

Dagmar Pinto de Castro

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Understanding the Brazilian family

topics:

- *economic problems of families in Brazil*
- *poverty*
- *family income*

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Throughout the history of humanity it is clear that human survival requires care. A child cannot survive or grow in isolation from other human beings. Various human groupings have appeared in order to deal with these basic needs. Many of these groupings do not have the characteristics of modern families, but they have still been given the basic function of guaranteeing the physical survival of their members and the perpetuation of moral and social values. The family is dynamic. It experiences the influences of social transformation and also plays a part in the process of change. We recognize that there does not exist one model that is "best". However, we do recognize the importance of the family in the process of the development and formation of the individual, as well as its function in guaranteeing basic conditions of health, education, home, and the creation of a sense of citizenship.

This importance is declared in the International Year of the Family – 1994, which states as a guiding principle the recognition of the “family as a basic unit of society, that is essential for the preservation and transmission of cultural values, that educates, forms and motivates the human being and deserves special attention, protection and assistance. As an essential instrument of action, the family assumes specific responsibilities as presented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Agreements and Conventions of the United Nations.” (Takashima, 1994, in *A Família Brasileira a Base de Tudo*)

The family, as a human group, requires certain conditions in order to maintain the physical and mental integrity of its members, make possible the organization of values and, principally, provide its members with safety, affection, and a sense of belonging and family identity. This micro-universe is the locus of the production of the basic social identity every child needs in order to construct a sense of active citizenship. In the case of Brazil, the poorer stratum of society requires special attention. This is in part due to the concept of the regular versus irregular family. The regular, or normal family, is understood as being composed of a father, mother and children living under the same roof. Families headed by women or other figures often characterize the irregular family. The regular family is generally valorized while the irregular family is not. The irregular family is increas-

ingly found in the poorer sectors of society. These paradigms increasingly contain prejudices that interfere in our comprehension of and work with families.

An understanding of the history of families in Brazil will help to broaden our view regarding this situation, or these differences. Business journals, in both the city of Rio de Janeiro and in the state of Salvador, dated more than a century ago reveal “an in-satisfaction with the black street urchins that wander the streets, threatening businesses and their customers; they also complain about their mothers, women of no apparent means of support that do not care for their many children and release them on the world without due attention.”(Neder, 1994, in *A Família Brasileira a Base de Tudo*). The association of poverty and delinquency (the criminalization of poverty) and the incapacity of family organization is an ideological and political question that has permeated the practice of interpretation and work with Brazilian families for decades. This context was modified with the Federal Constitution of 1988, with the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA) and with the conquests of movements in favor of women that have intervened through legislative means for a new constitutional definition of the family that is more inclusive and avoids traditional prejudices.

One of the major steps in this process is the recognition of equal rights and duties between men and women in the marriage relationship, the affirmation of family planning as a free decision of the couple, and the creation of mechanisms that restrict violence. These gains are fundamental in terms of work with families, but certain facts must still be taken into account in order to understand the Brazilian family. According to data regarding family income in 1990, the number of families living in very precarious conditions was quite elevated. 36.8% of family are below the so called poverty line, with a family “per capita” income of one half of a minimum salary (one minimum salary is approximately US\$ 135.00). The number of families below the poverty line increased in this decade, particularly in urban areas. The following graphic shows monthly “per capita” income of Brazilian families between the years 1981 and 1990.¹

Brazil 1981-1990	in thousands	
	1981	1990
Number of Minimum Salaries		
total	25,971	35,233
no income	465	776
1/4 Minimum Salary	4,225	5,985
1/4 to 1/2 Minimum Salary	5,658	6,991
1/2 to 1 Minimum Salary	6,536	8,203
1 to 2 Minimum Salaries	4,786	6,544
2 to 3 Minimum Salaries	1,738	2,523
more than 3 Minimum Salaries	2,357	3,768

The analysis of this data allows us to verify the growing poverty of families in this decade. In contrast, there is an increasing concentration of wealth in this decade that has increased social inequality. According to information from the Research Institute of Applied Economics – IPEA, there are approximately 9 million indi-

gent families in Brazil. With this information we can infer that working with families has reached a state of emergency in Brazil. Not only are children at risk, but also many families, which include adolescents, youth, women, men, persons with handicaps and elderly that live in absolute poverty. In light of the emergency state of the Brazilian family we cannot expect that the State alone will be able to provide minimum living conditions. All segments of Brazilian society are called upon to join forces in order to deal with this dramatic situation. The fragmentary work that is being done with children, adolescents and women requires new expressions. The child on the street, the women that suffers domestic violence and the adolescent that prostitutes themselves must have some type of family of origin. We need to return our gaze to this family and seek effective action at a preventative level in order that children do not go to the street and adolescents do not need to sell their bodies in order to obtain a minimal survival.

One of the basic requirements for this type of action is to recognize the prejudices involved with work with these populations. One of these prejudices is the myth of the “failure” of the poor family. This prejudice impedes effective work with these groups. We need to face and overcome this prejudice about poor families in order to seek, together, viable new options. This attitude has certainly helped create the rank prejudice that has affected decades of public programs as well as the training of professionals in the areas of health, education and so forth.

Bibliography

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