

Female Agency and Autonomy: Contributions to Sociological Studies in Contexts of Urban Poverty

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Abstract: Sociological knowledge has produced an extensive tradition based on the duality between the impossibility of agency and the voluntarism of action. Contemporary approaches, with contributions from feminists, have formulated the problem of agency and autonomy in order to escape this duality and offered more adequate constructs for investigations into the experiences of women. By combining the intersectional approach with the capabilities approach, this paper organizes an analytical resource capable of understanding agency and autonomy in a pendulum between constraints and choices. This undertaking is carried out considering the interweaving of gender, class, and race as a suggestion for studies in contexts of urban poverty, given its relevance to the debate on gender, poverty, and human development. This is a theoretical study on the proposed theme.

Keywords: feminism; female autonomy; poverty; agency; intersectionalities; Human development.

Agência e autonomia feminina: aportes para estudos sociológicos em contextos de pobreza urbana

Resumo: O conhecimento sociológico produziu extensa tradição com base na dualidade entre a impossibilidade de agência e o voluntarismo da ação. Abordagens contemporâneas, com contribuições das feministas, têm formulado o problema da agência e da autonomia de modo a escapar dessa dualidade e oferecido constructos mais adequados às investigações sobre as experiências das mulheres. A partir da combinação da abordagem interseccional com a abordagem das capacidades, este trabalho organiza um aporte analítico capaz de compreender a agência e a autonomia em um pêndulo entre os constrangimentos e as escolhas. Esse empreendimento é realizado considerando-se o entrelaçamento entre gênero, classe e raça como sugestão para estudos em contextos de pobreza urbana, tendo em vista sua relevância para o debate sobre gênero, pobreza e desenvolvimento humano. Esta é uma pesquisa teórica sobre o tema proposto.

Palavras-chave: Feminismo; Autonomia feminina; Pobreza; Agência; Interseccionalidades; Desenvolvimento Humano.

Agencia y autonomía de la mujer: contribuciones a los estudios sociológicos en contextos de pobreza urbana

Resumen: El conocimiento sociológico ha producido una extensa tradición basada en la dualidad entre la imposibilidad de agencia y el voluntarismo de la acción. Los enfoques contemporáneos, con aportes de las feministas, han formulado el problema de la agencia y la autonomía para escapar de esta dualidad y ofrecer constructos más adecuados para investigar las experiencias de las mujeres. Basado en la combinación del enfoque interseccional y el enfoque de capacidades, este trabajo organiza un enfoque analítico capaz de comprender la agencia y la autonomía en un péndulo entre restricciones y opciones. Este emprendimiento se lleva a cabo considerando el entrelazamiento de género, clase y raza como sugerencia de estudios en contextos de pobreza urbana, dada su relevancia para el debate sobre género, pobreza y desarrollo humano. Se trata de una investigación teórica sobre el tema propuesto.

Palabras clave: feminismo; Autonomía femenina; Pobreza; Agencia; Interseccionalidad; Desarrollo humano.

Introduction

The place that the notion of the individual occupies in sociological theory and political thought involves issues that interconnect debates about agency, autonomy, and human development. These debates encounter questions that have sometimes been raised by feminism, and other times challenged it, and have influenced analyses of patterns in domination and social conservation or social changes. In sociological traditions, especially in approaches inherited from structural-functionalism, social action was often not addressed as an issue. In turn, contemporary theories that have taken up the challenge of explaining and understanding experiences, everyday life or the life world, have endeavored to offer conceptual and analytical resources of social action.

The sociological problem of the relationship between structure and agency is also expressed in the political terrain and in public policies because it involves interpreting the ability, or inability, that individuals have to interfere in the configuration of their biography or in the history of society. In this way, structuralist, functionalist, and systemic sociological approaches find points of convergence with feminist political views that prefer to distance themselves from individualization perspectives. These constructions also converge on the refusal of liberal thought.

