

Amidst the Flow

*Biographical Narratives, Social Trajectories,
and Urban Itineraries of Crack Users in São
Paulo*

By

Richard A. Reichert

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Dedication

To my grandfathers Aldo Reichert (*in memoriam*) and Jair José Formento (*in memoriam*), who faced difficulties and inequalities in access to education, broke barriers, and dedicated their lives to teaching, guiding, and assisting their children and grandchildren in their journeys. You were examples of simplicity, humility, and selflessness. I will always cherish your stories, especially those from your childhoods when you walked barefoot for kilometers on the cold ground in winter to reach school and learn to read. I will hold in my memory, with eternal gratitude and admiration, the memories of our visits to the university and how you awaited my return, the questions about college and my work, and the way you admired and flipped through my books with the curiosity and enthusiasm of excellent researchers. Thank you for everything!

To the late Professor Dr. Alba Zaluar (*in memoriam*), one of my main references in the social sciences since my first year in the Psychology undergraduate program. '*A Máquina e a Revolta*', '*Violência e Educação*', '*Condomínio do Diabo*', '*Drogas e Cidadania*', '*Da Revolta ao Crime S/A*', '*Um Século de Favela*', '*Integração Perversa*', and '*Cidade de Deus*' were books that left a lasting impact on my academic journey, prompting me to critically examine the complexity of human and social phenomena. I will be eternally grateful for the opportunity to have known you, for the conversations (read as lessons) on the way to the university, at events, and at the airport, and for the partnerships that time and life allowed us.

It was in the same perspective as your writings, in the "tension between subjectivity and objectivity, between interpretation and critique, between ideology and science" (1985, p. 59), that this work was constructed. In accordance with your works and what you advocated throughout your career, and with the aim of continuing our dialogues, I will always strive to challenge simplistic reductionisms and

unscientific attitudes that lead to the formulation of inefficient public policies. Thus, guided by scientific knowledge, we will continue to pursue a more democratic, just, equal, and compassionate world.

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Preface

This book serves as an intricate narrative, intimately intertwined with my personal history, academic training, and professional trajectory. At a personal level, the connection is established through my curiosity for continuous learning, discoveries, and a passion for teaching. Echoing the sentiments of philosopher Clóvis de Barros Filho, who defined happiness as sharing knowledge, I find a fervent desire for these moments not to conclude too swiftly, be it with students, teachers, or family members.

This sentiment accompanies me when exploring studies and discussions about human behavior, particularly in the realm of drug use. In my academic journey, this topic serves as a gateway from neurosciences to human and social sciences, unraveling the intricate relationships linking molecules to society, from microstructures to social macrostructures. Addressing drug use demands not only a profound understanding of neurobiological aspects but also a comprehensive perspective that comprehends the complexity of social interactions.

This journey commenced during my undergraduate years and persists to this day. However, I firmly believe that these discussions should not be confined to academic circles; it is imperative to extend the dialogue to the broader community. In these opportunities, my excitement is immense, as I see the potential to disseminate knowledge and foster a more extensive and contextualized understanding of the topic.

Professionally, my entry into the "world of drugs" was not merely a choice but a response to the urgent need for effective and enlightening interventions. As a professor and coordinator of various social and university extension projects, I recognized the necessity for robust actions in dismantling stigmas. It was essential to clarify that drug use was, in reality, a secondary issue in the lives of these children and

adolescents—a multifunctional behavior manifesting in their life contexts. This mission transformed into an ethical commitment to guaranteeing rights and constructing more effective intervention strategies.

However, my comprehension of the topic was not always as nuanced. Like the majority, my introduction to this field was characterized by a simplified perspective and, at times, influenced by stigmas surrounding drug use. During my undergraduate studies in Psychology, while delving into psychosocial care for psychoactive substance use within an academic discipline under the guidance of Professor MSc. Maria Celina Lenzi, I encountered one of the initial opportunities to dispel deep-seated misconceptions. In an evaluative exercise where we were tasked with determining the accuracy of statements, I encountered the assertion that "In general, the estimated lifespan of crack users is eight months". Naively, I endorsed it as true, having been exposed throughout my life to narratives about the harmful potential of crack and other drugs, particularly their perceived association with social issues such as violence.

