

# Stigma, humiliation and social control among beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* Program

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## Abstract

In this article we intend to analyze the parameters from which representations and practices are constructed between the “street bureaucrats” and the “poor”. Among the research objectives, we first seek to understand how program candidates interpret and negotiate with program operators the categories assigned by them. Second, we seek to explore the extent to which the group of beneficiaries is perceived by itself and perceived as a differentiated social group in the enrollment sector. In this sense, three questions guide our analysis: 1) What values are applied by beneficiaries and candidates to justify their participation in the Program? and 2) Are they subject to constraints and/or controls that are particularly related to their status as state dependents? To answer these questions, we conducted 70 interviews with Bolsa Família program beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in a periphery of Rio de Janeiro. Among the research findings, we identified that there is moral disqualification and that the interviewees feel (in some contexts and not in the totality of their trajectories) stigmatized for being beneficiaries of an income transfer policy.

**Keywords:** Poverty. Bolsa Família Program. Stigma.

## Introduction

In this paper we have used the sociology framework to analyze the parameters from which representations, classifications and practices are built among “street-level bureaucrats” (LIPSKY, 1983) and the “poor”. We are particularly interested in the discussion on poverty that has led to different forms of analysis, focuses and theoretical/methodological biases. For this reason, we would like to clarify that the concept of poverty with



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which we work is far removed from the epistemological field of the economy, precisely because it limits poverty to a large extent to income aspects and access to consumption, and we also move away from the approaches used by political science, which tend to prioritize the analyzes of the effectiveness of policies.

For both the sociologist and the anthropologist, it would be interesting to analyze the State, from its social construction, as an institution that forms groups and produces identities. In this sense, we intend to discuss the slow, conflictive and diverse process of the construction of public policies, diverging from the view that sees the State as a homogenous, universal and finished institution. Strobel (2008, p. 65), for example, states that the concept of poverty must not be limited to the income aspect, since the process of pauperization presents multiple forms, which may be affected by symbolic, political, social and economic aspects. Strobel also states that even the discourse of exclusion can be interpreted as reductionist as it unifies situations and ends up imposing a very simple image of a dual society divided between those who have and those who do not have access to goods, services and social rights. The author argues that the use of the concept of exclusion may serve both as a means of silencing the poor<sup>1</sup> and making the phenomenon of precariousness look natural, or as a rhetorical device to accommodate the situation.

Analyses of public policies to fight poverty in Brazil (especially those made by the Political Science) recurrently use the policy themselves (and their objectives) to reflect on the consequences of the public actions, without, however, giving importance to the social construction of the production of political discourses and without evaluating the gap between institutional norms and daily practices. Thus, they either take the policy as an “entity” that has a strategic rationality, directing its interests to the target population, or analyze the impacts of the policy on such group, seeking to measure the effectiveness of such actions. However, this does not mean that the envisaged effects get materialized or that other effects will necessarily occur.

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1 Throughout the text, we will be using the word “poor” as a native category, for this reason it will come without quotes.

In this sense, within this broad question, we have created a specific focus on the discourses, representations and practices (especially moral and symbolic) of the actors of the State in relation to the poor beneficiaries or candidates to the Bolsa Família Program (PBF). To do that, we carried out some field work on the daily life of a group of “beneficiaries” of this program in a poorer area of Rio de Janeiro State. In this regard, we have proposed to discuss two main issues: the process of social stigmatization (and moral humiliation) in the Bolsa Família Program enrollment sector and the beneficiaries perceptions of the State’s selection criteria.

For decades, there has been an accumulation of a vast academic production focused on the conceptualization of social inequalities and poverty as social phenomena. Mapping these references would be an inexhaustible task. Thus, this theoretical discussion presents only part of the debate, with the objective of constructing a more general background, on which we will base our research topic. On the one hand, we will look at the cultural and moral aspects of poverty, and on the other hand, we will analyze the social distinctions under the symbolic frontiers. This type of approach has not been so deep in the scope of the Social Sciences; very few studies address the collective representations and the symbolic dimension regarding the functioning of social groups in relation to the State.

In fact, it is necessary to insist on the often neglected socio-political dimensions regarding the development of poverty. According to Strobel (2008, p. 71), it would be necessary, on the one hand, to analyze the forms of symbolic exclusion and stigmatization of social groups seen as different (or deviant). On the other hand, it would be interesting to investigate the processes (whether institutionalized or not) of suppression of rights that represent *clôture* forms of a local, professional and national community.

The issue of poverty gained more visibility at the state level as of the 1980s crisis, when a series of public debates about how to face it became widespread. However, it was in the 1990s that the need to combat poverty was more systematically discussed and dealt with (in Brazil as well as in other Latin American countries and in the world), given the fact that the economic reforms carried out (linked to the market and productive restructuring) would not be sufficient to generate a recovery leading to a

significant reduction of poverty. It was in this context that income transfer policies emerged still in the 1990s, the largest of which appearing in Brazil in the 2000s: the Bolsa Família Program, which centralizes the role of the family (and in particular the role of the mother<sup>2</sup> in the process) and the policy itself resembles the definitions of other income transfer programs in Latin America, such as: Honduras's Programa de Asignación Familiar (1990), Nicaragua's Mi Familia (2000), and Colombia's Familias in Acción (2001). Here in Brazil, the Bolsa Família Program is gradually gaining support from a wide range of political forces with varied ideological nuances and public opinion, although it also generates a wide range of controversies.

