

Violence in interpersonal relationships: Analysis of hate speech



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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the psychosocial elements involved in the propagation of hate speech through the Freudian perspective of culture. The selected corpus consisted of 9 offensive comments published on Facebook about 3 different news items

involving human rights violations. Hate speeches are constructed from generalizations about specific social groups. Culture projects norms and values onto individuals from certain historical moments and ideological formations; so, when those people believe they are exposing a particular point of view, all of them are only reproducing it. The dissemination of hate speeches does not necessarily indicate that there is currently more intolerance or prejudice against minority social groups, as these have always been part of the social structure. Society is going through a historical moment in which certain contents, once repressed, can appear through the internet in the form of hate speech.

Keywords: Interpersonal violence, Hate speeches, Psychoanalysis.

1 INTRODUCTION

The current national scenario is permeated by gratuitous exchanges of hatred and intolerance, which occur mostly through social networks. In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud reinforces how human culture inflicts on people an instinctual suffocation, for all its demands and deprivations. Since human beings cannot live in isolation, in order for there to be a good social life it is necessary that some sacrifices are made. Life in society produces an innumerable number of frustrations, so that every individual becomes an enemy of the potential culture. Therefore, in order for the current social order to remain functioning, a set of coercive strategies of the culture itself fulfills this role: its norms, institutions and commandments.

One of the ways to deal with the displeasure arising from the restrictions imposed by culture and the finitude of life is through religion. As an agency of social control, the religious institution tends to moralize and individualize issues of a collective nature, reducing social issues to moral dilemmas. Even so, it plays the role of the only source of consolation for many people, being indispensable to them as an aid to endure life (FREUD, 1927). However, if, on the one hand, religion protects the individual from an individual neurosis by means of adaptation and protection against suffering, on the other hand, it fails to impair people's autonomy, since it imputes to everyone the same path to follow (FREUD, 1930). To the extent that religion has, in certain contexts, an exacerbated power of influence



over individuals and that it advocates values based on prohibitions, its institutions not only guarantee the perpetuation of traditional values, but also contribute – albeit indirectly – to the maintenance of preconceptions, moralisms and, consequently, hate speech.

According to Freud (1930), individual freedom does not constitute a patrimony of culture, since culture imposes various restrictions on individuals in the name of the will of the masses. Then, a large part of humanity's conflicts would have as its claim the attempt to reconcile the individual demands and the cultural demands of the mass, finding a middle ground that would satisfy both parties. The underlying incoherence of the notion of individual freedom is that many people use it as an "authorization" for disrespect for others: claiming to be merely the expression of a "personal opinion" they vociferate atrocities. In this sense, in *The Malaise of Civilization* (1930), Freud states that human beings are endowed with a large share of aggressiveness. Therefore, the neighbor would not only be a potential helper or sexual object, but also an object over which it is possible to satisfy all the underlying aggressiveness. Moreover, the practice of the most diverse perversities and forbidden acts would have an economic explanation, since the amount of instinctual satisfaction found in the wild drives (those that have not been tamed by the ego) is greater than the satisfaction provided by the drives already submissive to the principle of reality.

The situation becomes even more complex when the individual, immersed in the mass, finds a common object for the discharge of aggression, allowing himself to perpetrate any barbarities against him. What, after all, leads an individual to abandon his principles, to suspend his inhibitions, his capacity for judgment, and to surrender to the irrationality of the masses?

In *Psychology of the Masses and Analysis of the Self* (1921) Freud tries to understand why an individual, immersed in the mass, acts so differently from the way he would act alone. Or, why a group of people acquires the capacity to exert a decisive influence on the psychic functioning of each individual individual.

By observing the individuals who make up a mass, he finds that: 1) no matter how different they are in their ways of life, occupations, character, intelligence, they begin to act, think and feel in a uniform way; 2) they are grouped around a common object, which unites everyone and guides their ability to influence each other.

Based on these observations, Freud (1921) states that the essence of the formation of the mass would consist of reciprocal libidinous bonds (of a non-sexual type) between its members, which would be confirmed by restrictions on narcissistic self-love and by the resignation of the (individual) ideal of the self to a mass ideal, embodied in the figure of a leader.