However, the assertion was false. I discovered that, in reality, even when crack use is present, the main cause of death related to users is external, resulting from their adverse living conditions and structural violence arising from the prohibitionist and repressive perspective. This shocking revelation was a turning point in my understanding, encouraging me to question and deepen my understanding of the subject. Since then, I have dedicated my work to deconstructing stigmas and promoting a more humanized and contextualized approach in the field of drug use.

It is evident that, in a scenario of criminalization, the deconstruction of misconceptions and myths related to drugs is configured as a "deviant act", as defined by Howard Becker, one of the fundamental theoretical bases of this study. As my thoughts and attitudes towards the topic moved away from the conventional view, I became an "outsider". In this condition, the need for deep reflection arises, seeking to understand the

influences, inclinations, and underlying motivations that led me to this position.

The career concept proposed by Becker proves to be particularly useful for understanding the sequence of stages or steps that culminated in this way of thinking. This includes the notion of “career contingency”, which encompasses both political-sociocultural factors and changes in individual perspectives, motivations, and desires that influence mobility from one position to another. My trajectory, marked by the deconstruction of stigmas related to drugs, is intrinsically linked to this contingent dynamic, where changes in society and in my own motivations play significant roles in my evolution as an “outsider”. This theoretical approach provides a valuable conceptual framework for analyzing not only the specific field of drug use but also the broader nature of deviant movements in complex and morally charged social contexts.

Before proceeding, it is crucial to pay attention to the fact that this brief report only addresses a selection of relevant points that led to the construction of this work. Many important episodes may be inadvertently omitted, considering the complexity of the route. This gap in the narrative is supported by the perspective of philosopher Dr. Marilena Chaui, who, when addressing the definition of ideology, highlights that history does not strictly follow a chronological succession of events or a linear progression of ideas. On the contrary, it dynamically reflects how human beings shape, reproduce, or transform social existence across diverse cultural, political, and economic dimensions.

In this context, understanding the evolution of my ideas and practices in relation to the topic of drug use requires a deeper and more contextualized consideration. The influence of social contexts, individual experiences, and significant events over time paints a complex and multifaceted narrative. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that this report does not fully cover this trajectory, being a

limited but enlightening representation of some of the crucial moments that shaped my perspective.

On a personal level, from family experiences to experiences in the community, the topic of human behavior has always sparked my interest. Encouraged from an early age to read, research, and write, the complexity of human interactions became a focus of special interest. In the community, even before the first week of Psychology undergraduate classes, the shocking case of the death of a well-known man provoked a series of questions. His suicide was correlated to alcohol consumption, an explanation that, in a decontextualized and simplistic way, could end there. Considering the effects of alcohol on the central nervous system, especially in high doses, its ability to depress higher cognitive functions is understood, impairing judgment processes, inhibitory control, and decision-making.

Surprisingly, this topic was addressed in the first undergraduate class, in the subject of basic psychological processes. So, I realized that this explanation was only one part of the complex picture of human behavior. In a deeper analysis, influenced by phylogenetic, ontogenetic, and sociocultural variables, Professor Dr. Eduardo Legal mentioned the books *'The Demon-Haunted World'* by Carl Sagan and *'Everything is Obvious'* by Duncan Watts. These works highlight the complexity of human behavior and warn about the harmful impacts of pseudoscience and simplistic conceptions.

It was in this context that I encountered B. F. Skinner and radical behaviorist philosophy, as well as behavior analysis. Returning to my readings of Charles Darwin and contemporary researchers such as Dr. Paulo Dalgalarondo (*'Evolution of the Brain: Nervous System, Psychology, and Psychopathology from an Evolutionary Perspective'*), I grasped that the organization and functioning of the central nervous system require a profound understanding of the environment in which the organism is situated. This worldview and understanding of human beings became my guiding principle in subsequent stages of the quest for a broader,

more contextualized, and humanized understanding of human inclinations.

In the following semester, my academic journey underwent a significant shift when I encountered Professor Dr. Micheline Ramos de Oliveira, a psychologist with a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology. From the very first Social Psychology class, Micheline managed to captivate my attention in an extraordinary way. Her ability to brilliantly present classic works of Anthropology and Sociology highlighted her incredible critical and reflective vision.

