

Article

# Citizenship in social work in Brazil: Balancing universal rights and individual care

by

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**Abstract**

*English*

Social work in Latin America is commonly associated with the struggle for citizenship, democracy, equality and universal access to social services, often with a strong political-ethical reference to structural change. Hence, the informal personal relations that have traditionally permeated many Latin American societies are often viewed as preventing social change and equality among their citizens.

This article discusses how the emphasis on universal rights and citizenship in the social services in Brazil represents a significant historical gain on the one hand, but an obstacle to providing social care on the other. With support from empirical data produced during fieldwork conducted among social workers in Brazil, the article shows that relations based on personal connections and relations outside the public sphere are vital to providing social care.

In professional practice, this seems to create a contradiction in social work. Fundamental values in social work, such as universal inclusion, respect and dignity are framed in an egalitarian discourse, but when implemented in practice, they are simultaneously dependent on the application of personal relationships associated with traditional hierarchical codes of interaction.

Therefore, in order to promote social inclusion and other fundamental values in social work, it is necessary to recognize the limits of an egalitarian and reductionist understanding of citizenship, and include the cultural practices of employing personal relations in the provision of social care. Due to historical and social legacies of exploitation and inequality, this paradox seems to receive scant attention in the dominant literature about social work in Brazil.

*Keywords:* Brazil, citizenship, institutional ethnography, democracy, universal rights, professional practice

*Spanish*

### **Ciudadanía en trabajo social en Brasil: Equilibrando los derechos universales y el cuidado individual**

El trabajo social en Latinoamérica se comúnmente asociado con la lucha por la ciudadanía, la democracia, la equidad y el acceso universal a los servicios sociales, frecuentemente con una referencia política y ética hacia el cambio estructural. Por tanto, la relación personal informal que tradicionalmente ha permeado muchas sociedades latinoamericanas es vista a menudo como un obstáculo para el cambio social y la equidad entre los ciudadanos. Este artículo debate acerca de cómo el énfasis en los derechos universales y la ciudadanía en los servicios sociales en Brasil, representa un avance histórico significativo, por una parte; pero a la vez un obstáculo para proveer cuidado social, por la otra. El artículo se apoya en datos empíricos producidos durante el trabajo de campo conducido con trabajadores sociales en Brasil, y muestra que las relaciones basadas en conexiones personales y fuera de la esfera pública, son vitales para la provisión de cuidado social. En la práctica profesional, esto parece crear una contradicción en el trabajo social. Valores fundamentales de la profesión, tales como inclusión universal, respeto y dignidad se hallan enmarcados en un discurso igualitario, pero cuando se implementan en la práctica, son simultáneamente dependientes de la aplicación de relaciones personales asociadas con los códigos jerárquicos y tradicionales de interacción. Por lo tanto, en aras de promover inclusión social y otros valores del trabajo social, es necesario reconocer los límites del entendimiento igualitario y reduccionista de la ciudadanía, e incluir prácticas culturales de empleo de relaciones personales en la provisión de cuidado social. Debido a los legados históricos y sociales de la explotación y la desigualdad, esta paradoja parece recibir escasa atención en la literatura dominante sobre el trabajo social en Brasil

*Palabras clave:* Brasil, ciudadanía, etnografía institucional, democracia, derechos universales, práctica profesional.

### **Social work ideology and social interaction in Brazil**

Considering the history of economic exploitation and contemporary social relations marked by extreme inequality, it is not surprising that social work as an academic discipline in Latin America in general, and Brazil in particular, is theoretically influenced by critical social work (Ornellas et al., 2018) . By critical social work, I refer in the case of Brazil to a collective term for various traditions in critical thinking and critical practice, in which structural rather than individual assets are the principal target for analysis and intervention (Heitmann, 2016; Iamamoto & Carvalho, 1982 [2014]; Mota, 2013; Payne, 2014). The Brazilian Federal Council of Social Workers (CFESS),<sup>1</sup> has also adapted a code of conduct which explicitly underscores that social work should promote and defend the interests of the working class (CFESS, 2011).

The public services are influenced by an emphasis on preventive measures, directing attention to structural contexts outside the immediate relations of the individual and the family (Cornely & Bruno, 1997; Montañó, 2012; Yazbek, 2012). In academic writing and teaching, governmental documents and professional practice, the fingerprints of different forms of critical social work theory and practice are evident. In this, the structural causes of social exclusion and social care as a civil right based on citizenship and active participation from civil society are accentuated.

