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Urban Ethnography, an interdisciplinary field of knowledge?

ETNOGRAFIA URBANA, UM CAMPO DE CONHECIMENTO INTERDISCIPLINAR?

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ABSTRACT

Urban Ethnography is a method and a scientific approach, used by social and human scientists from diverse areas. Anthropologists practice ethnography, and tend to maintain it as a specific skill, but it is also practiced by other researchers, often trained by anthropologists. This article presents the case of Portuguese Urban Ethnography. The History of this methodology is international, since it grew under strong relations between Portugal, Spain and Brasil, and to a less extent, with the United States and France. It is also interdisciplinary – linked mostly with Anthropology, Sociology, and History, but also with Geography, Architecture, and Political Science. On the other hand, Urban Ethnography as a methodological field is not self-assured. To what extent is Urban Ethnography interdisciplinary? And what about its practitioners? Who are they and what links them together? The paper will contribute to answering these questions, following recent results from qualitative research based on interviews and *Curricula* analysis about Portuguese Urban Ethnography.

Keywords: Urban Ethnography. Interdisciplinary. History of Science. Portugal. Social. and Human Sciences

RESUMO

A Etnografia Urbana é um método e uma abordagem científica, utilizada por cientistas sociais e humanos das mais diversas áreas. Desde logo os antropólogos praticam-na, e tendem a mantê-la como uma competência específica (Ingold 2013), mas é também praticada por outros investigadores muitas vezes formados por antropólogos. Neste artigo apresento o

caso da Etnografia Urbana portuguesa. Por um lado, a História desta metodologia em Portugal é internacional, uma vez que cresceu através de relações estreitas entre Portugal, Espanha e o Brasil, e de forma mais esparsa, com os Estados Unidos e com França. É também interdisciplinar – ligada sobretudo à Antropologia, à Sociologia e à História, mas também à Geografia, à Arquitetura e à Ciência Política. Mas por outro lado, a Etnografia Urbana não é um campo metodológico muito seguro de si mesmo. Até que ponto a Etnografia Urbana é interdisciplinar? E quanto aos seus praticantes? Quem são eles e o que os liga? Este artigo espera responder a estas questões, seguindo os resultados recentes de uma pesquisa qualitativa baseada em entrevistas e análise de curricula profissionais sobre a Etnografia Urbana em Portugal.

Palavras-chave: Etnografia Urbana. História da Ciência. Interdisciplinaridade. Portugal. Ciências Sociais e Humanas

INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper stands to better understand Urban Ethnography. Is it an interdisciplinary field of knowledge? The second part of the question is about the “field of knowledge” *per se*. In social and human sciences, Ethnography is seen as a specific qualitative approach, which is embedded in qualitative methods and inscribed in the literature by Anthropology. More specifically, it is seen by researchers other than Anthropologists as a *plus* to other qualitative methods. For instance, one can make a qualitative approach by gathering recorded interviews and then make a content analysis to the group of interviews, and, if the fieldwork implies a location or an institution, the researchers can go to the field and improve their empirical data with ethnographic data. One

way or another, Ethnography method has been used by social scientists and this trend is not new (SCOTT-JONES & WATT, 2010).

In Anthropology, Ethnography is the core method. Ethnography and Anthropology in a way are synonyms because Ethnography is a theoretical-methodological approach to make fieldwork. This may only be understandable for Anthropologists, and this is “our” fault. Certainly, Ethnography for Anthropology is a method because it is the method *par excellence*, and it is also a theoretic-methodologic approach more than a methodology. Fieldwork data frequently bring new theoretical needs to the initial projects, in a way that there is a big chance that throughout ethnography, the theoretical framework may change.

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In other words, it is the kind of method that after gathering empirical data, it is common that the topic of approach also changes a little bit. Anthropologists argue that during the ethnographic work, one must keep an open mind towards the subject. This is how we might add something to the discipline at the end of the day. If we go to do fieldwork with a strong model of analysis and cling to that, we probably will miss field data that do not fit into our subject. While doing ethnographic fieldwork, one sometimes experiences new data, unexpected events, classically called serendipity (PINACABRAL, 2007; YAKUB, 2018), that may inform better about what we are trying to understand.

