

WORKING PAPER

Experience-based knowledge from “the periphery of the periphery”:

southern knowledge production dynamics among Brazilian academia/technical experts and mothers of police's victims

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Abstract:

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1. Introduction

"Nothing about us, without us"

Débora Maria da Silva, Mother of police victim
Mothers of May Movement

From 1964 to 1985, Brazil testified the government of a Military Dictatorship. It was a moment of general violence, Human Rights violations and, on the societal level, collective fear. Although the collective memory of the crimes of the Military Dictatorship is often directed to persecution against somewhat intellectualized groups (politicians, intellectuals, and activist leaders), the authoritarian period was also deadly for marginalized groups, victims of police lethality and excessive use of force by institutions that could act without external sanctions.

After a tumultuous period of military dictatorial governments, the constitution of a “new democracy” in Brazil promised to end state violence and inaugurate an order of social pacification. These promises, however, proved to be practically impossible to resolve in the early years of the new Regime. On July 26, 1990, while the cries of families of those who disappeared and were killed during the Military Dictatorship still echoed, other mothers' voices emerged to demand justice for their children killed in the first massacre of modern Brazilian democracy: the Acari massacre. This massacre refers to the murder and disappearance of eleven young people, all

residents of the Acari neighborhood, one of the poorest areas in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In 1994, Amnesty International concluded that the perpetrators of this massacre were military police officers¹. As years passed and the statute of limitations expired in 2010, no police officer was convicted. This brief narrative has been repeating itself since then in various Brazilian cities². Along with these massacres, there are all the other "isolated" homicides that police officers commit against citizens, both on and off duty. Trying to make sense of this contradiction that arose in the face of democracy's promise to end authoritarianism, these families have coined the term of "Democracy of Massacres" to characterize this historical period. The apparent contradiction in terms of "Democracy of Massacres" – not so much if we consider 'the dark side of democracy' and the violent practices within the democratic system (Mann, 2004) – demonstrates a continuity of the Dictatorial regime *modus operandi* within the newly formed democracy.

Despite the movement for discussion and mnemonic recovery of the Military Dictatorship that unfolded during the 2010s, there was little discussion about the phenomenon of police lethality during the authoritarian period. There is no mention of deaths carried out by civil and military

¹ Brazil employs a dual police system established by the 1988 Constitution, consisting of Civil Police and Military Police in each state. The Civil Police functions as an investigative force, responsible for criminal investigations and forensics, Evidence collection and suspect interrogation, operating police stations ("delegacias") and post-crime investigation. Led by "delegates" (delegados) who must hold law degrees, Civil Police officers work in civilian clothes. The Military Police, though not part of the armed forces, serves as a preventive force handling street patrolling and crime prevention, immediate response to ongoing crimes, public order maintenance and traffic enforcement. They operate in uniforms with military-style hierarchy and training. When a crime occurs, Military Police responds first and secures the scene, while Civil Police conducts subsequent investigation. This differs from the U.S. system, where single departments handle both functions. While this specialization can enhance expertise, it can also create coordination challenges between forces.

² Some of the most relevant massacres since the Acari massacre are: the Matupá Massacre (1991), the Carandiru Massacre (1992), Candelária and Vigário Geral Massacre (1993), Alto da Bondade Massacre (1994), Corumbiara Massacre (1995), Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre (1996), São Gonçalo Massacre (1997); Alhandra and Maracanã Massacre (1998), Cavalry and Vila Prudente Massacre (1999), Jacareí Massacre (2000), Caraguatatuba Massacre (2001), Jardim Presidente Dutra and Urso Branco Massacre (2002), Amarelinho, Via Show and Borel Massacre (2003), Caju, Praça da Sé and Felisburgo Massacre (2004), the Baixada Fluminense Massacre (2005), the May Crimes (2006), the Complexo do Alemão Massacre (2007), the Morro da Providência Massacre (2008), the Canabrava Massacre (2009), the Vitória da Conquista Massacre and April Crimes in Baixada Santista (2010), the Praia Grande massacre (2011), the Crimes in Altamira (1989-1993), the Haximu Massacre (1993), the Colombo Massacre (2003), Guaíra Massacre (2008), the Pedrinhas Massacre (2010), the Mogi das Cruzes Massacres (2014 and 2015), the Costa Barros Massacre (2015), the Grande Messejana Massacre (2015), the Osasco and Barueri Massacre (2015), the Curió Massacre (2015), the Londrina Massacre (2016), the Alcaçuz Massacre (2017), the Manaus Massacre (2017), the Cajazeiras Massacre (2018), the Palmácia Massacre (2018), the Altamira Massacre (2019), the Paraisópolis Massacre (2019), the Ibaretama Massacre (2020), the Complexo do Alemão Massacre (2020) and the Jacarezinho Massacre (2021). In the Massacre Map, developed by Reconexão Periferias of the Perseu Abramo Foundation (2021), 786 massacres were mapped in Brazil between 2011 and 2020.

police in the *National Truth Commission* [Comissão Nacional da Verdade]³. The 434 dead and disappeared during the Military Dictatorship counted by the *National Truth Commission* do not encompass the extermination of marginalized and vulnerable populations⁴. These are bodies were not considered, remembered and even known.

In the list of 434, there were many names of people whose families belong to political and academic spaces from the middle and upper strata. The particular social space of these families allowed them to widely share their experiences about the state violence committed during the dictatorship. They produced books, lectures, documentaries, movies⁵, and editorials, among other forms of media, both academic and non-academic (e.g. Arns, 1985; Ottoni, 2004; Paz 1997; Tavares 1999). As members of the upper classes, these families had all the conditions to assemble these materials, given the intellectual training and insertion of these people in various fields of knowledge production (artistic, journalistic, or academic). Thus, in parallel with the academic production about the period, a corpus of knowledge was also spread based on the experiences of these families victims of the regime's violence. About the other dead, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds little was known, because little was heard, produced, and read. They are the "ungrievable" bodies, as Judith Butler (2010) conceptualizes when discussing the unequal distribution of mourning.

