

\* Original Article

## Theoretical and methodological reflections on interventions and care in the field of mental health<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article presents theoretical and methodological reflections by members of the Center of Interdisciplinary Studies in Mental Health (NISAM/ISC/UFBA). The theoretical and methodological approaches are based on fieldwork and analysis of empirical data from recent research conducted in psychosocial care centers. The reflections draw upon authors in hermeneutics and interpretive anthropology. Using studies and research that provide evaluative investigations in the mental health field, the theoretical and methodological framework adopted by NISAM adopts an ethnographic methodology. It employs a data triangulation strategy based on evidence from the multiple viewpoints of distinct social actors, including users, relatives, professionals, managers, and community members, who are involved in constructing mental health services and networks.

**Keywords:** Mental health; PCCs; Service assessment; Territory; Health care

### Introduction

Psychosocial care centers (PCCs), which are a direct result of debates during the psychiatric reform movement in Brazil, were created to reorient the mental health care model by using a strategy of interventions in the field to promote the social reintegration of people with severe and persistent mental disorders (BRASIL, 2002). According to mental health policies, the goal of PCCs should be the effective deinstitutionalization and citizenship of individuals with mental distress, marking a (somewhat radical) distinction between a hospital-centered model and an extended clinic model that aims to move these individuals into a broader social space.

PCCs act as microcultures, cultural universes that interact with society (NUNES et al., 2010). PCCs provide people with resources, significance, epistemological horizons, temporalities, and spatial arrangements, which can be considered cultural idioms. These idioms emerge from ideas and practices developed during locally produced and contextualized psychiatric reform movements. The relationships established between these microcultures and society, which reflect the social requirements of the environment, are largely responsible for the level of deinstitutionalization obtained and the resulting social inclusion of PCC users (SANTOS & NUNES, 2011).

PCCs are noted for their role as microcultures and their simultaneous participation in their surrounding territory. PCCs at once both transform and are transformed by the territories in which they are located. To study these effects, we conducted fieldwork in mental health using a specific understanding of the concept of "territory" (and PCCs), in which a territory is a (geographically non-delimited) space constituted by its use. A territory is understood as an appropriate space for people, but the locus of analysis is not the space itself but rather the interactions between the individuals in certain spaces. In this sense, the effects of PCCs exceed their spatial boundaries and accompany their

users through significant social developments.

To study these effects with respect to the dynamics of the social relationships that are developed, the inferred social processes, and the articulations of experiences that are produced, we adopt a fundamentally interpretive perspective. The present article discusses theoretical and methodological reflections by the authors and members of the Center of Interdisciplinary Studies in Mental Health (NISAM), Institute of Collective Health, Federal University of Bahia (ISC/UFBA). These reflections, which draw upon studies in hermeneutics and interpretive anthropology, are grounded in fieldwork and analyses of empirical data produced by recent research in the context of PCCs. Through evaluative investigations in the mental health field, the theory and methodology adopted at NISAM have privileged ethnographic methodologies. These methodologies use data triangulation strategies and evidence from the multiple perspectives of the social actors involved in constructing mental health services, including users, relatives, professionals, managers, and community members (MINAYO, 1991, 2005; FURTADO, 2001; ONOCKO-CAMPOS & FURTADO, 2006; FURTADO & CAMPOS, 2008).

## **Hermeneutics: Philosophical Inspirations and Their Repercussions in Anthropology**

Etymologically, hermeneutics refers to the processes of interpretation and understanding. According to Soares (1994), misunderstandings can occur in hermeneutical debates when things that are polysemic are taken to be univocal. Soares notes the existence of multiple and sometimes contradictory hermeneutical traditions and the need for specific theoretical-philosophical positioning.

The hermeneutic tradition contrasts with the positivist approach and draws upon the theoretical and philosophical influence of Husserl, Dilthey, Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer (SOARES, 1994). Dilthey states that the historicity of knowledge binds the presupposition of belonging in human beings. According to Dilthey, history is generated by "particularities, unique experiences, societies, and singular cultures" (SOARES, 1994, p. 22). In this sense, the essence of human beings is in their belonging. This category was revisited by Gadamer, who claims that human finitude precedes human belonging to the field of language .

