

Social invisibility: a brief overview

Rendering ‘social invisibility’ visible in a report does not constitute an easy task. The expression and the theme are becoming an important benchmark in the sociological field, with variants that are based on the terminology of anthropology, social psychology, political science, ethics, literature, fine arts, photography, etc. Were the words and variants formerly highlighted sufficiently forceful to expose the complex meaning of the experience of the “invisible” who pass unperceived among the “visible”? Undoubtedly not, but the discussion is necessary for those committed to a society based on equality and solidarity. It should be stressed that the interest here lies in social and health invisibility. Researchers have dedicated themselves in the past to studies that deal with other realities, such as the “invisibility of translators,” and the “invisibility” of monuments.

Not long ago, it was commonly said that the theme was a new one.

Indeed, its history and theory are still being written, but there are some moments that can be mentioned as landmarks on the subject in the sociological area from the end of the 1980s onwards. It was during the feminist movement that the issue of the depreciation of female labor (especially the work of the housewife) came to the fore, and in 1987 the American sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels (1930-2012) created the expression “invisible work,” elaborated upon in the following year in her book on invisible careers. As Daniels¹ writes: “One way to draw attention to that work is to show how it is constructed, what effort it involves and what it would cost if it were purchased in the market”; she continues [...] the housewife’s work “is private; there is no audience beyond the family and the work is personalized for the family members who rate it as they please. Under these circumstances, it is not hard to see why women, family members themselves, do not understand some aspects of their activity as work.”

Critical reviews of Daniels’ concept have been made, but her originality marks an inaugural moment on the theme.

The pertinence of the notion of “invisible work” is not absent from other research on the work of groups of people who are marginalized, neglected and who are systematically socially invisible in society.

Among Brazilians, psychologist Fernando Braga da Costa’s research papers into street sweepers have become classics and reproduced in different locations other than on the campus of the University of São Paulo-USP where he conducted his survey. These began in 1994 as part of his research work during his undergraduate course and lasted eight years. The teacher’s suggestion was that students should “engage in a proletarian task performed by people from underprivileged classes.” Fernando chose to work as a street sweeper on the streets of USP’s University Campus. His findings were incorporated in his master’s degree² and doctorate³. Dressed as a street sweeper (at least once a week) he joined the workers and, as he reported, he ended up being invisible to the eyes of his colleagues and professors who did not know who he was when they passed him by.

Regarding the material in this thematic issue, it should be noted that even if the 19 abstracts and the 73 key words do not directly refer to social invisibility, the themes addressed relate to this concept. Examples include institutionalized adolescents, homeless people, cleaning service staff, the elderly and indigenous populations.

Undoubtedly, the importance of the theme needs to be examined in depth and researched from its diverse perspectives.

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