

## WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE CONSTELLATION METHOD OF THOUGHT: A RESEARCH PROPOSITION IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY



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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to present a research methodology inspired by Walter Benjamin which, in the scenario of the war on drugs and marked by prohibitionism, allowed the production of other narratives about the use of illicit drugs different from the hegemonic and "official" ones. In order to problematize the phenomenon of illicit drug use in a society marked by prohibitionism and to present a perspective of production of subjectivation imbricated with the historical, political and social, our method of analysis/construction of narratives was guided by a constellation movement of thought, from a decolonial perspective, when looking at the phenomenon of drug use in a South American context. Thus, this article will explore a theoretical construction on the constellation method and present a narrative built from this research methodology in social psychology.

**Keywords:** Social Psychology. Research in Psychology. Drugs. Mental health.

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## INTRODUCTION

Narratives have often been used in qualitative research to understand, in a given context, different views of subjects, according to Onocko-Campos et. al. (2013). From Walter Benjamin, these authors state that "narration aims at the transformation of the present" (p. 2850) and that there is no appropriate narrative technique that "would be able to answer the questions raised or "extract" the right narrative" (p. 2848).

Benjamin's point that the art of narrating, transforming experience into narration, is becoming extinct, is well known. According to the author, this is due to the fact that experiences are no longer communicable while information emerges as a new form of communication. "If the art of narrative is rare today, the diffusion of information is decisively responsible for this decline" (2010, p. 203). For Benjamin, the facts already come to us impregnated with explanations: "Every morning we receive news from all over the world. And yet, we are poor in surprising stories" (p. 203). Thus, "almost nothing is at the service of the narrative, and almost everything is at the service of information" (p. 203).

More than seventy years after Benjamin wrote this text, we can say that we have deepened the mechanisms of the instantaneity of information, incessantly bombarded by facts and images through social networks; and we witness the agony of investigative journalism, the rise and predominance of disposable sensationalism; Not to mention the phenomenon of the dissemination of factoids, evidenced in recent years. In Brazil and in other countries, such as the USA, there are programs on open TV with a high audience rate, called popular programs, which reiterate day after day, only with the manipulation of information, the relationship between drug use and crime.

In his text, Benjamin notes that the combatants who had participated in the front in the Second World War returned mute from the battlefield, poor in communicable experience. "And what spread ten years later, in the flood of books on the war, had nothing in common with an experience transmitted by word of mouth." (BENJAMIN, 2010, p. 198). However, Benjamin reports that "there was nothing abnormal about it" (p. 198), for there was never an experience more radically demoralized than war.

This paper aims to present a research methodology inspired by Walter Benjamin, who, in the scenario of the war on drugs and marked by prohibitionism, allowed the production of other narratives about the use of illicit drugs different from the hegemonic and "official" ones.

## METHODOLOGY

Several areas of knowledge criticize research methodologies that presuppose a role of neutrality for the researcher. However, from the recognition that the production of knowledge also produces modes of subjectivation, there has been a growing formulation of research practices that not only recognize the impossibility of neutrality of the researcher in the field, but also incorporate an active role in the research process. The researcher does not go into the field to "extract" research data or confirm hypotheses, but to participate, through research, in meetings that produce experience and knowledge. In social psychology, this possibility of lateralized construction of knowledge, between academic and rural subjects, can be materialized in several research approaches, such as action research (TRIPP, 2005), intervention research (ROCHA & AGUIAR, 2003), cartographic research (BARROS & KASTRUP, 2012), decolonial research (MIGNOLO, 2003), among others.

Following this perspective, the choice of the method used in this research, through the construction of narratives with people who use illicit drugs, was also a political choice in the way of approaching the theme. Instead of opting for a methodology that proposes the construction of truths or generalizations – as would be the case of a study of the incidence of use of certain drugs, consumption pattern, age at onset of use, effects of substances on behavior or on the organism, etc. –, the methodology in question opted for narrative as a way of facing the theme in a way that has been little explored, escaping the hegemonic formats with which it has often been approached in the academic sphere.