From the criticism formulated from black feminism come demands for a feminist theory that is not informed by the ideology of liberal individualism (bell hooks, 2000). Among feminist studies on family, one finds charges that feminist perspectives informed by the notion of individualization are stuck in class biases that do not encompass the experiences of lower income or working-class women and families (Cynthia SARTI, 2004; Leny TRAD, 2010). There is also the criticism directed at colonialism that sees notions of individual freedom and equality as belonging to a Eurocentric idea and, as such, also oppressive. Such notions, when incorporated into international development projects, do not respect cultural differences and plurality and, moreover, sustain a harmful type of paternalism (Andrea CORNWALL; Elizabeth HARRISON; Ann WHITEHEAD, 2004).¹

The synthesis that can be made of this criticism is that there is, within feminist studies and politics, a persistent unease with categories of liberal thought. This discomfort results in refusals of a notion of individualization, which, in terms of sociological analyses, spills over into the erasure of *agency* and thus hinders views on autonomy. Notwithstanding such feminist critiques of liberalism, and without wishing to minimize their importance in highlighting certain limitations of development projects, my argument aims to argue that the normative ideal of female autonomy requires mobilizing, in a critical manner, notions that are influenced by political liberalism, such as agency, instead of rejecting them.

Elisabeth Badinter (2005), in dialogue with radical feminism of American origin, criticizes the feminist currents that, in their anxiety to amplify their power of denunciation, adopt political conceptions that victimize or infantilize all women, often without realizing it. In Badinter's (2005) view, feminist agendas that give prominence to issues such as violence against women, harassment, and rape often lead to victimizing approaches. Authors from the Global South have pointed out a similar phenomenon in studies on poverty, revealing how certain approaches conceive women as dependent, powerless, and objects of state interventions and other organizations working on the development agenda (Srilatha BATLIWALA; Deepa DHANRAJ, 2004).

The point Badinter raises is a plea for approaches that recognize female agency, that is, that recognize women as beings endowed with the capacity to act and to make choices. In doing so, one must be careful not to adhere to visions, also present in human development projects or programs aimed at women in poverty, which confer on them a certain kind of heroism, since they are able to achieve many benefits with few material resources, resulting in the denounced instrumentalization of poor women (Caroline MOSER and Annalise MOSER, 2005; Silvana MARIANO and Cássia CARLOTO, 2009).

Additionally, the claims found in authors, such as Patricia Hill Collins (2002), Angela Davis (2011), and bell hooks (2000), look at the experiences of black women and advocate for the recognition of the different ways of constituting oneself as a subject, and the diversity of action and resistance strategies. As Collins (2002) highlights, these experiences are shaped by the consciousness of being in the lowest echelon of the social structure. Approaches that victimize or infantilize women are likewise those that adopt the myth of female fragility, a myth that is informed by references to class and race (DAVIS, 2011 and hooks, 2000). The defense of a feminism that operates using notions and categories that account for the diversity of women and that recognize them as agents is a common view in these positions. If there is any consensus around these claims, it is agreed that female autonomy passes through agency, and that there is no agency without individualization. Here is where we encounter the capabilities approach as a support for a universalistic theory of justice that guides human development policies.

¹ Part of the development agenda criticism can be found in: Cornwall *et al* (2004). For a dialogue between criticism of colonialism and the defense of a feminist conception of universalist development, see Nussbaum (2001).

In this paper, based on the combination of the intersectional approach and the capabilities approach, the goal is to organize an analytical framework capable of understanding women's agency and autonomy in a pendulum between social constraints and individual choices. In a theoretical exercise, authors from the fields of black feminism, family sociology and the capability approach are mobilized, aiming at analytical resources to access perceptions and understand women's life trajectories and aspirations.

The next section of this paper develops sociological and feminist reflections that place the agency approach as an available and necessary tool for understanding the experiences of women in poverty, especially in view of human development issues. It is, therefore, a notion of agency that combines canonical views of Sociology with socially referenced knowledge for contexts of urban poverty. In the following section, the relationship between agency, capabilities and individualization is emphasized, advocating a sociological conception of the individual, taken as an agent constituted in the traversing of social relations involving different powers, configured in several dimensions, such as gender, class and race, and located in specific contexts. In the final considerations, the argument in defense of the explanatory potentiality of research that seeks to capture and apprehend the ways in which poor women in urban centers build forms of feminine autonomy and the contribution of this perspective to human development programs is revived.

Feminist contributions to approaches involving agency and autonomy

Since its first writings, feminist studies have brought forth new and enriching insights into the social world, including debates on social action, or *agency*. An interpretation to these ends must consider the specific contexts in which the intersections between individualization and social class are woven, in dialogue with the accumulation of Brazilian studies that point to the situation of greater individualization in the middle classes and greater emphasis on collective projects or interests among the families of the lower classes (SARTI, 2004).

