

Therapeutic cultures in elite families in Brazil: Life coaching, sociality, and the moral economy of privilege

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Abstract

Studies of wealth and the family have provided important insights into how financial and legal institutions allow the long-term perpetuation of fortunes, such as inheritance and trust laws, as well as examining the role of family offices and philanthropy as practices that upper-class families use to preserve their wealth across generations. Such scholarship has noticed that a flip side of this is that the family, as a unit involved in the preservation of inter-generational wealth, can also be a site of conflict that ultimately destroys great fortunes. Focusing on life coaching as a growing therapeutic cultural form among the wealthy in Brazil, I expand on these important financial and legal practices to include an often-ignored gendered site of elite reproduction: processes of self-cultivation to accrue interiority currency, as practised by wealthy parents (especially mothers) in the socialization of family heirs. In this article, I analyze the intersection of wealth, gender, and therapeutic cultures, as they contour sociability and social reproduction in Ipanema, a well-known Rio de Janeiro neighbourhood. I draw from the experience of Vera Ferreira de Oliveira, a Brazilian woman from a working-class family in Niteroi who married into a very wealthy Ipanema family in the early 2000s. Through Vera's life coaching experience with Katia Coutinho, I investigate the material repercussions (imagined or real) of therapeutic projects designed to alter the inner linings of the self and affective dispositions, and to shape elite family sociability. *Keywords:* therapeutic cultures, elite families, economy, Brazil.

Resumen: Culturas terapéuticas en familias de élite en Brasil: *Coaching* vital, socialidad y economía moral del privilegio

Los estudios sobre la riqueza y la familia han aportado importantes conocimientos sobre cómo las instituciones financieras y jurídicas permiten la perpetuación de las fortunas a largo plazo, como las leyes de sucesión y fideicomiso, además de examinar el papel de las oficinas familiares y la filantropía como prácticas que las familias de clase alta utilizan para preservar su riqueza a través de generaciones. Estos estudios han observado que la otra cara de la moneda es que la familia, como unidad implicada en la preservación de la riqueza intergeneracional, también puede ser un lugar de conflicto que acaba destruyendo grandes fortunas. Centrándome en el coaching vital como forma cultural terapéutica creciente entre los ricos de Brasil, amplío estas importantes prácticas financieras y legales para incluir un lugar de reproducción de la élite a menudo ignorado: los procesos de autocultivo para acumular divisas de interioridad, practicados por progenitores ricos (especialmente las madres) en la socialización de los

herederos familiares. En este artículo, analizo la intersección entre riqueza, género y culturas terapéuticas, tal y como conforman la sociabilidad y la reproducción social en Ipanema, un conocido barrio de Río de Janeiro. Me baso en la experiencia de Vera Ferreira de Oliveira, una brasileña de clase trabajadora de Niteroi que se casó con una acaudalada familia de Ipanema a principios de la década de 2000. A través de la experiencia de coaching vital de Vera con Katia Coutinho, investigo las repercusiones materiales (imaginarias o reales) de los proyectos terapéuticos diseñados para alterar los revestimientos internos del yo y las disposiciones afectivas, y para dar forma a la sociabilidad familiar de élite. *Palabras clave*: culturas terapéuticas, familias de élite, economía, Brasil.

Introduction

Scholars have noted that, unlike elites of the past, contemporary elites de-emphasize displays of power that hinge on refined taste, family lineage, and explicit name-dropping. Instead, they display privilege by developing a strong sense of self and ease in interacting with all people, whether a person is your trash collector or a fellow billionaire philanthropist (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Khan, 2010; Sherman, 2019). This approach to expressing status and privilege, while still sustaining existing social hierarchies, also creates a sense of intimacy in social interactions that pretends that a power difference is not there.¹ For upper-class men this typically involves learning to explain their success not by who they are, who they know, or how recognizable their surnames are, but by producing a biography around “accomplishments” that downplays inherited wealth and trust funds in favor of a “self-made” narrative. In the case of the upper-class Brazilian women at the center of my study, the equivalent to such “self-made” narratives consisted of cultivating the self through interiority projects; among these women, therapeutic cultural projects around psycho-spiritual growth and self-cultivation accrued forms of what I call “interiority currency.”

Building upon discussions of therapeutic culture (Wright, 2011), I propose the notion of “interiority currency” to describe how processes of self-cultivation operated and were instrumentalized within wealthy Brazilian families in Rio de Janeiro; in the specific context of Ipanema, interiority currency crafted images of the morally-deserving “good wealthy person” which pushed back against popular narratives that increasingly view the wealthy as corrupt and undeserving. I understand interiority currency as fluid and variable affective dispositions and embodied forms of psycho-spiritual attunement that give moral credence to high degrees of social inequality by providing a language for subjectivity and sociality, shaping spatial aesthetics and ambiance, and guiding socialization into wealth. In this sense, pre-existing external structures are not only internalized (as Bourdieu’s concept of habitus would suggest), but also experienced viscerally with various degrees of consciousness and reflection.² Interiority currency, therefore, fostered a continuous privileging of affect and emotional competency in processes of social reproduction. By using “currency” – instead of Bourdieu’s capital, for instance – I foreground the flow and multi-directionality of interiority projects, while also emphasizing the social and material power they carry.³ In

this article, I explore how interiority currency gets instrumentalized through life coaching.

