

Challenges of academic and scientific output in the interface between Social and Human Sciences and Food and Nutrition Sciences

Desafios da produção acadêmico-científica na interface entre as Ciências Sociais e Humanas e as Ciências da Alimentação e Nutrição

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses theoretical and methodological challenges in the production of knowledge located in the interface between the Social Sciences and the Sciences of Food and Nutrition, mediated by Health Sciences. We recognize that the discussion on the intersections between these scientific fields arises from the need to expand the understanding of the phenomena surrounding the field of Food and Nutrition from other theoretical frameworks beyond the biomedical paradigm. The discussion will guide a reflection on the following issues: a) how to establish Brazilian academic-scientific output at the interface between the Nutritional Sciences and Social Sciences, mediated by Health Sciences; b) considering that there is a 'field' of the socio-anthropology of food developed historically within the Social Sciences and Humanities, which distinguishes the production of knowledge in the field of health; c) the main theoretical and methodological challenges of academic-scientific output today. We also discuss challenges related to the practical consequences of this output, considering the interventionist legacy in the field of health. Lastly, we highlight that such reflections also face another important challenge, namely the urgent need to reinvent ways of thinking and doing science which, articulated with demands inherent to a new field shaped by the search for production of knowledge and practices, is more important to issues raised by health care.

Keywords: Health Sciences. Humanities. Nutritional Sciences.

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RESUMO

O presente ensaio aborda os desafios teórico-metodológicos enfrentados na produção de conhecimento na interface entre as Ciências Sociais e Humanas e as Ciências da Alimentação e Nutrição, mediada pelas Ciências da Saúde. Reconhece que a discussão sobre as intersecções entre esses campos científicos surge da necessidade de ampliação da compreensão dos fenômenos que cercam o campo da Alimentação e Nutrição a partir de outros referenciais teóricos, para além do paradigma biomédico. A discussão empreendida se pautará na reflexão das seguintes questões: a) Como se configura a produção acadêmico-científica brasileira situada na interface entre as Ciências da Nutrição e Ciências Sociais, mediada pelas Ciências da Saúde; b) ao considerar que existe um 'campo' da socioantropologia da alimentação desenvolvido historicamente no bojo das Ciências Sociais e Humanas, o que diferencia a produção de saberes realizada no campo da saúde; c) quais os principais desafios teórico-metodológicos dessa produção acadêmico-científica na contemporaneidade. Discutem-se, ainda, os desafios relacionados aos desdobramentos práticos dessa produção, considerando o legado intervencionista do campo da saúde. Por fim, salienta-se que tais reflexões enfrentam, ainda, outro desafio relevante: a urgência de reinventar modos de pensar e fazer ciência que sejam mais pertinentes às questões apontadas no campo de saberes e práticas de saúde.

Palavras-chave: Ciências da Saúde. Ciências Humanas. Ciências da Nutrição.

INTRODUCTION

This essay deals with the theoretical-methodological challenges faced in the production of knowledge located at the interface between Nutrition Sciences and the Social Sciences and Humanities, mediated by the Health Sciences. The reflections that we intend to undertake here have their roots in the need to expand the understanding of phenomena surrounding the field of Food and Nutrition on the basis of other references beyond bio-medical knowledge, on which the theoretical references of the Social Sciences have collaborated more intensely.

Hence, the text represents an intention to reflect on a number of questions in this field of intersection, which has gained greater vigor over the last decade, since its character is more likely to contribute to the discussion than to make conclusive statements on the challenges faced under this scenario.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to highlight that in referring to the sociology of food, or also, that from the start of the development of anthropological studies, food was portrayed as

an object of study at that historical point in tangential fashion and more recently, has been a central object of studies by many researchers¹. At the same time, this essay deals with the question of how the approach of a socio-anthropological kind falls within the field of health and imposes challenges on researchers deriving from this area, who are seeking to develop studies in the field of food and nutrition, mediated by the Social and Human Sciences.

