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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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LABOR AND MEMORY IMPORTANCE TO RECOVER THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRADITIONAL BIRTH ATTENDANTS

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, labor was kept as a private care for women and carried out by traditional birth attendants; women whose knowledge was practical and transmitted through generations. Having as starting point Halbwachs' arguments regarding the articulation between individual and collective memories, we display thoughts regarding the importance of preserving the memories of traditional birth attendants and the implications of the transmission and receiving processes of their experiences. The present study is a part of the author's doctoral thesis that among her study themes, discusses the significance of traditional birth attendants' memory considering it as indispensable to recover the childbirth humanity and the dignity of women facing this special period of their lives. The traditional birth attendants' memories are part of a memory that is not only theirs, but of many other women, who bring with them the need to provide assistance to other women, so this makes them part of a certain social group with a type of belonging; the groups put people in concrete social marks. Individual memory does not exist to the detriment of collective memory; we realize that the traditional birth attendants' memories are being underestimated, suppressed and at risk of extinction.

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INTRODUCTION

Labor is a part of the reproductive process which transcends the biophysiological, natural and family event. It carries a social meaning regarding the story of each one of the parties involved so it is a physiological phenomenon of which assistance is in a huge part a social event. On this basis, if the birth replies to an essential physiological and social function in the species maintenance, the act of giving birth carries with it, systems of cultural values, beliefs, and customs of specific groups. According to Largura (1998) for centuries labor was taken as a private care to the female gender which was performed by traditional birth attendants¹; Women whose expertise was practical and handed down from generation to generation.

Carvalho (2015) inform us that labor is far from being a neutral event, it invokes memory and revives ancestry memories. Traditional Birth Attendants are guardians of collective memories, as described by Giddens (1995); this memory is constantly rebuilt from the past and supported in the present and since it is charged with heritage, only the midwives can access them. In this context, it is indispensable to preserve the "know-how" of traditional labor, an immaterial cultural heritage, aligned by empiricism and whose knowledge are passed through generations, as an inheritance. The present paper is a qualitative study of exploratory and bibliographic character, which is a part of discussions and reflections arising from the author's doctoral thesis: *The Act of Giving Birth: Knowledge and Practices of Traditional Birth Attendants in the Southwest of Bahia*. From Halbwachs (2006) arguments concerning the articulation between individual memory and the groups of which the individual participate in, we display thoughts regarding the importance of preserving the memories of traditional birth attendants and the implications of the

¹Terminologies used to refer to legal birth attendants/midwives. This terminology often regards their educational level which appears to be insignificant for the academic world so that they execute the required actions for child labor/birth.

transmission and receiving processes of their experiences. For this discussion to meet its goals, we started by explaining about individual memory and collective memory in line with Halbwachs; we connect the author's understanding regarding the remembrance issue of the localization of time memories with the midwives being the specific group memories to be preserved, having as a starting point that the subject reminds more easily the facts he/she has experienced in a group and that this memory has the same validity as the time the group still exists, that being in practice or in its members memory.

“WE ARE NEVER ALONE”²: dialogues between collective and individual memories

The sequence of memories, even the ones that are more personal, is explained by the changes they produce on our relations with the various collective means, being definitely by these means transformations, each one separated and in a group. (HALBWACHS, 2006, p.51).

The essence of Maurice Halbwachs' work involves defending that individual's memory always comes from the collective memory. Therefore, various ideas, feelings, and emotions that we believe to be ours arise in the group. Although, it is worth mentioning that if, on the one hand, memory is collective, the one who indeed remembers is the individual. Memory has shifted from being regarded as an exclusively individual feature to being taken as a part of social development and beginning to comprise the process of building collective identities. Our individual memory converts into collective the greater our belonging relationships with members of the groups are. Halbwachs states that the individual memory can be called as the collective's memory point of view, with the facts being common domain of a group.

In all moments, in all circumstances, I cannot say that I was alone, that I reflected alone, since with thoughts I would move from a group to another, the one I composed with the archetype, besides this, with those of which, it was an interpret like me [...] To better remember, I come back to them, assume momentarily their point of view, I enter their group of which I continue to be a part of, because I still suffer with the impulse and I find in me a lot of the ideas and ways of thinking that I would not have had by myself, and through which I remain in touch with them (HALBWACHS, 2006, p. 31).

It may be noticed the presence of two memories, the individual and collective ones and that the individual memory comes from the collective memory. Halbwachs explains that the collective memory is defined by what is called as memories' milestones, these are built socially by means of symbols, images, and expressions (HALBWACHS, 1994). This affirmative is linked to the perspective of Mead (1993) when he says that a symbol that displays a meaning for a person has a huge potential to have the same meaning for other people. In other words, social processes may influence, or control individual attitudes through the generalization of their behaviors. According to Halbwachs (1994) when we think about the past, we place it in the present. There is no “social idea that is not a society's memory” (p.296). Memory is the recognition, a form of the past to access the present;

Halbwachs (2006) indicates that from group experiences, the memory can be rebuilt.

