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URBAN POVERTY IN BOGOTÁ: TERRITORY & REPRESENTATIONS¹

Palabras claves: Representaciones colectivas, imaginarios y pobreza urbana

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es identificar las representaciones y los imaginarios que poseen los ciudadanos sobre la pobreza y su relación con el territorio. Se habla de las representaciones e imaginarios sociales de la pobreza y la desigualdad en las localidades objeto de estudio, Ciudad Bolívar y Usme en Bogotá, y se analiza las relaciones entre la pobreza y sus representaciones en el territorio. Contiene los resultados obtenidos de la aplicación de talleres de cartografía social-participante y las entrevistas realizadas a diferentes actores sociales, durante 2010.

Keywords: Collective representations, urban poverty, imaginaries.

Summary: The main goal of this article is to identify the representations and imaginaries that Bogota inhabitants have regarding poverty, and its relation towards the territory. Representations and social imaginaries of poverty and inequality are contextualized in two specific zones in the city: Ciudad Bolivar and Usme. It is also analyzed the relationship between poverty and its representations in the territory. This article contains the findings after applying social-participant based cartography workshops as well as interviews performed to different actors involved, during 2010.

Introduction - The use of the term *urban poverty* is commonly used in reflections done inside the social and human sciences, as well as in institutional and official reports and geographical oriented works. However, when revising some of these, is very common to agree that there is not a clear definition of the term. This text reflexes around some aspects of these representations and imaginaries, and then analyses how they interact, in a territorial perspective, and finally proposes an exercise of specialization and mapping of those representations. This is how some conclusions regarding territories and representations on urban poverty in Bogota are presented.

¹ This article is an extract of the master's thesis REPRESENTACION Y EXPRESIONES TERRITORIALES DE LA POBREZA URBANA EN EL SUR DE BOGOTÁ D.C. (Localidades de Ciudad Bolívar, San Cristóbal y Usme). Work direction by: Alain MUSSET.

ZONE OF STUDY

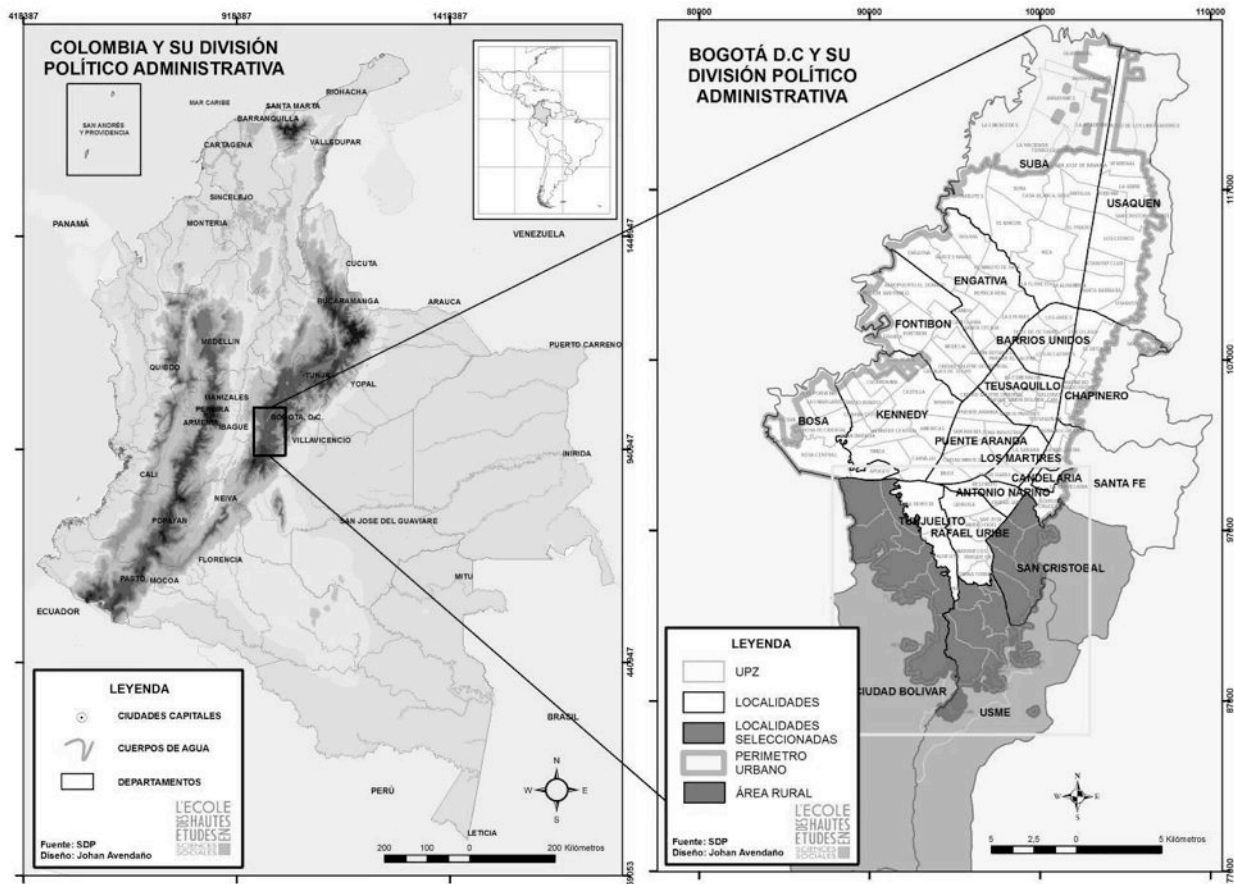


Figure 1. Location of the Zone of study

The investigation took place in the urban area of Bogota Colombia, in 3 different zones of the south: Ciudad Bolivar, Usme and San Cristobal. These three areas sum the 18% of the total population in the city. (628.366 -8.4%-, 363.707 -4.4%- y 410.148 -5.7%- respectively). These areas also owns a great stigmatization, due to the state of poverty and extreme marginalization² their inhabitants live in, as per evidence provided by social indicators (see figure 2).