In this way, this text shall be oriented by a reflection on a number of questions which challenge this trend: a) what is the form of the Brazilian academic-scientific output located at the interface between the Nutrition Sciences and Social Sciences, mediated by the health sciences?; b) considering that there is a 'field' of the socio-anthropology of food, developed historically within the Social Sciences and Humanities, what differentiates the production of knowledge realized within the field of health?; c) what are the principal theoretical-methodological challenges of this academic and scientific output today? It will also consider the challenges relating to the practical consequences of this output, considering the interventionist legacy of the field of Health.

Brazilian academic and scientific output at the interface between Nutrition Sciences and the Social Sciences and Humanities, mediated by the Health Sciences

From their origins, the theme of food has accompanied the history of disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. Poulain¹ highlighted that we may find dimensions of the act of feeding in various fields of sociology and anthropology, although food has not gone beyond an element indexed to a more general topic and does not constitute the sociology of feeding¹. The author considers that this perspective was modified from the 1970s onwards, particularly with the publication by Claude Fischler in an edition of the magazine *Communication*, entitled "*Gastronomie, gastro-anomie*" (1979), which is considered the unquestionable milestone that formed the point of departure of this movement.

The text is regarded as a foundation stone for the new perspectives of social thinking on diet, marking its multi-disciplinary character, an object of multiple entries, which may be understood on the basis of distinct theoretical structures that must be complementary and non-competing. The author adopts his perspective on the "undisciplined," both for research on the nature of man and for the approach to the "complex", to generate a "sociology of eaters"^{1,2}.

From the perspective of the sociology of eaters, food practices cease to be a form of expression or statement of social identities, to position themselves at the center of the process for the construction of an identity, taking on an autonomous status as an object of study in the field^{1,2}, and no longer falling within the heteronomous collaboration on other objects, from which they borrow this understanding.

Output of knowledge within the context of this interface has grown in the Brazilian context, with it is possible to observe this increment on the basis of the systematic revisions developed by Canesqui³⁻⁵ regarding the scientific output

which unites knowledge of Food and Nutrition Sciences with the Social Sciences and more recently, studies on food and culture collated by Silva *et al.*⁶, which provide an opportunity for a panorama of the research groups dedicated to the field, describing their institutional and geographical membership.

The establishment of the field named food and nutrition in collective health within the field of food and nutrition is fuelling scientific output at this interface, as was argued by Bosi & Prado⁷, in which we may locate many of the studies relating to the socio-anthropology of food by professionals in the area. Within the Brazilian context, for these authors, the knowledge clusters of this sub-field originate from the encounter of the field of collective health with that of nutrition, which has favored the linkage of the phenomenon of food with the field of study of nutrition, which was formerly isolated and closed at its origin in the cradle of modern scientific theories. Notwithstanding the fruitful results deriving from this connection with part of the field of food and nutrition, the authors warn that:

it is necessary to invest in the approximation, the comparison, and contradictions between these fields and knowledge and practice clusters, with a search for the dialectical overcoming of this polarization, as is demanded by ever more intense challenges arising to health, food, and to so many other spheres of human life (p.13)⁷.

It may also be said that this movement favors a certain breaking of boundaries of knowledge of the Social Sciences, which contemplated different training sessions in its postgraduate programs. For example, dieticians who dedicated themselves to the study within the context of this interface have tied themselves to its training process and to future action as researchers on graduate programs within the area of Social Sciences and related areas; for graduate programs in health and nutrition, more specifically in collective health, with a concentration in the field of the Social Sciences of Health.

From the perspective of the teaching body of academic graduate programs in nutrition, Silva *et al.*⁶ found more training, at the graduate level, in the field of collective health than in the social sciences, presupposing that collective health appears to represent the most secure and comfortable link between the field of food and nutrition and the social sciences and humanities for professionals in the area. In any event, despite this predominance, it may be considered that there is a growing number of agents in the area who at times are amphibious: from the health area with training in the Social Sciences, from the Social Sciences with training in health at the graduate level, with the challenges of facing a confused identity, with resonance in the construction of investigative work, both in theoretical-epistemological definitions and in the methodological construction and challenges facing ethics committees which focus, for example, on biomedical research, or also in the search for financing lines for their research.