Discussing agency, as well as individuality, is essential to autonomy studies. How to think about agency, drawing on a theory of individuality, without adhering to conceptions that support and legitimize individual competitiveness? At least since Émile Durkheim (1977), sociological theory has dealt with the distinction between individual freedom and utilitarian individualism, or, as found in John Rawls (2020) and Amartya Sen (1992), the defense of individual freedom does not presuppose adherence to the principles of meritocracy. Therefore, the ways of theorizing and interpreting the notion of individual are varied. For this text, we are interested in those forms that give relevance to the individual and recognize in him/her the possibilities of agency, without reification or atomism. The authors mobilized are aligned in this direction, such as, for example, Margaret Archer (2002 and 2010), Martha Nussbaum (2001) and Patricia Hill Collins (2002 and 1986), among others.

Martha Nussbaum (2001) offers an important contribution to the argument for recognizing the individual dimension of women. Nussbaum (2001) analyzes the situation of women in developing countries in comparison to women in countries with a consolidated welfare state, in a stage of coexistence with post-materialist demands, and indicates the need for a feminist agenda that encompasses the experiences, needs, and interests of the former. The demands of women in poverty are usually aimed at meeting the material conditions of immediate interest. Hence the emergence in international feminism, motivated by feminists from the Global South, of issues such as hunger, nutrition, literacy, land rights, access to work outside the home, and the rights of children. In developing countries, the agenda of women's autonomy requires an inversion of the logic of policies to combat poverty and human development, since these generally view women as mere instruments for the ends of others (NUSSBAUM, 2001), which involves the provision of care on the part of women. Inverting this logic implies implementing programs that consider women as an end in themselves. This is only possible by recognizing them as individuals and loosening the ties that bind them to traditional social roles such as mothers and caregivers. Holding women responsible for care giving, combined with gendered and racialized patterns of socialization, constitute important limiting factors for the exercise of female autonomy.

Feminist thinkers have approached the theme of autonomy considering aspects such as power and socialization processes. For Elizabeth Jelin (2004, p. 24), women's autonomy corresponds to "the ability to make their own decisions, based on information and knowledge, but in conjunction with the recognition of their own desires." From the same perspective, for Vera Soares (2011, p. 281), women's autonomy is "the ability to make free and informed decisions about their own lives, so that they can be and do according to their own aspirations and desires, in a given historical context." Aspirations and desires of their own are formed in material and symbolic contexts, configured by the process of socialization and the resources to which women have access. There are, therefore, impacts of oppression and domination on the formation of women's preferences and exercise of agency (NUSSBAUM, 2001; Flávia BIROLI, 2012).

Family dynamics occupy a prominent place for women's autonomy and conditions of agency. For Jelin (2004, p. 26), family is an organization of coexistence, sexuality and procreation and, as such, is a "power structure with strong ideological and affective components", whose basic principles are age, gender and kinship. Gender hierarchies, which operate in different dimensions of society, "restrict the horizon of what is possible for women" (BIROLI, 2012, p. 17). Moreover, there is the tension between personal autonomy and collective identity, with distinct implications for men and women. In the case of women, Jelin (2004) calls attention to the ambiguity, more pronounced in women from lower income classes, between the recognition of individuality and the role of the woman-mother as family support.

In dealing with social relations,

[...] autonomy and individual freedom can never be total, since individuals need and find benefits and satisfaction in the bonds of protection, solidarity, commitment and responsibility towards one another, starting with the most intimate and affectionate sphere that is the family (Elizabeth JELIN, 2004, p. 31).

Considering this perspective that autonomy is always relative, thereby never full, the conception of freedom in the works of Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2001) contributes to the solution of any impasse by interpreting freedom as an expansion of options of choice, even understanding that the choice is processed in a tangle of constraints, reflexivity and self-determination. To understand contexts that limit women's autonomy, Nussbaum (2001) deals with the conditions in which the deformation of preferences occurs, when women have this horizon of possibilities narrowed by social values and practices that limit their aspirations and desires, and therefore, their choices. Impoverished, sexualized, and racialized women are more likely to encounter preference deformation.

The adoption of a class cutoff, when seeking to understand the contexts of women in poverty, requires the choice of some conception of social class. hooks (2000) proposes that we think of class outside of Marx's interpretation scheme and that we consider behaviors, expectations for the future, and forms of action. In this aspect, according to hooks, thinking about social class in the terms proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (2007) offers possibilities for analysis capable of apprehending and explaining these class experiences.