As the social policies of economic development and fighting poverty have been determining "the ones deserving" of social policies (STEENSLAND, 2006) because they are classified as poor, we believe it is fundamental to investigate how and through which processes the understanding of what it is to be poor is determined and what repercussions this has among the recipient families of a Brazilian income transfer program.

## **The beginning of the Bolsa Família**

As a guiding principle of the former Fome Zero Program<sup>3</sup>, the Bolsa Família Program (PBF in Portuguese), created in 2003, is part of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government policy. This program has its origin in the unification of other non-contributory programs already existing in the previous president Fernando Henrique Cardoso's term, namely: the Bolsa Escola (school aid), Cartão Alimentação (food aid card), Auxílio Gás (domestic gas aid), and the Bolsa Alimentação (food aid), all of which created in the period 2001-2003<sup>4</sup>.

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2 In general, income transfer programs to fight poverty prioritize women as the ones who will help the intergenerational breakdown of poverty through the caretaking role.

3 Although this program has not been formally extinguished, Fome Zero (zero hunger) has been replaced by the program Plano Brasil Sem Miséria (Brazil without poverty plan).

4 The Bolsa Escola (school aid) and the Bolsa Alimentação (food aid) programs were focused on poor families with children.

In a short time, the PBF became the largest anti-poverty program in Brazil and one of the largest in the world; it served more than 13 million families until March 2013, according to data from *Ministério de Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome* (Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger) (MDS, 2013)<sup>5</sup>. In its design, the PBF has basically two objectives: immediate poverty relief through the direct transfer of income to poor families, prioritizing women as responsible for the benefit, and the exercise of basic social rights related to health and education, in order to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty reproduction.

The program was instituted as a Provisional Measure in 2003 – which later became Law nº 10,836. In its guidelines, the PBF characterizes itself as a direct income transfer program, which aims to guarantee the human right to food, education and health. The program not only encourages the education of children and adolescents, conditioning the receipt of the benefit to school attendance, but also health care, especially for children, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. In addition to the aforementioned conditions, PBF beneficiaries also have the possibility of benefiting from other public policies, such as the social tariff for electricity, training and literacy courses for young people and adults, exemption from public tender fees, among others. In its short-term objectives, the most latent is the immediate alleviation of the poverty condition for its beneficiaries. In the long term, the full exercise of the most basic rights is mentioned, such as health and education, with the aim of breaking the generational cycle of poverty.

An important configuration of this public policy and relevant to this work is the fact that, since the creation of the benefit, women have been placed as the legal responsible for receiving the resource. This choice was based on the idea that women are more dedicated to caring for their children than men, and therefore would more efficiently fulfill the program's objectives and conditionalities related to children's health and education. In addition to this configuration, thinking about the

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5 Now, *Ministério de Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome* (Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger) became *Ministério da Cidadania* (Citizenship Ministry). See: <https://www.gov.br/cidadania/pt-br>

guidelines and rules of the PBF is important to understand, in addition to its potential, its contradictions. Failure to comply with conditionalities, for example, implies different, gradual and restorative sanctions. In the study “Is Bolsa Família in the hot seat? The current challenges of income transfer programs”, Bichir (2010) addresses a series of tensions related to the program, structuring the main criticisms in some axes, in particular, that of conditionalities. Bichir (2010) points out that they may contain implicit meanings of control – since they presuppose a moral commitment on the part of families –, in addition to a denial of the right to receive part of the socially produced wealth by demanding that the poorest population fulfill compensation for this. Based on studies by several authors, Bichir (2010, p. 24) understands that the centrality of conditionalities in the national debate is more related to political issues and value judgment, based on the idea that the poor cannot receive money from the State without “the sweat of labor”.

In fact, public and academic debates on the PBF program have focused, in particular, on evaluating the program’s effectiveness: its focus on the population regarded as poor, meeting conditions regarding children school attendance, and access to food and health insurance. In other words, the majority of the studies produced so far have been focusing on analyzing the impacts of the PBF on the recipient population; that is, they aim to measure how close or how far the results obtained are from the goals established by the program itself. However, we have a different interest in the study of the Bolsa Família Program.

We would like to contribute to the reflection on public policies by proposing that they should be seen as a set of conceptions and actions that affect society, or part of it, beyond its declared objectives. Such effects can be of a symbolic nature and insert themselves in the relational fabric of a community, generating new forms of solidarity and tensions between social groups. This understanding of public policies is located within the studies on the implementation phase. Pires (2019) argues that this is the phase in which the relationship between State and society can be more strained due to the action of State agents commonly called “street-level bureaucrats”, responsible for facilitating the service to beneficiaries and

their needs, demands. According to Lotta, Pires e oliveira (2014), we can understand implementation as “the specific moment of materialization or implementation of policies”, a stage in which government action depends on state instruments and the action of bureaucrats (LOTTA; PIRES; OLIVEIRA, 2014, p. 12-13). In this sense, Pires (2019) understands that daily contacts between vulnerable segments of the population and services and public policies can lead to a series of unintended effects. The objective of this study is to focus precisely on the unexpected impacts, from the point of view of the Bolsa Família program.

