


## EMPIRICAL APPROACH/SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: PERCEPTION OF THE BODY AT WORK AMONG COOPERATIVE WOMEN OF THE CATAMATO NETWORK

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**Sandro Benedito Sguarezi<sup>1</sup>, Aline Pereira Dutton<sup>2</sup>, Erika Patrícia Lacerda Dias Souza<sup>3</sup>, Sonia Aparecida Beato Ximenes de Melo<sup>4</sup>, Elisangela Pires da Silva<sup>5</sup> and Washington José de Souza<sup>6</sup>.**

### ABSTRACT

This article sought to address the empirical situations and focuses on the social relations body and work in cooperatives of Waste Pickers and Waste Pickers that make up a Self-Managed Network of Recycling Cooperatives in the State of Mato Grosso. This study was developed based on the reflections of the collective of the Research Group: Sustainable Regional Development and Transformations in the World of Work (GDRS) and the Research, Innovation and Social Technology Network in Solid Waste Management, Sustainability and Solidarity Economy Project (REPITES) and seeks to promote theoretical reflections based on categories of analysis that emerged through empirical situations experienced between 2014 and 2024. The dialogue between empirical and theoretical enabled the initial construction of the analytical framework that will support the discussions of future research on the body at work among women waste pickers. We noticed that the field situations and everyday scenes put different social agents in motion, which produced similar inferences that need to be analyzed in the light of theory.

**Keywords:** Body. Gender. Social Representations. Work.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. in Social Sciences

Institution: University of the State of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT)

E-mail: sandrosguarezi@unemat.br

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7361-8977>

<sup>2</sup> Dr. in Sociology

Institution: Federal Institute of Mato Grosso (IFMT)

E-mail: alinedutton@gmail.com

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6251-382X>

<sup>3</sup> Master in Education

Institution: University of the State of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT)

E-mail: erika.patricia@unemat.br

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5197-8143>

<sup>4</sup> Dr. in Environmental Sciences

Institution: University of the State of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT)

Email: melo.sonia@unemat.br

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9142-5941>

<sup>5</sup> Dr. in Accounting Sciences

Institution: University of the State of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT)

E-mail: elisangela.pires@unemat.br

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4259-5025>

<sup>6</sup> Doctor of Education

Educational institution: Federal University of Ceará (UFC)

E-mail: washington.sousa@ufrn.br

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6295-2806>



## INTRODUCTION

The empirical approaches that we will present in this study are close to the theme of social research in progress entitled: Social representations: perception of the body at work among cooperative women of the CATAMATO Network, which emerge from the discussions and reflections carried out during the course of the discipline Sociological Theory II.

The empirical space of this research is the CATAMATO Network, chaired by a woman, and is formed by three Solidarity Economic Enterprises (EES). The Cooperative for the Production of Recyclable Material of Tangará da Serra-MT (COOPERTAN), located in the municipality of Tangará da Serra, located 250 km from the state capital, in which it has 47 cooperative members (25 men and 22 women). The Association of Waste Pickers of Recyclable Materials of Várzea-Grande (ASSCAVAG), located in the metropolitan region of Cuiabá, with ample potential for productive growth, as it hosts a significant number of wholesale companies and industries in the State, currently with 36 cooperative members (10 men and 26 women). And the Chapadense Cooperative of Recyclable Materials (COOPCHAMAR), located in Chapada dos Guimarães, 60 km from Cuiabá, with 30 cooperative members (14 men and 16 women). Of this universe of 113 workers, the CATAMATO Network has 40 men and 72 women (UNEMAT/IOCASS, 2017).

