Motherhood and social suffering in Brazilian mommy blogs

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the collective imaginary about motherhood. It is justified since, in contemporary society, motherhood appears associated with socially determined sufferings, despite its rewarding facets. It is organized around the use of the psychoanalytic method, here operationalized regarding investigative procedures of a survey, selection, register, and interpretation of posts from Brazilian blogs. The consideration of the material allowed the interpretative production of two fields of affective-emotional meaning: "I am a mother, therefore I am", and "Exclusive mother". These fields indicate the prevalence of a collective imaginary that, with heavy demands on women, promotes emotional suffering.

Keywords: Motherhood; social suffering; collective imaginary; mommy blogs; psychoanalytic method.

MATERNIDADE E SOFRIMENTO SOCIAL EM *MOMMY BLOGS* BRASILEIROS

Resumo: Esta pesquisa objetiva investigar o imaginário coletivo sobre a maternidade. Justifica-se na medida em que esta, apesar de suas facetas gratificantes, parece associada, na contemporaneidade, a sofrimentos socialmente determinados. Organiza-se por meio do uso do método psicanalítico, operacionalizado em termos de procedimentos investigativos de levantamento, seleção, registro e interpretação de postagens de blogues pessoais brasileiros. A consideração do material permite a produção interpretativa de dois campos de sentido afetivo-emocional: "Sou mãe, logo existo" e "Mãe exclusiva". Tais campos indicam a prevalência, no conjunto do material, de um imaginário coletivo que, com pesadas exigências à mulher, favorece seu sofrimento emocional.

Palavras-chave: maternidade; sofrimento social; imaginário coletivo; *mommy blogs*; método psicanalítico.

MATERNIDAD Y SUFRIMIENTO SOCIAL EN *MOMMY BLOGS* BRASILEÑOS

Resumen: Este estudio objetiva investigar el imaginario colectivo sobre la maternidad. Se justifica en la medida en que ésta, a pesar de sus facetas gratificantes, parece asociada, en la contemporaneidad, a sufrimientos socialmente determinados. Se organiza por medio del uso del método psicoanalítico, operacionalizado en procedimientos investigativos de levantamiento, selección, registro e interpretación de publicaciones de blogs personales brasileños. La consideración del material permitió la producción interpreta-

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tiva de dos campos de sentido afectivo-emocional: "Soy madre, luego existo" y "Madre exclusiva". Los campos en el conjunto del material indican la prevalencia de un imaginario colectivo que, con pesadas exigencias a la mujer, favorece su sufrimiento emocional.

Palabras clave: Maternidade; sufrimiento social; imaginario colectivo; *mommy blogs*; método psicoanalítico.

Introduction

The concept of social suffering, first used by Dejours (1993) refers to uncomfortable and painful emotional experiences arising from job insecurity associated with loss of social objects. Examples of social objects include access to health care, work, and public policies that ensure the rights of citizens. Subsequently, Kleinman, Das, & Lock (1997) broadened the concept and included emotionally difficult life experiences generated by the way social life is organized. From this perspective, situations of religious persecution, war, torture, oppression, racism, oppression against women, and other forms of prejudice are producing emotional distress. This broadened conception is an important advancement that can significantly enrich clinical psychology and the social psychology of health. For this reason, we agree with authors who define social suffering as that arising from oppression, discrimination, and exclusion, causing feelings such as abandonment, humiliation, injustice, and guilt (Ambrosio, Aiello-Fernandes, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2013).

It is known in the field of social suffering that people and/or groups facing discrimination often feel humiliated and wronged as they are belittled. Hence, their humanity is denied, sometimes in the sense of animalization, as in racism (Fanon, 1952), and sometimes in the sense of objectification, as in chauvinism (Bartky, 1990). There is, however, evidence that social suffering is structured in motherhood in a different way, to the extent it expresses itself mainly through anguish and feelings of guilt. This can be explained by the prevalence of a social structure that defines motherhood as an idealized target, causing important emotional distress to the point that what is socially prescribed is quite divorced from what is actually experienced in the routine of childcare (Das, 2006; Schumacher, 2015).