Still, a major challenge for social work in a Brazilian context is how the normative values embedded in egalitarian principles are legitimized and implemented in a society marked by privileges and hierarchies (Iamamoto & Carvalho, 1982 [2014]). As pointed out by Ronald Frankenberg some decades ago, neither white professional middle-class professionals nor black mothers in low-income communities step out of society when they meet in the consulting room (Frankenberg, 1980). This means that to understand social work practices, the social and cultural context needs to be taken into consideration. Therefore, in the case of Brazil, a society marked by the legacies of centuries of inequality and uneven distribution of privileges, the values and norms that permeate the economic, political and social fabric of society cannot be ignored.

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<sup>1</sup> Conselho Federal de Serviço Social

In this article, I will point to how professional social work practice is adapting to values and norms that are justified with reference to holistic and hierarchical perspectives on individuals, emphasizing the ability to activate personal relations in the provision of social care. Within positivistic Marxist theories, these practices could be interpreted as disloyal or counterproductive to social work. However, without discarding Marxist perspectives on social relations in Brazil, I would suggest that critical perspectives that are less dominated by positivistic structural determinism are more sensitive to the social and cultural realities of professional practice. In doing this, I will accentuate that people are connected to society in multiple ways, and that this is also reflected in the provisioning of social services and social care.

Consequently, I will suggest a theoretical and methodological approach that may be more sensitive to how social work is constructed in a Brazilian context, in which the social fabric of society is taken into consideration. This will hopefully contribute to an understanding of social work, where the dilemmas and contradictions that permeate Brazilian society are regarded as dimensions of social work, and not merely as shortcomings or disloyalty in the struggle for social justice.

### **Social work in Brazil**

There are currently approximately 160,000 social workers in Brazil, surpassed in numbers only by the United States and China (CFESS, 2017; IFSW, 2013). Since the first social workers graduated in 1938, the professionals have been providing social services under the canopy of different welfare state ideologies. In the first few decades, the influence of the Catholic Church was significant. With an emphasis on conservative Catholic values, social work was provided as a favour and to help individuals to adapt to society. In the 1930s, this was closely associated with the corporative state ambitions of the conservative one-party government of Getúlio Vargas. During World War II, Brazil strengthened its relations to the allied forces and the United States. Hence, after the war, on the ideological level, social work became influenced by North American traditions with a strong emphasis on case work. The top-down ideology of social work as charity and the provisioning of favours and care was nonetheless a dominant moral justification (Iamamoto & Carvalho, 1982 [2014]).

Social work in Brazil took a significant turn in the 1960s when the social sciences were influenced by a more critical perspective on society. Various clerics, especially in the rural areas, began to address the structural causes of inequality and poverty, with scholars like Paulo Freire agitating for the empowerment of the oppressed. This paved the way for a theoretical foundation in social work based on Marxist analyses of social relations in society. During the era of military dictatorship from 1964 until the mid-1980s, this represented a democratic alternative to the elitist and oppressive policies implemented by the military dictatorship. The most profound implications this had for social work ideology was the turn from social work as 'assistencialismo', in which the poor and destitute received help as a favour, to a perspective of social assistance as a civil right. In this, social problems were viewed as a structural problem in society, and to a lesser extent as the shortcomings of individuals (Netto, 2013).

In the 1970s, the central government welfare services represented a conservative corporate welfare model, where assistance was by and large limited to taxpaying citizens and was dependent on charity movements. At the same time, with inspiration from domestic and international ideologies emphasizing critical social work, liberation of the oppressed, popular participation and radical democracy, social workers and health professionals developed theories and practices based on ideologies that opposed the military dictatorship. Because of this, various civil movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a significant role. With funding from abroad, civil society represented an arena for articulating structural problems, and worked for universal social inclusion and democratic reforms in Brazil. This shift in social work was explicitly adopted at the third Federal Congress for Social Assistants in 1979, when the assembly voted to replace the representatives appointed by the government with their own representatives. Through a series of lectures and seminars, this congress, referred to as the Congress of the Great Turn (Congresso de Grande Virada), reconceptualized social work as a discipline based on Marxist interpretations of social relations, thus underscoring the significance of universal civil rights as the basis for access to social assistance.

With the return to democracy and civil rule in the mid-1980s, the influence of the civil movements and NGOs from the previous decade was significant in developing

principles of access to welfare benefits. As the new constitution was promulgated in 1988, welfare services such as social assistance and health services were articulated as the rights of the citizen, and it was the state's duty to provide services and guarantee access for all citizens. In the following decades, the social services in Brazil were profoundly re-organized and important legislative measures emphasized principles such as civil participation, universal access, de-centralization of authority and sensitivity to the relations of the family and territorial particularities (Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger, 2004; Prates, 2013).