The Ethnography's centrality to Anthropology sometimes gain the role of the synonym with Anthropology itself. Ethnography describes a group of people in a certain present time. And that description (CLIFFORD, 1990) is surrounded by theoretical discourses that are at stake in the narrative about that same group of people. Therefore, for a certain ideal of Anthropology, the results from a work in Anthropology is an Ethnography. That is why some anthropologists seem to control the ethnographic method. It is also important to say that Ethnography is not only a participant observation method; but it is also about gathering other types of data (local and/or family archives; *media*

data; laws; formal interviews) from an ethnographic sight.

Is it possible that other social scientists beyond Anthropologists make “real” Ethnographies? The question has a pitfall, “real”. There is no “real” Ethnography since it is as dynamic as any other aspect of sciences. I guess most Anthropologists understand this idea well, because they do not believe in “real” something, in the “origin” of a tradition, etc. So, to put it simply, can other social scientists, such as sociologists, who come from the first neighbour science of Anthropology, at least, a good Ethnography? The debate is old (SCOTT-JONES & WATT, 2010), and to this paper the specific interest is about Urban Ethnography.

We should discuss Urban Ethnography by remembering the Chicago School legacy. Christien Topalov recalls the foundation of the Chicago School saying that Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Burgess began a study program in 1924 considering the local communities of Chicago, and that “their ambition was to make Sociology a true science that went out from the classroom and the library and would face its natural “laboratory”: the big city.” (TOPALOV, 2015: 11).¹ A great number of researchers made an important contribution to understand the urban

¹ Free translation from “Leur ambition était de faire de la sociologie une véritable science qui, sortait enfin de la salle de classe et de la bibliothèque, affronterait son «laboratoire» naturel: la grande ville.”

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context as we do today. Some did not graduate in Sociology or Anthropology, some were journalists, but the Chicago School gained its status because of this singular interdisciplinary endeavour within the scope of the ethnographic method. Therefore, Urban Ethnography and its interdisciplinarity have a strong root in Chicago School.

Nevertheless, the debate about Ethnography made by other social scientists beyond Anthropologists continues its path, at least in Portugal, and one reason for that is that Anthropology has a recent history in this country. The first Graduation courses were in the 1980s, and Anthropology developed and subdivided itself thematically. At the same time, it was internationally clashed by post-modernity and an excess of reflexivity (CLIFFORD AND MARCUS, 1986), which drove Anthropology into an internal debate. That happened in Portugal when Anthropology needed to be more acknowledgeable, in the 1990s.

In the 1990s, Anthropology had already, in the Democratic context², an important history of studies made in rural settings.

² Before the 25th of April, Anthropology was developed moreover also in the rural context (LEAL, 2006). With Democracy, researchers felt free to criticize the former regime and to follow international anthropological approaches about rural communities (BRIAN O'NEILL, JOÃO DE PINA-CABRAL, JOSÉ SOBRAL, JOÃO LEAL). Even before the Revolution, some international researchers pave the way, like José Cutileiro with a study about Alentejo (1972) firstly published in the UK.

During the 1990s, there was a certain turn into urban studies (CORDEIRO & AFONSO, 2003), such as Cordeiro's work about Bica neighbourhood in Lisbon (CORDEIRO, 1997), which is recognized as an Urban Anthropology work. By then, other ethnographic studies began to be made in the urban context, but without an urban theoretical context – in this case, we may include migration, housing, and religion studies, most of them conducted among post-colonial black populations residing in urban areas, but with theoretical frameworks not based in Urban Anthropology. So, during almost a decade, only one anthropologist insisted in an Urban Anthropology, Graça Cordeiro, who says that Urban Anthropology, more than a branch from Anthropology, is an interdisciplinary science (CORDEIRO IN FRÚGOLI et al. 2014: 468). Nowadays, Anthropology and its branches (or other anthropologically specifics) face another potential step back in its inscription for being out of the Frascatti manual of sciences. To be evaluated by Anthropologists, a Portuguese Anthropologist needs to apply in the scientific area of Sociology, and then the presence of an Anthropologist in the evaluation panel to his or her scientific projects is not assured.³

³ A topic on the discussion about this may be found here: <http://www.apAntropologia.org/apa/tag/manua-l-frascati/>.