Throughout the research, a total of 14 people, self-declared users of illicit drugs, accessed through the snowball method, living in eight cities in four Brazilian states, were interviewed. The triggering question for the construction of the narratives was "what is your experience with drug use?". In all, one trans woman, eleven men and two cis women. The age range of the interviewees was from 27 to 60 years old, and one of the people did not reveal his age. Regarding race, two white women and one black trans woman, five black men and six white men participated in the research. Most of the interviewees (ten people) were considered middle class and four of them were in poverty. Two black men and the black trans woman had lived on the streets and one of the black men was homeless at the time of the research. As for schooling, four people with a postgraduate degree, three people with a complete degree, one person attending higher education, two people with complete elementary education, two people with complete high school, one person with

incomplete elementary education and one person attending elementary school. The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical recommendations for conducting studies with human beings, according to Resolutions 510/2016 and 466/2012 of the National Health Council (BRASIL, 2016; BRAZIL, 2012). The project was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology of UFRGS.

In order to problematize the phenomenon of illicit drug use in a society marked by prohibitionism and to present a perspective of the production of subjectivation imbricated with the historical, the political and the social, our method of analysis/construction of narratives was guided by a constellation movement of thought, as proposed by Walter Benjamin in his theses on the concept of history, situated in the context of those who observe the phenomenon of drug use from the South, that is, in the South American context. In this way, we will explore a theoretical construction on the constellation method and present a narrative built from this research methodology in social psychology.

## RESULTS

For the analysis of the social phenomena to which he dedicates himself, Benjamin uses a method that does not propose to be totalizing, assuming the fragmentary, historical and non-linear character of knowledge — characteristics that can also be attributed to his work, with a marked presence of incompleteness and that is updated (in the sense of becoming current) even after so much time of his writing.

The idea of constellation appears briefly, like a flash, in small excerpts of his work, first in the book "Origin of German Baroque Drama", from 1925, where Benjamin weaves his introductory questions of critique of knowledge, refuting the ambition of the scientific method to capture the truth, unitary and indivisible by nature. In this sense, it is worth highlighting an excerpt from this text, which outlines some guidelines used in the methodology of analysis and composition of the narratives in our research proposal:

The set of concepts used to represent an idea updates this idea as a configuration of those concepts. For phenomena are not incorporated into ideas, they are not contained in them. Ideas are their virtual objective ordering, their objective interpretation. If they neither contain phenomena in themselves by incorporation, nor do they evaporate in functions, in the law of phenomena, in the "hypothesis", the question arises: how can they reach phenomena? The answer is: in the representation of these phenomena. As such, the idea belongs to a sphere fundamentally different from that in which the objects it apprehends are. Hence we cannot say, as a criterion for defining its form of existence, that it includes these objects, in the same way that genus includes species. Because that is not his task. Its significance may be illustrated by an analogy. Ideas relate to things like

constellations to the stars. That is to say, first of all, that ideas are neither the concepts of these things, nor their laws. (BENJAMIN, 1984, p. 56).

The methodology based on a representational logic will always bring results that are different from the phenomenon investigated itself. Thus, together with the critique of representational logic – a logic that is so present in some theoretical perspectives of psychology, having a certain prominence in the production of academic research in the world, in different fields of knowledge – Benjamin proposes to think of a method for which the origin is not detached from the facts and these are always related, in the present moment, with its pre- and post-history. Citing Leibniz's monadology, Benjamin reiterates that "the idea is monad" (1984, p. 70), that is, each fragment of image contains the image of the world. "The representation of the idea imposes as a task, therefore, nothing less than the description of this abbreviated image of the world" (1984, p. 70). This idea of describing the image does not demand a posture of extraction of the true image, but rather implies an exercise of the gaze, of the way in which the dots are connected within an infinite multiplicity that offers itself to contemplation.