A significant directive for the organization of the social services was the National Politics of Social Assistance (PNAS) (Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger, 2004), which organized the services within the Unified System of Social Assistance (SUAS). Under the umbrella of the SUAS, social assistance is implemented under the auspices of the municipal authorities. The services are divided into three levels of attention. These are the basic and the special services, which focus on the integration of families and individuals in local communities, and the level of high complexity. The basic level primarily works with preventive measures and the follow-up of vulnerable families, provided by Reference Centres of Social Assistance (CRAS), whereas the Reference Centres of Special Social Assistance (CREAS) focus on assisting and empowering individuals through more therapeutic measures. In contrast to the first two levels of attention, the high-complexity services are characterized by the separation of the individuals from their daily environment. Attention is provided through different types of centres or institutional care, or other forms of individual follow-up, in cases where the family or community represents a social, psychological or physical risk (Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger, 2012).

After the transition to civil government and democracy, social work as an academic discipline has maintained the characteristics of critical theory. On the ideological level, it is profoundly influenced by Marxist interpretations, and displays a critical stance towards capitalism and the neo-liberal inclinations of the Brazilian welfare state (CFESS, 2011; Mauriel, 2010; Mota, 2013). At the same time, social work is a state-sanctioned profession embedded in the multiple processes in society that construct the governance of welfare policies. In other words, as pointed out by

Dellgran and Höjer (2012), while the profession refers to a given normative ideology, it is also subject to interests and demands articulated outside academia. This means that the professionals negotiate and seek to balance the demands and expectations set by political and administrative bodies within the welfare state, the values and norms in the cultural and social contexts in which they interact and the more academically inspired ideologies and knowledge bases of their professional disciplines.

In other words, social work in Brazil is developed in a specific historical, political and ideological context. These processes are in turn both framed in, and influence, the various values and norms found in Brazilian societies and cultures. When discussing the meanings of citizenship in social work in a Brazilian context, it is therefore necessary to take into account how social work is incorporated into given social contexts. Consequently, social work and social workers do not operate independently of the dominant values and norms in society, but rather to the contrary, are dependent on dialogue and interaction in order to establish a legitimate and meaningful role. The further implication of this is that social work as an interventional practice can hardly be said to be socially relevant unless the 'social' is explored and understood in terms of the interactions between individuals, groups of people and various interests. As expressed by Hanssen, Hutchinson, Lyngstad, and Sandvin (2015, p. 115), social work must take into consideration '[...] the relations and connections making up the sociomaterial practices in which people live and struggle with their lives'.

### **The person and society in Brazil**

As pointed out above, the SUAS is oriented towards the integration of the individual in their immediate social environment, such as their local community and family. It is therefore crucial to understand the social context of the relations between individuals and their surroundings in order to understand the legitimacy of the social services. Hence, I will direct attention to some theoretical approaches about the relationship between the person and society in Latin America in general, and in Brazil in particular.



In Latin American societies, the significance of personal relationships and holistic perspectives on social relations has drawn significant attention in the social sciences ever since the interwar period. The legacies of slave-master relations (Freyre, 1964), relations between small peasants, landlords and capitalist markets (Wolf & Hansen, 1972), the diffusion of informal economies (Fernández-Kelly & Shefner, 2006), the informal exchange of petty favours (L. N. d. Barbosa, 1995; Duarte, 2006), hierarchical political cultures (Levine, 1998) and the significance of religion (Bruneau, 2012; Lacerda, 2017) are but a few fields of investigation in which social stratification, hierarchy and inequality serve as gatekeeping perspectives used to interpret Latin American societies. At the same time, the region is marked by social activism and the struggle for political reforms and democratic institutions, as well as liberation from oppressive practices (Burity & Hallewell, 2006; Montero, 2014). There is an open debate and awareness about how cultural, social, political, economic and structural processes that maintain and legitimize hierarchical social relations in society comprise one of the major challenges to overcoming oppression, economic exploitation, social injustice and inequality.

This tension between the conservative and the progressive has been framed in dichotomies like 'traditional' and 'modern', or corresponding concepts such as 'holistic' and 'egalitarian' spheres of interaction (DaMatta & Hess, 1995). The Brazilian sociologist Roberto DaMatta refers to this tension as the 'Brazilian dilemma', where different codes of social interaction may apply in the same context (DaMatta, 1991). According to DaMatta, Brazilian society is composed of social relations that promote both egalitarian individualistic values and holistic relational values. The egalitarian values are associated with the values of public spaces, and are referred to as the sphere of the *street*, where equality, universality and anonymity are important elements. On the other hand, the holistic and relational values, in which individuals defined through their relations to other people are referred to as the sphere of the *house*. Stable relations, security and hierarchy, as well as care and security, are values associated with the house. In his descriptions of Brazilian societies, DaMatta emphasizes that Brazil is neither egalitarian nor holistic. Rather, the different though not mutually exclusive codes of interaction found in the spheres of the *street* and the *house* are equally valid in social interaction, and may be displayed at the same time (DaMatta & Hess, 1995).