The ideal of the self is one of the products of identification - the earliest externalization of an affective connection with another person, inherited from an archaic epoch of child development. As the mastery over the influences and demands of the environment demands the presence of another,



little by little there is an identification of the subject with the one who dominates the demands of reality and assures its existence. To the extent that this other is incorporated by the psyche, there is a division in the internal organization of the self, resulting in the constitution of another instance, the ideal of the self - which may even conflict with the self itself.

In collective terms, the leader of the mass would be a remnant of the feared leader of the primitive horde, a kind of "primordial father" on whom a collective ideal is configured. The leader is assigned the government of all *the selves* in place of the ideal of the self of each one. Through this ideal, the members of the group abandon their uniqueness and identify with each other. It is, therefore, the affective bonds that weld the masses together and maintain the cohesion of the group, and the common object would take the place of an ideal in the psychic economy of each one.

To the extent that group segregation can pose a threat to survival, when the individual is alone he or she feels incomplete. Because of the anguish that separation would cause, the individual avoids opposing the flock, which disavows everything that is new or unusual.

Moreover, what is known as *community spirit* derives from an original envy: no individual should want to stand out from others, because everyone would have to be equal and have the same things. Consequently, *social justice* represents the idea of renouncing many things in order that others will do the same, or at least that they cannot demand it. This premise of equality is what underlies the social moral conscience and the feeling of duty (Freud, 1921). Therefore, the feeling of impunity in the face of the various crimes reported by the mainstream media produces in the mass the desire to, through punishment, curtail the supposed privileges that the individual offenders would have over them. The masses, devoid of criticism and with the free circulation of their hostile motions, do not propose to distinguish between facts and rumors. Unconsciously, this attitude may be linked to the expression of a desire to also have access to these "privileges" and to be able to commit crimes without suffering any kind of condemnation.

Taking into account the above, the objective of this study was to investigate, from the psychoanalytic theoretical framework, the psychosocial elements involved in interpersonal violence, more specifically on the social phenomenon of the propagation of hate speech. Through the theoretical device of the French School's Discourse Analysis and the systematic reading of selected texts from Freud's work, as well as those of other pertinent authors, 9 offensive comments made by Internet users in 3 different news items published on Facebook by the official pages of media outlets were analyzed: a homophobic homicide, a gang rape and an act of torture against a suspected thief.

2 NEWS & REVIEWS

The first news refers to a homophobic murder of a 17-year-old teenager, expelled from home by his mother, who did not accept his sexual orientation. Lured into an ambush, when he arrived at her



home he was stabbed to death by two teenagers hired by her. To get rid of the evidence of the crime, the mother and stepfather set fire to and hid the body. Below are the comments extracted from the publication of the G1 news portal on January 12, 2017:

C1 – I don't believe in the media in this country, which is biased and manipulative. The crime sometimes happened for another reason, but this garbage media insists on putting the sexual issue as a banner to magnify the FALSE CAUSE of homophobia. Everything to you is homophobia, racism, Islamophobia and prejudice. #MídiaFake.

C2 – And the fact that he's a drug user and takes men home... It doesn't count, right? It's just because he's gay... Oh yes... If he had worked and responsibly, he could give it to whoever he wanted, but nowadays he doesn't even finish his studies and already thinks he owns the world.

C3 – Being effeminate, gay, homosexual, I don't know what to call it, in Brazil is passive suicide, even more so when they want to show that they are or when they stay in public places doing what they should do between 4 walls. I don't want to offend anyone, just try to tell the truth of our reality, no matter who it hurts.

The second piece of news concerns the case of a 16-year-old girl who was drugged and raped by 33 men in a community in Rio de Janeiro. The girl testified to the police after the publication of a video on social networks, in which she is naked, bruised and unconscious, among a group of men who laugh and touch her private parts. Deeply shaken, she reported feeling "strong internal pains, as if it were in the womb." The following comments were taken from the publication made by Folha de São Paulo on May 27, 2016.

