

The experience of intersubjectivity in feminist research: methodological perspectives

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the studies of research methodology. To this end, I seek to reflect on the experience of engaged research that clearly shows the influence of the researcher's existential trajectory on the choice of may object of study, as well as the methodological perspectives that favor the experience of intersubjectivity in the production of knowledge. The ultimate goal is to show that scientific research can be conducted based on a methodological paradigm that breaks with the subject-object dichotomy. As a reference to this discussion, we take an investigation that sought to understand how women constitute themselves as female subjects of theological knowledge and what power dynamics pervade the processes of entering and constructing a female faculty career in a place marked by hegemonic discourses and gender logics of a male social order. Therefore, we emphasize the hermeneutic perspective, as it allows to capture the meanings that female professors assign to their actions and experiences in the universe of theological knowledge. Hermeneutics as a research methodology favors the production of knowledge that is not intended as universal, but rather situated, subjective, and open to new interpretation perspectives. Such characteristics are central in the feminist epistemologies that seek to demystify the pure objectivity and universality of knowledge, showing that the subjects of knowledge are always immersed in a certain situation, position, and circumstance, and that, therefore, no knowledge is produced from nowhere.

Keywords

Intersubjectivity – Experience – Hermeneutics – Feminist research.

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A experiência da intersubjetividade na pesquisa feminista: perspectivas metodológicas

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Resumo

Este artigo tem a finalidade de contribuir com os estudos a respeito de metodologias de pesquisa. Para tanto, busca-se fazer uma reflexão acerca da experiência de uma pesquisa engajada em que se coloca em evidência a influência da trajetória existencial da pesquisadora na escolha do seu objeto de estudo e as perspectivas metodológicas que favorecem a experiência da intersubjetividade na produção do conhecimento. Em última instância, busca-se mostrar que é possível fazer pesquisa científica ancorada em um paradigma metodológico que rompe com a dicotomia sujeito/objeto. Para esta discussão, toma-se como referência uma investigação que pretendeu compreender como as mulheres se constituem sujeitos femininos de saber teológico e que dinâmicas de poder perpassam os processos de inserção e de construção da docência feminina, em um lugar marcado por discursos hegemônicos e por lógicas de gênero da ordem social masculina. Desse modo, destaca-se a perspectiva hermenêutica, por esta permitir captar os sentidos que as docentes atribuem às suas ações e às experiências vividas no universo do saber teológico. A hermenêutica, como metodologia de pesquisa, favorece a produção de um conhecimento que não se pretende universal, mas situado, subjetivo e aberto a novas perspectivas de interpretação. Tais características são centrais nas epistemologias feministas que buscam desmitificar a pura objetividade e a universalidade do conhecimento, mostrando que os sujeitos do saber estão sempre inseridos em uma determinada situação, posição e circunstância e, por isso, nenhum conhecimento se produz desde nenhum lugar.

Palavras-chave

Intersubjetividade – Experiência – Hermenêutica – Pesquisa feminista.

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The experience of intersubjectivity Introduction

The present work presents a reflection about the methodology adopted in a doctoral thesis, a methodology that moves away from perspectives centered in the pure objectivity of scientific production. This is enabled by bringing into the scene the influence of subjective experience on the choice of the objects of investigation and methodological processes that ensure the intersubjective relation in the production of knowledge. For this purpose, we used as basis an investigation that sought to understand how women constitute themselves as female subjects of theological knowledge and what power dynamics pervade the processes of entering and constructing a female faculty career in a place marked by hegemonic discourses and gender logics of a male social order.

Theology as an area of knowledge has been structured over history as a *non-place* for women. In Brazil, it was not until the 1970's that women gained access to higher education in theology. It was during that period that women increased their presence in the various academic areas. This phenomenon was driven by socio-cultural transformations and feminist mobilizations that certainly affected the religious and ecclesial environment. However, a major asymmetry still exists between female and male subjects in faculty positions, as evidenced in the thesis *Relações de gênero, subjetividade e docência feminina: um estudo a partir do universo do ensino superior em teologia católica* (TN: *Gender Relations, Subjectivity, and Female Faculty: a Study Based on The Universe of Higher Education in Catholic Theology*) (FURLIN, 2014).

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to share a reflection on the experience of an engaged research that evidences the influence of the researcher's existential trajectory on the choice of her object of study, as well as the methodological perspectives that favor

the experience of intersubjectivity in the production of knowledge, thus showing that scientific research can be conducted based on a methodological paradigm that breaks with the subject/object dichotomy. Considering that the choice for a particular material collection technique in a scientific study is part of that study's methodology and has a clear relationship with its goals, we also discuss a few related aspects, such as the learning that comes from field experience.

This reflection is, therefore, a way of objectivating part of a long process of construction of the paths of a research, which involves choosing the subject, the empirical data collection techniques, and a particular methodology for understanding and analyzing the field material. Certainly, this article can bring light or inspiration to those who are preparing to make themselves artisans in the art of building knowledge.

Choosing the subject of research: A purely objective process?

The interest in the subject of female faculty in theology, in an analytic gender perspective, is connected to my life trajectory and my engagement in the social and religious field¹. This clearly delimits my position of speech and my social engagement both as a woman and a subject of knowledge. My participation in catholic pastoral works at the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) led me to seek theoretical deepening in theology and, later, in social sciences. Thus, from 1994 to 1997, I attended a holiday course of pastoral theology at the Instituto de Teologia e Pastoral, which is linked to the Universidade de Passo Fundo (RS – Brazil).

