



THE CENTER PIECE IN THE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CIRCLE WITH MEN ACCUSED OF VIOLENCE: A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE OF SYMBOLS



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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the center piece in Restorative Justice circles as a central semiotic element, focusing on how its visual and symbolic components articulate meanings and reinforce restorative values. The research problem arises from the need to understand how these elements transcend aesthetics, promoting dialogue, reconciliation and collective construction of values, especially in the context of gender violence. It is justified by the relevance of deepening the integration between semiotics and restorative practices, expanding the understanding of the cultural and symbolic dynamics that influence social transformation. The main objective was to analyze the signs present in the center piece and their functions within the restorative ritual, based on the theories of Barthes (2004), Santaella (1983, 2005) and Peirce (1990). The methodology adopted a semiotic analysis of the centerpiece, using a photograph of a circle made in the "Encontros e Diálogos" project, of the CEJUSC of Ilhéus, which assists men accused of domestic violence. The analysis revealed that the elements present – dolls, books, papers with written values and visual guidelines – organize the space, promote welcoming and reinforce ethical values such as equality and horizontality. According to Barthes (2004), these objects are cultural signs that carry multiple meanings, connected to the interpretative context. The results highlight that the center piece acts as a microcosm of restorative values, being fundamental for the construction of a safe and transformative dialogue environment, especially in the fight against gender violence.

Keywords: Restorative Justice. Semiotics. Signs. Circles. Center piece.

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INTRODUCTION

The present study is the result of some of the concerns that arose during the field research of the doctoral project³ **"Restorative Circles of Justice: Discursive Views on Patriarchy, Regulations and Gender Tensions"**, developed in the Graduate Program in Letters: Languages and Representations of the State University of Santa Cruz.

Restorative Justice circles have been consolidated as innovative practices in addressing conflicts, especially in scenarios marked by gender-based violence. Based on values such as dialogue, empathy and collective responsibility, these circles rely on the center piece as an essential symbolic element. This study proposes a semiotic analysis to understand how the visual and symbolic elements of the centerpiece in Restorative Justice circles articulate meanings and reinforce values, promoting emotional and cultural connections among participants.

The thesis project "Restorative Circles of Justice: Discursive Views on Patriarchy, Regulations and Gender Tensions" developed an ethnographic research at CEJUSC (Judicial Center for Conflict Resolution) in Ilhéus, which has the project of reflective groups for men accused of violence, entitled "Encounters and Dialogues". Ethnographic research

Restorative Justice circles, according to Pranis (2011), are defined as structured processes that create a safe space for difficult or painful problems to be discussed with a view to improving relationships and resolving differences. This approach, which is rooted in ancestral practices, seeks to break with the traditional punitive model, prioritizing reparation and reconciliation as responses to conflicts (Zehr, 2008).

Semiotics, as a science of signs, is crucial for interpreting the symbols and meanings present in restorative circles, helping to understand how such elements are connected to the fundamental values of practice (Santaella, 1983, p. 14).

In Restorative Justice circles, the centerpiece plays a crucial symbolic role, functioning as an element that organizes the space, promotes connection between participants, and represents restorative values. Despite their importance, there is still little research on the semiotic impact of these elements in circles aimed at resolving conflicts related to gender violence. The fundamental question then arises: how can the symbols embodied in the centerpiece stimulate dialogue, facilitate reconciliation, and support the building of collective values within the context of Restorative Justice circles?

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to deepen the understanding of Restorative Justice as a practice that encompasses cultural and symbolic aspects. Through

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semiotic analysis, it becomes possible to explore the meanings, both explicit and implicit, of the objects that make up the circles, highlighting their function in promoting dialogue, encouraging accountability and strengthening community values. Considering the growing dissemination of restorative practices in Brazil and the need for innovative approaches to address gender-based violence, investigating how symbolic elements affect these dynamics offers a relevant contribution both for academia and for professionals working in this area.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the center piece in the circles of Restorative Justice as a signic element, exploring its visual and symbolic components in the promotion of restorative values, with emphasis on circles focused on gender violence. To achieve this purpose, it seeks to identify the main visual elements present in the centerpiece and their symbolic functions, to understand how these symbols help in the organization of space, in dialogue and reconciliation within the circles, and to relate the semiotic analysis of the centerpiece to the specific dynamics of Restorative Justice in the fight against gender violence.