The thesis of linguisticity is a contribution of Heidegger's hermeneutic theory (CASAL, 1996). Language, which both precedes and succeeds the human being, delimits its interpretive horizon when applied to a tradition or culture. Being situated in a language or culture implies limiting it and renouncing completeness, totality, full consciousness, and the absolute; it means recognizing the limits of reflexivity itself (SOARES, 1994).

A key concept in the hermeneutical tradition, referenced by both Husserl and Gadamer, is that the interpretation of the world, including scientific interpretation, emerges from pre-understanding or prejudice and is therefore subject to a specific horizon. Pre-understanding is the result of prior (historic) viewpoints, which are considered presuppositions of understanding (CASAL, 1996).

The notion of horizon implies the possibility of attributing meaning to reality as a sort of frame of reference. Hermeneutics, for authors such as Gadamer, results in a dialogue with pre-understanding, which is determined by the tradition that encompasses language and conditions the horizon. If, on the one hand, the notion of horizon suggests interpretive limits, on the other hand, it involves critical-creative availability and the incorporation of other traditions and cultures. Therefore, this concept promotes the fusion of horizons (SOARES, 1994). This is one of the fundamental concepts in Gadamerian hermeneutic theory.

The hermeneutic experience involves the meeting between an object's historicity (the other) and its interpreter's historicity. According to Casal (1996, p. 58), "A very successful understanding requires conjunction, fusion between two horizons: the other's horizon, from the past, of the tradition; and the self's horizon, from its own experience in the present".

The notion of horizon, therefore, is characterized by its openness and ability to incorporate the un-integrated or the new. From this perspective, hermeneutic activity is constructive and captive, active and passive. It is always perceived in some place, situated in some plane, based in some culture. Thus, it is assumed that the hermeneutic interpretation imposes pieces of the object. As Soares (1994) notes, we always perceive through a selective filter because we are historical beings who belong to a particular language and tradition. Thus, we are culturally marked; we are finite.

Hermeneutics has been marked by the dialectic between the particular and universal, identity and difference, subject and object, belonging and distance, and part and whole (SOARES, 1994). Human historicity and social phenomena, for example, determine the particularity and the object of

knowledge. This idea contrasts with feasibility, the concept that life reproduces according to laws and rules.

Belonging situates the interpreter in contrast to the object, providing an interpretive horizon. However, detachment can enable creative and critical acts and the fusion between horizons, such as a dialogic meeting between traditions and culture. Regarding the dialectical relationship between subject and object, it is assumed in the hermeneutic tradition that the former are not always active, and the latter are not always external and passive. From a Gadamerian perspective, subject and object are co-determinant, and knowledge emerges from the fusion between their horizons.

Among the dialectical pairs, the part-whole relationship is undoubtedly the most characterized by the hermeneutic approach. This relationship is the core of the hermeneutic circle theory. According to this theory, hermeneutic practice involves a complex relationship between parts and the whole, in which the meaning of each fragment (part) is registered in the whole that contains the fragments and determines their significance. In turn, the meaning of the whole can be learned only by articulating the significance between the fragments (parts) that constitute it (SOARES, 1994; SCHLEIERMACHER, 2006).

Hermeneutic interpretation, according to this theory, results from a complex investment that is "reflective, comprehensive, and imaginative" (SOARES, 1994, p. 24). The circularity of this enterprise is emblematic. The starting point is a fragment of reality that tangentially and partially reaches the sensory apparatus. To understand its meaning, the interpreter presents attempted interpretations or initial hypotheses that are relative approximations of the totality of the object.

During this process, pre-understandings come into play, determined by the tradition in which the interpreter is situated. Attempted interpretations are developed to represent the whole, explained by the fact that the meaning of the whole is necessarily relational and positional. As the other fragments or parts of reality are manifested, the initial hypothesis of the meaning of the fragment in relation to the projected whole, is reexamined and validated or invalidated. In the event of contradiction, the hypothesis must be reformulated.

The interpretive movement follows this circularity. In reality, as Soares (1994) notes, interpretation is always an inconclusive enterprise. Hermeneutic understanding results in a piece of reality. The totality can never be learned and may even constitute a part or fragment of another interpretive chain. Thus, the interpretive circle never ends. It is interrupted by dialogic processes and agreements between virtual interlocutors. In the scientific literature, the consensus among researchers on the relevance and plausibility of understanding is that a given social phenomena conditions the interruption of the hermeneutical circle, at least temporarily.

