inclusion possibility. When analyzing the narrative through the considerations of RAPS users and workers, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic established a very complex moment, considering the increase in social inequalities, as well as the distancing of social relations. Reflecting that it is from the dialogical relationship that the possibility of being in the world, of constructing and deconstructing meanings is established¹⁵, it is necessary to think about the impact that social withdrawal implies on people in psychological distress, considering that social withdrawal has already been and, therefore, sometimes it is still imposed on these subjects as a form of social exclusion.

The dialogical relationships established in the construction of a new practice, mainly in the virtual environment, made such action a potency as an alternative to minimize the suffering caused by social distancing.

Gerar Virtual was a great challenge for the whole team. Designing a project taking into account the adversities regarding access to digital media led to the search for other experiences in the field of mental health, as well as to outline strategies aimed at reaching people in a viable way. It was noticed that, although most users have a cell phone, internet access and expertise in the use of digital platforms are still precarious, bringing to the agenda the importance of digital inclusion for mental health users. However, the starting point was the conception of an education based on the context of students, contemplating their needs and not conforming to social injustices and oppression¹⁶. Thus, through the workshops and virtual interactions, the potential of collective construction was seen, perceiving the educational process as multiple, mutual, as we see in Paula's speech below:

[...] we both teach and learn and the learning that we have now online, [...] I'm learning by doing things on the internet, on the cell phone, for me this is a very important learning experience for me, as well as for people.

It is possible to perceive the educational process as relational, dialogical, since it transitions between learning and teaching. This relationship is established from the horizontal precepts that are placed in the actions, support in doubt, the idea in construction, thinking and doing together. The context inserted in mental health comes from excluding, mortifying practices, aiming at passive subjects and away from the social environment. An education for freedom¹⁷ is included here, which is desired when it is proclaimed that freedom is therapeutic. It is necessary to provoke the environment, to be present, to approach an emancipatory proposal and that it has a *praxis*

from the experiences of the subjects, understanding their subjectivities and potentialities in order to transform the social environment¹⁶.

In the dialogues referring to the activities of the workshops, it was noticed the fear regarding the practices, so that they would not culminate in a spectator relationship, but a dialogical relationship. Thus, speeches about possibilities and ways of provoking active participation in learning processes were frequent. The workshops had positive evaluations from the students, even with the difficulties linked to the virtual environment and the absence of physical contact. In this way, it became evident that the links established through electronic devices were a privileged space for the elaboration of the semantic webs of the network, as well as a relevant tactical element¹⁹ in coping with social distancing, bringing moments of joy, acceptance, distraction, incentives, learning and affection.

The use of the internet as a way of establishing a network with initiatives from other states of the country was important to expand possibilities for dialogue, as well as taking the voices that build the Gerar Network to different areas, expanding the autonomy of the subjects. Furthermore, it led to the belief in the possibility of a national articulation that broadens discussions on solidarity economy and mental health. At the municipal level, this construction was difficult, in view of the disarticulation of the collectives that, as a result of the sanitary measures, ceased or reduced their activities, making it impossible for RAPS users to produce and sell them. However, based on the actions of Gerar Virtual, it was possible to act as an incentive for the resumption of activities from the meeting that took place in order to discuss possibilities, including sales through the virtual store, which was later implemented.

Another aspect to be discussed is the contribution of extension students who, through their curiosity and openness to living as a worker, built important tasks in all stages of the project. The experience of working in

the interdisciplinary team is of great value in the student's training process, who then see themselves as part of it, with responsibility, opinions, frustrations and practical constructions⁴. Education is an interaction between theory and practice, it constitutes a dialogical-dialectic, that is, "nobody educates anyone, nor does anyone educate themselves: men educate themselves in communion, mediated by the world"¹⁶⁽⁷⁹⁾. Therefore, education starts from the transforming, critical, libertarian premise, aiming from these future professionals the same dynamics in their experiences.

In relation to Gerar Virtual, in the most diverse moments, statements were seen that guided continuity, the need for government incentive, the non-completion of activities, among other demands that coined the fear of finitude of activities. The constant dismantling of public health policies and the very instability due to the lack of financial incentives from the Gerar Network are on the agenda, highlighting the protagonism of the subjects as claimants of rights and the fighting character of the anti-asylum movement.

There is still a fragility of public policies aimed at mental health with regard to work and income, since initiatives often depend on public notices, support from institutions and donations to maintain themselves. There has been a growing government effort to dismantle public/mental health since 2016¹⁴, but also a lesser emphasis in Brazilian mental health policy on the implementation of inclusion practices through work. Thus, it is possible to notice the protagonist nature of their history that the project participants present, realizing this demand and claiming what contributes to their well-being. Based on this scenario, it is understood the importance of reporting the history of initiatives, demonstrating their constitution, functioning and meanings in their relationship with the various actors that cross them, also taking into account the factors that permeate the production of meaning regarding cultural, territorial, political aspects and the dialogical relationship plurality²⁰.

Final considerations

Gerar Network consolidates itself as an important initiative in Salvador's mental health, seeking to establish the precepts of deinstitutionalization based on inclusion through work, empowerment of autonomy and emancipation of people with mental suffering. It is committed, therefore, to the development of the potential of users in the territory and the deconstruction of the stigma of madness, based on the project's interaction with society. Idealizing to achieve these objectives, Gerar Network develops actions with actors from different fields of knowledge, articulating and mobilizing the network and being a reference for users, RAPS workers and students regarding the solidarity economy and mental health.

Interdisciplinarity in the construction of health care, emphasizing the user as an active agent, enabled innovative and powerful practices such as Gerar Virtual, which, despite the difficulties arising from the pandemic context and the digital exclusion of many users, provided new constructions and the ability to develop skills for all who participated in the various spheres.

One can see, from the experience reported here, the importance of, as Paulo Freire teaches, doing with and not doing for. The construction arising from a practice for freedom, jointly between students, people in psychological distress and professionals from different areas, brings breath in the midst of chaos and provokes us to reflect on the needs of public policies that address mental health in its diversity, specificity and subjectivity.

Considering the entire framework described, it is clear that, even in the midst of the fragility of public policies that deal with the mental health-work-income triangulation in the current context, the actions developed contributed to emancipation and living in freedom. In this sense, it is expected that the network will continue with its activities, adding the knowledge acquired during the pandemic period in its future actions, more and more placing itself as an interconnected space of hearts and minds in defense of life and the Brazilian psychiatric reform.

Collaborators

Santos C (0000-0003-0482-6187)* contributed to the design, writing and critical review of the manuscript. Portugal CM

(0000-0003-0373-4141)* contributed to the writing and critical review of the manuscript. Nunes MO (0000-0002-5905-4199)* contributed to the critical revision of the text. ■

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