This study proposes a semiotic approach to explore the importance of the center piece in Restorative Justice circles, with special attention to how its visual and symbolic elements articulate meanings and promote restorative values. From the analysis of a specific case within the scope of the "Meetings and Dialogues" project of CEJUSC in Ilhéus, it seeks to deepen the understanding of the relationship between symbols and the processes of dialogue and reconciliation, contributing to the development of more effective and humanized practices in the fight against gender violence.

From the methodological point of view, the study is based on a bibliographic and analytical perspective based on semiotics. The analysis was carried out based on an approach based on the studies of Barthes (2004), Santaella (1983) and Peirce (1990), focusing on the processes of signification that shape the signs present in the circles of Restorative Justice. This method seeks to understand how symbolic and visual elements connect to build, transmit and sustain social and cultural values, with special attention to the dynamics of the restorative justice circle with men accused of violence. From the semiotic perspective, it is understood that the signs present in the restorative justice circles studied act as mediators, reinforcing values and behaviors in order to rediscuss gender roles and promote accountability and awareness of violence in gender relations. Thus, the semiotic analysis illuminates how the objects and symbols used in the restorative circles help to form and disseminate meanings that directly impact the interpersonal and social interactions of the public that attends the circles of the CEJUSC of Ilhéus, men accused of domestic violence.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CIRCLE CONCEPT

Restorative Justice offers an alternative to the traditional punitive model, prioritizing reparation and reconciliation over punishment. Inspired by ancestral practices of North American, Maori and African indigenous cultures, it redefines crime as a violation of people and relationships, not just state laws (Zehr, 2008). Its focus is on restoring broken bonds, meeting the needs of victims and the community, while promoting constructive accountability of the offender.

This model adopts a consensual approach, involving victims, offenders and, where applicable, community members. The goal is to repair damage and overcome emotional scars in an informal and voluntary setting. Facilitators play a central role, guiding processes such as mediation, community conferences and decision-making circles, aimed at joint restorative solutions. Circular practices, such as peacebuilding circles, stand out for promoting dialogue, awareness, and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships (Pranis, 2011).

Restorative Justice requires transcending linear thinking, adopting a complex approach that considers multiple perspectives (Mariotti, 2000). In this sense, it not only holds the offender accountable, but seeks to rebuild broken relationships and meet the needs of victims, going beyond simple punitive retribution. In Brazil, restorative initiatives have expanded the scope of criminal legislation, integrating social and treatment measures, as provided for in Article 5 of the Federal Constitution and Law No. 11,343/06, which ensures both accountability and access to medical treatment.

The formal introduction of Restorative Justice in Brazil took place in 1999, with efforts by the Public Prosecutor's Office of Rio Grande do Sul. Pernambuco stood out as a pioneer in the implementation of the first Restorative Justice Center in Latin America, in 2001, while other states, such as Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, adopted more limited approaches.

In the field of gender-based violence, restorative justice faces challenges, but it advances by proposing a less punitive and more inclusive model. Pinto (2005) emphasizes that this approach seeks to rebuild damaged relationships, promoting dialogue and direct accountability of the aggressor. Reflective circles, known as Peacebuilding Circles, have been used to prevent violence and promote a culture of peace. According to Lima et al. (2020, p. 12), these circles have an essential pedagogical dimension, as they constitute profoundly human experiences that deal with the challenges of coexistence.

The Maria da Penha Law was strengthened by Law No. 13,984/2020, which inserted items VI and VII in article 22, making it mandatory for the aggressor to participate in recovery and re-education programs, in addition to psychosocial monitoring, both

individually and in support groups. These changes have legitimized initiatives such as the "Meeting and Dialogues" project of the CEJUSC of Ilhéus, which promotes reflective circles with aggressors to foster awareness and prevent recurrence.

