

The key role of social workers in clientelistic structures: constraints for citizenship construction among poor in Brazil¹

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Abstract: This paper analyses a piece of the modern Brazilian clientelistic gear in the Northeast region. The specificity of this "modern" clientelism is its appropriation of large-scale federal social policies of poverty reduction – particularly the Bolsa Família Programme (BFP). The study of clientelism in this context allowed us to understand the key role of social workers in the operationalisation of political clientelism and in imposing constraints for citizenship construction. In this sense, following the tradition of the cultural studies, one focus of the research was the symbolic boundaries between the actors involved, the categories of representation, actions and their intentions. The research is based on qualitative data collected over 6 months (in 2013 and 2014) in the Brazilian Northeast region. Two devices of social assistance were observed to compose an ethnographic material about the daily life of social workers, combined with interviews with relevant actors and beneficiaries of social programmes.

Keywords: clientelism; social assistance; poverty; CCT; Bolsa Família; Brazil

Introduction

This paper analyses a piece of the modern Brazilian clientelistic gear in the Northeast region. The specificity of this "modern" clientelism is its appropriation of large-scale federal social policies of poverty reduction – particularly the *Bolsa Família* Programme (BFP). The study of clientelism in this context allowed us to understand the key role of social workers in the operationalisation of political clientelism and in imposing constraints for citizenship construction. We found that their discretionary practices are the foundation of clientelism within social assistance.

A broad understanding – even if shallow in certain points – was necessary for the analysis of the relationship between citizenship and poverty. An incomplete citizenship, or one that experiences disruptions, can only be analysed considering the role played by clientelism within the social order. Similarly, that analyses of the construction of a citizenship bond (Paugam, 2008), or of its expansion due to social programmes such as the BFP is deficient if clientelism is not taken in account.

¹ Due to the paper's preliminary nature, all the analyses and data presented are to be interpreted as work in progress. A version of this paper was used for presentations in two other events: VIe Congrès de l'Association française de sociologie, (Saint-Quentin en Yvelines, June/July 2015); Annual RC19 Conference, International Sociological Association (Bath, august 2015).

The case studies

My analyses of these phenomena are based on events that unfolded in one of Northeast regional capitals², a city I call *Angico*³, where I developed my research during 3 months in 2013 and 2 months in 2014. Angico is the main city of its region, the second largest in its state after the capital, the third largest state electoral college. The choice for this municipality is explained by its relevance in the state political scene, its socio-economic importance, and its position as a medium-size city in the outback of the Northeast, the *Sertão* or Brazilian Semiarid (Figure 1). Its recent process of economic development and consequent urbanisation in a predominantly rural area is illustrative of the transformations occurring not only in the Semiarid, but in several regions throughout the country.

The essence of the chosen method is the addition of variables and ideas to the model under construction through the fieldwork phase. The strategy used for this is to come close to the conditions in which individuals assign meanings to objects and events, for a more precise description of these meanings. The adopted approach aims for breadth, rather than thickness: we seek to discover something about each topic the research touches, even if tangentially. The goal is to understand the phenomenon as a whole, the fitting of its parts and their interrelationships (Becker, 2001).



Figure 1. the *Sertão* or Brazilian Semiarid

The fieldwork focused on direct observation of the daily activities of two devices of the municipal social assistance: 1) the local coordination of the BFP, and 2) one of Angico's seven Social Assistance Reference Centres (CRAS).

The BFP is the largest conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme in the world, currently targeting more than 14 million families, about 50 million people – a quarter of the country's population. Its conditionalities are children schooling and vaccinations, besides regular medical checkups for pregnant women. The benefits

² Medium-size cities that have experienced rapid economic development over the past two decades, and that play an important role in the regional dynamics beyond the state capitals.

