

# The Strategic Role of Charm, *Simpatia* and *Jeitinho* in Brazilian Society: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

Charm is the power to attract, please and fascinate which creates a positive rapport in social interaction. In Brazilian society, charm is a highly valued and actively cultivated personal attribute. It is inextricably intertwined with *simpatia*, or the ability to empathise and strive for harmony in interpersonal relations. Based on a qualitative study carried out in Brazil, this paper explores the strategic role of charm and *simpatia*, and their links with another personalist Brazilian social practice known as 'the *jeitinho*'. It also examines the links of these practices with an imagined 'Brazilian identity'. The findings reveal that Brazilians generally take for granted the use of charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinho* to foster or enhance personal connections that can be advantageous to the people who use them. While these practices are not uniquely Brazilian, there is evidence that Brazilians attribute a particular significance to them in their daily routines.

**Key Words:** charm, *simpatia*, *jeitinho*, personalism, Brazilian society

## INTRODUCTION

Charm is the power to attract, please and fascinate which creates a positive rapport in social interaction. In Brazilian society, charm is a highly valued and actively cultivated personal attribute. It is inextricably intertwined with *simpatia*, or the ability to empathise and strive for harmony in

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interpersonal relations. Based on a qualitative study carried out in 2006-2007, this article explores the strategic role of charm, *simpatia* and a social practice known as “the *jeitinbo*”, from the perspective of a group of urban Brazilians. The findings indicate that not only are these practices regarded by Brazilians as core elements of their cultural identity, but they also fulfill important strategic roles in twenty-first century Brazilian society.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section briefly examines the literature on charm and *simpatia*; the second links charm and *simpatia* to the notion of personalism, introducing another Brazilian social practice known as ‘the *jeitinbo*’; and the third demonstrates the strategic role of charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinbo* in contemporary Brazil, from the perspective of a group of urban Brazilians.

## CHARM AND *SIMPATIA*

### Definitions

The word charm comes from the French word *charme* (incantation; c.1300) and the Latin word *carmen* which means song, verse or incantation (Onions 1996). It refers to the power one has to attract, please and fascinate. As defined by Tracy and Arden (2006, 4) charm is:

[...] the ability some people have to create extraordinary rapport that makes other in their presence feel exceptional. Charm has an engaging quality to which we respond powerfully and emotionally, almost instinctively.

In Brazilian society charm is closely associated with *simpatia*, reflected in the fact that the words ‘charm and *simpatia*’ often appear side-by-side in popular discourse. The term *simpatia* derives from the Greek word *sumpáttheia* which literally means ‘having a fellow-feeling’ (Onions 1996). For the purpose of this paper, I borrow Triandis *et al.*'s (1984, 1363) definition of *simpatia* as a personal quality ‘[...] where an individual is perceived as likeable, attractive, fun to be with, and easy going’. Thus, *simpatia* can be seen as that spark that makes a person decide within the first few minutes of a social encounter whether or not she or he likes their interlocutor. It must be noted, however, that *simpatia* goes further than charm as it engenders a conscious avoidance of conflict in interpersonal relations; connotes a tendency towards agreement and conformity in social interaction; and involves the ability to empathise. As noted by Triandis *et al.* (1984, 1363):

An individual who is *simpático* shows certain levels of conformity and an ability to share in other's feelings [...] behaves with dignity and respect towards others, and seems to strive for harmony in interpersonal relations.

The tendency implicit in *simpatia* to avoid interpersonal conflict is commonly observed in Brazilian society, in view of the social inequalities and asymmetries of power characteristic of that context. While the gap between the rich and the poor in Brazil seems to have diminished over the past few years, figures by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* indicate that in 2008, the wealthiest 10% of the population had a 42.7% concentration of income, whereas the poorest 10% had only 1.2% (IBGE 2008). These income disparities often cause social tensions (Tanure 2005, 107), which can be dispelled through the deliberate use of *simpatia*. As will be seen later, conflict avoidance through *simpatia* can be also used to cope with the stresses of Brazilian public spaces which tend to be over-crowded, noisy and chaotic.