1- In this article, I write in the first person, considering that one of the contributions of feminist epistemologies was the introduction of a new style of producing social science that gives voice to the social subject's reflexive subjectivity. In other words, without displacing the more objective style of a writing without a subject or without the *we*, another way of writing science is produced in which the subject places itself in the text and assumes its own scientific construction.

This course was meant for pastoral agents² and, for this reason, the attendance was formed by a significant number of women, considering that women usually perform most of the pastoral work. The course also had a small male participation, nearly all of which was formed by laymen³ or religious men who did not plan to follow an ecclesiastic career. The people who attended the holiday course of theology were seeking education to act in pastoral activities or deepen their sense of Christian faith. Now, in the regular annual course, the situation was the opposite, since nearly all theology students were male and seeking education with a view to ordained service. Celibate men conducted teaching activities in both the holiday and the regular courses⁴. The absence of women in teaching was justified in that few of them possessed an academic background in theology, an issue concealing other dynamics which were evidenced in my doctoral study.

My first contact with the concept of gender occurred during the theology holiday course, more specifically in 1995, at a theology conference that promoted a reflection on the subject – *Mulher semente de vida na igreja e na sociedade* (NT: *Women, the Seed of Life in the Church and in Society*), aided by female students from the regular theology course at the *Escola Superior de Teologia e Espiritualidade Franciscana (ESTEF)*, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Since then, I became aware that the female and the male, as well as the social role designated to each sex, are sociocultural constructions, and that gender inequalities have been built by a particular cultural reading of this difference, founded on the fixity of bodies. I also became aware of how, in

the course of history, this has contributed to make women invisible and to discriminate and exclude them from several spaces, both in the social and in the ecclesial spheres.

Thus, the perspective of gender begun to occupy an important place in my experience of life and action, particularly in the training of ecclesial leaders, in groups of popular reading of the bible, and in the pastoral work with basic communities. My view has always been that both women and men with the same education and professional training opportunities acquire the same intellectual and technical capacity to exercise the various activities in the public sphere of society, as well as in the ecclesial structure.

During my graduation in social sciences, my interest in gender studies progressively consolidated, particularly after taking the discipline of sociology of gender relations. Therefore, I consider that my doctoral research kept, in a way, a link with the senior research project I did for my degree in social sciences, titled *A questão de gênero no MST: um estudo sobre o discurso e as práticas de participação da mulher* (NT: *The Gender Issue in MST: A Study on the Discourse and Practices of Women's Participation*)⁵. This link is related to my interest in continuing to deepen the theoretical tools in gender studies, as well as their relationship with social sciences, only now with a different investigation topic. This certainly indicates that the themes we choose for our studies are almost always influenced by our personal or professional life trajectories, as a few sociologist have remarked.

Today we can affirm that the object is the continuation of the subject through other means. Therefore, all scientific knowledge is self-knowledge. Science does not discover, it creates, and the creative act undertaken by each scientist and the scientific community as a whole has to intimately know itself before knowing

2- Denomination of community leaders who coordinate and dynamise social and ecclesial pastorals.

3- The term *layman*, in the ecclesial context, means a person who exercises some leadership on the ecclesial sphere without belonging to consecrated religious life or the hierarchy of ordained service. In the Catholic Church, ordainment is only conferred to the male sex, through a specific ritual.

4- Among the holiday course teachers, there were just two women and one layman. They taught the following disciplines: introduction to sociology, elementary liturgy, and introduction to philosophy, all of which are peripheral in relation to the core disciplines of a theology course.

5- That senior research project was advised by professor Ângela Duarte Damasceno and defended in March, 2003.

what can be known through it as real. (SANTOS, 2004, p. 83).

This conception delimits a break with the subject-object dichotomy, a heritage of modern science which, on the one hand, has consecrated man as the epistemic subject, but, on the other hand, has expelled it as the empirical subject. Although that stance may not always be pacific in social sciences, today, the construction of the object of research can already be conceived as not a purely objective choice, as sociologist Wright Mills (1965) has well argued in his *The Sociological Imagination*. In other words, our choices are always linked, whether directly or indirectly, to our professional trajectories and subjective experiences. Likewise, sociologist Boaventura Santos (2004, p.85) writes:

Today we know or suspect that our personal and collective trajectories (as scientific communities), as well as the values, beliefs, and prejudices they carry, are intimate evidence of our knowledge, without which our laboratory or field investigations, our calculations or field works would form a tangle of absurd diligences without rhyme or reason.

Santos believes that, although the subjective perspective of constructed knowledge may or may not go unsuspected, it runs underground and in a clandestine way in the unsaid things in our scientific works, even though these might wish to claim a place for themselves as objective science. Thus, the contribution of feminist theory has also been a valuable one to demystify the pure objectivity and universality of knowledge, showing that it is always situated and subjective, since “no theoretical work is far from the experience of the person writing it” (ALCOFF, 1999, p. 125).

All strands of feminism start from the statement that the subject that knows is somebody situated in a certain situation, position, and circumstance, thus considering

that no knowledge is produced from “nowhere” (BACH, 2010). In this respect, feminism can be characterized as a hermeneutic viewpoint, the methodological perspective of which considers that each of us is an inhabitant of a culture, a period, a geographic situation, and – I wish to add here – a gender position. Therefore, it is from those references that we interpret and understand the world. In other words, we look at reality and produce knowledge from within it, not from a superhuman neutrality.