It is in this sense that the authors Otte and Volpe (2000) propose, based on this analogy suggested by Benjamin, a constellation look at thought. Constellar, because we cannot see all the stars; the brightness we see from some corresponds to stars that no longer exist; and, with respect to those that still exist, what we observe are their images of the past. In other words, given the spatial distance between the observer and the bright point, added to the speed of light – which imposes a temporal difference – we never have access to the totality, but rather to fragments.

From a historical perspective, the fascination with stargazing is recorded in different cultures and different times. In South and Central America, we have astronomical observation temples in archaeological sites of original societies, such as the Mayan, Aztec and Inca civilizations. According to Otte and Volpe (2000), constellations are stimulated by the imagination of observers, by drawing lines between bright points, forming narratives and figures according to the times.

The constellation known to the Romans as Ursa Major, for example, was Alexander's chariot to the Greeks; the plough for the Egyptians; the seven rishis or sages, to the Indians and has come to be known in the contemporary world as a practical instrument: the big dipper, the great conch. (OTTE and VOLPE, 2000, p. 36).

## DISCUSSION

In Brazil, the original peoples, in their different ethnicities, have a diversity of ways of perceiving celestial objects and incorporating them into their social lives. Recently, a series of publications seeks to give visibility and resume this worldview, passed down from generation to generation through orality, some of these publications being carried out by the members of indigenous ethnic groups themselves. In other words, many indigenous groups still preserve the knowledge of their own ways of seeing the stars (DIAKURU AND KISIBI, 2006; AFONSO, 2009; LIMA et al, 2013). According to Afonso (2009), the Brazilian indigenous "also realized that fishing, hunting, gathering and farming activities obey seasonal fluctuations. Thus, he sought to understand these cyclical fluctuations and used them, mainly, for his subsistence" (p. 01). The constellations of the Ema, the Heron, the North Tapir, the Old Man, are the result of this vision, but cannot be considered as the Brazilian indigenous worldview, as there are differences between the ethnic groups. However, it is noticeable that, in the worldview of the original peoples of our land, the relations between heaven and earth are presented differently from the relationship of the white European with the celestial bodies. In some ethnic groups, they could even indicate the proper time for rituals where the consumption of substances that we would call drugs would be propitious. This is the case of the Desana culture, from the Amazon region, for which the final period of the flood, announced by the position of the heron constellation, is propitious for the preparation of the caapi vine, also relating to a series of other events, according to Diakuru and Kisibi:

According to our group, the year begins in the second half of August, when the constellation yahi (heron) enters the west, at dusk. It is called yahi puiro (flood of the crane). Yahi puiro is a small flood. At this time, the indigenous peoples of the region wait for the night leafcutters (nami megã) and the queens of the maniuaras (megã diarã) to fly to catch them to eat. It is also the anniversary of the arrival of the Transformation Canoe at the Ipanoré Waterfall. That is why, at that time, all kinds of fish arrive and dock in Ipanoré, such as tigamtt (mandi), boreka (aracu), waipitt (surubirn) etc. These fish symbolize the arrival of the People of Transformation in this waterfall. (2006, p. 18).

It is possible to perceive the connectivity between the various elements of this scene. This research – inspired by Benjamin but also by what our ancestral peoples teach – unlike a so-called traditional scientific methodology, which has as its paradigm the gesture of isolating phenomena to better understand them, sought the connection between narratives to dialogue with complex issues such as drug use. Science, aimed at explaining the questions from isolation, ended up erasing a series of other forms of understanding



about the phenomena of nature and life. The knowledge considered profane, even those that confirmed the same results obtained by hegemonic methodologies, but based on different methods, were deprived of their status as truth. The search for truth through traditional science ended up generating a hegemonic model of doing science, westernized and aseptic.