³ Given the delinquent and illegal nature of the surveyed activities, confidentiality and anonymity were the basis for establishing a relationship of trust with informants and respondents. The risks incurred by them in providing this type of information were high, and involve at least the loss of their job. Also, since some of my informants participated in illegal activities themselves, even if passively, by coercion, preserving their identity is crucial, an important ethical research commitment.

vary between R\$ 35 and R\$ 336⁴, depending on family composition, in order to lift families above the poverty line⁵. Although it is a federal programme, the BFP is managed in collaboration with municipalities. The main managing steps are:

1. the federal government allocates quotas to municipalities, based on the estimated number of poor people;
2. municipalities proceed to registering of potential families in a centralised database, Unified Registry⁶;
3. the federal government uses the data to determine families eligibility and the value of benefits, besides constant checking of cadastral irregularities;
4. municipalities keep track of beneficiaries: regular update of cadastral information, compliance of conditionalities, irregularities verification.

To conduct observations in the local BFP office was a natural choice since it is where almost all activities concerning the programme are developed at the municipal level. Most of the observation efforts focused on the activities related to the registration and update of family data, involving mainly the routines of social assistants – 2 or 3 –, and indirectly, two dozen interviewers and the coordination of the programme.

Noting the ephemeral and superficial character of the relationship between beneficiaries and BFP social workers, and understanding that the clientelistic structure under investigation had the social assistance as a fundamental piece, it was clear the observations had to be expanded to another social assistance device. Thanks to an informant with whom I had already established a good relationship with in 2013, and who was now working in a CRAS, I was able to realise whilst paying her a visit, that this was a strategic observation point of clientelistic practices.

The CRAS is also a federal program, launched by the former president Lula, whose main goal is to facilitate access to services provided by the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), which includes the BFP. These units are part of a decentralisation strategy and are placed in the most vulnerable areas of each municipality. It is also responsible for “territorial management of basic social service network, promoting the organisation and the articulation of the units referred to it and the management of the processes involved” (MDS, 2015). The novelty offered by this programme is the monitoring of families in social risk in order to prevent “the breaking of ties, promoting access and use of rights and helping to improve the quality of life” (MDS, 2015).

The numbers that compose this programme are also illustrative of its importance: in the unit studied (one of the seven CRAS in Angico), there were a little over a dozen technical staff – ranging from social workers, psychologists to pedagogues – while the BFP had at most three. The CRAS gathers the poorest families of municipalities, by situating themselves in the poorest neighbourhoods. They develop continuous and ongoing work with these families, acting with different programs (including

⁴ Circa 10 and 100 euros, respectively.

⁵ In Brazilian social assistance, “family” is the home with all its members, which can also be extended family, non-formal partners, and permanently associate people. In short, all those who live there.

⁶ The *Cadastro Único* is a database controlled by the Ministry of Social Development and fed by municipalities that gives access to all federal social programmes, mainly the BFP.

registering and cadastral updating for the BFP), and creating personal and lasting relationships with the social assistant beneficiaries. It was no different in the CRAS I visited, which was situated in the city's poorest district and the largest in Angico in terms of population covered and employees. To include the CRAS in the research is justified by its central role in the clientelistic structure observed, together with the BFP and its municipal coordination. As part of the same system orchestrated by the mayor, the distinction between these two devices of the social assistance will only be made when strictly necessary, taking into account the simplification of the explanations.

In summary, the research comprised two social assistance devices: the BFP municipal office and one CRAS, located in the poorest and most populated neighbourhood in Angico. In the former, the routine of the social workers was observed (two in 2013 and two others in 2014), accompanying them on households visits and at the office, where they hold scheduled meetings with beneficiaries – mostly to solve problems related to benefits suspensions – and exchanged with the rest of the staff. At the CRAS, the social workers' office was the observation point, where they received beneficiaries and prepared for interventions and family visits. The focus in both places were the interactions between social workers and beneficiaries, and repeated interviews (formal and informal) were conducted with a total of ten social workers.

Formal interviews were conducted in order to complement ethnographic observations. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty social assistance beneficiaries, without the presence of social workers⁷. The interviews focused on the beneficiaries' perceptions of the BFP and the broader social assistance, politics and elections, and clientelism and vote-buying.