While the existing literature reveals many studies exploring the notion of *simpatia* in Hispanic Latin American cultures (Burma 1970; Fitzpatrick 1971; Gomez 1994; Griffith *et al.* 1998; Heller 1966; Murillo 1976; Rubel 1970; Triandis *et al.* 1984; Wagenheim 1972) none of these works focuses on the role of *simpatia* within the specific context of Brazilian society. The current study addresses this research gap by examining *simpatia* as a highly valued personal attribute which, together with charm and the *jeitinho* can be said to play a *strategic* role, in that they help Brazilians cope with the stresses of modern life. Although the cultural meanings of charm and *simpatia* in Brazilian society have been frequently acknowledged in the literature (see for example, Barbosa 1992; 1995; Buarque de Holanda 1995; DaMatta 1984; 1995; Duarte 2005; 2006a; 2006b; Freitas 1997; Page 1995; Prates and Barros 1997), there is clearly a need for a more in-depth analysis of the *strategic* role played by these social practices.

Before proceeding, it is important to stress that it is not the author's intention to pass value judgment on the use of charm and *simpatia* in Brazilian society. The purpose of this paper is rather to explore the cultural meanings of these practices through the eyes of a group of urban Brazilians. It must also be noted that while the notion of charm may be associated with physical attractiveness, the current analysis is specifically concerned with charm as the ability to create rapport and empathy in interpersonal encounters.

## Charm, *Simpatia* and Cultural Identity

It would be erroneous to assume that the strategic use of charm and *simpatia* is a uniquely Brazilian phenomenon. Charm and *simpatia* are used strategically in non-Brazilian cultures also – including Anglophone cultures. This is reflected, for example, in a management self-help book by American Writers Tracy and Arden (2006) – suggestively entitled *The Power of Charm: How to Win Anyone Over in Any Situation*– which examines the role of charm in the context of business encounters.

However, it is my contention that there is indeed something unique about the use of these practices in Brazilian society, as they are widely perceived to be an integral part of an imagined national identity. This was a core theme of Buarque de Holanda's (1995, 146) influential study of the 'Brazilian character', *Raízes do Brasil* in which he proposed what has become a common archetype of Brazilianness: *o homem cordial* (the cordial man). The 'cordial man' archetype (which I prefer to label in gender-neutral terms as 'the cordial person') embodies a number of charm-related attributes. As Buarque de Holanda puts it, 'Sincerity, hospitality and generosity, virtues so exalted by foreigners who visit us, represent in effect a defined trait of the Brazilian character (1995, 146).<sup>1</sup>

Gilberto Freyre (1946) traces the historical roots of the 'cordial man' to the patriarchal family of colonial Brazil which, in his own words, was based on '*laços de sangue e de coração*' (ties of blood and heart). While acknowledging that not always did the patriarchs treat their slaves humanely, Freyre suggests that, as masters and slaves lived together in a kind of symbiotic relationship within the confines of the *engenhos de cana de açúcar* (sugar cane farms), the patriarchal family would have created the ideal conditions for intimacy, subjectivity and the personalism characteristic of Brazilian society (Kujawski 2001, 113).

It can be speculated that the cultural archetype of the cordial person has become embedded in the collective consciousness of Brazilian society, operating like an underlying structure which organises and influences behaviours and attitudes in that particular cultural context. Most importantly, the cordial person archetype also influences the way in which Brazilians perceive themselves in relation to people from other cultures. At this juncture, it will be illuminating to re-visit the ideas of Stuart Hall (1996; Hall and Maharaj 2001) on the construction of cultural identity. Hall proposes that identities are constructed through *difference*, therefore it is

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1 [A] contribuição brasileira para a civilização será de cordialidade – daremos ao mundo o "homem cordial". A brameza no trato, a hospitalidade, a generosidade, virtudes tão gabadas por estrangeiros que nos visitam, representam com efeito, um traço definido do caráter brasileiro [...].

through people's relation to 'the Other' –the relation to *what they are not*– that a sense of cultural identity emerges. The notion of 'being Brazilian' thus presupposes a comparison with non-Brazilians. Perhaps due to the fact that, in geographic terms, the United States is the closest Anglophone country to Brazil, 'othering' in Brazilian society often occurs in relation to North Americans and, by association, with people from other Anglophone cultures (Duarte 2005). There is a tendency for Brazilians to regard North Americans as 'cold' or 'reserved'; not as much fun or as affable as Brazilians.

The cordial person archetype also informs how Brazilians are perceived outside Brazil. For example, in his book *The Brazilians* (1995, 9) Page sees cordiality as 'a defining characteristic of [Brazilians'] behaviour'. It is his view that Brazilians 'radiate an irresistible pleasantness, abundant hospitality, and unfailing politeness, especially to foreigners'.