² Among others to:

https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/condiciones_vida/pobreza/Bogota_Pobreza_2013.pdf

<http://www.sdp.gov.co/portal/page/portal/PortalSDP/InformacionTomaDecisiones/Estadisticas/Bogot%C3%A1%20Ciudad%20de%20Estad%C3%ADsticas/2012/DICE126-CartillaMetodoPobreza-2012.pdf>

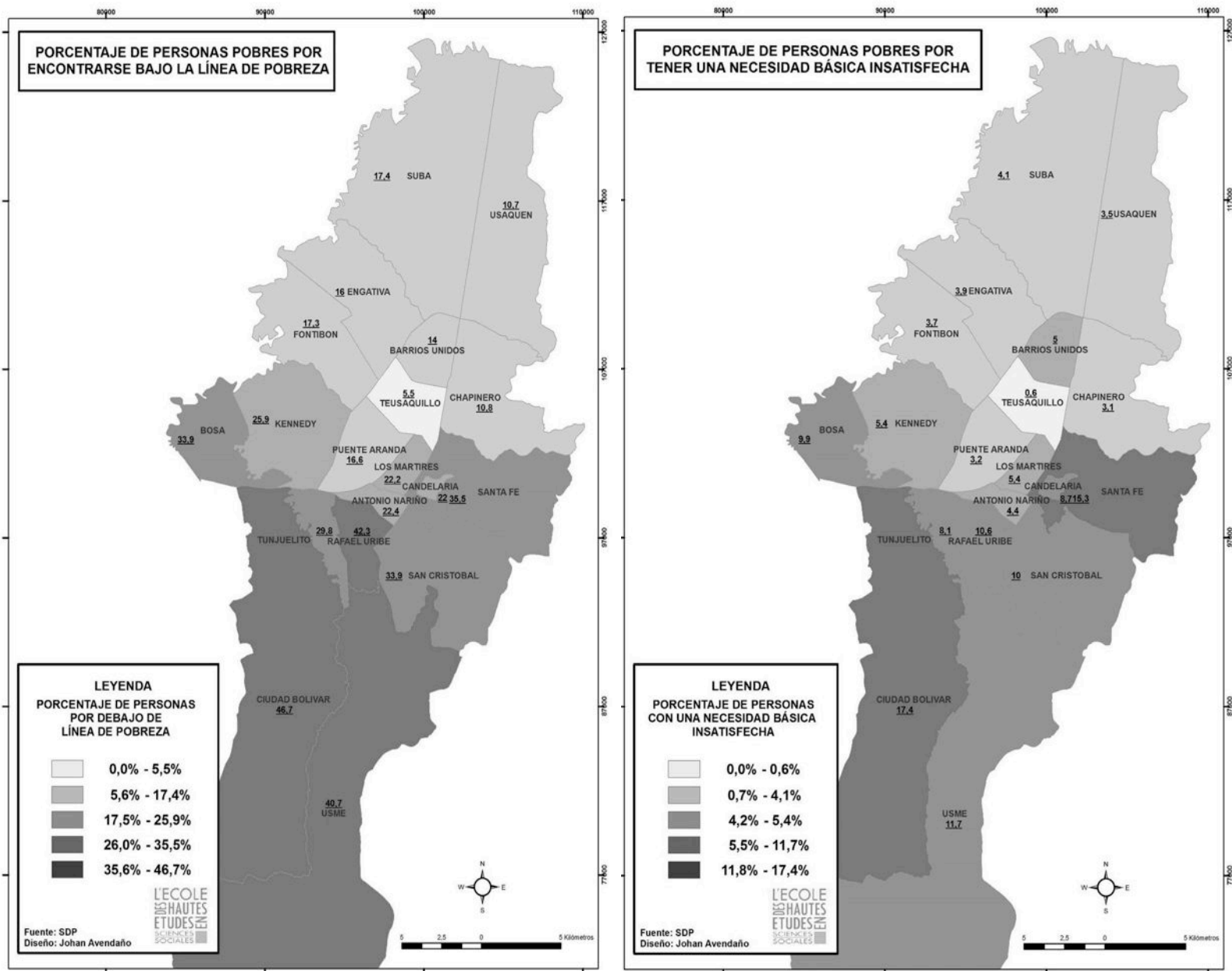


Figure 2. Poor population per poverty line by NBI. Source: Planning District Secretary office Bogotá.

1.1 Representations, Imaginaries and Identity construction.

Talking about representations, imaginaries and identities holds a subjective connotation. Guy Di Méo quotes Satszak (2004) to define *identity* as the representation that each individual develops of

itself. It allows, though out the time, to make a personal printing, it is an inalienable and inherent trait to each individual and social group as well. It is dynamic, as the result of a variety of process, it is also in permanent construction and object of multiple “Tensions”. Thus, the territorial identity can be understood as the representation build about a specific space or territory.