Pranis (2011) defines circles as structured processes of dialogue that create safe spaces for difficult discussions. Each step of the circle, from the opening ceremony to the closing, is designed to promote connection, equality, and mutual listening. The facilitator plays an essential role, ensuring respect for the rules of the circle and creating a welcoming environment where everyone can express themselves honestly (Pranis, 2011, p. 17).

In summary, Restorative Justice represents an innovative approach, which transcends the traditional punitive logic and seeks to promote a more humanized and inclusive system, focused on rebuilding relationships and social transformation.

THE PROJECT OF CIRCLES WITH MEN ACCUSED OF VIOLENCE

The **"Meetings and Dialogues"** project was conceived in 2019 by Judge Sandra Magali Brito Silva Mendonça, at CEJUSC in Ilhéus, to promote Restorative Justice circles with men accused of domestic violence. The initiative seeks to create spaces for reflection and dialogue, focused on accountability and behavioral change, in addition to preventing recurrence. Its methodology integrates restorative justice facilitators and the accused, with an emphasis on issues of gender, power, and domestic violence.

Designed to address gender-based violence through restorative practices, the project received support from institutions such as the Public Defender's Office, the OAB, and CRAM, which also worked to protect victims (Mendonça, 2022). During its structuring, five reflective meetings were established addressing topics such as violence and power, gender issues, misogyny, sexism and accountability. The circles replace, in some cases, the obligation to appear at notary offices, as requested from the Criminal Courts (Mendonça, 2022).

In August 2019, the project was presented to the OAB and the public during the week of combating violence against women. In the same month, letters were sent to the Criminal Courts requesting authorization to refer the accused to the circles and refer victims to the CRAM. In September 2019, the project was presented to judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, marking an important moment of articulation (Mendonça, 2022).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the initial implementation of the project. The resumption took place in 2021, in accordance with Law No. 13,984/2020, which made it mandatory for aggressors to participate in re-education and psychosocial monitoring programs. The resumed activities include five biweekly meetings, each

addressing topics such as violence, power, and gender relations. These meetings have a pedagogical and reflective approach, going beyond the punitive aspect.

The circles follow a structured format, starting with an opening ceremony, which includes themed videos or clips. This is followed by **check-in**, where participants share how they feel, and the presentation of guidelines, such as respecting the "object of the word", listening carefully and maintaining confidentiality. The central stage includes "storytelling", which facilitates the engagement of participants, and questions about the theme of the meeting, although silence and avoidances are common. The closing is marked by reflective readings and **check-out**, with reports on how the participants feel after the meeting.

Despite its relevance, the project faces challenges, such as the lack of investment from the judiciary, relying only on volunteer facilitators and TJBA interns. According to Beiras et al. (2021, p. 175), technical qualification and the integration of gender and masculinity studies are essential for practices to reach theoretical and subjective depth. In addition, Beiras et al. (2021, p. 206) indicate that similar projects may require between 10 and 25 sessions to generate significant subjective changes, pointing to the challenge of achieving sustainable results with only five meetings.

The project is of great importance, especially with the measures applied to those accused of domestic violence inserted in the Maria da Penha Law in 2020 provided for in the Maria da Penha Law, in its article 22, items VI and VII: "VI – attendance of the aggressor in recovery and re-education programs; and (Included by Law No. 13,984, of 2020) VII – psychosocial monitoring of the aggressor, through individual and/or support group care. (Included by Law No. 13,984, of 2020)".

Restorative Justice offers an innovative approach to dealing with conflicts, valuing the symbolic meaning present in the elements that make up the circles. As Santaella (1983, p. 9) points out, "every sign is part of a system of signification that, in its essence, is intimately linked to the cultural context in which it is inserted". Thus, the structure of the circles seeks to create restorative meanings through the interaction between all those involved, as victim and offender, fostering a dialogue that goes beyond the conventional punitive logic.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SEMIOTICS

Semiotics, according to Santaella (2005), is the science that examines the processes of production of meaning in different contexts. In the practice of Restorative Justice circles, signs play a crucial role, serving as mediators of values and meanings. Barthes (2004, p.