C4 – Paying for it? And the pictures of rifles, pistols and the fuck 4 no one talks about, right? Go take it in the ass, fucking slum buggly! [/sic]

C5 – The girl is already a mother at the age of sixteen and is not a saint and a drug user, she put herself in this position, if she had been at home taking care of her daughter, nothing would have happened. [/sic]

C6 – Women and girls, for God's sake, don't hang out with these kinds of people, some sniffing guys, smoking rocks and marijuana, then these things happen and everyone gets angry, let's take care of yourselves, kids, you like to be called young and everything else falls into the hands of some dogs like that and splinters, women's judgment of my Brazil. There's no point in sticking a little letter, it doesn't move rapists, these types of people only understand one language: the smoke in their ass. [/sic]

The third news item deals with the case of a 17-year-old teenager who had his forehead tattooed with the words "I am a thief and a scoundrel" by a tattoo artist and his neighbor, in addition to having his hair cut and his feet and hands tied. The aggressors claimed that the boy had tried to steal a bicycle in the area, so they decided to punish him. According to family members, he was a drug user and suffered from mental problems. The comments were taken from the news published by G1 on June 11, 2017:

C7 – Ahhh poor him, victim of society... Oh globe, stop defending bum, I want to see if this crap of people enters someone's house, terrorizes, beats, even kills a worker... That's rubbish... I should do that in all these troublemakers... Bunch of bums... And his stories victimizing bums are even more disgusting to watch. You're going to do an article about the disabled person that this crap tried to steal... He defends a bum, he is a bum too. [/sic]

C8 – That 'Adopt a Bandit' campaign fits right in this case. Society applauds those who steal, those who kill, and those who torture, but they repudiate those who take the law into their own



hands! Please, let's stop this clowning, the day it happens in the house of those who defend it I want to see if they won't act in the same way.
C9 – Wow, now the boy is a saint. He was just drunk, missing, and his family claims he is a drug user. Did the guys do it all for free? For the Judiation boy was coming back from church. Oh for right, imbecile society.

3 HATE SPEECH

Hate speech is not only directed at the victim of the crime, as one might assume, but at specific social groups. The discourses are based on the social imaginary that the subjects have about these groups, based mainly on generalizing ideas, such as stereotypes, preconceptions and prejudices, coming from different discursive and ideological formations. The reproduction of generic discourses reveals an attempt to prevent the construction of other possible interpretations, producing an effect of transparency of meaning and placing the interlocutor in a certain place in relation to desire and ideology. There is an ideologically constructed imaginary that challenges the subject of the discourse, who, without being aware of what he is doing, in a given condition identifies himself with the hegemonic class and, in another, with the dominated class, placing himself in specific positions of production of meanings. By means of discursive generics, the marks of enunciation are erased, giving the impression of an objective saying and a universal truth (TFOUNI; FAST; MONTE-SERRAT, 2013).

Regarding the propagation of such discourses, there is a strongly present media influence, since the distorted views of Internet users are, in part, a product of the media's own discourse. It acts on the process of production of social identities through the provision of models that dictate how subjects should be and act. These models have a social utility, as they institute paradigms, stereotypes, and these ways of acting and thinking symbolically insert the subject in an imaginary community. Media discourses contribute to the regulation of knowledge about the use that individuals should make of their bodies and lives, in addition to the construction of positions that should be occupied by men and women in their relationships with others. The sayings and actions are inserted in given discursive formations, so it is through the discourse that the knowledge of a given historical moment is constituted (GREGOLIN, 2007).

Depending on the conditions in which the discourses are produced, it is possible for certain contents to be enunciated and others to be hidden by people or collectives. Therefore, the omission or exposition of some ideas to the detriment of others are strategies that control the meanings and truths that are present at each moment of history (GREGOLIN, 2007). Thus, the media itself plays an important role in what should be censored or exposed at any given time. However, not only the influence of traditional media and parallel vehicles for the circulation of content, distributors of the so-called *fake news*, would be enough to stimulate the propagation of discourses. Due to the particular characteristics of electronic devices, such as mobility and direct access to the internet, considering the



high speed with which information circulates in the virtual environment, communication barriers are reduced, in order to enhance the sending and receiving of messages in real time.