³ The National Truth Commission (Comissão Nacional da Verdade - CNV) was established during the presidency of Dilma Rousseff, who signed it into law in November 2011. This was particularly significant because Rousseff herself had been imprisoned and tortured during the military dictatorship period. The Commission was created to investigate human rights violations that occurred between 1946 and 1988 in Brazil, with special focus on the military dictatorship period (1964-1985). It operated from 2012 to 2014, following similar truth commissions that had been established in other Latin American countries like Argentina and Chile. The timing of the Commission's creation, nearly three decades after the end of the military regime, reflected Brazil's gradual process of confronting its authoritarian past. Unlike some other Latin American countries that established truth commissions shortly after their transitions to democracy, Brazil took longer to formally investigate these human rights violations, partly due to the 1979 Amnesty Law that protected both opposition members and state agents from prosecution. The Commission's work represented an important step in Brazil's process of transitional justice, though some critics argued it came too late and had limited power since it could not prosecute those responsible for the violations due to the still-standing Amnesty Law

⁴ On repression of rural populations during the Military Dictatorship, see the **Final Report of the São Paulo State Truth Commission - Volume IV - Report of Activities of the Working Group on Repression in the Countryside in São Paulo State, 1946-1988**; On repression of indigenous peoples during the Military Dictatorship, see **Indigenous Peoples and Military Dictatorship: subsidies to the National Truth Commission (1946-1988)**; on repression of the LGBT movement during the Military Dictatorship, see **Dictatorship and homosexuality: repression, resistance and the search for truth**; on repression of the black movement during the Military Dictatorship, see **The Anti-racist Struggles of Afro-descendants under surveillance of DEOPS/SP (1964-1983)**.

⁵ The new released and Oscar nominee movie "I am still here" is an example. The movie tells the story of a engineer and former deputy killed by the military.

Since police killing gained strength and spread in the post-dictatorship period, family movements against this violence also grew in the same proportion. Débora Maria da Silva from the Mothers of May Movement, for instance, experienced state violence in various periods of history, having her brother, husband (both during the Military Dictatorship) and son (in 2006) being killed by police lethality: "I saw my mother wait for justice sitting on the sofa, I saw my mother-in-law silent and not touching on the subject. When I realized I was in the same situation. I went to fight to try to transform what is commonplace in the constitution of this country: the death of black and young boys " (Silva's testimony to the São Paulo State Truth Commission, 2015). Since the Acari massacre, several other family movements have emerged – a phenomenon already known in Latin America since the 1970s, such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and CoMadres in El Salvador⁶ (Ota & Mason, 2022), among others. The various family movements, although composed of historically and socially silenced portions of society, appeared as a symbol of pain and resistance organized around the experience of grief. The movements are forms of activism that catapulted their voices against police lethality in contemporary times.

Academic interest in these movements in the last decade has been noteworthy. Research focuses vary on the themes involving mothers' movements. Some works seek to understand state violence and resistance against it through the lens of mothers' movements (Vianna & Farias, 2011; Santiago, 2019; Silva & Silva, 2023; Gonçalves, 2012; Oliveira et al, 2022); others look at the issue of racism directly associated with police lethality and family movements (Carregosa, 2019); some researchers, primarily associated with media studies, have looked at the issue of digital activism and the communication of these movements through social media (Soares, 2024; Calado, 2020; Moraes & Miguel, 2023; Araújo & Vidica, 2023); recently the topic of psychological illness and care work among women of mothers' movements has been an emerging topic (Almeida, 2022; Jesus et al, 2022; Araújo *et al*, 2022); and finally there are works that focus on the dynamics of the movements themselves (Quintela, 2021; Araújo, 2007).

From this intense interaction of academia with family movements (their object of study), the latter gradually entered academic spaces: they started to give lectures in universities, be invited

⁶ The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Movement is an Argentine group formed during the military dictatorship to demand information about disappeared children, protesting peacefully with weekly marches in Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires. The COMADRES Movement (Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Murdered of El Salvador) is a human rights organization founded in 1977 that fights for justice and clarification about political disappearances and murders during the Salvadoran civil war.

to debates, and co-write books or reports. "We put our foot within academia," states Débora Maria da Silva in several of her public speeches. More than participating in these projects, several mothers have started questioning academia's epistemological approach: "we didn't want to be a laboratory anymore. It was necessary to bring these mothers as researchers" (Débora Maria da Silva, 2024, public speech during the release of the report *Voices of pain, struggle and resistance of women/mothers who are victims of state violence in Brazil*⁷ in São Paulo, on July 16, 2024).

Their presence in spaces of knowledge production has also extended beyond academia to events related to the circulation of knowledge in the Judiciary (such as seminars promoted by the Public Defender's Office), where family members articulate political and legal arguments in the discussion about their processes (judgment processes of their children's cases) and about state violence.

From their experiences, they have helped to understand contemporary Brazilian democracy and the authoritarian continuities across political regimes. In addition to the socio-political contributions, their insertion in spheres of knowledge production (such as academia and judiciary) allows them to rethink the epistemological process of scientific knowledge production, policy-making, and legal judgment from within, thus opening space for the contribution of multiple types of knowledge and expertise in a new dynamic of co-production of knowledge.

