Interpersonal networks and the archaeology of social structures; using social positioning events to understand social strategies and individual behaviour

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Introduction: spiritual kin, social position and the estimation of prominence

In this paper we demonstrate how spiritual kin, “apadrinhamento”, can be used as a source of information about social structure. Our argument is that when a family chooses the godfather and the godmother for a child, they produce a “social positioning event”: they assert their perception of their own social position relative to the godparents.

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We take as axiomatic that people never invite individuals that they consider to be of lower social rank than themselves to be godparents of their children. On the contrary, they always choose either from close relatives, who, by definition, are of similar social rank, or from those they perceive as being of higher position, using spiritual kin to reinforce social links associated with potential flow of resources, patronage or protection. To choose the godparent of one’s child is to choose a potential surrogate parent and this implies inevitably the choice of someone considered better or equal. Used in this way, spiritual kinship could be considered a compensating phenomenon, that diminishes social distances by creating a link of protection and dependency (Calliert-Boisvert, 1968: 99).

The axiom is confirmed by even a superficial analysis of the sources of the period under study. The most frequently chosen godfathers are clearly people that have a relevant place in the social structure: members of local government, heads of the prestigious fraternities of the Misericórdia (provedores), or local nobility.

This means that parish records are filled with “social positioning events”, choices where individuals, or families, define their social position regarding other individuals and families. In a parish like Soure, in the early 18th century, around 100 baptisms occur every year, providing 200 events of relative social positioning (choosing the godfather and godmother of each child).

Our argument is that this information constitutes valuable data we can use to reconstruct the endogenous image of the social structure. But to reach this objective, we must be able to aggregate the combined perception of a great number of social agents. By devising a methodology to achieve this, we create an alternative to the inference of social positions from individual attributes (estimated wealth, noble titles) or from inclusion in groups that maintain social boundaries (the municipal élite, or the Misericórdia).

The concepts and tools of network analysis provide an essential contribution to developing a methodology that uses the “social positional events” of baptisms to gain insights into social structure. Spiritual kin constitutes an example of the type of network that is capable of supporting a formal analysis of “prominence”, “prestige” or “centrality”, or other concepts that express the general idea of the “importance” of an actor. The web of “apadrinhamentos” can provide ample data for the analysis of what is called