Studies of wealth and the family have provided important insights into how financial, legal, and wealth management institutions allow the long-term perpetuation of fortunes, as well as the practices that upper-class families use to preserve dynastic wealth (Harrington, 2016). Such scholarship shows that families, even (or especially) wealthy ones, can also be a site of conflict that ultimately destroys great fortunes (Morck, Stangeland & Yeung, 2000). Focusing on life coaching as a dominant therapeutic cultural form in Brazil, I contribute to the existing financial and legal scholarship on wealth management to include an often-ignored gendered site of dynastic familial reproduction: strategies of self-cultivation deployed to accrue interiority currency.

Contemporary research on therapeutic cultures and classic theories of privilege and distinction have tended to undermine how everyday affective perspectives, expressions, and representations in the Americas are racialized or infused with racial difference. While studies of race have been a staple of Brazilian social sciences for decades, my contribution to the field is more modest: I intervene by noting how whiteness, as a form of racial privilege, is acquired, maintained, and reproduced largely through interiority practices often communicated through therapeutic cultural projects aimed at cultivating interiority currency. Most of the Brazilian upper classes I interviewed described themselves, upon probing, as *de pele clara*, and viewed race along a continuum such that there were multiple degrees of whiteness at various social intersections (de Santana Pinho, 2009). While the particularities of these forms of “racialized affect” are considered elsewhere (cf. Berg & Ramos-Zayas, 2015), interiority currency – and life coaching as a generative therapeutic cultural practice – highlight how individuals learn, internalize, and reflect upon their place in everyday racial situations.

To demonstrate the concrete manifestation of interiority currency, I analyze the intersection of family wealth, gender, and therapeutic cultures, as they contour sociability and social reproduction in Ipanema, a well-known Rio de Janeiro neighbourhood. I draw from the experience of Vera Ferreira de Oliveira, a Brazilian woman from a working-class family in Niteroi who married into a very wealthy Ipanema family in the early 2000s.⁴ Vera’s range of class experiences, as well as the multiple and conscious ways in which she is called to reflect on her variable cultural, economic, and symbolic capital, allows for a fine-tuned examination of how therapeutic cultures are deployed under various social configurations, expectations, and levels of consciousness. Through Vera’s life coaching experience with Katia Coutinho, I investigate the material repercussions (imagined or real) of therapeutic projects designed to alter the inner linings of the self and affective dispositions, and to shape elite family sociability and moral self-fashioning.

As a methodological note: My most recent ethnographic materials were gathered in 2020 over several Zoom interviews and participant observation in

individual and group life coaching sessions led by life coach Katia Coutinho; while I focus largely on Katia's one-on-one work with Vera Ferreira de Oliveira, I draw from other group participants at times. Rather than a "case study" of one individual's life coaching process, however, there is a greater ethnographic subtext informing the life coach/coachee dyad at the center of this article. Between 2012-2017, I conducted a total of nine months each of ethnographic research among wealthy families in the neighborhoods of El Condado in Puerto Rico and Ipanema in Brazil (Ramos-Zayas, 2020), including the families referenced here.⁵ Over the time of my ethnographic research, I examined how wealthy parents overlayed child-centered nodules of sociability over spaces that had historically been LGBTQ, non-normative, working-class subsections of San Juan and Rio de Janeiro, respectively. Behind such "parenting empires," everyday childrearing practices provided moral valence to the strong, continuous, and unequal control that wealthy families had over public space and municipal police surveillance. What remained underdeveloped in this earlier project was something I highlight here, using original and new materials: these are the ways in which embracing certain therapeutic cultures, particularly life coaching, has allowed Brazilian parents to recast their social privilege – including their wealth and racial self-fashioning as white (or approaching whiteness) – in moral, not superficial, terms. Wealthy parents often shared examples of how their own projects of personal growth and self-fashioning increased their effectiveness in helping their children to navigate the family's expectations around how wealth needed to be protected, embodied, and shared, and that it was not incompatible with being a "good person."

Centering on one client-life coach dyad, out of the multiple such relations I witnessed over the years of my Ipanema fieldwork, I show how therapeutic projects were deployed in daily life to shape relationships and cope with an uncertain social world in which being an elite arguably requires more self-awareness and moral legitimacy than it did in the past. The article is organized into a series of vignettes documenting a sort of progression in a life coaching experience as perceived and interpreted by Vera and Katia. Before introducing the first vignette, I provide a brief background about the world of life coaching in relation to Latin America. I conclude by considering how therapeutic cultures and language influence perspectives on parenting, marital relationships, and extended families, as well as shape everyday life, social reproduction, and sociality in upper-class families.

Latin American foundations of life coaching

"Therapeutic culture" refers to the growing sociological and humanistic interest in the language, projects, and operations of psychology and social constructions of personhood and the self that have flourished under neoliberalism. As neoliberalism incites us to feel certain emotions and to adopt rules for their outward expression, the self and interiority acquire even greater cultural salience

(Harvey, 2016). In this context, life coaching and other such practices provide a new criterion for ranking people and structuring bourgeois society. The pursuit of these interiority projects yields a specific kind of sociability, or “psy-sociability” (Matza, 2018), that harbors its own racial and class logics and encourages people to share their inner struggles, personal problems, and even political or familial traumas as parts of everyday interaction.⁶