The human being in it relation between the space and territory, at the same time it creates its identity also defines a sense of belonging with places, spaces, they assign meanings and constructs to himself a space representation and imaginaries (Musset, 2009). Imaginaries are understood as that mental image constructed around a space or life experience. These experiences does not have a direct relation with an experience from that individual, but they are also related to other channels like narrations, stories and memories. On the other hand, the representations, the social ones, are the group of symbol systems created in a defined social context, which help to comprehend the meanings given to cultural phenomena (De Alba 2004). Therefore, territorial representation refers to the symbol system that gives the structure to meaning of the geographic space.

As the creation of identity and representations are intrinsic of each individual, it is necessary to have as many of these as the existing number of individuals. This is a factor characterized for the presence of values and cultural traits, common social goals, and in many of the cases, it is built around the sense of belonging of the common space. Not in vain, many processes of identity “Transfer” pass through the territorialization. This means, that all the important events that are conceived as a particular symbol of social cohesion took place in a specific space (as small village, a neighborhood, a group of cities, or in certain patrimonial and/or environmental element). The territory ends up as the factor that reinforces the image of collective identity, contributing with elements of justification and particularization.

All in all, it is possible to talk about territorialization of the identity, which can even be associated to a legitimization political control tool or as an icon of collective actions. Di Méo states: *“the space references are for the collective identity, is the equivalent of the individual identity to the body”* (2007:52).

1.2 Social representations and imaginaries of South Bogota's poverty.

Based on social-participant cartography workshops, (see figure 3), field trips of observation and semi-structured interviews, (see figure 4), in which the inhabitants of this zone were inquired about the representations and imaginaries that they have around urban poverty. They from their life experience, delivered a wide range of arguments to define this phenomena. Knowing that the population is widely diverse, it was mandatory to set different postures. It was decided to divide the groups according to their ages (children, youngsters, young adults, adults and elders) (common citizens, leaders, inhabitants within social processes, institution representatives). And so, kids between ages of eight and thirteen years old, were inquired first. In a brief discussion the kids defined:

Poverty is when people cannot afford food or being well fed, their houses are ugly made of materials that do not hold together. Poverty can be seen in how people look, the way they talk and dress. They dress badly. They do not have money. Being poor is ugly. Those poor neighborhoods are ugly. Someone rich has nice houses, are well dressed, have food and a stable family.



Figure 3 (Left): Map created by children between 12 and 13 years old from Lucero neighborhood in Ciudad Bolivar Bogota.

Figure 3 (Right): Type of house children from Ciudad Bolivar zone consider as a “poor family” house.

The group of participant boys and girls thought to relate poverty as an evident fact related with other people appearance –they do not dress good-. Children stated *“They are people with no money, no food, beg for money, and in most cases live in the street. They, the poor people, do not have someone close to give them support”*. At the same time, poverty is associated with urban spaces with evidence of violence inside the family, sexual aggression, child labor (washing cars, selling candy on the streets), or with children that are not taken care by their parents or do not even know them. They claim that poor neighborhoods have precarious houses, made out of tin plate and wood sticks: *They are ugly, of weak materials, located in risky zones*. These places do not have proper roads, play grounds or parks.

As complement, children also talked about being not poor it is for them, that means “being rich”. Once again focused on the appearance and space where the subject live. They consider that rich people dress “well”, talk “well”, live in pretty houses with 3 or more stories, own cars, eat “very good” food, have money, can have fun visiting parks, traveling, go to the movies, or leaving the city for vacation, and have more possibilities in life (Young, 1990). They say that “wealthy territories” are those where there are many tall buildings, Green areas, parks, sport areas, paved streets with no garbage around, have variety of services and education centers nearby.

From the speech of the children around poverty and their representations, dominant categories can be determined on the wealth conditions (Max-Neef, 1986), physical appearance both in subjects and housing and therefore on their living space: The neighborhood. The use of pejorative words, that undermine the image, is the way poverty representations is created for children: *ugly, dirty, messy, and dangerous*. These terms are assigned into a social and spatial value assessment, symbolic system (De Alba, 2010) which the individual identifies, associates and qualifies others. Another scale applies to the three dimensions previously mentioned: the individual, housing, neighborhood or zone. This rating cant be separated from these three dimensions: *“You are poor when you have a bad look, live in a precarious house and in a dangerous neighborhood with no proper constructed roads”*. On the other hand, “not

being poor” or “being rich”, also has categories in the same scale: *A good appearance for being well dressed, live in a nice big house located in a safe and organized neighborhood.*

It is worth to ask now, where do children get and construct those representations and imaginaries about poverty? In fact, a dedicated study to find the origin of these answers must be conducted. However, as per the conversations and the walkthrough their neighborhoods can be stated that these correspond to stereotypes that the mass media, mainly TV, has created in them. Some of the children used phrases such as: *“the news talk about insecurity of poor neighborhoods...”*, *“The houses of the rich people the way they are shown in soap operas”* If this is related to the influence of television, the main distractor, which is present in all homes no matter how “poor” they are, along with the posture of resignation, “naturalization” and constant reinforcement of the stereotype by the parents, it might be possible to find the origin of these statements the children do.

The second group of identified population, youngsters between 14 and 18 years old, represent poverty, as first evidence, related to the physical surroundings of the territory (Formiga, 2007). In their words:

It is known that a zone of neighborhood in the city is poor when the streets are filled with dust and dirt, no paved on, with no parks or green areas to spare time; also because there is a marked difference in public services (utility), the houses are very rusty and built with weak and little resilient materials. In these areas there is this feeling of chaos and disorder, they are dangerous. In general, the most important aspect is how their houses and streets look like. (See figure 5).