The interplay of different spheres of social interaction is eloquently illustrated through the well-known Brazilian *jeitinho*. This practice is frequently referred to as a genuine Brazilian practice (L. Barbosa, 2006; Duarte, 2006; Ferreira, Fischer, Porto, Pilati, & Milfont, 2012; Vieira, Costa, & Barbosa, 1982), and labelled by some as a daily ritual in Brazil (DaMatta, 1991). It is a form of informal problem-solving, in which one asks for and provides favours on the basis of evoking compassion or sympathy rather than by seeking solutions within the formal and legal regulations. An example of a *jeitinho* could be a young mother from a low-income household dependent on informal work, who has been offered her first contract as a formal employee (Motta & Alcadipani, 1999). However, unless she presents her workers identity card within the next day or two, the offer will be passed on to someone else. When the woman comes home, she discovers that her identity card is nowhere to be found and she rushes to the public office to apply for a new card. The clerk at the office informs her that the process takes a month and there is no way to speed it up. For her part, the mother explains the situation, the urgency of the request and the possible positive or negative consequences for her children, and does her best to evoke sympathy for her situation. After some hesitation, the clerk might decide to give her a *jeitinho* and move her case forward, thereby issuing the card within the hour.

Naturally, bending the rules and ceding to discretion based on personal considerations are well-known practices outside a Brazilian context (Duarte, 2006). Yet in Brazil, these evocations of the personal and relational tend to gain the upper hand in a series of relations that, at least in principle, are subject to formal, bureaucratic and legal rulings. The possibility of applying pragmatic and reasonable solutions come to the fore, as the person is not viewed as an anonymous citizen equal to all others, but as a person where the totality of social relations that defines them is taken into consideration.

It is in this juncture between the person as situated in a web of personal relations, and the individual as a citizen who is equal to other citizens, that the Brazilian dilemma occurs. It is obvious that the clerk cannot grant priority to everyone who presents their personal problems to him. This would jeopardize the legitimacy of his work as a public servant, therefore possibly adding to the problems of those who

follow the rules and wait patiently. To remain a positive feature, the *jeitinho* must constitute an act of compassion and sympathy, indicating that it is something you can ask for, but not something you can demand. The risk of creating possible negative consequences for others should also be regarded as minor or morally acceptable. If avoiding regulations and legal requirements becomes a normal practice in the public office (something that could happen), the negative consequences of the *jeitinho* will be debated and the practice could be considered morally unacceptable (Ferreira et al., 2012). The clerk could of course act in the same manner if the mother appealing for special treatment paid the clerk for the favour, but this would normally be considered bribery and corruption and is, in general, morally condemned. A more difficult situation in a moral sense occurs if the clerk comes from the same town as the young mother. Their families in their hometown could be tied through multiple relations within the social whole, where the families hold the same or different positions in a local hierarchy of social relations. In this case, the clerk might take into consideration that the outcome of his actions in relation to the young mother will be communicated to his family in their hometown and considered an interaction between the two families, and not as an interaction between the public office and a citizen. In this case, the position and power of family and friends influences the outcome, obscuring the pure solidarity of a *jeitinho*, but without necessarily being considered corruption.

The social services in Brazil accentuates in different ways that access to social assistance is based on the principles of citizenship and universal rights. In official discourses, such as those found in legal and administrative regulations and information at the federal and municipal levels, as well as in the Federal Council of Social Work's guidelines and norms, individuals are addressed as 'citizens' (CFESS, 2011; Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger, 2004, 2012; Municipal Authorities of Vitória, 2014). This underscores the egalitarian values attached to the interaction between the person and the state, in which social assistance is based on the rights of the citizens. Furthermore, what is often referred to elsewhere as social problems is referred to in the public discourses as a 'violation of rights', whereas the request for assistance could be described as a citizen approaching the social services to present a 'demand'.

In other words, the egalitarian principles of the person are highly accentuated as an ideological reference for the SUAS. In the following, I will discuss how such normative and formal guidelines represent a particular dilemma in professional social work practices in the context of Brazil. While the articulation of social services as a right of the citizen and a duty of the state no doubt represents a significant conquest in Brazilian society, the everyday provisioning of social assistance poses a moral dilemma. Cultural expectations of social interaction as exemplified through the *jeitinhos*, in which personal relations, care and sympathy are viewed as central aspects of human compassion, sometimes run counter to the normative foundation and ideological references for professional social work.

### **Empirical examples from a Brazilian context**

In 2014 and 2015, I conducted six months of fieldwork among social assistants working in an urban low-income neighbourhood in the city of Vitória, the capital of the state of Espírito Santo. Like many low-income neighbourhoods in Brazil, the community households were marked by a lack of stable sources of income, and were dependent on poorly financed public services. The fieldwork was part of the research for my PhD thesis about the construction of social work in a Brazilian context. The objective of the fieldwork was to explore how professional social work was constructed through daily practices.