The first book Micheline recommended for class discussion was '*A Máquina e a Revolta*' ('*The Machine and the Revolt*', in English) by Alba Zaluar, a pioneer in the field of Urban Anthropology in Brazil. In this work, Zaluar criticized the dichotomous models and simplistic theses often present in discussions about drug use and trafficking, violence, and crime. She also explored relationships of reciprocity and the formation of subjectivities, offering a broader and deeper perspective on these social phenomena.

One aspect that stood out was Zaluar's reflection on ethical issues in research, highlighting the importance of alterity marked by differences and respect for the customs, behaviors, and practices of the social groups studied. This ethical and sensitive approach to the social context resonated deeply with me and directly influenced my approach to the study of drug use. From that moment on, Alba Zaluar became one of my main theoretical references, inspiring me to adopt a more comprehensive, contextualized, and ethical perspective in my research and professional practice.

The following year, I commenced my role as a teacher and coordinator in various social and university extension projects, working in contexts of high social vulnerability, mainly with adolescents. Right from the start, I was often asked to address the issue of drugs, a topic that gained prominence at teachers' meetings, always approached in an alarming and sensationalist way. Fellow teachers suggested that there was an

"epidemic of drug use" in schools, especially in relation to marijuana, which was considered the central problem. Some even insinuated that students were involved in drug trafficking.

However, having established a close relationship with the students, I knew that this view was incorrect. Firstly, there was no "epidemic of drug use" in schools; even if some students did use drugs, it was a very small proportion of the population. Secondly, among those who did use some psychoactive substance, alcohol was the main one, but curiously it was never mentioned in the concerns and discussions among teachers. However, it is well known, according to information from various institutions, including the World Health Organization (WHO), that alcohol is the most widely used substance globally and can have more serious social and health consequences when compared to other substances.

In addition, those communities faced other pressing issues that should be the focus of concern and discussion, including poverty, which meant that many students didn't even have enough to eat at home. Along with poverty, many students' life stories were deeply marked by episodes of violence and violations of fundamental rights. Therefore, when some psychoactive substance was consumed, the behavior played some role in the environmental contingencies and social reality in which these students were immersed, from a sense of group belonging and pleasurable sensations to the relief of aversive emotional states.

Recognizing this does not imply denying the potential risks and harms associated with substance use, nor does it constitute an apology for drug use. It is undeniable that young people in the process of development need health care, especially during adolescence, when processes of brain maturation and refinement of cognitive functions are still ongoing, being crucial for adult life. However, this care should not be limited only to concerns and measures related to the use of psychoactive substances but also include arrangements of living conditions favorable to the full healthy development of these young people. A broad and contextualized understanding of the complex

social realities of these communities has become essential in my approach, directly influencing my professional practices and emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive view of the health and well-being of adolescents.

In meetings between teachers, where the complexity, multifactoriality, and pluridimensionality of issues relating to drug use are often unknown, countless suggestions for "preventive" strategies emerged. It is common in these educational environments to observe a certain lack of knowledge about mental health topics, especially drug use. Furthermore, families are often blamed, and responsibility is transferred to other sectors, especially public security.

In this context, one of the recurring ideas among the most outlandish "preventative" strategies was the holding of a cinema session for students, showing the film "Christiane F.". This film portrays the possible negative consequences of drug use based on the life story of a young woman classified as a "drug addict" and "prostitute". However, this approach, in addition to being simplistic and stigmatizing, tends to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and does not address the underlying complexity of the topic.

At the extreme, among the most authoritarian and perverse proposals, measures of reporting to the police and expulsion from the school context were suggested. These actions represented yet another chapter of exclusion and marginalization in the life stories of those students. Instead of offering support, understanding, and resources to deal with the challenges faced by students, such extreme proposals contribute to the perpetuation of a cycle of stigmatization, further harming the development and well-being of these young people.

Given this scenario, it is imperative to promote a more humanized and contextualized approach, which recognizes the complexity of issues related to drug use and prioritizes prevention and intervention strategies based on evidence, inclusive and sensitive to the realities of students. This implies the promotion of open, educational, and non-

punitive dialogues, involving not only educators but also mental health professionals, social workers, and the community in general.