A Google search using the phrase 'Brazilian culture' reveals that the cordial person archetype is also imprinted in cyber-consciousness. The two excerpts below, from websites that provide information on Brazil for potential visitors, are illustrative:

Brazilians are known for their informality, good nature, and charm (*simpatia*), as well as their desire not to be thought unpleasant or boorish (*chato*). They place high value on warmth, spontaneity, and lack of pomp and ceremony (Coutsoukis 2004, in geographic.com).

The average Brazilian knows the power of the smile and a smooth word and touch, that of which they use to their advantage, and can quite possibly leave the unsuspecting charmed out of their pants. So there, you've been served with fair warning!! (Brazilista.com 2004).

Implicit in the second excerpt is a warning about the dark side of charm and *simpatia* – that is, the possibility that these practices might be used to deceive and manipulate. Indeed, charm and *simpatia* have a political dimension where people use what Tanure (2005, 38) calls *sedução afetiva* (affective seduction) in order to 'get their own way'.

## **PERSONALISM IN BRAZILIAN SOCIETY**

Personalism is an attitude in which the point of reference is the ability to use personal relationships to serve one's own interests. It entails an expectation of 'personalised, individualised attention, rather than being treated in a standardised way like everyone else' (Albert 1996, 225). The historical roots of personalism in Brazil can be also traced back to the

paternalistic relationships between masters and slaves in colonial times where, in exchange for their subordinates' loyalty, masters regularly granted them personal favours and privileges (Rosenn 1971). As a native Brazilian, I affirm with certain confidence that personalism is alive and well in contemporary Brazil, reflected in the centrality of networks of family and friends which are routinely called upon to solve problems or to grant favours.

The notion of personalism has been explored at length in the work of Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta (1991) who analyses the phenomenon against the backdrop of the complexities and contradictions of Brazilian society. DaMatta (1991, 9-10) writes about a distinctive duality in the Brazilian social system which accounts for certain idiosyncrasies found there. At one level, Brazil is a personalist society where 'proximity and affection' are highly valued in personal relationships (Freitas 1997, 48). At another level, this country is characterised by a pervasive system of impersonal bureaucratic rules that impose formidable obstacles in people's daily routines. In view of this, DaMatta (1991, 9-10) concludes that Brazil has a 'dual social system' where personalism and impersonalism exist side-by-side in a dialectical relationship. This dual social system, he notes, 'tends to feed itself on the dialectics of a Draconian impersonal law and a system of personal relationships that perversely enables people to get around laws and decrees' (10).

Two decades later, DaMatta's analysis remains significantly relevant to contemporary Brazilian society where discordant elements still co-exist in a dialectical relationship within the social structure. Personalism exists side-by-side with a darker, sinister underbelly characterised by poverty, social inequality, urban violence and crime, political corruption, environmental degradation and other problems. Life in the big cities of Brazil has become even more challenging over the past few years as a result of growing psychosocial stress arising from over-crowdedness, perennial traffic jams, noise pollution and violence in the streets.

In view of this, it can be suggested that personalist elements such as charm and *simpatia* have roles other than just counteracting impersonal rules, as contented by DaMatta. They can be seen as coping mechanisms to deal with stressful situations arising from dysfunctional environments. This is particularly evident when these practices are used in conjunction with another prominent Brazilian social practice called 'the *jeitinho*'.

### **The *Jeitinho* as a Personalist Practice**

The word *jeitinho*, which literally means 'a little way', can be described as a

personalist practice that involves cajoling or seducing in order to achieve certain outcomes. Hence, the effectiveness of the *jeitinho* depends on one's ability to establish *simpatia* with their interlocutor. As noted by Barbosa (1992, 39), a request for a *jeitinho* is more likely to succeed if the supplicant is charming and *simpático*; if they are able to smile and use a gentle tone of voice. Take this hypothetical situation as an example: a university student, who urgently needs to borrow books from the local library for an assignment, will consciously 'turn on their charm' (i.e., smile; speak softly) in order to persuade a stern librarian to issue her a library card. The student knows very well that there is a waiting period of 24 hours for the card to be issued, but she believes that if she is charming, and explicitly asks for a *jeitinho*, she is likely to persuade the librarian to bend the rules and issue the card immediately. As noted by DaMatta (1984, 98-99), the *jeitinho* is used in Brazilian society to mediate between the personal and the impersonal in order to solve problems.<sup>2</sup>