At the institutional level, eight employees holding coordination positions within the municipal social assistance were interviewed. Interviews with social assistance coordinators of neighbour municipalities were also carried out in order to establish a comparative perspective. At the national level, three high level officers within the BFP were interviewed. Table 1 summarises key-information of fieldwork activities.

⁷ Once I got familiarised with the neighbourhood where the CRAS was, I could walk freely without guidance. Its size, approximately 20 thousand habitants, guaranteed that I could remain a stranger, not identified with the social workers.

Actors <i>City</i>	Number	Technique
BFP social workers <i>Angico</i>	4	Repeated interviews (formal and informal), direct observation
CRAS social workers <i>Angico</i>	6	Repeated interviews, direct observation
Beneficiaries <i>Angico</i>	20	Formal in-depth interviews
Local social assistance coordinators <i>Angico</i>	8	Formal structured interviews
Social assistance coordinators of neighbour municipalities	4	Formal structured interviews
BFP high national officers <i>Brasília</i>	3	Formal structured interviews

Table 1. Summary of fieldwork activities (2013-2014)

Results

The lack of clarity of the term clientelism results in its use without distinction, leading to a loss of the concept's scientific value. There are only a handful of recent scientific papers where a literature review on the topic is made, and many are those that confuse clientelism with concepts such as patronage, vote buying, electoral targeting of public resources, assistencialism and corruption. Clientelism is always materialised on the micro-sociological level, and through this reasoning, we propose a redefinition of the term by making use of Tina Hilgers' work, who has managed to highlight the key elements of this concept:

In addition to being an exchange in which individuals maximize their interests, clientelism involves longevity, diffuseness, face-to-face contact, and inequality. That is, it is a lasting personal relationship between individuals of unequal sociopolitical status. Establishing these characteristics facilitates differentiation from concepts such as vote buying and corruption and determines clientelism's analytical position at the microsociological level (Hilgers, 2011: 568).

We identify thus five fundamental dimensions of the concept: maximisation of interests, longevity, diffuseness, face-to-face contact, and inequality. This perspective allowed us to understand the key role of social workers in the operationalisation of political clientelism and in imposing constraints for citizenship construction. In this sense, following the tradition of the cultural studies, one focus of the research was the symbolic boundaries between the actors involved, the categories of representation, actions and their intentions (Small *et al.*, 2010).

Symbolic boundaries in the social assistants and beneficiaries relationship

The relationship between social workers and beneficiaries (both groups composed mainly of women⁸) is constantly permeated by symbolic class boundaries. It is in their appearance that we notice the first signs of this border. Even if the (still weak) democratisation of university education has enabled the existence of social workers from working classes, and perhaps even once recipient of social assistance programmes themselves, integrating this group requires some sort of aesthetics conformation. This is easily seen in the use of high heels and brand new clothing; the makeup and straightened hair; use of accessories, big earrings and gold bracelets; iPhones; fancy bags. No effort to hide or take this distinctive signs out of the highlight is done. And sometimes it seems just the opposite, when the conversations about traveling to the capital or major new purchases do not stop with the presence of one or two beneficiaries in their office for an appointment.

The beneficiaries are also women who care for their appearance, it should not be forgotten. They also carry smartphones, even if a bit more modest. However, even during those encounters, they are also in a domestic sphere, of private life, sometimes not very far from home. And, of course, we see the contrast between these two women especially during the meetings at the beneficiaries' homes. They wear, therefore, always *havaianas* sandals and simple clothes, short pants, as they do at home; the makeup and straightened hair are reserved for special occasions; their black or brown skin and curly hair also mark racial difference; accessories are simple, no gold jewellery; no brand bags or sunglasses.

In these exchanges, silence is the rule among beneficiaries, the gentle tone of their voices answering questions or telling their problems. The rare occasions where indignation is expressed are constantly responded with incomprehension by social workers, asking them to control themselves; the laughter begins after these women leave. Empathy and friendship of social workers is restricted to few among them. For those "who really need, who have suffered much, who are trying to fight against life hazards". There, going beyond the appearances that mark these encounters, is where we find the most relevant symbolic boundaries for the construction of their relationship.

