

Spatial distance, social distancing: relationships between different social categories in Brazilian society in COVID-19 times

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Abstract *One of the current forms of servitude, domestic work is highlighted by the high demand for children and elderly care, recognized as an essential service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Few categories have been so affected by the health and social crisis associated with COVID-19 due to its insecurity – labor, wages, exposure, and vulnerability – in the face of the pandemic. Based on ethnographic data from doctoral research carried out in 2011 on a network of nannies, who sometimes acted as domestic workers, and in dialogue with the care theory literature, we discuss how the experiences of social distancing were expanded by the COVID-19 pandemic and update the dynamics that operate in the relationships between different social categories in Brazilian society, foreseeing what may be a new element in the existing social interaction. In conclusion, we discuss the so-called cultures of servitude, highlighting that, in these cases, servitude does not imply rigidity, but plasticity, which makes affection become a commodity that values Latin American domestic workers differently in the labor market, where this characteristic is a comparative advantage that boosts the affection market.*

Key words *Social inequalities, Female work, Social distancing, COVID-19, Servitude*

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Introduction

Did she have the feeling that she lived for nothing? I cannot even know, but I don't think so. Only once was a tragic question asked: who am I. She was so scared that she stopped thinking altogether.
(Clarice Lispector, *A Hora da Estrela*, p.32).

Working at someone's home is one of the oldest occupations ever recorded, and it derives from slave labor and several forms of servitude¹, supporting the thesis that thus forged the servitude cultures², with specific features, according to the history of each region where its existence is observed and different paths through which it reached the contemporary world. Historically, domestic work articulates two main cleavages: race/ethnicity – which is the core of servitude; and gender, with the assignment of domestic tasks and care, predominantly to women. In Latin America and the Caribbean, many of those involved in the domestic service sector are primarily of African descent and indigenous women. An essential part of the inequality in the region is based on this segmented labor market³. From a quantitative viewpoint, the numbers are eloquent: between 11 and 18 million people are engaged in paid domestic work in Latin America and the Caribbean, of which 93% are women⁴! If, on the one hand, domestic work accounts for 10.5% to 14.3% of the women's employment in the region, on the other hand, the income of domestic workers is equal to or less than 50% of the mean of all employed people. More than 75% of these workers are informal⁵; 17.2% are migrants, and 73.4% of the employees are women. According to a census carried out in the region in 2010 by the ILO in eight countries, 63% of people who provided domestic work were of African descent³. There is yet another critical aspect, which will not be developed in this paper, which are the so-called "global care chains"⁶, which are women's movements from more impoverished areas to cities or countries, setting true migratory corridors linked to domestic work – within entire regions and countries within specific regions⁷⁻¹⁰. Considered by some studies and reports¹¹⁻¹³ as one of the contemporary slavery forms, domestic work gains specific weight due to the great demand for care for both children and older adults, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the case of Brazil, the category of domestic workers exceeded 6 million at the end of 2019 – the highest number since 2012¹⁴ – according to

estimates, consisting of 93% of women, mostly of African descent, without a formal contract and in most cases the sole providers of their households. Since 2016, the total of domestic workers with a formal contract decreased by 11.2%, and those without a formal contract increased by 7.3%¹⁵.

Considering the number of domestic workers in Brazil, they represent between 54% and 33% of the region's total compared to Latin America and the Caribbean. Undoubtedly, a significant number, under any consideration, especially when we know the characteristics of our social inequality¹⁶ and its several dimensions¹⁷, with segregation and cleavages of participation and connection in the labor market^{18,19}; education-related²⁰; skin color-related²¹; gender-related²²; and affective option-related^{23,24}; with social processes that oppose individual and person²⁵; with coexisting modernisms and archaisms in constant relative movement of confrontation and complementation, the so-called Brazilian societal coalition remains like a sphinx that challenges us with self-updating formulations^{26,27}.