DaMatta's characterisation of the *jeitinho* as a '*simpático* way' of doing things has the imprint of the cordial person archetype, a connection which is also made in the work of Barbosa (1995, 134). Echoing Buarque de Holanda, she writes that 'The *jeitinho* embodies our cordial, conciliatory, joyful, *simpático*, warm spirit, [the spirit] of a beautiful, sensual, young tropical country, full of possibilities'.<sup>3</sup> Like charm and *simpatia*, the *jeitinho* is also perceived as a marker of Brazilian identity, even though there is ample evidence that similar practices exist in other cultural contexts. For example, Cavalcanti (1991) compares the *jeitinho* with the *trinkgeld* in Germany, the *bustarella* in Italy, the 'speed money' in India, the *backsheesh* in Egypt and the *vizyatha* in Russia. Bourdieu (1963, cited in Barbosa 1995, 38) mentions a practice known as *chtara* among the working class of Algeria, which resembles the *jeitinho*. In Latin America, practices such as the *palanca* in Colombia (Albert 1996), the *pituto* in Chile (Juan Salazar, pers. comm, 29 September 2005), the *guaperia* in Cuba (Barry Carr, pers. comm, 1 November 2003) and the *favorsito* in Mexico (Coronado, pers. comm, 13 December 2003) can also be said to operate in similar ways to the Brazilian *jeitinho*. However, as explained by Barbosa (1992, 15-16, 28), in Brazilian society the *jeitinho* plays a particularly prominent role, as people attribute a 'social weight' to it. In other words, Brazilians value this practice, consciously use it in their daily routines, and often boast about it as an 'essentially Brazilian way of doing things'. While, like charm and *simpatia*, the *jeitinho* can be used unethically or disrespectfully (Rega 2000), its 'dark side' is not

2 [...] *um modo simpático, [...] de relacionar o impessoal com o pessoal.*

3 [O] *jeitinho* encarna o nosso espírito cordial, conciliador, alegre, simpático, caloroso, humano, etc de um país tropical, bonito, sensual jovem e cheio de possibilidades.

normally acknowledged when talking about the Brazilian ‘collective identity’.

Summing up, it can be suggested that the Brazilian *jeitinho* has three interconnected dimensions. The first is informed by the cordial person archetype and refers to a perceived Brazilian way of being (i.e., a ‘natural’ tendency to be charming, *simpático*, affectionate, affable, cheerful and so on). The second refers to the flexible and creative Brazilian style of solving problems, which has been extensively explored in the literature (Barbosa 1992; 1995; Duarte 2006a; Freitas 1997; Motta and Caldas 1997; Prates and Barros 1997; Wey 1987). The third constructs the *jeitinho* as a subversive social practice which entails bending or breaking the rules to ‘get things done’. This is clearly reflected in DaMatta’s (1991, 169) translation of the word *jeitinho* as ‘a clever dodge or bypass’, and also in the statement by Jarrad (1995, 226) that the *jeitinho* is the Brazilian ‘under-the-table, off-the-record, between-you-and-me’ personal favour or deal. As will be seen below, these three dimensions of the *jeitinho* emerged in the interviews with the Brazilians who participated in the study.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF CHARM, *SIMPATIA* AND *JEITINHO***

### **Methodology**

The study presented in this paper was carried out in 2006-2007 as part of a major cross-cultural research project financed by the Australian Research Council (ARC). The broad aim of this project was to explore the role of informal practices and social networks in organisational settings of different countries. A qualitative methodology was used, and the data was obtained during a six-week fieldwork in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 26 Brazilians aged between 23 and 42 years. The primary purpose of the interviews was to collect *casos* [stories based on personal experience] about situations in which the participants, or people they knew, consciously used informal tactics to ‘get things done’. The interviews also included questions that focused more specifically on the participants’ perceptions in relation to charm and *simpatia*.

The participants were recruited through the snow-balling technique whereby a small group of people from the researcher’s own networks in Brazil was initially contacted and asked for further referrals. The participants came from a variety of occupational and educational backgrounds from sectors such as service, retail, education, information technology (IT) and health. In this paper, their names have been replaced by pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

It must be emphasised that, as this is a qualitative study, the findings are not meant to be ‘generalisable’. The idea is rather to explore the *experience* and *perceptions* of a group of urban Brazilians in relation to a set of social practices characteristic of that cultural context. This can contribute to a better understanding of the interconnections between culture and identity.