Another challenge highlighted is that output in the area also conforms to other knowledge interfaces of the Social Sciences and of Food and Nutrition Sciences, such as the anthropology of food, the body, and health. Each "sub-field" in turn represents a theoretical *corpus*, in addition to a *modus operandi* for doing science, of seminal authors specific to each field, with this definitively increasing the challenge for researchers in the field of dealing with different benchmarks and above all, the exercise of approximations of these distinct benchmarks. However, without clear outlines, even if it remains nebulous due to its own interdisciplinary character, we may observe that it is a multi-faceted and multiple field.

In this way, this context is supplemented by the emergence or consolidation of research networks and groups directed towards the field, such as the "Comida e simbolismo" (Food and symbolism) Group - *Associação Brasileira de An-*

tropologia (Brazilian Anthropology Association); the Brazilian Section of the International Commission on Anthropology of Food (ICAF); the Slow Food Movement in Brazil, *Grupo de Antropologia da Alimentação Brasileira* (GAAB, Brazilian Anthropology of Food Group); Gilberto Freyre Foundation (*Recife, Pernambuco*); the *Grupo de Estudos História da Alimentação* (History of Food Study Group), *Universidade Federal do Paraná*, among others, each of which has contributed in its own way to establishing the field.

Within the context of the area of nutrition, from the second half of the 2000s onwards, we should highlight the initiative of dieticians informing the *Rede Interinstitucional Alimentação and Cultura* (Inter-institutional Food and Culture Network), the recently formed *Rede Ibero Americana de Pesquisa qualitativa em Alimentação e Sociedade* (ATHENA NETWORK, Ibero-American Network of Qualitative Research on Food and Society), encompassing researchers from various universities in Brazil and in other countries and clusters of Brazilian institutions linked to the topic: *Núcleos de Estudos and Pesquisas em Alimentação and Cultura* (NEPAC, Study and Research Clusters for Food and Culture) of the *Universidade Federal da Bahia*, founded in 2006, and *NÊCTAR - Alimentação and Cultura* (Food and Culture) of the Institute of Nutrition of the *Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*, founded in 2008. We also highlight that these two Groups are linked to the graduate programs in nutrition of their respective institutions and to date, are the only ones with specific lines in the field, highlighting that output is not restricted to specific lines within the programs.

In this way, studies which may characterize the trend in this more recent output would be timely, demarcating the emergence of new objects or reaffirming those elucidated by Canesqui⁵. This panorama, which aims to offer guidelines regarding the interest of professionals in seeking this field of interaction, has become fundamental.

What are researchers in the field of Health and Nutrition seeking in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities?

It is nevertheless important to reflect on the growing interest of health area professionals, in particular, dietitians, in dealing with the phenomenon of food, supported by the theoretical-methodological framework of the Social Sciences. As a rule, the undertaking appears to be oriented by the need for broader understanding of phenomena linked to Food and Nutrition, on the basis of the premise that eating is more than ingesting nutrients. This has been one of the mantras, among many others, circulating in distinct knowledge clusters in the field of Health.

On the one hand, we may admit that the subjective dimension involving eating practices has gained greater visibility in the current context, in some way reflecting the history of science itself, which has incorporated subjectivities in other ways, with this a 20th century movement, on the basis of which phenomenological trends, psychoanalysis, feminism, and distinct fields of knowledge have provided another place for subjectivities in the field of science⁸. On the other hand, food has appeared more clearly as a complex social phenomenon, which the field of knowledge which has traditionally concerned itself that it is no longer able to understand, in the light of the concerns arising within its explanatory models.

In this way, the proposition that eating is both a biological and social act generates a certain complexity regarding the issue. This perspective has acquired a place in the initial chapters of many works, as this connotation has also been introduced into the benchmark documents for public food and nutrition policies, among which, the recognition of the cultural dimensional of food is expressed in questions such as “respect for diversity and food culture” or in the recognition of the “inadequate appropriation of the cultural

and social dimensions as determining food habits” (p.36)⁹.