Few cultural frameworks other than political liberalism and market efficiency have mustered as wide a level of cultural legitimacy and range of influence as the therapeutic; we are hard pressed to find institutional arrangements or intimate relationships (e.g. economic organizations; patterns of child rearing; intimate and sexual relationships; schools; the welfare state) not influenced by therapeutic cultural projects of personal growth, self-awareness, or mindfulness. An interest in the psyche emerged partly from a classed and racialized relationship between the intellectual elites of Latin America and Europe in the context of European migration to the Americas in the late 1800s and early 1900s. A connection between psychoanalysis and trauma/memory was reinforced under Southern Cone dictatorships in the 1960s-80s. Throughout these moments in Latin American social history, psychoanalysis was considered a subversive, politicized ideology that South American dictatorships viewed as a threat.⁷ More recently, Latin America has also become the region of the world witnessing the greatest growth in life coaching, with a 175 percent growth in trained life coaches and many more uncertified practicing coaches (ICF Global Coaching Study, 2021). In a quest to address relationship issues within the family or achieve psycho-spiritual depth, wealthy families in Ipanema hired a range of therapists, counselors, and other “experts” in the self and inner-cultivation, from marriage and family counselors to developmental psychologists to psychiatrists and gurus or shamans.⁸

Contemporary life coaching achieved greater popular reach in the 1980s, when it became consolidated as a discipline with its specific methodologies, terminology, and identity (Brock, 2008). These early iterations of coaching were largely grounded on loose interpretations of Eastern and humanistic philosophy concerned with themes of personal responsibility, growth, and self-awareness; eventually, the work of life coaches was differentiated from that of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers by its goal orientation and focus on self-optimization. Rather than tending to mental health conditions, life coaches emphasized that they work with individuals who “were already successful, healthy, and accomplished” (Klar, Mendola & Fisher, 1990, p. 99).

Unbeknownst to many, Latin America occupies a central, foundational role in the field of mainstream life coaching. In addition to the European and the US coaching models, which focus on productivity and goal-orientation, a third current in the world of coaching originated in Latin America: the ontological coaching approach. Also known as “South American coaching,” the ontological approach is built on the premise that the goal of a life coach is to aid coachees, first and foremost, to name and identify the beliefs and paradigm upon which they

have built their everyday lives, and which may be preventing them from achieving a particular goal. Since ontological coaching assumes that language generates reality, it is only through unique thoughts and conversations that life coaches could guide coachees to relate differently to their life circumstances and scenarios (Sans Zapata, 2012). Latin American ontological coaches are critical of a globally circulated US-style of coaching that is action-oriented, “you can do it!”-type, noting that such coaching lacks depth and a capacity for a more profound transformation (Brock, 2008). Chileans Rafael Echeverría, Julio Olalla, and Fernando Flores constituted the core of the Latin American coaching perspective. This is a coaching specialty based on ontological philosophy that situates the self in a historical context with social economic political dimensions, and which reflected the background of their creators.

Minister of Economy under the late Chilean president Salvador Allende, Fernando Flores thought that one of the main challenges of Allende’s socialist government was to transform Chilean thought and culture, which was tightly embedded in US capitalism. After being held in prison for three years following the 1973 US-backed military coup in Chile, Flores emigrated to Palo Alto, California, where he developed his own philosophy about communication (Brock, 2006). Echevarría and Olalla were both protégé’s of Flores and had also been forced into exile from Chile in 1973. Eventually Flores returned to Chile and once again became involved in politics, while Olalla became a sort of ambassador of ontological coaching in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Venezuela, Peru and Colombia, as well as in European countries and the United States in the early 1990s. According to Olalla, “their philosophical approach to coaching was based on the principle that emotions are the way human beings are compelled to act and that language cannot be comprehended if you do not consider the emotional dimensions of it” (Brock, 2008). Latin American coaching, at least in its beginnings, involved looking at the social, economic, and worldview dimensions within which the coaching relationship evolved, as each coaching conversation or relationship is historically situated within existing dimensions.

The predominant form of contemporary Latin American life coaching is still oriented toward the earlier iterations of positive psychology fostered by Olalla, Echevarría, and Flores in the 1990s. In 2011, the first Brazilian congress on Positive Psychology was held in Rio de Janeiro under the title “The Road to Flourish” with Olalla-trainee Martin Seligman as the keynote speaker.⁹ Some of the key debates addressed in this congress included: the regional unevenness in the integration of positive psychology in life coaching, with Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina being the countries with highest levels of scientific production in the field; the ubiquity of topics psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships and psychotherapeutic interventions in studies of positive psychology in Latin America; a concern with the fine line between positive psychology, life coaching, and “pseudo-sciences,” such as alternative therapies, new age, mysticism and spiritual exploration (ICF, 2020).

Notwithstanding distinctions across these therapeutic cultural products, some of them significant, my exclusive focus on life coaching allows me to have more direct access not only to the teachings of coaching, but more importantly to how some Brazilian elites internalized and implemented coaching goals in ways that expanded their cognitive repertoire and fostered, enhanced, and morally justified their privilege. While life coaching – and the products, services, and language it generates – has reached a range of class backgrounds and world regions, the sociological impact of these practices is hardly uniform or democratic. Among upper classes, these interventions have significant impact on decisions about dynastic wealth, family and kinship relations, and opportunity hoarding for subsequent generations. While most, if not all, the upper-class families I interviewed in Ipanema had hired therapists or counselors for themselves and their children, attended Eastern religion-inspired retreats in Brazil and internationally, and participated in wellness seminars, lectures, and webinars at some point, about a third of them (overwhelmingly the women) had worked with an actual life coach. In this sense, the goal here is to examine the social, material impact of accruing such forms of interiority currency, particularly as these dovetailed with neoliberal aspirations. In pursuit of analytical depth rather than a representative sample, I focus on the life coaching encounter between an upwardly mobile woman who had married into a wealthy Ipanema family and her life coach.

