Possibilities of ethnomusicology applied to the field of public health

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> Abstract This article analyses methodological possibilities of ethnomusicology in the field of public health, starting from an experience that triangulated ethnomusicological theories with discourse analysis (DA). After an introduction to applied ethnomusicology, it is followed by a description of methodological aspects of the experience in question. Subsequently, the conduction of the ethnomusicological step and the triangulation process was described. Results show that the musical systems are situated in power structures, influencing the construction of subjectivities. Applied ethnomusicology emerges, therefore, as a possibility for analyzing the structures on which the music is rooted in. From a research on the relations between forró and the perception of young people's perception about sexual violence, ethnomusicology presented itself as a theoretical possibility for the study of violent social performances and about the effects of music in identity building, besides providing elements for the confrontation of violence inside the cultural system itself. Its triangulation with DA contributes for an ethnographic-discursive research, as possibility of analysis of social practices.

Key words Music, Methodology, Public health

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Introduction

The phenomenon of violence, in its different manifestations, is not ahistorical or devoid of subjectivity¹. Analysing violence against women implies understanding how these processes es permeate societies and their mechanisms of naturalization and legitimization², including its relationship with cultural discourses and performances³ and with different social technologies⁴, which act in the continuous process of cultural identity formation³ and gender performativity^{5.6}. Thus, the need to analyse its relationship with the naturalization of violence against women emerges based on the premise that historicity is pivotal to the construction of identity processes⁷.

Music acts as an artefact⁸ being "performatively interpreted by a range of hierarchising and selective procedures [...] subservient to various powers and interests, of which the 'subjects' and agents [...] are never sufficiently aware³⁷. Given studies that associate musical performances with elements that nurture gender violence⁹⁻¹³, the following question emerged: how does music contribute to the perpetuation and legitimization of violence against women?

This question guided the study "Gender, sexuality and forró: a historical social study in the Northeastern context"¹⁴, which analysed the discourses of forró music from 1940 to the present. Immersion in thematic and musical theory led to the expansion of the methodological scope in subsequent research, bringing it closer to ethnomusicology.

Understanding the violent behaviour and mimetic performances of violence as part of a coherent system loaded with cultural significance, a strand of the so-called applied ethnomusicology seeks to understand the performative abilities of violence and the meanings that violent performances have to victims, perpetrators and witnesses¹⁵. From that emerged a study anchored in the epistemological assumptions of applied ethnomusicology that sought to understand the relationship between the ritualistic performances of forró and youth perception about sexual violence¹⁶.

Considering that ethnomusicology has important potential in the field of Public Health, we present an experience report on its use in the 7th Ibero-American Congress on Qualitative Research¹⁷. In this context, the present article analyses the methodological possibilities of the use of ethnomusicology in the field of Public Health, starting from the experience of a study on violence against women held in Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil, which triangulated ethnomusicological theories with discourse analysis (DA).

Methodology

This article is based on the report of the experience of a study that used ethnomusicology as a theoretical framework, triangulating it with DA. The data of the study in question will not be replicated because they are already available in another publication. They will, however, be referenced to guide the discussion about the possibility of applying ethnomusicology to the field of Public Health.

To support the discussion, the theoretical framework, i.e., ethnomusicology, is presented next.

Ethnomusicology

Originating from the purely musical¹⁸ Berlin school, ethnomusicology evolved into various variants¹⁹. Its anthropological prespective^{20,21} understands music as an expression of human sociocultural behaviour. This strand considers that music has no meaning in itself and that subjects add - to its meaning - conceptualized and referenced meanings that do not exist in verbal language²². The understanding of music as a revealing expression of the human being gave new impetus to ethnomusicological research²³. In this context, some ethnomusicologists sought, from Clifford Geertz, the necessary theorisation to transpose the analysis of musical experience²⁴. Similar to Geertz, ethnographers do not study the experience itself but the structures by which experiences occur^{25,26}. Ethnomusicologists should deepen the structures on which music is based and its role in the continuous construction and support of this structure. Musical performances are situated and inserted within structures of power and influence, being in themselves political acts. Where they are performed, by whom and for whom, as well as the rituals that permeate and sustain them, reveal much about the cultural and social status in which they are inserted²⁷.