Poverty representations and the discretionary practices of social assistance

In their constant contact with beneficiaries, social workers reinforce a representation of poor as lazy and deceitful, always trying to take advantage of the generous state. In their daily activities, social workers incorporate such representations with the intention to force information disclosure, which the beneficiaries could have omitted or changed in order to increase their benefit. This representation and its consequent practices form a particular habitus of social workers. As defined by Bourdieu (1979), a habitus is a system of acquired and incorporated dispositions that reproduces the conditionings of its origin, widely shared across a certain category or group.

Throughout the fieldwork, only once did I come across a social worker who did not share completely these representations, and whom she did not show openly to her colleagues. Her practices, however, were to some extent shaped by this same system of beliefs. This habitus is directly influenced by the class habitus, to which

⁸ In the BFP case, women are always the responsible for the benefit.

social workers belong. Given the extreme concentration of wealth in the region, access to higher education is still restricted, and the choice of this profession is fairly esteemed by upper-medium classes.

In this context, an identity conflict emerges between their professional activity that must assist those in need, and their social class which relates poverty to merit, and doubts the reasons why someone may seek assistance. The first of these profiles, presented to them in adulthood in higher education, is evoked in their discourse when encountered with critical poverty situations, where empathy facing an extremely vulnerable situation is indisputable. Other situations, those less critical, are seen through the class lenses, and a stigmatising discourse of the poor is immediately evoked. The BFP's limited resources and the amount of people on the waiting list are used to justify the coexistence of both behaviours, since they must "make room" for the true poor people who are currently not receiving the benefit. Their work thus, becomes crucial to the achievement of the programme's goals, and they will be as strict as possible when it comes to finding out who is committing fraud and wrongly receiving the benefit.

The discretionary nature of their work is intended in the BFP format. In fact, if the delimitation of a target profile is made primarily by the household income, in a context of poverty, formal employment is rare. In fact, by having a formal job, a family rarely falls under the poverty line, and therefore not eligible for the programme. The majority of recipients have informal work, seasonal, unstable, or paid by day. It also means they can not provide proofs of wages.

In the BFP guidelines, registration is self-declaratory, and given information can not be contested. The files are processed by the programme's centralised system at the federal level and the benefit granted is based on the transmitted information. In this context, social workers or other agents do not have much influence. Only in a second moment, when the presence of social workers is required to check irregularities directly from beneficiaries, a deeper assessment is made. It is up to them to assess cases particularly, using sensitivity acquired in their training to reach a decision: is the household eligible or not to receive the allowance? Are the values provided corrected?

The common practice is to estimate, with the family, the household's average monthly income. This calculation can be done in different ways. The social worker can force a "real average value" of income. It may also request details of household expenses and compare to the declared income. In this way, "people do not think to do all the calculations before", explains one social worker. And finally, even if they are not supposed to, they can also integrate into their analysis the condition of the house, objects that are visible, a motorcycle parked in front of the house, a television. All can be used by social workers to assess the real needs of the family, and compare it with other families. Having decided that, they just find a way to integrate this "qualitative assessment" in the dossier so that this evaluation be reflected in the value of the benefit, its suspension or continuation.

In their critical view of the BFP, social workers highlight its self-declaratory character. The bureaucratic obligation to "believe" the beneficiary is frowned upon, and regularly challenged and contested. This is the case of the declaration form signed by the programme's beneficiaries, testifying that the information given by the respondent is true. The social workers informed me that they always emphasise the juridical-legal

nature of the document, especially the part where it says: “liable of criminal and civil prosecution as a result of committed frauds”. One of them said “we make them a bit scared” [*a gente faz um medinho nelas*], and laughing, told me how, ironically, at this moment the respondents tend to “remember” an income source or something alike.

Street-level bureaucracy and the clientelistic strategy

These and other practices were observed systematically, and are viewed by the social workers as fixes to the programme’s flaws, or simply “normal” strategies to better achieve the programme’s goals. The implications of this behaviour is the generation of a vicious cycle (Figure 1), that reinforces misinformation and the representation of the beneficiaries as deceitful.