## **Thematic Patterns**

The findings of the study revealed five major thematic patterns illustrating the different roles played in Brazilian society by charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinho*:

- a) charm and *simpatia* as elements of Brazilianness;
- b) charm and *simpatia* as strategies to enlist cooperative behaviour;
- c) charm and *simpatia* as tactics of personal politics in work settings;
- d) explicitly made links between charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinho*; and
- e) ‘techniques’ used to enhance charm and *simpatia*.

### ***Charm and simpatia as elements of Brazilianness***

The cordial person archetype informed the responses of many participants. Echoing patterns found in previous studies of Brazilian culture and identity (Barbosa 1992; 1995; Buarque de Holanda 1995; Duarte 2005; 2006a; 2006b; Rega 2000; Robertson 1993), many interviewees shared the view that charm and *simpatia* are specifically Brazilian attributes. Adjectives such as warm, easy-going, friendly, polite, sweet and affable were frequently used to describe Brazilians. For example, hairdresser Beatriz highlights the ‘sweet disposition’ of the Brazilian people and their characteristic *jeitinho* that brings fun to life:

Yes, [Brazilians have] a sweet disposition. [...] I don’t know [...] I’ve never lived abroad, to be honest, but I think this *jeitinho* only exists here [in Brazil]. A *jeitinho* that makes everything end up “in pizzas and hot dogs” [metaphor for light-hearted fun]. Only Brazilians are like this!

In similar terms, public servant Eduardo sees kindness, affability and hospitality as typically Brazilian traits:

This affability is something that is characteristically Brazilian; something that I think is really cool. We are very kind and affable, and... [pause] we’re always polite with people who visit our country. I think this is great!

Highlighting what he perceives as the warmth of Brazilian people, IT technician Paulo draws attention to the importance of the smile in Brazilian society to generate *simpatia*. In his response, the term *jeitinho* is once more used to refer to a particularly Brazilian way of doing things – which Paulo wholeheartedly endorses:

The Brazilian has, you know, warmth, the way they treat others [...] maybe it's their smile [...] Yes, everyone has a special way of greeting, or a special way to smile, or a special way to say "ciao" which is so *simpático*, so warm.

Resonating with Hall's (1996, 4) observation that identities are constructed through difference, some participants contrasted the charm and *simpatia* attributed to Brazilians to what they see as the 'not-so-charming' behaviours of people from other cultures – in particular those from Anglophone cultures. This pattern is evident in the response of market analyst Vanda to the question 'To what extent do you think charm and *simpatia* are part of the Brazilian identity?' In her answer, Vanda contrasts the friendly Brazilian way with what she views as the unfriendly behaviour of English-speaking people:

I do think charm is part of the Brazilian character [...] If a foreigner goes to Brazil –even if he doesn't speak Portuguese– he'll feel right at home because Brazilians have this charisma, this charm; this will to help – even if they don't speak their [visitor's] language. This is in contrast with Brazilians who visit English-speaking countries and can't get by because no one gives a dam about them. If you don't speak English, that's too bad! I think Brazilians have this charm, this charisma; this will to help [pause]. It's part of our culture.

Legal secretary Marcia contrasts the emotive nature of Brazilians with what she perceives as the 'coldness' of foreigners:

[In Brazil] we work a lot with emotions, you know. And that's one of our sins. We're too soft-hearted, right? In other countries what we see is the following: foreigners are cold and competent; they know what they want, and they do trample on people. This doesn't happen in Brazil, does it?

Psychology student Janaína frames her response in terms of a dichotomy between the rule-abiding English and the easy-going, hedonistic Brazilian. She believes that the care-free attitude of Brazilians helps them to get over hurdles:

I wonder how it would be in England, you know. I think other

countries are more rigorous and punitive [...] You can do wrong things, but if they catch you out, you get punished. So, people are probably more cautious to get up to no good. There's something like a brake, because people know that there'll be punishment for wrongdoings. Here in Brazil it's not like this; everyone likes *samba*, beer, *mulatas*, carnival and all that. This is true, you know, this is true! You can see that Brazil is a happy country, with good vibes [...] So, you don't want to waste time with something that will spoil your life, something that'll stop you from having a good weekend, from having good holidays, you know. You don't want to have hassles. Brazilians avoid hassles, so they get over things.