Studies by researchers such as Timoti and Rice provided important elements for the construction of the theoretical relationship between music and identity²⁸⁻³¹. Rice organizes the theorisation of this strand of ethnomusicology into two perpendicular axes. One axis focuses on the community: (1) geographically focused studies on nations, regions, cities, towns or villages; (2) ethnic, racial and minority groups; (3) the musical life of institutions such as schools, prisons and clubs; and (4) the social life of musical genres. The second axis includes the themes specific to musical theory: music and politics; the teaching and learning of music; concepts about music; gender and music; among others²⁸. Understanding the role of music in identity building brought ethnomusicology closer to other branches of the social sciences, such as cultural studies and Marxist theory³². In this context, Rice describes six themes that the author grouped under the moniker of ethnomusicology in times of difficulty: (1) music, war and conflict; (2) music, forced migration and minority studies; (3) music, disease and healing; (4) music in particular tragedies; (5) music, violence and poverty; and (6) music, climate change and the environment¹⁵.

The approximation to critical approaches of difference (feminist theory, minority discourse etc.) well established in ethnic studies, feminist studies, studies of popular culture and literary studies32 culminated in new epistemological possibilities for ethnomusicology. The Brazilian researcher Samuel Araújo and his colleagues at the Laboratory of Ethnomusicology of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro based their research on the ideas of Paulo Freire to conduct a study on violence in Rio de Janeiro. They started from the understanding of funk as a territory, both from a functional and symbolic perspective and from its relationship with modes of existence (and resistance) of the residents of the Maré community, a poor neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro. In addition to the analysis of the musical discourses and their contextualization, the study by Araújo questioned the importance of dialogical ethnographies of sound practices to curb violence from the socio-scientific viewpoint³³. His research fits the perspective of researchers who understand music as a field of action for a subject³⁴, organized in ritual language and symbolized by historicity and by the social relations of power²⁷.

The confluence between ethnomusicology and studies on social performance³⁵ reveals the scenario for a feminist ethnomusicology²³, for which music plays an important role in the construction of subjectivities and in the introjection of gender roles³⁶⁻³⁹. In addition to sound, musical performance acts in the process of socialization, both expressing and shaping social order and gender relations²³. Thus, studies of musical behaviours act as indicators of gender-based power relations, supporting sustainable coping strategies. They transpose the geographical space of their execution, insofar as they analyse universal practices of legitimization of violence, tied to its principles of body management and life management.

Results

The results are organized into three stages. The first addresses the methodological aspects of the experiment in question, which will be thoroughly described, including references to previous studies, the reasons that led to the use of ethnomusicology and its triangulation with DA. In the second and third stages, an ethnomusicological study and the process of triangulation will be described, respectively.

Methodological aspects of the experiment

The forró (genre of music that originated in Northeast Brazil) is not only musical style but is in fact an important phenomenon in the creation of the idiosyncratic image of a single and timeless Northeast that, although it never existed⁴⁰⁻⁴², has been introjected, including by Brazilians from the Northeast region⁴³, giving forró a status of a Northeastern cultural symbol. In this context, forró and its relationship with social gender roles have become our object of study.

A previous DA of forró songs provided important information about the discursive and ideological formations that permeate the lyrics. However, this study emerged from the need to analyse the relationship between forró, bodies and subjectivities in their real context of interaction. Thus, for eight months, between March and November 2014, researchers and technical staff were deeply immersed in the daily life of the Fortaleza neighbourhood, which has the worst rates of violence against women44. The neighbourhood in question exhibits several vulnerabilities: it has a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.403⁴⁴, is located in the most populous region of Fortaleza (with 585,347 inhabitants), which is also the poorest, with an average household income of 3.07 times the minimum wage, and has the second highest rate of illiteracy (17.83%). It is no coincidence that the neighbourhood belongs to Integrated Security Area (AIS, for its abbreviation in Portuguese) 2, the territory with the highest homicide rate in Fortaleza⁴⁵. Considering that Fortaleza is located in the Northeast - the Brazilian region with the highest numbers of

femicides⁴⁶ – the neighbourhood in question revealed itself to be an appropriate scenario for the proposed study.

