

The Cultural Semiotics of Intimacy: Family Roles in Elder Care Responsibility in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural semiotics of intimacy in Brazil, focusing on the family's role in elder care responsibilities. Rooted in the concept of familismo, elder care is framed as a moral and emotional obligation deeply tied to cultural values of reciprocity, respect, and collective identity. However, traditional caregiving models face significant challenges due to urbanization, shifting gender roles, smaller family sizes, and economic disparities. Women, who are disproportionately burdened by caregiving duties, experience both financial strain and emotional labor, exacerbated by limited access to formal care services. The study examines the intersections of gender norms, economic realities, and societal transformations, highlighting how cultural expectations are renegotiated in the face of modern pressures. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for systemic reforms, including expanded public elder care services and equitable caregiving policies, to address the evolving landscape of family roles in Brazil while preserving its cultural heritage.

Keywords: cultural semiotics of intimacy, familismo, elder care

1. Introduction

In Brazil, family dynamics are deeply embedded in a tapestry of cultural, historical, and social frameworks that define how responsibilities and relationships are navigated within households, particularly when it comes to caring for elderly family members. The concept of elder care in Brazil transcends the mere provision of physical assistance; it is a culturally rich, symbolically charged practice that embodies notions of familial love, moral obligation, and collective identity. This cultural semiotics of intimacy reveals that caregiving for aging relatives is not solely a pragmatic response to the challenges of aging but a multidimensional phenomenon deeply rooted in the country's societal values. Brazilian society is shaped by the ethos of familismo, a cultural principle that places the family at the center of social and emotional life. Within this framework, caregiving for elders is often viewed as a moral imperative and an extension of lifelong bonds of love and respect. However, these caregiving roles are not evenly distributed across family members. They are influenced by historical gender norms that assign caregiving responsibilities predominantly to women, reflecting broader patterns of patriarchy and domestic labor division. This dynamic unfolds within a socio-economic landscape marked by significant inequalities and gaps in public elder care infrastructure. In many cases, the family becomes the *de facto* safety net, a role magnified by the limited availability of formal care services, particularly for low-income families. Caregiving thus emerges as a site where cultural ideals intersect with economic realities, compelling families to reconcile emotional duty with the pressures of resource scarcity. As Brazilian society evolves under the forces of globalization, urbanization, and shifting gender roles, traditional caregiving models face mounting challenges. This paper examines the cultural, social, and economic dimensions that underpin elder care, exploring how these intersect to shape family roles and the lived experiences of caregivers.

2. The Semiotics of Family and Intimacy in Brazil

Family in Brazil is not merely a social unit but a deeply ingrained cultural construct that serves as a primary source of identity, support, and obligation. The concept of family extends beyond the nuclear household, encompassing an intricate network of relationships, including extended family and close kin. This broad understanding of familial ties is crucial in the cultural semiotics of intimacy, where caregiving is seen as an embodiment of collective responsibility and moral duty. In Brazilian society, family acts as both a practical and symbolic structure, reinforcing bonds of affection and solidarity through shared responsibilities, particularly in elder care. The cultural ethos of *familismo* lies at the heart of these dynamics. This principle emphasizes the primacy of family over individual interests, framing familial obligations as sacred and non-negotiable. Within this context, caregiving for the elderly is not only an act of necessity but a moral expression of love, respect, and gratitude. These responsibilities are often rooted in the idea of reciprocity: elder care is seen as a repayment for the care and sacrifices made by parents and grandparents in raising their children and securing the family's future. Intimacy in Brazilian familial relationships goes beyond emotional closeness to encompass actions that signify commitment and interdependence. Acts such as preparing meals, assisting with medical needs, and providing emotional support are semiotic markers of a relationship built on shared responsibility. These practices signal not just affection but also the fulfillment of deeply embedded cultural expectations. Religion and spirituality also play a significant role in shaping these familial norms. Predominantly influenced by Catholicism, Brazilian society often regards elder care as a moral obligation imbued with spiritual significance. Caregiving is framed as an expression of faith, rooted in Christian ideals of selflessness, compassion, and filial piety. Despite these traditional ideals, the semiotics of family and intimacy are not static. Urbanization, migration, and changing economic conditions have introduced tensions between these long-standing cultural expectations and the realities of modern life. Increasing geographic separation among family members and the rising costs of caregiving challenge the sustainability of traditional caregiving models. The semiotics of family and intimacy in Brazil represents a complex interplay of cultural values, social expectations, and evolving realities. By understanding these dynamics, we can better appreciate the deeply rooted cultural meanings attached to elder care and their implications for family roles in contemporary Brazilian society.