Our view on the issue of poverty involves a discussion around three objectives. First, we seek to understand how the candidates to the program interpret and negotiate with the program operators the categories assigned by them. Second, we seek to explore to what extent the group of recipients is perceived by themselves and perceived as a differentiated social group in the enrollment sector. Basically we will pursue two questions: 1) what would this differentiation consist of? and 2) what values (or multiple moralities) are (not) applied by the beneficiaries and candidates to justify their participation in the program?

At this level of analysis, we would like to understand to what extent these professionals typify the low-income population and the “deserving” of the aid, in addition to understanding the rationale according to which the PBF implementing agents produce such typifications; that is, what would be the instruments (bureaucratic, economic, moral and/or being acquainted with an insider) used in order to legitimize and certify their positions. We will also present the criteria of justification used by the beneficiaries to explain the fact that they are “deserving” of the aid and the way in which they perceive their trajectory after receiving such aid. Do they suffer constraints and/ or controls that are particularly related to their position as citizens assisted by the State? In short, we seek to look into the movement of constitution of the “moral career” of the beneficiaries, when, at the same time, the “disciplinary control” (GOFFMAN, 1987) starts being exercised over them in the public sphere. The idea, then, is to reflect on how a public image of the recipient is created from a formal and informal

identification through which they must be morally watched, controlled and even punished if necessary.

In order to better understand the complexity of the formation of the recipient status, we go through the several spheres (formal and informal) in the context of poverty in Itaboraí (outskirts of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro) which these individuals attend, such as schools, Bolsa Família Coordination and the registration sector, Centro de Referência de Assistência Social (social assistance referral center) (CRAS), the popular restaurant and the neighborhood itself. Through participant observation, we can say that the relationships established between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (institutional actors and neighbors) are based on a moral matrix, with the presence of gossip, moral judgments and specific social controls that are developed around the figure of the recipient. From this study on the daily interactions of the poor, we can see a process of symbolic differentiation progressing among the people who depend on the social welfare service and people who do not depend on such service. Now let us see how the construction of processes of social stigmatization, moral humiliation and the internalization of shame for being a recipient of an anti-poverty program occur.

## **Social Stigmatization, Humiliation and Embarrassment**

We would like to analyze how people begin to have experiences of humiliation and prejudice that will mark their institutional trajectories (generally related to the PBF program) and their social life in their neighborhood when they become beneficiaries of an income transfer program. At this point it is important to mention that the function of the enrollment in the PBF is not the election of beneficiaries, but only the inclusion of the candidates in the federal system called CADÚNICO<sup>6</sup>.

Before presenting the research results, we will briefly contextualize the field research carried out. We chose the municipality of Itaboraí, on the

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6 The Cadastro Único para Programas Sociais (single enrollment for social programs) identifies and characterizes the socioeconomic conditions of low-income families (understood by the MDS as those who earn an income equal or less than half a minimum wage per capita or a monthly income of up to 3 minimum wages). See: <https://www.gov.br/cidadania/pt-br/acoes-e-programas/cadastro-unico>



outskirts of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, due to two reasons: the degree of precariousness of the living conditions of the local population and the high incidence of beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família program. As a methodology, we used in-depth interviews and participant observation in different spaces: school, health center, Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS), PBF Coordination, registration sector, popular restaurant and the neighborhood itself. 70 interviews were carried out, between 2011 and 2012, with different public actors and contracted employees (health agents, social workers, public school teachers, Bolsa Família registrants and Program coordinator), with beneficiary families (women holders of the benefit, their husbands and/or partners and children/adolescents) and also with non-beneficiary families (neighbors of the interviewed beneficiary families). We used a semi-structured script for the interviews, which allowed us to map important issues for this study, such as: perceptions about poverty, control, stigma and sociability among the “poor” people. We will present some research findings below.

A recipient called Adelir<sup>7</sup> states that during her enrollment, she experienced humiliation. “That day there, I felt humiliated. A lot of people give up because of that, don’t they? I said I was in need [...] and they treat you with suspicion, they think you’re lying”. For Luciana, the most serious issue is the financial dependence on the State. This is the most humiliating factor for the beneficiarie:

Ahhh, it’s so humiliating not to have a job and get support from others. You feel useless. I would like to work and make a living on my own rather than go to the bank to get an aid from the Government. Looks like it’s a favor, doesn’t it? While lining up, nobody says anything about being embarrassed, but when they come to receive the aid, many friends of mine hide the aid card. While lining up, we hear some nasty comments, like, “there they come, the only thing they do is depend on other people’s money”. It’s awful.

Claiming to have suffered humiliation, another recipient named Naiara points out that the humiliation suffered was mainly caused by the clerks in the enrollment sector in the PBF coordination office.

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7 All names here have been changed.