113) states that "the photographic sign is a cultural construction that reveals layers of meaning depending on the context of interpretation". This perspective applies directly to the centerpiece, in which each visual element carries symbolic meanings that resonate with the participants.

Semiotics examines the modes of constitution of any and all phenomena as a phenomenon of production of meaning and meaning (Santaella, 1983, p. 14).

Peirce, cited by Santaella (2005), defines the sign as triadic, constituted by the representamen (sign), object (what it represents) and interpretant (the meaning generated). This model is fundamental to analyze the signs present in Restorative Justice circles, allowing us to identify how sensory, functional, and symbolic elements interact to reinforce restorative values. For example, in the context of the centerpiece, the drawn hands and written values function as indexes that connect participants to the restorative goal.

Charles Peirce (1990) introduces the categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness as structures for interpreting signs. These categories are crucial to understanding the sensory, functional, and symbolic dimensions of the centerpiece in the restorative context. Peirce also proposes that the sign is triadic, involving a *representamen* (the sign itself), an object (what the sign represents) and an interpretant (the meaning generated in the receiver) (Santaella, 2005, p. 4).

In the field of law, in general, we have several signs that can appear as an object of semiotic analysis. According to Eduardo Bittar (2020), legal symbols, such as the scales and the sword, represent universal values of justice. Similarly, the center piece in restorative circles acts as a mediator of values and meanings, connecting participants to restorative practices in a visual and symbolic way.

THE CENTER PIECE IN THE CIRCLE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AS A SIGNIFYING ELEMENT

As announced in the introduction of the study, this article is the result of some concerns that arose during the ethnographic research of the thesis project RESTORATIVE CIRCLES OF JUSTICE: discursive views on patriarchy, regulations and gender tensions".

The study investigated the crisis of masculinity and gender-based violence. The research had as a field of observation two male reflective groups held at CEJUSC in Ilhéus, who participated in five restorative justice circles of the **"Meetings and Dialogues"** project. In the period from January to April, two groups were formed, called Group 13 and Group 14, which were the object of the doctoral research. Each group participates in five meetings held every two weeks, with previously defined themes:

- **Circle 1:** Violence and power;
- **Circle 2:** Rights, duties and respect;
- **Circle 3:** Issues of gender, misogyny and sexism;
- **Circle 4:** Aggression, victimization and relationship;
- **Circle 5:** Reflection, awareness and accountability.

The circles are led by two Restorative Justice facilitators, who ensure compliance with the guidelines and promote a safe and welcoming environment for dialogue.

All the symbology of the circle has always caught the researcher's attention, especially the objects and elements present in the centerpiece. The center piece is the heart of the circle, concentrating elements that symbolize restorative values and goals. Barthes (2004, p. 87) observes that "the meaning of an object depends on its position and function within the system in which it is inserted". Thus, the puppets, books and visual guidelines present in the center piece transcend the decorative, assuming symbolic roles essential for restorative practice.

In Restorative Justice circles, the center piece is composed of elements such as the word stick, books, and cultural or spiritual items. These objects perform specific functions:

1. **Icons:** Visually represent cultural values and identities.
2. **Indexes:** Directly connect participants to restorative practices.
3. **Symbols:** Embody cultural and restorative values, such as inclusion, balance, and reconciliation (Santaella, 2005).

As highlighted by the theory surrounding restorative justice circles, especially in Pranis (2011), the center piece organizes symbolic space and helps create visual and emotional connections. It includes elements such as books, which symbolize the reflective dimension, and the giraffe, which represents nonviolent communication, highlighting the separation between reason and emotion.

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CIRCLE

In order to develop a semiotic analysis based on the theories mobilized so far, it is interesting to present the photograph taken from the center piece of one of the restorative justice circles of the "Encounters and Dialogues" project of CEJUSC in Ilhéus.

