



ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

## HISTORICAL-CULTURAL LESSONS ON SCHOOL BATHROOM GRAFFITI

<sup>1</sup>Mark Fernando da Silva Raboni, <sup>2</sup>Leonardo Santos Maia, <sup>2</sup>Maria Paula Oliveira Nasser, <sup>3</sup>\*Wanderlei Abadio de Oliveira, <sup>1</sup>Luciane Sá de Andrade, <sup>1</sup>Marlene Fagundes Carvalho Gonçalves and <sup>1</sup>Marta Angélica Iossi Silva

<sup>1</sup>School of Nursing of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Brazil

<sup>2</sup>University of Franca, Brazil

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters at Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Brazil

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 02<sup>nd</sup> October, 2018  
Received in revised form  
19<sup>th</sup> November, 2018  
Accepted 07<sup>th</sup> December, 2018  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2019

#### Key Words:

Adolescent, Public Health, Restroom Graffiti, Gendered Communications, Anonymous Communications, Public Bathrooms.

### ABSTRACT

Bathroom graffiti are a mean of communication between unknown and can convey ideas, images and answers to social and cultural questions. Hence, this study aimed at analyzing bathroom graffiti made by students from 10 Brazilian public schools. We carried out a research of qualitative character that gathered a photographic record of images and texts from 58 school restrooms for both sexes. We identified a total of 544 graffiti in women's bathrooms and 87 in men's bathrooms. We conducted data analysis through Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective to guide us in the building of thematic categories. We identified five thematic categories associated with the expression of students' experiences both regarding a wider social context (music, for example) and school (conflicts and affection, for example), as well as children's and adolescents' developing phase at school (sexuality and self-image, for example). It was possible to conclude that analyzing historical-cultural graffiti is important to address health issues based on knowledge, values, representations, taboos, meanings and concepts of identified social practices.

Copyright © 2019, Mark Fernando da Silva Raboni et al. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Mark Fernando da Silva Raboni, Leonardo Santos Maia, Maria Paula Oliveira Nasser, Wanderlei Abadio de Oliveira, Luciane Sá de Andrade, Marlene Fagundes Carvalho Gonçalves and Marta Angélica Iossi Silva, 2019. "Historical-cultural lessons on school bathroom graffiti", *International Journal of Development Research*, 9, (01), 25062-25065

## INTRODUCTION

Bathroom graffiti are drawings or rough sketches made by any population or anonymous people, being considered culturally marginalized inscriptions aimed at conveying messages to unknown users of places in which they are recorded (Leong, 2016). The habit of drawing and writing signs in walls arose from several historical contexts and is still present nowadays in the walls and doors of public bathrooms (Bartholome e Snyder, 2004; Haslam, 2012). Bathroom graffiti are also called eschatological writings (Teixeira and Otta, 1998). Bathroom graffiti record experiences, ways of thinking and popular speeches, considering people produce them spontaneously, unconcerned with the others' judgement. In addition, this type of graphic production can be considered an expression of language and of how subjects operate reality and specific themes through cognitive processes (Damião e Teixeira, 2009).

\*Corresponding Author: Wanderlei Abadio de Oliveira,  
Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters at Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Brazil

When these drawings or recordings started showing up in school bathrooms, they offered researchers the opportunity to decode the students' styles, their way of organizing themselves in groups, their repertoires of resistance, negotiation, and struggle during the development process (Damião e Teixeira, 2009). Different studies have documented common characteristics between bathroom graffiti and relevant topics for our discussion. In general, the themes address discussions on sexuality, gender diversity, and aggressiveness, valuing biological aspects. However, only a few studies analyze socio-political or cultural issues regarding bathroom graffiti. In this perspective, the theoretical reference of Vygotsky's historical-cultural theory emerges as a possibility to explain bathroom graffiti, understanding them as an expression of human behaviors that stem from social and historical perspectives (Fava et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 2007). In this scenario, this study aimed to analyze graffiti produced by students 10 bathrooms of Brazilian public schools. Bathroom graffiti might convey senses, meanings and, therefore, knowledge, that can be useful for intersectoral actions on primary health care of children and

adolescents in school age, especially regarding education and health promotion actions.

## METHODS

### Type of study

Study of qualitative character theoretically and methodologically based on a historical cultural approach. To address sense and meanings from photos of bathroom graffiti made by students in school bathrooms.