Given its regional and global importance, Brazil has awakened, in countless intellectuals and researchers, interpretations and attempts to understand and apprehend the set of its social, political, and economic dynamics, which offer rich material for reflection²⁸, especially considering the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. An object of long-standing studies and reflections²⁹, few socio-professional categories have the degree of relevance of their work as domestic workers, and few are also being as affected due to the health and social crisis associated with COVID-19, in particular, due to their unstable work situation, low wages, lack of protection and significant vulnerability to the pandemic^{4,5,30}.

For long decades, the so-called Brazilian societal coalition occupied social scientists of all faiths³¹. In the search for an explanation that would give meaning to our social arrangement and the origins of its dysfunctionality, especially those related to income distribution³², the Portuguese-imperial, Tupi, and African origins³³⁻³⁶ were analyzed, sometimes the national elites' conservatism^{37,38}, the economic (dis)organization and institutional starvation^{39,40}, and some other times resulting from selective modernization⁴¹.

What would be the hallmarks of this societal coalition? A nation in eternal crisis that preserves the foundations of a society with dual and almost immutable characteristics^{25,42-44}. What is the role of religiosity, especially Catholic and Evangelical, and of faith²⁴⁵⁻⁴⁸. From this perspective, we will

reflect on how the experiences of physical distancing, required by the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, update the dynamics of social invisibility in the relationships between different Brazilian social layers, foreseeing what could be a new element in the existing sociability. Furthermore, given the particular importance of domestic workers and their outstanding role in the country, we speculate how this supposed new element would express itself in the contemporary Brazilian sociability, especially in the relationships between domestic workers and employers of Brazilian households, analyzing some points of exchanges between these two social universes.

Methods

Revisiting the ethnography “As a family member”: the (in)tense relationship between mothers and nannies

Based on ethnographic data from doctoral research carried out between 2007 and 2011 on a network of nannies who sometimes also acted as domestic workers, in dialogue with the literature that addresses the theme articulated with the theory of care, we discuss the reverberation of constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of these workers. We refer to an itinerary of critical analysis of the theme that seeks to relate three data sources: a) revisiting and reinterpreting ethnographic data on the representations and practices of relationships between mothers, children, nannies, and other actors/domestic workers, gathered in an ethnography of affections; b) care theoretical arguments; and c) expressions of social distancing translated into the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We started from an ethnography completed in 2011, whose fieldwork occurred in two stages. At first, considered an entry into fieldwork, brief research was carried out in the iconographic collection of Militão Augusto de Azevedo and Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura at the São Paulo Museum, transforming it into a first historic meeting with the nannies of the past – the slave wet nurses. It was a first approach to the theme through the collection in its different dimensions: as a producer of knowledge and concerning the interpretation of the photos themselves. Then, over seventeen months, the ethnographic observation, combined with other techniques such as in-depth interviews and informal conversations, and its leading site was a square located in the South

Zone of Rio de Janeiro visited by middle-class families and Rio elites.

Nine years have passed from this ethnography, but “shared time” in Fabian’s terms⁴⁹ reminds us that empirical research is made up of observation, data collection, and, above all, interaction based on intersubjectivity. All this is done with the time shared between what we see and what we write. Thus, in the square, it was moved by this “perspective miracle” mentioned by Simmel⁵⁰. It watched who was watching, observed who was observing; and it was somehow affected by something that also affects those we study. “Being affected”⁵¹, therefore, leads us – researchers – to go through long years of study, intellectual interest, and empirical observation of various expressions of our object of study in everyday life, self-transforming (or remaining the same?) culturally and historically. We argue that social experiences are not underpinned by transformation or permanence alone; but, yes, we understand, as Sahlins⁵² teaches us about the relationship between history and culture, stating that “continuity underlies every change [...] both regarding biography and culture itself”. Thus, this research itinerary updates us on the new arrangements that arise as a result of some relevant sociological milestones, such as with the approval at the National Congress of the “PEC of domestic workers” in 2013 and, now, the possible translations that can be made from the interactions between domestic workers and Brazilian households in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, collating here and there with brief comments from international experiences, understanding that, among the most affected aspects of life in a few months that transformed COVID-19 into a global pandemic, this will be how we organize the practice of care⁵³.