Hermeneutical theory ultimately enhances the relevance of relationships between interlocutors to produce knowledge. The subjects participate in the hermeneutic circle, positioning themselves in relation to their objects by dialogical arguments. In this process, it is necessary to consider the co-determination between the part and the whole as well as the co-determination between the subject and object. The reflexivity of hermeneutic practice is thus revealed: the interpreter must include itself or, better, its own interpretation, in the hermeneutic circle. Subject and object meet and co-determine, merging their horizons and producing knowledge.

In discussing the hermeneutic production of knowledge, Casal (1996, p. 50) takes the Gadamerian perspective: "The essential methodological device is the dialogue: dialogue between individuals, dialogue between observer and observed, dialogue between interpreter and interpreted, independent of each object's temporality".

*Horizon fusion* emerges from this dialogue. Thus, the learned meaning is the meaning shared between the subject and the object and between interpreter and interpreted. It can be inferred from this premise that hermeneutic interpretation implies the intersubjective production of knowledge.

The debate on the methodological application of hermeneutics contains a multiplicity of theoretical traditions. For Soares (1994), positioned between Gadamerian traditions, hermeneutics must not be confused with a method. Its character is not instrumental. Gadamer, like Casal (1996), assumed an anti-methodological stance in the development of hermeneutical theory, leaning toward the issue of comprehensibility: "How is comprehension possible, what is comprehension"? (CASAL, 1996, p. 57).

In this sense, Soares (1994) refers to Schleiermacher to highlight hermeneutics as a relevant problem in itself, envisioning the hermeneutic contribution for social sciences and humanities. Soares explains, "Hermeneutics explores the essential structure of the act of interpretation, reflecting on conditions of its possibility, its limits, and extraordinary implications derived from comprehension of

this structure and this process" (SOARES, 1994, p. 14). In other words, hermeneutics consists of a reflective practice of the interpretive act itself.

Despite Gadamer's intentions, his theoretical-philosophical assumptions did not lead to the development of a hermeneutic methodology in the social sciences and humanities. Soares' (1994) methodological course emphasizes that interpretation involves four fundamental components: a) presumptions (pre-understandings or prejudices) provided by tradition, which constitute the interpretive horizon; b) the tradition, from which we engage in dialogue with the interpreted object; c) methodological instruments, which distinguish the ordinary hermeneutics of everyday life from interpretation for the production of scientific knowledge; and d) the productive imagination, which introduces critical reflection so that the projection of pre-understandings does not restrict interpretive activity to mere reiteration of tradition.

Regarding the methodological contributions of hermeneutic theory, Casal (1996) attributes an important role to Paul Ricoeur in advancing the interpretive methodology, with considerable repercussions for the social sciences and humanities, notably interpretive anthropology. For this purpose, Ricoeur adopts Gadamer's own theoretical-philosophical reflection as a reference. In his own theoretical and methodological proposal, Ricoeur contrasts assumptions by Dilthey and Schleiermacher related to the learned intentionality of these authors, seeing these assumptions as a misunderstanding that "intends to understand an author better than he understood himself" (RICOEUR cited in CASAL, 1996, p. 63). Ricoeur's theoretical investment searches for ways to objectify linguistic processes.

Hermeneutic methodology, according to Ricoeur (1989, p. 141), assumes text, or written speech, as an object, defined as "all discourse fixed by what is written". Fixing discourse preserves it because every oral enunciation is characterized by its transience and its tendency to disappear. It is assumed that fixing discourse guarantees more than its mere preservation; it affects the communicative function of the discourse (RICOEUR, 1976).

Another repercussion of fixing discourse is the transformation of the dialogical situation characterized by face-to-face meetings between subjects in conversation. Thus, the author's intent and the meaning of the text are dissociated. The semantic autonomy of the text results, evidenced by being "*said as such*" (RICOEUR, 1976, p. 21). In other words, what the text means is more interesting than what the author meant to say by enunciating or writing it.