### Background and context

This study was carried out in 10 Brazilian elementary public schools from the state of São Paulo, Brazil. A total of 58 bathrooms of both sexes were visited. In 2015, about 8,561 students were enrolled in 10 elementary schools, using the 58 school bathrooms.

### Procedures

Data were collected in November and December 2015. After the approval of the research project by the Research Ethics Committee, 10 schools were contacted to schedule and conduct the research procedures (photos of bathroom graffiti). The photos were taken by the responsible researcher when there were no students in the schools. A digital camera and a field journal were used to record each step, place and date of photographic records.

### Data analysis

The analysis was conducted by identifying and categorizing the data collected in the photographic records and by basing on the historical-cultural approach. The steps were the following: 1) analysis of the basic structure (content and form) of each graffiti; 2) analysis of the possible historical processes of these meanings (genotypic analysis); and 3) construction of thematic categories from data (Barroco e Superti, 2014; Vygotsky, 2007).

### Ethical matters

This study was analyzed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Nursing of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo (CAAE 48609915.4.0000.5393).

## RESULTS

We identified a total of 581 graffiti in women's bathrooms and 138 in men's bathrooms from 10 schools. We identified the following thematic categories: 1) songs; 2) aggressiveness; 3) sexuality; 4) affection; and 5) self-image. We will present these categories from individual senses associated with the analyzed social meanings.

### Theme 1: Songs

We identified 33 graffiti in women's bathrooms and 1 in men's bathrooms that made direct references to musical materials. We found that in female bathrooms, there were only graffiti with positive words about singers or musical groups, as well as expressions of personal positive and hopeful feelings. While

the one found in the men's bathroom referred to a song of a musical style from Rio de Janeiro called funk, highlighting elements about the body and the sexual act (lyrics and graphical representation). Figure 1 presents photographic records of this category.



Caption: image on the left: To dream and never give up (MC Gui, singer); the image on the right: Bounce on my dick (funk, Brazilian music style).

**Figure 1. Examples of photographic records of school bathrooms**

### Theme 2: Aggressiveness

In this category, we gathered aggressive phrases directed to people from the same sex of the authors. We collected 124 of this type of graffiti in women's bathrooms and 21 graffiti in men's bathrooms. Women's bathrooms showed a more complex vocabulary in terms of language and more interactions between its users. Authors of insults mostly offended women with multiple sexual partners. Boys wrote more simple inscriptions that comprised the name of colleagues and an claimed insult directed to them. In men's bathrooms, the most common insults addressed homosexuality. Figure 2 presents photographic record of this category.



Caption: image on the left: great friend, better times are ahead of us [name of a student], [name of a student] bitch, beanpole, miserable wretch!; the image on the right: [name of student] gay.

**Figure 2. Examples of photographic records of school bathroom graffiti**

### Theme 3: Sexuality

Here we gathered subscriptions of explicit sexual or erotic content and references to sexual and excretion organs. We collected 56 of this type of graffiti in women's bathrooms and 36 in men's bathrooms. Most female and male graffiti in this unit comprise words that convey the search for pleasure and personal satisfaction with the sexual act. In women's bathrooms, we found 37 drawings of the male genital organ, 14 of them being downwards and 23 upwards. In the men's bathrooms, boys always draw straight upward penises, often penetrating the female genital organ. Figure 3 presents photographic records of this category.



Figure 3 Examples of photographic records of school bathroom graffiti

#### Theme 4: Affection

This unit comprised entries associated with romantic love, friendship or some kind of affection. In this sense, we collected 176 graffiti in women's bathrooms and 13 in men's bathrooms. Both in female and male graffiti, romantic writings were visually the same: first there was the name of the author followed by the name of their love interest. In women's bathrooms, affective writings and drawings are more impersonal and showed up in the form of hearts. While in men's bathrooms, graffiti express friendship appreciation, which we could see considering their use of affectionate nicknames. Figure 4 presents photographic records of this category.



Caption: image on the left: names of two students; the image on the right: nicknames of two colleagues.

Figure 4. Examples of photographic records of school bathroom graffiti

#### Theme 5: Self-image

This unit assembled the records of students' names to illustrate their perspectives about themselves. We collected a total of 155 graffiti of such nature in women's bathroom and of 16 in men's bathrooms. Graffiti of both sexes are equal in this category as they only contain a name often accompanied by an affective or positive phrase or by the year when the authors have written the message. Figure 5 shows photographic records of this category.