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Urban Ethnography is highly in debt with Urban Sociology and Urban Anthropology, and the method is spread in other scientific fields such as Geography, Psychology, and Architecture.⁴ It requires to understand the Portuguese context of Urban Ethnography in more detail. The next section presents the methods applied in my research project about Urban Ethnography in Portugal.

METHODOLOGY

The project about Urban Ethnography in Portugal had begun with a post-PhD fellowship (2016-2018) and continued under a research contract. The project marked a big turn in my research subjects; in the past, my interests were driven to housing, migration, and transnationality.⁵ At first, for the present project, one of the intentions was to make an ethnographic approach to the field. The field was “my” daily activity field as well, in what turned to be a sort of auto-ethnography [not in the sense of conducting fieldwork about myself, but to work about a context in which I participate actively] (GANS, 1999; ELLIS AND BOCHNER, 2000). The other intention⁶, which I followed, was to make

interviews of professional trajectories to the population under study. Who is this population? The people who carry out Ethnography in an urban context – anthropologists and other social and human scientists who selected Ethnography as an important methodologic endeavour in their works. Beyond the interviews,⁶ the most important empirical work has been done through the analysis of the researchers’ *curricula*. The *Curricula vitae* analysis was suggested by a colleague who was interviewed in the beginning of the project, back in March 2016. This empirical work provides me with significant elements to understand the professional network among urban ethnographers. *Curricula* offer info about academic degrees and access to academic positions. This type of information is central to understand the professional contexts and acknowledge the diverse generations of urban ethnographers. Moreover, *Curricula* also refer to team projects, which substantiate the autonomy of Cities as a field of studies in general. Additionally, team projects leave a track about professional networks, either national or international ones. Finally, other more “objective” data can also be found in *Curricula*: gender, age, faculty where the academic degree is achieved, and other specific elements; this type of

⁴ In the Portuguese case, the interest grew specifically in the recent years with the Ph.D. in Urban Studies, conducted in ISCTE-IUL and FCSH-Nova, with students from Planning, Architecture, Anthropology, Sociology, among other.

⁵ Previously I worked with a Hindu-Gujarati population in Lisbon’s outskirts, in Leicester (UK), Maputo (MZ) and Diu (IN). The theoretical approach derives from Urban Anthropology, but also Post-colonial studies (Cachado 2013; 2014; 2017).

⁶ Until now, 22 semi-directed interviews were made among researchers with a professional trajectory approach.

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information will give an important overview of the chosen universe.

Hence, the approach has been made more with researchers' contribution to the research rather than throughout their publication outputs, although they are intertwined. In the history of science, the analysis of the published results by scientists has a tradition in Portugal (FIOLHAIS, 2013; ÁGOAS, 2013). For the subject at stake, since the researchers are alive and working, no better than them to give a representation about the field. This is especially the case with young researchers – or not so young, but not holding a permanent position, which happens a lot nowadays in the academic system (PEACOCK, 2016). As mentioned earlier, I have not much experience in the field of history of science. What I am certain is that, considering Urban Ethnography in Portugal and the fact that researchers are alive (i.e. available to be interviewed), there is a chance to approach coevity, meaning the fact that it is possible to research in this field at the time when it happens, with a generation of contemporary researchers.

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY IN PORTUGAL

Who are the Urban Ethnographers in Portugal? Considering the existing literature, there is a group of people, who should be acknowledged as influential on

urban ethnography. While in its first steps, the field is already strongly interdisciplinary, with researchers from Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Geography, and Architecture.

In Anthropology, Graça Cordeiro⁷ represents the field of Urban Ethnography. She set up an optative course of Urban Anthropology beginning in 1989 at ISCTE-IUL, mostly attended by Anthropology and Sociology students; she had a central role setting up the Urban Anthropology Ph.D. International Program Lisbon/Tarragon (2004-2013); and she also set up the existing Ph.D. in Urban Studies (ISCTE-IUL/FCSH-Nova). She made her ethnographies usually in urban contexts with an urban anthropologic mindset (1989; 1997; 2019).⁸

For her Ph.D. she developed a Thesis about a “historical” neighborhood in Lisbon, Bica (CORDEIRO, 1997), which along with other neighborhoods in Lisbon is nowadays highly affected by gentrification processes. Among her main contributions, this Thesis can be considered as an early work of Urban Anthropology in Portugal. Also, this work, is an in-depth study of an urban

⁷ To whom I am grateful for the generous interviews given in December 2015, November 2017, January 2018, and February 2020. Beyond other reasons, these are important records for the history of Urban Anthropology institutionalization in Portugal.