Shouting hate speech on the internet is a way of staying in the same position while maintaining the same opinions. In this way, one avoids coming into contact with otherness, which in principle the subject refuses to accept and which motivates the reproduction of hatred. The function of the dissemination of hatred is to protect the subject from this otherness that invades him, and that intimately attacks his primary narcissism. Hatred presupposes a process of identification. From the moment the subject identifies himself with a certain discursive position, sometimes partisan of the majority social groups, sometimes favorable to minority social groups, he differentiates who represents the "we", his group to which he belongs, and who "they", the others, are. Thus, the threat that otherness offers him seems to refer to an idea of contamination by difference, a potential risk of acquiring for himself the "unpleasant" characteristics that he points out in the other. These characteristics that mark the otherness of the other acquire a taboo character. By transgressing certain social conventions, which are often linked to social taboos, that is, by doing something supposedly forbidden, people themselves become taboo. As already advocated by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), the dangerous attribute to which taboo is linked is precisely the tendency to excite the ambivalence of individuals, who are tempted to transgress the prohibition. In this sense, whoever violates the "taboo" also becomes a taboo, because he acquires this dangerous quality of causing in others the temptation to transgress the rules, encouraging imitation.

In the analyzed comments, a pattern was observed based on the justification of the crimes by the supposed "worthiness" of the victims, who, by circumventing social norms, become the exception figures. The moralization present in the discourses presupposed that, if the victims had been doing something considered useful to society, they could have avoided the crime.

By distinguishing between those who are part of their group of belonging and those who are not, the subjects create two extremes: a strictly good side, to which they belong, and a completely bad one, where the others fit. They put themselves in the place of "good citizens" and expose their prejudices in order to position the victims in the place of the opposite figure, seen as taboo. The comments can be considered as an attempt to mimic rational arguments, not in fact having a consistent foundation. In the search for the unsaid, there are traces of an argumentation based on religious precepts and a mere disqualification of people for their personal characteristics.

4 NATIONAL CONTEXT

In recent years, Brazil has been facing extreme political polarization, which gradually came to the fore after the 2013 demonstrations for the reduction of 20 cents in the value of bus tickets, reaching its peak in the period of presidential electoral disputes in 2014. Since then, several changes have taken



place and the country has gone through political, economic and social instabilities. With all these events, including the victory at the polls and the subsequent impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, ideological confrontations have intensified, and one of the products of these disputes is hate speech. The biggest source of these discourses is the internet, although they have also had repercussions on people's real lives.

The historical perspective shows that the country went through an initial moment where discrimination and violence occurred freely due to the lack of legal apparatuses of social protection, exacerbated by censorship that, during the military dictatorship, barred any type of social or political movement. With the redemocratization that culminated in the 1988 Constitution, much of this violence was prevented, and the curtailment of freedom of expression was put to an end. It was during this period, at the end of the twentieth century, when other countries in Latin America and Europe had also gone through dictatorial regimes, that important milestones in relation to human rights were achieved in Brazil and in the world. However, the same right to freedom of expression, which protects individual freedom, allows people to utter hate speech in the name of a supposed "personal opinion." As people need to get rid of hostile motions not elaborated to ensure the maintenance of their psychic balance, but fear the resulting sanctions, the internet has become the medium where they can expose their prejudiced and extremist positions, anchored by the anonymity of the network. Thus, society is going through a moment in which certain content, once repressed, appears in the form of hate speech.

Expressing yourself on social media is much simpler and safer than giving speeches directly to people. Thus, the condition of immediate production of discourses occurring in a virtual environment makes it possible to lower the censorship of individuals about their words. An analogy can be made with the role that culture plays in the censorship of contents of the unconscious, as well as in the contents that are consciously hidden from the speech of the subjects in their eagerness to avoid some punishment. From childhood, the human being gradually begins to internalize external coercion, which results in the construction of a psychic instance of moral character, the *superego* (or *superego*). Through this process, children become social and moral beings, and this strengthening of the *superego* can be considered a psychological heritage of culture (FREUD, 1927).

By means of the *superego*, culture projects its norms and values onto the conduct of individuals, and these who, although they may believe that they are exposing a particular point of view, based on a universal truth, in reality are only reproducing a set of values coming from a certain historical moment, linked to certain ideological formations. What happens is that ideology challenges the subject in such a way that, even when a position is not taken, it is already evident that there is an ideological movement there. Even omission or negligence implies that the subject locates himself, takes responsibility, revealing the desire. Therefore, not taking a stand is also a stand.



Through the beginning of the process of criminalization of violence against minority social groups, the false impression was created that prejudice no longer existed. On the other hand, the phenomenon of the dissemination of hate speech does not indicate that people today are more intolerant than before, since prejudice and stigma have always been part of the social structure. What determines what is or is not said by people is not restricted to their individual positions, but is greatly influenced by the historical and social moment.