They say, "That's all, my dear". "The Government will not give you anything else!". "You have to work!" "There's nothing left!" Then I'm not even going to the yellow house<sup>8</sup> anymore because I do not want to be mistreated. They say these things for everyone to hear: "You guys are lazy and don't want to do anything but make easy money!".

Most beneficiaries feel uncomfortable interacting with the PBF clerks. In fact, we were able to see (during our participant observation) the existence of a set of problems that involve the interaction of the beneficiaries with the professionals who work in the management of the PBF: prejudice, moral judgments, embarrassing and humiliating situations. These adversities are reported both by the beneficiaries and by the technical staff associated with the Program (especially social workers and health care workers) who try to redirect the behavior of the "front door" attendants so that they avoid discriminatory practices.

Such social controls lead to a morally classifying process, making public a negative image of the recipient. The idea of "bad reputation" (GOFFMAN, 1988, p. 80) helps us to better understand the development of several valuation categories on the recipient, such as "they spend money on alcoholic drinks", "they don't care for their kids", "they only want to take advantage", "they are vagabonds" etc.

While a relationship based on embarrassment and humiliation is likely to take place, there are other situations in which, according to administrative logic, the demand of a candidate (enrollment) or recipient (re-enrollment) is made quickly, without involvement of the clerk, who proceeds to fill out the form with the candidate's or recipient's data bureaucratically. Let's look at the case reported by Maria:

It was such a direct thing: she began to ask a lot of questions, and went on filling out the form, checking, and then I asked when I was going to get it and she said: "That's up to the Federal Government. I do not know anything". After she finished, she gave me a paper with the phone number and said, "You can go, you're done".

In the same context, another type of interaction between the attendant and the candidate (and/or recipient) may develop, one in which the

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8 Casa Amarela (yellow house) is the most common name used to refer to the Bolsa Família Program office.

clerks offer resources and referrals according to the demand. This is evident in Jucelia’s words:

When I went there, the woman filled my data form correctly and asked me if I wanted anything, if something was missing. They helped me this way [...] the woman spoke of the courses they offered, and she said that I had to weigh my son who was very thin at the time. Then she gave me the number of the health unit that does the weighing.

In this sense, we could analytically typify these interactions in three ways:

**Chart I – Interaction classification**

<b>Typification of Interaction</b> Attendant ↓ Applicants and Beneficiaries	
<b>Stigmatizing Interaction</b>	Offenses and humiliation aim to destroy the beneficiary’s front
<b>Bureaucratic Interaction</b>	Administrative function of completing the registration or re-registration. Speed and efficiency drive the attendants` actions.
<b>Care Interaction</b>	It happens when the attendants provide guidance, directions, and referrals.

*Font: Prepared by the author (2022).*

When it comes to the (re) enrollment situation, the interactions of candidates and / or beneficiaries with the clerks can basically be developed in three ways: 1) stigmatizing interaction: in which offense and humiliation aim to destroy the façade of the recipient; 2) assisting interaction: when the clerks provide aids and resources such as referrals; and 3) bureaucratic interaction: when clerks carry out the administrative function of completing the enrollment or re-enrollment forms. In other words, in the scope of the service, the clerks carry out varied normative judgments and end up crossing the virtual frontier between “bureaucracy” and “culture”. The clerks themselves oscillate between rational/legal, logic (when interacting in an assisting or bureaucratic way) and valuation assessments (in which morality and stigma appear more strongly).

We now want to show how the institutional actors perceive the trajectory of the candidates to the Bolsa Família Program, from the phase of enrollment until the moment they become beneficiaries of the Program, when they start fulfilling the requirements of the policy. How do they see their interactions with the group of beneficiaries? What do they consider to be more important in the context of interaction? Is there a process of degradation of the image of the recipient, morally and socially disqualifying him or her? These questions guided this part of our analysis.

Soon Élidea (Social Worker) points out the program's unintended effects, highlighting the emergence of prejudice related to the recipient figure:

I think the Program is like humiliation, and the person herself who receives it incorporates the thought that she is a beggar, isn't she? I think when the Government thought this out it intended to help meet the needs, but people end up feeling humiliated ... and also because it is very little money, but in order to get it, you need to do so much [...].

Now, Cacilda (Health Agent) perceives a difference in the degree of humiliation regarding the value of the aid; thus, the lower the value, the greater the possibility that the beneficiaries will feel embarrassed or go through humiliating situations. Cacilda also realizes that the beneficiaries feel embarrassed when their names appear on the Social Service assistance list.

Yes, they get embarrassed, but they disguise it, and they try not to demonstrate [...]. When we ask about it, they move away from the topic. On a daily basis, they are more embarrassed than the fear of being reported, because when they have their names there, they think, "They'll treat me like a poor bastard" [...]. I think the poorer people get even more embarrassed to be receiving the Bolsa Família. There is a case of a lady who receives 30 reais, who went to solve a card problem, and she is scared of being indoors. Then one day, it took her a long time, so she came back the next day, and it was taking a long time again, and then she said: "I will not stand in line because of 30 reais. As much as I need it, I will not stand in line". She felt humiliated in that situation. Then they made the deposit, but she had already given up.