⁸ Nevertheless, it was only from the final stage of her Ph.D. onwards that she developed her international networks with other urban anthropologists.

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collectivity, which gives specific insights for the concepts of neighborhood, sociability, popular culture. Methodologically, she goes way beyond ethnographic fieldwork: she made an archive research similar to those made by other anthropologists in the rural contexts during the seventies and the eighties,⁹ but completed in an urban setting – to be precise, she included in her work a long-term newspaper research (1862-1989). After that, she also published works reflecting about the field of Urban Ethnography, and also as co-author (CORDEIRO, 2003; CORDEIRO & COSTA, 1999; BAPTISTA & CORDEIRO, 2002; CORDEIRO & VIDAL, 2008; CASTRO & CORDEIRO, 2014). To sum up, her work holds a significant amount of references to understand her centrality as Urban Anthropologist in the Urban Ethnography field.

Other researchers from Anthropology background, who not necessarily chose the urban context as ethnographic fields, developed their theoretical frameworks by considering what is now known as the field of Urban Studies. Susana Trovão developed an important research about the history of urban marginalization (BASTOS, 1997); Filomena Silvano began fieldwork in a rural area but realized the centrality of the urban context (SILVANO,

1994). She theorized on spaces and places, with a book called *Anthropology of Space* (SILVANO, 2001). Antónia Pedroso de Lima, who did a MA and part of her Ph.D. in Urban Anthropology in Catalonia, and then did her Ph.D. in Anthropology about rich families in the urban context (LIMA, 2003). It is easy to understand from this range of anthropologists that topics, and the types of urban ethnographies, are diverse. The scope of a former generation of Anthropologists who did or does Urban Ethnography does not end with this summary, but these are the first recognized works.

From the field of Sociology, the main reference in Portugal is António Firmino da Costa, who wrote a Ph.D. deeply based on ethnographic fieldwork, (COSTA, 1999), and his work is fundamental for students of Sociology in Lisbon¹⁰. The author developed long-term fieldwork in Alfama neighbourhood (1978-1998), with both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, where ethnography, or field research as the author seems to prefer as methodological designation turned up to be a central research strategy (COSTA, 1999: 11). His work includes a number of contributions for understanding the urban context: in a

⁹ See footnote 3.

¹⁰ For this research project, the Porto, Coimbra and other university realities were not yet approached, so I don't know if this affirmation is true for the whole country, but several students and ex-students in the interviews talk about this reference as the "bible of Sociology".

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way, it was the first approach to Lisbon's gentrification process (COSTA, 1999: 378-383). It developed the concept of interaction frameworks (COSTA, 1999: 296-349); the centrality of the cultural practice of Fado for the Alfama population (COSTA, 1999: 122-151); the migrant strategies from a rural to an urban setting and the significance of the place of origin (COSTA, 1999: 245-264). This way, the author gives important input to urban studies, at least in three domains – gentrification; urban cultural practices; rural-urban migration – which have an urban slope.

Another researcher, from the field of Psychology, is Luís Fernandes who adopted Ethnography for his Ph.D. research, to analyze drug consumption in a peripheric neighborhood in Porto (FERNANDES, 1998). Among other reasons, his work is important because he wrote a specific chapter about the ways how he collected primary data, through fieldnotes, and explains the empirical process and its analytical potential. Later he clarified the process in a contribution to a book on qualitative methods for social sciences (FERNANDES, 2003), which is used by teachers, including anthropologists, to explain the ethnographic practice; actually, this is a rare example of a Portuguese written text about fieldnotes and its uses.

Other two researchers should be considered to be included in a first generation of urban ethnographers. Geographer Jorge Malheiros who, in his Ph.D. focused on Great Lisbon territory to approach “Indian” migration, where he finds the limits of the quantitative data to analyze this urban, and plural population (in nationalities, naturality, religions), and chooses the micro lenses of specific neighborhoods to make his research (MALHEIROS, 1996). Sociologist Luís Baptista, in his Master Thesis (BAPTISTA, 1987) included ethnography although to a less extent, to approach Rego, which is a neighborhood with characteristics of an early example of Metropolization of Lisbon.