Moreover, it worth remembering that one of the major contributions of feminist studies was the introduction of a different way of producing science where the subject’s experience and position in his/her context are significant elements.

Studies of gender and the questions about feminist epistemologies introduced, among other ways of producing social science, a way that gave more space to reflecting about the author’s subjectivity and the construction of social subjects’ subjectivities. (MACHADO, 1998, p. 125).

Therefore, without displacing the more objective style of a writing without a subject or without the we, another way of writing science was produced in which the subject places itself in the text and assumes its own scientific construction. This new way gives voice to the social subject’s reflexive subjectivity and is definitely one of feminism’s valuable contributions⁶.

The arguments of scholars in the field of sociology and feminist theory made me grow conscious of my condition as a researcher, i.e., someone who is a woman socialized in the Catholic religion, with a close relationship with her field, and whose choice for the object of research resulted from an existential trajectory. Moreover, there was the awareness of being a subject that produces knowledge from a situated,

⁶- In view of this, I chose to write in the first person.

contextual stance, and whose perspective affects the process of knowledge. Today, such features, far from invalidating a research, are placed as the starting point for conducting it.

According to Gilberto Velho (2003), the complexity of contemporary urban society allows many anthropologists to conduct studies close to their universe of origin, researching situations more or less familiar to them. This situation alone is the starting point for an investigation. However, it required from me as an investigator an estranging, critically revising attitude toward what was close to me, as well as the use of theoretical-methodological tools to scientifically understand and interpret the meanings that female faculty attribute to their action within the sphere of theological knowledge. Therefore, the theoretical-analytical foundations that gave scientific support to my research came from the feminist theories and gender studies with their sociological contribution. This allows arguing that the study of the construction of female faculty careers in the theological sphere is part of the roll of feminist studies of science and gender as well as of dominantly male careers.

Methodological perspectives and the experience of intersubjectivity

In scientific investigation processes, the qualitative approach has been an epistemological advance as it shows that the subject is not only objective – materiality and concrete processes. In this respect, one of the first major contributions to thinking the importance of subjectivity comes from Max Weber's (1992) studies, whose proposal was deepened by different theoreticians in different academic areas. Thus, one particular feature of qualitative methodology is the emphasis on the subject, which may be neutral. Now, the differential of feminist methodology lies in showing that the subject is neither neutral nor universal, but generalized⁷, historical, and situated. However,

7- The term *generalized* is used by feminist Londa Schienbinger (2001, p. 145) to refer to typically male or female behaviors, interests, or cultural

a research can only be characterized as feminist if it adopts the theoretical and methodological perspectives of feminism.

Therefore, my doctoral research gave voice to female faculty in the field of Catholic theology, so that they actively participated in the knowledge production process. Through the narratives of these female professors about their experiences in a dominantly male institution, the study sought to understand the dynamics involved in their joining the field, their perceptions about their own experiences, as well as the dynamics of gender and power in the sphere of theological knowledge; the way they understood and formed themselves as female subjects of theological knowledge; and how they built their agency possibilities in a space that has been structured over history as a place unintelligible to them. According to Lincoln and Guba (2006), voice can mean, particularly in the more participatory forms of research, not only the voice of a researcher in the text, but also the possibility for participants of the study to speak for themselves. To the English sociologist Margaret S. Archer (2009):

Giving people a voice also gives us better explanations about what they actually do, thus replacing empiricist generalizations. Conversely, when agents are allowed to reflexively evaluate their objective social contexts in terms of their personal concerns and to adequately decide on the course of their actions, *the active agent is restored to sociology*. This because people struggle for some control over the course of their own lives and actively design their way through the world, rather than being passive receptors of social pressures. (ARCHER, 2009, italics added).

values the features of which cannot be conceived as innate or arbitrary, but as realities constructed by historical circumstances that, for this reason, can change because of other historical circumstances. By this term, I refer to the same questions pointed by Schienbinger.

Therefore, in order to listen to the reflexive memories of these women's experiences in their process of forming themselves as subjects of knowledge, including the sense they gave to their actions, I gave priority to a qualitative approach. Qualitative investigation, according to Briceño-León (2003, p. 161), "allows the investigator to work from within. It approaches the studied reality in a natural way and allows collecting rich data through non-structured strategies." This type of investigation opens "windows" so the subjects of the action can expose their deepest motivations and meanings regarding their action and worldview.

Although this is a qualitative study, it was also necessary to use the questionnaire technique, normally associated with quantitative approaches. In Briceño-León's (2003) view, integrating both techniques allows exploiting the potential each of them can offer. In the present case, combining both techniques was necessary to establish an evidence framework, enabling the construction of more solid, contextualized conclusions. As to the specific differences of both perspectives, far from being an obstacle, they emerge as possibilities that, when adequately used, can bring higher quality scientific products. More important than a method's purity is a method's:

[...] capacity to provide answers to the goals of the investigation, the capacity to understand a social process or the behavior of individuals, integrating methods virtually becomes a necessity. (BRICEÑO-LEÓN 2003, p. 181).

