



Articles

Work Relations and Helping in the Lives of Amazon Rural Women Workers

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Abstract

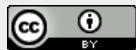
Changes in methods of agricultural production have impacted on the lives of those involved in this sector. New social relations, technologies, values and landscapes have been introduced as well as potential risks to health. Female workers have a specific experience that requires a closer analysis to understand their situation. The research addresses the interrelationship of health, work, and the environment of women agriculturalists in a rural Amazonian community. This focus allows the identification and understanding of relations between the women and the actors with whom they share daily activities and the implications for health, work, and self-image. Using qualitative methods the experiences of 47 women were captured through collective interviews, which were analysed by Nucleus of Meaning Analysis (NMA), adapted from Categorical Content Analysis. Work is central to the lives of the women workers but is attributed with different meanings depending on the context and the relationship. It was found that the relationship with employers increases the risk of workplace exploitation; with male partners work is characterised as 'helping'. Work with female co-workers increases a sense of identity, strengthens social bonds and an ability to solve problems. In conclusion, in addition to issues related to production methods, the subjective relational universe of these workers is marked by a complexity that impacts on their lives and health. The authors suggest that research on the impact of daily life and workplace on health considers the different and complex relations and subjective demands, especially in contexts endowed with uniqueness.

Keywords: interpersonal relationship, labor, work, recognition, woman agriculturalists

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This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The research which originated this chapter focused on the daily life of Agriculturalist Women (AW) in a community in the Amazon region, by attempting to understand the nature of labor and its relationship to health in a rural setting. The goal was to learn, recognize, and analyze the different places, types of work, and multiple activities incorporated into daily life, as well as the discussion of their work, working conditions, and the health of working women in the rural Amazon environment.

The health-disease process goes beyond biomedical limits to include living conditions, and, particularly, the organization of work, which requires understanding the interpersonal relationships that shape this context. The health-disease process of AW who took part in this research is related to the conditions in which they live, including the different types of work and their characteristics, such as: Who are the persons they are involved

with in doing their tasks? How are they valued by these persons in different contexts? Which kinds of resources come from these different relational fields and how helpful are those resources for coping with the risks to health or lack of labor rights?

Job satisfaction and recognition and a sense of usefulness and participation are associated with everyday positive coping. Being autonomous and acting critically are considered important for a positive relationship between work and health, which suffers losses by invisible processes of domination and exploitation incorporated in the naturalization of historical and cultural factors, such as gender relations at work. In the Amazon region, the invisibility of exploitation, constructed and naturalized in the different processes where gender relations are given, amplified historical labor rights losses and interfered in the health conditions of rural women (Nina, 2014).

Recognition and appreciation favor a healthier posture in relation to work. Lack of recognition, in turn, promotes the concealment of disease and loss of social and labor rights, namely the right to healthier lives supported through work. On the one hand, informality and non-recognition are associated with precarious employment relationships, hindering the exercise of rights, underreporting of injuries and accidents. On the other hand, relations that allow rural women workers to be productive and act critically, besides being valued for participation in their daily tasks, would produce a positive effect on their lives.

Due to the centrality of work in the production of material and symbolic life and its close linkage with health, the objective in this chapter is to explore the relations between rural women workers and different actors with whom they share the day-to-day tasks, and to focus on how these relationships result in differences with respect to health and work.

The methodological overview includes a short description of the search field, the participating women, and the data collection procedures. Then the everyday chores of AW are described, with emphasis on the relationships they establish with their employers, husbands, and female coworkers, discussing the implications of these relations in the light of historical-critical theory in dialogue with the Psychodynamics of Work.

The Research Process

The Place

The rural community studied is located in Vila do Engenho, in the Sagrado Coração de Jesus community. It is located 140 km from the municipality of Itacoatiara, State of Amazonas, which is distant 210 km from Manaus, the state capital. Its history is linked to the organization of rural workers as an important social and political movement in the region. Created here was the first rural association of Amazonas State to receive funding for the production of *cupuaçu*ⁱ and cassava, regional products of great importance to the local economy. Another important aspect is the success attributed to planting techniques in this agricultural sector, integrating technological knowledge and traditional knowledge, where non-formal education plays an important role in agriculture and family organization of local residents (Jesus, 2009, p. 15).

Although characterized as a rural community, it is necessary to consider that changes in production models in agriculture impact the lives of workers and rural residents, introducing new social relationships, technologies, values, and landscapes, making it more complex than before. To understand this space it is necessary to

overcome the traditional view of the countryside as a locus of exclusively agricultural activities as well as the usual urban design as a place of industries and services. Even in regions like the Amazon, where geographical characteristics favor the isolation of communities, rural life assumes new configurations of the technical process, dematerializing certain urban work processes and creating forms of multiple and complex work, with the presence of agribusiness and sophisticated machinery. Likewise, city locations include actions and processes that exhibit rural aspects, especially in lifestyle organization, such as family farming activity.