The CATAMATO Network materialized from the *initial dialogue established between the various Support and Development Entities, highlighting the effective participation of the University of the State of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT) through the Center for the Study of Complexity in the World of Work (NECOMT)<sup>7</sup> and the Incubator of Collective, Self-Managed, Solidary and Sustainable Organizations (IOCASS), together with the cooperative members of COOPERTAN.*

The collective articulation consolidated the elaboration of the Project, aiming at the presentation of a proposal to meet the Public Call Notice of the National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy (SENAES) No. 001/2012 FBB/PETROBRAS/BNDES/MTE-SENAES, which aimed to Strengthen the Infrastructure of Waste Pickers' Cooperatives for the Collection, Transport and Commercialization of Recyclable Materials – Solidarity Logistics (CATAFORTE). With the project prepared by the UNEMAT/NECOMT/IOCASS team and with the effective participation of the Waste Pickers, with COOPERTAN as the proponent,

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<sup>7</sup> NECOMT emerged with the creation of the UNEMAT-UNITRABALHO Nucleus, in an articulation of the Mato Grosso Network of Education and Socio-Solidarity Economy (REMSOL) and the Interuniversity Foundation for Studies and Research on Work (UNITRABALHO). This is a national university network that currently brings together 42 universities and higher education institutions from all over Brazil. UNEMAT/NECOMT became part of UNITRABALHO in 2003 and in 2012 IOCASS was institutionalized.

the CATAMATO Network obtained its work proposal approved, ranking first in a broad national competition.

The constitution of the Network was justified by the need to bring together cooperatives and associations of Solid Waste Collectors in the State of Mato Grosso that work in the services of selective collection, recycling, sorting, processing and commercialization of recyclable materials, aiming at the production and commercialization of goods and the use of recycled materials collectively and that act based on self-management and the principles of Solidarity Economy. *In its incubation process, it had the support of other important EAF, the University Center of Várzea Grande (UNIVAG); the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) through the extension program Incubator of Social Technology and Solidarity Economy (INTECSOL); the Mato Grosso Network of Education and Solidarity Socio-Economy-MT (REMSOL) (Sguarezi, 2012).*

The empirical experiences addressed at this moment refer to experiences lived in different contexts, but which are intrinsically related to our research object, which has as research subjects the Waste Pickers of the CATAMATO Network, this said, problematizes: What are the social representations about the body and work in the relations of self-managed work, associated work, in the perception of the cooperative women of the CATAMATO Network?

The reflections presented here were very relevant for the deepening and design of the theoretical framework that will support future research. As we have described the empirical in detail, we were able to highlight the categories of analysis, in order to initiate the dialogue with social theory.

We divided the work into two empirical experiences, each detailing the empirical situation, the social agents involved, the logic of the action, the resources and the categories of analysis evidenced. Finally, we seek to elucidate the theoretical framework, which is currently still in the process of construction.

According to Gomes dos Santos, Sguarezi and Neves (2024), problematizing gender and sexuality relations is a work that requires that the categories be analyzed and understood in a sociocultural context that is constructed, structured and (re)modified within their own spaces and times. When analyzing gender relations and rural labor in rural settlements, they appear as secondary aspects, that the struggles for the liberation of peasant men and women from degrading conditions imposed by class issues receive greater visibility compared to gender relations.

It is not possible to generalize the situation, but it seems that there is a reproduction of processes, whether in the countryside or in the city, gender relations present an

opportunity to learn and to improve the empirical/theoretical relationship and to promote new research agendas.

