

Mapping youth at the university: Mental health, collective action, and the common

Cartografando a juventude na universidade: A saúde mental, as ações coletivas e o comum

Cartografiando la juventud en la universidad: La salud mental, las acciones colectivas y lo común

Cartographier la jeunesse à l'université : La santé mentale, les actions collectives et le commun

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Abstract

Within the university context, which is permeated by neoliberal logic, young people experience a reality shaped by relationships marked by competition and competitiveness, academic productivism, the weakening of social bonds, and the ideal of becoming entrepreneurs of themselves. Against this backdrop, research and data concerning psychological distress among university students have increased in recent years. This study presents an account of intervention research conducted through a cartographic methodological approach. Through encounters with young people at the university, clues/scenes were produced that enabled reflections intertwining youth, modes of subjectivation, and neoliberalism, with a view to conceptualizing the common as a political principle. These clues, approached as scenes, broaden the notion of mental health and underscore the importance of social interaction during the educational process, as the university experience can foster new encounters whose affects reshape this experience. Thus, based on the clues/scenes constructed with young people, we propose thinking about mental health beyond mental health education or individual clinical and therapeutic services, embracing a discussion capable of mobilizing the concept of the common. From this perspective, we emphasize the importance of collective action within the university setting, as it can challenge entrenched notions of individual responsibility and blame for success or failure, as well as the assumption that mental health must be continuously optimized. This approach makes it possible to conceive of the common as a political principle, thereby deprivatizing suffering and making it collective once again.

Keywords: youth, mental health, collective action.

Resumo

No campo universitário atravessado pela lógica neoliberal, a juventude vivencia uma realidade constituída por relações marcadas pela concorrência e pela competitividade, pelo produtivismo acadêmico, pela fragilização dos vínculos e pelo ideal de ser empresário de si mesmo. Nesse cenário, pesquisas e dados referentes ao adoecimento psíquico de jovens universitários têm crescido nos últimos anos. Este estudo apresenta um relato de pesquisa-intervenção, com percurso metodológico cartográfico, no qual, por meio de encontros com as juventudes na universidade, foram produzidas pistas/cenas que possibilitaram tecer reflexões, entrelaçando juventude, modos de subjetivação e neoliberalismo, de modo a pensar o comum como princípio político. As pistas, tomadas como cenas, discutem ampliações

da noção de saúde mental, sustentando a importância da convivência no período de formação, uma vez que a experiência universitária pode potencializar novos encontros, cujos afetos produzem outros contornos para essa vivência. Propõe-se, assim, pensar a saúde mental para além da educação em saúde mental ou dos serviços clínico-terapêuticos individuais, a partir das pistas/cenas construídas com as juventudes, de forma a apostar em uma discussão capaz de mobilizar o conceito do comum. Desse modo, sustenta-se a importância de ações coletivas no espaço universitário, que podem produzir torções em noções arraigadas de responsabilização e de culpabilização individual em relação ao sucesso ou ao fracasso, bem como em relação a uma suposta saúde mental a ser constantemente otimizada. Nessa aposta, torna-se possível pensar o comum como princípio político, desprivatizando o sofrimento e recoletivizando-o.

Palavras-chave: juventude, saúde mental, ações coletivas.

Resumen

En el ámbito universitario atravesado por la lógica neoliberal, la juventud experimenta una realidad constituida por relaciones marcadas por la competencia y la competitividad, por el productivismo académico, por la fragilización de los vínculos y por el ideal de ser empresario de sí mismo. En este escenario, las investigaciones y los datos referentes al padecimiento psíquico de jóvenes universitarios han aumentado en los últimos años. Este estudio presenta un relato de investigación-intervención, con un recorrido metodológico cartográfico, en el que, por medio de encuentros con las juventudes en la universidad, se produjeron pistas/escenas que posibilitaron tejer reflexiones, entrelazando juventud, modos de subjetivación y neoliberalismo, con el propósito de pensar lo común como principio político. Las pistas, tomadas como escenas, discuten ampliaciones de la noción de salud mental, sosteniendo la importancia de la convivencia durante el período de formación, dado que la experiencia universitaria puede potenciar nuevos encuentros, cuyos afectos producen otros contornos para esta vivencia. Se propone, así, pensar la salud mental más allá de la educación en salud mental o de los servicios clínico-terapéuticos individuales, a partir de las pistas/escenas construidas con las juventudes, apostando por una discusión capaz de movilizar el concepto de lo común. De este modo, se sostiene la importancia de las acciones colectivas en el espacio universitario, las cuales pueden producir torsiones en nociones arraigadas de responsabilización y culpabilización individual en relación con el éxito o el fracaso, así como respecto de una supuesta salud mental que debe ser constantemente optimizada. En esta apuesta, se torna posible pensar lo común como principio político, desprivatizando el sufrimiento y recolectivizándolo.

Palabras clave: juventud, salud mental, acciones colectivas.