Bourdieu's sociology, by privileging class in its scheme of social distinction, subordinates the determinations of other classification systems, such as gender and race, for example. However, as for the conceptualization of class, we agree with hooks (2000) that this is still a fertile resource, insofar as class, for Bourdieu, is not restricted to economic phenomena and, consequently, is not mobilized in a dichotomous model. In this way, the careful use of Bourdieu's analytical schemes can help in the direction proposed by hooks. Nevertheless, I propose its use without commitment to the adoption of the *habitus* of class concept, even though I am aware of its relevance in Bourdieu's sociology.

Bourdieu's formulation is promising in offering analytical tools for a sociology of social practices, which gives some relevance to the individual or agent, who is still tied to the *habitus* of class, which is a "unifying principle and generator of practices" and concerns the "embodied form of the class condition of the constraints it imposes" (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 101). It is a system of dispositions that tends to produce relative homogeneity of values, expectations, strategies and practices among people belonging to a class or fraction of a class. Bourdieu's emphasis is, therefore, on sociological regularities. For him, the construction of classes, as an analytical resource adopted by the sociologist, must "consciously take into consideration (...) the network of manipulated secondary characteristics (...) [and] apprehend the origin of objective divisions, that is, incorporated or objectified in distinct properties" (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 101). Social class, for Bourdieu, corresponds to the diversity of practices and the multiplicity of determinations, or over determinations, including, secondarily, dimensions such as sexual identity and aging. To understand the forms of subjectivation of women in poverty, we need a fluid notion of social class, like Bourdieu's, which must be placed on the same analytical plane as sex or gender and race. An analysis in these terms takes a certain distance from Bourdieu, even though it starts from him, and approximates intersectional thinking.

The sense adopted by Bourdieu to address the construction of social classes is useful for the purposes of a sociology interested in social practices, insofar as it articulates the economic and cultural dimensions. However, the concept of *habitus* from Margaret Archer's (2002; 2010) realist, or morphogenetic, perspective offers greater fluidity for the treatment of the relationship between structure and agent. Thus, when we replace the notion of "determination," employed by Bourdieu, with the notion of "social constraints," adopted by Anthony Giddens (1984) and Archer (2002; 2010), we find better analytical support on agency and autonomy. In the same vein, the perspective of "intersectionalities" (Kimberlé CRENSHAW, 2002), instead of "over determination", provides greater scope for understanding the forms of action and resistance of the subjects.

Based on the intersectional approach, the analysis gains more complexity by addressing agency from what Collins (2002) exemplifies as the problem of the fit between consciousness and activity. Some branches of the social sciences, according to the author, assume that certain measures of human behavior correspond to certain kinds of human consciousness with respect to self and social structure. Collins warns that this assumption is not a competent resource for understanding the experiences of black women, since "Black women's experiences suggest that Black women may overtly conform to the societal roles laid out for them, yet covertly oppose these roles in numerous spheres, an opposition shaped by the consciousness of being on the bottom" (COLLINS, 2002). Occupying a position "at the bottom of the social structure" lends another perspective to these women's strategies and indeed another perspective to what is meant by action or activism. This approach helps us understand that social rules are not simply reproduced or reiterated by the agents, since the ability to make use of the rules often involves their reinvention or re-signification. Even the relationship between obedience and resistance, that is, being in conformity with a pattern or in conflict with it, are inter-subjective interactions that are not limited to the fit between consciousness and activity or the polarization between reproduction and change. In this way, those who are situated "at the bottom of the social structure" do not find themselves in the condition of powerlessness.

The notion of reflexivity formulated by Margaret Archer (2002; 2010) contributes to this understanding of agency and produces some advances over Bourdieu's and Giddens' sociology, for example. Despite its promise, Bourdieu's sociology is still predominantly deterministic, while Giddens' sociology, in contrast, exaggerates the individual's capacity for agency. Archer aims to advance on this ground with morphogenetic analysis, operating with the interweaving of structure, culture, and agency. These are things that are intertwined, but not inseparable. Such a conception offers contributions to explain the relationship between social change and conservation, and also interweaves different levels of analysis, the micro, the meso and the macrosocial.

The interweaving of objectivity and subjectivity, for feminists, also has the implication of seeking, at the epistemological level, the valorization of mesosociological analyses that deal with the everyday, the context, the situation or the contingency, depending on the referential adopted. Feminist studies are among those that have spread criticism to the notions of "objectivity" and "neutrality" and to the relation between subject and object, when this is taken as a relation of separation or overcoming. Studies oriented by these new perspectives have contributed to the understanding of various modes of oppression, thus distancing themselves from previous perspectives based on universalistic approaches considered a-historical.