Vignette 1: “Stuck” in an elite Brazilian ipanemense family

My mother-in-law tells me: “Vera, you and Thiago [Vera’s husband] need to connect better as a couple. Forget that discussion about buying joint property. Focus on the marriage.” But Ana, sometimes I get very frustrated because Thiago is very unconcerned about money. Deep down, he still believes that, if he makes a mistake, his family will bail him out. (...) He worries about Felipe [their 12-year-old son] dropping a bread crumb on the floor. I worry about Felipe’s inability to achieve his potential in Brazil. I’m always telling Felipe, “What you have today is because your mom studied a lot and worked hard.” Thiago can’t say that to Felipe because everything was given to him (Vera, late-40s, Ipanema/Rio de Janeiro).

It was largely because of her mother-in-law that Vera Ferreira de Oliveira ended up seeking life coaching from Katia Coutinho, a Brazilian life coach whose clients included many of the upper-class Ipanema families I have met over the years. While many of those families came from a lineage of dynastic carioca wealth, Vera had been raised in a working-class Niteroi family with a mother who had worked as a nanny during Vera’s childhood in the 1980s. In this sense, Vera’s case is one of outstanding social mobility rare in Brazil but enabled partially because of the social welfare policy of the early-2000s, heightened under the Workers’ Party government (Pinho, 2021); ironically, though perhaps not terribly surprising, Vera never explained her mobility as a result of government

policy but as the outcome of individual hard work and self-cultivation. While attending university in Rio de Janeiro, Vera met Thiago da Silva, the son of a prominent Ipanema family that had sold their multi-generational family business to foreign investors. While Thiago occasionally served as consultant for the new owners and retained shares of the company, Thiago and Vera lived largely off money disbursed through off-shore foundation money. In 2012, Vera and Thiago had been married for nearly fifteen years and had a 12-year-old son, Felipe. They lived in one of the many apartments which Thiago's family owned, and, like many other upper-class families, Thiago had worked in the family business until it was sold. Work, wealth, self-reliance, and merit were at the core of both nuclear family conflict and tensions with the extended family.

Vera sought life coaching largely to correct the "dependency" she felt she and Thiago had on the extended family fortune. In individual and group life coaching sessions, Vera outlined her concern: she felt that Thiago lacked the motivation to work towards forging a marital *patrimônio* (patrimony) or, roughly, an arsenal of tangible goods and property that they, as parents, could pass on to Felipe that created a bond between them outside extended family dynamics. Rather than taking this concern seriously, Thiago expressed a "lack of concern with *questões materiais* (material issues)." His goal was to raise Felipe as "the kind of person who travels, knows the world, and feels comfortable among different cultures," which is why he always rejected the possibility of leaving cosmopolitan Ipanema, unless it were to move to Europe. For Thiago, who felt confident in his family's wealth, opportunities and a sense of competency were measured in terms of neoliberal forms of adaptability or experiences that enhanced one's cosmopolitan outlook, social graces, and ease.

Vera's parents-in-law frequently remarked about Vera's high "level of anxiety over money"; they blamed Vera's anxiety for the heightened stress they noticed on the marriage. While certain conditions, like depression, were rarely contested and existed without much social debate, anxiety was a "debatable" condition among Ipanema elites; determining whether one's anxiety was legitimate or pathological was not an individual-driven assessment but a social discussion within families, particularly when those families were bound by wealth. Ironically, dealing with the in-laws' family dynamics required that Vera viewed happiness in a very typically therapeutic way: As a categorically positive virtue that one needed to strive for on one's own, rather than a product of special social interactions or objective conditions, and which had to be preserved particularly in moments of conflict.

A frequent source of conflict had to do with disagreement over what constituted being a good wealthy person and the moral economy of privilege to which one subscribed. For instance, while Vera wanted to teach Felipe to "earn" his privilege (e.g. not expecting domestic workers to tend to his every whim), Vera's parents-in-law viewed privilege as who they were and a series of ways of being in the world rather than something to be earned. Ironing out these variations in the origins of one's social standing and socialization goals, as Vera came to

understand, required not only that she should acquire greater social or cultural capital, but that she should remain aware of her own process of handling family conflict in ways that retained what she viewed as the moral advantages of her own social mobility path. Removing any trace of incompatibility between the different approaches to wealth was at the crux of how Vera cultivated interiority currency.

Thiago's family's dynastic wealth constituted a type of inherent family value built upon long-standing social capital and naturalized elite formation to which Vera could only have selective access and often at great personal cost. In such a context, Vera became, initially, an observer of family dynamic, while cultivating interiority currency to carve a space for herself in everyday interactions which required that she embodied affective dispositions and forms of psycho-spiritual attunement, constitutive of interiority currency. In this way, Vera turned distinctions between inherited wealth and upward mobility into an alternative source of value dependent in nonmaterial forms of currency.