Résumé

Dans le milieu universitaire traversé par la logique néolibérale, la jeunesse fait l'expérience d'une réalité constituée de relations marquées par la concurrence et la compétitivité, par le productivisme académique, par l'affaiblissement des liens et par l'idéal d'être entrepreneur de soi-même. Dans ce contexte, les recherches et les données relatives à la souffrance psychique des jeunes universitaires ont connu une hausse ces dernières années. Cette étude présente un récit de recherche-intervention, dans une démarche méthodologique cartographique, au cours de laquelle, à travers des rencontres avec des jeunes à l'université, ont été produites des pistes/scènes ayant permis de tisser des réflexions articulant jeunesse, modes de subjectivation et néolibéralisme, afin de penser le commun comme principe politique. Les indices, envisagés comme des scènes, interrogent l'élargissement de la notion de santé mentale, en soulignant l'importance de la vie en commun durant la période de formation, dans la mesure où l'expérience universitaire peut favoriser de nouvelles rencontres, dont les affects dessinent d'autres contours à cette expérience. Il s'agit ainsi d'envisager la santé mentale au-delà de l'éducation à la santé mentale ou des services cliniques et thérapeutiques individuels, à partir des pistes/scènes construites avec les jeunes, afin de miser sur une discussion capable de mobiliser la notion de commun. De cette manière, on souligne l'importance des actions collectives dans l'espace universitaire, qui peuvent infléchir des notions profondément ancrées de responsabilisation et de culpabilisation individuelles face à la réussite ou à l'échec, ainsi qu'à l'égard d'une prétendue santé mentale censée être constamment optimisée. Dans cette perspective, il devient possible de penser le commun comme principe politique, en déprivatisant la souffrance et en la re-collectivisant.

Mots-clés : jeunesse, santé mentale, actions collectives.

One possible entry point: neoliberalism, youth, and the university

Neoliberal rationality, as discussed by Dardot and Laval (2016), is understood as producing and constituting ways of relating and, therefore, ways of being. It is a rationality that produces subjectivities.

In other words, with neoliberalism, what is at stake is nothing more and nothing less than the form of our existence, i.e., the way we are led to behave, to relate to others, and to ourselves. (Dardot & Laval, 2017, p. 16).

Foucault (1979/2008) observes that this neoliberal rationality permeates not only the economic sphere but the entire social fabric, producing subjectivities as well as ways of being in the world. The philosopher discusses this historical dimension of subjectivation processes as a construction that takes place through mechanisms of competition that establish the enterprise model across the units of social life.

There is, therefore, a subject of enterprise and production, forged through competition; it is the multiplication of the “enterprise” form within the social body that constitutes, in my view, the scope of neoliberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition, and, consequently, the enterprise what we might call the formative power of society. (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 203).

The effects of this rationality on subjectivation processes indicate that subjectivity is not a fixed and immutable entity but rather something that is engendered through the different practices of each historical period. Subjectivity is understood as a production that occurs through encounters (Mansano, 2009). In this discussion, youth is not conceptualized on the basis of age markers or from an essentialist perspective, but as a social construction and a plural and complex phenomenon (Félix & Oliveira, 2020). Accordingly, we also use the term in the singular, understanding that the very notion of youth, according to Coimbra et al. (2005), encompasses multiplicity and heterogeneity, unlike the notion of adolescence. According to the authors, the term itself does not undo naturalizations or perceptions surrounding a demarcated age group; rather, they advocate its strategic use, operationalizing it through flows, becomings, and differences.

Thus, when considering young people’s ways of being, we understand that being young means being held responsible for success and upward mobility, as well as for failure or withdrawal. Coimbra et al. (2005) argue that such responsibility individualizes issues that are social and, consequently, collective in nature.

From this perspective, Mansano (2003) discusses the value attributed to choosing a profession during youth beginning in the early nineteenth century. The aim of bringing individuals and work closer together reinforces the temporal pressure for this decision to be made quickly. This conception of a linear life composed of linear stages demands that young people establish a professional identity in order to attain what is understood as adulthood. Young people are therefore regarded as individuals who must make choices. This period is perceived and experienced as decisive, with an apparent freedom of choice that fosters particular modes of subjectivation. Thus, it is as though, once the choice has been made, everything will be resolved and the individual will be on the path toward an assumed state of stability.

Throughout professional life and educational trajectories, individuals face a series of decisions and choices that may lead them down paths that had not previously been planned. It is therefore necessary to move away from what has been established as truth regarding youth and young people’s professional and educational lives, particularly the notion that youth constitutes a single decisive period in which such decisions become crystallized. Instead, we must consider the potential of human life as a process of permanent creation, as becoming (Mansano, 2003).

Likewise, youth within the university context, also permeated by neoliberal logic, is constituted through relationships of competition and competitiveness that sustain this rationality and capitalism. From this perspective, Duarte (2020) points out that individuals are left to their own resources, thereby valuing and encouraging individual action.

Accordingly, this entrepreneurial imperative manifests itself in academia through internal and external pressures, demands for productivity, the pursuit of often unrealistic goals, mechanically imposed deadlines, and the normalization of exhaustion among students, as described by Maia (2022). Furthermore, modes of subjectivation are permeated by an ideal of performance in which everyone is free, “everyone is a rational and autonomous enterprise, struggling against one another to carry out their own entrepreneurial life project” (Maia, 2022, p. 88).¹

Accordingly, it is essential to recognize that the university context is not only permeated by neoliberal rationality in its pedagogical and educational relationships but is also affected by institutional demands associated with evaluation policies and research funding. This occurs because productivity metrics imposed by funding agencies and graduate education evaluation systems, such as those administered by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), tend to reinforce a performance-oriented logic that affects both faculty members and students. Quantitative indicators, such as the number of publications, impact factor, time to degree completion, and funding secured, contribute to the intensification of academic work, potentially stripping knowledge production of its meaning.