Thus, Cacilda – corroborating the idea of Duvoux (2009) – states that the sense of embarrassment and the incorporation of stigma do not seem like random among beneficiaries. The poorer (to use Cacilda's

words), or the more resilient (in Dubois's terms, 2010), the greater the chance of submission to a process of humiliation and acceptance of stigma imputation. This may be related to the lack of a minimum educational repertoire for reacting and confronting the stigma. Silencing, especially among the poorer, often represents the acceptance of their condition, which we can observe in the enrollment queues for receiving the PBF aid.

With regard to the specific humiliation suffered by this population, Raquel (teacher) evaluates that the beneficiaries invest the money in an erroneous way and, in doing so, they attract negative moral judgments. Thus, according to her:

I've heard, "Oh, you're hungry [...]" "Instead of giving money, why not do something else?" But this is out of the community. I particularly do not like these comments, because I like aid programs. I just do not like how they are used. That's why I think there could be better supervision, because people may have been using the money to feed their addiction to substances.

According to the perceptions of institutional agents, the aspect of humiliation usually relates to the precarious position of the subject who, when needing to apply for the aid, is classified as impoverished ("hungry"), which produces a feeling of constant embarrassment. For Paula (Social Service trainee), the beneficiaries are not humiliated by receiving the aid itself, but mainly by the treatment they receive from clerks:

[...] within the realm of the Bolsa Família coordination. At the reception, the people who work there feel they own the program. There, they say to the recipient: "Oh, you do not have a husband? With that ring on your finger, you don't have a husband!" "She kind of listens with suspicion. They work in appointed positions, don't they? Most clerks do not have a college degree and function as Social Workers. There's a lot of prejudice here at the front door, they even call names such as whore. I, for example, have already attended to a person here, who started talking to me and started to cry. Then I asked: What is up? And she said, "I lost my mother less than two months ago. I wanted to try to shift it to my name so I can get the money, and we hardly get to the front door we are mistreated. I just came here to try some right for me that I'm a young mother, I'm only 19 years old". And I said, "Your mother died of what?" Then she said, "Please read the death certificate". Then I looked at the death certificate and it was "food insufficiency", she died because she did not eat. She said, "My goodness, we hardly get here and are mistreated and the first thing you have is the law of contempt; disrespect against a public official leads you to jail".

In this Brazilian urban context, we perceive that the symbolic brand seems to consolidate more between those classified as “honest” and as “self-interested”. Therefore, in order to deviate from the demoralizing category of “self-interested”, people who seek the aid now claim that the need will be temporary (thus denying their dependence on the Assistance Service), or they embody the image of the victim, to demonstrate that really need the resource that will be transferred to them, using the notion of necessity to justify the interest. Even non-beneficiaries witness (or hear reports of) humiliating experiences. Vilma, for example, retells a case of a girl who went to apply for the Bolsa Família aid and, as a result, felt humiliated:

One day, a girl who lives here came crying because of humiliation. She said the clerk was so evil to her that she said she would not go back there [...]. Then I said: you should go tomorrow, because maybe someone else will attend to you [...]. Maybe she has love in her heart. And then when she came back they said, “You do not need the aid, you have only one child, you’re young and you can work”. And sweetie, listen! Many people try hard to get the aid, you see?

Even though she had evident financial restrictions in her life, Mara chose not to apply for the aid, precisely to avoid possible humiliation and prejudice that could be inflicted by the representatives of the State. “I’d rather starve than ask. It’s humiliating, isn’t it? I’m poor but I won’t lower myself even more by begging for money. “Dayane also resisted the pursuit of the aid, considering that for her the possibility of “being a recipient” would mean going through a process of moral humiliation:

I will not apply for the Bolsa Família aid, because I will not stand in line for hours with my children to enroll, so maybe I will get an insignificant amount of money. I will not humiliate myself for crumbs, not me! I’m going to “go for the lottery” every month, and what for? To earn 44 reais. You see? My friends here go out in the hot sun on foot to stand in line so they can get 40 reais every month, that is, to be abused. I’m out!

As stories of humiliation and embarrassment in the coordination of the PBF are reported by beneficiaries in the neighborhood, some give up applying for the aid. They avoid face-to-face interaction because it would be a way of preserving their façade (Goffman 2012, 13-14), defined as behavioral rules of self-respect, which presuppose recognition by the other of their “positive social value”. This happens when the person

avoids participating in certain social gatherings in which he or she may be subjected to offensive treatment. What we see in all beneficiaries is that they develop strategies that will guide their social encounters, preserving or not (depending on the context) their façades.

Much of the difficulty in accepting the aid also seems to come from the little money offered by the program; this refusal might not occur if the money offered were enough for helping the whole family. The embarrassment is less related to the idea of “failure” in their professional life and more related to receiving an insignificant income. That is why beneficiaries often give up on receiving the aid, as they are scared of the negative imputations (such as “starving”, “lax” and “homeless”) that could ensue if they apply for the aid. The explanation of the resistance to receiving the benefit does not present itself in a similar way to the French and particularly to the American case, in which the fear of becoming a recipient comes from accepting and recognizing an individual professional failure.