We should highlight that the recognition that social, psychological and cultural “factors” form part of the act of eating, food and nutrition is not necessarily anything new. However, at present such issues are being revisited, with the proposal of reflections which tend to break down the barriers of “factors” for constructing knowledge, the interdisciplinary and dialogical character of which manifest themselves, in an attempt to overcome binary questions such as biological and social, nature and culture, among other classic dichotomies in focus in a discussion of the sciences.

However, returning to the issue, what are dietitians actually seeking in establishing a dialogue with the social sciences? Would it be better to have a greater understanding of the phenomena involved in the act of eating? But with what objective? It has been empirically observed that considering the interventionist character of the area of health, a better understanding of how individuals deal with the act of eating would be the best way of establishing new feeding practices. It is concerning when this intentionality is cloaked in the maxim of “knowing in order to dominate better” in a manner that anthropology has already effected at several points, such as in the chapter on the anthropology of colonization.

To this supposed intentionality may be added the use of resources of so-called qualitative studies, as a mere technical recourse, used as an access route to this understanding, without the theoretical-methodological confrontation which the object requires. This fact is characterized by a failure to confront the dichotomies remaining within the field, criticized by Victora¹⁰ when she discusses qualitative research and its use in the area of health, dichotomies such as “we” and “the others”; “knowledge” and “belief”; “theory” and “methodology”; and “techniques” and “rationality” of research, reflecting on the absence of discussion on the method, ethics, and

discourses themselves of researchers in these areas. In this way, the Nutrition Sciences take on an epistemological monism, as the only truth in the face of other knowledge, with a portrait characterized by Barros¹¹, which sees the existence of the colonization of the Social Sciences by biomedical culture in the field of Health.

However, we recognize here that the contribution of the Social and Human Sciences to the field may go much further and at least may constitute a becoming. One of the principal theoretical-methodological challenges is the support that the Social and Human Sciences offer for the constant review of the status of Food and Nutrition Sciences. This is seen here as a socially and historically constructed field, containing contradictions, disputes, relations of power and interests, subjectivities, and uncertainties. The objectivity and neutrality remaining in its discourse are not supported as premises for scientific practices. In this way, the interface must perhaps provoke us into developing a possible epistemology of the Food and Nutrition Sciences, recognizing its history, its contradictions and uncertainties as inherent to it and involving us in the exercise of rethinking the knowledge and practices of the field.

This is a movement more fruitfully discussed in the field of collective health, with the motivation of the genesis of the field itself in the soil of the Social Sciences¹². In this arena, both the scientific field and that of training may, since they feed back on themselves, encounter resistance from the disputes and power relations relating to the fields themselves. In these relations, the rethinking of knowledge and practices encounters these relations as one of its greatest challenges, starting from the training of agents acting within it, whose current practice in the field of Health reinforces and feeds back on it even further.

We may select various authors to embark on this discussion, on the basis of which an epistemic revision of the objects of study at the interface of the field of Social Sciences and of

Food and Nutrition may prove inspiring. Clearly, this dialogue would refer to practices more equivalent to the complexity and indiscipline of phenomena which we contemplate and on which we act.

We may take food and the relations which we establish with it on the basis of the theoretical proposal and articulation regarding hybrid objects of Latour¹³. For this purpose, we adopt two premises of Fischler^{14,15}, the first of which relates to the principle of incorporation, referring to the understanding that in consuming food, the establishment of the eater is updated by this action, both from a physiological viewpoint, already recognized classically in the anatomy and physiology of the human body and also in the subjective dimension.

There is another premise of this incorporation, expressed by the anguish of the modern eater in incorporating an unknown, representing the "biocultural feeding crisis". The foods that we currently ingest no longer enjoy a trust in their origin or composition, but involve the ingenious actions and additions of the agri-food and industrial system, raising them as objectives which, on the one hand, can no longer be located in the natural order or, on the other, in a cultural one. According to Latour's definition, hybrid objects are averages, existing in both of these two worlds and both belonging to and being modified by them. The domains of knowledge, politics, and technology concerned with them are multiple and seek to revise the very status of the objects of the Social Sciences and those in which they become entangled.