Vera used life coaching to create a self that was better able to handle family and social relationships, largely by managing her anxiety and how she participated in family-wide debates about the legitimacy of her anxiety. Life coaching was not necessarily a turn towards individualism, but rather a collectively motivated impetus toward greater familial harmony through self-work (Nehring et al., 2016). While recognizing the sociability of internal or psychological experiences, interiority currency provided footing into a moral economy of privilege in one of the most socially unequal countries in the world. Accruing interiority currency required Vera to reinterpret or revise "morality" so that privilege was in alignment with her new social standing as a member of a wealthy family. Self-work provided a path to doing this because it allowed Vera to go from having an awareness of her own internal dialogues to offering the techniques for restructuring or reimagining her interiority in relation to the social space of family and wealth.

While individuals across class and racial background may learn similar life coaching techniques, reflection and contemplation usually require time, resources, and validation that are classed and racialized (Rocha, 2006) that could yield very different classed and racialized outcomes. Foundational concepts in life coaching, including the power of "manifesting" or the premium on one's intuition, are often associated with degrees of self-work rather than sociological conditions of inequality and privilege; ultimately, manifesting and intuition were not only premised on the power of the mind over any material constraint or obstacle, but also on the social judgment of outcome as a reflection of interiority currency and dedication to working hard on the self.

Vignette 2: Getting un-stuck

Have you heard about India's Spiritual Laws of Acceptance? They are four very important ideas that shape how we approach any circumstance in life.

First, everything happens for a reason. Second, every person that comes to our life is the right person. Good or bad, they are the people you need in that moment in your life. Third, things happen at the right time. And fourth, everything will pass (Katia Coutinho, Vera's life coach).

Encouraged by other parents in Felipe's private school, Vera began individual life coaching sessions with Katia Coutinho, an Ipanema-based life coach in her mid-40s. Eventually individual sessions were complemented with bi-weekly group sessions that brought together about a dozen Brazilian women living throughout Brazil and other parts of Latin America, Europe, and the United States. Like other life coaches, Katia drew from a spectrum of discourses and cultural artifacts that clients were expected to integrate and practice in their everyday life. Perhaps the greatest emphasis in Katia's life coaching was what she termed, rather arbitrarily, "India's laws of acceptance." These "laws" consisted of truisms that could be considered staples of most life coaching programs cohered around amorphous references to spirituality, body care, life balance, and even a "liberal" social learning (largely unrelated to electoral politics). Katia's reference to India was emblematic of an Orientalist undertone and symbolism ubiquitous in self-cultivation practices in Ipanema; at a time when Eastern spirituality is often associated with anything from fitness routines, like yoga, to ashram retreats, Ipanema elites reimagined an Orientalist universe as cosmopolitan and a tool of self-cultivation.¹⁰

Over several months of life coaching sessions, Vera identified personal aspirations that better aligned with her authentic self by engaging in multiple exercises (meditation, vision boards, mantras) through which her life coach guided her. When Katia asked Vera to "visualize" her ideal future (and later to "manifest" it), Vera's image involved moving away from Ipanema, preferably to Portugal, since Thiago had an EU passport and language would not be an issue for Felipe's schooling. Curiously, these guided inner world incursions shifted the ambiance, rhythm, and tone of my interviews with Vera. Whereas in early interviews Vera would occasionally articulate a class critique of the Brazilian elite, based in her own working-class background and in relation to her in-laws, now she attended to mantras that helped her redirect her energy to gaining a sense of control and ease. In guided meditations that she recreated throughout her day, Katia placated Vera's multiple anxieties and relationships with the social by substituting those "negative thoughts" with more productive ones. While the negative thoughts had material, sociological grounding, the productive ones operated on metaphysical registries. In Vera's case, Thiago's financial dependency on his family's estate lost centrality as her energy became redirected to developing strategies to deal with her in-laws as individuals.

Katia's life coaching practices were not circumscribed to time spent in sessions but shaped her clients' sociabilities more broadly. As a result, for instance, Vera sometimes acted as a life coach "proxy" to her *empregada*, Leandra; she would judge Leandra's romantic choices and speculated about Leandra's

“inability to attract a good partner.” In these interactions, the realms of intuition and manifestation became unequal sites of power for Vera and Leandra that further contoured a frequently oppressive labor context. Because Leandra had not “done the [interiority] work,” she was incapable of properly manifesting a better romantic partner and, ultimately, a better life for herself and her children. Thus, life coaching-style sociality often conditioned how elites viewed broader cultural values about power, governance, and moral responsibility; even nonmaterial sources of power and inner-world cultivation, the reach of interiority currency, became both about carving spaces of privilege for the self and closing off those spaces for others along class and racial lines.

A language of “manifesting” and “intuition” was central to life coaching practices. Intuition, while difficult to pinpoint, has been popularly referred to as a strong (generally gendered) gut feeling that guides an individual to act in a certain way without a full understanding of why. Intuition is peculiar because it is alternatively valued or viewed as a liability depending on the individual in question; for instance, while many of the domestic workers with whom I spoke valued their own intuition as pragmatic knowledge, their bosses were sometimes encouraged to question their intuitions to achieve positive thinking. Katia encouraged Vera to pay attention to her intuition and to inhabit a perpetual state of aligning her affective states with what she wished to manifest. It is equally difficult to approach “manifesting” in social scientific, interpretive ways, largely because the very existence of the concept is doubted or altogether relegated to the realm of mysticism, at best. In her sessions, Katia evoked intuition as a mode of knowing life and the self that needed to be examined, and “manifesting” was treated as a process of divine co-creation or materialization of a desired outcome.