Results and discussion

COVID-19: the return of “as a family member”?

Few professional categories have the synthetic characteristics that reflect our cultural complexity, such as domestic workers. Perhaps in Brazil, none represents our societal dilemmas so well. Few carry our past of slavery and our so unique and ubiquitous slavery mentality to the point of having caused a significant transformation in the very architecture of the apartments, with their domestic worker’s rooms or the cur-

rent reversible rooms. Curiously enough, in this symbol of the modern urban is this architectural permanence of the concept of spatial proximity and social distancing, and it is worth consulting Figueira⁵⁴ for a discussion of the modern and archaic in the Brazilian family. Situated between an archaic that has not ended and a modern becoming that still resists being implanted – will it ever be implanted? –, the category of domestic workers appears as a missing link between the person and the individual that explains the country's entire dilemma: a disastrous alternation between a national framework of universal laws whose subject is the individual and situations where each one must get by, dance to the music, using their relationships system⁵⁵.

The health and social crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic refreshes the concept of spatial proximity and social distancing, dramatically and unequally translating how different social layers adopt health measures of physical isolation and quarantine. If the habit of domestic workers sleeping in the houses where they work seemed to be on the decline²⁶, as some of the research interlocutors had already announced, journalistic articles^{56,57} revealing that families proposed their domestic workers a shared quarantine appeared shortly after the start of the pandemic. Isolated middle-class and elite families, but gathered with domestic workers and nannies “living more their bosses' lives”⁵⁸, in an apparent intimacy. Recognizing domestic work as essential during the pandemic, in deference to the work of the doctor who would prioritize their profession, to the detriment of their domestic tasks “is not an advance towards the recognition of domestic work as fundamental to Brazilian social organization, but shows once again that it is founded on upholding privileges”⁵⁹.

Here, we should consider the existing tensions between transformation and overcoming; growth and development; form and content, and so many other apparent dichotomies that operate as engines of social dynamics. From this perspective, we can consider Figueira's observations⁶⁰ on the transformation of the Brazilian family from the 1950s onwards – when the hierarchical family model where the positional authority predominated –, to the model from the 1980s onwards when the egalitarian model prevailed. These two models are the Brazilian family identities. The hierarchical model is supported by the patriarchal model described by Freyre³³. The co-existence and interrelationship between the two models – an old and a modern one – are justified

“by the very speed of the process in Brazil; what we have is the acquisition of new identities (articulated in a complementary and variable way to the new ideals) that overlap with the old positional identities, without, however, changing them substantially”⁶⁰. Velho²⁶ comments on the idea of concomitant polarity as an uninterrupted movement and argues that the interaction between employers and domestic servants happens in both directions, with a meaningful cultural exchange. He emphasizes that “far from being mere survivals of an archaic past, domestic workers are active builders of new worlds, in which hierarchy and individualism, tradition, and modernity are transformed into intriguing metamorphoses”²⁶.

We should consider some dimensions of domestic workers. Let us go over some of them. The first, mainly consisting of poor black women and breadwinners, integrate, from a broader viewpoint, and which are expanding in the global economy, together with caregivers and sex workers⁶¹. This category operates in a silent limit, hardly or almost hardly declared to be the monetization of affection or the commercialization of intimate life⁶². A job with two main characteristics, which appear both in developing or semi-traditional societies and in developed ones, namely: they must perform discreetly¹¹ cleaning up the mess, which no one wants to do. This brings us to the second dimension, perhaps the most important, which is social invisibility. Among its several underlying components, invisibility consists of the characteristics of domestic work, which takes place in the private environment and as an allegedly “natural” female activity. In this way, erasing all aspects involved in its implementation and consequently disqualifying the work of this category, which, by the way, in the Brazilian case, is yet another institution, due to its political, ideological, and aesthetic interfaces that translate into Brazilian cultural complexity⁶³. An endless work marked by a constant updating of the need to start over²⁷. This characteristic, which could serve to add value, along with the other features described by Fraga²⁷, namely, the persistent imprints of slavery and legislation that excludes and disqualifies it vis-à-vis other workers, deepens intersectional inequalities.