In later phases, including some internal critiques of feminism, feminist research went through different modulations between an emphasis on "oppression" or on autonomy. As is often the case in this milieu, if feminist research always looks for "oppression," it will see only oppression. To be able to grasp women's agency, one must have analytical systems capable of capturing their actions, strategies, and choices, beyond hegemonic parameters of classification.

For these purposes, it is useful to address autonomy in both its sociological and political dimensions, considering the feminist contributions that have brought a critical and deconstructionist approach to the term. Agreeing with hooks (2000), I take into account her critique of using the notion of oppression as an opposition to autonomy. Thinking in the North American context, hooks proposes that "exploitation" and "discrimination" would be more appropriate terms to encompass most women's reality. "Oppression," for the author, supposes a universality among women that leaves no room for the diversity of experiences, such as those of class and race. The author also interprets "oppression" as "absence of choices" and, in this society, many women have choices, even though they may be inadequate. White, educated, and affluent women have certain options available to them, when compared to black, poor, and less educated women (hooks, 2000).

The strategies for expanding women's options, however, may involve a number of possible arrangements. For example, hooks (2000) criticizes a certain feminist bias that sees the world of work as an expansion of women's freedom and raises questions about the type of work, and about domestic and care work, bearing in mind that the demands for women's inclusion in the labor market are biased by class and race. Poor, black women have always worked outside the home for pay. The condition of being a housewife, seen as oppressive in works such as Betty Friedan's (2010), can be viewed as desirable by black and poor women, as hooks (2000) tells us.

Treating objectivity and subjectivity in a relational perspective, as these feminist currents propose, is a challenge similar to the one Archer formulates in terms of the relationship between *habitus* and reflexivity. How do these women act in their respective contexts? How are their trajectories marked by social constraints as well as by choices? How do we address the weight of class, gender, and race systems? For Archer (2010), the influences of social order on the individual's conduct are neither entirely within agents nor entirely outside them. Archer's framework, therefore, offers an analytical structure for the forms of action by agents inserted in contexts configured by multiple social conditioning factors, such as black and poor women.

When we look at research on female autonomy and/or human development in contexts of urban poverty, we have as a backdrop a research agenda interested in social change. Archer's formulations, in the company of feminist studies, are useful in this sense. For the author, although the structural properties are continuously dependent on the activity, through analytical dualism it is possible to separate and agency and examine their relations in order to account for the reproduction and change, or even the structuring and restructuring of the social order (ARCHER, 2010).

In this process, a double morphogenesis occurs, the transformation of structure and agency, which must be explained both in diachronic and synchronic terms. Archer continues as follows (2002),

To account for variability as well as regularity in the courses of action taken by those similarly situated means acknowledging our singularity as *persons*, without denying that our sociality is essential for us to be recognizable as *human persons*.

This notion of agency, even in its variations between Giddens and Archer, is close to the concept of capabilities developed by Amartya Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2001), a concept that has contributed to the insertion of women at the center of debates on human development,² which is relevant for women in situations of poverty. One aspect that Nussbaum highlights in his work is the link that he makes between the capabilities approach and political liberalism. In so doing, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that this approach, like the agency theories, attaches special value to choices, or preferences. Therefore, the individual is a special topic of reflection in these conceptions. In dealing with human capabilities and their link to the challenges for human development, Nussbaum advocates an analysis that considers economic, institutional, and emotional aspects. Such an approach is compatible with that advocated by Archer, who operates with the interweaving of structure, culture, and agency.

Women are often not treated as an end in themselves and are not recognized as people, which negatively affects the recognition of their dignity and respect for their rights by laws and institutions. Entrusted with providing care, seen at times as sexual objects and at other times as representing the interests of the family or the community (rather than personal interests), women are thus instrumentalized, and placed at the disposal of others. This instrumentalization can bring both positive and negative values.

This capabilities approach presupposes the consideration of women as individuals and requires, as the normative center of its theory, that women be regarded as an end in themselves. Considering the fact that inequality between the sexes is a global phenomenon, as well as the indications of strong correlations between gender inequalities and poverty, Nussbaum (2001) suggests that "the themes of poverty and development be tackled based on feminist political and economic thought, since women, practically all over the world, synthesize the intertwining of these two issues and formulate interpretations on these challenges."

