

## **Agency and Subjectivity in Pandemic (Neoliberal) Times: A Duoethnographic Study**

Lívia Fortes (UFES)

Luciana Ferrari (UFES)

### **ABSTRACT**

This duoethnographic study addresses some of the conflicts that two academics in a public Brazilian University have experienced during pandemic times. As they engage in conversations prompted by their own narratives exchanged online during the first weeks of quarantine, they start theorizing on some emerging topics that, for them, needed to be critically examined and, eventually, ressignified. In this sense, this article discusses the role of agency in their academic and personal lives and how it was engendered during such complex and unpredictable times, drawing special attention to questions of collectivity and diversity. Furthermore, the present work examines questions of identity and the neoliberal subjectivities that also emerged through this extremely rich collaborative experience, leading, therefore to risky and truthful subjectification processes on the part of the authors.

**keywords:** duoethnography; agency; neoliberalism; subjectification.

### **1 Introduction**

The challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic have imposed on our human condition as sociological subjects, that is, as sociocultural and historical individuals constituted by language and by social structures and interactions, are innumerable and of different natures. Many are the decenterings and countless are the uncertainties that our identities and academic praxis have undergone and been subject to. In the face of so many changes and the countless questions implicated in them, we are urged to act with responsibility, ethics and critical awareness as the pandemic has strongly highlighted and reinforced social differences and, alongside, our weak capacity to deal with the different other, the unpredictable and the risk.

We have no recipes, no survival kits or manuals, and never before has the motto “tomorrow is another day” been so true. Along with Paulo Freire (1987, p. 72), the crisis of the new Coronavirus reminds us that we are unfinished, imperfect, inconclusive beings, inserted in a reality that, “being historical as well, is also unfinished”. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic has made history. We do not know when the virus will cease to spread, if it ever will, nor how transformed we will eventually be. Therefore, assuming our imperfections and accepting the fragility of the other and of our institution has never been more urgent and necessary, as well as the understanding that we are part of that too and can, if we wish, transform our own realities or at least, the way we want to see them. All of that constitutes a survival exercise as well as an exercise of citizenship, new language practices, new subjectivity events that lead us to Freire’s (1987, p. 73) timely understanding “in order to be, one has to go on being”.

Based on these brief and initial reflections on the pandemic, this work ramifies and is scientifically and identitarily instituted through the writers’ subjectivities in the making. In this duoethnographic study, two women, academics, teachers, mothers, friends and life partners inside and outside the University focus on their own and multiple lifeworlds influenced by the experiences and transformations that the new Coronavirus brings to our personal and professional lives, to the institutions we attend, to our discourses and social practices. Our collaborative interactions mediated by technology in times of social/physical isolation, along with our personal accounts on our first experiences, as well as our anxieties and actions during the first months of the pandemic became triggers for deeper critical reflections and deconstructions, ruptures and agency which, for us, have turned into rich subjectification processes.

In the following lines, we invite the reader to embark with us on this route of problematizations and resignifications around notions of agency and subjectivity influenced by the neoliberal ethos in pandemic times. Through our anxieties and the conflicts emerging from our discourses, we share a little bit of our learnings as we also open ourselves to the risk and unpredictability of the meanings underlying this article, bound to the multiple interpretations that will, in turn, represent the subjectivities of our readers. But for those who have apparently survived the threats of the disease, may this new challenge come!

## 2 Methodology

As we set out to outline the possibilities for writing this article about language education in pandemic times, one very thought crossed our minds as we wanted our contribution to this special *RBLA* issue to be both valuable and personal. How could our views be juxtaposed and analyzed dialogically based on our personal experiences as academics (teacher educators at a Brazilian Federal University), as the mothers of children attending both elementary and middle private Brazilian schools, as upper-middle-classwomen, as daughters and friends, to name a few of the identities that we hold?

Having developed our academic praxis upon the Qualitative-Interpretative research paradigm (ERICKSON, 1986), with special emphasis on postmodern and poststructuralist views and epistemologies, we found that the duoethnography perspective could meet our needs as, according to Sawyer and Liggett (2012),

[d]uoethnography as a method is more conceptual than prescriptive. Its method is framed by a poststructuralist approach to research. Such an approach rejects the notion of a single, fixed, and absolute reality existing independently of human consciousness and imagination. Instead, meanings are constructed in the process of interpretation. Drawing from this philosophy, duoethnographers engage in multiple interpretations as they use self as a site of analysis of sociocultural meanings and influences (SAWYER; LIGGETT, 2012, p. 629).