## **EMPIRICAL SITUATION: CONTRADICTIONS THEORY/PRACTICE OF A BEVERAGE COMPANY IN THE DISPOSAL OF RECYCLABLE MATERIALS**

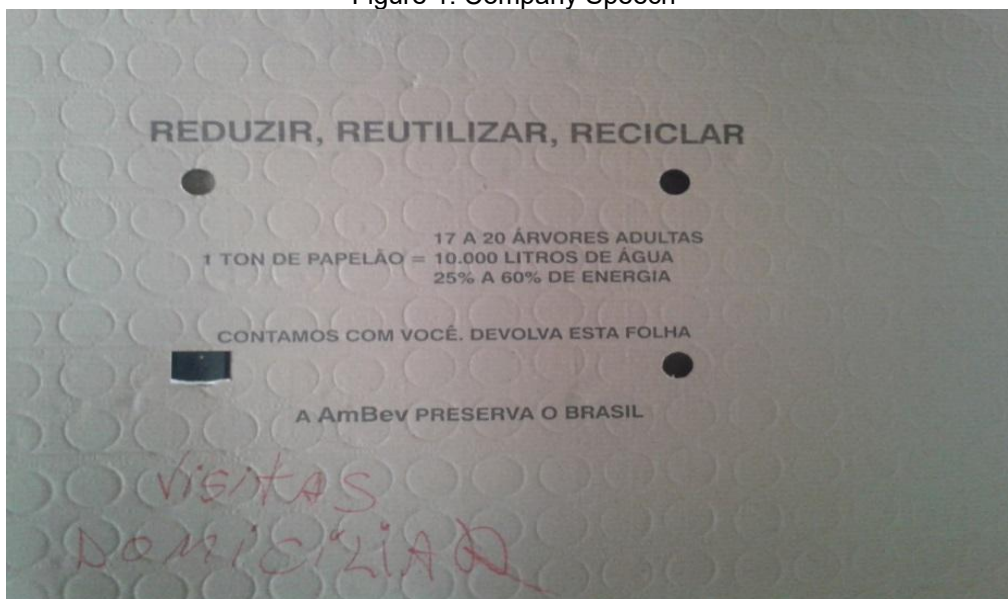
During technical visits guided by NECOMT/GDRS-IOCASS and REPITES Network provided by the discipline of Popular Education and Work and Self-Management 2016/2 with the Master's Degree in Education of the State University of Mato Grosso in *on-site visits* to the Associations of Recyclable Material Collectors and to the Dump of the municipality of Cáceres-MT, with the objective of observing the various work relationships established in these spaces and collecting field material for this analysis.

The agents who establish social relations in this context are generally excluded workers, who as waste pickers sought in the dump and recycling new ways to produce and resignify their own life and that of their families. They are workers who face a daily routine under a scorching sun, with an average temperature of 40° degrees, or rain, or on cold days. They traveled more than 15 km, often by bicycle or even on foot, to harvest their subsistence at the Dump.

In this space, waste and waste are deposited without prior separation, and it is up to these workers who collect recyclable materials to carry out the selection process. In general, the materials that interest them for income generation are: plastics, pet bottles, cardboard, aluminum – usually cans –. To this end, this process of separation, both in the Dump and in the associative organizations, is still configured by precarious work, without minimum safety conditions, that is, in degrading situations. This work exposes them to numerous risks, such as: aspirating infected air, piercing with some sharp material, becoming infected by medical waste and others that lead to other risks, as also exposed in the works of Corrêa, Sguarezi and Melo (2024) and Arruda *et.al* (2025).

The dump was a space that had no owner, without any look from the municipal authorities responsible for the collection and disposal of waste, who do not direct any initiative with a Public Policy Project to raise awareness among the population for Solidary Selective Collection, as well as organizing a municipal landfill regulated by environmental legislation only in 2016. In one of our field trips, we witnessed a renowned national company that ponders its discourse for environmental sustainability, for the preservation of the national forest, through the reduction, reuse and recycling of cardboard sheets, unfortunately dumping a truck ironically crammed with cardboard sheets in broad daylight.

Figure 1. Company Speech



Source: Aline Dutton, 2014.

Figure 1 is a piece of recyclable cardboard, which hangs on the entrance door where the old facilities of the Clean City Work Cooperative (CTCL) in the municipality of Cáceres used to be.

Figure 2. Practice/Company carrying out the dumping of the material



Source: Aline Dutton, 2014.