Recent research has begun to explore the role of family members – particularly mothers – in knowledge production, as well as their interactions with researchers (Farias *et al.*, 2020). However, the sociological implications and consequences of 'lay knowledge' production remain underexplored. This paper seeks to address this gap by mapping and analyzing the dynamics through which these actors contribute to knowledge production within traditional epistemic spheres. Specifically, we examine how mothers, positioned both by circumstance and political-epistemic awareness, have emerged as knowledge objectors and producers. To guide our inquiry, we propose the following research questions: Why are traditional spaces of knowledge production and expertise increasingly incorporating the experiences of non-experts (or 'lay experts')? How do these actors engage in knowledge production across different epistemic settings? What are the broader implications of these cases for our understanding of knowledge production? By addressing

⁷ This report is related to research developed by a partnership among Mothers of May Movement, São Paulo State University and Harvard University.

these questions, this paper aims to contribute not only to the understanding of this specific phenomenon but also to broader theoretical debates on knowledge production and epistemology.

2. Theoretical Framework: Experts, "experience-based knowledge" and critical consciousness

On the 2024 Coser Award Lecture at the American Sociological Association (ASA), Claudio Benzecry suggests the formation of a 'strabismic sociology'. The Argentinian sociologist brings together the theoretical perspectives of Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell and Argentinian writer Esteban Echavarría. In 1837, Echavarría introduced the concept of the 'strabismic perspective,' suggesting that comprehensive theoretical understanding requires simultaneously focusing on both foreign ideas and local realities. This metaphorical 'crossed-eyes' approach, according to Benzecry, resonates with Connell's argument in her 2007 work *Southern Theory*, where she advocates for utilizing Northern theory not as an all-encompassing framework but as a source of "productive" or "insightful" ideas.

The convergence of Echavarría's and Connell's perspectives illuminates an instrumental approach that emphasizes the value of diverse theoretical viewpoints, fostering a bidirectional dialogue between North and South. Historically, knowledge produced in the periphery, particularly the Global South, has been systematically undervalued in academic discourse. Operationalizing Benzecry invitation 'for a strabismic sociology', this paper extends this discussion further by examining what we term the 'knowledge produced by the periphery of the periphery': knowledge produced by non-academic, economically disadvantaged Black people from the South, esp. Brazil.

Over the past two decades, sociology and other disciplines have increasingly engaged with critiques of the hierarchical relationship between Northern knowledge systems and colonized peoples' epistemologies. Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2014) work on "Epistemologies of the South" represents perhaps the most exemplary contribution to this debate. However, our approach aligns more closely with Benzecry's relational perspective, which synthesizes Echavarría's strabismic vision and Connell's concept of Northern theory as a 'fruitful box' of ideas. This theoretical section aims to facilitate dialogue between Northern and Southern theories to frame our research questions regarding experience-based expert knowledge in the context of police violence in Brazil. By deliberately engaging with 'the best of the North' and 'the best of the South,' we attempt to transcend the existing intellectual and geopolitical division between these hemispheres.

Experts Knowledge and lay experts

The debate about “lay expert knowledge” is relatively recent in sociology. According to Epstein (2023), it appears for the first time in 1995, in the field of STS (Sociology of Technology and Science). The nomenclature “lay expert knowledge” is contradictory, it is an oxymoron that expresses this non-scientific knowledge, specifically about a theme that is based on one's own experiences. It is used to avoid confusion with other sociological terms like “common sense” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1966; Turner, 2012, 2017), “everyday knowledge”, “local knowledge” (Geertz 1983). This is because the idea of “lay expert knowledge” would not concern any knowledge perceived by an individual through non-scientific means, but rather specific knowledge about something based on a long or unique experience that has not been scientifically elaborated and certified. In this sense, other terms emerged to characterize this idea, such as “extra-scientific knowledge”, “non-expert knowledge”, “uncertified knowledge”, “experience-based knowledge”, and “non-expert knowledge”. In this paper, we call it as “experience-based knowledge”, which expresses this non-scientific knowledge, specifically about a theme that is based on one's own experiences. As we will see, “experience-based knowledge” is a specific kind of “lay knowledge”.

Sociology's interest in this type of knowledge emerged within a discussion within STS that involves both the “extension problem” and the “legitimacy problem,” giving rise to what Collins and Evans (2002) called the “third wave of STS studies”: Studies of Expertise and Experience (SEE). The first wave of STS studies was based on Popperian discussions about the epistemological conditions of knowledge production (Collins & Evans, 2007). The second wave brought a sociological turn that strongly relativized the epistemological status of scientific knowledge (Collins & Evans, 2002), prioritizing a social-constructivist approach that symmetrizes scientific and non-scientific knowledge, privileges non-scientific factors for knowledge construction and its consensus and investigates the use of scientific knowledge in various social institutions, such as the judiciary, school, political institutions, among others. This wave of studies also problematized how science cannot solve technical problems in the public domain since political decision-making is faster than the formation of scientific consensus. As a result, there was also much discussion in this second wave about the need to legitimize technical decisions that did not necessarily pass through scientists.

It is in this wave that SEE emerges, aiming to address the question of who should and should not contribute to decision-making by virtue of their experience (Collins & Evans, 2002; 2007). The problem guiding this third wave is the "extension problem", a tendency to dissolve the boundary between experts and the public so that there are no longer reasons to limit the indefinite extension of technical decision-making rights. The "extension problem" brings debates about the idea that science can be rethought by someone with less formal training or a different perspective from the scientific one for a given problem. These are less systematic, more situated knowledge based on everyday or extra-everyday personal experiences (in this case, involving experiences of oppression, violence, and injustice). They can be "more embodied and ineffable, less prestigious, and more oppositional" than traditional knowledge (Epstein, 2023, p. 82).