The main informants consisted of professionals in the social services who worked within the same neighbourhood. Some of them were employed in the public services, and some were employed by an NGO. In addition to this, I also spent a number of days observing and interviewing social workers in the public services in another neighbourhood in the same city, interviewed social workers employed in other services at the municipal level and met with the administrative management at the Municipal Secretary of Social Assistance<sup>2</sup> (SEMAS) on several occasions. The empirical context for professional practices in my research was the basic level of services as described above, but I also conducted two days of planned observation and interviews with professionals working in the services at the level of special attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Secretaria Municipal de Assistência Social

The social workers in the public services were employed at a CRAS, which is responsible for the basic services in the SUAS at the community level. The organization of the CRAS is a municipal responsibility, regulated by the federal government programme, Integrated Protection and Attention of the Family<sup>3</sup> (PAIF), where the cohesion of the family, access to social and material benefits and the provisioning of networks of support for families with special needs are central characteristics of their work (Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger, 2012). The CRAS is geographically located in the community to ease access for the families living in the area covered by the CRAS. In this, collaboration across different services and sectors (public, private and civil) are accentuated as being crucial aspects of approaching the family in the context of their daily lives.

The professionals employed by the NGO worked with pre- and after-school activities, offering activities within sports and culture to children attending primary and lower secondary school. The aim of their services was to provide activities for children, so as to build their self-esteem and help to prevent recruitment to crime in a neighbourhood where drug cartels controlled much of the physical public spaces. In their work with children, the attention was directed towards the family and the community, just like the CRAS. This involved empowering the families of the children through counselling individually or in groups, reflection groups, by assisting them in their interaction with different providers of social assistance and occasionally by providing vocational training for the adult population in the community. Like the CRAS, they were engaged in cross-sectorial collaborations with other stakeholders in the social services, and participated in different civil councils at the community, municipal and state levels.

Because my academic background is from the field of social anthropology, the methodology was based on ethnographic field observations and semi-structured interviews. The context of the observations was restricted to situations where the professionals performed their professional work. This means that I was present during regular working hours, usually between 8 am and 5 pm, but occasionally during activities taking place in the evenings as well. I followed the professionals in

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<sup>3</sup> Proteção e Atenção Integral à Família

their daily work at the CRAS and in the neighbourhood, including participating in home visits, counselling and various meetings in the neighbourhood. The research was approved by the Municipal Secretary of Social Assistance (SEMAS) in Vitória and the Committee of Ethics in Research at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, to which I was affiliated during the research. In total, I interviewed 27 people employed in various parts of the networks of social assistance related to the CRAS and the NGO.

The analytical approach was inspired by micro-interactionism, with the aim of explicating the contextual meanings of social work in a Brazilian context. With inspiration from institutional ethnography (Smith, 2006), I inquired into the professional practices to disclose how their actions were ruled by relations, discourses and various forms of standardization. These relations, which can be said to originate outside the particular context of the study, were not taken for granted a priori, but were defined by to what extent they were active in and relevant to the specific interaction. The implication of this is not so much what 'social work' or 'citizenship' is per se, but rather how these concepts are produced as meaningful categories through what people experience and do.

### **Constructing citizenship in social assistance**

When presenting the empirical findings relevant to the scope of this article, I have chosen to divide the findings into two categories: *complaints from citizens* and *informal networks of professionals*. There are of course many other categories that could be relevant to the discussion, and some relevant empirical findings may be omitted as they do not easily fit into either of these categories. However, I would suggest that these categories are useful in the following discussion about the meanings of citizenship in social work. The first category concerning complaints from citizens explicates that the social services encounter various forms of dissonance when implemented in the community, while the second category refers to how the social services are embedded in relations outside the formalized relations of collaboration. They underscore the wider social context and relations of interaction between the professionals and their surroundings, as well as explicating the subsequent intertwining of meanings and contexts in social work practice. I also

assume that narrowing the attention by limiting the types of interaction will enhance the comparative value.

### *Complaints from citizens*

As described above, the SUAS and normative social work ideology place a heavy emphasis on the rights of the citizen. All of the professionals in my research, both in the public service and NGOs, emphasized the universal right to assistance. In various community councils with representation from the citizens of the neighbourhood, explicit reference was also made to democratic participation and universal access to benefits. Assumptions based on this rhetoric may indicate that the egalitarian principles defining the person in relation to the society are dominant in the interaction between the social workers and the citizens.