This logic, aligned with neoliberal rationality, affects modes of subjectivation by individualizing responsibilities, rendering institutional and collective working conditions invisible, and reframing psychological distress as individual inadequacy. Thus, psychological distress and illness within the university context cannot be understood separately from these structural demands, which place pressure on the meaning of education, research, and academic coexistence and directly affect the mental health of those who inhabit this space (Maia, 2022; Dardot & Laval, 2016; Ehrenberg, 2010).

Within the university, there is a minefield of conditions that erode meaning and relationships, radically affecting the educational experience. We can consider the production and reproduction of an ethos, as Maia (2022) suggests – i.e., a

¹ For the purposes of this article, all direct quotations from the original sources have been translated into English.

collective way of being. This way of being turns everyone into performance machines, thereby affecting relationships with others, “where such freedom becomes the denial of any social interaction, disseminating a logic of permanent hostility that regards any form of otherness as an obstacle or opponent” (Maia, 2022, p. 91).

It is in this context, in which the other becomes an obstacle to performance, that the common is hollowed out. As we become both masters and slaves of ourselves, there is a rupture in narrative time – in our ability to narrate ourselves and also to listen to others, as Maia (2022) argues. Moreover, according to the author, the perception of being one’s own manager (of what one studies and how one develops one’s skills, for example) reflects ideals of performance-oriented action that, when considered in relation to the university environment, suggest the prevalence of solitary paths. Bonds that are not grounded in care, solidarity, and belonging come to be regarded more as contracts.

Given this context, attention to mental health care within universities has increased in recent years in response to data and circumstances pointing to psychological distress of a collective nature. However, Leão et al. (2019a) explain that initiatives aimed at addressing mental health within universities are commonly oriented toward clinical and therapeutic strategies and/or mental health education. These strategies are constructed within a particular neoliberal rationality and reinforce individualization, framing such issues as problems to be treated and cured individually.

According to the 2022 Higher Education Census conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (Inep), 72% of university students who enrolled in 2022 chose distance education (DE). This growth suggests a need for greater oversight by regulatory bodies to assess the quality of educational programs. In this context, the number of students entering DE programs has surpassed that of students entering in-person programs, which has been declining since 2014 (Assessoria de Comunicação Social do Inep, 2023).

In Brazil, 77% of undergraduate students attend private higher education institutions, a result of expansion initiatives launched in the late 1990s. In private higher education, financing programs such as the Brazilian Student Financing Fund (FIES) help provide access to students whose socioeconomic circumstances would otherwise prevent them from covering tuition costs, while in public higher education, affirmative action quota policies seek to promote diversity among students. Accordingly, cuts to programs such as FIES pose a threat to access and inclusion (Mariuzzo, 2023).

Hooks (2020) identifies elements that give meaning to the experience of learning and raises issues related to her experience as a university professor. In this regard, she notes the existence of a deeply entrenched educational culture grounded in the belief that knowledge is already complete and that university students are expected merely to receive or memorize it. This perspective overlooks the full complexity of an educational experience such as undergraduate education, in which individuals should have the space and opportunity to disagree, question, and construct knowledge in which they are actively implicated. The university as a space of potential, invention, and encounters is also emphasized in the discussions of Félix and Oliveira (2020).

In addition, student agency and the idea of collectivity become central to this discussion. Students are viewed as subjects rather than merely as customers.

This collectivity evokes an idea of agency that does not align with the perspective imposed by the neoliberal system, which overvalues individuality as a means of achieving a better life and conceives of the student merely as a customer of services offered and purchased in the market (Fioreze et al., 2022, p. 704).

From this perspective, this study aims to discuss the incursions and processes experienced through intervention research designed to understand young people’s journeys through the university context in times of neoliberalism. To this end, the theoretical and methodological resources of Cartography, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1995), were employed. Encounters with young people at the university generated a number of clues that enabled us to construct scenes which, more broadly, gradually outlined a kind of map. The resources used for data production were: (i) the researcher’s field diary, which enabled the recording of everyday life, lived experiences, and encounters with young people at the university from March to December 2023; and (ii) individual interviews with university students, conducted between August and December 2023. In the present study, however, the data presented are drawn from the field diary, which constitutes the material discussed and analyzed.

Thus, through the weaving of a map from the perspective of an apprentice-cartographer (Passos & Barros, 2009), readers will encounter the paths opened by and within the intervention research. Yet a question remains: what is this open-ended map? It entails an attentive engagement with the field; it constitutes a sensitivity to the forces that traverse and constitute a given reality. As Fonseca et al. (2020, p. 44) suggest, it is necessary to “dive into the folds of events,” like a baker stretching bread dough into layers that previously appeared fused and superimposed. In this case, it is through the process of encounter and the production of clues/scenes arising from encounters with university youth that discussions about modes of subjectivation become possible.