In summary: even though the interactions established between the coordination clerks and the candidates (and/or beneficiaries) are more strongly characterized by moral judgments (either explicitly or tacitly), other forms of interaction (less frequently) are established in the enrollment sector; sometimes marked by a mere completion of the form, other times by recommendations, tips and referrals to Social Welfare services. It is important at this point to offer some methodological explanations, within the scope of the representations; the interviewees tend to report those experiences with the clerks which are more related to an affective/moral experience, but perhaps this is related to the fact that people in general tend to report bureaucratic/legal experiences less often. However, these representations of moralities in interaction are also confirmed within the scope of practice, according to what we saw when doing participant observation; we indeed witnessed the strong recurrence of social categories of judgment.

## **The perception over the selection of beneficiaries**

The process of selecting beneficiaries goes through the (in)formal, social and moral classification of a group into a specific category: “poor”. This labeling occurs at the “front door” to the PBF enrollment area. The pro-

cess of entering the program is either pursued in a conflictive way or in a resigned manner by those who (due to precarious economic conditions or interest) submit to the statutory identification as “poor”. Based on what notions do the beneficiaries believe they are selected? What justifies their inclusion in a social program? Let us look at some examples expressed by the beneficiaries discourse.

As for the receipt of the aid, Naiara (recipient) is surprised by the news, and at the same time frightened, believing that she could have done something against the Government. I had even forgotten. Then a letter arrived from the enrollment office and the clerk went to my house, saying that I had been selected. And I said: but I did nothing, nothing against the Government (laughs), and she said: “Yes you did!” Then she reminded me [...]. Then I went to the meeting with the beneficiaries.

Two points in this account seem interesting to us: first, the idea that she was drawn, that is, by chance (through luck); she said she was chosen by the Government; second, her not understanding that she was entitled to something, which made her deviate from that belief; on the contrary, she believed that the Government was going to punish her for something rather than offer her a service.

Candidates (and beneficiaries) know that, when starting an interaction with the clerks, they run the risk of experiencing a problematic situation; therefore, they use the ceremonial/ritual order to guarantee the standards of politeness and order. In this game, the participant must report about “why they are there”, so that the clerk can evaluate how coherent and legitimate her report is for receiving the aid. In this context, there is an unequal exchange of justifications for “merit” to the benefit: the candidate uses the criteria of need and suffering as justification for receiving the PBF aid, and the clerk may or may not consider her deserving of the aid.

An interesting element is the differentiation between “those who get to receive the aid early” and “those who have to wait”, a matter attributed to “luck” that, when further investigated, does not seem to be random; on the contrary, it is related to the social capital acquired throughout the enrollment process. This is the perception of the recipient Adelir, who points out: “In fact, I think that happens because some candidates are



acquainted with a few people who work there; these candidates are the ones who get the aid faster”.

Carla, who also receives the Bolsa Família, confirms Adelir’s argument, by saying that “having acquaintances” in the Social Assistance department makes the aid come faster, and emphasizing that several people would like to apply for it, but they give up because of the amount of bureaucracy, the time spent on the request process and the poor service of the clerks. “There are a lot of people who give it up because of the poor treatment offered by the clerks”. As the waiting time for the receiving the aid varies in each case, I asked her why she believes there is this time variation: “Look, it took me three months to get the aid, but [...] some people may end up waiting for two years. My neighbor got it a year after her application”. According to her: “many get it faster because they are acquainted with insiders. A colleague of mine had been waiting for a long time until her husband met an employee of the PBF office, spoke to him and then soon she got it, including the ones of the previous months. Gisele (recipient) believes that people are chosen to receive the PBF aid through family income, according to the understanding of “those who need it most, right? Those who have a lower income [...]. Then, it was kind of [...] those who did not need it were getting it, but then they asked for the work license document and cut several people out of the program”.

Why me? This question was passed on to Simone (recipient), who understands her enrollment in the program both due to her manipulative use (and meaning) of language and to the production of a bodily *hexis* (BOURDIEU, 1983) that attempts to correspond to the expectations of the Social Worker. Thus, Simone, through a reflexive action, triggers a specific behavior:

It really depends on the person’s talk, doesn’t it? (laughs). They see if the person needs it, what she is going to say, how she is going to talk about her problems. Some women even take their little kids with them during the enrollment process, don’t they? Those who want to get it won’t show up all neat and dressed up, right? If you really need it, you can’t go there all cute and neat. I do not know, maybe it’s how and what the person says. There are those who can convince the clerk, there are those who can’t.

As Goffman (2012, p. 126) point out, one can use his or her suffering consciously so that another will engage in his or her emotional play. The rule of emotional involvement is critical to maintaining the interaction. Thus, if there is disinterest, ignorance or insensitivity, the relationship will either go the other way or be “broken”. Taking still as a reference the work of this author, we can think that the actors play with a devalorizing or stigmatizing image with their clothing and ways of expressing themselves. From there on, they play a social role according to their interest and context. For Goffman (2012), it is through the ceremonial component that an evaluation of the person will be made, in order to judge their qualities as desirable (in our work, notions of “true”, “dedicated” and “good poor” emerge) or undesirable (through categories such as: “self-interested” and “parasite”). From the point of view of truth, the clerk tends to belittle the candidate’s precarious convictions, questioning her condition, and demonstrating a moral distrust of her position.