Figure 2 depicts the action/practice of this company at the time of solid waste disposal in the city's dump, a material of great potential for the recycling process. The company's truck – it is part of AMBEV<sup>8</sup>, the same one on the poster in Figure 1 – has the

<sup>8</sup> Companhia de Bebidas das Américas – Ambev is the successor to Companhia Cervejaria Brahma ("Brahma") and Companhia Antarctica Paulista Indústria Brasileira de Bebidas e Conexos ("Antarctica"), two of the oldest breweries in Brazil. <https://ri.ambev.com.br/visao-geral/historico/>



logo of one of the brands sold by it in the municipality, and still uses its own employees as labor.

Of course, it is not only this company that does not do its part in reverse logistics, but sincerely observing this practice has raised several questions. If, instead, this company promoted actions that contemplate its discourse of Reverse Logistics, for example: through the strengthening of ties with cooperatives that work guided by the Solidarity Economy, would it not be collaborating for social humanization? To value the work of recyclable material collectors? To contribute to the environmental preservation of our country, of our city?

In this empirical situation, we have as social agents: workers who waste pickers; employees of the Ambev Company; Ambev Company; Association of Waste Pickers; State and the University. We observed that in the logic of the action of the agents involved, the waste pickers: seek work and income in the dump to produce life, who are exposed in this space to precarious labor relations; the employees of the aforementioned company: comply with hierarchical administrative orders, as a way of maintaining employment, evidencing power relations; Ambev Company: works from a neoliberal perspective, a capitalist view, which seeks to avoid or reduce expenses, considering that if it is to separate recyclable material and deliver it to the Associations' locations, it may require a larger number of employees and time to carry out the activity; State: absence of public policies for the implementation of a project for sustainable collection; University/PPGEdu: presupposes reflexivity for the construction of knowledge.

This empirical situation occurred in September 2014. According to the waste pickers, they have been working at the Dump for more than years *"it is not the first time that the aforementioned company has done this process of disposing of solid waste at the Dump"*.

### **EMPIRICAL SITUATION: ON-SITE VISIT TO COOMDEC-MIXED COOPERATIVE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CÁCERES-MT**

COOMDEC was founded on November 10, 1998, in the city of Cáceres-MT, aiming at the social valorization of recyclable material collectors, in the promotion of recycling for job and income generation, and contributing to the minimization of environmental impacts in the final disposal of solid waste.

With the intention of getting to know the Cooperative and briefly understanding how the dynamics of work occur in its context, we made a visit at the beginning of November/2016.



Right from the beginning we were surprised by the change of address of the Cooperative. Upon arriving at its old dependency, we found that there was no longer a cooperative in that space. In front of the building, there was a gentleman sitting who promptly said that the cooperative had moved to another place, and informed him of his new address and the name of the person who could certainly receive us.

We continued to the Cooperative, it was a Saturday at 10:30 am. Arriving at the Cooperative, the social gate was open, upon entering the place, we were greeted by a worker. Mr. Leopoldo, slender and smiling body. We introduced the team, explained the reason for our technical visit, attentive and kind soon introduced us to the structure of the Cooperative.

In our eyes, the Cooperative was well organized, a large space, with: Shed, which separated the pressed and packaged materials for sale (cardboard, plastic bench, colored plastic, pet bottle and Tetrapak packaging) and a large amount of stacked tires; structured kitchen; area in front, with table and chairs, and on the wall hung several banners about the Cooperative; covered side space, in which recyclable materials were awaiting sorting; area at the bottom, with two machine/press; open space, in which there was a winch and organic materials waiting to be collected for disposal. At the time of the visit, we observed two workers making the cardboard press.

After visiting the cooperative's facilities, Mr. Leopoldo invited him to a coffee with prose. His look conveyed joy for receiving us. Initially, he briefly related his story. He is a 65-year-old man, separated, father of four children, all adults. When mentioning his children, his pride visibly showed when he said that they are all studying, going to college, because according to him, he did not have the same opportunities, who only completed elementary school. In addition to his work in the cooperative, he also pointed out to us that he is a farmer, and that he gets up at 4:00 a.m. to get milk, and only then will he carry out his work in the cooperative.