Poverty representation is expressed in the physical appearance, related to money absence, social or material possessions (Sen, 2009). In other words, in reality the poor is who does not have money to own a pretty and comfortable house, or to live on a neighborhood with a good infrastructure. Even when in the children case it can be found almost the same categories, the difference between youngsters is that these focus the whole poverty state in the absence of proper means to success (Lampis, 1998; Sen, 2000; Young, 1990) and money to satisfy all material needs. In their case, it weighs more their live experiences, in other words, the lack of daily money as the limitation to satisfy their needs and growth opportunities. Youngsters are old and experienced enough to quantify

the coast to provide food to their families, education access, recreation, and even health services. Their common ground revolves in HAVING, as a mean to, later, much later being able to project their BEING.

It seems like young people represent their own lives in a permanent “poverty context”: “We do not have the same opportunities to have a better way of life”. Their words contain little optimism. They do not talk about “overcoming poverty” or “looking for welfare”, on the contrary, their rush to resolve daily basic needs is reinforced, what they are demanded at their homes about paying for utilities and/or foodstuff. Their speech, contrary to what it is expected to this group, youngsters start to take over some sort of deference: “a strong reality”. Along with this, the rise in the cases of them who drop off school, or those who complete high school but never get to enroll in superior education (University or College), even when is their desire. Without determination, they are easily attached to non-qualified jobs, as well as, sporadic weekend based jobs, and in some cases, related to illegal activities. Others are simply teen parents³.

After walking around some areas, especially those within urban borders as Soacha Municipality⁴, is evident how teenagers are seen by criminal organization as a “breeding ground” to recruit (see figure 6), as well as selective targets for territorial control, setting of scores or junkie extermination, the morbid “social cleansing” strategy.

³ To expand on the subject, refer to: http://www.dane.gov.co/candane/images/Publicaciones/magazin_v_2013.pdf
<http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/pebi/v11n2/v11n2a07.pdf>
<http://www.ceacsc.gov.co/index.php/que-hacemos/componentes-permanentes-de-investigacion/seguimiento-y-caracterizacion-del-embarazo-en-adolescentes/12-que-hacemos>

⁴ The Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia “A.U.C.”, paramilitary groups from right wing, they had a great presence in the border during the last years of the first decade of the XXI century. In Altos de Cazuca, they were in charge of controlling the territory, blackmailing, selective murdering, private surveillance and recruiting teens to their army.

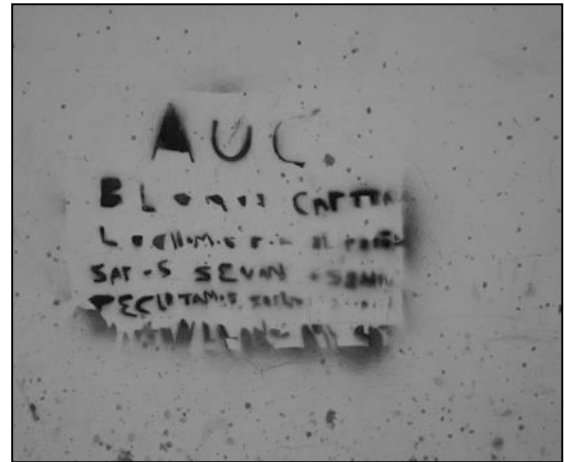


Figure 5 (left): Urban configuration of the highest area in Ciudad Bolívar. Figure 6 (Right): Example of graffiti found at some neighborhoods of Altos de Cazuca, border between Ciudad Bolívar and Soacha municipality.

The paradox in all these, is the fact that teens express themselves with high levels of reference. For instance, they make comparisons between the neighborhoods in different areas of the city. This did not happen with children because they do not know beyond their areas. Teenagers talk about a lot of experience, dream with good and stable jobs, have the desire to experience the benefits that living in a capital city can bring. But at the end, after an emotional intervention all their strength is gone with the reality of their daily needs, family problems and money lack they must overcome to being able to access to education.

Two aspects of what youngsters mentioned stood up. First, the chaos association with poor neighborhoods. They refer to urban configuration, absence of order in streets and other areas. This setting has developed an imaginary of streets invaded with vehicles and pedestrians, street vendors music and deafening advertising. This is a merge between the irregular set up of their neighborhoods, of the expression of how the soil occupation occurs, and the non-formal economy, which is the main source of revenue for many of their inhabitants. Second, it makes reference to the chaos used to describe those areas where there is “no law”, where criminal groups are the owners and intimidate the people, areas where a different order rules, due total absence of the State⁵.

⁵ Among many others, refer to http://issuu.com/ceacsc/docs/libro_picsc_bogot___2013_-_2023_opt

Teenagers state that one of the main problems inside their population group is the lack of job opportunities and access to education, they do not associate in a direct way with poverty. They propose the fact that they cannot develop their capabilities widely: Absence of spaces of interaction with arts and culture, recreation or spare time. Having little options to be engaged with working or educational environments turns to be a great limit in their lives. Although studying or working is not an absolute and immediate guarantee to overcome their issues, it is indeed the main tool these youngsters, and inhabitants of these areas, to start creating new project lives, to have personal and social growth, and impact on their, and or, their families reality. That it is how *poverty understood as lack of capabilities* by Amartya Sen (2000) appears.

The last group corresponds to the adult and elderly population, which means those between 18 and 68 years old⁶. Given the sample is quite wide, subdivision among them were created according to the role they play within the community: Regular inhabitants⁷, those inhabitants associated to social processes (non-formal education or space-environmental), community leaders and institutional actors.