Briceño-León argues that a qualitative investigation also allows the interpretation of quantitative data, i.e., qualitative results can help with the interpretation of quantitative data, not only through data confrontation, but also through the dialogue with the individuals themselves, who leave the condition of aggregate figures to become actors. Numbers do not speak for themselves, they need a theory

to give them a sense and to confront them with the problematic of the research. In the study of my thesis, they were important to objectivate certain structural dynamics of gender. Therefore, both statistic data and the professors' narratives were interpreted in light of the theoretical-analytical category of gender. This allowed taking into account power relations, which are instituted – and institute themselves – in social relations. This aspect, in turn, brought us to the set of contents that constitutes those female professors' experiences.

In order to evidence some of the interpretative, analytical process of the contents found in the voice of the study subjects, I take as an example an excerpt from the narrative of Pricila. Based on her experience as a female professor at a hierarchic, male institution, she recounts, in a reflexive way, how the dynamics of power impose distinct conditions for each sex in the legitimation process as a subject of teaching.

Being a woman or a man is not the same thing in the field of theology. Besides, it's not enough to be a man, you have to be a priest. There's a difference, theology at the seminary is the place of the priest-teacher. We know there are many priests in theology who are good teachers, but some can be mediocre, and they will stay because they're priests. Being a woman and in that place, you have to be much more competent than they are, really, a whole lot more. You have to stand out because of your competence, you have to study, you have to produce, and so on. You have to show that students like you. Now, the priest, he doesn't have to, he can give an ordinary class, he can do it as he feels like it, students will complain and complain, but he'll still be there, because it's his place, you see? I think that for you to stay as a female professor, you have to make a huge effort. You have to be really competent, you have to strive in studies, and so on, and be up to date with things.

Show them that you know your field. So, when you have a lecture, a theology week, you have to do some work and show you're competent so you can keep your place. (Priscila, 60 years old).

Underlying Priscila's narrative, which reveals a symbolic order where women submit to double effort in order to prove their intellectual capacity and legitimacy as a *woman-subject*, is the validity of the meanings produced by the symbolic representations of gender about female subjectivities, as well as the relations that become established in an androcentric knowledge structure.

Beyond scientific truth, the knowledge of theological moral, as regards sexuality, has produced women's inferiority (whether mental, intellectual, moral, or spiritual), with a discourse that remains politically valid in ecclesial institutions.

[...] the female, as a synonym of pejorative, has worked as a builder of meanings and an organizer of sexual and symbolic differences that was important to the functioning of these structures (BRAIDOTTI, 2004, p. 61).

Therefore, within this representation, a sense of hierarchy of positions and recognition is created which is not always given by formal education, but operates on the symbolic level.

In the interpretation above, an intersubjective relationship is established between the content of Priscila's narrative and the analytical eye of the researcher. Therefore, in my thesis, I sought to learn, explain, and understand the sense of the actions and experience of female faculty subjects in theology, as well as the relations of power and gender inscribed in institutional discourses and practices.

In this respect, Gadamer (1999)⁸ highlights that hermeneutic comprehension is

8- Hans-Georg Gadamer is one of the main researchers of hermeneutic. His methodology includes the human experience of the world and praxis of life.

not a mechanic, technically closed procedure, since nothing of what is interpreted can be understood at once. Interpretation is always one interpretation, and the act of understanding, more than an unveiling of the truth of the object, is the relation of what the "other" (you) posits as true. In the present study, the narratives of the female professors allowed to verify how power and gender dynamics pervade the trajectory of these women within Catholic institutions, i.e.: the female process of entering the academic sphere; and the political strategies they produce to re-signify spaces, relations, practices, and to reinvent themselves as they positively affirm alterity as a political strategy to become female subjects of theological knowledge in a universe ruled by an androcentric symbolic and normative order.

Minayo (2003) considers that the subject objectivates itself in its own action and out of this comes its subjectivation, i.e., the subject subjectivates itself in action-subjectivation. Still, it was surely necessary to consider the gender position of the study subjects, whose situation is not normally treated in the hermeneutic approach. This objectivation of oneself, which is conducted through action, is a constant in many narratives, and a continuous process that becomes objective in the interactive processes with other faculty and students. To briefly illustrate this, here is an excerpt of the narrative of Noemi (46 years old) where she speaks about the meaning of teaching in her life, i.e., that she objectivates herself through the action of teaching.

I think theology is effectively part of my life, it gives me a direction. I see myself, yes, as an educator of faith. From the very beginning, I've always been an educator of faith, at theology courses in communities, in religion classes [...] So, I feel this mission of being an educator in faith who is now going through a faculty career. I feel I'm an educator of faith, a collaborator in the construction of meanings and new meanings [...].

It is worth remembering that the hermeneutic perspective, besides allowing interpreting and establishing relations in different directions, allows intersubjectivity among the researching subject and the researched subject in a process of both understanding and self-understanding. According to Minayo (2003, p. 92):

Understanding is always eventually understanding oneself. The general structure of this form of approach finds its concreteness in historical understanding, since this is where the concrete bindings of customs and traditions become operative, as do their corresponding possibilities of future.

Hermeneutic “proposes intersubjectivity as the ground of human action’s scientific process” (MINAYO, 2003, p. 97) and as an interpretive *praxis* requiring that differences and similarities be sought between the author’s context and that of the investigator, and that the observed world and the research subjects be shared with the world of the investigator’s life, since “understanding is always understanding oneself”. In this case, as a researcher, my view is that of one who shares with the study subjects/agents the experience as a place of becoming a female subject of knowledge, in the here and now.