Nussbaum (2001) has also warned that it is crucial to understand how context marks both choice and aspiration in the formation of adaptive preferences or preference deformation. If development means the expansion of freedoms and if freedoms are dimensioned with reference to the choices available to individuals, considering the inequalities in the distribution of these opportunities, then it follows that a theory of agency is indispensable and unavoidable to address these issues. This agenda also highlights the peculiarities of social groups that have historically encountered more obstacles to the recognition of their status as individuals, including women, blacks, and the poor.

Martha Nussbaum's (2001) universalist philosophical basis, sensitive to pluralism and cultural differences, is fundamental to understanding her concern regarding the relationship between social justice and women. By listing a series of aspects in which women are at a disadvantage – greater malnutrition, worse health indices, greater vulnerability to violence, inequality in the labor market, among others – the author argues that women need greater support when it comes to capacity building. Thus, according to her, in general terms, social and political circumstances, when based on gender, provide women with unequal human capabilities, compared to those given to men (NUSSBAUM, 2001). As such, boosting human development necessarily involves recognizing women as individuals, agents capable of participating in this process and including their interests in it. This condition can only be achieved when we stop having homogenizing visions about poverty and poor women and when we are endowed with the capacity to understand their social practices.

Considering more recent advances in Brazilian modernization, including feminism as one of the sources of this modernization, a broad research agenda has been consolidated to question the individualization of women in poverty in the large urban centers of the country. This debate intersects with the themes of agency and autonomy.

² Although Sen has achieved great notoriety with the capabilities approach, Nussbaum's contributions to this approach are also of interest. There is not enough space and opportunity here to discuss the similarities and differences between the two proposals.

This section develops elements to argue for the validity of analyses that attempt to equate the dualities between social determinations and voluntarism, or between victimization and heroism, in view of conceptions of agency and autonomy that dialogue with concerns about the experiences of women who are impoverished, sexualized, and racialized. In the following section, we reflect on the most appropriate scale of analysis for this type of research and advocate for the benefits of mesosociological studies anchored in material and symbolic contexts.

The importance of contexts

The construction and exercise of women's autonomy are intertwined with the formation of preferences. As Nussbaum (2001) demonstrates, women may not even desire certain rights, goods, and services if they do not see them as tangible. Circumstances shape and modify both options and preferences. Women who are not aware of experiences, for example, such as the provision of treated and piped water, will not make this an object of desire, nor make claims for it, and will adapt their preferences to this reality. To the extent that this lack can be taken as a case of social injustice, such adaptation is an example of a deformative preference.

This also applies to the issue of women's bodily integrity. A break with the idea that mistreatment is the fate of women is only possible in contexts where the interpretation of, for example, individual rights and human dignity for women is available. Criticism of discriminatory structures in the labor market, including with regard to wages, requires the presence of the value of equality in this sphere. This premise that preferences are deformed by social injustices embedded in economic, institutional, and emotional structures provides an analytical support capable of producing critical distinctions that uncover women's low expectations (NUSSBAUM, 2001), given that they are at the bottom of the social structure.

By exposing the limitations of abstract, generalizing and universalizing approaches, feminist studies have invoked the need for contextualized and informed approaches that take into account the power relations that affect individual freedoms, thus conditioning autonomy and, consequently, circumscribing the very possibilities of making choices. In this way, reflections on female autonomy can rely on approaches that take into consideration the material and symbolic contexts in which women's social practices are produced, experienced, and transformed. According to Mary Dietz (1987), "if context is all, then feminism in its various guises is committed to uncovering what is all around us and to revealing the power relations that constitute the creatures we become."

Since individual freedom, choices, and preference formation must be understood in their contexts, women's own experiences, or social practices, must be comprehended in their specificity. Considering the developments in the previous section, analysis on a mesosociological level is suitable for this endeavor. Thus, research involving women in poverty will be interested in those contexts that are made up of material and symbolic conditions and processes that allow us to explain and understand how these women are agents in their everyday life and the strategies that make this everyday life possible. Such a study will be interested in both the regularities and the variations that take shape in social practices. The concept of reflexivity is key to this understanding.