The semantic autonomy of the text is a key concept in hermeneutics, according to Ricoeur (1976). Autonomy does not imply a loss of references from the text, which "remains a discourse said by someone, said by someone to someone else about something" (RICOEUR, 1976, p. 42).

However, the authorship of the text is one of its dimensions. The author is no longer present, as when the text was produced; thus, the author can no longer be questioned by the reader or interpreter. However, the text is characterized by its openness to indefinite readers capable of multiple interpretations. In this scenario, the dialectic of the semantic autonomy of the text is situated: "Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends" (RICOEUR, 1976, p. 43). This is how interpretation can be objectified (CASAL, 1996).

Thus, the externality of the discourse fixed in the text is reflected in the detachment between the author and the reader. Text references are no longer limited to face-to-face dialogue, making it possible for indefinite interpreters to access the world through fixed discourse, which facilitates the transcription of the world: "Understanding or interpreting a text thus consists of confronting all possible meanings" (CASAL, 1996, p. 64).

From this perspective, Ricoeur (1976) claims that externality, through the process of detachment, is a necessary condition in hermeneutics. By distancing itself from the author, the text can become closer to the reader or interpreter, thus opening new referential horizons, according to Casal (1996). Learning meanings involves the appropriation of the foreign, strange, and unfamiliar. This is the essence of dialectical detachment and appropriation as they manifest in hermeneutic interpretation.

## **Sign Systems, Meanings, and Practices and Fieldwork in Mental Health**

In accordance with the theoretical and methodological references grounded in the hermeneutic Gadamerian tradition and authors of interpretive anthropology, one of the possibilities developed by NISAM researchers for quantitative fieldwork in mental health involves systems, significances, and practices (S/ssp) (BIBEAU, 1992; BIBEAU & CORIN, 1995; ALMEIDA-FILHO et al. s/d; s/d(a); ALMEIDA-FILHO, COELHO & PERES, 1999; CAROSO, RODRIGUES & ALMEIDA-FILHO, 1996; 1998). This methodological model facilitates the articulation of micro- and macro-social contexts, proposing

a method that focuses on the subjective experiences and singular trajectories of people in specific situations while considering the structural conditions and collective organizing experience that sustains them (BIBEAU, 1992).

S/ssp was developed with the goal of providing an alternative means of investigation in the transcultural psychiatric field that integrates interpretive, phenomenological, and social perspectives in critical anthropology. This approach provides a partial revision of the limits of the epidemiological approach to mental disorders, with mental health as the objective of the study (BIBEAU, 1992; BIBEAU & CORIN, 1995; ALMEIDA-FILHO et al. s/d; sd(a); ALMEIDA-FILHO, COELHO & PERES, 1999).

S/ssp proposes three methodological steps in data collection: pre-polling, extensive polling, and case reconstruction. *Pre-polling* aims to identify the signals associated with socially problematic people as these signals spontaneously appear in dialogues about the problem. In *extensive polling*, key interlocutors are identified who can explain the signs and their meanings through open interviews and discussion of specific cases. The third step involves *case reconstruction*, focusing on the causes of disease, its severity, reactions to the person affected by the disease, and the treatments conducted (CAROSO, RODRIGUES & ALMEIDA-FILHO, 1996; 1998; ALMEIDA-FILHO et al. s/d; s/d (a)).

S/ssp consists of three levels for approaching a problem: factual, narrative, and interpretive (BIBEAU, 1992). The initial data collection is a way to capture the interlocutor's viewpoint, including assessments of the researcher's work, until the interpretive work is finalized. At the *factual* level, we begin from the idea that is necessary to determine the facts, events, and specific actions that are significant to the subjects under study. Complementary data are also collected, including statistics related to the problem (BIBEAU, 1992).

The *narrative* level relates to initial collection of spontaneous reports on the problem and identification of the key interlocutors. In a second, more systematic step, at this level, the interlocutor's experiences of dealing with the problem on a daily basis are reconstructed. It is particularly important to note that narratives are the principal units for analyzing the proposal, not the cases themselves. This is reflective of a type of research design that does not study cases but rather arises from the medical or psychological clinic or from current sociology (BIBEAU, 1992).