But if these experts are "lay," in the sense of not being scientists, what would be the specificity of their expertise so that they are not considered like any person? According to Collins & Evans (2002, p. 252), experience cannot be the only defining criterion of "lay expertise," since everyone could become an expert in anything they had some kind of experience. In other words, "lay expert knowledge" is still "expert knowledge", that is, a specific knowledge different from a generalist judgment. However, it is not scientific (Eyal, 2019, p. 22).

According to Collins and Evans (2002), there are four types of "lay experts": (a) lay people who have some type of specific training or education in an issue, subject, or technology, (b) lay people who transform themselves into experts to challenge scientific experts; (c) lay people with specific knowledge based on tradition and/or experiences of specific situations or social position; (d) lay people who represent an alternative perspective to expert views precisely because they are not experts. Regarding our empirical object, the lay experts in question hold specific knowledge based on experiences of specific situations or social positions. In this sense, the mother's victims fall into classification "c" proposed by Collins and Evans (2002).

Considering democratic contexts where there is interaction between different spheres (civil society, academia, politics, among others), Eyal (2013) proposes to understand expertise not as a set of skills or knowledge that some individuals possess, something reified that one either has or does not have. Alternatively, Eyal understands that expertise emerges in specific historical contexts with uncertainty and the possibility of contestation about who can be an expert on something. This relational and distributed idea of expertise depends on internal conditions

(embodied skills and tacit knowledge, for example) and external conditions (socialization in specific groups and audiences/institutions that validate expert claims, for example).

The focus of Eyal's argument is on the relationality and distribution of expertise phenomena; that is, the emergence and consolidation of the concept of expertise is intrinsically related to specific historical and social contexts where there is a multiplicity of agents claiming expert status. And for this status to be recognized, there needs to be a process of legitimacy production, where certain claims to knowledge and authority are validated and made credible in public discourse. This process involves continuous boundary work, establishing crucial distinctions between experts and non-experts, scientific and non-scientific knowledge, and technical and political issues.

There is an ongoing literature exploring cases of these dynamics between scientific and lay expert knowledge. Lay experts were studied by Epstein (1996) in the case of AIDS treatment, as they were able to contribute knowledge to scientific studies based on their experience with the disease. Tal (2019) also presents two cases. In the case of the "Cumbria sheep," local farmers predicted that the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear accident would last 6 years (not 6 months as predicted by scientists) because they knew the soil well, along with sheep grazing patterns and regional vegetation; and in the case of the French Muscular Dystrophy Association, patients' parents took control of research direction and created an association where scientists were subordinate to a board composed of lay people (the parents themselves), creating a solution of knowledge co-production (scientific and experiential) about the topic. Other topics about the interaction and dynamics between scientific experts and lay experts have already been explored (Collins & Evans, 2002), such as technologies of local interest, public use of technologies, and esoteric knowledge.

Unlike these case studies, our object encompasses knowledge that involves scientific experts linked to social scientists who study a phenomenon with profound subjective impact. We define "academic/technical experts" as not only researchers who work in academia but also those who act in the public sphere as technicians (such as legal operators). The way these experts interact is also particular. Unlike the sheep case, for example, where academic/technical experts go to local lay experts to understand the studied phenomenon, it is the "lay" experts (the mother's victims) who enter academia and the judiciary to question how this knowledge is being produced and place their experience of pain as a central substrate for debate - very similar to the dynamics observed in the case of the French Muscular Dystrophy Association. The approaches of SEE strongly

consider the element of experience for knowledge formation but do not work on the nature and way this experience is constituted.

Experience knowledge and critical consciousness

Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (2000 [1970]) brings a complementary perspective to this debate by considering how oppressed groups develop and articulate their own forms of knowledge through critical consciousness. His seminal work studies how marginalized groups construct knowledge about their social and political reality through critical reflection and action (*praxis*). Freire explores how people who have experienced oppression develop unique forms of understanding their reality, challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge production.

With a focus on situated practices and lived experiences, Freire provides a theoretical framework to understand how subjective experiences of oppression form critical consciousness that encompasses both emotional and political dimensions. His concept of "dialogue" as a horizontal process of knowledge construction is particularly relevant here, as it recognizes that authentic knowledge emerges from the lived experiences of those who directly face oppression. At the same time, Freire explores how oppressed groups develop what he calls "thematic universe" – the complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges that emerge from their concrete situations.

This theoretical framework provides a compelling lens for understanding how mothers of police violence victims develop distinct forms of knowledge through their experiences. Drawing parallels with Paulo Freire's conception of how oppressed groups transition from 'naive consciousness' to 'critical consciousness,' these mothers develop sophisticated understandings of state violence through their direct encounters with institutional violence and injustice across multiple levels of bureaucracy. Their journey begins with street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), specifically the police officers responsible for their sons' deaths, continues through their interactions with the Homicide Unit⁸ during murder investigations, and extends to their engagement with the judiciary system throughout criminal proceedings. This process, pervaded by systemic negligence and institutional injustice, not only compounds their trauma and suffering but also leads to secondary victimization. However, it is precisely from these devastating

⁸ In Brazil, the Homicide Unit is formally known as DHPP [*Departamento de Homicídios e Proteção à Pessoa*], which functions as the Department of Homicides and Protection of the Person within the Civil Police structure.

circumstances that these mothers emerge as activists, channeling their grief and their experience-based knowledge into collective action through various mothers' movements. Their process of knowledge production follows what Freire would call a "problem-posing" approach, where they critically examine their reality while actively working to transform it.