This group was the most hard to address to, because even when they had all the willingness to give work in this study many of them felt intimidated when talking given their current context as refugees from Colombian conflict, and also some others felt ashamed of writing their points of view for their illiteracy. The majority of them have barely finished the first 5 years of elementary school, a few others more could access high school education, and in very little cases some of them accessed to technical education.

In any case, the common factor between them, was the fact that never before, according to their own words, they had the chance to think about their current situation and poverty. The rush and stress of their everyday lives refrains them to think about the origin and reason of their needs, also about the inequality in which they live. Their conclusion revolved around the definition of poverty as the *dissatisfaction of the basic needs to have a good quiet life*. (Checa, 2005; Max-Neef, 1986). According to

⁶ In Colombia adult legal age is 18, moment in which an indicial enters into the Economically Active Population (PEA in Spanish) only in certain situations Colombian government gives work permits to minors between 14 and 17 years old. However, it is clear that in many social contexts is very common the non-regulated child labor.

⁷ In reference of regular inhabitants, it is when this population group is not affiliated to any community organization. These citizens use institutional services, and beyond of paying taxes and premises utility do not have an important approach to the State.

them, that dissatisfaction on the basic needs refer to: No access to daily foodstuff, not having a job, having a refugee status due to Colombian conflict, own a very precarious house located in an area of great risk of flood or collapse (see figures 7 and 8), history of a helpless or family violence childhood, inability to access medical treatment for both high cost diseases and children disabilities, and finally, living in dangerous neighborhoods where children and teenagers are exposed to a high risk of drug consumption.



Figure 7 (Left): Ciudad Bolívar, Higher part of El Lucero showing precarious houses.

Figure 8 (Right) New emerging informal housing.

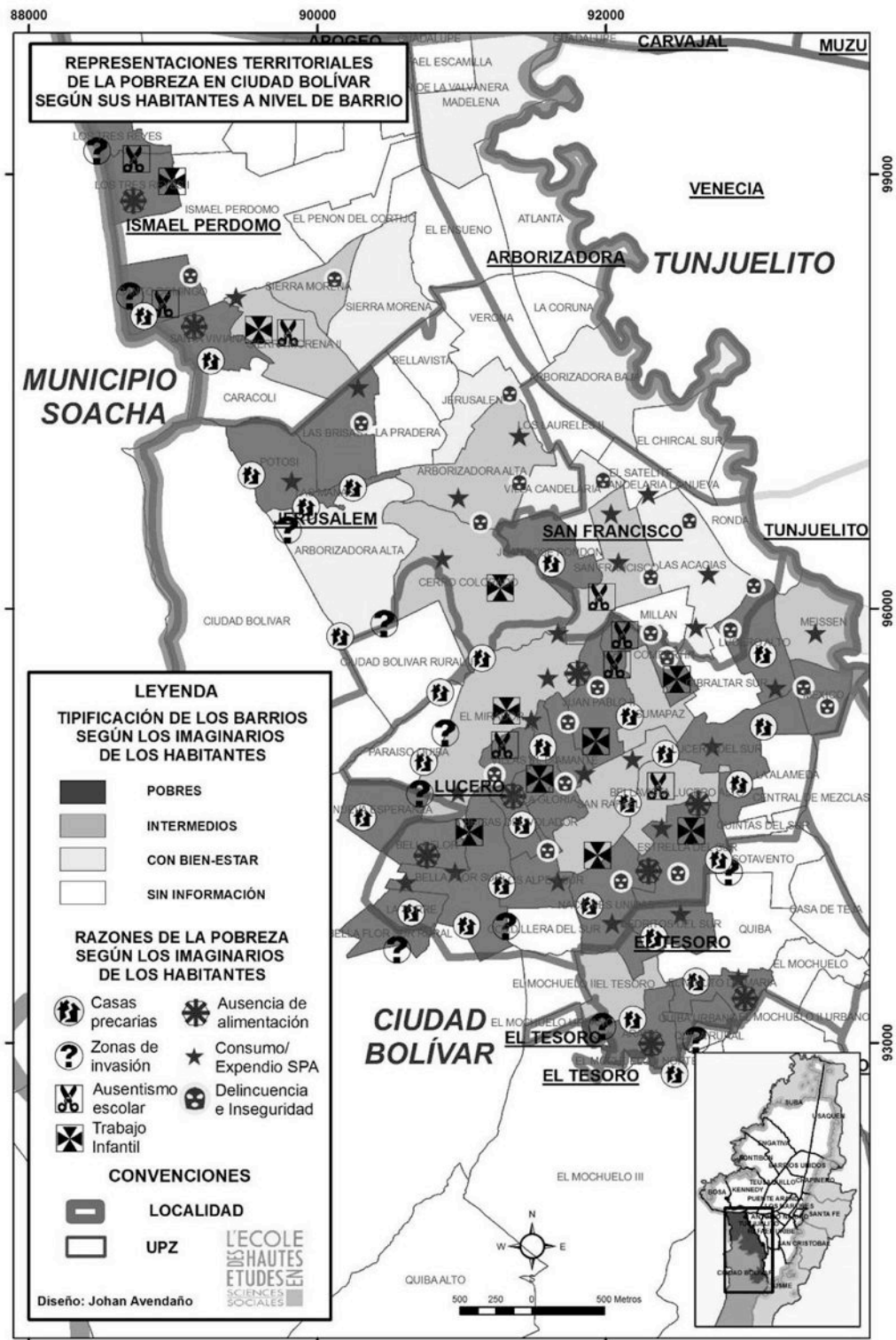


Figure 9. Territorial representation of poverty within Ciudad Bolivar area.