The insertion (or non insertion) of the candidate into the category of poor will occur according to the understanding (and acceptance, even if temporary) of their condition of precariousness and also by formal (and bureaucratic) approval of their enrollment as a “deserving” subject by right. We see, from the empirical material, that people – to some extent – consider whatever they need before they actually enter a face-to-face interaction. This type of repertoire is presented as a social strategy of manipulation (even if contextual) of the “identity of the poor”, as an important tool in order to be successful in their demand<sup>9</sup>.

Another tool that contributes to approving the enrollment and receipt of the aid appears in the element “God” (referring to luck? To magic?). This perception is developed by Deilson (recipient, Carla’s husband), to justify why his family was chosen by the program: “Everything in life, honey, is done by God. We were chosen for a reason: it was the divine hand. Not everyone has this chance. Here in the neighborhood, there are several people who tried and failed. It is only through the power of God Himself.

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9 A good discussion of the status of the poor can be seen in Katz (1990).

Sérgio (recipient, Jucimar's husband) did not know for certain what criteria the government uses to select the candidates, but he thinks that "perhaps it is according to your record [...] you know, what is in the document. Let's say I have three children and another person has six or five, but maybe with five, their aid will be greater than mine. "As we can see, for Sérgio, the selection is made according to the number of children in the household, a perception that fits the criteria currently used by the program. However, Jucimar, his wife, believes that she was selected not by a strictly technical formal evaluation of her condition, but rather by what she calls "good talking," that is, a form of language manipulation for bargaining purposes. In order to obtain the aid, the candidate must convince the clerk of her poverty condition.

We have observed that the application for the PBF aid is almost like a job interview to the extent that the clerks run background checks on the candidates' personal history, with the candidates looking forward to being selected and trying hard to meet the requirements of the "profile" they believe the clerks want to see. In the sphere of the enrollment, the incorporation (even if unconscious) of the bodily *hexis* of the poor appears as an attempt to use stigma in their favor, that is, to victimize their condition to convince the clerks that they are entitled to receiving the aid. As the income transfer in Brazil does not have a universal scope, this strategy of victimization appears as important, since the demand often comes up against the scarcity of public resources. In addition to the making up of this character, we observed the use of "the good talk" as a relevant way to achieve success in the demand; that is, it is important, at the time of the enrollment, to be well prepared orally and come up with a talk that will meet the expectations of the "front door" clerks.

Under the idea of preserving the façade (GOFFMAN, 2012), a set of strategies is mobilized by individuals to compose their repertoires, such as demonstrating themselves as "good subjects". This, however, does not mean that it is a matter of pretending; on the contrary, it is based on conscious judgments. The experience of sociability causes people to learn how to use (or not to use) their façades, through a continuous process that takes place during the interactions with other individuals.

Through his study on the service delivery of care service in France, Dubois (2010, p. 4) shows that individuals accept to fit into the role of beneficiaries, translating their personal condition in terms of administrative categories. We find, as Duvoux (2009, p. 23), that “[...] there are cases where the beneficiary will make his speech from the perspective of domination, but in this case, what device will they put into practice?” It seems that presenting oneself as “victim” or “poor” to obtain care assistance tends to correct a social strategy.

Edilcéia presents a particular logic among our interviewees as she argues that she was selected because the income transfer policy is entitled to her as a citizen. At the same time, however, she uses the verb “give” to represent the Bolsa Família Program granting policy, which would denote a situation of gift giving and not of complying with a law:

I, as a citizen, vote, right? I think it was a way to help, and even to help lessen unemployment effects, but I think if we had an opportunity, huh?, which I have been looking for, but I've been going to the doctor's and I still can't (work), I'm taking a strong medicine, see? I have a serious problem in my spine, but I still try to work, I do one thing here, and another there, I do not stop. But if there were enough job opportunities, more jobs, I don't think I would need to receive this aid. I was even talking to my sister-in-law about hunger; these are very difficult times, you see?

When she applied for the aid, Gisele did not believe she could receive it. This skepticism could be related to the fact that she is not religious, but the determination of a variable to explain the interviewee's perceptions seems to us hasty.

I confess to you that I did not believe it until the day my card arrived, that he took it for me, because my children have always been very ill. Then I myself went there, because it was under my name. He never applied to it, I did it under my name. Ever since he was here, I received it all. Oh, I used not to believe it, I thought it was one more promise, because, in fact, we see that happening very often, don't we? Same as all Brazilians see. I thought it was one more joke to fool people.

Elisabeth also did not believe that she would receive the Bolsa Família aid, but for a different reason: she believed that the clerks would not take her demand seriously because they did not treat her properly. “I saw it like that [...] they did not even look straight at me, see? Then I got suspicious

and thought: they write a few things down and deny the aid. They do not care about you. You go there and they treat you bad. I left the place and thought: not this time”.