Furthermore, the highlight of duoethnography may be that it allows researchers to review their past experiences and the meanings attached to them through dialogue, and, as they engage in conversations (be it spoken or written), new insights arise providing new opportunities for resignification. As stated by Lowe and Kiczowskiak (2016), this type of investigation is not about the researchers *per se* as it should not be “simply” autobiographical. What it does is to frame researchers’ perspectives on certain topics and inquiries as they represent the site, or the *loci*, where meanings are located and eventually, reconceptualized. According to the same authors,

[t]his emphasis on the subjective and individual forms the basis of duoethnography, since it seeks to circumvent the crisis of representation in qualitative writing (the difficulty in authentically representing the voice of another person or group) by allowing people to present and explore, through dialogue, their own experiences (LOWE; KICZKOWIAK, 2016, p. 4).

In a more recent attempt to overcome the “crisis of representation” mentioned above, Morgan, Martin and Maciel (2019, p. 10-11) highlight the nature of duoethnography as being “[...] less concerned with arriving at singular, objective truths and more concerned with exploring how other participants and stakeholders may be differentially positioned and effected by specific policy and practices.” Upon their reasons for choosing this approach they advocate for the possibility of juxtaposing different perspectives on common phenomena by allowing “[...] co-authors to see our own localities of research and teaching in ways less considered”, betting on the richness of the “pluralization of experience” (MORGAN; MARTIN; MACIEL, 2019, p. 10-11).

Resuming the central theme of this article, we acknowledge that the dynamic nature of the pandemic has definitely impacted people’s lives in quite similar, but yet, unique ways. As we seek to explore some of our experiences and emotions through the narratives we brought about and chose to represent us in the course of quarantine days, and mostly, taking into account the complex and rhizomatic nature of our identities inside and outside of the academic realm, the duoethnography method seems to be more than suitable to the present account. Following Sawyer and Liggett (2012), through duoethnography, as researchers and co-authors, we do not need to avoid being implicated in the data and in the meanings drawn from them as

[i]nstead of “bracketing” themselves out of the method, duoethnographers situate themselves centrally within the meaning of the text they are creating, thus promoting the inquiry goal of researcher/reader self-reflexivity. As an aspect of social justice, reflexivity in this instance is a process of deep researcher reflection and conceptual and behavioral change. A goal in duoethnography is not to “uncover findings,” but rather to promote more complex and inclusive social constructions and re-

conceptualizations of experience (SAWYER; LIGGETT, 2012, p. 630-631).

In terms of procedures to attend to, Rose and Montakantiwong (2018) list some general tenets within any duoethnographic study: 1. It must be dialogic, with narratives juxtaposed and collaboratively explored; 2. It should allow the authors to challenge one another within their interpretation frames as well as readers to be challenged to actively make their own meanings; 3. It invests on the strength of plurality in views as differences, and 4. Its methodology must avoid being too prescriptive so as to remain open and flexible. As far as reliability is concerned, we agree with the idea that “In duoethnography, research becomes trustworthy when researcher reflexivity becomes apparent, when the research is explicitly tied to human life and researcher experience” (SAWYER; LIGGETT, 2012, p. 630).

Having all this in mind and after agreeing upon what procedures we would like to follow for the present account, we have each written our narratives on the pandemic and then shared them so that we could make our own meanings while reading them and, consequently, engage into a collaborative and dialogic exercise. That exercise presented itself as a challenging one: firstly because it was the first time we had ever worked with a duoethnography; secondly, because we felt each other as being the research site indeed, that is, our identities were “on the spot” for anyone to “grab” them, which can be an uncomfortable situation; thirdly, because it was a rhizomatic process, meaning we did not know or plan what was about to come, since the themes would emerge as we would read and reflect upon each other’s comments on both researchers’ narratives.

In the next section we will present excerpts of both narratives, produced and exchanged online as the pandemic did not allow face to face conversations and gatherings. We start with Luciana’s narrative, *The Pandemic and I*, moving on to Livia’s narrative, *Covid-19 Narratives*, both followed by the flows of online conversations that were generated. Following them, we present a critical reflection on the emergent themes where we eventually deepen the analysis of the narratives. For organizational (and scope) purposes, we could not present the narratives as a whole, so we picked the exchanges which seemed to have brought about a greater investment from us, the researchers, showing more of our contrasts and differences of opinions. Finally, as it will be noticed below, the excerpts come with some stretches in bold, meaning that they served as prompts and triggers for the comments and the interactions that follow them. This should

not mean that the non-highlighted text is not relevant. However, for scope reasons, they will be left for further analysis and critique.

Com base no texto “**Agency and Subjectivity in Pandemic (Neoliberal) Times: A Duoethnographic Study**”, responda às questões de 1 a 5.