When talking about the cooperative, it was again possible to perceive the sparkle of your eyes and the wide smile. He said that he has been part of the cooperative since its founding process, and that today he holds the position of coordinator of the work within the cooperative, that is, he is responsible for directing the activities to be carried out on a daily basis.

At the time, the cooperative had twenty cooperative members, however, he pointed out that only twelve were in activity. According to Mr. Leopoldo, the other members are very old, some sick and are no longer able to work. Regarding this issue, he told us that an Assembly will take place during this month to deliberate on this issue. In addition to these

workers, there are three inmates from the prison system, two men and one woman, who have been developing this work for three months. I asked about this partnership, trying to understand how this process occurs, however, he told us that he did not know how to inform me precisely, and that these issues are resolved by the President of the Cooperative.

One piece of data that caught our attention in this dialogue is the female presence and the sexual division of labor that occurs in the cooperative. We saw that there are two cooperative members, one being President of the Association and the other developing her work totally focused on the kitchen. According to Mr. Leopoldo, the partner, as he referred to this worker, was responsible for making lunch for the workers, as everyone has this meal in the cooperative. The third woman, a re-educating woman, carries out the cleaning work. This situation makes us reflect and question, in the case of a cooperative that develops its labor relations from the perspective of the logic of the Solidarity Economy, how can work in this bias contribute to thinking about gender relations at work?

In this empirical situation, we have as agents: Mr. Informant, who in the logic of the action reported to us about the change of address of the cooperative; Cooperative member Leopoldo, worker and cooperative member for 18 years; Two women, two workers, we assume that they are cooperatives, who were developing the work in the press, for the cooperative members this work must be carried out by the man considering the physical strength necessary to handle the machine.

The Cooperative was founded 18 years ago, the same time as Mr. Leopoldo. Three months ago he settled in this new address, as the work demands increased. According to the cooperative member Leopoldo, the number of people who currently collaborate for selective collection, which takes place twice a week in partnership with the City of Cáceres, is significant. In addition, the people and companies that take recyclable materials directly to the cooperative.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND EMPIRICAL CATEGORIES

This research is part of the perspective of contribution to the Sociology of Work, focusing on the social representations of the body at work established in the self-managed productive relations in the perception of the cooperative women themselves. From this theme, we initially have four analytical categories: Gender, Body, Work and Social Representation. We observed that the empirical approaches elucidated in this work present similar categories: Gender, Body, Labor Relations, Division of Labor, Income, Social Class, Power.



From the initial evidence, we assume that initially it is necessary to understand the relationship between body and work, so that from these central categories of analysis we can advance in the construction of the theoretical framework through social theory. By thinking about the relationship between body and work from a perspective of the social and historical constitution of the subject, we will be based on the light of Marxist theory, which critically analyzes work within the mode of production of capitalist society.

For Marx (1996), work is the essential element in the ontological constitution of the subject, which is the reference in society and concretizes social relations. It is through corporeality in his human action that the subject relates to nature, and it is through the body in its distinct manifestations that it produces life itself and the relations of productive forces.

Human existence is a corporeal existence, which a priori, even in its physical materiality, needs to establish relationships to meet basic human needs, such as: eating, drinking and clothing. Marx and Engels (1998, p. 10) point out that "the first condition of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human beings. The first situation to be verified is, therefore, the bodily constitution of these individuals and the relationships it generates between them and the rest of nature" The action of man when transforming nature, transforms himself, however, to make this condition effective, new ways of relating emerge, with work being the fundamental element of transformation.

It is in/through the body that the subjects are able to express the reality in which they are inserted, for this it is necessary to understand the social and work relations constituted in the course of the historical process through structures and production in force in the political, economic and cultural power of society, as these relations organically imply the dimension of the body.