Afonso (2009, 2013) and Lima et. al. (2013) point out that different missionaries, ethnologists and naturists have recorded the ways in which Brazilian indigenous people relate to the sky. The authors take up the writings resulting from an expedition of two French Capuchins (Claude d'Abbeville and Yves d'Évreux), carried out in 1614, with the Tupinambá in Maranhão. D'Abbeville presents in detail the description of the celestial system as it was understood by that indigenous group. "Regarding the observation of the sky by the Tupinambá of Maranhão, d'Abbeville states that they know most of the stars and stars of the hemisphere which they call their own, according to their tradition." (LIMA et al, 2013, p. 107). However, it is worth mentioning, in d'Abbeville's writings, the relations established by the Tupinambá between heaven and earth from the moon:

Thanks to d'Abbeville's description, we have some information about what the Tupinambá knew about the Moon. They distinguished its phases, as well as several other things related to it, such as the lunar eclipse which they called yasseuh pouyton. Another important observation made by d'Abbeville concerns the fact that the Tupinambá relate the Moon to the tides, clearly demarcating the tides that are formed at the Full Moon and the New Moon. This observation has an important significance, for at the time d'Abbeville wrote his book, the causes of the tides, though a matter of debate, had not yet been determined. (LIMA et al, 2013, p. 108).

Afonso (2009) draws attention to the fact that, twenty years after this writing by d'Abbeville, the astronomer Galileo Galilei refutes the idea of the influence of the moon on the tides, understanding this phenomenon as related to the rotation of the earth. It was only seventy years later that Isaac Newton demonstrated that the gravitational attraction of the moon on the earth is the main cause of the tides. In other words, long before European scientific discoveries brought knowledge to the world, the peoples who lived here already had this knowledge.

We highlight these regional, Brazilian and South American understandings – constellar understandings distinct from international conventions – as inspiration for the analysis of the narratives, aiming at other understandings and research paths in the field of alcohol and drugs. We circulate, then, through narratives that are commonly erased in the

course of history – "minor", non-hegemonic narratives, which do not claim to represent the whole.

The constellation perspective of thought, as a research methodology, takes into account the narrative-images and the place of the observer, their places in the historical-political-social world. As Otte and Volpe point out, "it would not be just a set (constellation), but an image, which means, in the first place, that the relationship between its components, the stars, is not only motivated by the proximity between them, but also by the possibility of meaning that can be attributed to them" (2000, p. 37). In this sense, by not working with a previously formulated hypothesis in relation to the research findings, the researcher's proposition is to operate as a collector of the images, "because the collected fragments – such as the mosaic pieces – do not have their own meaning" (2000, p. 43).

The active exercise of assembling the mosaic of narratives, by creating lines that were interconnected to each other, being a method of analysis in research, imposes a challenge related to the collectivization of experience. There is a risk of observing a grouping of stars as one observes clouds, attributing to them ephemeral shapes and arrangements that will be restricted to the researcher's universe. The process of "harvesting" narratives and their analysis are carried out as not only complementary but inseparable steps, to account for the complexity of the dialogue between researcher and research field.

In addition, this research process, as a way of producing knowledge about drugs in the contemporary scenario, was strongly inspired by Benjamin's theses on the concept of history, his last work, already mentioned above, written in 1940, before the attempt to escape the Nazi capture of the Jews in French territory, which ended up costing him his life. In this writing – considered current, because it addresses issues that touch contemporary culture, and prophetic, because it seems to announce the holocaust and Hiroshima (LÖWY, 2005) – Benjamin again brings up the idea of constellation, fifteen years after the publication of the work *Origin of German Baroque Drama*. According to Löwy (2005), the stimulus for Benjamin, when writing his theses, arises from the troubled historical moment in which he lived, with the beginning of World War II and the occupation of Europe by Nazi troops; But the theses also constitute a synthesis and expression of all his work.