The importance of the Knowledge Preservation of Traditional Birth Attendants: The Traditional Birth Attendants activity is, in its essence, relational. The follow-up of pregnant women transcends the technique and a relationship is built between the birth attendant and the pregnant woman, her family, and the community in which these women live in. The literature, just as the field research for the thesis shows that traditional midwives kept a close relationship with the pregnant woman and family that they were then regarded as the woman's godmother, or an older mother or even as a step grandmother of the child who was born. This established relationship was maintained forever because it started to involve empathy, affection, and a common life story. Young aged children are taught to call the midwives of mother, godmothers, grandmothers (Cruz, 2019).

Supporting this idea, Carneiro and Vilela state that,

A practice regularly employed during the assistance of a pregnant woman and parturient. It is a procedure in which it is established all the relationship between the woman and the midwife. Based on the manual touch, and used from the diagnoses until the end of the birth, it is more than a technique: it is a ritual charged with spiritual power” (CARNEIRO E VILELA, 2002, p. 82).

This relationship is distinctive of the lives in society of traditional social communities. In fact, the lives of these populations are characterized by concrete experiences with the natural setting where it is set a cultural legacy is that corresponds to the assumptions and values that guide their everyday practices. These assumptions, values and knowledge must be shared with younger women, so that this occupation remains in the course of time, as Teixeira (2011) indicates:

Traditional Birth Attendants are women who were devoted to the job of watching the future mothers on the times of labor. They have a practical and empirical knowledge regarding the art of supporting the mother and baby on the moment of birth, providing careful attention. The midwives' knowledge is kept in the memory and stories that will be told, passed and that are part of the interest and collectives imaginaries, to talk about welcoming every new child (TEIXEIRA, 2011, p. 2).

This knowledge that Teixeira claims are legacy memories from a knowledge built from the memory of another one. Taking as basis Durkheim (2008), when in his work "The Division of Labor in Society", the author addresses that social agreement can be originated in two ways, through Mechanical or Organic Solidarity. When it comes to traditional societies as in the birth attendants case, mechanical solidarity is present, since people share the same concepts and social values with respect to religious beliefs and in relation to the material interests that are required for the group's survival. It is worth highlighting that it is precisely this parallelism that makes this a socially cohesive group. It is interesting to emphasize the reminder displayed by Barros (2001) that traditional birth attendants are mostly women of advanced age, without schooling degree, so they cannot read or write and, their knowledge are passed orally from a mother, grandmother to daughters and granddaughters,

² HALBWACHS, 2013, p. 30

and from godmother to godmother. For this occupation to be passed from one generation to another, the only demand, as Acker et al (2006) describes, is that the woman who will get the information has age and experience, or that she is a mother who has experienced the labor pains.

In the research with birth attendants in the Southwestern region of Bahia, it was noticed and registered the lack of interest of younger generations in learning the labor activity, the birth attendant's occupation. This phenomenon has increased because of some factors that discourage the continuation of this occupation, like: absence of regulation of the birth attendant's profession, difficulties faced by the birth attendants in the performance of their work, ranging from the little help they get from local health services to the discriminatory way in which they are treated by a large part of health professionals, that is to say, their service is undermined (CRUZ, 2019). Making a link with the studies of Halbwachs (2006) when taking into consideration the remembrance act as a recovery of the learned past, received, on behalf of the present and coming back to the author's conception that collective memory is limited by the duration period of the group's memory, it is evident that it is necessary to preserve the group so that its memory continues. So traditional birth attendants need to continue transmitting their knowledge so that the group can be preserved.

This way, memory is not something given, but an event that is built. Social forces are crucial, nevertheless the individual's role is the foremost role in the construction of memory, because it is the subject who has the function of moving through different social groups and then establishing articulations of different periods and social spaces. Facing his/her memories with the ones of the group, they forge an individual memory and helps structure the memory of the group. For this reason, Halbwachs (2006) says that it is indispensable the present of witnesses so that memories can continue. For the constitution of individual memory, it is noticed the importance of the links of coexistence raised with people from various groups that are part of our daily environment, of our reality, enabling the confrontation between individual and other peoples' memories. Therefore, if the group ends and we do not have anyone to share our memories with, the experienced frame escape from our minds. In "Les Cadres Sociaux de La Mémoire", Halbwachs looking for explaining the process of remembrance based on the social field, as certain that the social setting is indispensable form memory construction. It is as sume that our memories survive in the group we are part of through objects, places and points of reference. This way:

Cuando evocamos un recuerdo, y cuando lo precisamos localizándolo, es decir, en resumen, cuando lo completamos, se dice a veces que lo adosamos a aquellos que lo rodean: en realidad, es porque otros recuerdos en relación con éste subsisten a nuestro alrededor, en los objetos, en los seres pertenecientes al medio en el que vivimos, o tempo, nociones históricas, geográficas, biográficas, políticas, datos de experiencia corriente y maneras de ver familiares, todo aquello que no era de partida sino el esquema vacío de un acontecimiento pasado y que estamos en condiciones de determinar con una precisión creciente (HALBWACHS, 1994, p. 55-56).