Freire helps us understand how these mothers' movements are not merely sharing testimonies but are engaged in what he calls "authentic thinking" – thinking about their social reality and is intrinsically linked from action to social transformation. This approach to knowledge production, which combines lived experience with critical analysis of systemic violence, exemplifies what Freire describes as the development of critical consciousness through *praxis*. Expanding the theoretical consequences of his argument, we suggest that Freire's pedagogy framework is also insightful to think how this 'authentic thinking' of these mothers is not only something for them to make sense of their own experiences; it is also an expertise (a "lay" experience-based expertise) that is beneficial for the universal knowledge of police violence, both in academic and non-academic settings. Thus, this knowledge has higher consequences than the developing of critical consciousness, as this consciousness provides a better understanding of the issue that can be used for solving social problems, policy-making, and moral judgement.

To sum up, while the third wave of STS studies recognizes lay experts with "specific knowledge based on tradition and/or experiences of specific situations or social position" (Collins & Evans' type "c"), Freire's framework helps us understand how this expertise is actually developed through a process of critical consciousness. Where STS scholars identify the existence and validity of experiential knowledge, Freire illuminates the process through which oppressed groups transform their lived experiences into systematic critical knowledge through a dialectical process of reflection and action (*praxis*). This theoretical bridge is particularly relevant for understanding mothers' movements against police violence. These mothers' journey from individual trauma to activism and collective knowledge production exemplifies both the type of "lay experience-based expertise" that STS scholars describe and the process of consciousness development that Freire theorized. Moreover, their insistence on being recognized not just as testimonial sources but as knowledge producers themselves reflects Freire's emphasis on the oppressed becoming "subjects" rather than "objects" of knowledge production.

Decolonializing knowledge

The intersection between STS's third wave recognition of lay expertise and Freire's theory of critical consciousness reveals a persistent contradiction in Global North academic practices. While STS scholars theoretically acknowledge the validity of lay expertise, particularly that emerging from specific situated experiences (Collins & Evans' type "c"), the actual practices of knowledge production in Western academia often reproduce what can be termed "academic paternalism." This paternalism manifests in the way that lay experts, especially those from oppressed groups, are frequently treated as mere sources of raw data or testimonial evidence rather than legitimate knowledge producers in their own right.

This dynamic precisely exemplifies what Freire criticized as the "banking model" of knowledge, where academics position themselves as the sole legitimate interpreters and organizers of oppressed people's experiences. Even when acknowledging lay expertise in principle, Western academic practices often maintain hierarchical relationships where researchers retain the privilege of theorizing about - rather than theorizing with - lay experts from marginalized groups. This creates what Santos (2007) calls an "abyssal line" in knowledge production, where certain forms of knowledge are systematically made invisible or reduced to mere "cases" for academic analysis. Indeed, the "academic paternalism" reveals an intriguing dynamic that extends beyond the traditional North-South power relations in knowledge production.

While scholars have extensively documented how Northern academia often dismisses or patronizes knowledge from what it considers the 'peripheral' South, less attention has been paid to similar patterns of epistemic hierarchies within the Global South itself. This internal stratification manifests particularly in how Southern academic institutions and researchers often reproduce paternalistic attitudes toward knowledge produced by "peripheral" groups within their own societies. Despite these mothers developing complex analytical frameworks through their direct encounters with state violence and institutional injustice, their knowledge production has faced the same paternalistic treatment that Southern academics. The institutional practices of academia often relegate them to the role of "research subjects" rather than knowledge producers. This represents what Freire would identify as a form of "epistemological oppression", where the very structures meant to validate lay expertise end up reproducing patterns of intellectual colonization.

This critical perspective helps us understand why movements like the mothers' collectives insist not just on being heard, but on transforming the very ways in which knowledge about state violence is produced. Their demand to be recognized as researchers rather than merely research

subjects' challenges both the theoretical limitations of Western approaches to lay expertise and the institutional practices that maintain academic paternalism. Their stance echoes Freire's insistence that authentic knowledge production must involve the oppressed as subjects of their own inquiry, not objects of others' investigation.

The dynamic between academic/technical experts and lay experts from oppressed groups cannot be fully understood without addressing the colonial foundations of traditional knowledge production institutions. While STS's third wave theoretically legitimizes lay expertise, and Freire's framework explains how oppressed groups develop critical consciousness, both approaches must be situated within a broader critique of what Quijano (1997) terms the "coloniality of knowledge." This colonial epistemic framework has historically privileged academic forms of knowledge while systematically delegitimizing knowledge produced by marginalized groups, particularly from the Global South. From this perspective, the academic paternalism previously discussed is not merely an institutional practice but a manifestation of colonial epistemic hierarchies. When mothers of victims of police violence enter academic spaces and demand recognition as knowledge producers, they are not simply challenging individual institutional practices - they are confronting centuries-old colonial structures that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and who can be recognized as a legitimate knowledge producer.

This challenge to traditional epistemic institutions operates on multiple levels: a.) methodological: it insists on research approaches where "mother researches mother," these movements contest the colonial separation between researcher and researched; b.) epistemological: their embodied knowledge of state violence, combining emotional, practical, and analytical understanding, challenges the academic separation between objective and subjective knowledge; c.) institutional: their demand to be recognized as researchers rather than research subjects disrupts traditional academic hierarchies and certification processes; d.) political: their resistance to being confined to "specific panels" separate from "experts" challenges the spatial and organizational manifestation of epistemic hierarchies. In the following, we will see how these levels concretely operate.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative multi-method research design to examine the epistemic dynamics between mothers' movements and academic/technical experts in Brazil. Our

methodological approach integrates documentary analysis, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic observation to capture both the formal knowledge production processes and their lived experiences within institutional settings.