We share the same symbolic world of discursive and linguistic representations and images in the male social order that has marked our subjectivities. We are white, Latin American women socialized in a Western, Christian-Catholic culture. We walk on the same cultural ground and share, still, the desire of a positive affirmation of the female subject. We are subjects of knowledge and, by valuing women’s situated experiences, we seek to produce contextual, partial knowledge; we therefore share figuring our being able to build a better world both for ourselves and for every woman. This because in the act of producing knowledge, the interviewed professors also adopted hermeneutic as a methodology of

critical interpretation in the production of so-called feminist theology. In other words, they start from women’s experiences to suspect of the already said in the biblical discourses produced by the male vision and experience. Thus, besides establishing a criticism of an abstract, universal, male thinking, they are building alternative knowledge that re-signifies images and symbolic representations, producing new possibilities for the subjectivity of women.

Therefore, in this study, if I sought to understand the experiences and strategies of women in their making themselves professors in a male universe on the one hand, on the other, this process made me understand myself as a female subject of knowledge. Gadamer (1999) had already emphasized that understanding requires the researcher’s engagement, in the sense that the researcher assumes an attitude where he/she recognizes his/her continuous threshold experience of living between familiarity and strangeness. Or, as Minayo (2003, p.98) puts it, the “hermeneutic activity moves between the familiar and the strange, between the intersubjectivity of unlimited agreement and the breaking of the possibility of that agreement”. In this perspective, the subject of knowledge interacts with the subject of the research and vice-versa, since in the act of understanding, the subject also understands him/herself. Likewise, Boaventura Santos (2004) argues that the construction of scientific knowledge is also a pursuit of self-knowledge.

Therefore, more than situating ourselves in similar contexts and sharing a few meanings of the world we experience, the intersubjective relationship, in this case, is established because, as a researcher, I cannot consider myself the only maker of knowledge, since this knowledge depended on the reflexive narratives the professors developed about themselves and about the meanings they gave to their experiences. This led them to participate as subjects of the production of knowledge and to interact with the gender contents I problematized as an investigator. In this respect, educator Alan

Peshkin (1993, p. 24) argued that “the path of our knowledge is bound both to the content of our knowledge and to our relationship with the research participants”.

In this perspective, Minayo’s arguments about the intersubjective relationship in research were important, because:

[...] the investigator should not seek in the texts/interviews an essentialist truth, but the sense meant by who produced them. Thus, the investigator will only be in a position to understand the significant content of any document/interview if he/she undertakes to make the author’s reasons present in the interpretation. On the other hand, the interpretation never has the final word; the meaning of a message or reality will always be open to various directions, but mainly in the face of new findings in the context where it was produced, and also in the face of the new questions that are made. (MINAYO, 2003, p. 98).

This methodological proposal dislocates the researcher from the position of protagonist of scientific truth to a view that considers the relational position between the subjects. A relationship that is much more than simply getting close to the study subjects, because it is an attitude in which, as a researcher, I had to allow myself to be touched by their narratives, which I problematized through a critical, theoretical perspective. In other words, through this intersubjective relationship, my task was one of interpreting and understanding the meaning of the professors’ actions, as well as their discourses and social context.

In order to illustrate a little of this intersubjective relationship, which allows the researcher to interpret the narrated contents, I present another fragment of the narrative of one of the professors. In a first comprehension, one can realize that this professor uses her professional qualification as a political strategy in order to achieve a position in the discipline

connected to her educational background. Such a strategy, as Fraser (1997) sees it, is a struggle for fair redistribution of power by a subject who is entitled to it, particularly when what is at stake is hiring a professor in the same area as hers.

I’m teaching the field I studied. But it took a long time, too. I’ve had a challenge, for example, of speaking at the council, “You’re hiring a pastoral theology professor”. They said, “Oh, it seems he’s coming on someone’s request, you know”. I asked, “But why?” “Oh, because here we don’t have a professor with a degree in the area, and we’ll have to hire one”. I said, “Did you forget I have a degree in the area and I’m doing a doctorate? I’ve more qualifications than he does, and I took that course in the same university he’s attending”. They said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I hadn’t thought about that”. You see my point? Then I was hired, I took over the discipline and all. The woman has to show herself, too, and adapt to situations at the right time. The problem is qualification, then, if that’s the problem, you have to analyze to what point it is true what they’re giving you as a justification in a situation. (Madalena, 55 years old).

Madalena’s narrative evidences the logic of power and gender that governs practices in the theology environment. This narrative seems to suggest there is a subtle discrimination that has nothing to do with education level – since she is a qualified professional – but, rather, that it occurs on account of a difference, the marker of which is sex. In this case, one can understand the emphasis she places on her professional qualification as a criterion of equality. According to Boaventura de Souza Santos (2000), people and social groups have the right to be equal when difference degrades them, and the right to be different when equality deprives them of their characteristics. Thus, Madalena seems to interact with the rules of the academic field, i.e., she appropriates the

discourse of specific education, which is valid for male subjects, as a possibility of becoming a female subject of theological knowledge with equal rights to assume a teaching position in a specific discipline.

In this case, in the hermeneutic perspective that favors the intersubjective relationship, my position as a subject of knowledge was only to produce an interpretation of the content of Madalena's narrative – an interpretation that can never be the ultimate one. This because, in this perspective, every interpretation remains open to new contextual possibilities and new questions. Therefore, in hermeneutic, there is no neutral interpretation or absolute truth, since interpretation depends on the researcher's hermeneutical place, i.e., the social and theoretical place from where the subject of knowledge looks at reality and interprets it.