Much of Vera’s work with Katia was on the topic of anticipating transformation: transformation of her life circumstances in Brazil and in relation to her husband, son, and in-laws. As Adams, Murphy, and Clark (2009, p. 248) argue, “as an affective state, anticipation is not just a reaction, but a way of actively orienting oneself temporally”. Anticipation required that Vera kept a record (through journaling) of her progress toward achieving desired transformations and paid attention to evidence of how “manifestation” operated in that process. This interiority focus was highly and counterintuitively social because it also involved sharing and co-constructing a self-narrative with Katia (Pagis, 2010). During one of Vera’s coaching sessions with Katia, Katia articulated what she viewed as Vera’s achievement over a few weeks of life coaching. In a serious and intense tone, Katia stated: “Vera, do you realize what you have already achieved? You began teaching Felipe about the need to earn things. So a critical part of our work had to do with parenting from within.” To this, Vera assented: “Even the other day, when Felipe asked me ‘Mom, why is that homeless person in the street?’, I told him, ‘Felipe, things get passed on from family to family. She [the homeless woman] most likely comes from a family who didn’t give her structure. You see how Vovó Lala [Vera’s mother] used to live on a farm and her own mother had to work to give her a better life? And then she worked to

give me a better life? There's continuity.'" Vera activates lessons from life coaching to produce an alternative familial dynastic legacy sustained on the moral work interiority currency allows.

While Vera's statement would be unremarkable in the United States, where meritocracy is a national foundational narrative, this is not necessarily the case in Brazil. Prompted by Katia, Vera increased her interiority currency by introducing the language of meritocracy. Importantly, her perspective on meritocracy shifted along the way; she no longer presented her "hard work" and social mobility in counter distinction to Thiago's inherited wealth; rather, Vera's embodied meritocracy became an inherited disposition that she deployed in relation to the Ipanema homeless, not the Ipanema elite. Using meritocracy in this way also served the pedagogical purpose of teaching Felipe how to justify his privilege: Felipe was no longer the passive recipient of unearned wealth, which was one of Vera's main concerns when she began life coaching, but the inheritor of a tradition of ancestral hard work. Therefore, a structural critique of racial or class inequality became coopted by or re-framed in a therapeutic language of care and manifesting. Interiority currency shows that, while structuring structures (Bourdieu's *habitus*) are enduring partly because they are affectively appraised, interiority becomes currency when such affective appraisals and dispositions were adequately manipulated and externalized.

Vignette 3: The material landscapes of interiority currency

It is because of my coaching work with Katia that we are here. Here in Portugal. Here as a couple. Here as parents working together. Even here, in terms of reaching adulthood, right? We have no parents to bail us out, no domestic worker. Because we don't have a domestic worker here, we are forced to work together. I can trust Thiago more, because he is more involved as a father, as a partner. Even my relationship with Thiago's family has improved (Vera, Portugal, 2018).

By November of 2018, Vera, Thiago, and Felipe had moved to Portugal and settled in the upscale coastal town of Cascais. Vera Skyped with me from her beachfront balcony, eager to share the details of their "new adventure." It had taken several years, but Thiago had finally succumbed to Vera's wishes; he had agreed to move to Portugal, they had closed down their Ipanema apartment, and were now settled in an ocean front apartment as a nuclear family. "From one ocean to another," Thiago remarked when I pointed to the beautiful background.

Vera and Thiago were now part of a sizable ex-pat Brazilian community of upper-middle class and wealthy families living in the beachside resort town, where they used Thiago's family money to buy the luxury apartment and a brewery business. In their new social network was Luciana Ribeiro Oliva, a Brazilian lawyer who had also moved to Portugal with her husband and children, and who had been a member of Katia's life coaching support group for several

years. Years of vision boards, journaling, and recasting frustrations had paid off; as Katia Coutinho had once promised, the four Indian laws of acceptance had been “crucial to crafting the steps to get unstuck.” “We are citizens of the world and tomorrow we could be in any other place, but we’ll still stay in contact! We’ll continue to be grateful for the opportunity to grow and evolve,” Katia mentioned once, in a conversation we were having through WhatsApp.

Some of the evidence Vera introduced to show me how life coaching had transformed her life were predictable: moving her nuclear family to Portugal, away from meddling in-laws and a corrupt country to the presumably politically transparent Global North. Moreover, Felipe was in a school with the children of other expat Brazilian families, which allowed the family to maintain hierarchies of power and status comparable to those in Brazil, while also activating the complexity of their place as immigrants in a society where Brazilians were often marginalized. The value of this more complicated situation of family wealth – a language of merit and being “self-made” – allowed them to be a kind of elite that was different from the presumably more entitled grandparents’ generation. Notwithstanding the fact that the Cascais apartment and brewery were funded by inherited wealth, in Vera’s view they were now a run-of-the-mill “self-made” (presumably income-dependent) couple.

Curiously, rather than the list of achievements related to her child, husband, and herself, what Vera considered one of the best parts of living in Portugal was getting away from a domestic worker culture she associated with Brazil. From her new life in Portugal, Vera reflected in retrospect: “The level of anxiety I had around domestic workers was out of proportion with the benefits of having someone do your laundry.” Vera appeared to echo what I had heard many times from her own in-laws: that, rather than being opposed to hiring paid domestic work as such, what she disliked was the modern, unsentimental approach that domestic workers took toward their work: “I know of a few families who have built beautiful relationships with their nanny, over generations, who ended up taking care of the nanny in old age, got her a house. Now nannies are just like regular employees, and the household becomes like a corporation.”¹¹ Vera and Thiago were now “learning to be a couple, without depending on the extended family, and doing all the house chores ourselves.” The transformation of domestic work, from hiring a paid worker, to increased gender equality around domestic tasks was the single biggest difference that Vera raised between her life in Brazil and in Portugal.