First, we conducted systematic documentary analysis of written productions emanating from mothers' movements against police violence. This corpus includes movement-authored books and *memoirs*, technical reports co-produced with academic institutions, public statements, and digital activism materials. This documentary analysis allows us to trace the evolution of these movements' knowledge claims and their increasing engagement with formal institutional spaces.

Second, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with seventeen mothers who actively participate in knowledge production processes. The interview protocol focused on their experiences navigating academic and legal institutions, their perspectives on knowledge co-production, their critiques of traditional academic approaches, and their vision for transforming knowledge production practices. These interviews, averaging 90 minutes in length, were conducted between April and November 2024, audio-recorded with consent, and professionally transcribed for analysis.

Third, we documented and analyzed six public seminars and events where mothers' movements interacted with academic and judiciary representatives. These events, selected for their significance in institutional knowledge production processes, provided opportunities to observe real-time knowledge negotiation processes, changes in communication dynamics, challenges to traditional academic and legal protocols, and the emergence of new collaborative practices. Field notes from these observations were supplemented with video recordings when available.

Our analytical approach adopts an interpretive framework that centers the mothers' own theoretical and methodological contributions while placing them in dialogue with existing scholarly frameworks. The ongoing discourse analysis of both written materials and interview transcripts focuses on epistemic claims and challenges to traditional expertise, the emergence of new methodological approaches, the transformation of institutional practices, and the intersections of gender, race, and class in knowledge production. Our goal as researchers is to produce a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of these dynamics in a way that we can focus on their experiences and discourses so they speak for themselves in this paper.

As this working paper presents preliminary findings, we acknowledge certain limitations in our current analysis. While we have completed the documentary analysis and initial coding of

interview transcripts, full analysis of all collected data remains ongoing. Future iterations will incorporate complete analysis of all interview transcripts, detailed coding of event observations, systematic mapping of institutional changes, and extended analysis of collaborative knowledge products. The research design pays particular attention to ethical considerations given both the sensitive nature of the subject matter and our commitment to transforming traditional research practices. We obtained informed consent for all interviews and observations, protected participant privacy and confidentiality when requested, followed mothers' movements' own protocols for research collaboration, ensured participants had access to research outputs, and incorporated feedback from mother-researchers on preliminary findings. This approach reflects our dual commitment to rigorous academic analysis and the transformation of traditional research practices that these movements advocate. Our preliminary findings draw primarily on completed documentary analysis and initial interview coding, supplemented by key observations from public events. This ongoing analytical process allows us to identify emerging patterns while remaining open to new theoretical insights as analysis continues.

4. Preliminary Analysis

The epistemological dynamic between academic/technical experts and lay experience-based experts in question encompasses mothers of victims of police lethality and academics from the areas of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law. About the latter, it is remarkable the interface with Judiciary operators, especially from the Public Defender's Office.

What it is called "mothers' movements" refer to networks of mothers who lost their children to police violence and are oriented to question, debate, and demand from the state topics related to state violence. They are not necessarily "institutionalized social movements," as there are other mothers who are not linked to any of these movements, but who are together with them in spaces of struggle and in academic and legal spaces with equivalent demands and articulation capacity to the movements.

As we mentioned, the type of knowledge produced by these people is based on their experience with police lethality against their sons and its consequences. It is knowledge that involves a subjective dimension of pain and trauma, situated in a place of marginality, poverty, and extreme state oppression. Upon having their life traversed by their child's death, they hold not only their life experience of poverty and violence but also, they end acquiring technical knowledge when

coming across to a sinuous institutional path: medical-legal institutes, police stations, police battalions, judicial system, and psychosocial clinics. This technical knowledge acquisition is needed to ensure some level of justice for their children's cases. With that, they end up acting to collaborate with the states institutions: they collect evidence for processes; take courses in forensics and investigation, analyses about police lethality; think about strategies to deal with incessant deaths; make complaints to international bodies about human rights violations (not only police violence but also institutional violence of imprisonment); identify traces of the state's *modus operandi* in relation to state violence, and in relation to the absence of assistance provided by the state to victims/family members of victims of state violence.

In this process, many of these mothers establish an active process of knowledge production that involves everything from producing *Memoirs*, poetry and chronicles books (e.g., Gonçalves et al. 2022; Movimento Mães de Maio 2011, 2018, 2019, 2023), reports or books about police violence (e.g., Fernandes, 2017; CAAF-Unifesp⁹, 2015, 2024), academic papers assistance in technical notes and law projects (e.g., Silva & Silva 2023), among other forms:

I saw that my son's memory won't end, my son's memory will continue, not only for me but for people who take the book and read (Maria Medina Costa Ribeiro, in-depth interview, May 7, 2024).

In this research, we bring pioneering research, of mother researching mother (victim's mother Debora Maria da Silva, speech at the launch of the CAAF-UNIFESP report, in São Paulo, on July 16, 2024).

We are discussing a law project, (...) it has an excellent technical note, and everything in this project is interesting and is also very authentic, because the people who elaborated this are people who accompany us *and also the mothers themselves*, so since something is to be approved, and that these public policies of assistance to family members, then let it approve this project, that we can push forward this bill (victim's mother Rute Fiuza, Event "Public Policies and Assistance to Family Members of Lethal State Violence promoted by the Public Defender's School", June 10, 2024).