The slight differences between the representations, in the light of the social role each one of the individuals of this group play, are seen in the ability they have to acknowledge their context of unfairness (Musset, 2010). And so, within the “regular inhabitants” the loss of hope over the wellbeing stands out, deference and resignation too, they never ask themselves why they are living those realities and what they only know is that there are other people having better lives and opportunities around the city. On the other hand, those who are linked to some social procedure or are community leaders, focus their justifications on the government failure to give proper attention to them. Finally, the institutional actors, besides of blaming the inhabitants themselves for their lack of “entrepreneurship” and justify poverty given the resource limitation the State has to assist such a large population. In the end, none of them question themselves about the reason of so many necessities, or even less they dare to think a way of changing that reality. That is to say, they feel the inequality but do not recognize it as a social injustice fact.

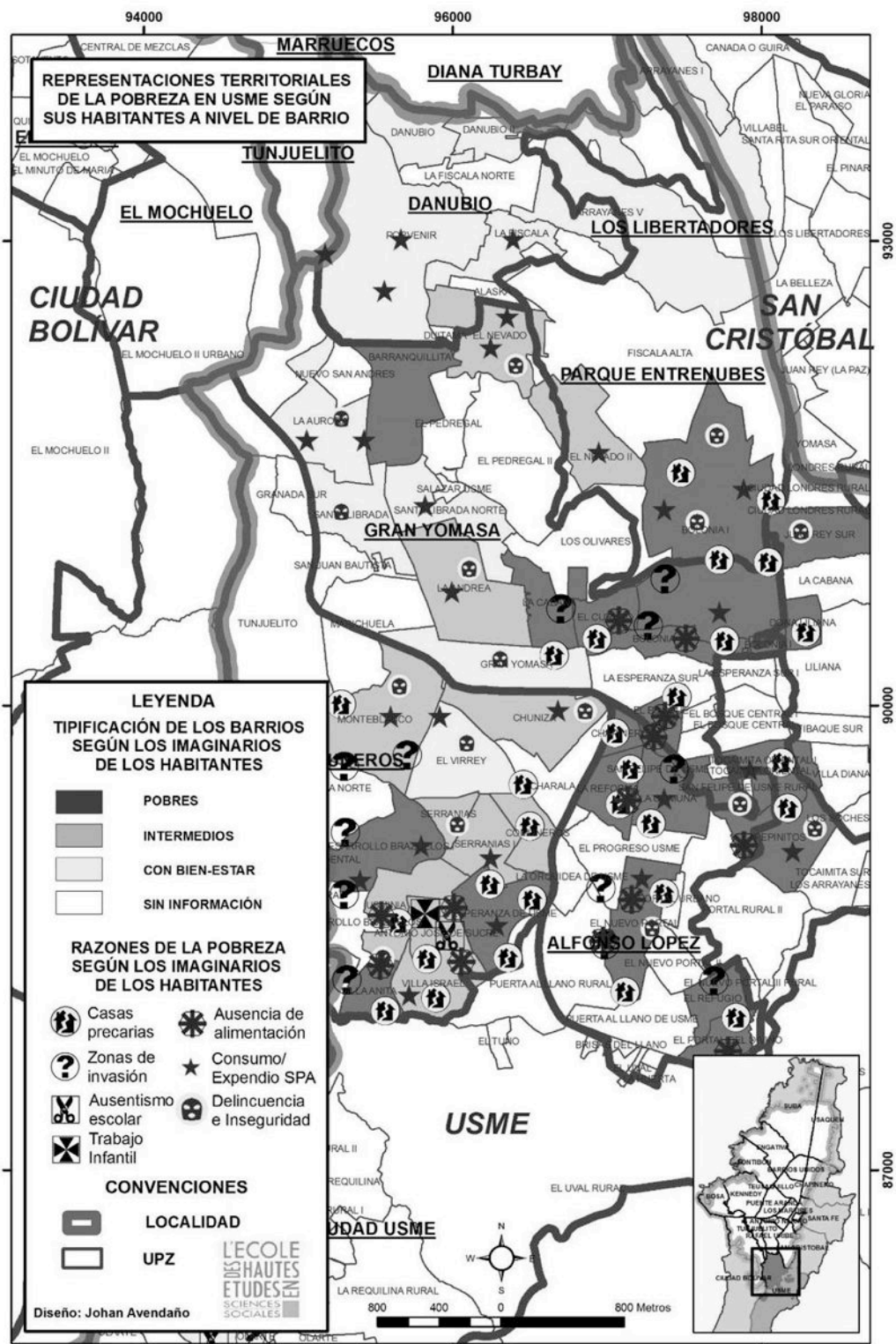


Figure 10. Territory representation of poverty in Usme area.

1.3 Space separation of the poverty representations and imaginaries.

When drawing the map of poverty based on the definitions made by Manfred Max-Neef, a very different representation of poverty, from the official maps, is shown. (See figure 2). Poverty is varied, therefore there are some territories where a wider number of these needs are present, and others showing just one type of a very complex need: They are receivers of violence refugee population on a daily basis. These areas that are not “officially” considered as poor, in terms of urbanistic, they are not consolidated (and apparently they do not show absence of money/income), have other type of “poverties” such as the lack of security and are vulnerable to many different kind of violence⁸.