Finally, the *interpretive* level considers the interlocutor's interpretations as native interpretations that cannot be limited by the researcher. Anthropological hermeneutics requires a transition from a mere description of facts and explicative native models to an elaboration of interpretations; that is, it is a cooperative analytical work that supports emerging meanings that may escape the social actors (BIBEAU, 1992).

The S/ssp model inspires us to share two operational issues: 1) the advantages of considering the narratives produced by interlocutors (for example, representatives of a scientific field rather than laypeople), which is locally constructed, plural, fragmented, and even contradictory knowledge, as a starting point for the understanding of these narratives; and 2) the idea that interlocutors' particular histories of challenges in working in public health, particularly in the mental health field, should not be read as "autonomous texts" that summarize their subjective experiences and reify their narratives. This idea includes the notion that meanings must be understood in a specific sociocultural context (BIBEAU, 1992).

On the interpretive level, the authors consider hermeneutics at the second level to be a strategy that combines the *text submission* of the collected dialogues and the *violence* inflicted by the researcher on these texts. In this sense, the interpretive process originates from four basic rules, presented in aphorisms by Bibeau and Corin (1995).

The first concerns the necessity to "acquire familiarity with reality's surface" in an effort to familiarize the researcher with the natives' world by learning their language, customs, and activities. The second aphorism is related to the ability to "look behind the scenes and read between the lines"—that is, the researcher must avoid superficial interpretation in favor of uncovering layers of reality and seeking intentionally or unintentionally hidden significance. This approach considers the analogy of culture as texts (GEERTZ, 1989) produced in the interaction between the researcher and the respondents and the search for "cultural subtext": the gaps, silences, and multiple guises of native concepts.

The third rule, "following the footsteps of diviners", has two meanings: a) the selection of people, authorities, storytellers (the key respondents) who authorize the narration of their experiences and who are knowledgeable about the object of the researcher's interest and b) the interpretive process as a kind of "divination", not in the magical sense of the word in the possibility that the researcher may connect the selected signs and identify them within the prevailing meaning system or mode of

thinking of the studied group.

Finally, the fourth rule in developing anthropological interpretation rests on a reliable foundation, determined by the researcher, that "engages in creative cooperative effort" to understand the reality studied. In this sense, the interpretation of the text involves cooperation between the writer and the reader (RICOEUR, 1989; 1991) that allows the researcher to fill in the blanks. Respondents can be considered co-authors in the native interpretations. As Bibeau and Corin (1995, p. 60) note, "Meaning is always considered a collective product, but this is rather incessant and cooperatively created by cultural actors, negotiating between themselves about different stages and publically revealed" [our translation].

For these authors, the violence of the ethnographic process in anthropological hermeneutics has developed through the ongoing effort to make the studied reality more familiar to the researcher as a way to capture meanings that would otherwise be overlooked by superficial perceptions of these situations. We seek to fill in the blanks of the texts produced to access prevailing modes of thinking in the studied groups.

In an operational sense, *focused ethnography* suggests that an "analysis of ethnographic data should be conducted to identify patterns and focal points around the wide parts of cultural and social life, organized in each context" [our translation] (ALMEIDA-FILHO et al. s/d (a)). From this perspective, focused ethnography is a methodological strategy that seeks to describe the significant aspects of the context to delimit the problem under study, exploring aspects that are relevant or that are produced *a priori* in the daily reality of the study.

We can highlight four epistemological premises that have guided fieldwork in studies developed at NISAM: the object-model, relative validity, weak representativeness, and contextual sensibility (ALMEIDA-FILHO, CORIN & BIBEAU, s/d). Considering an object of study an object-model implies seeing it as the "result of reduced traits selected from specific phenomena within general universal categories" [our translation] (ALMEIDA-FILHO, CORIN & BIBEAU, s/d). This approach assumes a praxeological perspective that emphasizes dialogic comprehension in producing knowledge. This approach distances itself from approaches that perceive the object as a "direct representation of reality" and that ignore the object's emergence within the complex power relationship of the institutional contexts and social and political webs that legitimize it. This approach does not necessarily imply that social reality only exists as a condition of the interpretation.