However, not unexpectedly, there were several cases of dissent regarding to what degree the services adhered to these principles. One illustrative example of this was how the local *vereadora*, the local municipal council representative, regularly approached the CRAS wanting to intervene on behalf of dissatisfied citizens. On one of these occasions, the *vereadora* arrived together with some of the citizens who demanded to speak to the manager of the CRAS. They were taken to the manager's office, where their complaints were discussed.<sup>4</sup> I spoke with the manager and some of the social workers afterwards. According to the manager, she had needed to inform the *vereadora* about the regulations and guidelines set by the PAIF, and that they would not provide services outside the jurisdiction of the CRAS. One of the social workers solemnly replied that he suspected that the *vereadora's* motive for approaching the CRAS was primarily based on her interest in maintaining political support.

Independent of the *vereadora's* motives, I will direct the attention to how personal relations were activated in the meeting. The partners were not necessarily in conflict about rights and universal principles as the foundation of the services, but in a situation of conflict, as the citizens had allied themselves with the most influential politician in the community and presented their complaints orally. Later, as I inquired

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<sup>4</sup> I was not present during their meeting, and did not speak to the *vereadora* myself.

into the incidence, I learned that the meeting had not been registered and the complaints had not been formalized, either before the meeting took place or at a later stage. This in itself is not necessarily unusual in any sense. Nevertheless, when I spoke to the social workers about whether any formal complaints had been registered with the CRAS at all, none of them could recall a single incidence of formal complaints. This does not mean that there were no complaints to be heard about the social services; to the contrary, there were a lot of complaints in daily encounters between professionals and the citizens, but these rarely led to formalized complaints contesting the practices of the CRAS.

In Vitória, there are various ways of forwarding complaints regarding the social services in particular, and the public services in general. At the House of Councils,<sup>5</sup> where the administration of different statutory councils of public-civil cooperation within the health and social services are co-located, the citizens have the possibility of forwarding their complaints. This can be done through civil representatives in the councils, and individually through conversations with municipal or civil society representatives. Also, in this situation the complaints are transmitted orally. The most common procedure for complaining about public services, covering everything from parking restrictions to corruption and police violence, is the municipal *Ouvidora* (listener). By calling a free three-digit number, the citizen can speak to a municipal representative and report their complaints. The same service is also available on the internet, but is commonly referred to as a phone service.

In all of these examples, the rights of the citizens are a central value. The politician confronts the CRAS on the basis of questioning to what extent they fulfil their public mandate, and the House of Councils and the *Ouvidora* underscore their role as serving the citizens and strengthening their rights to report anything from mistakes to malpractice in the public services. At the same time, all these cases are examples of an interaction that facilitates direct communication between people. By this, they also facilitate the possibility of interpreting the problems and complaints with reference to the person, not only as an egalitarian citizen, but also as a particular person in a particular situation. Without evaluating the significance of this with reference to the

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<sup>5</sup> Casa dos Conselhos



outcomes of their complaints, it is important to pay attention to how the preferred means of communicating complaints *facilitates* the possibility of seeing the person in their specific relation to society. Moreover, formalizing the complaints in writing were not very common. As one of the social workers said when I asked if there were any formal venues for proceeding with a complaint: 'They have the right to open proceedings against the CRAS, but that has not happened with me. I do not know of any cases either.'

### *Informal networks*

The question arising from the above description is to what degree this actually leads to *jeitinhos* or worse, unequal treatment or corruption in the public services. I expect that this may vary in different contexts, but in my material, the social workers emphasized that the relations between them and the citizens were based on rights and not favours. As expressed by one of the professionals:

They are conscious that they have these rights, but (they think) the person who will do this for them is the CRAS or the professional [...]. They thank us [...] Sometimes they (the citizens) say that the CRAS did this and this for me. But it was they themselves who approached the CRAS in order to orient themselves, to search for solutions [...]. They understand that they have rights, but the majority are under the impression that we help them.

While the professionals were very conscious about the rights of the citizens, the social workers in both the public services and the NGO found that the organizational framework placed restrictions on what kinds of services they could provide. Financial resources, juridical regulations and organizational aims framed their professional practices. At times, this led to dilemmas as the interventions they deemed necessary were not available, legal or within their mandate.

One telling example of this was the distribution of food baskets. This was somehow a controversial practice, as simply providing food to families with no secure source of alimentation resembled the practices of 'assistencialism', in which social benefits were provided as donations. Food baskets were distributed through both the CRAS and one NGO in the community. At the CRAS, this was strictly regulated. For a family to receive a food basket, the urgent need had to be documented, usually through a home visit. The aim of the home visit would be to detect whether there were other interventions that could be better, or whether there was another follow-up the CRAS

should consider. If a family asked for a food basket a second time, the family would need to accept regular follow-up from the CRAS with a view to avoiding a further need for food donations. According to official regulations, each family could only receive four food baskets a year. On the other hand, although having their own procedures for distributing food baskets, the NGO was not bound by the same regulations. Both the number of baskets they could provide, and the procedures related to their distribution were regulated on the basis of their own discretion, resources and internal procedures.