### ***Charm, simpatia and cooperative behaviours***

The connection between charm, *simpatia* and cooperative behaviours was frequently acknowledged in the interviews. For example, Sonia works as a nurse in a large public hospital, and she points out that in her job, politeness and sense of humour are catalysts for *simpatia*, and thus cooperative behaviour. In her own words:

People know that if they are *simpáticos*, if they lower the tone of their voices, or if they joke around with you a bit, maybe this excessive *simpatia* will charm you and will get you to solve their problems.

The role of politeness, as part of the *simpatia* complex, was also acknowledged by school teacher Luciana who believes that people who are not *simpáticos* will not be helped, as they will not be able to create good will in others. She recounts her stressful experiences in Brazilian public spaces to illustrate her point:

This is something I've learned [...] You go to the bank, or to the movies, and notice that sometimes people get into negative moods; they don't feel like working, or whatever. Look, what you should do is to act with politeness; be as polite as you can [speaking loudly and emphatically]. You may be feeling like s\*\*\*, but you will smile and you will say "Please" [...] otherwise people lose their good will, and you can just give up! In other words, if you're not *simpática*, my dear, you'll most certainly hear a "No"!

The theme of rudeness negatively predisposing people to be helpful, as opposed to *simpatia* eliciting cooperative behaviours also emerged in the interview with Rodrigo who works in the retail industry. Rodrigo stated that some customers 'get angry' if employees do not appear *simpáticos* to them. It can be suggested that his comments reflect the asymmetrical power relations

frequently observed Brazilian society; in other words, people in subaltern positions often feel obliged to appease their ‘superiors’ in the class system. However, Rodrigo believes that the reverse is also true – that is, sales staff may lose the will to help (or the obligation to appease) when faced with rude customers. In his own words:

If you are calm and *simpático* and all that, you’ll get things done. But if you lose your cool, or if you don’t treat people nicely –even if you just raise your voice or give people a disapproving look– they will get angry, and even if you’re right, they won’t help you [...] At work, I’ve noticed that people often say “I know I had to help the customer but he was rude and shouted at me. So, I decided not to help him.”

Similarly, church administrator Pedro believes that *simpatia* is essential to foster good relationships with his clients, and this can be accomplished through the conscious use of politeness. As he puts it:

If a person is polite with you –face-to-face or even on the telephone– you feel that the person cares for you. Sometimes this is nothing extraordinary: you’re polite because you’re feeling happy; you’re looking forward to going to work [...] So, you can end up creating a friendship with the client who says “I found you very *simpático*.” And then they come back, sometimes even bringing gifts for you – sweets, or... or whatever.

Pedro’s response suggests that *simpatia* can create a commitment to be pleasant, which in turn predisposes people to grant *jeitinhos* to others (in the sense of breaking the rules or being lenient, as Pedro professes to be with his clients).

### ***Charm, simpatia and personal politics in work settings***

Some of the participants openly admitted that they use charm and *simpatia* as strategies of personal politics in work settings. For example, sales representative Eloísa explains that she consciously uses flattery to elicit *simpatia* with her clients for the specific purpose of building business relationships. In her own words, ‘If I know of some problem that [a work colleague] is facing, I ask whether he or she has been able to solve the problem. I demonstrate that I’m genuinely interested in him or her’. In the interview, Eloísa also recounted a *caso* about a former boss who had a habit of using flattery to ensure compliant behaviours among her employees:

The boss would approach me and say: “Eloísa, what a beautiful pair of boots!” Another day it’d be: “Wow, what an interesting pattern on your

blouse. Where did you buy it?” And soon after, “Eloísa, I’ve got something for you to do, as I don’t have the time. Can you help me out?” The boots, huh?! [Sarcastic laughter].

However, if power relations are reversible, which means that flattery can be used by subalterns as a strategy to ingratiate themselves with their bosses. The comments below by data analyst Cíntia are illustrative:

I do this a lot at work. [...] When I have to finish up a report and I’m running late, I begin to chat amicably with my boss, and all that [...] I praise her in some way, and sometimes it works.

### ***Explicit links between charm, simpatia and the jeitinho***

Consistent with the work of Barbosa (1992; 1995), the study identified strong links between charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinho*. The assumption underlying this pattern is that people are more inclined to obtain *jeitinhos* if they are charming and manage to establish a good rapport with their interlocutors through being consciously charming and *simpáticos*. The comments of solicitor Carlos illustrate this point and also highlight the power of personalism (friends) over impersonalism (the law) in Brazilian society:

Well, I think the *jeitinho* only happens when there’s a personal connection between people. I’ll only help you if I think you’re a nice guy. If I don’t, you’ll need to follow the law. “To friends, everything, to foes, the law” [old Brazilian adage].