Certainly, my viewpoint has allowed one interpretation among so many others. Therefore, in a hermeneutical attitude, we can conceive that knowledge is not something purely objective, in the sense of a supposed neutrality of the world we experience, i.e., of the values, beliefs, and affections that are part of the authors' contextualized experiences; also, through this attitude we can believe that history is not marked by notions of cause and effect. In this respect, the lessons from genealogy are suitable to us.

For my thesis research, besides the hermeneutic proposal, I adopted a methodological perspective inspired in Michel Foucault's (1999) genealogy method in the treatment of historical elements, since I did not plan to interpret and understand history as a linear continuity nor seek the origin of the processes of both theology and these female theologian's relationship with higher education teaching. This because genealogy is not concerned with tracing cause-effect relations. Nor does it question what facts represent, but the motives for their being represented in a particular way, or the conditions that made them possible. In other words, while it pursues the conditions that favor the emergence of

new social practices or new knowledge, the genealogical research also reveals how the subject constitutes itself within and through these practices and knowledge. "Therefore, there is a mutual implication between genealogical research, social practices, and subjectivation process" (ESPERANDIO, 2011, p. 124).

Through genealogy, I sought to understand the conditions in which subjectivation processes occurred. Thus, on the one hand, I took traditional theological discourses filled with representations and symbolic images of gender in a discontinuous way, in order to evidence absences and meanings produced by the male institutional discourses and their effects on the constitution of the female subjectivity. In a second moment, I took women's narratives in order to understand the action and the meanings contained in the memories they recount about their academic trajectories, the accounts of which are not built as a continuous history, but by particular, situated circumstances that gave a meaning to their practices and experiences in the process of producing and understanding themselves as subjects of action and knowledge. In the same direction, Theresa de Lauretis (2000, p. 7) had argued that "the path of thought, as that of life, is not linear but made of turn-backs, anticipations, detours, and projections." Their narratives are not merely individual memories, but shared experiences discursively mediated and situated in a distinct social context, assuming a historicity character.

Therefore, considering Foucault's genealogical proposal and Lauretis' considerations, we can affirm that the narratives regarding women's experiences and actions in the theological universe evidence the process of their constituting themselves as female subjects of knowledge in the here and now of present history, amidst the gender dynamics of a male symbolic order. However, this construction is never finished, but remains always in a state of becoming (BRAIDOTTI, 2004). It is not a history of the past, but of present, "of becoming, here

and now, rooted in practice, contradiction, heterogeneity” (LAURETIS, 2000, p. 27).

Through these methodological perspectives, a process of dialogue with the professors was built, revealing the meanings produced in their process of becoming subjects-agents of teaching and knowledge production whose actions questioned the principles of traditional methodological paradigms, such as that of scientific neutrality and objectivity.

Choosing research techniques: a reflection

Obviously, the questions that are posed to an investigation eventually guide the choice of the techniques that best respond to its goals. In my research, the collection of information and empirical data necessary to meet the purposes of the study required a combination of techniques that included bibliographic research, visits to websites of Catholic theology higher education institutions, questionnaire application, participation in theology congresses, analyses of teaching programs, and in-depth interviews.

The instrument for collecting quantitative data was sent to every Catholic theology higher education institution. During the period of the research⁹, there were 71 institutions distributed in different categories: Catholic universities, higher education centers, faculties, and archdiocesan institutes¹⁰. With the return 40 questionnaires, we obtained the participation of 56.3 percent of the existing institutions. This allowed establishing an approximate, valid evidence framework about the male and female representation in the universe of theology teaching. Moreover, it allowed situating in a contextualized way and on a nationwide basis a few dynamics and

aspects of these institutions, according to the indicators selected for the questionnaire¹¹.

Among the techniques used, we emphasized in-depth interviews as a way of giving voice to the research interlocutors and of listening to the narratives about their trajectories in the academic field of theology, their actions, relationships, and experiences in the exercise of teaching activities: teaching and production of theological knowledge.

Gaskell (2003) highlights that qualitative interviews provide the necessary data for developing and understanding the relationship between social actors and their situation. They allow a detailed understanding of beliefs, attitudes, and motivations concerning people’s behavior in their specific social contexts. According to him, a research that uses interviews allows the interaction and exchange of ideas and meanings between the interviewer and the interviewee in the different perceptions to be explored. In other words, it allows the intersubjectivity of the subjects involved.

In the same direction, Otávio Cruz Neto (1997) argues that in-depth interviews allow an intensely corresponding dialogue between the interviewer and the informant. Considering the questions pointed above, the in-depth interview technique was chosen because it offered greater possibilities of exploring a roadmap of themes. It is recommended by Gaskell (2003, p. 78) in some situations such as:

When the goal of the study is to explore in depth the world of the individual’s life; when the topic refers to detailed individual experiences, personal choices and biographies.

Bibliographic research and quantitative data collection allowed contextualizing the situation of Catholic higher education institutions

9- I.e., during 2008.

10- This last category refers to the institutions where higher education in theology was not yet legally recognized by the Brazilian Ministry of Education.