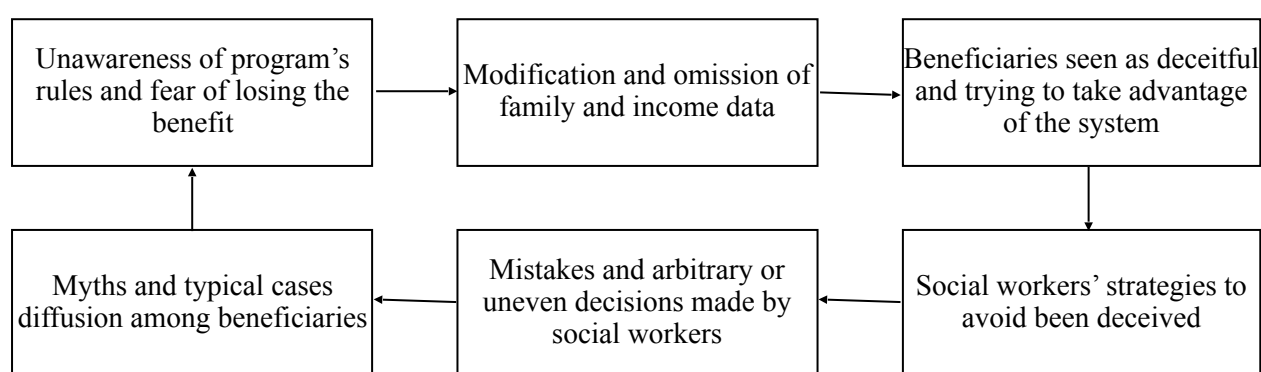


Figure 1. Vicious cycle: poverty representations and misinformation in the BFP

This arbitrariness echoes the “street-level bureaucracy” studies (Lipsky’s, 1980), since social workers use their bureaucratic discourse and practice to confuse their interlocutors, maintaining power over them. Lipsky’s main argument is that this agents should be “acknowledged and conceptualised as the last link in the policy-making chain because it is only in the interaction between caseworkers and clients that formal social policy comes to life” (Rice, 2012: 1039). According to Lipsky’s theory, the behaviour of agents are influenced by two factors: organisational context and intrinsic cognitive-emotional utility functions. The latter concerns not only individual disposition, but the habitus shared by the group, as explained above. The organisational context gives the material structure and limitations that will influence the individual’s perception on the discrepancy between the programme’s goals and the means to its application. The combination of such factors determines whether street-level bureaucrats rigorously apply, creatively adapt, or undermine the programme goals in their interaction with beneficiaries (Rice, 2012).

In the case analysed, social workers rely on a range of informal strategies to creatively adapt the programme. They are not deliberately undermining the programme’s goal, since they justify their practices by putting forward the need to unsubscribe fraudulent beneficiaries from the programme. They also do not apply those rules rigorously, because they receive training and are aware of the guidelines for their work, of which they do not believe there are enough.

Among their strategies, the most common were: inquiring about beneficiaries lives among neighbours; comparing answers given to similar questions on different

occasions; requiring their presence at the BFP office for intimidation rather than actual need; omitting information about the programme's functioning and rules; emphasising and exaggerating legal consequences that one might suffer if convicted of fraud. The misinformation about the program, beyond being a result of its increasing complexity, is fed deliberately by social workers in order to give less subsidies to beneficiaries who may be deceiving them.

The result of these practices, explained in the vicious circle presented, is insecurity over earnings. Being already a beneficiary is not a guarantee of its continuation. Each one of my interviewees knew of a case, a neighbour, who lost her benefit for no apparent reason. Assumptions are made: "I think the BFP has a limited duration"; "she made a big purchase of furniture once"; and finally, "the social worker paid him a visit". The real programme conditionalities are not mentioned often. Quickly they recognise that there are things beyond their understanding. "It's like that". In this context, someone who can offer a guarantee, or a "little kick-hand to solve any problem with the benefit" is really welcome.