In other words, the study of eating requires heterodox ways of articulating it with health. While the eloquence with which healthy eating has been professed by different agencies, its notion does not enjoy a consensus within the milieu through which it circulates, despite a certain convergence regarding its bases since the adoption of restrictive practices from an energetic and quantitative perspective¹⁶.

In any case, both by the paroxysm that the risk acquired in the field of Health¹⁷, with an illusion of incorporation into food, which in turn confers a daily reflexivity on the question of what to eat¹⁸, and by the cultural character which gives rise to a polysemy of meanings¹⁶, the study of healthy eating practices causes us to reflect on its experience, submitted to the multiple contingencies of the life of individuals, associated with those through which foods pass, as well as the contexts in which these are realized. In this sense, the reference to praxiography articulated by Mol¹⁹ appears to be a promising interdisciplinary theoretical backbone for studying contemporary feeding practices.

Lastly, we have located two examples which invite us to shift our attention from an object carrying on a dialogue with other fields of knowledge to a multiple and acting object, which as such, is undefined.

By understanding that there is a 'field' of socio-anthropology of eating developed historically in the Social Sciences and Humanities, what is it that differentiates the output of knowledge generated in the field of Health?

The study of phenomena related to Food and Nutrition at the interface with the Social Sciences and Humanities requires an approximation by dieticians and appropriation of a theoretical-methodological framework, with which they had little dialogue during their basic training. The interstitial field which arises guides itself by evoking different rationalities and methods. Let us think about the rationalities which structure the different fields: while the Social Sciences reflect on eating as the result of decisions and choices, in recognizing this phenomenon, Nutrition Sciences concern themselves with the question of what to do with it?

Comparing the interrelationship between the *modus operandi* of the two sciences,

Canesqui⁵ admits both to its feasibility and to the distinction between its points of departure:

The former are comprehensive, historical, and ideological, entailing subjectivation and intersubjectivity, being relational and not merely restricted to the subjectivity of individuals, even if this dimension is not excluded. The latter are anchored in biology, in physiology, and its true interrelationship requires more than the transfer of techniques and procedures of investigation, with the recomposition of disciplines able to generate new forms of research, in the production of hybrid objects, provoking among researchers the control and handling of theories, methodologies and instruments adopted by the disciplines, cross-linked in multi-or interdisciplinary practice (p.135).

It happens that on the side of Food and Nutrition Sciences, there is a strong tendency for the objects to arise from professional practice. Although there is no direct exercise of the so-called "practice", the training of the health professional is fundamentally permeated by an interventionist tradition in health and nutritional problems which, at the limit, results from the responsibility, even of an ethical nature, for "providing answers" and/or "proposing solutions" to the identified health and nutritional problems.

The object of study appears to be outlined specifically by the limits imposed by a practice, the stipulation of which, deriving from biomedical knowledge, appears to give signals of inadequacies in responding with regard to an "uncertain" body, the subjective dimension of which it is not divorced from the one on which the instrumentality of the biomedical model operates. It seems to us that this instrumental reason will pursue the entire trajectory of the study, resulting in the fundamental and urgent need to transform knowledge, practices, and actions. This is a science which urgently points at the future and in an immediate fashion. Besides this question, there are other tensions in the field

of health: if, on the one hand, the most orthodox ask “what is the point of studies of this nature?”, even though they may consider them to be “interesting”, on the other, those who conduct them sometimes tend to “abandon” their basic training, recognizing themselves in another field, that of the frontier with the Social Sciences. All in all, health professionals are distinguished by a different view of the objects as well as by a new form of doing, which differs from researchers deriving from the social and human sciences in the narrow sense.

In this way, the training of health professionals highlights their action, is politically involved with it and its regulation and develops it on a day-to-day basis. In some way, in dealing with objects of study linked to this practice, it also refers to the individuals who practice it, i.e. its daily practice is its object, conferring a certain reflexive character to it, which frequently causes discomfort in the training process and in the research practice of these professionals, when they recognize the limits of this practice in greater depth, in the light of dialogues with the social sciences, and the place occupied by the professional who delivers a hegemonic biomedical discourse.