The main source of income of rural workers in the Vila do Engenho comes from pineapple monoculture (82.5%). The remaining 17.5% involves a system of crop rotation: cultivation of papaya, pepper, and passion fruit (Machado, 2014, p. 30). The two latter activities show the highest concentration of female workers, especially in the pollination of passion fruit and pepper harvesting, since they require attention and dexterity in handling the plants.

The diversification of production is encouraged aiming at higher profitability throughout the year. However, this implies new knowledge and different technologies (production cycles and management, use of inputs and machinery, and adherence to management and marketing processes). This new production logic requires rapid changes in the forms of social intercourse and the use of resources. Labor relations in rural areas also suffer changes such as decreased solidarity and cooperation processes, as production activities previously carried out via joint effort, are now replaced by day laborers, a condition true of much of rural women workers in Vila do Engenho.

The Agriculturalist Women

In Vila do Engenho women play an essential role in the agricultural community. They carry out family farming, provide services to employers in planting and pollination as rural workers, and perform work-related activities by organizing a Women's Group – GRUMASCOPEⁱⁱ –, for providing service to the agricultural industry (production of cupuaçu pulp and pineapple).

This study included 47 women aged 18 to 65 years. Of these, 12 women worked in the Agribusiness Farmer's Cooperative of the Community of Sagrado Coração de Jesus – ASCOOPE; 23 were associated with GRUMASCOPE, providing cooperative management of product substrate services (manufacture of sweets, pulps), as well as the administration of events related to community festivals or of special events where their services are requested. The remaining 12 women worked in agriculture as rural workers. The survey was conducted in 2012 and 2013, and the interviews took place in the same spaces as production activities, during the time these were performed.

Data Collection Methods

The method for data collection was inspired by the Labor Clinic model, which consisted of listening to workers talk about their routines, work organization, satisfaction, and suffering (Dejours, 2011b). Individual and group dialogues with the researcher took place on the plantations in encounter groups in the GRUMASCOPE, to record the experiences and meanings attributed to work and health in the daily lives of the women surveyed. Through qualitative methods we could investigate the meanings of activities – to understand what the job is and where it takes place as an everyday product – on qualitative dimensions.

The method of data analysis used was Nucleus of Meaning Analysis (NMA). This is an adaptation of Categorical Content analysis developed by Bardin (2009), which emphasizes the speech, the analysis of subjective experiences, and the search for their meaning (Mendes, 2007). The dialogues with AW were analyzed from the Critical Theory of Work perspective, permitting the description of the underlying domination. Fundamentals of the Psychodynamics of Work and Historical-Cultural Psychology oriented the interpretation of data focusing on the contradictions and the dynamics surrounding the interpersonal relations: subject, labor, health, and social and cultural factors, applying dialectical principles.

Semi-structured interviews, using open questions, with individuals and groups, were conducted. This enables the mapping of experiences as well as creating a record of the history of the agriculturalist women's organization in the community. Thus, through dialogue we attempted to reveal the aspects of AW life that are marked by overwork, domination, and co-operation.

Interpersonal Relationships in Everyday Life in the Affairs of Agriculturalist Women

Indirect consequences of new forms of agricultural production include new social relations and precarious working conditions. These consequences are not always apparent to workers. When not identified, the processes that sustain the precarious working conditions remain hidden, accentuating work overload and various types of illness. However, by allowing space and time for discussion and reflection on everyday reality with emphasis on work, one can generate reports in which it is possible to identify the modes of interpersonal relationships that result in greater or lesser autonomy, recognition, political action, and personal fulfillment.

From the reports of the AW, three modes of relationships were identified in which different manners of defining work relationships reveal different ways of defining their work through the interpersonal relationships they establish. The first mode is concerned with labor relations with the employer; the second mode addresses labor relations in which the husband shares in the activities. The third mode, in contrast to the others, highlights the bonds among AW in their routine tasks.

Relations That Make AW Invisible: Gratitude to the Employer

The significance of women's work is historically and culturally located and it has implications for the transformation of the place. The essence of this process escapes direct observation in work situations, but is slowly being identified in several circumstances where work plays an intermediary role in the male domination of women where the work that women do is seen as inferior.

"I started working on the plantations and saw those men [working together] and heard them say that we [women] would not work that we used to go there to meet men. [...] Some men still think that our work has no value, we will go there to have fun with others, things like that" (AW 1).