Cartographic weavings and possibilities for research/intervention

In contrast to any claims of neutrality, the cartographic path sought to make visible the relationships that constitute a given reality. The research was organized along rhizomatic lines; thus, as Rosário and Coca (2018) note, the results took

shape through the lines comprising the investigative trajectory, offering a kind of map that will be narrated through scenes.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1995), the map constituted through cartography is produced through the cartographer's gaze, which, amid potential connections, traces lines for the investigative proposal. Fonseca et al. (2020) use the metaphor of the artisan, who leaves fingerprints – their mark – on a clay vessel. Likewise, the construction of research and knowledge is imbued with corporeality and implication: “that is, research becomes a plane of authorial inscription, the repository of unrepeatable intertwinings between subject and object, leading us to the maxim that, through it, we can always see the world for the first time” (Fonseca et al., 2020, p. 42).

By being recognized as something “political that not only follows but also produces within the social field” (Bocco, 2008, p. 52), cartography made it possible to follow young people at the university dynamically and processually. Throughout the study, this approach enabled an analysis of the forms of knowledge and realities created along the research path, in which the researcher is continuously implicated (Bocco, 2008).

The study was conducted at a community university located in southern Brazil between 2022 and 2023 and was designed as intervention research guided by the cartographic method. In this study, cartography does not seek to represent a previously given object, but rather to follow processes, affects, and forces that traverse young people's modes of subjectivation within the university context. Undergraduate students from different programs at the university participated at different points in their academic trajectories and joined the proposed encounters as spaces for social interaction, listening, and exchange.

During the study period, the collective encounters were held in person across approximately five meetings, without a fixed script, allowing experiences, demands, and tensions to emerge from the process itself. Field productions were recorded in a field diary and constituted clues that were subsequently approached as cartographic scenes. These scenes do not correspond to isolated factual accounts, but rather to compositions that condense statements, gestures, silences, and recurring situations experienced during the encounters, making visible the effects of neoliberalism, academic productivism, and performance demands on the university experience. The analyses presented in this article are developed from these scenes, with the aim of problematizing young people's mental health and affirming the common as a political principle.

In this study, we draw on the notion of clues/scenes to present the results and discuss data. In its dictionary meaning, a clue refers to the possibility or existence of something, while a scene relates to a stage; figuratively, it is the place where something takes place (Ferreira, 2010). The clues/scenes were constituted from different moments and encounters that occurred throughout the research.

Importantly, the encounters were not limited to interviews, but also included informal conversations with students and student leaders in different discussion forums at the university. They also took place through participation in activities proposed by ongoing initiatives and in conversation circles addressing this topic within the university, all of which were recorded in the researcher's field diary.

Accordingly, the two clues/scenes – “I came here to study, but also to live alongside others” (Scene 1) and “The silence surrounding what produces mental health” (Scene 2) – guided the focus of the discussion and analysis. These materials demonstrate the extent to which the field diary is not only a product of research but, above all, a producer of the research itself, as it operates as a device that generates forms of knowledge and realities rather than merely describing them (Souza, 2005). Through the act of writing the diary, the person conducting the research continually positions herself as a researcher.

Thus, this type of record brings into academic writing a sense of everyday life, in which conversation constitutes one of the ways through which people produce meanings and position themselves within the relationships they establish in daily life. This is because conversations can be understood as discursive practices that transform language into action (Menegon, 2000). When the informality of the situations in which they occur is also considered, conversations represent privileged modalities for studying the production of meaning, in keeping with the proposal of cartographic research.

Cartographic research is an attempt to enter the field-topic as an existential territory, guiding and weaving writing as it is traversed by the field. In this sense, the production of a field diary is a device capable of generating shifts and tensions that can set in motion and unsettle the ways studies are constructed. This weaving of knowledge through the field diary as a device runs counter to standardized forms of production and becomes a form of resistance through other ways of researching and writing (Nascimento & Lemos, 2020).

Rigor and precision are understood as an attitude, as a commitment and attentiveness to what is alive and to the movements of life, which are taken as clues. Thus, “the clues that guide the cartographer function as references that help sustain an attitude of openness to what is being produced and of recalibrating the path throughout the research process itself” (Passos & Barros, 2009, p. 13). In this context, narrating the research paths, the clues, and the construction of a map “means situating our way of researching within the plane of a micropolitics, without claiming to become molar, typified, or hegemonic” (Fonseca et al., 2020, p. 59).

In this sense, we seek refuge in the two scenes woven as settings/stages. They constituted a space-time from which to build reflections intertwining youth, modes of subjectivation, neoliberalism, and the proposal to conceptualize the common as a political principle associated with accomplishing something jointly and collectively (Dardot & Laval, 2017).

Accordingly, this study aims to discuss the incursions and processes experienced through the intervention research project entitled “Youth Crossings: Mental Health, Neoliberalism, and the University,” whose central aim was to understand young people’s crossings through the university context in times of neoliberalism. On June 6, 2023, the research project received ethical approval under CAAE No. 69658223.5.0000.5343 (Opinion No. 6,105,150). The study complied with the ethical guidelines established by National Health Council Resolutions No. 466/2012 and No. 510/2016 (Resolution No. 466, 2013; Resolution No. 510, 2016).

Clues/Scenes, cartographies: on young people’s ways of being and existing at the university

The cartographic scenes presented below were produced during encounters with university students within the context of the intervention research. They do not correspond to isolated or exemplary episodes, but rather to compositions constructed from recurring situations, statements, gestures, silences, and affects that permeated the encounters. The scenes were selected for their analytical potential, as they condense tensions experienced by young people within the university setting, particularly those related to psychological distress, performance demands, and forms of social interaction. By treating these scenes as analytical operators, it becomes possible to problematize the modes of subjectivation at play and sustain the analysis proposed in this article, articulating mental health, collective action, and the common as a political principle.