3. Gender and Caregiving

The role of women in elder care is deeply ingrained in Brazilian society, shaped by traditional gender norms and cultural expectations that position caregiving as a predominantly female responsibility. This dynamic forms a critical aspect of the cultural semiotics of intimacy, where caregiving is not only an act of practical support but also a reflection of emotional and social bonds. Women, often viewed as the emotional and moral anchors of the family, bear the brunt of caregiving duties, a reality that reflects both the persistence of patriarchal structures and the unequal division of domestic labor. Historically, caregiving has been intertwined with notions of maternalism, where the role of a caregiver is seen as a natural extension of a woman's identity as a nurturer. Cultural narratives valorize women who undertake caregiving with patience, selflessness, and devotion. These expectations are reinforced through media portrayals, religious teachings, and intergenerational socialization, where daughters are implicitly or explicitly trained to assume caregiving roles. Mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law are particularly central to elder care, often sacrificing professional opportunities and personal ambitions to fulfill these obligations. The emotional labor involved in caregiving is significant but frequently undervalued. Women are expected to manage not only the physical needs of elderly relatives, such as bathing, feeding, and administering medication, but also their emotional and psychological well-being. This dual burden creates immense stress, yet it is often normalized within the cultural discourse, perpetuating the invisibility of women's contributions to caregiving.

Economic factors compound these challenges. Women in Brazil often face precarious employment conditions, lower wages, and limited access to formal caregiving resources. Many are forced to leave the workforce or work reduced hours to provide care, leading to financial strain and diminished opportunities for economic independence. This intersection of gendered labor and economic inequity further entrenches the caregiving burden as a gendered phenomenon. Despite increasing societal awareness of gender inequality, significant barriers to change remain. Efforts to redistribute caregiving responsibilities among family members often face resistance, as they challenge deeply entrenched cultural norms. Public policies aimed at supporting caregivers, such as subsidized elder care or financial assistance, are limited in scope and fail to address the broader systemic issues that underpin the unequal distribution of caregiving roles. Gender and caregiving in Brazil are inextricably linked, revealing how cultural, social, and economic factors intersect to place disproportionate burdens on women. Addressing these inequities requires a shift in cultural attitudes, greater institutional support, and a more equitable sharing of caregiving responsibilities across genders.

4. Economic Context and Its Influence

Brazil's economic landscape plays a pivotal role in shaping how families navigate the responsibilities of elder care, intertwining cultural expectations with financial realities. Limited public investment in elder care services

and a fragmented healthcare system place significant pressure on families to act as the primary caregivers for aging relatives. This reliance on family-led care highlights Brazil's socio-economic disparities, where access to formal care is often a privilege reserved for wealthier households. For low- and middle-income families, the cost of private elder care facilities or home-based assistance is prohibitive, making familial caregiving a necessity rather than a choice. This dynamic is further exacerbated by the uneven distribution of state-supported services, such as the Unified Health System (SUS). While SUS provides universal healthcare, its capacity to address the complex, long-term needs of elderly populations—such as geriatric care, physiotherapy, or mental health services—is often limited by underfunding and resource constraints. Consequently, families are left to shoulder the burden of not only providing daily care but also managing medical appointments, treatments, and medications, often at their own expense.