In the following year, I chose not to return to my role as a teacher and decided to continue in the school context, this time working on the implementation of a project I had designed. In partnership with other university students, especially my friend Rodrigo Silva, also a Psychology graduate, the project began with the intention of addressing issues related to drug use. However, we were already fully aware that drug use constituted a tiny, if not insignificant, portion of those students' lives.

Given this understanding, we decided to expand the scope of the project, completely removing the focus from drugs and highlighting the human beings before us. This approach was in line with reflections by important researchers in this field, including professors Elisaldo Carlini from the Universidade Federal de São Paulo, a pioneer in studies on the therapeutic applications of Cannabis, and Antonio Nery Filho from the Universidade Federal da Bahia. Both defend the idea that we should not talk about drugs but rather about human beings who use drugs.

In this way, we executed the project in a school whose management and teaching staff were concerned about the dropout rate and the constant absences of students. Surprisingly, we managed to attract dozens of after-school students to participate actively, proactively, and collaboratively in a small classroom. All the students, including those classified as the "worst students in the school" – the "outsiders" – were enthusiastically involved. Even on rainy days, in communities prone to flooding, the students continued to attend the project, staying twice as long in the school environment.

In the midst of music, painting, cooking, and other activities, important issues arose, including mental health demands. In addition to the support of students and professionals who collaborated on the project, the students developed a significant support network among themselves. Notably, drugs were not the central focus of the project; on

the contrary, we sought to promote the general well-being of the students, stimulating the development of skills, creative expression, and, above all, the building of a more resilient and connected community. This experience reinforced the conviction that people-centered approaches have the power to significantly transform educational and social dynamics, moving away from stigmas and promoting a more inclusive and enriching environment.

All the stories we encountered among the students had a profound impact on our lives, demonstrating in practice what we had studied in theory regarding the role played by environmental contingencies in the behavior of individuals. One particularly striking case illustrated the effectiveness of interventions focused on changing living conditions, while at the same time dramatically pointing to the failure of institutions to deal with the reality of life and the vulnerabilities to which their students are exposed. This case involved a student abandoned by his parents, under the care of a frail grandmother with health problems.

Although he used marijuana sporadically, the student only discussed his use with us when we established a relationship of trust based on respect and reciprocity. On the contrary, he vehemently denied it to the school's management and teachers, who stigmatized, blamed, and threatened him. The student shared his story of abandonment, broken bonds, and violence suffered throughout his life. In some moments and situations, especially in social interactions and periods of sadness, the use of alcohol and marijuana was present.

In order to reduce the vulnerabilities and possible risks to the student's well-being, resulting mainly from the lack of education for autonomy and health promotion, we collaboratively built a life project. Respecting their autonomy and protagonism, we outlined objectives and the means to achieve them. We obtained a partnership with a university extension project that promoted the professionalization of students in the manufacture of surfboards and taught them the sport.

In a short time, we saw not only a change in the student's substance use patterns but also greater engagement in various social activities. However, the student was inexplicably expelled from school, and we haven't heard from him since. Once again, an abrupt rupture marked his life, highlighting the urgency of rethinking institutional practices and investing in approaches that are more understanding and focused on students' needs, rather than perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalization.

Two years before carrying out the study that resulted in this book, I took part in a congress of the Brazilian Psychological Society held in the city of São Paulo that year. At that time, in a year before the presidential and state governors' elections, São Paulo's so-called "*Crackland*" was once again at the center of the candidates' attention. This period coincided with significant challenges in Brazilian history, including the institutional coup of 2016, which was accompanied by the intensification of conservatism in the country. We saw the exacerbated rise of authoritarianism, constant threats to democracy, human rights violations, and the suppression of social and health policies.

During this period, countless repressive actions were carried out at drug consumption scenes, creating images that resembled a war scenario. In the places I went, I was constantly warned about the risks of getting close to "Crackland" and the users, who were often pejoratively labeled as "zombies". On the day of my return home, in the car on the way to the airport, the driver stopped at a traffic light and suddenly a man threw himself at the windshield of the car. Contrary to what the driver thought, it wasn't a robbery, but a person intent on cleaning the glass in exchange for some cash to survive on the streets.