After these primary works, some of these scholars worked together in a way that resulted in the solidification of the field. They organized seminars, projects, and MA and Ph.D. programs. They continued working along with two types of colleagues – international colleagues also committed with Urban Ethnography somehow, and junior researchers who are interested in the study of urban settings using Ethnography (CACHADO, 2018). For the junior group of researchers, we can say that they establish a new generation, but this concept holds a pitfall, not easy to overcome. On one hand, they belong to a younger “group” between 30 and 45 years old; all of them were students of the former

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referred researchers in diverse contexts, attending courses (Urban Anthropology, Urban Sociology), supervised by them in their PhDs, etc; and the majority of them do not hold a permanent position in the academic system.

Methodologically, it is a great opportunity to study coevity – contemporaneously – the fact that they are available to be interviewed. One does not need to gird only on publications to understand the field, although almost the same could be said considering the older ones (45-65 years old), that is, they can be also interviewed, but most of them already have been interviewed by other researchers, and their professional trajectories can be conferred in published interviews, as well as in public *Curricula*, and often they have published papers or chapters specifically written to share their methodologic preferences.

Considering the whole group, where I managed to count 48, a part of the group was already interviewed (from a total of 22 formal in-depth interviews, 17 are from “junior” Portuguese researchers and only two, until now, for the “senior” group; the remainder are Brazilian researchers). It is also true that the senior researchers only partially fit in the concept of “generations”, because they nourish work in groups, not only through projects but also advocating equal academic relationships. This form of work is

highlighted by “junior” researchers in their interviews, and I quote a clear statement regarding the same issue:

“I do not see an interest regarding the generation issue, if it is from the academic point of view, considering the elder goals, which were precisely to deconstruct the generational issue. (...) [but] from the problems we faced, it is generational”. (INÊS PEREIRA, interview 15/03/2017)

This researcher gives us a clue to avoid the pitfall of the generation concept: although the idea of two different generations is incorrect regarding the senior attitude, their professional experiences were rather different, facing different challenges. Namely, the precarious work of the junior ones, which is also true for other work domains (CARMO AND MATIAS, 2019), and the difficulty of progress in careers for seniors.

Considering the group of interviewees until now, it is easy to find an interdisciplinary input, although almost among Sociology and Anthropology (with singular cases of History and Psychology). If the present project proceeds with (even) younger researchers, we will find a wider range of disciplines, including Architecture, Planning, and Geography (considering the Graduation courses from the students enrolled in the Urban Studies Ph.D., a program that is taking place in ISCTE-IUL and in FCSH-Nova since 2012, engendered by Professor GRAÇA CORDEIRO and Professor LUÍS BAPTISTA).

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Trying to resume the first topics which were approached by these junior researchers (Ph.D. thesis from 2007 to 2013, then not that “junior”): we find a large range of themes – housing (NUNES, 2009; CACHADO, 2012); social movements (PEREIRA, 2009); graffiti (FERRO, 2016) and hip-hop culture (RAPOSO, 2013); gentrification (PEREIRA, 2018); education (ABRANTES, 2008); and city squares (MALET CALVO, 2011).

However, the history of Urban Ethnography in Portugal would be even more incomplete if we restricted the field to the national context, knowing that academic research tends to be, in its “nature”, international. The international imprint of Urban Ethnography in Portugal is from the beginning made with the Brazilian Urban Anthropology context, and with the Catalan one, and to a less extent, with France and the United States (data from Graça Cordeiro’s interviews and from FRÚGOLI et al. 2014). There are two central characters in this history, Gilberto Velho (1945-2012) from Brazil (CACHADO, 2018), and Joan Pujadas from Catalonia, who represent the heart of Urban Anthropology. Along with them, a large group of colleagues and students compose this academic network. Recently, this Urban Ethnography Network was

formally arranged¹¹. To conclude the presentation of this group of researchers, who somehow dedicated a part of their empirical work to an ethnographic approach, I make a summary of the main lines found throughout the *curricula* analysis made until now. Forty-two *Curricula* were collected from a group of approximately 60 researchers. The 42 *Curricula* are from Portuguese researchers and the remaining are from Brazilian, Spanish and French, one from the USA and one from Romania. Considering the disciplines, Sociology and Anthropology are at the top, and other sciences as expected, includes Geography, History, Architecture, and Psychology.