The place of women in agriculture presents a contradictory history of power and resistance (Carlos, 2007, pp. 16-19). On the one hand, the landowners opened work areas - while maintaining clear differentiation in the field between men and women - and on the other, women came to understand that agricultural work was mediated by a sense of freedom, as a possibility for emancipation, in reaction to housework.

“For me, agricultural work means [...] freedom. I have to free myself from things. Because there are many women whose husbands work and say: ‘I will not work, because my husband has been working and I want to stay at home’. I do not! I work for me, not to have my money, but to be free [...]. It’s a kind of freedom that I have for me to have my own money” (AW 2).

Dejours (2011d) points out that work has an emancipatory dimension for the woman, who, from their insertion in the world of production, can achieve financial autonomy. However, in Vila do Engenho, women are absorbed into the labor market in agriculture in an inferior condition with respect to men. AW accept the conditions that the owner imposes both in wages and in the number of hours worked. This results in temporary employment contracts and in the exploitation of the AW. However, some AW report that even where there are informal, daily, or non-existent contracts, they prefer agricultural work to domestic work.

“On the days when I wasn’t working on the farm my other service was as a ‘secretary of the home’ as they call it” (AW4).

This statement demonstrates a successful means of re-appropriation of identity through work as an AW rather than as a housewife or domestic servant.

“I like the work I do. I’m not much to deal with the house [...] It is my choice. [...] I am rural worker by choice, because I like working on plantation” (AW 3).

The offer of rural paid work is represented by women as the possibility of financial independence and as a way of developing a separate identity as an agricultural worker. However, the conditions in which this occurs are not ideal. They show admiration for those who offered them jobs, regarding them as men who believe in female potential, which was previously unknown and unappreciated.

“Today I would rather stay here and work for the landowner [...] I got tired of domestic work. It wasn’t just one house, it was three or four houses” (AW 1).

One can observe that the process of change establishes a contradictory action where, despite perceived emancipation, there remains the domination of women by men. Inequalities were found in daily rates of pay for men and women. This was justified by the specificity of some tasks – some require physical strength – others by the risk inherent in the activity, such as the application of pesticides. Men and women are day workers on the plantations; but men are hired for longer periods and receive higher pay than women.

It can be understood then that any limitations placed on one or the other gender are ideological, so the woman, historically, is still the target of several imposed restrictions: an AW who portrays conditions as unfavorable when doing domestic work in three or four distinct houses, prefers agricultural work as a day laborer, justifying that the work is better on the plantation, because it centers on only one type of activity. However, there is a contradiction in the description of the work:

“In the morning I go to the plantation to collect the pepper by putting it in the bucket. In the afternoon I pollinate the passion fruit flowers, wash the harvested papaya, and put the pepper in the boxes” (AW8).

The gratitude of the employee to the employer, which maintains and reproduces the place of domination, reduces the visibility of the actual working conditions of these women, because of relationships mediated by affection and alienation:

“When it rains on the day of pollination, we’re no longer able to do it [...] then we will do another task. We are proud to say that we do what he [the landowner] asks us to do. The other day he commented that he let us [women] do everything [...] if he asked us to weed, we would weed. If he asked us to go composting like the ‘boys’ do, we would do the same. Everything he asks us, we would do” (AW 5).

Affective dependence of agriculturalist women on the landowner reproduces domination in the work place, even when the women perform multiple tasks in sometimes precarious conditions. However, it is in agriculture that the rural worker’s identity can be strengthened, by the recognition of their importance and of their role, which had not been previously appreciated in this context. Recognition is a privileged way to strengthen the identity, considered by [Dejours \(2011a\)](#) as the “armor” of mental health. Recognition enables the transformation of suffering at work, and it is therefore fundamental.

“Helping” the Husband as Concealment of the Importance of Women's Work

The work done with their husbands is identified as ‘helping’.

“... and when I have nothing else to do, I will help my husband in the family production” (AW6).

In the public realm, women working in agriculture are seen as having autonomy to work or not. However, in domestic activities or on the family land it is seen as an obligation, a responsibility without choices for the woman. This is prescribed by social conditions, affecting women’s health and wellbeing.

In describing their daily lives and interpersonal relationships, the women speak of invisible suffering brought on by women’s work, submission, and domestic work. The women reproduce practices prescribed by the local culture which consider a man’s work as duty and a woman’s work as obligation without recognizing the contribution that a woman can make in the agricultural activities of planting and harvesting. Their participation is described as ‘helping’.

The relationship with her husband contains the ideas of helping, of responsibility for the success of family life, and of the fulfillment of the work function, leading to a possible explanation by the historical and social conditions.