Although he wrote in his historical period, we perceive in Marx that the division of social class is responsible for the stratification, exploitation of the worker, whose central analysis of capitalism focuses on the labor force, which encompasses the means of production and the division of labor. In this theoretical conception we understand the body as a commodity, a labor force of which the worker sells it to obtain his survival, while the capitalist has in this commodity the production of surplus value, configuring the central point of the exploitation of capital over labor.

To deal with the body category, we will seek in Bourdieu's analyses centered on the structuring relations of society, in its constituent elements in the notion of *habitus* and field, the understanding of the symbolic field work as a social space of struggles and social relations, and the body as the bearer of *habitus*, a place of social learning acquired from social relations, which the social and historical agent establishes in a given symbolic field.

For Bourdieu (2001), the constitution of the social body is an instrument of knowledge that occurs from the understanding of the *habitus concept*, which makes it possible to understand the different ways of using the body in social relations and in everyday life. According to Bourdieu, individuals know society from birth through the body, justified by the fact that the structure is ready even before birth and exerts force on the individual. The individual body is created from an early age for social life through relationships through *habitus*, a set of durable dispositions that the individual acquires over time and that have permanence in history and that function as structured structures, Medeiros (2011, p. 285) states

The body becomes the bearer of *habitus* since the incorporated dispositions shape the body based on material and cultural conditions, until it becomes a social body. This is the process of socialization, producing an individual being forged in and by social relations, making individualization itself a product of socialization. That is why the notion of *habitus* articulates the individual and the collective.

According to Bourdieu (2001) learning is a bodily construction, it is through the notion of the bodily schema that for this sociologist, social agents are also able to express their feelings, as they are able to externalize social structures incorporated by structured dispositions, which serve as a basis for decoding the social world, "the body is linked to a place by a direct relationship, of a contact that is nothing but one way among others to enter into a relationship with the world" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 165).

We observed especially in empirical situation II, as well as in our research proposal, the category "gender" strongly present. The legitimacy of gender inequality has historically been sociologically constituted from the sexual division of labor. Traditionally, women have been assigned roles and social functions with symbolic elements in which a field of inferiority refers to the feminine tasks to the male condition, which operate in different time/space.

The Sociology of Labor has been advancing in discussions related to the issue of gender based on the theory of the sexual division of labor, a term that emerged in France in 1970, strongly influenced by the feminist movement of the time. According to Kergoat (2003), it is the way in which the social division of labor occurs in a given historical context based on the social relations of sex. This conception places men in charge of public space and production, while women are assigned private space and reproduction. The author states that this form of sexual division of labor operates from two principles that vary in a given time/space, that of separation and that of hierarchization.

The principle of separation promotes the division of what is socially considered the work of men, of what is the work of women. The second refers to the social hierarchy of

work, in which there are founding elements of recognition, appreciation and social prestige. These principles are responsible for gender inequality in social relations, which is effectively not indissociated from the concrete work plan, established by power relations.

Among the different segments in the field of Solidarity Economy<sup>9</sup>, we have seen that the recycling cooperative, or the waste pickers' organizations, detailed in the empirical situation, initially pointed out that the organization of work still concretizes hierarchical relations that operate in gender inequality at work. It is in this sense, the interest in deepening this issue, we believe that future research may provoke an advance to think and debate the social relations of gender and work and the possibilities of resistance for women in this scenario that still reproduces and naturalizes issues internalized by the social construction of the capitalist system.

The social class category has in Marx an antagonistic struggle divided into bourgeois and proletarians, which are evidenced by the hegemonic economic structure, which emerge from the social division of labor in the domination of productive capital, of those who obtain the means of production over those who do not own productive goods, configuring the process of exploitation and alienation by capital.