In Giddens (1984), one of the advocates of the reflexivity concept to explain modern societies, his rejection of the paradigms that conceive of human behavior as the result of forces that actors neither control nor understand is relevant. On the other hand, Archer's contributions are significant in order to avoid the risks of a sociology that may exaggerate the agent's capacity for action and, also, the risk that Archer points out in Giddens of leveling all actors and actions. As per Archer (2010, p. 160-161),

As an explanatory framework, the morphogenetic approach endorses a stratified ontology for structures (Archer 1995), cultures (Archer 1988), and agents (Archer 2000) because each has emergent and irreducible properties and powers – and explains every social outcome as the product of their interplay. Outcomes, which can be broadly reproductive or largely transformatory, depend upon the intertwining of structure, culture, and agency, but not by rendering them inseparable, as in the central conflation.

Com esses referenciais, as pesquisas podem conciliar a dupla hermenêutica (GIDDENS, 1984) e a dupla morfogênese (ARCHER, 2010) a fim de produzir uma "descrição densa" das práticas sociais das mulheres e, ao fazê-lo, a interpretação sociológica deve alcançar as dimensões pessoais, culturais e estruturais. Para Archer (2010),

Only by striking the right balance between personal, structural, and cultural emergent powers is it possible to explain precisely what people do, rather than falling back upon correlations between group membership and action patterns, which are necessarily lacking in explanatory power.

By operating a study of context at a mesosociological level, this procedure fails to capture the richness of individual variations, which Bernard Lahire (2004) even accuses of "sandpapering" those events or situations that are divergent or contradictory. However, the damage of losing

the refinement of the dispositionalist approach is assumed with the deeper understanding of sociological portraits in order to achieve both social *variability* and *regularity*.

Life stories are a privileged means for the analyst to mobilize these conceptual and theoretical resources. The act of looking into the life stories of the participants in the research allows us to apprehend the experiences of these women, the way they perceive their situation and the meanings they articulate.

The interpretations that the agents make of their social condition are traversed by class, gender, and race belonging. The intersection between these three axes has already been the object of analysis by Brazilian sociologists, such as Heleieth Saffioti (2000) and Maria Lygia Quartim de Moraes (2000), when they showed that society is made up of three fundamental contradictions that reinforce each other: gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. As Saffioti (2000) notes, these three axes form the “patriarchy-racism-capitalism” system. In a certain branch of contemporary feminist literature, especially since the studies of black feminists, the interweaving of these three axes has been called the intersectional approach (CRENSHAW, 2002), and this approach has been productive for studies on social inequalities that operate with multifaceted perspectives, without atomizing or reifying agents (MARIANO; Márcia MACÊDO, 2015). As a common feature among these approaches, one can highlight the refusal of any hierarchization among the three axes, and, consequently, the refusal of any essentialization of the subjects or agents.

When planning an investigation within these references, the researcher must take the necessary care so that the topics covered in their guides are able to access the interpretations that the research subjects convey on the different powers that Archer (2010) deals with: personal, cultural and structural.

In this arrangement, the very manner of constructing the sociological object will already be traversed by the theme of agency, which will impact the means of constructing the interaction with the research subjects. Attributing special relevance to context therefore implies taking seriously the interpretations that women, as subjects of sociological research, develop about their experiences. The contributions made by feminist research to this topic, including the intersectional approach, reiterate the conception of research as a relationship between subjects, rather than between subject and object. The anchoring of the research in a certain context contributes to the analyst’s ability to capture the experience and interpretations of the agents.

The valorization of context in social research, although present in numerous schools of contemporary sociology, has special significance when it comes to researching women’s experiences, especially those that have been subalternized. This is because canonical knowledge about the social world has often rendered women’s experiences invisible (Joan SCOTT, 1988; 1991), in different disciplinary fields.

Investigations anchored in context tend, for example, to produce more elements on the ambiguities experienced by women between the claims for individuality and the performance of roles as wife and mother, ambiguities that, according to Jelin (2004), are more pronounced among women from the lower social classes and, I would add, among racialized women, to whom, in a racist society such as the Brazilian one, more obligations in caring are attributed.

Aiming for an explanation that ponders these two aspects relevant to women’s experiences, Carol Gilligan proposes that individualization may be interpreted with reference to an “ethics of care” whereby individualizing oneself is not at odds with responsibilities to others, these being equated with responsibility to oneself (GILLIGAN, 1982, p. 94 *apud* BIROLI, 2016).