Benjamin ([1940] 1994) then problematizes the concept of history and the function of the historian (or chronicler), problematizations that are related to social psychology, given



the conception of the subject as a historical-social construct. Brushing history against the grain is Benjamin's main indication for the development of this function, as it signals that the historian of historicism identifies affectively and undeniably with the winners. In this sense, an effort is needed so that those who hold the power of communication and technical reproducibility do not extinguish the flames of the past, flames where insurrections of the oppressed, or the vanquished, update the present. Although Benjamin calls his proposal historical materialism, we agree with Löwy that the methodological proposal of Marx and Engels is reinterpreted by Benjamin, revealing "a heterodox, heretical, idiosyncratic, unclassifiable version" (2005, p. 59).

For Benjamin ([1940] 1994), thinking does not only include the movement of ideas, but also their immobilization, when one recognizes a sign of events to explode the continuum of history (of the victors) and an opportunity to fight for a repressed past. The author takes up constellar ideas as a fruitful method to redeem past and present, with a view to the future. In this way, it is up to the chronicler to narrate the events without distinguishing between big and small, taking into account that, for history, nothing that ever happened should be considered lost. "The true image of the past permeates, fast. The past only allows itself to be fixed, as an image that flashes irreversibly, at the moment it is recognized" (1994, p. 224).

In this sense, this research had as a political choice the construction of narratives together with those who, in discussions about drugs, constitute the defeated (or oppressed) side: the users. Through lines that connect the narratives to each other, like constellations, perspectives different from the hegemonic ones were sought in the history of drug use and its impacts on the social and on the subjects. The following is one of the constructed narratives:

I started to use it, even with a certain periodic frequency, more than... Well, as if it were a monthly use of cocaine, but it was not the use of a small amount, it was the use of spending the night, then, of creating strategies, with a partner, with acquaintances. A friend of mine, an older person, whom I have known for a few years now, and who retired, a warrior, worked in a public university and such, he is a long-time crack user, and I have always been a strenuous person with the use of crack, until 3 years ago I had never used it was when I tried it and I was also thinking about this experiment, From the beginning, as a strategy, we will use everything we can in 24 hours, on a day from Friday to Saturday, and avoid going into mouth and inside the house, playing general, playing dominoes, playing cards, cards and a session of 40-50 stones between two people. When I had the first session of use at this intensity, I had very physical reactions, I vomited, something that hadn't happened to me for a long time, it didn't happen anymore with sweets, with cocaine, cocaine even some bad ones did that to me too, but it wasn't the case, only alcohol, once the person still gets in the way, we create a lot of strategies