As is commonly recognized, our society idealizes motherhood, considering that being under the care of biological mothers corresponds to a natural and more satisfactory solution for the dependent condition of babies and children. Anthropological studies, however, reveal there to be various ways in which different societies organize the care intended to meet the needs of babies (Gottlieb, 2012; Rogoff, 2014). Therefore, the notion that the biological mother is the best caregiver to whom a child naturally becomes attached is a view that underestimates the importance of culture.

The cultural arrangement currently in force generates, in the words of Odenweller and Rittenour (2017), stereotypes of women who play professional roles and women who exclusively dedicate themselves to domestic chores. The situation is quite complex

because the fact that women are included in the world of work seems not to have affected their expectations that they will dedicate themselves to their offspring, according to a scheme women experience that is known as "double shift" (Sullivan, 2015). Therefore, a situation emerges in which women believe they have a double responsibility: as a mother and as a professional. Those who remain professionally active tend to feel guilty and overwhelmed, while, at the same time, they face the problems and enjoy the advantages that characterize the life of those engaged in the world of work. On the other hand, those who exclusively dedicate themselves to household duties, among which is the care of children, experience other types of emotional distress, either guilt because they do not generate income and they fail to achieve professional realization, important aspects of adult life in contemporaneous society. Alternatively, there may be insecurities arising from being economically dependent on their husbands. Therefore, all women-mothers are affected by current social demands, even though specific circumstances may either aggravate or alleviate such unease. In other words, we believe we must acknowledge that contemporary motherhood conforms itself to the social suffering that crosses social class, race, culture, and religion.

This idea does not sound strange if we consider that, if the organization of a society that produces suffering is based on oppression, discrimination, authority, and prejudice toward various groups, among which women are included, those who become mothers probably will not be spared entirely. Obviously, we cannot deny that specific social conditions, as well as some situations such as a severe disease affecting mother or child, drastically influence the various ways motherhood can be experienced, either with more or less intense suffering. Nonetheless, when we consider the social suffering of women-mothers as a phenomenon that is incorporated into a greater situation of oppression against women, we need to stress that such a phenomenon affects all women-mothers.

In our opinion, an acknowledgment that the concrete ways through which women experience motherhood in the current world correspond to a condition permeated with social suffering justifies this study. This study's objective is to psychoanalytically investigate the collective imaginary concerning motherhood so that a richer understanding of this phenomenon can lead to knowledge that is relevant for clinical psychology in psychotherapeutic and psycho-prophylactic terms.

Method

In this study, we gave priority to psychoanalysis as a method, understanding it as a foundation for theories and clinical procedures that derive from it. Based on the theoretical-methodological perspective known as concrete psychology (Bleger, 1977), which uses clinical material generated by this method to produce knowledge according to a relational paradigm, we organized this study with two basic concepts: collective

imaginary and fields of affective-emotional meaning. We conceive collective imaginary as conducts, in the precise meaning, the term assumes according to Bleger (1977). The fields of affective-emotional meanings correspond to the conception of the unconscious, forged by concrete psychology as a proposal linked to a relational paradigm. Therefore, it derives from the criticism and abandonment of a view according to which the unconscious would be an intra-psychic instance, in favor of a conception of the unconscious as an inter-subjectively shaped field, from which conduct emerges. Ontologically, the fields emerge from human acts, not being methodologically considered as deriving from infrahuman action. Hence, produced by conducts, these are configured as worlds dramatically inhabited by individuals and collectives, from which new conducts emerge.

Procedures

The psychoanalytical method was operationalized in terms of investigative procedures, in order to clarify as much as possible the investigative path we adopted, as well as to encourage communication with researchers who adopt different theoretical-methodological frameworks:

1. Investigative procedure concerning the surveying and selecting of posts.
2. Investigative procedure concerning the recording of the material.
3. Investigative procedure concerning the interpretation of material.

A survey was conducted using Google, a step that corresponds to the investigative procedure concerning the surveying and selecting of posts. The following criteria were established prior to the survey:

1. Posts written by Internet users who identify themselves as mothers.
2. Posts originated in Brazilian personal blogs.
3. Posts the theme of which was postpartum depression.