Edilcéia, however, had hopes of receiving the aid. This expectation probably relates to her religion (evangelical churchgoer) that seems to propel her to believe in receiving the Bolsa Família aid: “Honey, I have always believed it, because if we do not have faith, what is left to us? You gotta have faith. It took a while, but I got it. It is the hand of God”. Even having said earlier that it was because of her right as a citizen, she believes that God “lent her a hand”. Participating in interactions with the candidates to the Bolsa Família aid, we asked them about their expectations regarding receiving the benefit. Their accounts either showed disbelief or brought hope as an important element for meeting their expectation. The hope of receiving the aid was stronger when the interaction in the enrollment sector was lighter, that is, when the clerk had a social ability (nicety) when attending to the target audience, feeding the candidates with a great expectation of being selected. However, the disbelief either appeared in a more general way (due to the lack of political credibility) or more specifically, when the interaction was marked by embarrassments linked to moral judgments produced by the clerks in the Bolsa Família Aid office.

## **Some considerations**

Finally, we saw, in the Bolsa Família enrollment sector, that the poor, when interacting with the clerks, they build a social role as a “candidate”, developing discourses, behaviors and languages appropriate to an interview situation. This interview is not a simple one; it aims to analyze the client’s profile (level of suffering, number of children etc.), to judge whether the person can be legitimated as “poor” and deserving of the aid. Developing the role of “humble”, “needy” or “pauper” is part of the interaction game, in which enhancing the identity of “victim” is necessary as a ritual for the acquisition of the aid. The situation of the interaction during the enrollment is based on the exchange between the construction of a discourse consistent with the suffering the candidate is going through and

the interest of the listener in verifying the truth of the condition described by the candidate.

If the candidate does not discursively explain his or her poverty condition, the interaction is broken or becomes merely bureaucratic in filling in the enrollment forms, without important indications for the legitimation of her demand. It is through the awareness of the interaction that the candidate manipulates (through gestures and behaviors) a social role of “poor”, which meets the expectations of the clerk. By having this awareness, their involvement with the clerk should serve as a form of convincing (demonstration of suffering and explanation of difficulties) that their problems deserve to be solved. In general, they try to demonstrate that their condition does not derive from a personal problem, but from a “social problem” (job loss, Family got bigger etc.). This reinforces Dubois statement that “[...] the mere application of administrative categories becomes an attribution of status and the apprehension of the administrative relationship is equivalent to a reappréhension of the norms of social life” (DUBOIS, 2010, p. 138, our translation).

In the context of the enrollment, the interviewees always put their feelings over the rules of policy, which lessens the rigidity of the classification by formal categories (income, schooling, marital status). Therefore, the interaction is more about moral judgment than a strictly economic assessment. The expression of suffering of some beneficiaries, at the time of the enrollment (a sad look, lowered head etc.) either taps into the clerks sensitivity leading them to approving the candidate, or disenchantment, leading them to abandon the sentimental order and restore the concrete order of questions and answers. The clerks do not appear to be pretending, (or faking neutrality). On the contrary, we have seen, in the Brazilian context, an open expression of their opinions.

We saw that the effects of the Brazilian Income Transfer Program are of different types. On the one hand, *social inclusion*: the Program has as a consequence modalities of insertion (even being considered precarious) of families in the sphere of consumption and services of a universal nature, such as health and education, generating a perception of improvement of self-esteem and happiness of beneficiaries. On the other hand, *moral*

*disqualification*: the interviewees feel (in some contexts, not everywhere, as it seems to be the case in France) stigmatized as recipients of an income transfer policy.

Lastly, we have seen how the oscillations of support (networks of solidarity, friends and family), participation (in the conditionalities of the program and in the life of the neighborhood), identification (of a moral character around the beneficiaries) and rejection (when stigma develops) which beneficiaries go through in their everyday interactions are developed. Thus, the institutional acceptance of the request either produces positive emotional reflexes, or processes of stigmatization over the recipient population.

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## Estigma, humilhação e controle social entre beneficiários do Programa Bolsa Família

### Resumo

Neste artigo pretendemos analisar os parâmetros a partir dos quais se constroem representações e práticas entre os “burocratas de rua” e os “pobres”. Dentre os objetivos de pesquisa, primeiramente buscamos entender como os candidatos ao programa interpretam e negociam com os operadores do programa as categorias por eles atribuídas. Em segundo lugar, procuramos explorar em que medida o grupo de beneficiários se percebe e é percebido como um grupo social diferenciado no setor de cadastramento. Nesse sentido, três questões norteiam nossa análise: 1) Quais valores são aplicados por beneficiários e candidatos para justificar sua participação no Programa? e 2) Estes sujeitos estão sujeitos a constrangimentos e / ou controles que estão particularmente relacionados à sua posição de dependentes do Estado? Para responder a essas questões, realizamos 70 entrevistas com beneficiários do programa e não beneficiários do Bolsa Família em uma periferia do Rio de Janeiro. Dentre os achados de pesquisa, identificamos que há desqualificação moral e que os entrevistados se sentem (em alguns contextos e não na totalidade de suas trajetórias) estigmatizados por serem beneficiários de uma política de transferência de renda.

**Palavras-chave:** Pobreza. Programa Bolsa Família. Estigma.