Even though the CRAS was subject to strict regulations, the professionals often found themselves in situations where they would donate food baskets beyond the formal regulations. This could be when confronting very complex issues, including a lack of regular habitation, drug addiction or psychiatric problems, in which the likelihood of assisting the families to achieve a state of independence in the near future was slim. Thus, if there were any food baskets available, the CRAS occasionally donated one, even though the citizens were not formally qualified. More often, however, they called an NGO to ask if they had any baskets to donate. By doing this, they could evade regulations seen as an obstacle to really helping the families, and adhere to the less bureaucratic regulations of the NGOs.

Such activities, where the professionals at the CRAS made informal referrals to NGOs, were seen as an important dimension of their work. One of them said: 'It is impossible to work without my network.' The networks in question could refer to the formal collaboration between different public services such as health, social services, education and vocational training, as well as partnership arrangements between the municipality and different private partners and NGOs. Still, in their daily practices, it could also include informal collaboration with professionals employed by NGOs or other services without encompassing formal obligations to collaborate with the CRAS. This made it possible for the professionals at the CRAS to make use of services that for different reasons were unavailable at the CRAS, either because the citizens were not qualified, their services were insufficient in terms of their extension and quality or the services did not exist within the public system. The professionals at the CRAS could therefore use their informal contacts in the community to facilitate different services. This was not only limited to food baskets, but included, for

example, pre- and after-school activities for children, maternal care for single mothers, vocational training and various forms of counselling.

These services are not rights-based services in a legal sense, and even though the citizen could not demand that the professionals make use of their informal connections in the community, it was possible to ask them to. My principal aim in directing attention to the significance of informal networks is that in professional practice there are ways of avoiding the bureaucracy, and to help individuals to achieve more adequate services than those available through the CRAS.

### **Who is the Brazilian citizen?**

In the examples of interaction between the public services and the citizens referred to above, it is possible to interpret and activate various perspectives on the relationship between individuals and society. On the one hand, the meetings between the professionals and citizens underscore the egalitarian principles for the social services found in policy documents, information and guidelines from the SUAS, academic literature and contemporary discourses on social work in Brazil. On the other hand, these interactions simultaneously facilitate the possibility of seeing the individual in a holistic perspective, where the person's specific situation can be taken into consideration.

In the context of complaints, the preferred venue for forwarding complaints was through personal communication. Likewise, when the standardizations of the public services did not fulfil expectations or perceived needs, there were other possibilities of evading the egalitarian principles of bureaucratic universalism through activating informal relations. To better understand these dynamics in a Brazilian context, I find it valuable to view this in terms of an interplay of different moral universes – those referring to the egalitarian values of the street and those referring to the holistic values of the house.

In a discussion about citizenship in an urban slum area in Recife in Brazil, Koster describes the dual meanings of citizenship, in what he describes as the 'official and the unofficial realms' (Koster, 2014, p. 217) of interaction between the citizens and the public representatives. In his analysis, Koster argues that dwellers in the poor

communities generally feel alienated from the official discourses on the struggle for citizenship since: 'slum residents do not often inhabit the official sphere, and, through squatting and extra-legal livelihood practices, are more active in unofficial domains in which personal relationships are central to their survival' (Koster, 2014, p. 217). This aspect of Brazilian cultures and societies becomes even more evident if we add the perspectives of the street and the house as described by DaMatta, in addition to the daily practices of helping out in difficult situations like the *jeitinho*.

In the community where the CRAS and the NGO operated, the citizens had various options in terms of their survival strategies and various venues to pursue if they needed social assistance. The CRAS, the health station and other public services represented some possibilities, while various NGOs and religious communities also provided social assistance. Food baskets, pre- and after-school activities, vocational training, child care, cultural activities, social security benefits, care for the disabled and the elderly, youth centres and popular restaurants with low-priced alimentation and a local bank providing favourable loans exclusively to the dwellers of the community, were all available benefits and services. They all had their principles of inclusion and exclusion, sometimes different and diverging, and they were sometimes connected to each other through formal or informal collaboration. This means that, in practice, the principles for receiving social benefits were different and in various ways negotiable. Sometimes, the aid and alliance with the *vereadora* is helpful in this negotiation process, whereas at other times, the social workers' position from where they can activate different informal connections in their networks may secure access to benefits that are otherwise unavailable.

In this context, the statutory services that emphasize universal rights, equality and citizenship as the basis for access to social benefits, when enforced in full, represent a brute and blind egalitarian justice. The personal struggles of the individuals are reduced to equalizing universal categories and numbers which define their right to assistance. By this, the individual is placed in the anonymous realm of the street where it is difficult to evoke sympathy and care. Personal connections and informal relations that are important in order to manage everyday lives are difficult to deploy. In turn, this means that the rule of egalitarian morals carry the risk of locating the individual outside the care and compassion of the realm of the house. In this sense,

citizenship does not empower the individuals, but rather reduces them to mere citizens no different from others. Consequently, the moral legitimacy of the services can be questioned.