Once again, I witnessed in practice the iatrogenic effects of policies of prohibition and repression, which transform places of greater social vulnerability into zones of conflict and constant violation of human rights. Instead of "putting an end" to "Crackland", the repressive actions resulted in people dispersing to different parts of the city, representing a negative result in terms of health care policies since many care

strategies took place where people were previously. With the repression, people began to feel more suspicious and reactive, distancing them from care.

In addition, the general population was fearful, given the stigmatizing images constantly conveyed in the media, associating crack use with violence. This allowed candidates to pursue political campaigns against this population, using crack as a scapegoat. Thus, repressive policies prevailed to the detriment of policies based on Harm Reduction, such as the 'De Braços Abertos' Program, which represented a paradigmatic change in the field of health care and the human rights of these people.

So I made a personal decision to return to São Paulo to better understand that reality, the history of those people, their living conditions, and the motivations behind their use of crack and other drugs. At university, initially, few professors and advisors encouraged the idea of going to another state to carry out research like this. However, as always, it was different with Micheline, who always supported and contributed to my ideas and projects. Our partnership went back a long way, with Micheline involving me in various academic research projects, as we were both scholars in the field of violence and shared many common interests.

Micheline had set up a center for contemporary studies in administration and public policy management. I presented the research project to her, and together we managed to secure funding to carry out the study. Years of searching for funding and research grants, often without success, reflected the words of neuroscientist Carl Hart, who in one of his articles (*'Viewing Addiction as a Brain Disease Promotes Social Injustice'*) addresses the social injustices arising from research in the field of drug use, highlighting the multimillion-dollar funding of studies that ignore aspects of the social factors related to drug use.

This time, however, we were successful and obtained funding, albeit limited and insufficient to carry out the research in full. Even so, we continued, and the study was carried out. The data and reflections from

this immersion in this context are described in this book, representing not only an academic effort but a personal and ethical commitment to a deeper understanding of the realities faced by those who are often marginalized and stigmatized by society.

Before arriving in São Paulo, I had the privilege of meeting Carmen Lopes, a social worker who played a crucial role in the '*De Braços Abertos*' program. After leaving the program, Carmen continued to care for people in the "*Crackland*" territory, creating a Collective focused on generating income and promoting humanized strategies for the population served, mainly transgender women and transvestites in situations of high social and programmatic vulnerability. It was with Carmen that I entered the field of research, sharing experiences and daily observations. Our conversations, held every morning, afternoon, and evening, were fundamental to understanding the realities experienced by the study participants. With her, various issues were discussed and clarified, contributing significantly to the construction of the reflections in this book.

In addition to Carmen, I also had the opportunity to meet Dr. Eroy Silva, a researcher linked to the Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP; Federal University of São Paulo, in English) with extensive academic production in the area of drug use. My contact with Eroy was the first step towards joining UNIFESP and starting my doctorate in the Department of Psychobiology, in the area of Medicine and Sociology of Drug Abuse. Our conversations mainly dealt with the ineffectiveness of criminalization and punishment policies in the region and were fundamental to the construction of the reflections in this book.

A few months before arriving in São Paulo and making my first observations in the field, I was already organizing an academic conference that would be attended by numerous researchers, professionals, and activists in the field of drug use. At this point in the story, some events intertwine in a significant way. The week before I left, I shared some incredible news with Micheline, my advisor: I sent

an email to Alba Zaluar. Surprisingly, she promptly replied, agreeing to take part in the event.

The congress I organized brought hundreds of people, including researchers, health professionals, activists, teachers, teenagers, and the community in general. The choice to hold the event in the week of my birthday turned out to be a remarkable decision because during the congress, I was presented with a series of important and memorable events in my academic training in the field of drug use studies.

Firstly, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Denise De Micheli in person, one of my main references in the neurobiological issues of substance use. We talked about projects aimed at adolescents, my research in São Paulo, and ideas for future books. Together with Eroy and other colleagues, we organized several books, including *'Drugs and Human Behavior Biopsychosocial Aspects of Psychotropic Substances Use'*, published by Springer Nature. Denise also invited me to do my doctorate at the Universidade Federal de São Paulo.

Secondly, during a personal conversation with Professor Simone Oliani, we began organizing a book on behavior analysis and substance use, entitled *'Behavior Analysis and Substance Dependence: Theory, Research, and Intervention'*, also published by Springer Nature.