Marx's theoretical and methodological analyses reflect a relevant theoretical contribution that we cannot attach to orthodox Marxism, since his studies took place in the historical period of industrial growth and rise, which considered that economic relations were responsible for the structure of society. In this way, he did not analyze social class in other cleavages. Therefore, even though we do not know the concrete reality of the empirical space of the research, we believe that Thompson's studies based on the concepts initially extracted in Marx will contribute to these analyses that deepen these discussions.

In a brief reading, we saw that for Thompson (1987), social class is not something ready-made, static, it is the individuals who constitute the social class, so it is not just an economic structure, but a dynamic that occurs through social relations, which involves historical and cultural issues. When we seek to present the structural and historical context of the women/cooperative members of the CATAMATO Network, we will need to understand how these women occupied this social role and how this process of social organization occurred. To do so, we will need to consider the experience of these women in the established social relations. And this notion of experience has in Thompson a theoretical prism that emerges in the concept of class, in its historical, cultural and economic

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to highlight that according to Correia, Ssquarezi and Melo (2024), "The solidarity economy movement is recognized by the active participation of those involved in the work processes of solidarity organizations, the challenge of assimilating the principles of Cooperation, Self-Management, Solidarity and Economic Action (CASA)"

dimension, which comprises the subject in its space and in its historicity.

In empirical situation I, we clearly perceive that power relations occur between the market and nature, and the market exploits nature, the company's employee, and in the production of raw materials – in this case cardboard boxes, as well as in their improper disposal –. In empirical experience II, although it does not appear in detail, we saw that this category is also present, which allows us to perceive contradictions present in the perspective of self-managed work, which has as one of the main characteristics of Solidarity Economy, self-management, or the collective management of associated work.

We hypothesize that this category can be perceived in the context of the Solidarity Economic Enterprises (EES) that make up the CATAMATO Network. We believe that this "Power" should appear in labor relations, even within the field of Solidarity Economy. Based on Bourdieu, and on his concept of Symbolic Power, which founded Marx on the notion of domination. As we saw in empirical experience I, the employees of the AMBEV company did not perceive the symbolic power exerted on them, who in this situation became the object of the power relationship.

Although the empirical situations described have not produced analytical inference about social representation, this category is one of the central ones that comprises the proposal of future research that should analyze and understand whether the participation of women in the CATAMATO Network influences and/or effectively alters the social representation of the body of these working women. Durkheim already said that the social world is made up of representations, which are produced in the organization of social relations. For Durkheim (2000), society is a structural-functional system integrated by relations that represent a certain reality with its own *sui général characteristics*.

Here the authors did not intend to carry out an analysis from a theoretical point of view, but to perceive the importance of dialoguing with empirical and theoretical in order to enable the initial construction of the analytical framework that will support the discussions of social research on future agendas.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After the experiences of these empirical experiences, and the realization of readings and discussions of relevant theorists of sociology, we realize that the maturation and theoretical muscle toning have been built to subsidize the analytical corpus of future research that deals with the social problem, one of which is presented in the form of a starting question is: To what extent do productive relations from the perspective of self-managed work change the social representation of the female body from the perception of



the women collectors of recyclable materials who are cooperative members of the CAMATAT Network?

Future research should consider starting questions that focus: How do gender relations occur in Waste Pickers' Organizations? Do Solidarity Economic Enterprises (EES) enable the construction of gender relations different from capitalist companies? How is the relationship between social representations and body image among Waste Pickers? What are the representations of the body in Recyclable Material Collectors and how do they occur? What are the differences and similarities of the representations of the body for Waste Pickers and how are they processed ? What are the approximations and distancing of the representations of the body between genders and how are they verified?

We observed that although these empirical experiences were carried out in other contexts, the categories evidenced are intrinsically related to those that we initially delimited as central points of analysis of our future research agenda. We realized that the field situations and the scenes put different social agents in motion, which produced similar inferences that need to be analyzed in the light of theory. Although incipient, this work has brought significant contributions to our reflection in relation to the theoretical conflicts that concern us.



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