The third criterion, related to the selection of posts addressing postpartum depression, corresponds to a methodological strategy that became necessary due to the extensive material available on the Internet. Postpartum depression was adopted because it is grounded on the idea of research-based procedures, which are interesting when researching sensitive topics. These procedures are based on the enunciation of an interest that does not exactly coincide with the objective of investigation (Aiello-Vaisberg, 1995). Hence, we use the idea of hidden procedures to survey posts using the term "postpartum depression blogs", to identify posts that focused on situations of distress among women-mothers. That is, we did not take postpartum depression as an object of study or research problem. In reality, we opted to study posts on

postpartum depression because these posts are a privileged locus to understand more deeply how motherhood and social suffering is linked.

After establishing selection criteria, the search was conducted on Google in April 2015. We selected the first 30 posts, considering these were the most frequently accessed since search results appear in descending order of being accessed. After reading all the posts, we selected only those written by Internet users who identified themselves as mothers, which resulted in 17 posts. Later, only those posts that described the experience of postpartum depression remained, that is, seven posts. Note that Google automatically sent us to a single post available in each page, or link. Therefore, we stress, for the sake of methodological rigor, that we did not cut and past the bloggers' posts, but rather transcribed them verbatim.

The investigative procedure concerning the recording of the material refers to the transcription of posts, as they appeared online. The transcription aimed at preserving the material from disappearing from the Web, and to facilitate interpretation, which requires reading and re-reading the material.

We performed the investigative procedure of interpretation of material by re-reading the posts numerous times in light of the pillars of the psychoanalytical method, that is, from skimming the text and the free association of ideas. We read the posts accepting all and any association, emotion, feeling and/or memory, according to the recommended use of this clinical method. Thus, inserted in a transference web of human meanings, we interpretatively reached the emotional determinants underlying the conducts under study, i.e., underlying the fields of affective-emotional meanings. We clarified this investigative procedure observing the command words coined by Herrmann (2001), which, resting on the injunctions of the psychoanalytical method, can be taken as a guide for a psychoanalytical interpretation of the material: let it arise, take it into account, and complete the configuration of the emergent affective-emotional meaning.

The study was concluded through the elaboration of reflective interlocutions, corresponding to a resumption of interpretation, that is, of the fields of affective-emotional meaning that were created/discovered, in light of the thoughts of other authors whose contributions can improve our understanding of the phenomenon. In this phase of the study, usually called discussion, we abandoned evenly distributed attention and free association to perform a theoretical-conceptual work.

Results

The results that emerge in qualitative research using the psychoanalytical method do not consist of the collected material. Rather, they emerge from the proposition of interpretations. These interpretations, in turn, can be roughly thought of as an expression of what is repressed by individuals or as inter-subjective fields. Grounded on concrete psychology, we adopted the second conception of the unconscious,

conceiving it to be a set of fields of affective-emotional meanings that define themselves in a minimalist way. The creation/encounter of fields of affective-emotional meanings, that is, of interpretative results, derives from various readings in a state of evenly distributed attention and free association of ideas from the set of posts.

The material enabled an interpretative production of two fields of affective-emotional meanings: "I am a mother, therefore I exist" and "Exclusively a mother". The first field of affective-emotional meaning "I am a mother, therefore I exist" was organized around the belief that women only achieve true happiness when they become mothers. The second "Exclusively a mother" was organized around the belief that the biological mother is the only person capable to take care of a child and this must be her only mission in life.

Discussion

The first reading of definitions of both fields of affective-emotional meaning, here interpretatively proposed, seem to be sufficient to indicate the prevalence of a collective imaginary concerning motherhood, that demand women to dedicate themselves both fully and integrally to the care of their children, giving up other aspirations, such as being totally happy and fulfilled. Such a conjunction between heavy demands and promises of happiness and personal fulfillment open up a space that is unfit for the experience of dissatisfaction or frustration, which certainly cause significant emotional distress. Women-mothers experience suffering because motherhood is idealized. It is a complex phenomenon that on the surface exalts women but, in reality, is deeply attached to cultural organization modes and politics that we can call androcentric.

There is no doubt about the fact that human babies demand care, without which they cannot survive. We should, however, note that birth marks an important change of condition to the extent which newborns are able to survive with the presence of adult caregivers, even if the biological mother dies.