Similarly, hairdresser Beatriz sees charm and *simpatia* as a form of social investment that predisposes people to give *jeitinhos*. She seems to use charm and *simpatia* in her workplace as strategies of ‘affective seduction’ (Tanure 2005, 38) when dealing with clients to create positive relationships:

You do things because of the friendship you’ve got with someone. So, you’re always inclined to give a *jeitinho* to please that person. For example, sometimes you’ve got an appointment on your diary, and you can’t serve a client because you won’t have the time, but if the person is nice, you always find a way of making a time for her, so that everyone can get out of here looking beautiful [giggles]. You do this with those who are *simpáticos*. So, everything is related to the friendship that you have, to the *carinho* [tenderness] the person shows for you. So, you don’t want that person to go away; you want to grab her, to look after her, so she can leave [the hairdresser’s salon] feeling really happy.

MBA student Marcos explicitly admits that he habitually uses charm strategically to obtain *jeitinhos*. He proudly recounts an event that coincidentally had happened on the very day of the interview:

Yeah, just today I used my charm to get a *jeitinho*. [...] I do post-graduate studies and tomorrow I have an exam. I don't know anything about the subject. I haven't studied, I don't know anything, and I won't learn the stuff for tomorrow. So, I rang the subject coordinator, with whom I have a friendship; a relation of *simpatia*. I told her nicely that I could not do the exam tomorrow, and she said: "Marcos, don't worry, you can do it next week, so you have some time to study [...]" There you go, I got a *jeitinho* through *simpatia*" [giggle].

Reflecting on her own stressful experiences in public places, school teacher Luciana expresses her view that sometimes, *simpatia* must be combined with calm to foster predisposition for *jeitinhos*:

You'll see that when you are in a queue at the hospital or at the bank, no one is *simpático*. No one wants to know about *jeitinhos*. But if you remain calm and *simpático*, perhaps you'll get served.

### ***Charm and simpatia techniques***

The strategic use of charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinho* is further reflected in the fact that some participants openly reported the deliberate use of certain 'techniques' (Barbosa 1992, 39) for the purpose of enhancing their chances of achieving outcomes. For example, accountant Roberto believes that a smile is essential to elicit *simpatia* and *jeitinhos*:

Oh, I think a smile is necessary to get through to people. I don't know, it's that *jeitinho*, really; that *simpatia*. I always smile at people and say "How are you going?"

Market analyst Vanda also sees smiling as an effective technique to generate *simpatia*. She admits that she smiles a great deal at work because this will predispose people to be more cooperative. In her response Vanda shows awareness that her smiles are appreciated by her workmates:

Yes, smiling is important. As I said, when you ask "Could you please do this for me?" and then give people a big smile, you're more likely to get what you want. I'm a person who, if you look at me, I'm always smiling [giggle]. And this is reflected in my professional life. People say to me, "Vanda, we get here and always find you with this big smile!"

According to sales representative Eloisa, a smile from her clients will motivate her to help them:

I've noticed that I am inclined to be nicer with clients who are nice to me. Suppose a person arrives and is rude to us. Even if you don't want it, your service won't be as good as it is when a person arrives with a smile and greets you.

*Despachante* [troubleshooter] Maurício believes that a smile is at times even more valuable than money:

There are many things that you can only get with money – this is more than proved all over the world because money can get things happening. But there are people who'll try to buy with money, what they can get with a smile.

Legal secretary Cíntia regards 'a gentle tone of voice' as an effective technique to charm shopkeepers, thus eliciting cooperative behaviours and good will. In her own words, 'In the shops if you are arrogant and speak harshly, you won't be served. But if you speak with a gentle tone of voice, the sales person will tend to be more helpful'.

For Osvaldo, being patient is a technique that works particularly well to foster *simpatia* in bureaucratic settings. Osvaldo is a *despachante*, and in this type of work processes tend to be complex and slow. (*Despachantes* are paid by the hour to carry out tasks such as standing in long queues for clients in bureaucratic institutions and solving hurdles associated with obtaining documents such as driver's licence, electoral titles and identity cards.) Hence, for Osvaldo being patient is an important 'technique' to generate *simpatia* for the purpose of appeasing cranky clients. As he puts it:

You must be patient; you must listen to people's stories first. Things will happen at the right time, and you must have patience to listen. So, this is the other side, you must be patient. In my business, it's pointless trying to make appointments; there's no such a thing as appointments. When you're troubleshooting for people, things can happen by lunchtime, or later in the afternoon; but they can also stagnate for a whole day! So, the thing is to have patience [...] You have a commitment to your client. But sometimes they don't want to know about it; they just want things done! They say: "I've paid you, and I have the right to demand your services!" So, if the connection [with the client] breaks down, things get complicated. And it's here that you have to come in with *simpatia*, to persuade the client to wait till the next day [giggle].