The paths adopted by mothers have been the production or co-production of knowledge in places they consider "neutral" from the point of view of institutional partisan politics and disputes. Frequently, mothers mark a position of distance from party politics and have little presence in events and initiatives linked to party politics, placing themselves in other spaces of knowledge and

⁹ Center of Forensic Anthropology and Archeology at the São Paulo State University.

power, such as the Judiciary and academia. They have guided the academic debate on the topic but also questioned and confronted the way these spaces have produced knowledge. This dynamic is not one of discrediting science, but an emergent dynamic of political and scientific awareness that refutes the idea of becoming "mere objects" of scientific study. That is, more than "lay experts," these mothers have become "scientifically engaged lay experts" (Thompson *et al*, 2015, p. 610). In this sense, mothers have also questioned scientific policy, such as, for example, the viability of research grants and their role as researchers within academia.

These epistemic disputes are quite advanced, and nowadays, victim's mothers have already participated in some joint initiatives with the university, since "lay experts do not rely only on their own experience but also appropriate the official knowledge of their 'credentialed'/'scientific' interlocutors" (Epstein, 2023, p. 88). As recipients of extension grants, some mothers have played a direct role in research development. Some of these are: (i) the development of research on clinical-political devices of writing about state violence in conjunction with the Graduate Program in Social Psychology at Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP)¹⁰, (ii) the development of the study in conjunction with the Center for Forensic Anthropology Archaeology at Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP)¹¹; (iii) research on psychological illness of mothers of victims of police violence¹² developed by the Harvard University and State University of São Paulo (Silva, González & Assumpção, 2024), (iv) a future project coordinated by the Rio de Janeiro Public Defender's Office in partnership with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) to structure a care network for people affected by State Violence. All these initiatives presuppose a co-production of knowledge between mothers and academia and/or the Judiciary.

In these partnerships, it is possible to verify debates about research ethics. In a first moment these mothers are active asking for feedback, for them to see how their experience is being used by the researcher and if not is being distorted. As Débora Maria da Silva (*apud* Silva, González & Assumpção, 2024, p. 33) says, "the mother is misused by the researched. The mother is used for media sensationalism that does not provide feedback for us mothers". When there is this asymmetry among academic/technical experts and the mothers, as they not control the ways of

¹⁰ The research's outcome is the book "Mães em luto"/ *Grieving mothers* (Gonçalves et al. 2022)

¹¹ The research's outcome is the report "Violência de estado no Brasil: uma análise dos Crimes de Maio de 2006"/ *State violence in Brazil: analysis of May Crimes of 2006* (Amadeo, 2019)

¹² The research's outcome is the report: "Vozes da dor, da luta e da resistência das mulheres/mães de vítima da violência de estado no Brasil"/ *Voices of pain, struggle and resistance of women/mothers who are victims of state violence in Brazil* (Silva, González & Assumpção, 2024).

narrative production, the latter have to engage in a second type of work, to combat the stigmas imputed on them: “We also fight against the stereotypes that the State and its representatives and part of society impose on us when they call us: mothers of criminals, mothers of drug dealers, mothers of prisoners” (Movimento Mães de Maio, 2023, p. 5). Nevertheless, when the partnership among different types of experts is done properly, it is possible to see a harmonious research products, especially in ethical: “the result is so positive, because if it were just the academic student bringing this result, they wouldn't achieve what these mother women managed to bring” (Debora Maria da Silva, victim's mother, in the speech at the launch of the CAAF-UNIFESP report, in São Paulo, on July 16, 2024). According to Debora, with these partnerships, it is possible to achieve a better outcome for all parties involved in the knowledge production process.

Thus, the result of these collaborations goes beyond the discussion about the content of police lethality. These mothers strongly believe that they can contribute beyond the particular topic of discussion, with her experience encompassing broader implications to rethinking academic dynamics as a whole. They aim at academia to rethink its internal relations and, mainly, to produce a more horizontal form of knowledge that does not encompass traditional forms of domination:

[Our goal] is to break the hierarchies that define traditional research, which place affected people in the role of research “objects”, whose participation is not only instrumentalized by formal researchers and their academic institutions, but which also reproduces the inequalities of power that have already marked the relationship between the state and the communities affected by its violence (Silva, González & Assumpção, 2024, p. 34).

These mothers not only guide how knowledge about the subject is produced, i.e., they are not just interlocutors but have also produced knowledge with an expressive gender component. This differentiates them from other movements or activists aligned with human rights defense or against police violence, composed of people who have not gone through the experience of losing a child. This gender component becomes very clear when they say that the “struggle is born from our uterus” or that only “mothers” enter the struggle, because it is “the mother who generated and brought into the world” and “struggle is what allows them to continue exercising their motherhood.” These positions are very characteristic of mothers' production and can frequently conflict with current expert/technical knowledge about gender, for example, which opposes this biologizing perspective of gender. The engagement in knowledge co-production brings challenges to specialized scientific discourses, especially because they can go against these expert/technical

knowledge forms. These dynamics of knowledge e co-production also create a space for negotiation between different forms of knowing.

It is not only their gender identity that is embodied in this negotiation process. There are also identitarian aspects that are present there. Mainly, these mothers are mostly black or brown and are placed in marginal places of society regarding their socio-economic status. The intersection between gender-class-race generates a particular struggle experience that comes with an equality particular knowledge practice:

The experiences of victims and survivors of state violence are fundamental to the production of knowledge about it. As Lélia Gonzalez pointed out, “The place in which we are located will determine our interpretation of the double phenomenon of racism and sexism” (Gonzales, 1984, p. 224). The same concept of this "situated knowledge" applies to our interpretation of state violence that is a product of racism, sexism and other relations of domination (Silva, González & Assumpção, 2024, p. 34).