Second, the validity of findings and interpretations is conditioned on the approach and the explanation of the concepts important for its comprehension. Thus, the findings are relative. We can attribute relative validity to the knowledge produced because it is influenced by modeling the object and by the social, historical, and cultural contexts (ALMEIDA-FILHO; CORIN & BIBEAU, s/d).

The notion of weak representativeness ensures the eminently qualitative character of the model, in contrast with quantitative research (using structured methods), for which the choice of key respondents considers their potential heterogeneity and their discursive diversity in comprehending the object. This approach does not correspond to the investigative standards of structured methods, which are oriented in statistical procedures that define their sampling (ALMEIDA-FILHO; CORIN & BIBEAU, s/d).

Finally, the cultural sensibility of the S/ssp model emphasizes the researcher's commitment to producing contextualized scientific knowledge. In other words, this model is in accordance with the goal of enhancing local interpretation through the understanding of signs and meanings attributed to the object as a fundamental starting point for work that values the particular but does not exclude reflections on universal aspects (ALMEIDA-FILHO; CORIN & BIBEAU, s/d).

Some of the notions that sustain interpretive anthropology (GEERTZ, 1989; 1989a; 2002; 2002a) have proved useful for understanding objects of study in mental health. It is important to note that many orientations of S/ssp are in accordance with the interpretive perspective of Clifford Geertz, which suggests that researchers in S/ssp can systematize methods for sampling and analyzing ethnographic data on health problems.

The main idea consists of the understanding of social life based on the metaphor of text. In work by Geertz (2002a) and his followers, the notion of text that sustains interpretive anthropology is principally based in philosophical reflections by Paul Ricoeur. The text metaphor is a powerful resource at the foundational moment of a new anthropological approach and suggests a specific relationship between dialogic production in fieldwork and its interpretation *a posteriori* (GEERTZ, 1989; 2002)

In this sense, the analogy of social life as a text that can be read is inspired by the *inscription* concept, developed by Paul Ricoeur, which is “the key for transitioning from text to analogue text, from written text as speech to action with speech” (GEERTZ, 2002a, p. 50). For Ricoeur (1991, p. 106), as previously stated, “*text* is any discourse fixed by writing”, and *inscription* fixes the meaning in any type of record.

Interpretive anthropology, from this perspective, consists of actions and meanings that can be read as a text. From the viewpoint of interpretive ethnographic writing, recording an action allows us to transition from a mere description of facts and explicative native models to elaborations on the researcher's interpretations (GEERTZ, 1989; 2002; 2002a).

Based on the concept of recording action, Geertz (1989) states that ethnographic description is interpretive and microscopic. What is interpreted is the flow of social discourse, which seeks to save the “said”, thus preventing its extinction and fixing it in searchable forms. The meaning attributed to the microscopic characteristics of the authorized description allows for “very extensive knowledge of extremely small subjects”. In thus describing the object, we prevent the locus of study from necessarily coinciding with the object under study, as is common in most classical anthropological studies (GEERTZ, 1989).

We consider the effort of lived experiences (GEERTZ, 1989) and highlight the possibility of assessing their meanings through ethnographic practice in an attempt to identify how subjects think and feel. It takes a researcher to record these experiences and to provoke the interlocutors through data collection techniques, such as interviews, or through direct and/or participatory observations.

## Final reflections

The problem of the meanings of new forms of mental health care, assuming the psychosocial care center as a privileged empirical field and its territory, is at the core of the theoretical and methodological reflections made and shared at NISAM. Throughout the fieldwork, the daily dialogues produced by the PCCs or in the territory (*to say*) temporarily disappear at the moment of action within the service and/or the territory (developed activities, trips, movement in the neighborhood/community). However, the meanings (*what was said*) remain, principally, and not exclusively, in recording (fixing the meaning), which makes it possible to determine the *viewpoints* of the *native-users/familiars/professionals*, considering the possible relationships established with broader elements of reality that may be institutional, cultural, or political (GEERTZ, 2002).

However, a warning is required: we are in the place of one who “reads”, not one who “listens”, when treating the collected data. In particular, we must consider two distinct moments in producing data and their analysis. First, the interviews and/or observations are conducted by one group of researchers whose role is to listen and produce a dialogue with their key respondents. In the adopted perspective, an interpretation is already produced that is guided by a script and thus is less conscious of what is said and of the process.