11- The indicators selected were: institution type; how long the theology course has been running; current situation with the Ministry of Education; number of students and faculty by sex; age group of faculty; education level of faculty and where they graduated from; and hiring criteria.

and apprehending the level of participation of men and women in theology faculty on a national level. This enabled selecting women from different institutions for the interviews. However, considering the goals of my research, I established a few criteria for that choice, such as: professors with a background in theology who were teaching undergraduate classes in theology¹²; who had a production in the feminist or gender perspective or who had had some contact with gender and feminism theories¹³ during their period as higher education students; who were female professors at institutions with a theology course recognized by the Ministry of Education and located in the South and Southeast regions of Brazil.

This choice for interlocutors from institutions in these regions is primarily because this is where the largest number of faculty with a published production are, particularly with approaches based on the contribution of gender studies and feminist theory¹⁴. Also because, according to empirical data, the largest number of institutions offering a theology course are concentrated in these two regions, as are the institutions with greatest academic recognition in the country.

Therefore, having a previous knowledge of the set of main theological institutions in these regions, and taking into account those that had a certain number of women in faculty positions who could meet the selected criteria for a possible interlocutor in the research, I initially chose to interview women from three of those institutions, two of which were universities, and one was a theology school.

In all, I conducted 14 interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and categorized

by theme for purposes of analysis. Interviews' average length was approximately from one hour and a half to two hours. A thematic, open roadmap was followed. This technique allowed the professors more freedom to speak about what they considered more important concerning the different themes approached. That is obviously one of the advantages of in-depth interviewing, since it allows exploring the same issue from different perspectives.

During this work, I chose not to interview any man, considering that the analytical approach of gender relations is not limited to thinking the relations between men and women within a given social space, but includes analyzing women in their relationship with discourses, institutional practices, and androcentric structures that produce unequal relations and social exclusion. Therefore, I gave priority to female subjects in order to understand the dynamics of participation in, and production of, faculty in mostly male higher education institutions.

Thus, the male subject was treated in a more generic way, taking into account the quantitative data, theological discourses, and, most importantly, the women's narratives and the relations they build with their peers in the theological institutions. In this respect, giving voice to women has both political and symbolic contents. This because these are subjects that have been long silenced and now can speak about themselves, their experiences, the action carried out in teaching, and the perception they have of the relations established in theological institutions, in a field of knowledge where the male subject's voice has always ruled. In this socio-ecclesial place, women have been defined and thought of according to the patriarchal view. i.e., the view of a subject that claimed to be unique and universal. It is a feature of gender studies to seek the voices silenced by history and, in this respect, this study gave priority to the voice of the subjects, women who are professors and producers of knowledge. Women who, in a way, broke gender barriers, entering

12- This because there are theology professors at the pontifical Catholic universities who teach the discipline of *religious culture* in other courses.

13- One expects that a person who has had contact with, or produces this perspective of knowledge can both realize and problematize better the gender dynamics that pervade everyday life, and this becomes an important criterion given the study's proposal.

14- This does not mean that no female theologians producing in this perspective exist in other regions of Brazil. However, publications by female theologians who are self-designated feminists have their viability concentrated in the South and Southeast regions of the country.

and acting in a mostly male professional environment in which hierarchic, genderized power relations still predominate.

Feelings and learnings in field experience

The field experience is unique for each researcher and brings challenges inherent to the problem of each research. Since the beginning, I was aware of the challenges I might face in the field as I sought the interlocutors, which, in this case, would be women working as theology professors. Challenges concerning the time they might or might not have for interviews, the forms of interaction I could establish with them, since I did not personally know each of them, and the fact that they lived in various cities. I remembered so many research experiences from the texts I had studied in the discipline of research methods, in the first semester of my master's research in sociology, as those texts already pointed the challenges that each research object presents in its field conduction.

The fact of having read articles by a few of the theologians and professors I planned to interview and knowing people connected to theology was important in approximating and interacting with the subjects. Of course, I already knew some of them personally, because they had participated in events held by the Conferência dos Religiosos do Brasil (NT: *Conference of Religious in Brazil*), an organization I had professional relations with for four years. However, I do not believe this may have influenced the fact that nearly every one of them was disposed to collaborate from the first moment I exposed the goals of the research. Some were immediately indicating other colleagues and offering bibliography. Others asked me whether I really needed their testimony since there were other professors who could be interviewed. In those cases, I explained to them the reason why I had chosen professors at those institutions, and they, on a second moment, accepted to join the group of my interlocutors.

During the interviews, the accounts of some of the women lengthened and brought interesting details about their experiences in a male universe, and those experiences raised a desire in me to interact, as on many moments I felt I shared the same experiences, even though in a distinct context. I had to restrain that desire to make remarks or say that I had had similar experiences. Assuming the researcher position required that I learned to listen without interfering as they built their narratives. In all interviews, I felt at ease with the professors and realized that they, too, shared that relation. I tried to treat them not as mere informants, but as subjects-agents of the memories of their experiences, resistances, and actions in the universe of theological knowledge, remembering that the narrative act allows the objectivation of the subject in its own experiences and concrete actions in the field, as Minayo (2003) well remarked.

The field was a great learning. The narratives about the trajectories and life experiences of these women in their function as theology professors were distinct and significant. Many times, the accounts of these professors made me think of my own life experience as a woman, and the strategies necessary to occupy or build spaces and propose egalitarian relations in a culture that still reproduces sexist power dynamics. At different times, I felt I shared the same subjective, structural experience, even though in a different context. I could see a corroboration in me of what Gaskell (2003) and Neto (1997) had mentioned regarding the in-depth interview technique as a technique that allows the interaction of ideas and meanings between the interviewer and the interviewee in the different perceptions to be explored in the interview.