#### Questão 01

Com base no artigo, responda às questões:

- a) Qual é a proposta de discussão do artigo? (1,0)
- b) De acordo com as autoras sobre quais aspectos a crise do Corona vírus pode nos alertar? (1,0)

#### Questão 02

- a) Quais identidades as autoras do artigo se apresentam? (1,0)
- b) Qual convite as autoras fazem aos leitores do seu artigo? (1,0)

#### Questão 03

- a) De acordo com as autoras, qual é filiação epistemológica assumida na pesquisa pesquisa? (1,0)

#### Questão 4

De acordo com Sawyer and Liggett (2012), o que consiste o método de estudo duoetnográfico? (2,0)

#### Questão 05

Conforme a leitura do texto, responda às seguintes perguntas:

- a) Por que Lowe e Kiczkowiak (2016) afirma que a pesquisa duetnográfica não deve ser considerada “simplesmente” como um estudo autobiográfico? (1,0)
- b) Quais procedimentos são listados por Rose e Montakantiwong (2018) com relação ao estudo duoetnográfico? (2,0)

## Espelho da prova

Com base no texto “**Agency and Subjectivity in Pandemic (Neoliberal) Times: A Duoethnographic Study**”, responda às questões de 1 a 5.

### Questão 01

Com base no artigo, responda às questões:

- c) Qual é a proposta de discussão do artigo? (1,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que o artigo busca discutir o papel do agenciamento acadêmico e pessoal em tempos complexos e imprevisíveis da pandemia de Covid-19, voltando-se para as questões de coletividade e diversidade.

- d) De acordo com as autoras, sobre quais aspectos a crise do Corona vírus pode nos alertar? (1,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) compreenda que a crise do novo Corona vírus pode nos alertar para a noção que somos seres inacabados, imperfeitos, inconclusivos e inseridos em uma realidade histórica, igualmente inacabada.

### Questão 02

- c) Quais identidades as autoras do artigo se apresentam? (1,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) aponte que identitariamente as autoras se apresentam como duas mulheres, acadêmicas, professoras, mães, amigas e companheiras dentro e fora da universidade

- d) Qual convite as autoras fazem aos leitores do seu artigo? (1,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que o convite ao leitor está relacionado ao percurso de problematizações e ressignificações em torno de noções de agência e subjetividade, influenciada pelos *ethos* neoliberal em tempos de pandemia. Além da ansiedade e dos conflitos que emergem dos discursos das autoras, bem como compartilhar a aprendizagem que elas tiveram e a imprevisibilidade dos significados subjacentes ao artigo, dando possibilidades a múltiplas interpretações dos leitores.

### Questão 03

- b) De acordo com as autoras, qual é filiação epistemológica assumida na pesquisa?  
(1,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) compreenda que as autoras têm uma filiação como os pressuposto do paradigma da investigação Qualitativo-Interpretativa, com especial ênfase sobre visões e epistemologias pós-modernas e pós-estruturalistas.

#### Questão 4

De acordo com Sawyer and Liggett (2012), o que consiste o método de estudo duoetnográfico? (2,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) infira que a [d]uoetnografia como método é mais conceitual do que prescritivo. Seu método é enquadrado por uma abordagem pós-estruturalista de pesquisa. Tal abordagem rejeita a noção de uma realidade única, fixa e absoluta existindo independentemente da consciência e imaginação humanas. Em vez disso, os significados são construídos no processo de interpretação. A partir dessa filosofia, os duoetnógrafos se engajam em múltiplas interpretações ao usar o self como um local de análise de significados e influências socioculturais.

#### Questão 05

Conforme a leitura do texto, responda às seguintes perguntas:

- c) Por que Lowe e Kiczkowiak (2016) afirma que a pesquisa duetnográfica não deve ser considerada “simplesmente” como um estudo autobiográfico? (1,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) compreenda que é enquadrar as perspectivas dos pesquisadores sobre determinados tópicos como eles representam o lugar, ou os locais, onde os significados estão localizados e, eventualmente, reconceituados.

- d) Quais procedimentos são listados por Rose e Montakantiwong (2018) com relação ao estudo duoetnográfico? (2,0)

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) compreenda que os procedimentos são os seguintes:  
1. Deve ser dialógico, com narrativas justapostas e exploradas colaborativamente; 2. Deve permitir que os autores desafiem uns aos outros dentro de seus quadros de interpretação bem como leitores a serem desafiados a fazer ativamente seus próprios significados; 3.



Investe na força da pluralidade de visões como diferenças, e 4. Sua metodologia deve evitar ser muito prescritiva para permanecer aberta e flexível.