In the second moment, the analysis of the narratives puts the researcher in the role of the reader. This role is enriched by prior participation in the direct production of the narratives that are units of analysis but are not limited to this moment and would not be impractical without the participation of the researcher: what is said is written.

This observation is especially important for the analysis and interpretation of the empirical data by the research group. For example, in their latest study, NISAM conducted fieldwork over a two-year period to evaluate new forms of mental care using 11 participating PCCs, seven in Bahia State and four in Aracaju State, Brazil. An ethnographic database was produced and used interpretively by group members despite a lack of agreement between the PCCs in which the data was collected (and that directly participated in the dialogues) and the diverse interpretations included in the *a posteriori* analyses.

We began with the premise that the *act of reading* is different from the *act of dialogue*. An important characteristic of this difference is that writing preserves the discourse and makes it available to individual and collective memory. According to the author, dialogue is to speech as writing is to reading because writing takes the place of discourse. However, for the author, there is no supremacy between speech and writing: “What appears in the writing is the discourse as intended to say and [...] writing is a direct record of this intention, even if, historically and psychologically, the writing began when graphically transcribing the signs of speech” (RICOEUR, 1989, p. 143).

Understanding the text as taking the place of discourse (RICOEUR, 1989) (i.e., of social life) seems to be one of the stimuli for developing the interpretive perspective of anthropology. This approach

suggests that this approximation goes beyond a record and extends to interpretation. This notion is based on the separation of the text from orality, which transforms the relationships between language and the world as well as the relationship between language and the subjectivities of the author and reader.

Reading a text means interpreting it and appropriating what initially was strange by reducing cultural distance (RICOEUR, 1989; 1991). The task of reading refers to the world and to a subject, reflecting the ambience and the audience. From Ricoeur's viewpoint, writing claims reading, which modifies the author-reader relationship and situates the reader as one who produces an interpretation that follows the interpretation offered in the text itself.<sup>2</sup>

This notion reflects the interpretive perspective proposed by Geertz. The researcher's task, or the task of ethnographic practice itself, is to meet the world from the native's viewpoint. However, Geertz warns:

*"The ethnographer does not perceive – especially unable to perceive – what their respondents perceive. What they perceive, and also with a lot of uncertainty, is 'that', or 'by means which', or 'through which' (or whichever expression) the others perceive".* (GEERTZ, 2002, p. 89).

For Geertz (2002), interpretation can be understood as the transition from near experience to distant experience. Near experience involves the natural use and effortless explanation of similarities that are seen, felt, thought, and imagined and that the other group members easily understand. Distant experience is another interpretation, no less valid than the previous interpretation, that attempts to achieve scientific, philosophical, or practical goals.

In the field of interpretation, the researcher must not limit the near experience but instead must consider it a fundamental starting point. We take the reports of our interlocutors as near-experience concepts. However, at times, they make use of distant experience concepts because they are also specialists. According to Geertz (2002), there is no normative difference between these concepts; one is not better than the other. There is a difference of degree, not extreme opposition.

We highlight these ideas to emphasize the ability of interlocutors to produce meaning in specific situations in addition to considering the researcher's active role in reading texts produced cooperatively with his or her respondents. Bibeau (1992) argues that in the interpretive process, we must retain the responsibility and autonomy of the social actors and the researcher without neglecting the political, social, and cultural factors involved in explanations and decisions in specific situations.

Finally, one more observation must be noted, which involves the text metaphor as a strategy for understanding social reality. This metaphor provides the premise of an interpretation that is valued by "the action to its meaning, and not the behavior and its determinants" (GEERTZ, 2002a p. 55). We do not seek positive associations between variables based on a cause-and-effect relationship; we seek meanings that are attributed to the actions of specific situations.

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## Notes

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2 "When text takes the place of speech, we cannot properly talk about the locutor, at least in the sense of an immediate and direct self-designation which speaks in the instance of discourse: this proximity of the speaker with their own speech substitutes a complex relationship of the author with the text that allows us to say that the author is instituted by the text, which itself remains in the space of meaning traced and inscribed in the writing; the text is exactly the place where the author survives" (RICOEUR, 1989, p. 145)