Vera’s in-laws, Vera noted, would never have been able to survive without domestic workers making sure the household was functioning.¹² What Vera found emotionally exhausting in her relationship with domestic workers and domestic work in general was that these across-class, across-race relationships required a sociability inspired by humanitarian and even multicultural ideals with which she was unfamiliar (Ward & McMurray, 2015). Engaging with subordinates along humanitarian and neoliberal lines are taught in many elite and international schools around the world (as shown by Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009).

Not belonging to that traditional elite background or having attended elite educational contexts, these relationships proved to be confusing and ineffective for Vera and raised moral concerns. Such forms of excellence, rather than depending on inner-world cultivation and interiority currency that Vera was pursuing, required full belonging to elite institutions and being secured in one's whiteness in relationship to domestic workers who were poor and hailed from racialized regions of Brazil; Vera would have been required to embody a white, elite disposition that was premised on welcoming the otherness of subordinates (rather than being a white-with-limited-class privilege), because one is completely at ease and confident with one's wealth and whiteness.

For Vera, whose mother had been a domestic worker, the top of the social hierarchy seemed more slippery than it may have been for traditional elites, like her in-laws or even Thiago. Both meritocracy and ease are integral to the making of elite subjectivity (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009); while Vera was able to articulate her social mobility in terms of meritocracy, she was not able to fully master the ease required to relate to subordinate others without feeling emotionally depleted and anxious.¹³ While Vera, Katia, and other coachees had spent many life coaching hours discussing anxieties about their relationships with domestic workers, no amount of manifesting or reflection could resolve those tensions because elite interiority currency was ultimately predicated on perceived categories of human complexity and engagement with processes of self cultivation to which domestic workers had no access or were excluded. Even after several years of life coaching and delving into various therapeutic cultural projects, Vera and the other women in Katia's life coaching group complained that domestic workers were more materialistic than wealthy people (e.g. "They were materialistic and had the latest iPhone, which even I refuse to buy!"); that they were not hands-on enough with their own children (e.g. "My maid's kids are always in front of a screen"); that they stayed in abusive relationships (e.g. "I would have never allowed a man to treat me like that"); and that they were too dependent on government handouts (e.g. "They voted for the PT because of the handouts they promised...the '*bolsa familia*,' '*bolsa* this and *bolsa* that"). As racialized and classed others, domestic workers were considered less emotionally complex, evolved, or self-aware, and the *bolsa familia* social welfare program under the PT was sometimes blamed for that; in that sense, interiority currency effectively preserved hierarchies of inequality not only at the level of the material, but also of the emotional and psychological.

Conclusion

Guided by her life coach Katia and her life coaching support group of other wealthy Brazilians, Vera shifted the kind of elite family to which she belonged, possibly also altering certain aspects of Felipe's socialization to privilege and charting what she considered a "moral" or "proper" way of being privileged: from the elite expectation of having full-time domestic workers, inheriting

heirlooms, and attending philanthropic galas to being part of a modern, upper-class nuclear family of hands-on parents and shared housework. Nevertheless, racial and class privilege became the moving-targets on the terrain of the meta-physical. Life coaching often fostered a “psychologization of the social” (Rose, 1990). As seen in Vera’s story, there were several projects of the self that accomplished this, including the deployment of Orientalist narratives and a politics of manifesting and intuition, alternative forms of self-fashioning as an elite, and a psycho-spiritual pursuit of a moral justification for social inequality intricately linked to how children were socialized into wealth.

Therapeutic cultures have long played an extensive role in society beyond formal institutional arrangements and clinical practice; life coaching is emblematic of a merger of therapeutic perspectives on the self and a capitalistic logic that creates a self that must profess being able to read others’ feelings and respond appropriately since these skills are desired in the labour market. Therapeutic cultural practices have grown exponentially in Latin America and the Caribbean, and life coaching has been among the wider spread among them. Therapeutic ways of knowing and working upon the self, including life coaching, aligned with political economic projects and created sites of “psy-sociality” for commenting upon and contesting such projects. A critical examination of therapeutic cultures, like life coaching, raises perspectives on interiority that intersect with ordinary ethics (Lambek, 2010) and moral striving (Das, 2015) among elites in the Global South. Such moral dimensions of social life should be included in our theorization of wealth, families, and social reproduction. To gain insight about the affective dimensions of economic and racial privilege, it is crucial to better understand how elite families revise and critique their past selves and future hopes in light of the things that have happened to them, their neighborhoods, and their countries.