Ethnomusicological observations were made in the daily life of the neighbourhood, focusing on the relationship between people and the music that people play in the neighbourhood. In addition, ethnographic observations were performed at forró dances, observing the physical structure, sound, social performances, dynamics of the parties and the relationships between men and women in real situations. The thorough and detailed descriptions in a field diary provided a broad overview of the relationship between music and social gender roles. This knowledge was crucial for planning the subsequent stage.

In the second phase of the research, two focus groups were conducted in 2015 with 14 boys aged 14 to 18 years old who were enrolled in two elementary and secondary schools in the state. After preliminary explanations, three previously selected forró songs were played. After each song, the meaning of its contents were debated. The discussions were recorded and transcribed in full and analysed according to the principles of DA⁴⁷. The findings of that study have been published¹⁶, and we do not intend to repeat them here. The present article focuses on the methodological aspects that guided the aforementioned study, seeking to discuss the application of ethnomusicology in a study in the field of Public Health.

Immersion in the musical world scenario – the violence experienced in the chords and beats

The approach to the musical reality of the neighbourhood presented numerous challenges. The first derives from the very concept of ethnomusicological research. This is generally understood as the study of a musical culture alien to the researcher's experience, seeking to identify the internal codes of the observed cultures. Despite the participation of an experienced anthropologist in this study, immersion in musical culture required the researchers to observe and record the musical aspects and to delve into the theoretical aspects of the field of musicology. Another challenge was access to the field, which required authorization from the faction groups that run the region.

Thus, the authors experienced immersion in the scenario. The ethnomusicological observation of an ethnographic nature demands a humble approach to the cultural codes that orchestrate local sounds, performances and movements. This process requires multiple data collection instruments, including non-participant and participant observation, detailed descriptions in a field diary and audio-visual records of daily life in the neighbourhood. In addition to the structure and the sociocultural habits and interactions that are organized in it, the researchers were attentive to the musical culture of the neighbourhood and its relationship with individual and group performances. Thus, dense sound immersion was the goal. We observed and recorded the various musical styles that vibrated throughout the daily routine of the neighbourhood, in addition to the individual and social performances built around these songs. Sounds from home radios that pierced through the walls of houses and speaker cars (carros de som - cars with loudspeakers mounted on top), music in commercial establishments, cell phone ring tones - all music was observed and recorded. In the midst of funk and country music, forró stood out. The conversations with the residents involved questions about daily life in the neighbourhood and about the influence of music on the cultural identity of the residents. Given that violence against women is the object of the study, the relationships between genders - including social performances and the influence of music on them - were central to the observations.

The observation of daily life was accompanied by immersion in the neighbourhood's night life and its relationship with forró. For that, the researchers immersed themselves in the six forró clubs that enliven the landscape. Observations were performed on several nights during weekends for six months. The observations focused first on the physical structure, common to all clubs. The walls surrounding the terrains, the holes in the wall that act as ticket offices, the narrow entrances and exits, the organization of the stage, basically, the whole structure was rigorously described. In this scenario, ritualistically reproduced performances, with temporal sequences, hierarchies, rules, interdicts and obligations48, were organized both on stage and in the dance hall. The observation of clothing, music, dance, body movements, ways of approach and changes in these aspects with the temporal sequence allowed us to understand the ritualistic organization of forró for those individuals and their relationship with the introjection of hierarchically structured social gender roles.

Triangulating ethnomusicology and DA

After ethnomusicological immersion, focus groups were conducted with adolescents. The knowledge acquired with the first stage of the research and the historical-social study of forró music was crucial for the organization and implementation of the subsequent stage. Twelve songs were chosen in a previous study¹⁴, based on the presence of elements associated with sexual violence. During immersion in daily life in the neighbourhood, based on the observation of everyday sounds and parties and on the mediatic reproduction in the neighbourhood's most popular media, this group was reduced to three¹⁶.