The social function memory idea (HALBWACHS, 2006) further strengthens the significance of preserving the knowledge of women who are traditional birth attendants. In other words, collective memory carries the daily reality into the field of the subjects' life history as they recognize themselves by a common past. Memory is conditioned to a setting and interaction with people who share a common fact or experience, in this case the knowledge of traditional birth attendants. Therefore, remembering is to share experiences, mediated by social groups of which we are part of. It is interesting to point out that to be part of a group it is necessary the establishment of bonds during the time of coexistence, as the memories experienced by a group mean more than the individualized ones. Therefore, we must share the facts to rebuild a past event, acquiring the memory. Individual memory is the form with which we organize our memories and habits, details, images as well as the settings that comprise the subjective that is lived individually and integrated into the collective memory. Individual memory is influenced by collective memory, because

Our memories remain collective and are reminded by others, even if they refer to events in which just we were involved in and objects that only we saw. This happens because we are never alone. There is no need for others to be present, physically different from us, because we always take with us and in us a certain number of people who do not confuse each other (HALBWACHS, 2006, p.30).

To enlighten the words of Halbwachs, Bosi (1987) explains that mostly to remember is not to revive, but to rebuild, to rethink the today, with lived and past experiences. Memory is not isolated, closed; the individual memory provides collective memory knowledge, since "to evoke someone's own past, overall the person needs to appeal to other people memories, being carried to points of reference that exist outside of themselves which are determined by society" (HALBWACHS, 2006, p. 72). In accordance with Santos (2002) memory is an indispensable cultural biological device of identity, conservation, and development. As a result, it is necessary to recover the memories of traditional birth attendants so that the labor and birth acts can be re-signified and actually have a humanized character like it has been proposed by the Brazilian Policies of Birth Assistance. Knowing that collective memory has the participation of the individual memory of each subject towards an event, Halbwachs (2006) points out to us that from the group experiences, memory can be rebuilt. The birth attendants occupation is not inert and, even knowing that little has changed in its performance in the course of time, just like any social practice, this activity goes through major changes depending even on historical changes that may take place in the community in which it exists. Brazil is a country with huge geographical dimensions, and it is interesting to emphasize that this update needs to consider regional particularities, taking as primary base the memories of the groups present there and that share a common belonging. In the establishment of childbirth humanization policies, in practice this does not happen, either because of the absence of financial resources or because of the unavailability of health managers in accept and recognize the knowledge of traditional birth attendants as essential. Concerning this knowledge tension, Borges (2008) wonders: "what is the best about the production of the taking care way for science and the common-sense knowledge of taking care?" (p. 330). In response to this matter we can mention Escobar (2005), when he states that knowledge is

plural, and it is found in many places, being incomplete and finite. This means that knowledge should be respected and valued. Examining the integration of birth attendants into health services, Borges (2008) recovers the idea of mechanical solidarity already exposed in this paper, asserting that the legitimacy that sustains the care of traditional birth attendants is within the solidarity present in their knowledge and practices. Knowledge that should be shared to remain alive. The childbirth activity is effective in the intersection of theory and practice, of knowledge and action. This knowledge is filled not just with rationality, but also with affection using the senses, the body, the touch, and the spiritual. The process of production of their knowledge is not subjected to a dichotomous logic that divides the objective and the subjective, dualizes the traditional and the modern and exactly because of the peculiarities that involve this knowledge, the memories need to be revived, kept and preserved. Unfortunately, the childbirth humanization did not become a reality in our country, the impediment to reach this objective are various like the inability to rescue birth origins and for this purpose, it is necessary that professionals who provide just science-based assistance are able to envision the beauty and wealth arising from the knowledge of simple women, whose knowledge base goes beyond the technical and cold vision.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The traditional birth attendants memories constitute a confrontation with the existing hegemonic model of women assistance in Brazil, which is mechanistic and technocratic, an actual barrier to the care humanization for women in labor to the extent that, among other ideas, it assesses the women passive role in the childbirth setting, since everything will be performed in a technical way by the professional and the institution. We believe that the traditional birth attendants memories may be of major importance for the establishment and maintenance of a humanized care towards women in their postpartum and pregnancy period, nevertheless these memories should be shared so that they remain alive and not silenced.

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