Nevertheless, the experience that they bring is not only about grief within domination structures; it is also about hope and social change:

Showing that their stories are also important, that we deserve to be read and referenced within academia, brings me joy. My hope is renewed, especially if this reading is part of the training of professionals who serve the masses. Because I believe that our studies can also *contribute to the end of institutional racism* (Nívia Raposo, mother of police lethality *apud* Silva, González & Assumpção, 2024, p. 8)

Finally, there is a reorganization of how this produced knowledge is conveyed and circulated, the way scientific and legal events are organized. Within the scope of the Judiciary and Academia, when there is participation of social movements, they are usually invited to specific panels, separately from the so-called "experts" (academic/technical experts). Frequently, mothers' movements have also emphatically contested the way these communications and debates have been organized. Academics who have experienced co-production with mothers have joined this claim:

An audience was scheduled by Faquim because of ADPF 635 (ADPF of the Favelas), many researchers were invited by the movements to participate (...) we were urged by the family members to apply to participate in the audience. I remember they separated family members in one block and experts in another block and when it was my turn to speak I said 'the experts have already spoken, the experts are the mothers, nobody understands this violence more than them,'

because they are not only giving testimonies, but also making public analyses, and it is these analyses that today guide the demand for reparation, justice and memory (researcher Juliana Farias from the State University of Rio de Janeiro, CRISP Interview Podcast)¹³.

The dynamic of many public events has changed due to mothers' demands. As subjects' experts (both through direct experience of the phenomenon and through the knowledge they have accumulated), they have dictated the way knowledge about the topic should be transmitted. The aesthetics of communication underwent a transformation: the sober and measured speech of academic and legal events has given way to forceful, emotional, and authentic communications from mothers:

I have no control over my voice, I am like this, nobody will change me, I don't speak with fear, anyway... it's not academia that will control my speech. I was born this way, nobody will change my rhythm of speaking (Débora Maria da Silva, in-depth interview, April 30, 2024).

This co-production of knowledge about police lethality and its consequences by academic/technical experts and lay experts... mothers (lay experts) position themselves as researchers and experts, challenging traditional approaches and proposing new methodologies, can illuminate crucial questions about the dynamics of knowledge production in contemporary times.

5. Final remarks

This paper examines the knowledge produced by women who are mothers of police violence victims in Brazil and analyzes their relationship with academic and technical knowledge produced about them and about police lethality. Our analysis extends beyond the hierarchical epistemological relationship between the Global North and Global South (the periphery), focusing also on the power dynamics between Southern academia and peripheral populations (specifically poor Black women).

¹³ Available on:

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://open.spotify.com/show/08kfV9vcmBXXKh8CQ3n8zaH&ved=2ahUKEwjmmIq5paqLAXV9pZUCHXo2FdgQFnoECBgQAQ&usg=AOvVaw384NsSJEFfhHiXAubTWfji>

Currently, these mothers are challenging both Brazilian academia and the judiciary system regarding the knowledge produced about them. As mentioned, several collaborative initiatives between academic and technical spheres and these mothers have emerged. These partnerships demonstrate how questioning and challenging epistemic institutions are crucial for renovating and decolonizing knowledge production.

While numerous scholars have addressed epistemological hierarchies, epistemic decolonization, and epistemic injustice (e.g., Anderson, 2017; Babitt, 2017; Collins, 2017; May, 2014; Minnich, 1990; Spivak, 1998), we chose to discuss our case study through a relational approach. This approach integrates Science and Technology Studies (STS) frameworks with theoretical contributions from Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, deliberately bringing together theories produced in both North and South. This discussion represents a step forward in exploring epistemic injustice, building upon existing foundational studies (Kidd, Medina & Pohlhaus, 2017; Medina, 2012).

In this paper, we aimed to demonstrate how the journey of these mothers from mere "subjects of study" to active knowledge producers sheds light on broader questions about epistemic justice and democratic knowledge production. This is noteworthy in new democracies where the meaning of democratic institutions is still under dispute in an environment that many times present continuities with the authoritarian regime, particularly regarding the excessive use of force by repressive agents of the State. Their expertise, gained through direct critical experience with state violence and its bureaucratic aftermath, is systematically devalued or relegated to separate panels away from "academic experts." They confront epistemological injustice in their struggle to have their unique forms of knowledge production recognized within traditional academic and legal frameworks. Their insistence that "we didn't want to be a laboratory anymore" represents both a recognition of these injustices and a collective effort to overcome them. The demand to be recognized not just as bearers of testimony but as legitimate knowledge producers' challenges the "abyssal line" (Santos, 2014) in knowledge production.

These dynamics reveal that the distinction between "information" and "knowledge" is itself a way to target marginalized groups. While mothers possess detailed information about state violence and its consequences, their ability to transform this information into recognized knowledge through their embodied experience and critical consciousness is often obstructed by institutional barriers and epistemic hierarchies that emulate colonial division. Their insistence on

co-producing knowledge, rather than merely providing information for others to analyze, represents a fundamental challenge to these hierarchies. The success of initiatives where mothers participate as researchers rather than research subjects suggests possible paths forward democratic inclusion and social justice.

These dialogical experiences demonstrate how expertise can be reconceptualized to include rather than exclude marginalized voices, and how academic institutions might be transformed to facilitate rather than obstruct democratic practices in knowledge production. However, this requires more than simply "including" marginalized voices; it demands a fundamental transformation of how knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated. Thus, meaningful democratic practices must enable marginalized groups to participate as full subjects in the production and validation of knowledge about their own realities. In addition, this new understanding of knowledge production has profound implications for academic research, as learning from their “critical consciousness” is also propitious to produce universal knowledge about the topic, the goal of any scientific endeavor.

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