Scene 1: “I came here to study, but also to live alongside others”

The first clue-scene emerged during an encounter with university students through an outreach project² linked to the university’s Graduate Program in Psychology. The project facilitated contact with students and sought to understand the university community and its different members (e.g., faculty members, staff, and students) as well as the return to in-person activities after the pandemic, particularly with regard to mental health. Academic leaders, that is, students who were members of the student associations of each program, were invited to participate in a conversation circle held at the university’s Central Student Association (DCE).

During the encounters with university students, we listened to their perceptions and views regarding mental health at the university in a post-pandemic context. This meeting was proposed in order to hear about their own experiences and about what they were also hearing from their peers, given their roles as student leaders, particularly with regard to mental health. The questions were open-ended and posed in a conversation-circle format. In this context, we understood the statement “I came here to study, but also to live alongside others”³ (*sic*) as a clue – an important scene within the investigative lines of our map. Along young people’s crossings through university life, the university setting was recognized not only as an educational space for the construction of knowledge and learning, but also as a space for social interaction, i.e., for living “with” and “alongside” others. In a tone that conveyed a certain sense of frustration, one university student described the difficulties experienced during the pandemic, but also those associated with the return to in-person activities and the resumption of multiple responsibilities as well as the different points along her university trajectory involving productivity and performance. These issues resonated within the small group of undergraduate students, among whom we heard a desire for belonging and expectations surrounding social interaction and “living together.”

In contrast to the notion of the trajectory-individual (Ehrenberg, 2010), the idea of social interaction points toward a path in which encounters and exchanges emerge as fundamental. The notion of the trajectory-individual refers to the construction of oneself within an environment where collective emancipation policies have been dismantled. This entrepreneurial spirit, this entrepreneurial adventure, constitutes a dominant model of singularization. Neoliberal logic thus operates as the backdrop of contemporary modes of subjectivation, fostering individual and solitary trajectories while also constituting privileged ways of being and living in relation to imperatives of productivity and performance. These imperatives turn individuals into entrepreneurs of themselves and simultaneously hollow out relationships.

Libâneo and Pulino (2023) problematize the entry of first-year students into university from the perspective of welcoming them and remaining open to their views and perceptions. According to the authors, first-year students must be welcomed in their diversity, so that “this community welcomes them in their singularities, seeks to integrate them into the institutional culture and, at the same time, as part of this culture, allows itself to be transformed with them, through the encounter with them” (Libâneo & Pulino, 2023, p. 196).

² The outreach project emerged in response to a request from the university administration to identify and map issues related to the mental health of the academic community, given the recent return to in-person activities and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this context, the researcher, who was also a scholarship recipient, joined the outreach project.

³ The excerpts in italics followed by (*sic*) were taken from the researcher’s field diary and constitute part of the material analyzed in this article. This approach was adopted to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants. Accordingly, statements made by young people at the university were presented throughout the text in order to contribute to the proposed discussion and analysis, without distinctions that would link particular statements to specific participants, thereby serving as an invitation to reflect on these productions.

Each university student's arrival in the academic environment activates a sense of estrangement toward the unfamiliar while simultaneously opening possibilities and potentialities. Yet is there space to listen to those who arrive? Libâneo and Pulino (2023), who are authors and school psychologists, describe two forms of welcoming practice through which psychology begins to address issues previously treated as individual concerns in subjective-institutional terms. The aim is to develop activities that enable different relationships with reality and broaden understandings and perceptions of the university, thereby disrupting homogenization and, consequently, creating space for other modes of existence, both "singular and collective, exposing institutional and human incompleteness and placing us in a permanent process of becoming" (Libâneo & Pulino, 2023, p. 201).

Hearing the clue-statement "I came here to study, but also to live alongside others" (*sic*) becomes part of our map, our landscape, because cartography follows movement through the action of forces. Thus, every landscape is in a state of deconstruction and reconstruction; consequently, worlds begin to unravel when new affects seek passage (Mansano, 2003). This clue-statement therefore leads us to think about "mental health" from other perspectives, as well as about other ways of living and making sense of being at the university. When youth is understood as a social construction, it is also understood as both a producer and a product of existing relationships.

Accordingly, Félix and Oliveira (2020) emphasize the importance of constructing meaning in the experience of being at the university collectively. Choosing a degree program is often a solitary process, as are the responsibility attributed to that choice and uncertainties regarding the future and the labor market. The fluidity and speed of change produce a frequent sense of instability. Félix and Oliveira (2020, p. 92) therefore place their emphasis on collectives: "these collectives are forms of encounters and missed encounters among young people who, despite all their complaints about the difficulties of being at the university, end up 'saving' them, caring for them, and helping them find meaning in their presence in this place."

The scene we present, involving a collective affected by the desire to live alongside others, leads us to another clue that emerged from an encounter with a university student, who stated: "the bridge exists, but it feels like it's broken in the middle, you know?" (*sic*). This bridge suggests the possibility of encounters, affective engagement, support, and the production of meaning in the experience of being at the university, which can occur collectively but is, at that moment, experienced as an impossibility – as something that must be rebuilt or invented.