The financial interdependence between generations is another critical factor. Many elderly Brazilians rely on government pensions, such as the *Benefício de Prestação Continuada* (BPC), to sustain themselves and, in many cases, contribute to their household's income. These pensions are often used to support multi-generational families, blurring the lines between caregivers and those being cared for. This reciprocal exchange reinforces the economic dimensions of intimacy, where caregiving responsibilities are deeply entwined with financial obligations. For adult children, particularly those from low-income families, this arrangement can create a dual burden. They are often responsible for supporting their elderly parents while simultaneously managing their own financial challenges. This economic strain is particularly acute for women, who may reduce working hours or leave the workforce entirely to provide care, resulting in long-term financial insecurity. The economic realities of caregiving in Brazil underscore the need for structural interventions, including expanded public elder care services and financial support for caregivers, to alleviate the disproportionate burden placed on families and address the inequities in access to formal care resources.

5. Challenges and Transformations

While Brazil's traditional family structures and cultural values surrounding elder care remain resilient, they are increasingly strained by profound societal changes. Urbanization is a key driver of these shifts, with more Brazilians moving to cities in search of employment and better opportunities. This migration often creates significant geographical distance between adult children and their aging parents, complicating the logistics of caregiving. Rural-to-urban migration, combined with rising housing costs in urban centers, has further fragmented multi-generational living arrangements that once facilitated daily caregiving. The participation of women in the workforce has expanded significantly over recent decades, challenging the longstanding expectation that women are the primary caregivers within families. Women, who traditionally bore the brunt of caregiving duties, now balance professional careers with caregiving responsibilities, often leading to physical and emotional exhaustion. This shift not only underscores the unsustainability of gendered caregiving models but also highlights the lack of systemic support for working caregivers, such as paid leave or workplace flexibility. The decline in birth rates and smaller family sizes further exacerbate these challenges. With fewer siblings to share caregiving responsibilities, the burden often falls disproportionately on one family member, typically a daughter or daughter-in-law. This dynamic intensifies stress and amplifies feelings of isolation among caregivers, particularly in the absence of formal elder care support.

Changing attitudes toward gender roles and individual autonomy are also reshaping the cultural fabric of caregiving. Younger generations increasingly question traditional norms, advocating for a more equitable distribution of responsibilities among family members or exploring alternatives such as professional caregiving services. However, these shifts often clash with older generations' expectations and deeply ingrained cultural values, creating tension within families. The interplay of these factors points to a need for transformative solutions. Expanded public elder care services, workplace policies supporting caregivers, and cultural dialogues about equitable caregiving are crucial to adapting Brazil's caregiving practices to the realities of a changing society.

6. Conclusion

The cultural semiotics of intimacy in Brazil highlights a deeply entrenched system of values, expectations, and practices that govern family roles in elder care. Rooted in the principles of *familismo*, caregiving is often seen as a moral and emotional duty, underscoring the centrality of family in Brazilian society. These traditions, however, are increasingly at odds with the socio-economic and cultural shifts that characterize contemporary Brazil. Urbanization, smaller family sizes, greater female workforce participation, and shifting attitudes toward gender and caregiving roles all challenge the sustainability of traditional caregiving models.

While cultural narratives of reciprocity and respect for elders remain strong, the practical burdens placed on families—particularly women—have reached critical levels. Economic disparities and limited access to formal elder care services compound these challenges, exposing systemic inequalities and highlighting the urgent need for policy reform. Without targeted interventions, such as expanded public caregiving resources, financial

support for families, and workplace policies to accommodate caregiving responsibilities, these burdens will continue to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable.

The way forward requires balancing cultural heritage with innovation and inclusivity. By addressing the evolving realities of caregiving, Brazil can preserve its deeply rooted familial values while ensuring that elder care is equitable, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of all members of society.

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