FIGURE 1: Center piece of one of the circles of group 13



Source: image registered by the author with permission of the members.

Barthes (2004) teaches that signs are cultural constructions that carry multiple meanings, interpreted according to the context. Barthes (2004, p. 113) argues that "photography freezes cultural and emotional meanings, becoming a sign of a broader reality". The analysis of the centerpiece of the project "Encontros e Diálogos" reveals how each element was carefully arranged to reinforce values such as equality and horizontality.

The centerpiece of the restorative justice circle of the "Encounters and Dialogues" project of Cejusc in Ilhéus, includes objects such as dolls, papers with written values, books and visual guidelines. Each item plays a specific and intentional role:

- **Puppets and cultural objects:** They represent personal and collective narratives, evoking emotional and cultural connections between participants.
- **Books:** They act as "reflective mediators", promoting introspection and collective learning (Santaella, 2005, p. 8).
- **Papers with written values:** They reinforce ethical commitments, such as "humility" and "love". In photography, the papers with words such as "humility" and "authenticity" are connected to the symbolic dimension of the circle, functioning as "mediating symbols of collective values" (Santaella, 2005, p. 8). This setting encourages participants to engage in dialogue in a more reflective and committed way.
- **Visual guidelines:** They guide participants with rules such as "do not judge" and "keep confidentiality". The poster with explicit guidelines, such as "respect the object of speech" and "be sincere", plays an organizing and normative role, ensuring compliance with the ethical and collaborative principles of the circle. In addition, they reinforce the ethical commitment of the circle, functioning as indices that guide the behavior of the participants.

The photograph of the centerpiece, as Barthes (2004, p. 113) discusses, is more than a visual record; It becomes a sign that carries cultural and emotional meanings, building connections between observers and the symbolized values.

The centerpiece transcends the decorative paper and materializes the restorative values. Pranis (2011) states that its circular disposition reinforces equality and promotes an environment of dialogue and active listening.

Circles also have an essential pedagogical dimension, as highlighted by Lima et al. (2020), as they constitute profoundly human experiences that develop in multiple areas of coexistence.

In addition, the centerpiece photography reflects how the visual elements promote an emotional and symbolic connection between the participants, transforming the space into a microcosm of restorative values.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Semiotic analysis sheds light on the symbolic richness of the centerpiece in Restorative Justice circles. Barthes (2004) reminds us that objects in a cultural composition carry multiple meanings, deeply connected to the context in which they are inserted. In this sense, the centerpiece transcends mere aesthetic value and becomes a reflection of restorative values and objectives, fulfilling the role of mediator of meanings and agent of social transformation.

Semiotics allows us to explore the symbols present in restorative circles. As Peirce (1990) pointed out, "a sign is something that leads us to know something more". Thus, the centerpiece organizes the space, connects participants to restorative principles, and stimulates meaningful dialogues. Much more than an adornment, it represents the ideals of cohesion, equality and the foundations of Restorative Justice.

The study showed that the elements of the centerpiece – such as puppets, books, visual guidelines and papers with written values – have a relevant contribution to the organization of the space and the construction of emotional and cultural connections. Barthes (2004) observes that these objects go beyond their materiality by carrying cultural and emotional meanings. Thus, they dialogue directly with the values of the circle. These items symbolize and promote equality, horizontality and welcoming, creating an environment conducive to introspection and dialogue.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that the symbols of the play operate in sensory, functional and symbolic dimensions, as in Peirce's categories (Santaella, 2005). This dynamic favors active listening, accountability, and reconciliation, pillars of social

transformation in restorative practices. Integrating pedagogical and aesthetic dimensions into these practices becomes essential, especially in challenging contexts, such as gender conflicts (Pinto, 2005; Lima et al., 2020).

Therefore, the centerpiece is not just a decorative object, but a symbolic link that connects participants to the circle's purpose and shared values. His semiotic analysis reveals a microcosm of cohesion, equality, and welcoming, underscoring the importance of studies that delve into the cultural and ethical aspects of restorative practices to make systems more humane and transformative.

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