For fellow *despachante* Maurício, the ability to use flattery is another charm-

related technique that works well in his line of work – in particular with female clients. In the interview, Maurício explained how he deliberately ‘turns on his charm’ to appease cranky female clients: ‘Well, you have a good look at the lady, and at the right moment, you say “Wow! You look lovely today!” It works!’ In his job, Maurício is required to help clients obtain documents such as driver licence or car insurance papers, and in the interview he gave a ‘lesson’ on how to use flattery to soothe difficult clients, including police officers:

I tell my clients, when they’re having problems with car documents, “Leave the documents with me, and I’ll fix them up tomorrow?”. And then I give them some advice: “If a cop stops you, you look at him and say: ‘Mr Policeman, what a slick uniform you’ve got on!’” [Stated with a smile and a mock seductive tone of voice].

## CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, the above excerpts illustrate the centrality of charm, *simpatia* and *jeitinho* in Brazilian society, and thus the weight attributed to these social practices in that cultural context. The findings highlight perceptions of an imagined Brazilian identity and the strategic use of charm and *simpatia* to establish or enhance personal relationships. They also illustrate the three interconnected dimensions of the Brazilian *jeitinho* mentioned earlier, namely, the *jeitinho* as a perceived Brazilian way of being; the *jeitinho* as a creative Brazilian style of solving problems; and the *jeitinho* as a subversive practice that entails bending or breaking the rules to ‘get things done’.

While it is clear that the conscious use of charm, *simpatia* and *jeitinhos* to achieve outcomes is not an exclusively Brazilian practice, the study suggests that a ‘social weight’ (Barbosa 1992, 15-16) is attributed to these behaviours in that cultural context. As seen in the participants’ comments presented above, Brazilians explicitly recognise the role of charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinho* in their daily routines, value them and use them strategically to solve problems and accomplish goals.

The findings also highlight charm and *simpatia* as core elements of the personalism that characterises Brazilian society, in that they are often used in social interaction as tools of ‘affective seduction’ (Tanure 2005, 38) to create instant rapport between people. Rapport established through charm and *simpatia* plays a strategic role, as it is consciously sought to increase people’s chances of obtaining favours. This was particularly evident in responses that highlighted the deliberate use of charm-related techniques such as smiling

and a gentle tone of voice to create personal relationships that could be advantageous to the people who used them (see for example responses by Vanda, Eloísa and Cíntia).

Resonating with DaMatta's dual system model of personalism *versus* impersonalism, there was also some evidence in the data that in Brazilian society, personalist practices such as charm and *simpatia* operate as antidotes for the paralysing effects of bureaucratic rules. This was reflected, for example, in the *casos* told by Osvaldo, which focused on the charm-related antics he regularly uses in order to circumvent the bureaucratic constraints encountered in his profession as *despachante*.

However, only superficial evidence was found in the study to support the claim that charm and *simpatia* are mechanisms used in Brazil to cope with stressful situations (this theme only emerged in the interview with Luciana who acknowledged the calming effects of charm and *simpatia* when facing long queues in Brazilian public spaces). There was also only scant evidence for the claim that charm and *simpatia* are used in the Brazilian context to diffuse conflict arising from the asymmetries of power which create the potential for interpersonal tensions (Tanure 2005, 107). This seemed to be only implied in Janaína's comments which suggested that Brazilians tend to avoid confrontations, diffusing conflict through their friendly patterns of behaviour. There is therefore scope for future studies to further explore these two themes. There is also scope for future research to examine the broader webs of relationships between individuals and institutions, influenced by the *personalismo* (personalism) and *clientelismo* (patronage) which have historically characterised politic life in Brazil. It is recommended nevertheless that future studies adopt a more critical approach in relation to charm, *simpatia* and the *jeitinho*, taking into account perspectival variations according to gender, social class, educational level, and even geographic location. This would help to demystify homogenised conceptions of 'national identities', acknowledging the inherent complexity of human societies.

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