A historical transition was observed in the photographic pattern in the research carried out in the iconographic collection of Militão Augusto de Azevedo and Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura at the São Paulo Museum, which initially had a wet nurse alongside the children, and later and gradually underwent a process of suppress-

ing and shredding the figure of the nurse, which marks her new place in the set of new social relationships of the period. In them, there is only “evidence” of their presence, mainly through their hands, which serve as both support and calming for the babies photographed, since, as a result, “the risk of the babies becoming restless during the making of the portrait was reduced”⁶⁴.

This is one of the expressions of social and sociological erasure, considering its “non-in-scription in the academic text”⁶⁵. The formulation “as a family member”, used in the ethnography referred to here, intends to domesticate and naturalize this relationship. However, we are already implying that something “is not” when we say “as”, but it is “as if it were”. The ethnographic analysis of these relationships between employers and domestic workers showed us the conflicts, ambiguities, and paradoxes of these relationships marked, at the same time, by intimacy and social distance. If, on the one hand, learning to be a domestic worker implies a relational pedagogy with the bosses, on the other hand, children learn from adults, from early childhood, to make the visible invisible^{61,66}. The near-perfect babysitter was the one who managed to make herself invisible, as if she did not exist: a “non-person”⁶⁷ doing a “non-work”⁶³.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic workers are at serious risk of losing their jobs and, consequently, their labor guarantees. The situation is dramatic in Brazil, the country with the most significant absolute number of domestic workers in the world⁵. Besides being infected by the virus, there is a risk of social isolation, distancing from the family, and dramatic restriction of the social network⁵⁷ for those who did/do not lose their job. There are still risks of suffering violence in the homes, whose employers demanded that they stay, a confinement “in the family”. Just read some newspapers headlines: “*Cases of abuse of domestic workers increase during the COVID-19 epidemic*”⁶⁸; “*The difficult reality of domestic workers amid the COVID-19 crisis*”⁶⁹; “*Coronavirus: how the pandemic affected domestic workers in Latin America*”⁷⁰; “*Domestic workers: frontline workers face the challenges of COVID-19*”⁷¹. An international panorama is found in the papers by Cave⁷² and Hamilton⁷³. In Rio de Janeiro, the headline “*First victim of RJ was a housewife and caught coronavirus from her mistress in Leblon*” announced the emblematic case of the first victim of coronavirus – Cleonice Gonçalves –, a domestic worker who was part of the risk group. Her employers, possible transmitters of the virus,

were in Italy at the beginning of the epidemic and did not release her from their services^{59,74}.

Based on measures taken by countries related to physical distancing and the characteristics of domestic occupation, the ILO³ estimated that the crisis severely impacts 72.3% of domestic workers in the world. Therefore, as a whole, domestic workers are one of the main categories affected by the pandemic⁵³. This happens, in part, because of the characteristics of the virus: highly contagious, imposing the distancing and closing of schools, restaurants, and several care-related services, and in part also because of their work’s characteristics: the exercise of activities requires the direct contact with older adults, children, and sick people. This is reinforced by crowding on public transport – many workers carry out the activity in more than one household, which increases the probability of infection and spread^{5,30,75}.