In discussing the experience of professional trajectories, Mansano (2003) takes a position that runs counter to what is solitary, mechanical, or linear:

Living through a choice is not limited to defining an identity, but involves an active process in which the individual is called upon to create, abandon, and experiment, as they experience the everyday life of a university program and/or professional activity as an experience open to discoveries and inventions (Mansano, 2003, p. 73).

Thus, throughout this process, encounters should be welcomed, and individuals should allow themselves to affect and be affected by what emerges from them, making room for the new configurations that take shape. The need for social interaction during the educational process suggests that the university experience can foster and generate new encounters, which in turn produce new affects and may give this experience new contours.

Scene 2: The silence surrounding what produces mental health

During another encounter with university students, we were invited to participate in a conversation circle held as part of the academic week organized by health-related programs. The proposed topic centered on the idea of "mental health" and its relationship with the feeling/desire to keep up with demands. At the beginning of the conversation, we listened to students describe a series of complaints and concerns regarding feelings of failure in the face of so many demands, as well as exhaustion and fatigue. Corbanezi (2023, p. 2) points out that "in general, in everyday life, the term mental health is paradoxically used to refer to its absence."

So, what kind of mental health were they talking about? In this context, mental health was approached from an individualizing and blame-oriented perspective, with narratives about suffering that individualized failure and fostered feelings of guilt. According to Silva et al. (2021), such narratives isolate the political dimension and exclude the ways in which life is organized, which also shape and constitute the ways in which we become ill or experience suffering.

At one point in our engagement with the students, we attempted to reverse this logic and introduce a degree of tension through the following questions: "What produces mental health?" and "How can mental health be produced within the university setting?" These questions silenced the group, constituting a clue-scene of a silenced collective. The overall silence of the group, whose members had previously described, with a sense of bewilderment, their suffering in the face of demands and a perceived lack of mental health, suggests a lack of knowing.

The clue-scene of silence contrasts with the possibility of voicing complaints and identifying ways in which students believe they could be supported, whether in caring for their mental health or, according to their perceptions, in addressing its absence. A suggestion voiced by several participants concerned expanding access to psychological and psychiatric

care. Leão et al. (2019a) point out that psychological distress is a multifaceted phenomenon and, therefore, strategies for addressing it must be articulated in a complex manner.

Leão et al. (2019b) emphasize that psychological distress within the university environment must be considered through socio-structural, collective, institutional, and individual dimensions. The issue is that the individual dimension is commonly the only one considered, and when it is treated as the sole dimension, the resulting perspective becomes overly narrow, misguided, and reductionist. These dimensions are inseparable and mutually influential. It is therefore necessary to consider the academic environment, institutional practices, symbolic violence, economic difficulties, and the challenges of university life.

What have we constructed through these clues? They lead to a discussion in which “mental health,” described as something that is “lacking,” is regarded as an object, a product, and is linked to students’ perceptions of themselves as unproductive or as failing to meet expectations. Silva et al. (2021) argue that neoliberal governmentality constitutes a profound social intervention that has numerous effects on modes of subjectivation. In addition to its therapeutic function, mental health also comes to signify self-improvement. The production of subjectivities can be understood as an enterprise to be managed, because the generalization of the enterprise form within the social body opened the way for individuals to understand themselves as “entrepreneurs of themselves” [...] they understand their affects as objects of work on the self aimed at producing “emotional intelligence” and optimizing their affective competencies. (Silva et al., 2021, pp. 30–31).

According to Corbanezi (2023), this social model, divided between “winners” and “losers,” places responsibility for success and, consequently, failure on individuals themselves. This also applies to the notion of mental health, whereby its management becomes an individual responsibility and a form of social control. Mental health is associated with the idea of remaining productive, so that productive capacities can be optimized to the greatest possible extent. In this context, the concept has been, to a considerable degree, “captured and subverted by the socially and culturally dominant imaginary of neoliberalism” (Corbanezi, 2023, p. 7). Thus, as Leão et al. (2019b) point out, suffering cannot be experienced outside society, yet discussions often revolve around such reductionist problematizations that they seemingly seek to exclude our ways of living and being from considerations of psychological distress. We can therefore understand that mental health cannot be considered separately from the environments, relationships, and practices that exist within these spaces.

These discussions point to modes of subjectivation and ways of being in the world that are permeated and constituted by neoliberal rationality, which, beyond an economic theory or an imposed ideology, constitutes a world-reason – a rationality. Accordingly, the domain of coaches, meditation techniques, neuro-linguistic programming, psychology itself, and motivational lectures is intended to foster self-mastery, high performance, and the pursuit of achievement and the accomplishment of goals (Dardot & Laval, 2016). Along the same lines, Leão et al. (2019a) emphasize that the notion that we are capable of managing everything is inadequate.

It is the false idea that, with the appropriate technique, we are capable of managing everything, even our feelings and affects, in the same way that an entrepreneur manages a company. Thus, it is assumed that acquiring technical knowledge makes it possible to (self-)promote mental health. (Leão et al., 2019a, p. 134).

From this perspective, Han (2022) explains that, because suffering has been privatized, there is no room for the sociality of suffering, as suffering is privatized and individualized. Everyone feels ashamed and blames only themselves for their weakness and inadequacy. Thus, “No connection is established between my suffering and your suffering. The sociality of suffering is thereby ignored” (Han, 2022, p. 131).