“What is a woman in a man's life? Sometimes, if the marriage falls apart it is not the man's fault it is the woman who does not help. Because, if the woman helps, for sure [the marriage] will last a long time. I've been married for nineteen years but we're both there, side by side, no one passes in front of the other” (AW 2).

Despite supposedly being “side by side” in an equal relationship, the participant explained that it is the man who exercises the position of power and prominence in the public social framework and the woman the function of helper. This relationship can be described as positive or strategic when the women say it is important to keep the links and dynamics of family functioning. In contrast, the woman’s social invisibility leads to the disqualification and concealment of female labor for the naturalization of women’s skills or even illness.

[Hirata and Kergoat \(2007\)](#) argue that such naturalization means considering certain skills or qualifications as women's natural abilities linked to their anatomy or gender. However, in the process of organizing the community, nothing is invisible. Everything becomes apparent and revealed when attention is given to the different scenarios of the place of women's work in the Vila do Engenho, such as planting, the women’s association, housework, the family farm, agribusiness, party organization, and the production of handicrafts.

In this location of the apparent and the invisible, the women highlight the visibility and importance of their work to family subsistence. However, they describe this as manual, simple, and light:

“The woman helps her husband on the farm. It’s the fertilization job, which is done with a spoon. You fertilize. It is not done with machines. It’s done by hand, so it’s a light job, It does not become heavy for women” (AW7).

In qualifying their work as light, the worker disregards the fact that the activities also involve long working hours, repetitive strain, poor posture, and prolonged sun exposure. Invisibility linked to the production system can cause overload that is revealed, often in the health- disease process, given the diverse demands of multiple tasks on the body and the psyche of these workers.

The subjective nexus of body and work that is processed, is composed of work stories, sometimes portrayed outside the home. The visible, at other times, becomes invisible in housework duties, including the entire family production process. A relevant aspect of relations that sustain this way of understanding and experiencing work is the place occupied by these women in the family constellation, understood as strategic and necessary for its maintenance. The contradictions between freedom, independence, participation, and denial of domestic roles seem to be diminished by the satisfaction of contributing to family maintenance. However, grievances derived from non-reflection persist in the ways in which work takes place in this sphere.

Solidary Relations: Speaking, Listening, Identification, and Recognition Among AW

Two realities intersect in the speech of the participants: **need** – which represents their suffering from rural work – and the **pleasure** of finding friendship and cooperation, healthier ways of dealing with their difficulties.

The work described as suffering from sunrise to sunset, is pressed by necessity. At the same time, it favors meeting, partnerships, and trust. The women approach friendly relations with other rural workers as an important dimension. In this context, they speak of their realities, the similarities of which are intertwined in the lives and stories of the other.

“What makes you happy is that we are all together as we are now working, talking, playing, though it may be in the hot sun or in the rain, but we are happy to be here working” (AW 5).

When describing the relations established between them on plantations or in GRUMASCOPE, the participants report ways of sharing group living, stronger bonds, and lifetimes and work. It is the description of these interpersonal relationships that define the space of dialogue, not always experienced at home or with employers.

Sharing with others is useful for overcoming the demands of the day (Mendes & Araújo, 2011) and establishing trust and solidarity, constructed from daily work, as observed in the statements:

“We have a break at 3pm. We stop to have lunch. Everyone brings something and whoever brought food shares it with those who did not” (AW5).

The extent of the mobilization of the workers shows commitment to action that enhances the transformation of working conditions and of coping with suffering. To Dejours (2005, p. 96) this is about the subjective mobilization of personalities and minds in acts of work, that is, the subjective dimension of AW.

Besides the opportunity to choose where to work and financial gain, learning to deal with adversity in planting activity and the coexistence of labor relations, collective spaces which establish cooperation, are enabled. To [Dejours \(2005\)](#), cooperation is the combination of the level of natural qualities with compensation for natural flaws, requiring trusting relationships between individuals, as this statement shows:

“Here one helps the other like this: when one bucket is empty and the other is full, we only go out when the other’s bucket is full. It’s all fellowship. One puts pepper in the bucket of the other. One brings the meals and the other brings coffee. If I could, I would fill the bucket of [a colleague] with peppers, to help her” (AW8).

Cooperation is a construction and it presupposes commitment to the collective operation, construction, stabilization, adaptation, transmission, and respect for work rules ([Dejours, 2007](#), p. 19). These have to be built, adapted, and then transformed by the workers. [Dejours \(2011c\)](#) states that the transformation of suffering experiences, labor pains, pains of life, experiences of pleasure, and more supportive conditions can only come by the gain obtained by work in the construction of identity and in conducting themselves as workers.