Considering their present positions, the idea of generations is not completely excluded, since 19 hold a position in the career system and 21 do not (this number includes 9 Ph.D. students). Therefore, the “senior” and “junior” categories are not negligible (acknowledging that juniors include researchers from 27 to 45 years old). Five hold a full professor position, four are associate teachers, eleven are assistant teachers (3 of them for more than 15 years), and one is a full researcher. Six have a researcher contract for five or six years (and have been under consecutive job competitions since their PhDs), three are trying to finish their PhDs along working as research fellows; seven have

¹¹ See the Open Access academic blog Etnourb, at <https://etnourb.hypotheses.org/parceiros>.

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Ph.D. fellowships; two are unemployed but somehow working in research, and one, despite holding a Ph.D., works in another area. Eight hold a Ph.D. before 2000; eleven during the decade of 2000; ten until 2019; the other five are finishing their PhDs in Anthropology, Architecture, and Urban Studies, but the range of disciplines also include Sociology, Psychology, Geography, and History.

This summary is concerned with professional trajectories from the career position point of view. The reason for this first approach¹² is linked with a hypothesis I developed in the research project; the fact that the half a dozen precedent years were lived under a difficult situation for the academic researchers (and for the Portuguese society as a whole), naming the research policies taken during the austerity government between 2011-2015. With precarious professional positions and the universities pressure to publish, influenced by an international phenomenon of the need to be cited in indexed journals (FERNANDES, 2017), recent years were lived in stress by most of the researchers that take part of this project. This situation is by no means singular to Urban Ethnography, but considering that the research includes recent experiences, to include this aspect is mandatory (KNIGHT & STEWART, 2016).

¹² A further approach to the *Curricula* is in the process (early 2020), which will consider the topics used in papers titles.

FINAL REMARKS

Considering the preliminary results from a research project about the History of Urban Ethnography in Portugal, it was highlighted the facet of its interdisciplinary. However, to what extent Urban Ethnography is interdisciplinary? Following my interlocutors, both regarding those who are now doing their PhDs, embracing Urban Ethnography, but graduated in areas beyond Sociology and Anthropology, and those who have finished their PhDs five years ago or more, interdisciplinarity is difficult, if not impossible for some of them, considering the theoretical frameworks.

Although one may read and be influenced by works from a diversity of disciplines (from researchers who made Urban Ethnography educated in different scientific fields), at the end of the day, one has to, or feels the need to maintain his or her theoretical backgrounds. Nevertheless, Urban Ethnography is recognized as a method, an empirical way of doing science, which is rooted mainly in Anthropology but employed by a diversity of social and human sciences. The present hypothesis is that Urban Ethnography in Portugal is—interdisciplinary since it is practiced by scientists from different areas, and who practices Urban Ethnography call upon theoretical references of different areas from their own. However, one may

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ask an epistemological question: if the method is interdisciplinary, to what extent can we say that the results are not interdisciplinary?

Other questions remain unanswered and deserve further attention: considering that Urban Ethnography involves, to a certain extent, a compromise with interlocutors, are urban ethnographers more committed with applied or collaborative research? Why am I noticing that Urban Ethnographers other than Anthropologists are more insecure about the method? Is it because they are being interviewed by an anthropologist or because they were trained on the idea of classical Ethnography, and therefore their ethnographic efforts to approach urban contexts, in their view, don't fit there?

As an urban ethnographer myself, from the "junior" generation, I witnessed by conversations with other researchers developing their ethnographic works, that a common concern was precisely with getting more or less involved with the urban processes they were observing (ALVES AND FALANGA, 2019). Although this is not new for ethnography in its entirety (the mutuality¹³ processes commonly involve reciprocity processes), it deserves more ethnographic attention in the next stages of the project.

¹³ For mutuality in ethnographic fieldwork see Pina-Cabral 2011.

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Diálogos
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