Final considerations

The hermeneutic perspective as a methodology was a finding in terms of

validating intersubjectivity, i.e., the relational position between subjects – the researcher and the professors – in the act of producing academic knowledge. Therefore, I could see that the result of my research was one understanding among so many possible others, precisely because this production was conducted from my hermeneutic position as a researcher. In other words, standing from a socio-cultural and theoretical position allowed a certain comprehension and interpretation of reality. Therefore, I am aware that the knowledge produced is partial and situated, not enclosed in itself, since the data are susceptible of questionings, as hermeneutic allows new possible interpretations through other views, other questions, or even by using other theoretical-analytical frameworks.

Obviously, because of the hermeneutic perspective, I was able to conduct the experience of interacting with the research subjects in such a way that, as I problematized and analyzed the interlocutors' narratives through theoretical-analytical frameworks chosen for the knowledge production process, I was also able to understand myself as a genderized subject. In other words, I was able to understand the actions I perform, my conduct of freedom, reflexivity, and resistance over the social, normative conventions that produced me, as well as the agency processes I can build in a distinct context.

The research also had its role of producing self-knowledge as it produced me as a subject of sociological knowledge through the use of a methodological proposal that breaks with the object-subject dichotomy so dear to modern science. Thus, the study of my thesis about the construction of female faculty careers in Catholic institutions of theology, based on gender and feminism theories, is part of so many other studies that show it is indeed possible to produce knowledge from a position that is relational between subjects. This because today one can already accept the presupposition that that no purely objective knowledge exists, since the choices of the objects of research

are usually linked, directly or indirectly, to the professional trajectories and subjective experiences of the researchers themselves. In this respect too, relevance can be attributed to feminist theories, which have contributed a great deal to demystify the pure objectivity and universality of knowledge by showing it to be always situated and subjective.

In this respect, being able to keep a reflexive, critical distance while practicing the sociology of absences and giving emergence to the theme approached in my doctoral research was a permanent challenge, due to my proximity to the object of research and to the priority I gave to intersubjectivity as a way of producing knowledge. However, the work's scientificity was ensured by the estranging perspective and the critical attitude that were anchored in the theoretical-analytical categories assumed in the process of interpretive analysis. Beyond the challenges faced, my proximity with the object of research also allowed me to bring up a topic little studied in the sphere of sociology, and, in a way, to contribute to feminist studies of science, gender, and mostly male professional careers.

Placing emphasis on the subject – in this case, female professors who interpret their actions and experiences, who produce strategies to re-signify the female subjectivity, even if pervaded by contradictions – made me understand I was before a subject that was not only a product of social institutions and power relations, but also constituted itself as a reflexive subject, one capable of subjectively recognizing and transforming itself, and, therefore, causing changes or re-signification processes in the androcentric structures of the field of theological knowledge.

In this study, the women were not seen as victims or the passive result of normative codes and symbolic discourses, but as subjects who, although accomplices of power, were building possibilities for their own agency, thus producing new meanings that, therefore, destabilized the gender symbolic system of the male social order. To this end, in the study of

my thesis, I emphasized conceptions of both Foucaultian and feminist theories in a post-structuralist perspective, as they suggest the constitution of the subject in its relationship with power, inscribed in the symbolic universe (representations, symbols, discourses, and institutional practices) and in specific socio-cultural contexts pervaded by gender, class, ethnic group/race, and sex orientation dynamics.

More specifically, these are theories that allow thinking the subjects' processes of political resistance within contexts normatized by hegemonic social conventions, thus representing a break with the view of a fully constructed and determined subject. It is a conception of subject not resulting from a totally free, sovereign construction or a fix determination, but one that is always constituting itself in becoming, in a sort of nomadism – as presented in the theory of Rosi Braidotti (2004) – the process of which does not occur separated from, or independently of, social contingencies. On the contrary, it occurs through the interaction with these structures, which can either limit or enable strategies of subversive or re-signifying action. Such actions can occur in both an individual and a collective dimension, particularly when a common awareness exists about discriminatory processes and a desire is shared for identity recognition policies, for a fair distribution of power, and for becoming a subject of knowledge, as I evidenced in the study of my thesis.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that the situated, contextual struggle of the female professors interviewed, in their self-constitution process as female subjects of theological knowledge, as specific a struggle as it may be, can obviously refer to other fields historically considered as male, since, despite major socio-cultural changes, we still live with a system with strong traces of the patriarchal culture, which seems to continue requiring inequity, hierarchy, and symbolic violence in order to subsist. A system that produces gender and power mechanisms and seems to perpetuate itself also into theological institutions. Perhaps, these women's struggle for their ethical self-agency, understood as a positive affirmation of the female subjectivity through professional recognition and the production of new symbology and meanings as a way of changing the collective imaginary, can bring us to believe that:

transforming the world starts with transforming our minds, and renewing our minds starts with transforming the images we introduce in it, i.e., the images we hang on our walls and the ones we carry in our hearts (Kaiser)¹⁵.

15- This thought has been with me for so long that, as I cited it, I could no longer find the complete reference. However, I believe it is important to refer to it in order to emphasize the idea developed in the conclusion.

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