Finally, the remarkable presence of Dr. Alba Zaluar was the highlight of the event. I picked her up at the airport with great emotion, and she closed the congress on my birthday. In a packed auditorium, she announced that she would be giving me a present. Showing a slide with the phrase by Lende and Downey (2012) – "For psychoactive substances to become catalysts and objects of pleasure and desire, they must circulate not only through the blood, the brain, and other parts of the body but also through social contexts" – she introduced me to the field of neuroanthropology, enriching my reflections on issues related to drug use, which culminated in this book.

Prefácio – Versão em Português

Este livro representa para mim uma narrativa intricada que se entrelaça de maneira íntima com minha própria história pessoal, minha formação acadêmica e minha trajetória profissional. No âmbito pessoal, essa ligação se estabelece primordialmente pela minha incessante curiosidade por novos aprendizados, descobertas e pela paixão pela docência. Como expressou sabiamente o filósofo Clóvis de Barros Filho em sua definição sobre felicidade, ao compartilhar conhecimentos sobre o tema com diversos públicos, seja composto por alunos, professores ou familiares, experimento um desejo fervoroso para que esses momentos não se encerrem tão rapidamente.

Esse mesmo sentimento me acompanha quando mergulho nos estudos e discussões sobre o comportamento humano, mais especificamente no tocante ao uso de drogas. No contexto da minha formação acadêmica, o tema tornou-se uma porta de entrada para transitar das neurociências às ciências humanas e sociais, explorando as intrincadas relações que conectam moléculas à sociedade, das microestruturas às macroestruturas sociais. O desafio de abordar o uso de drogas não exige apenas um entendimento profundo das questões neurobiológicas, mas também uma perspectiva ampla que compreende a complexidade das interações humanas.

Essa jornada começou há anos, nos primeiros passos da graduação, e persiste até hoje. Contudo, acredito firmemente que esses debates não podem limitar-se aos círculos acadêmicos; é imperativo ampliar o diálogo à comunidade em geral. Diante dessas oportunidades, minha empolgação é imensa, pois vejo nelas a possibilidade de disseminar conhecimento e promover uma compreensão mais ampla e contextualizada do tema.

No âmbito profissional, minha incursão no "mundo das drogas" não foi apenas uma escolha, mas uma resposta à demanda urgente por

intervenções efetivas e esclarecedoras. Como professor e coordenador de diversos projetos sociais e de extensão universitária, percebi a necessidade de uma atuação contundente na desconstrução de estigmas. Era crucial esclarecer que o uso de drogas, na verdade, era uma questão secundária na vida daquelas crianças e adolescentes, sendo, na verdade, um comportamento multifuncional que se manifestava em seus contextos de vida. Essa missão tornou-se um compromisso ético pela garantia de direitos e pela construção de estratégias de intervenção mais efetivas.

Entretanto, nem sempre minha compreensão do tema foi assim. Assim como a grande maioria das pessoas, quando adentrei neste campo, possuía uma visão simplificada e, por vezes, marcada pelos estigmas que envolvem o uso de drogas. Foi durante a graduação em Psicologia, ao cursar uma disciplina de atenção psicossocial ao uso de substâncias psicoativas ministrada pela Professora MSc. Maria Celina Lenzi, que me deparei com uma das primeiras oportunidades para desconstruir alguns mitos arraigados. Em uma atividade avaliativa, na qual deveríamos assinalar "verdadeiro" ou "falso" para uma série de afirmações, deparei-me com a assertiva de que "Em geral, a estimativa de vida de usuários de crack é de oito meses". Ingenuamente, assinaliei a afirmativa como verdadeira, pois ao longo de toda a minha vida havia ouvido falar sobre os potenciais danosos do crack e de outras drogas, especialmente sua devastadora relação com problemáticas sociais, como a violência.

Contudo, a assertiva era falsa. Descobri que, na realidade, mesmo quando o uso de crack está presente, a principal causa de morte relacionada aos usuários é externa, resultante de suas condições adversas de vida e das violências estruturais advindas da perspectiva proibicionista e repressiva. Essa revelação impactante foi um ponto de virada em minha compreensão, instigando-me a questionar e aprofundar meu entendimento sobre o assunto. Desde então, tenho dedicado meu trabalho à desconstrução de estigmas e à promoção de