If the theme of individualization tends to emphasize the ability to make choices, this aspect is nuanced when the sociological gaze also addresses the constraints experienced, which is expressed more viably with a “situated and nucleated gaze” (Lia Zanotta MACHADO, 1994). According to the literature, in research involving women in poverty, they discuss and reflect on the difficulties that arise from the scarcity of time for their own use, it being dedicated to care, due to the sexual division of roles and the sexual division of labor, the absence of public services, especially daycare centers, as well as inequalities in the labor market, among others (Bila SORJ, Adriana FONTES; Danielle MACHADO, 2007; MARIANO; Márcio SOUZA, 2015; 2019).

Class, gender, and race conditions are inextricably linked to understanding the phenomenon of poor, black women being held individually and privately responsible for the care of their children and for the care of other dependents, even healthy people such as adult men, for example. Taking into account this same intricate arrangement is necessary for an understanding of why black and poor women are assigned paid care work, as is highlighted in paid domestic work in Brazil, and are the majority in anti-poverty programs linked to development policies. This is a phenomenon that, in addition to the elements that construct multidimensional poverty, produces the racialization of gender and the generification of race, in different contexts and circumstances, with effects for women’s agency and autonomy. Authors such as hooks (2000), Davis (2011), and Crenshaw (2002) highlight the fact that gender is not always the most determining factor in women’s experience, including experiences of exploitation and discrimination. Again, in the

sociological richness afforded by a contextual analysis, it is possible to better understand these processes and their effects.

Considering the accumulation of literature on empirical research about female autonomy, certain proposals stand out regarding advantageous topics for the operationalization of the notion of autonomy and the identification of women's margins of choice, taking into account their contexts, such as leaving their parents', relatives' or employers' homes to form a new family nucleus; formation and dissolution of marriages or unions; amorous and sexual relations; decisions about reproduction; handling the cycle of domestic violence; experience with sexual violence; decisions related to the organization of domestic space; individual and family consumption or financial planning; forms of placement in paid work; responsibilities related to care giving; self-assessment and self-definition.

The temporal dimension is also a powerful analytical resource for the researcher to detect signs of social change. In particular, this resource enables us to track indications of changing gender patterns, as perceived by women, and holds promise for studies on women's autonomy.

Even in contexts of vulnerability, women act as agents and have some range of autonomy, which can be seen, for example, in intergenerational comparisons. Archer's (2010) proposition is useful in understanding this duality between constraints or enablements:

Three conditions are required for the conditional influence of structural and cultural properties to *exercise their powers* as constraints or enablements. (...)

1. "such powers are dependent upon the existence of human projects".
2. "there has to be a relationship of congruence or incongruence, respectively, with particular agential projects."
3. "agents have to respond to these influences, which, being conditional rather than deterministic, are subject to reflexive deliberation over the nature of the response, and their personal powers include the abilities to withstand or circumvent them".

The analytical contributions articulated here are viable and promising for delving deeper into the interpretations of women's narratives so that sociology can grasp the structural, cultural, institutional, and emotional constraints and women's dispositions for action.

Final considerations

Visions of women in poverty tend to polarize the focus on victimization or heroism. This tendency permeates both sociological studies and development programs designed to combat poverty. The first approach gives rise to policies that protect women, contribute to forms of promoting powerlessness, and perceive them as dependent. The second gives way to narratives, for example, about black and poor women as "warriors," something common in the Brazilian social imaginary and that Sueli Carneiro (2015) criticized by pointing out the exclusion, discrimination, and social rejection that produce the "matriarchy of misery." This approach results in social unprotection.

Rejecting the views of victimization or heroism (or voluntarism) towards women, especially women in poverty, in this article I have argued for a framework that values agency and autonomy as conceptual and theoretical resources necessary for understanding women's experiences considered in particular contexts. In theoretical terms, I have argued that even in contexts of vulnerabilities, individuals act as agents and have some range of autonomy, and given gender, class, and race inequalities, this is even more relevant for sexualized, impoverished, and racialized women.

Additionally, a case has been made for analyses that escape the dichotomy between the microsociological and the macrosociological and appreciate the meso level in order to apprehend and explain the structural, cultural, institutional, and emotional constraining factors and the dispositions of action among these women. Mesosociological analyses can be undertaken to consider the context in which the action is located and can thereby be used to comprehend both regularities and variations through perceptions and intersubjectivities constituted in everyday life.

With adequate theoretical resources, it is possible to escape from interpretations and interventions that infantilize women or treat them as heroines, as have been the predominant approaches in development programs aimed at populations living in poverty. To conceive of these women as autonomous subjects, with their own desires and interests, produces more fitting visions about the contexts of poverty, with improved conditions to develop responses to women's needs.

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