5 CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Some authors consider that today's society is going through a "crisis of identifications". According to Pedrossian (2008), individuals no longer try to identify with each other, but try to fit into types of psychic configurations demanded by society for the sake of an established pattern, so as to become undifferentiated and subjected. In this context, social relations are guided by an instrumental logic, in which an attempt is made to formalize reason in a social environment that propagates irrationality.

Identification is a primordial mechanism for keeping social bonds alive, as it is the basis of social and cultural formation, allowing the sublimation of sexual drives. It is also linked to the premise of equality between individuals, from which social feeling originates, cited by Freud in *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the Self* (1921). In this sense, identification would function as a kind of social glue, whose scarcity in contemporary society would be reflected in indifference and indifferentiation. With the increasing flexibility of the social parameters provided by identification, which guided their psychic constitutions and choices throughout life, individuals began to base themselves even more on the precepts imposed by a broader social structure, that is, by normative instances other than those of their peers. This phenomenon generates a divergence of standards to be followed, which favors a syncretism of ideas. Thus, people start to have values and positions that are antagonistic to each other and, in this way, they feel lost when trying to reconcile different demands between the various instances that place themselves as dictators of what should be said, done or thought.

On the one hand, there are individuals who, at first, are unable to identify with certain social groups, generating enormous anguish due to the absence of a sense of belonging, which is so important so that they do not feel confined to isolation. On the other hand, there are also those who, in order to avoid anguish, remain attached to specific mass formations, uncritically accepting everything that is imposed on them. In the past, although there were several restrictions and censorships, social instances acted more firmly on the role of prescribing how people's paths should be, ensuring predictability to the lives of individuals, who knew what their lives would be like from beginning to end, with no room



for the unexpected. As much as they also complained about the impositions made on their generation, their hostile motions had specific targets to be directed.

There is, therefore, a movement of individuals who clamor for an authority figure to tell them what to do, to name their possibilities and impose limits on them, with the aim of bringing back an idealized psychic security. Because there are so many different possibilities of being and acting on the one hand and, on the other, different prescriptions of standards, the subjects end up appropriating at the same time discourses linked to divergent ideological formations. As much as there is currently an advance in relation to human rights, respect for differences and individual freedom, greater freedom of choice requires a price to be paid, costly to the psychic economy of individuals. Initially, subjects were limited to positions they could not get out of, while nowadays everything is very flexible and undefined. Extremism, so strongly present, would be a way of trying to return to previous patterns, where psychic security was forged by external forces that dictated to individuals the rules of what they should be and do.

When the imperatives placed on the conduct of individuals were more specific and incisive, the types of prohibitions and demands imposed by society were different. There will always be certain social norms that will no longer be regarded as prohibitions in favour of others, which will take their place. However, some individuals try to claim the prohibitive character of yesteryear. Even if the prohibitions are cultural, dependent on the historical moment, people have the illusion that they are incontestable truths, erasing the historical character of social conventions and rules. The use of the Bible as a justification for the spread of hatred and bigotry exemplifies this erasure well. As much as it is a symbolic object built on the basis of values from a different time, some use its passages to argue in favor of their particular prejudices. By adopting values for convenience, they only allow themselves to be moved by crimes and violence that are "compatible" with their ideological formations.

6 FINAL THOUGHTS

There is no way to get rid of ideological formations, since they permeate any discursive formations that the subject appropriates. Among those who remain attached to the outmoded values of the great mass, even though they have lost their meaning even for them, there is an insistence on their maintenance and propagation as ends in themselves, as if, through their incessant repetition, at a given moment they could attain an ideal of morality.

Such discourses share paradigms, stereotypes and propose a normalization of ways of acting and thinking. As a consequence, their propagation through the internet – a virtual place that supposedly protects the user through the anonymity of the network – generates in the subject a feeling of belonging to a certain social group – "his equals" – and inserts him in an imaginary community. Supported and



stimulated by this "community", the individual is authorized to proclaim and propagate hate speech against those who do not share his ideal and beliefs.

The reproduction and dissemination of generic discourses, devoid of criticism, without concern for the distinction between facts and rumors, and the fierce opposition to any questioning or contradictory reveal the attempt to prevent the construction of other possible interpretations that can produce an effect of transparency and meaning and, consequently, reveal to the interlocutor his place in relation to the desire and ideology that sustains and permeates his group of belonging.



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