In this way, in ethical terms, these research studies tend to be involved studies in so far as the researcher is in some way involved in their object in a particular way. Professionals belong within their own context of action as researchers. That is, in addition to the challenge of comprehension which remains to be overcome in understanding the objects on which they act, the question arises as to their own ethical stance, professional practice and training which leads them to a feeling of strangeness with regard to themselves and to its origin.

Lastly, what are the principal theoretical-methodological challenges of this academic and scientific output?

Consequently, the development of research in the area of health, food, and nutrition

from the perspective of the Social and Human Sciences faces numerous challenges. Such challenges imposed against this other field of knowledge also refer to the expansion of theoretical-methodological horizons, beyond the application of research techniques and consequently, in the rigorous treatment given to the results of the investigation. Authors in the field of Social Sciences and Health have accurately discussed this question, which is valuable for the purpose of this text^{10,12,20}.

Prior to technique, we must understand the epistemological basis of orientation and the implications deriving from it^{5,10,12}. The tendency in the field has been virtually only to borrow research techniques, notably on a priority basis, semi-structured interviews, focal groups, and to a lesser degree, participatory observation which, when used, tends to be complimentary. As is highlighted by the aforementioned authors, techniques are not disconnected from their theoretical-methodological tendencies, which must be considered carefully, otherwise, the formulations on which they are based are obscured in practices, i.e. the failure to appropriate the theoretical-methodological framework may cause the applied knowledge tradition to prevail over the methodological and analytical treatment of phenomena which they are addressing.

At the same time, there is another challenge here, that the training of health professionals in the area of Social Sciences should not necessarily be characterized by the training of anthropologists and sociologists. That is to say, the ways of doing science must be reinvented in such a way as to meet the demands inherent to the field. There is a debate between social scientists and health professionals about this field, which is being shaped. On the one hand, social scientists are generally seen as individuals who are familiar with practice in a rarefied way, with an output which lacks an objectivity which may inspire practices relevant to the knowledge generated. On the other hand, health professionals are seen as those who lack adequate training in the Social Sciences,

producing knowledge within the incipient theoretical- methodological construct which the field requires. Ultimately, it should be highlighted that the debate is also circumscribed by the power relations surrounding an object of research, by the corporatist tendencies which a professional training still confers.

These are disciplinary frontiers which require other confrontations: the reinvention of ways of thinking and doing science which take account of the demands inherent to a new field formed to ensure that the production of new knowledge and practices is more relevant to the complexity of phenomena and the demands which they make. As is highlighted by Soares²¹, orientation documents for public policies teach us that practices have foundations both of a scientific nature and which are oriented by the cultural references of contexts. At the same time, the normative documents summarize the scientific and cultural benchmarks in a non-conflicting manner, albeit without announcing the clear trends surrounding them.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Lastly, this discussion can extend to many more issues, which transcend the phenomenon of food in society, its interactions with health, corporeality, disease processes, as adjectives proliferate for healthy eating, in the face of the many uncertainties surrounding it, specific to late modernity. Notwithstanding this, in addition to the understanding of phenomena, we repeat here that the dialogue with the Social Sciences appears to call on us to question the status of the phenomena themselves, the epistemology of the Nutrition Sciences.

In turn, the type of mantra which affirms that food is not only a biological but also a social and cultural phenomenon, which appears to guide searches in this interstitial scientific field, is still sufficiently solid to cause shifts in the predominant basis from which professionals with

a training in nutrition need to shift in order to succeed in understanding the phenomena.

For its part, the pragmatic nature of health training also reveals itself in a certain way as a significant "impasse," insofar as interventions are presented as structuring the profession. Otherwise, it is possible to consider that the utility of knowledge may cause changes in the status of the interventions, in the relations which arise around these phenomena, producing something new, which has been the claim for the field of health practices. The challenge is to avoid falling into yet another trap at the interface of scientific fields, of producing dualities, such as relativism and pragmatism. This is not an easy task but is a development of this interface.

CONTRIBUTORS

L Amparo-Santos and MD SOARES participated in the design, bibliographical research, drafting and revision of the article.

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Received: September 6, 2014
Approved: September 26, 2014