Piva (2022) argues that the embodied affective experience of exhaustion, overload, shame, guilt, feelings of displacement, and anxiety is part of university life, yet these affects are excluded from and silenced within the public spaces of academia. Opportunities for sharing them are almost nonexistent, occurring instead in hallway conversations, during breaks, and in brief moments. As a result, they are commonly perceived as individual experiences. In this sense, one possibility is to address what occurs in academic life, including its psychosocial and affective dimensions, opening spaces and pathways for lived experiences that can be situated in relation to class, gender, sexuality, race, and other dimensions (Piva, 2022).

Silva (2018, p. 44) highlights the “civic role in the capitalist world,” namely, the role of being a consumer. Feeling thus becomes associated with dysfunction rather than with sensitivity to the adversities inherent in existence. Those who suffer cease to participate in their own suffering and instead become victims of something that is organically wrong. Once “a disorder” is identified, there is also a drug capable of providing a concrete solution. This incorporation of the enterprise ideal into the social body frames affects as objects to be improved, with the aim of optimizing affective competencies.

In this context, strategies aimed at improving mental health are often constructed within and permeated by this capture of the term mental health, as Corbanezi (2023) explains. This is why clinical and therapeutic strategies, as Leão et al. (2019a) suggest, are grounded in an individualizing approach to university students’ experiences of suffering. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the experience of psychological distress is real and therefore calls for space and support. However, “ways of dealing with suffering may also involve resignifying these contradictions and re-engaging individuals around political and collective responses” (Leão et al., 2019a, pp. 136–137).

The experiences of an outreach project described by Medeiros et al. (2022) support the importance of group-based devices, as they enable anxieties and experiences to be collectivized, allowing themes related to university students' lives, to what affects and impacts them, to emerge. Elitism, productivism and competitiveness, homophobia, relationships within the university, and difficulties with adaptation are some of the issues shared and collectively addressed in and through these encounters. Thus, collective experience emerges and produces an experience of the common, which, in turn, enables a sense of belonging (Medeiros et al., 2022).

These feelings of belonging and a sense of security are explored by Leão et al. (2019b), who argue that the profound social transformations brought about by modernity have dissolved networks of symbolic reference. The perception that there is no symbolic ordering produces a sense that each individual bears sole responsibility for themselves. Consequently, trust in public, political, and educational systems is permeated by uncertainty and insecurity: feelings that are experienced collectively.

These perceptions generate feelings of overload and profound uncertainty about the future. Importantly, these uncertainties are not related to an openness to what is new or to new possibilities, but rather concern the availability of subjective and material conditions of existence. Indeed, the university setting no longer guarantees a place in the labor market, particularly in positions that provide security and dignity (Leão et al., 2019b).

Félix and Oliveira (2020) aptly identify collectives as powerful spaces, as do Medeiros et al. (2022) when highlighting their experience with an outreach project and, accordingly, advocating for group-based devices. For Leão et al. (2019a), however, efforts to foster collectives must be sustained, supported, and encouraged by the university; spaces that promote student agency and student movements are therefore essential. Neoliberal rationality also constitutes a particular way of being a student, marked by political powerlessness or indifference, insofar as education and the labor market are sustained and organized according to this logic, fostering individual trajectories (Ehrenberg, 2010) and cultivating a rationality of the self as an entrepreneur (Foucault, 1979/2008), in which university students are treated merely as customers (Fioreze et al., 2022). How, then, can dynamics and movements be expected to orient themselves toward the collective? This is precisely why movements of resistance exist, and why the university can, and must, be a space in which multiplicity, diversity, and otherness are present.

The political principle of the common as a possibility for affirming the potencies of life

As we have emphasized, the university must be a “powerful space for setting lives in motion, building dreams, welcoming, and planning life projects for our young students” (Félix & Oliveira, 2020, p. 86). Mansano (2003) also emphasizes the role of universities in their responsibility for educating new professionals and, therefore, their ethical and political task within the educational process.

Thus, thinking about the common by articulating the importance of the university setting with the discussion of homeschooling, which has sought to gain ground through legislative proposals, entails defending the relevance of collective social constructions – of what is common. Lockmann (2020) explores this movement by arguing that the notion of the right to choose is distorted in relation to the possibility of homeschooling, insofar as it comes to constitute a right to exclusion.

The movement toward preventing social interaction thus becomes strategic, as coexistence with diversity is conceived as something to be managed or even avoided. This diversity of life encompasses different ways of living, families, religions, beliefs, and values (Lockmann, 2020). In this sense, it is through encounters with plurality, diversity, and otherness that we become subjects. This entails defending the idea that school cannot be reproduced or replaced.

Dardot and Laval (2017) argue that other paths open up for those who are dissatisfied with the purported freedom of neoliberalism. The 1990s marked the emergence of the time of the common, both in concrete, local struggles and in large-scale political mobilizations. According to the authors, thinking about the common means “producing new visions beyond capitalism [...] the emergence of a new way of challenging capitalism, or even of considering how it might be overcome” (Dardot & Laval, 2017, p. 17). The challenge lies precisely in the neoliberal foundations that insist on individualization and individual responsibility for exceeding targets, on the imperative to surpass oneself, thereby stripping any and all action of its collective dimension.