We should keep in mind what Winnicott (1983, 1992) states, based on clinical practice, that initial care can either favor or harm the delicate processes of the constitution of one's self, which are essential for an individual's future mental health. Therefore, when human infants are born, they are totally dependent on others and for this reason devoted adults genuinely and authentically concerned with children's needs are necessary for infants to adapt in active and emotional terms.

The dependency of human infants is a biological fact. Guided by the Winnicotian theory, we know that human infants need care not only to survive but also to accomplish developmental milestones, from which they can acquire the psychological condition of singular existence (Winnicott, 1992). Winnicott understands that the best care is that provided by the biological mother who experiences primary maternal preoccupation (Winnicott, 1958).

However, because of its strongly biological nature, this theory deserves to be criticized in light of Bleger's (1977) warnings. Such warnings refer to reductionist approaches to the study of human conduct. Bleger notes some myths that would view that consider human beings as abstract, natural beings isolated from social contexts in which the lives of individuals and collectives take place. Such myths correspond to some assumptions in Western thought, according to which humans are originally non-social beings, endowed with a pure and essential nature, prior to experience. We propose that the concept of primary maternal preoccupation can be considered an expression of such myths, as it shows a conception of motherhood unrelated to the drama people experience as social beings who establish bonds, considering that infrahuman hormonal forces would cause retreat in the mother. Thus, understanding that the initial postnatal environment may play a relevant role in the constitutional processes of someone does not imply associating good care with the biological mother, disregarding any other form of social organization of care provided to infants.

In our view, both fields of affective-emotional meaning created/discovered here can be considered an expression of such myths, as both are linked. The first field "I am a mother, therefore I exist" encourages women to believe that their lives would be fully realized if they became mothers. The second field "Exclusively a mother" is linked to the first field with the idea that the biological mother would be the best caregiver and this should be her life mission. Hence, we can observe that the fields of affective-emotional meanings show beliefs according to which mothers would be endowed with an incredible ability to fully dedicate themselves. These characteristics clearly contradict what modern life demands from people in terms of significant individualism.

Supported by studies conducted by Gottlieb (2012) and Rogoff (2003), we see that a birth opens up a possibility of various cultural arrangements to deal with the dependency of human babies. In her anthropological study of babies, Gottlieb (2012) talked about how an Ivorian tribe organizes itself when a baby is born. Because the dependency of newborns is recognized, other people in addition to the biological mother become responsible for the care of infants. Rogoff (2003), in turn, using sociocultural psychology as a reference, proposes analyzing similarities and differences in human development that take place in various societies, which methodologically facilitates an assessment of the role played by culture. The author notes, for instance, that childcare is provided in different ways and is not restricted to what is provided by the biological mother. Therefore, we become more confident in stating that the idea that the mother is the best caregiver is a social construct, while the dependency of babies is not. Consequently, approaches that consider motherhood an abstract biological phenomenon isolated from bonds and macro social contexts seem to be unwise.

Badinter (2012) emphasizes that the biomedical sciences played a role in the creation of beliefs – which persist until today – denying the different social possibilities for care provided to babies, in addition to reinforcing certain ideas, such as natural motherhood, maternal instinct, and duty of a "good mother". In this line of thought,

some ideas, according to which gestation and labor themselves would ensure a bond is established between mother and child and disregarding the importance of psychological and social dimensions of human phenomena, seem to be wrong.

In agreement with this study's results, Granato, Tachibana, &Aiello-Vaisberg (2011), who conducted an empirical study, reveal that there is an expectation for women to experience motherhood in an enthusiastic, sublime and pleasurable way. Therefore, researchers caution that certain beliefs related to the idea and fantasy that the mother is the best caregiver of a baby could serve various purposes, among which is to "maintain social alienation regarding the responsibility for the care of children" (Granato, Tachibana, &Aiello-Vaisberg, 2011, p. 87). The authors show a concern with a tendency to idealize one of the potential solutions for the problem of taking care of babies and children as an abstraction. Additionally, they reveal a concern with the withdrawal of other family and social figures, of ethical contact with babies and children, which in modern times, would probably progress to solidarity in the community.

Finally, despite the limitations this research shares with qualitative studies, it reveals elements that deserve the consideration of those working in clinical psychology and especially clinical child psychology. Association between motherhood and social suffering is a relevant topic for future research.

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