For the workers, working together is more than just simply work: it puts the subjectivity in action, recognizing challenges and developing survival struggles.

They feel valued by colleagues, and this recognition increases the pleasure of being part of that work. Together they identified themselves as rural workers and it is in this work place – GRUMASCOPE – that they are allowed to dialogue about working conditions that affect life and health, such as sunburn and body aches, seeking alternatives for confronting problems and listening to and recognizing each other. They collectively celebrated in everyday life the fact of being able to work to financially provide for themselves and their dependents. They also feel they have won freedom through their condition as workers.

Final Considerations

Society produces work histories. The work of AW in the Amazon has trajectories, that, as well as elsewhere, express gender relations, power, and rights. The contradictions observed reveal achievements and recognition, oppression, and denial of rights as well as systemic arrangements from interpersonal relationships between these women and the actors with whom they share their daily lives. The complexity that impacts their lives and health defines the resources available or deployed for coping with everyday problems.

Listening to AW of Vila do Engenho made it possible to understand the power involved in the different work relations, manifested in different workspaces. It reveals inequalities, similarities, alliances, confrontations, and recognition. The *Psychodynamics of Work* states that recognition is the path required for the renewal of subjective mobilization ([Dejours, 2011a](#)). Therefore it is essential to maintaining the health and socio-emotional organization of any worker. In this study, the data show that recognition is the category which maintains bonds, although it takes place in different ways.

Listening to AW in their workplace provided an opportunity to comprehend the dynamics of their work, leading to greater understanding of how the relations between these women and those with whom they share daily activities result in different perspectives on the work itself.

The systemic arrangements of the relationships in the everyday life of these women reinforce the importance of individual recognition and collective strength as fundamental to maintaining more adequate conditions of subjective organization, as stated by [Dejours \(2011a\)](#). In everyday life, these women feel positively valued as workers, especially in their relationships with colleagues and employers, but not always with the community to which they belong.

With colleagues, satisfaction is associated with creative power, critical participation, mutual support, and solidarity. With employers, satisfaction is linked to affective elements that reveal contradictions that favor labor exploitation, and the persistence of unequal and negative working conditions. With their husbands, there is no recognition for work as such, since this is reported as 'helping'. If this is 'helping', it never appears in official statistics as productive work, hindering the recognition of rural workers and restricting the access of these women to more effective rights to health and work. However, they point out the importance of 'helping' to strengthening and maintaining family and community ties.

For AW, recognition is not related only to their salaries, but also to the need of the employer to offer them work. With colleagues, they refer to belonging and appreciation on the part of the group. They recognize the importance of learning from each other, sharing, and creating bonds of trust and solidary relationships.

According to [Dejours \(2011c\)](#) the condition of belonging to a community is imbued with two senses: one that concerns the utility value of the subject's contribution as technical, social, and economic utility, which involves the judgment of the superior, usually the employer. The other sense is related to the aesthetics and the beauty of their work. This evaluation is usually made by pairs. It is understood that recognition by the worker's colleagues generates leverage resources for AW coping with everyday life. More than other actors, pairs know how much effort and commitment is necessary to succeed ([Dejours, 2011c](#); [Rosas & Moraes, 2011](#), p. 216).

The dialectic that make it possible to understand the movement, tensions, alliances, and confrontations in different relational arrangements that are established in everyday life, by emerging dimensions of the historical subject, and to understand the connections established with the others. Thus, the conditions of life and health that are part of the daily lives of AW of the Vila do Engenho, need to consider the effects that emerge from interpersonal relationships with the different actors involved.

Understanding the complexity of these arrangements is one of the ways to seek to establish healthier conditions for the rural working population that lives in the Amazon. The AW reveal both a movement of resistance to the historical processes of domination and devaluation of women and the acceptance and reproduction of these processes. However, ways of coping and promoting more satisfactory relational paths to health and well-being are present in their lives, by suggesting ways to decrease the workload and increase healthier living conditions, grounded in forms of more solidary and active participation.

Notes

i) Cupuaçu (*Theobroma grandiflorum*) is a fruit native to the Amazon Region. Its high value for industry and export is related to the properties of the fruit, the pulp and seeds of which are used both for cooking (jam, chocolate, juice, marmalade, etc.), and cosmetic products ([Lourido, Silva, & Motta, 2007](#)).

ii) GRUMASCOPE is a female rural workers association, created through the Agribusiness Rural Workers Cooperative (ASCOPE), due to the need to organize themselves over issues related to work. They work in a co-operative system, preparing fruit pulp for agroindustries ([Nina, 2014](#)).

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Competing Interests

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