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Notes

- 1 These ethnographic studies have overwhelmingly focused on US elites. In the case of Latin American elites, while I have noticed a similar tendency among progressive elites in Rio de Janeiro (Ramos-Zayas, 2020), sociologist Hugo Ceron-Anaya observed that,

- among men in golf clubs in Mexico City, the embodiment and expression of wealth and status followed along more traditional elite lines of refined taste, conspicuous consumption, and hierarchical social interactions (Ceron-Anaya, 2019).
- 2 This departs from Bourdieu's conception of habitus in that interiority currency does not assume that effective socialization practices are exclusively transmitted without conscious intention, but highlights actions that are neither fully conscious, intentional, and rational nor entirely established through misrecognition, tacit consensus, or common sense (Bourdieu's doxa). While the nonconscious aspect of habitus is an important contribution of Bourdieuan practice theory, I want to highlight that there are multiple levels of consciousness beyond absolute rationality and inadvertent compliance. Unlike habitus, interiority currency often requires that individuals continue to view themselves in historically grounded ways, as is Vera's case.
 - 3 Even though Bourdieu never refers to inner-worlds or emotions in his own work, Illouz notes that Bourdieu's practice theory allowed an understanding of emotional capital that gives a sociological grounding for emotions which had generally been considered the realm of psychology. According to Illouz (2007), a merger of therapeutic discourse and capitalistic logic creates a self that must profess to be able to read others' feelings and respond appropriately since these skills are desired in the labour market. For a discussion on how these capitalist logics operate in the context of race and affect, see Berg and Ramos-Zayas, 2015.
 - 4 Following ethnographic conventions, all names are pseudonyms.
 - 5 I appreciate a reviewer's urging to be more specific about the years in which I conducted the Zoom interviews, particularly given the heightened political polarization that characterized Brazil at the time (and now). From the data that I have, much of it predating the height of Bolsonaro in Brazil, I cannot decidedly situate Katia's or Vera's approach to life coaching in relation to its direct connection to Brazil's political landscape. I would argue that, perhaps, that is part of the underside of therapeutic cultures selective intersection with political economy and history. Curiously, though, Bolsonaro received the endorsement of a prominent Brazilian life coach. See Pablo Marçal oficializa apoio a Bolsonaro: '*Você ganhou um genera*' (uol.com.br)
 - 6 While personal growth is at the centre of elite life coaching, the poor experience psychosociality is often built around crisis counselling and remedial interventions, thus suggesting that profound inequalities emerge in matters of selfhood (Silva, 2013).
 - 7 Not only did the number of people accessing psychoanalytic treatment expand during the 1970s in Brazil and the rest of Latin America but there was also an increase in the 'social prestige' or status conferred on those practising or attending psychoanalytic treatment (Rubin, Mandelbaum & Frosh, 2016). Alongside psychoanalysis, and in response to perceived economic downturns, there has been a resurgence of New Age versions of self-improvement (See Tavaréz, 1999).
 - 8 As the scholarship has consistently shown, Latin America has a syncretic belief system. Vera and other elites in my research followed this tendency; they combined mainstream religious practices, particularly associated with Catholicism or Judaism in a few cases, with alternative ones, like *Candomblé* or *espiritualismo*. See Moreira-Almeida and Koss-Chioino (2009).
 - 9 During the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of Brazilian coaches acquired even greater social and media prominence. See: <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/dino/em-meio-a->

- pandemia-psicologo-fala-sobre-a-importancia-da-espiritualidade-no-processo-terapeutico,867ed80edc5542f7188dd4b3b007de05i971o0ug.html. In the 2019 “Brazil: Country of Coaches,” Scalzarotto notes the increase in advertisements for coaching programs in Brazil, from billboards around the international airport in Sao Paolo to TV advertisements and the buzz on streets and social media. See <https://rd1.com.br/instituto-brasileiro-de-coaching-se-posiciona-sobre-polemica-em-o-outro-lado-do-paraiso/>, <https://veja.abril.com.br/economia/cresce-procura-por-cursos-de-coaching-mas-falta-regulamentacao/>, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/sobretudo/carreiras/2019/06/1988149-coaching-e-crime-entenda-o-que-esta-por-tras-desse-debate.shtml>, <https://veja.abril.com.br/cultura/merchandising-de-coaching-na-novela-pode-ter-cusado-ate-r-5-mi/>, and <https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/educacao-br/formacao-em-coaching-sao-mais-procuradas-por-psicologos-e-administradores-revela-instituto>.
- 10 In the twentieth century (or late-nineteenth), a turn to the “Orient” in Latin America was marked by the popularity of One Thousand and One Nights and Rabindranath Takore’s visit to Buenos Aires in 1924. Kanderism in the first decades of the twentieth century and the 1960s New Age counterculture, along with the professionalization of psychoanalysis, contributed to such imaginaries of “the Orient” in Brazil.
 - 11 Teixeira, Carrieri and Souza (2020) document the nonmonetary transactions between Brazilian domestic workers in Belo Horizonte and their employers as a dominant moral code between domestic workers and *patrões* that dated back to turn-of-the-twentieth-century Brazil. Among many of the domestic workers interviewed, nonmaterial aspects, like affection, tended to complicate evaluations of who was a “good employer”; notably, these assessments were often rooted in the domestic worker’s perception that she was not being “treated as empregada” but as a member of the family. These relations often conditioned the worker’s (in)ability to demand labour rights.
 - 12 In fact, like the Indian elites in Ray and Qayum’s ethnography, Brazilian elites like Thiago’s family harboured feudal expectations of a household largely maintained by servants and of lifelong affective and loyalty ties between employer and servant, while also believing that the lifestyles and aspirations of employer and servant were decidedly different.
 - 13 Mills (1956/2000, p. 283) emphasizes the role of class power in consolidating a sense of self, emphasizing the psychological facet of class, writing that “nowhere in America is there as great a ‘class consciousness’ as among the elite”. He also anticipates Bourdieu’s notion of “ease,” a mode of becoming for elites where skills acquired gradually through the family appear to be natural because they bear no mark of the effort that goes into acquiring them (Bourdieu, 2012).

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