to reduce the damage, take care of yourself, but every now and then you're tired and you drink and get behind the wheel, it happened to me, in a checkpoint, you know, I drank, I was very safe, but I put myself in a horrible experience, with a revoked license, paying all that money, that sitting on the grease, so, guy puts himself at risk. But anyway, crack surprised me like that, because it reminded me of another more entheogenic substance like ayahuasca, which has some bad moments of bad trip and good moments of good vibe, and crack when he made me this analogy of use, I took it away from me as a risky truth. But every drug can have entheogenic use, regardless of its nature, if it is natural in the organic sense, like a cannabis flower, regardless of whether it has a more rustic chemical process, or if it has a more synthetic, artificial chemical process, any substance, in my experiences, has this entheogenic power, so it is a substance of power, Crack is a substance of power, which can awaken your gods or your demons and you have to deal with it. I say entheogen in the religious sense, the guys must find what I'm saying blasphemous, what is read, it enters within a cultural context such as Santo Daime, such as the União do Vegetal, other lineages that exist today of the use of ayahuasca, whether they are more syncretic from the African point of view, from the point of view of Latin American indigenous cultures, the entities and the songs they use, have more perspective of it being something sacred. That substance is a sacred substance, it will pass on to you a process of visions of itself, it has all the context of care in the use of this substance, there is the person who coordinates, it does not coordinate without paying attention to the effect on the people who are in the circle, trying to lead them to situations of not exposing themselves to risk, But really enjoying madness, if it's strong, if you've seen your demon and you're having to come across it, you'll have to come across it, then that's the experience of entheogen. Which is a difficult experience at first, it is difficult but it is also revealing, but of course it is a long use, it is a small dose for a wide effect, and in crack there are several micro doses to keep these effects there, and it's good man, it's good, I have fun, it's like finding a friend, catch up, have a beer, play a game, play a game, we bet some glass chips, there's no money, it's just partnership, talk there, talk here, but at some point too, it became more intensive than I would like, also feeling more guilty in the relationship that my friend is older and has asthma, And he's a survivor, he's used everything, including with him he was also with whom I injected drugs, as an old man I used a cocaine harpoon, as an old man, it was even on his birthday, so the days kind of come together, and some, I, in this case, am a guy who throws myself a lot into this experience, I have re-signified this identity place of "junkie", and put myself in situations of less risk, especially alcohol, alcohol is a substance that I have been more careful with, especially for driving and such. And the candy too, I had some good experiences, and another one didn't work out very well, I ended up taking it in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and it was a very good substance, it would last many hours, and I was on a motorcycle, I had to wait for that experience to pass as much as possible, and it was bad, I planned badly, this year, months ago, and I already had a very good experience with it, at home. So, at the same time that's it, it's the god and the devil, it can make the experience like this place more of a meeting, medicinal, anyway, I've been enjoying this pyre, and crack, with this friend I talked to him about it, and he found it very interesting, because he always vomits, he vomits horrors, and then I remembered that ayahuasca we vomit too, So not always, not always. There are things that you need to get out, when you vomit with ayahuasca, it's something you need to get out, it brings this to be a crack use, of course, I'm saying this within a context of people with higher education, men, brown, white, with an active life, in various ways, with work, with family, With leisure, with militancy, activism, but who use drugs, I use marijuana, every day, my medicine, and for example, I have made peace with the use of marijuana because all medicine, all drugs, you know, have side effects, there are difficult experiences, and there is also intoxication, and we end up creating tolerance, the excess also intoxicates, Alcohol intoxication for me is horrible, and marijuana too, but I smoke every day, it doesn't mean that every day, there are moments, cycles, that I smoke more than others, then I think there is a self-regulation too, which is to think that when I need it most, the more I use, and the

less, I use it less, it has to do with the moment of life, with the moment of work, of family, with the moment of leisure, but for me it is kind of a stabilizer. (Male, white, 36 years old, post-graduate (master's degree)).

## CONCLUSION

A challenge posed to research in social psychology refers to investigating the processes of subjectivation without falling into constructions of truths about certain themes and, at the same time, without losing the necessary methodological rigor to deepen the researched phenomena. In this sense, the use of the constellation method of thought, inspired by Walter Benjamin, can be opportune and powerful to approach complex phenomena of contemporaneity, such as the use of illicit drugs in a society marked by prohibitionism.

In summary, making research a constellation consists of positioning the narratives as stars, developing the writing based on what the narratives trigger in the researcher: what they arouse, which authors are invited to dialogue with them, to compose a relationship of connection with them. It is not a priori an investigative field where one seeks to confirm hypotheses or collect data. Nor is it a matter of seeking the meaning behind the narratives, or analyzing their content, falling back on a representational logic. In this sense, just as different peoples look at the heavens and attribute meanings to the stars related to their cultures, it is necessary to look at the phenomena we investigate in our research and build constellations from where we are. In the case of drug use, in a Brazilian, South American context, inviting the discussion of worldviews that situate this use outside the colonial crossings may be opportune to displace our understanding of the official narratives about drug use.

The narratives, grouped as constellations, allow a methodology where certain arrangements operate in the logic of making visible. Thus, in the research presented here, the method was decisive for the irruption of other discourses on the relationship with drug use.

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