Lockmann (2020) argues that the common will not entail the abolition of neoliberal governmentality, but suggests sustaining it as a political principle so as to problematize how educational spaces can foster and mobilize other forms of existence. This is a form of “re-existence” that understands the common as both a political principle and a way of life, making it possible to live together, alongside others, while sharing heterogeneous ways of life in their forms, intensities, and relationships.

Thus, according to Mansano (2003), we must embrace the desire to build a different world with other possibilities. By defending and believing in the social and historical construction of subjectivities, we understand that the production of subjectivity is not limited to what has been instituted, but also encompasses that which may come to reject the instituted and enable new forms to emerge.

Dardot and Laval (2017) explain that neoliberalism favors accumulation through the expanded subordination of all elements of life, including subjectivity itself, as well as consumption, the use of space and time, leisure, education, health,

and transportation. In this context, struggles surrounding the common have expanded and led to the organization of key points of convergence for those affected by this generalized domination. Thus, the “common” refers to an understanding of regimes of institutions, practices, struggles, and even research that may create space for envisioning a non-capitalist future (Dardot & Laval, 2017).

Accordingly, Medeiros et al. (2022) propose enabling the common through group-based devices. Brito (2022, p. 77) reinforces the idea that “the common eliminates the dimension of competition, of objectivity,” given that such modes of subjectivation tend to regard the social bond as virtually extinct because they position the other as an enemy to be destroyed, a characteristic of the entrepreneurial subject. In this context, there is a collective imaginary in which the other is deprived of meaning and significance and, consequently, relationships are stripped of value (Brito, 2022). It therefore becomes necessary to intervene at the very core of relationships, rebuilding the bridge, dialogue, and encounter.

Dardot and Laval (2017) suggest that this political principle can enable commons to emerge and be constructed; therefore, they must be brought to life, expanded, and preserved. In understanding the common as a political principle, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by politics. In this regard, Dardot and Laval (2017, p. 616) define it as “the activity of deliberation through which people strive to determine together what is just, as well as the decision and action arising from this collective activity [...] of sharing words and thoughts in common.” Han (2022, p. 130) emphasizes that “political space is a space in which I encounter others, speak with others, and listen to them.” Listening thus has a political dimension because it entails active participation in another person’s life, existence, and suffering.

Dardot and Laval (2017) identify several dimensions of the common as a principle: as the foundation for everything else, that is, the premise underlying any reasoning; as *munus*, referring to the political obligation arising from acting in common; and as something that cannot be appropriated, which is neither an object nor susceptible to appropriation.

From this perspective, the importance of dialogue in its ethical dimension points to paths and possibilities, because being with others and cooperating in common action enables us to cultivate an idea of community constituted through dialogue (Brito, 2022). We must therefore transform ourselves into a society of listeners and those who listen, following Han’s reasoning (2022, pp. 134–135), because “neoliberal temporal politics dissolves the time of the other, which it regards as unproductive time.”

Within the context of universities, the production of meaning, and the commons, Mansano’s (2003) discussion suggests that, if anything is capable of establishing a connection between individuals and work, it is neither the maturation of a professional identity nor the socially constructed expectations surrounding it, but rather the affective relationships built through contact with the profession beginning during the educational period. This period should be experienced through ethical relationships and within spaces of care, as these foster an intimacy with desire and production that is unique to this professional/educational territory and gives meaning to the experience of being at the university.

Beyond mental health understood from the perspective of mental health education or individual clinical and therapeutic services, it is necessary to consider the clues constructed with young people and embrace a discussion capable of introducing the concept of the “common.” According to Han (2022), the privatization of suffering is a strategy of domination that prevents its socialization and politicization, whereby “the constitution of a political will, a public space, a community of listening, a political community of listeners radically disappears” (Han, 2022, p. 131, emphasis in the original).

Despite this context, this does not mean that we cannot construct ways of making the challenges and difficulties of university life collective once again and resignify what we understand as suffering in a manner that does not place exclusive blame on individuals. Leão et al. (2019a) argue that spaces can be created to foster encounters, discussion, and dialogue, thereby helping to deconstruct a social imaginary that tends to push us toward blaming ourselves. Such collective articulation is essential. In this sense, although the university should not replace students’ own forms of organization, it should support student organizing, facilitate encounters, and ensure appropriate conditions and spaces through institutional channels recognized by students, because “in contrast to the time of the self, which isolates and separates us, the time of the other fosters community. It is, therefore, a good time” (Han, 2022, p. 135).

The clues, approached as scenes, broadened the notion of mental health and underscored the importance of social interaction during the educational process, given that the university experience can foster and generate new encounters. These new encounters produce new affects and, therefore, make it possible for this experience to take on different contours. Mental health can thus be conceptualized beyond mental health education or individual clinical and therapeutic services by drawing on the clues constructed with young people and embracing a discussion capable of addressing the common. This perspective underscores the importance of collectives within the university setting, as they can challenge entrenched notions of individual responsibility and blame associated with success or failure, as well as the notion of mental health as something to be optimized through continuous self-improvement. By embracing collectives and the shared experience of university life, it becomes possible to conceptualize the common as a political principle, deprivatizing suffering, making it collective once again, and enabling mental health to be understood not only through its absence.

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