Caption: image on the left: name of the students; image on the right: name of the students.

Figure 5 Examples of photographic records of school bathroom graffiti.

## DISCUSSION

This study identified five thematic categories on bathroom graffiti of 10 Brazilian public schools. There were many different types of records that expressed some of the students' experiences both concerning a wider social context (songs), school experiences (aggressiveness and affection) and human development experienced by children and adolescents in school (sexuality and self-image). Regarding the difference between the number of bathroom graffiti in women's and men's bathrooms, it is worth to highlight that girls tend to produce more graffiti than boys (Schreer and Strichartz, 1997). We observed that the students usually record their emotions and personal feelings, especially when writing song lyrics. These data corroborate with those found by other studies (Hinkel and Maheirie, 2011; Wazlawick *et al.*, 2007). Hence, one should note that these graffiti incorporate affective images from feelings experienced by students and then transmitted through musical language or through the identification with the artists (Hinkel and Maheirie, 2011). At the same time, music was able to translate body expressions and its communicative potential, reflecting on physical as well as on cognitive, affective and sociocultural realities that comprise the song lyrics or drawings (Medina, 2017). When analyzing aggressiveness, we could observe the conflicts experienced by students. Among the different demonstrations recorded, we can highlight discriminative and qualifying situations involving colleagues. These types of records also indicate manifestations of violence between peers in the school environment (Oliveira *et al.*, 2015; Oliveira *et al.*, 2017; Zequinão *et al.*, 2016). From the historical-cultural point of view, the aggression manifested by the students in the school environment can indicate the processes of internalization of values and socialization practices (Oliveira *et al.*, 2015; Oliveira *et al.*, 2017).

In addition, the aggression manifested through bathroom graffiti is closely associated with the sexuality of their populations (Bartholome and Snyder, 2004; Rodriguez and Clair, 1999; Teixeira and Otta, 1998), as identified in this study. The sexuality theme has the highest number of recorded graffiti. The graffiti conveyed the search for pleasure in the sexual act, a common aspect when addressing students of this development stage (Bartholome and Snyder, 2004; Leong, 2016; Rodriguez and Clair, 1999). This search becomes personified throughout the body and that is why the drawings of sexual organs are the most common ones. The male sexual organ prevailed in the drawings of school bathroom graffiti, which can be explained by the difficulty to approach female sexuality still present nowadays, as well as those associated with male masculinity (power and strength, for example) in a wider social context (Bartholome and Snyder, 2004; Leong, 2016; Rodriguez and Clair, 1999; Schapper, 2012). When it comes to affections, the use of drawings and visual representations prevailed. According to the historical-cultural perspective, the used signs compose the knowledge, perceptions and feelings the students have felt up until this point of development, and also the difficulty to put what they feel into words (Vygotsky, 2007; Vygotsky, 2001). The use of the heart symbol represents the universal symbol of romantic love and relationships (Prates, 2005). However, one must understand representation of affection within the analysis context, considering this type of representation does not remain the same, suffering internal modifications of different magnitudes (Ferreira, 2001). Regarding the understanding of



self-image, students may write their own names in the bathrooms as an attempt to mark their presence and territoriality (typical male behavior in the animal world), make a personal statement, or may even represent some form of pastime and relaxation (Damian and Teixeira 2009). Despite the recorded manifestations presenting a dialectic approach, they contemplate differentiation and similarity movements in the relationships with other subjects (Hinkel and Maheirie, 2011). These relations are similarly reproduced in dialogues written in the doors and walls of school bathrooms. From this discussion and throughout the historical-cultural elements used in the analysis of the data, we observed that graffiti made by students in school bathrooms create a zone of proximal development (Baroque and Superti, 2014; Vygotsky, 2007).

This way not focusing on its current development, but on what they may become within possibilities that culture provides for their development (Baroque and Superti, 2014; Vygotsky, 2007). Such potentials can influence sexual development or even the development of personality, self-efficacy and the sense of self. In addition, the historical-cultural approach explains that the imaginative process does not required a completely harmonious relationship between the subject and the environment around them. From the different graphic works, it was possible to grasp the social dilemmas and conflicts that transmit the pains and discomforts lived collectively (Damião and Teixeira, 2009; Silva and Saraiva, 2014; Silva and Saraiva, 2017). Which suggests that imagination and creativity expressed in bathroom graffiti do not come out of nowhere, as they rely on the experiences and conflicts lived in society (Vygotsky, 2009). Finally, considering the strengths of this study, one should interpret its results not forgetting to consider its limitations. Firstly, this is a cross-sectional and qualitative study developed through the analysis of photos, an aspect that prevents us from interpreting them when addressing the real motivations behind students' bathroom graffiti. Secondly, we have not conducted interviews with the students so that they could manifest their impressions or interpret their graffiti. Thirdly, it has not been possible to identify the date and exact time of graffiti production, which unable us to carry out a temporality analysis. There is need for further studies of different design approaches to overcome these limitations.