The case of Brazilian sociability also has a third dimension, which highlights the “Home”, as described in the work of Freyre³⁴, prefaced by Da Matta⁷⁶, as a “total social fact”⁷⁷. The importance of this aspect could hardly be overstated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The house has become par excellence, the space in which domestic workers and employers live in quarantine unequally. To situate one of the great national complexities, it is impossible not to mention the famous, and no less critical, passage by Freyre about the role of the “black nurse who did with words the same as with food, [...] she removed their bones and hardness, leaving only the soft syllables for the white boy’s mouth”³³. In our view, two issues intervene here, forming a broad analytical mosaic with great potential for understanding contemporary social dynamics in Brazil. The first is designated as servitude cultures²; and the second, tracking intimacy issues to investigate issues related to Brazilian sociability^{26,78}. We will develop the first question a little, leaving the second for another opportunity.

In their book about India, *Cultures of Servitude*, Ray and Qayum² elaborate on three themes that are also crucial for Brazil: the concurrence of traditional and modern values; domesticity; and the issue of social classes. They summarize, over a few paragraphs, what would be, according to them, a culture of servitude: it is one in which the social relationships of domination/subordination, dependence, and inequality (1) are culturally legitimized in such a way that domination, dependence, and inequalities derived from there are tolerated and entirely accepted; (2) are reproduced in everyday social interactions; (3)

permeate both the public and private spheres; and (4) form a kind of structure of feelings/affections associated with the establishment and domestic servitude relationships produced by the confluence of historical material conditions and prevailing social organization.

Those who live in a culture of servitude accept it as the given order of things, the *modus operandi* of both the public and domestic spheres. We can think of domestic work from this perspective. However, we can also think of the culture of servitude giving direction, meaning, and magnitude to a mentality, such as that prevailing in Brazil, but not exclusively⁷⁹, through which we could understand our almost infinite tolerance for social inequalities in all their manifestations, with the specific exclusion of African descent people, and the condemnation of women, especially those with low income, to what has been called “lifetime slavery”¹². It should be noted that servitude does not imply rigidity. On the contrary, it operates with plasticity, which makes affection become a demanded value and qualifies, for example, **nannies** and domestic workers from Latin America as affectionate, loving, and helpful^{7,62,80,81}, attributes that differentiate them for the jobs, which is an objective comparative advantage in the affection market⁸² that demands a stock of maternity explicitly⁶.

Conclusions

We presented in our paper elements of an unstable and dynamic balance between the archaic and the modern, the cultures of servitude and the postures and initiatives of domestic workers, who are not passive or phantasmagorized by a past marked by slavery. This complex of emotions is marked by intersectional inequalities enhanced by gender, generation, regional origin, skin col-

or, and social class aspects. Crossing between work and family, money and affection, and social hierarchy and intimacy are antagonistic and complementary analytical pairs and, therefore, synthesize one of the country's great dilemmas. However, it is worth emphasizing that the cultural heterogeneity observed in these relationships is an essential factor for the possible negotiation between these stakeholders. From the reinterpreted ethnography, we can comment on some profiles of female workers, which summarize this precarious balance between past and contemporary. If one considered herself “as a family member”, another one denied this sublime position and argued that she was not a “tentacled babysitter”, whose employers expected her to embrace the family they worked for fully. Therefore, a considerable antagonism is found in these relationships, which often generate social dramas, such as those we have seen in the COVID-19 pandemic, in which high emotional and affective costs are at stake. As we can see in cases where employers dismissed domestic workers, some alliances ensure their wages but not without conflicts of values and interests. The hierarchy-individualism axis is seen as one of the bases for differentiating the scale of values with consequences in the world of domestic care performed by domestic workers. Although a rigid and schematic division cannot be established, there is a tendency for the predominance of hierarchical values among domestic workers, while there is a more significant presence of individualistic perspectives in the universe of families. However, this does not mean that these do not appear, and sometimes intensely.

Whether in confinement with the employers' family or their family, compulsory isolation and the lexicon established by the COVID-19 pandemic had dramatic expressions in the lives of these workers.

Collaborations

LMB Silveira and AL Najar equally participated in the elaboration of the paper.

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