In those territories where is considered that welfare exists, poverty of protection is the one that rules. In other neighborhood cases, the diversity of poverties is wider. When this information is cross referenced, it is no longer valid to state that: the poorest population is the one located in the highest part of the mountain, the ones living in the middle of the mountain have an “acceptable” life style, and the ones with the best welfare live in the flat areas. This assertion, of deterministic orientation, goes in wrong way towards the diversity of tendencies that appear when social representations of poverty were divided in the maps. This shows that what characterizes the differences gives a better view to this phenomenon, in this case, the view from the territory enables us to see a group of expressions that we would not be able to see in the generalized mapping measures of poverty (Martinez, 2007; Sanchez, 2008).

⁸ www.ceacsc.gov.co

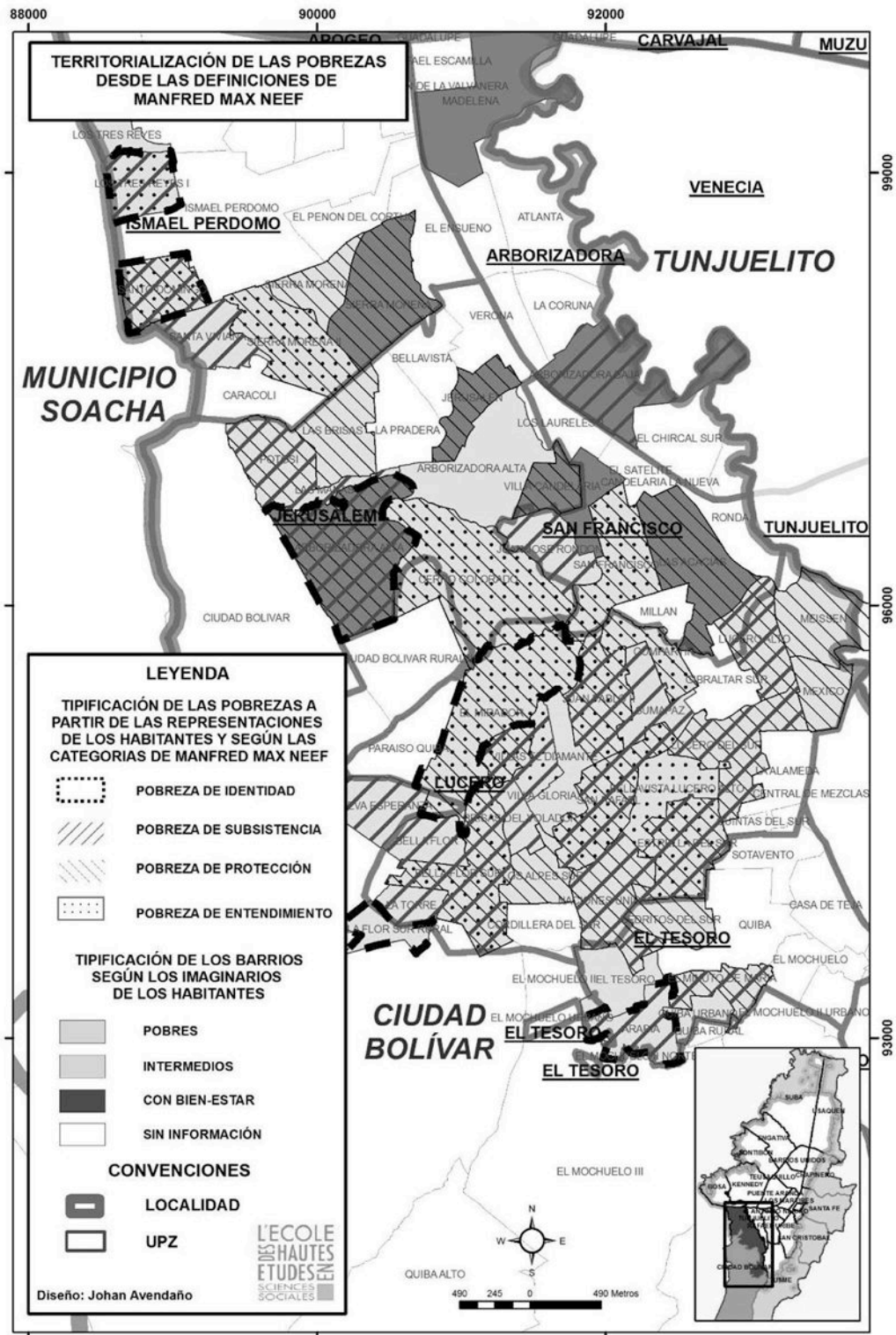


Figure 11. Mapping the poverty in Ciudad Bolívar within Manfred Max-Neef frame of reference