Citizenship within the egalitarian sphere of interaction emphasizes equal access to benefits in society and opposition to the hierarchical codes of interaction. On the other hand, reducing the individuals to mere citizens, and in particular individuals who are subject to some type of social exclusion in the first place, deprives them of the assets necessary to secure their needs and interests through personal relations and the evocation of sympathy. The moral universe of the egalitarian street views the individuals as equal and as defined by normative, juridical and universal principles, while the moral universe of the relational house views the individuals as different, defined through their personal relations. Both views include positive and negative elements, and both views are applied in Brazilian society.

#### *Studying citizenship in social work in Brazil*

With a return to democracy and growing political consciousness, the discourses on citizenship among the urban poor in Brazil are often directed towards popular participation, protagonism and the right to participate in the defined political system. This conquest of citizenship 'from below', often referred to as 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston, 2008), has been central to understanding the challenges in implementing democracy in Brazil. However, in my opinion, many of these studies, which are based on critical social work theory and consequently promote a critical analysis of traditional hierarchical social relations, fail to acknowledge the complexity of the social relations that influence and legitimize social interaction in everyday lives. With their basis in normative and ideological references, they tend to represent the egalitarian and hierarchical spheres as mutually exclusive dichotomies. I therefore suggest that in the study of social work as a professional practice, the different spheres of the house and the street should be considered in relation to how they appear in practice – not as dichotomies but as interaction.

On a theoretical level, this requires an approach similar to that proposed by DaMatta, in which the depictions of the house and the street, places where people live their lives, are employed as references to describe the relationship between the individual

and society. In research, and especially in social work that aims to understand the 'social', this implies that micro-interactionist theories which focus on the construction of meaning will be useful analytical approaches. Instead of assuming that the meaning of concepts travels across context with little or no change, the meanings should be studied as they arise from the different contexts. This is explicated through the analytical lenses of institutional ethnography in which the ruling capacity of translocal normative standardizations is not discarded. Nor are they taken as a priori structures. Instead, they are viewed as processes that need to be activated as meaningful constructs in local contexts.

In other words, the meaning of citizenship in social work is constructed through practices. Therefore, in social work research in Brazil, studying the provisioning of social benefits as a field of services provided by professionals and institutions representing various ideologies, organizations and sectors in society will add important perspectives to the understanding of the meanings of social work and social assistance. This will align the perspectives on social assistance to the experiences of those in need of assistance. Hence, to understand the meanings of citizenship in social work, it is important to inquire into how it is practised by the citizens.

The variation in different regions of Brazil is also significant, and the interplay of egalitarian and hierarchical values can be manifested in various forms. Demography, economy, culture and political relations influence the SUAS differently in the different regions, allowing different social relations to dominate in social interaction (Andrade & Zimmermann, 2011; Couto, Yazbek, Silva e Silva, & Raichelis, 2014). Personal relations are more dominant in the political administrative system in some municipalities than in others (Delgado, Brito, Sagastume, & Moraes, 2017; Ottmann, 2006; Sodr e & Alves, 2010), and the relations with indigenous peoples entail a different set of historical and social relations between the state and the citizens (Borges, 2016). Exploring the local is thus a valuable perspective.

## **Conclusion**

In social work in Brazil, universal social inclusion, democracy and citizenship are important fields of discussion. These discussions are related to a long history of

social inequality and exploitation, and are important in order to define the role and significance of social work in society. In this article, I have identified how these discussions contribute to discourses on social work, in which the values and norms associated with hierarchy and holism are viewed as contradictory to the egalitarian values of citizenship. However, drawing on sociological theory on social work in Brazil, I have argued that these dimensions must be understood as social practices, where they are complementary and open up for different morally acceptable practices. Moreover, I have argued that a strict egalitarian practice of rights and citizenship will impede access to social benefits, and that the holistic hierarchical values are necessary to provide morally acceptable care.

In social work in Brazil, this analytical approach needs to be explored. I have suggested that practices relating to complaints and informal networks of professionals can be pursued as fields of investigation to help exemplify these dynamics. On a methodological level, I have suggested employing micro-interactionist models to interpret meanings in social work. This perspective is strengthened by employing institutional ethnography as an analytical perspective, as it connects the local to the translocal and the general processes orchestrating society.

The article suggests a line of interpretation that can be applied to the 'social' in Brazil that not only approaches social work in an ideological and normative way, but also defines social work practices from a culturally relevant perspective.

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