In addition to planning the data collection, triangulation with ethnomusicology increased the scope of the data analysis. The forró ritual – as most musical systems – involves music, dance and behaviour. DA requires contextualization. In this context, in a study that aims to analyse the discourses of young people about forró songs that refer to sexual violence, the ethnomusicological observation allows an understanding of the functioning of social practices related to music and the role of music in building identity.

Discussion

Given the epistemological diversity that makes up ethnomusicology, its application seeks a way to theorise about the field and to act on it⁴⁹. Mimetic behaviours of violence are part of a system fraught with cultural significance. Not surprisingly, the results of the present study showed concordance between forró and other cultural artefacts. The theoretical understanding of the effects of musical performance on identities and subjectivities therefore provides elements for facing violence and for other public health problems to occur within and through this same cultural system^{15,50}. It is noteworthy, however, that applied ethnomusicology transposes the theorisation of music as a sound evocative of other elements of the context, demanding analyses of the processes by which sound is perceived²⁴.

The various musical systems are usually semantically complex. The term forró, for example, is not restricted to music and is also used to describe the dance, the festivals and the spaces where it takes place. These elements together culminate in ritualistic performances that act as intensifiers of internalized social practices in a continuous transgenerational interaction²⁷. Just as they are socially and culturally situated, the musical systems also become ethically saturated. Our deeper values are implicit in the ritual structuring of more complex systems²⁷. Musical systems, however, do not function only as repositories of cultural values. They act in the construction of subjectivities and in the introjection of gender roles^{31,36-39}. Ethnomusicological studies can therefore point to indicators of gender-based power relations, supporting sustainable coping strategies within the culture itself.

In areas of conflict, it is common for rival groups to use cultural systems to silence, antagonize, exacerbate differences, terrorize and even torture enemies¹⁵. On the other hand, musical practices are also used as strategies of transformation and resistance. A study conducted in 2013 in Sri Lanka, for example, addresses the emergence of songs against or outside the communal languages promoted by the two armies that were fighting a civil war in the country. That study explored these songs as possibilities of resistance and of building new national cultures that favour the psychological and cultural freedom of the population⁵¹. A study conducted in a poor community marked by violence in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, brought ethnomusicology closer to the ideas of Paulo Freire of building horizontal social connections between researchers and the population³³. Inspired by the study by Araújo, the young participants were invited to develop an extension project that aimed not only to discuss the songs but also to deconstruct and reconstruct them, for facing cultural violence.

These recent epistemological possibilities of ethnomusicology build a scenario favourable to its triangulation with other critical theories, as is the case for most approaches based on DA. According to Orlandi, the senses are not produced by the subject but rather in another place, anterior and external to him/her because "language is materialized in ideology, and ideology is manifested in the language"52. Understanding the functioning of social practices and their relationships with discourse therefore demands contextualization, benefiting from an immersive experience in the field. In this sense, Magalhães, Martins and Resende propose an ethnographic-discursive study, according to which DA approaches studies of an ethnographic nature, in a relationship of complementarity, for analysing social practices⁵³. In this case, a study that analyses discourses on musical systems and their relationship with public health problems (in the present case, sexual violence) finds the triangulation with ethnomusicology to be a fruitful practice.

Conclusion

Ethnomusicology, in its applied and critical strands, presents itself as an epistemological possibility within the field of Public Health. The study reported here allowed theorising the role of forró as a complex musical system in the internalization of violent gender relationships. In addition, it constructed a scenario for the development of transformative practices of coping with violence located within forró's cultural system. Ethnomusicology emerges, in this context, as a possibility for understanding and transforming the social world in which asymmetric gender relations are produced.

Collaborators

The manuscript was written by ES Feitosa. AVM Brilhante contributed to the research, drafted the methodology and prepared the final draft. AMF Catrib carried out the intellectual review of the manuscript. EC Feitosa worked in the intellectual revision and in the final formatting.

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Article submitted 02/06/2019 Approved 18/11/2019 Final version submitted 20/11/2019

Chief editors: Romeu Gomes, Antônio Augusto Moura da Silva