## Conclusion

This study aimed at analyzing bathroom graffiti produced by students in 10 Brazilian public schools. We identified graffiti associated with themes such as songs, aggressiveness, sexuality, affection and self-image. We analyzed these data from Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective that allowed us to conclude that these graphic productions do not stem from individuality, being productions that express features associated with the students' development and their wider social context. Graffiti also allowed us to understand social imagery on the the act of scribbling graffiti over a public space as an inappropriate behavior of transgression and space delimitation, both very common the development of adolescents.

## REFERENCES

- Barroco SMS, Superti T. 2014. Vygotsky and the study of psychology of art: contribution for de human development. *Psicologia e Sociedades*; 26(1): 22-31.
- Bartholome L, Snyder P. 2004. Is It Philosophy or pornography? Graffiti at the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que. *The Journal of American Culture*, 27(1): 86-95.
- Damião NF, Teixeira RP. 2009. Bathroom graffiti and gender differences: what would restrooms tell? *Arq. bras. psicol.*, 61(2):1-10.
- Fava SMCL *et al.* 2013. Historical-cultural approach as a theoretical framework for nursing research. *Reas.*, 2(2):107-15.
- Haslam N. 2012. Toilet Psychology. *The Psychologist*; 25(6):430-433.
- Hinkel J, Maheirie K. 2011. Musical appropriation: the art of raplistening. *Psicol. Estud.*, 16(3):389-398.
- Leong P. 2016. American graffiti: deconstructing gendered communication patterns in bathroom stalls. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23(3):306-327.
- Medina A. 2017. Bodily scripture from the speakers of the music box: early Childhood Education. *Educ. rev.*, Curitiba, 64:267-281.
- Oliveira WA *et al.* 2015. The causes of bullying: results from the National Survey of School Health (PeNSE). *Rev. Latino-Am. Enfermagem*, 23(2): 275-282.
- Oliveira WA *et al.* 2017. Students' health: an integrative review on family and bullying. *Ciênc. saúde coletiva*; 22(5):1553-1564
- Prates PR. 2005. The heart as symbol. *Hist. cienc. Saúde*; 12(3):1025-1031.
- Rodriguez A, Clair RP. 1999. Graffiti as communication: exploring the discursive tensions of anonymous texts. *The Southern Communication Journal*, 65(1):1-15.
- Schapper J. 2012. The writing is on the wall: the text(ure) of women's toilets in Australia. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 19(4):494-517.
- Schreer GE, Strichartz JM. 1997. Private restroom graffiti: an analysis of controversial social issues on two college campuses. *Psychological Reports*, 81:1067-1074.
- Silva NA, Saraiva LAS. 2014. Symbolic violence at organizational non-places: a study of graffiti in bathrooms. *Revista Gestão Organizacional*, 7: 61-72.
- Silva NA, Saraiva LAS. 2017. Graffiti and taboos in organizations: an iconographic study in bathrooms. *Revista Pensamento Contemporâneo em Administração*, 11:116-130.
- Teixeira RP, Otta E. 1998. Restroom graffiti: a study of gender differences. *Estud. Psicol.*, 3(2):229-250.
- Vygotsky LS. 2001. A construção do pensamento e da linguagem [The construction of thought and language]. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- Vygotsky LS. 2007. A Formação Social da Mente: o desenvolvimento dos processos psicológicos superiores [The Social Formation of the Mind: the development of higher psychological processes]. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- Vygotsky LS. 2009. Imaginação e criação na infância [Imagination and creation in childhood]. São Paulo: Ática.
- Wazlawick P *et al.* 2007. Meanings and senses of music: a brief composition from culturalhistorical psychology. *Psicol. Stud.*, 12(1):105-113.
- Zequinão MA *et al.* 2016. School bullying: A multifaceted phenomenon. *Educ. Pesqui*, 42(1):181-198.