During the 2014 elections, this uncertainty and misinformation was used by politicians in electoral campaigns in order to gain votes. For the politicians in power, the use of public resources facilitates this process, since they control their staff by threats of dismissal (since the vast majority of them hold non-stable positions and can be fired at any time) and therefore can use their discretionary work in their favour. That was mainly the case of the BFP office, where the coordinator held private meetings with beneficiaries with bureaucratic problems with their benefits, and allocated certain social workers of her thrust to work more intensively in neighbourhoods where political allies had their electoral base.

Regarding the CRAS, all activities were to be suspended, and it was to function on minimum staff. One or two technicians stayed back for urgent matters while the rest had orders to scan their areas (the city's worst-off) in order to revert the bad performance. Orders were to: 1) ask for votes and encourage those who had not already voted for the candidate; and 2) identify family needs and make offers, ensuring detailed lists of demands were to be forwarded daily to the central committee, which would be met during the following days. A third step was described by families, which could not be identified as an order received or a spontaneous strategy used by the social workers: to highlight CRAS' advantages and how bad it would be if the services would no longer be available.

Clientelism and citizenship

Beyond the description of clientelistic organisation, a focus on the client's perspective was also given by attributing them an active role in the clientelistic relationship. Within this relationship, domination may appear, however this is just one of many aspects, and is not considered a fundamental and explanatory factor. Thus, a sociocultural approach towards clientelistic ties is adopted, highlighting that these ties must be analysed within the poor's cultural universe. This relationship has two fundamental dimensions: material (goods, services or support) and symbolic (schemes of assessment, perception and action in subject's mental structures – or simply, Bourdieu's *habitus*), setting cultural reciprocity expectations prior to the individuals involved. These two dimensions complement each other setting a moral

economy that implies rights and duties, obligations beyond material exchange, terms of reciprocity negotiated according to a moral calculus (Thompson, 1971).

In a perspective of utilitarian individualism, clients' rational behaviour was observed not only regarding the choice of the patron and the strategies used to maximise their interests, but also the manner in which these individuals assimilate their dual role as clients and citizens. Three different types of voting patterns, related to clientelistic practices were observed. First, voters who openly and deliberately contest clientelistic arrangements, not by their refusal, but rather by using different patrons and not considering those engagements as constraints for their votes: "I take from whoever wants to give me. At the end, I vote for whoever I want". Second, voters who assess patrons by their moral worth. They label good candidates and politicians as family, good-hearted and hard-working men, while bad ones are those who do not care for the poor or do not keep their promises. When the social workers with whom they interact work as intermediaries of clientelistic relationships, they are trusted as such, and their promises and threats are taken as true. Third, those who engage indifferently in clientelistic relationships. The patron who wins their votes is usually the one who gives more. They only vote because it is mandatory, and no correlation is to be found between voting and their daily life. They are also indifferent to who wins or loses, as long as the promises are previously paid.

Conclusion

This arbitrariness echoes the "street-level bureaucracy" studies, since social workers use their bureaucratic discourse and practice to confuse their interlocutors, maintaining power over them. The misinformation about the program, beyond being a result of its increasing complexity, is fed deliberately by social workers in order to give less subsidies to beneficiaries who may be deceiving them.

A part of the clientelistic structure is thus set: in a context of insecurity, stigmatisation and extreme poverty, political candidates target the poorest neighbourhoods offering the continuity of programs which they are entitled. Not rarely, social workers are forced to make this negotiation at election time.

Finally, even in the context of citizenship expansion, where the poorest and most marginalised in Brazilian society are experiencing an economic and political inclusion – with their needs officially recognised by the State and not object of charity or paternalistic benevolence – clientelistic practices show resilience.

Thus, my argument is that for the Northeast poor, the BFP initiates the opportunity not only for broadening of citizenship conception, through a more direct contact with public institutions, but also for the consequent rearrangement of terms in political clientelistic relationships. This expression of Brazilian citizenship of the Northeast poor merges modern democracy values and a local control system.

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