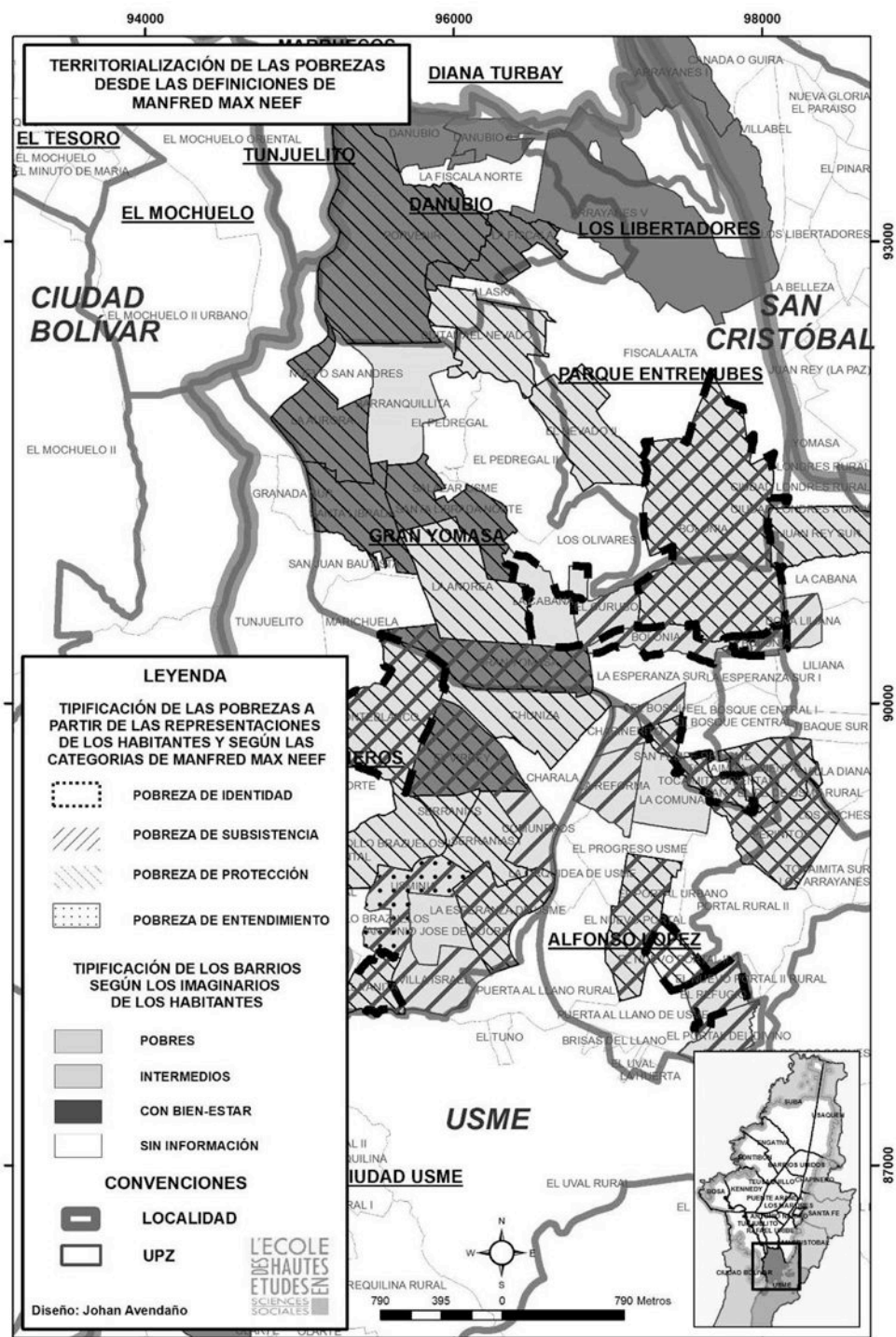


Figure 12. Mapping of poverties

Conclusions: A Space Socially Build As A Reflect Of Social Injustice And Urban Poberity - The Geographical space becomes the evidence, and at the same time the result, of all social injustice that the inhabitants of the south of Bogota have to live. The results of the previous investigation confirms that analyzing the urban poverty from the point of view of the territory brings others elements that the traditional view just decide to omit (Reyes, 2007). It is not only about a problem in the handling of statistics, that means that weather or not there were more details and accurate information of poverty lines, there would not be wider panorama of the different expressions of poverty.

The initial issue is in the conceptualization of the approximation, from where the evidences of the poverty existence (or not), is being looked for (Kaztman 2003; Max-Need, 1986; Sen, 2000). Just as Fresneda and Yespes (1999) state, it is not a matter of diminish the importance of the different types of poverty and ask to each individual about their perception of poverty. Maybe, it should be recognized that poverty is a phenomenon that in the current social-territory context it is made out of several different dimension, where the absence of resources, as per Sen (2009), it is a small glimpse of a limitation, but not the main reason of it.

It could also be identified a negative effect in the way the information is spread, and it can be seen in the fact that their inhabitants stigmatize the imaginaries: All of them are poor. Ciudad Bolivar's case is the most well-known, even worldwide, because the mass media have spread the idea that it is a poor territory that has the highest indicators of violence in the whole Colombia⁹. These stereotypes build imaginaries and social representations on certain groups, and therefore, on the territory they live. (De Alba 2004).

When this information is seen from a territorial perspective, it is understood that is not possible to match the poverty condition one citizen has to the poverty other citizen lives in. The context of poverty in each neighborhood is different from others, and it is there where it can be proved that there are many kinds of poverty, simply because there are subsistence poverty (lack of food and or precarious housing) and there are others (the ones ranked as "regular") that even when they have these needs covered can be ranked as poor in safety, because the violence which inhabits with their youngsters intimidates the rest of the community.

⁹ http://www.policia.ov.co/imagenes_ponal/dijin/revista_criminalidad/vol50_1/07lahistoria.pdf.

As per Alain Musset (2010) the purpose of this is not only for the sake of just having it but to being able to show that the needs from the inhabitants of these areas are different, and thus their dissatisfaction is spread differently across the territory, and this must be seen as the visibility of social injustice. The purpose of synthesis the maps have, should be good to determine and recognize the evident inequality within the territory.

The cartographies about social-space injustice, shown the high degree of fragmentation the social relationships have, not only in terms of rupture of physical access, but also in the limitation to access different services, limitation of thinking and culture expressions and the enjoyment of political liberties. A difficulty rises at the moment to conceptualize the type of variables to be mapped, and it is to recognize that the social relationships are multidimensional, that in some cases they own vague boundaries and in some other cases they are superimposed one on top of the other, without having any type of boundaries.

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