

# Contemporary institutional transformations: an analysis on non-contact relations

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**Abstract:** Social Psychology emphasizes the analysis of institutions that distribute functions and operate the socialization. In contemporary times, a historical approach of the institutional network reveals that the same process transformed the institutions: the emergence and consolidation of non-contact relationships. This study aims to analyze the institutions, in the attempt to understand how they take place and what are the functional changes the capitalist societies attach to them, focusing on family, school, prison, and labor organizations. The qualitative method was adopted, characterized by an in-depth study of social events, considering the discourse and practices of their agents. As a result, the research outlined the main changes in the institutional framework the modern societies face.

**Keywords:** institutions; social transformation; psychology; contemporary; technology.

## TRANSFORMAÇÕES INSTITUCIONAIS CONTEMPORÂNEAS: UMA ANÁLISE SOBRE AS RELAÇÕES NÃO PRESENCIAIS

**Resumo:** A Psicologia Social destaca a análise das instituições que distribuem funções e operam a socialização. No período atual, uma abordagem histórica da rede institucional revela que as instituições foram transformadas por um mesmo processo: a emergência e consolidação de relações não presenciais. O presente estudo objetivou analisar as instituições buscando compreender como se dão e quais são as mudanças nas funções que as sociedades capitalistas lhes atribuem, focalizando a família, a escola, a prisão e as organizações laborais. A metodologia adotada foi qualitativa, que se caracteriza pelo estudo aprofundado dos acontecimentos sociais, considerando os discursos e as práticas de seus agentes. Como resultado, a pesquisa delineou as principais mudanças no âmbito institucional que as sociedades modernas enfrentam.

**Palavras-chave:** instituições; transformação social; Psicologia; contemporaneidade; tecnologia.

## TRANSFORMACIONES INSTITUCIONALES CONTEMPORÂNEAS: UN ANÁLISIS SOBRE LAS RELACIONES NO PRESENCIALES

**Resumen:** La Psicología Social pone de relieve el análisis de las instituciones que distribuyen funciones y operan la socialización. En el período actual, un enfoque histórico de la red institucional revela que las instituciones se transformaron por el mismo proceso: la aparición y consolidación de las relaciones no presenciales. El presente estudio pretende analizar las instituciones tratando de entender cómo ocurren e cuáles son los

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cambios en las funciones que las sociedades capitalistas les atribuyen, centrándose en la familia, escuela, cárcel y las organizaciones sindicales. La metodología adoptada se caracterizó por una profundización cualitativa de eventos sociales, teniendo en cuenta los discursos y prácticas de sus agentes. Como resultado, la investigación describe los principales cambios que las sociedades modernas viven.

**Palabras clave:** instituciones; transformación social; Psicología; contemporaneidad; tecnología.

## Introduction

Social psychology, as a field of knowledge that encompasses both individual subjects and collective processes in its research, has always reserved a prominent place for social institutions, which are considered mediators between collective determinations, whether state-owned or cultural and individuals. In a preliminary way, institutions can be understood as sets of rules and procedures to be followed to achieve certain social results. Thus, with the family, primary socialization takes place, complemented in the school, which gives continuity to this path through secondary socialization. This broad configuration, an institutional "general form," in turn, gains material support for the execution of its functions through institutional establishments: the school, the hospital, the prison, and others. The space of each of these institutions groups subjects to be transformed in a given period, so that, in this sharing of the environment, it constitutes a territory that can be the object of affective and desiring investment by the subjects who will remain there.

The institutional territory thus gains consistency by grouping in the same space and for a certain time a group of individuals that builds mutual relationships and with the institutional establishment. If we consider that, as Foucault (1996) observes, institutions succeed one another by producing modifications in the subjects, we can admit that, in the institutional environment, there is a continuous way of producing a way of life or a type of existence. Foucault emphasizes that what is at stake is the adaptation of the human to the current social order and the corresponding productive arrangement. The type of life demanded by the current capitalist society is then produced, which incorporates expectations of productivity and uncritical acceptance of the whole set of standards that compose and regulate the social environment.

Several authors (Donzelot, 1986; Ariès, 1981; Foucault, 1998, 2014), with different theoretical-methodological conceptions, have thematized the institutional problem from different perspectives, but always highlighting the institutions' political functions. The historical approach applied to the institutional scope is also a constant in these studies. In these approaches, institutions perform formative, educational, punitive, health promotion, and other functions, in addition to actively participating in the individual socialization process. As an effect of this process, the strategic role of the individual in the production of the docile and submissive individual (Foucault, 1998) is identified in the institutions, within what can be characterized as a process of social conformation (Carvalho, Mansano, & Cunha, 2011). The horizon for this process

is the reduction of the possible forms of resistance and contestation, directed at the organization modes of the societies.

The historical-critical approach emphasizes that one of the effects that can be categorically attributed to institutions is the reproduction of values and the dominant social hierarchy, making the subjects defend the status quo and the social order in force. In view of this historical view, the institutions can also be analyzed longitudinally, that is, in their variations over time. Another consequence is that the institutions can be dated: they are born, develop and sometimes exhaust themselves in the fulfillment of their social functions. Like everything else in the social and historical midst, institutions may end up being replaced by others, more appropriate to the historical moment, because they are more effective in exercising their powers. Taking into account this context, the objective of this study is to analyze the past and ongoing transformations in social institutions due to the emergence and consolidation of the global computer network, which highlights non-contact relationships.

## Development

The twentieth century, with its accelerated technological advance, provoked irreversible transformations in all domains of human life and this extends to social institutions. The bourgeois nuclear family, a family model made hegemonic in all social strata, witnessed its growing importance as a legitimizing institution of capitalism. Analyzing the period, Guattari describes this process, emphasizing the political functions the family environment will play. The author says:

Throughout the twentieth century, existing powers acquire "greater care" by coding and controlling the domestic life of the wedded couple and the nuclear family. In short, reterritorializing the family on a large scale (by the media, care services, indirect wages...) attempts are made to turn the worker's subjectivity as bourgeois as possible (Guattari, 1997, p. 48).

As Guattari considers, the family institutional environment undergoes transformations that inscribe it, with new functions, in a society under the permanent effect of the media. What other changes in established ways of life can we identify as a result of the emergence of communicational societies?

Throughout this century, the school has also undergone considerable changes regarding its role in training and education. Schooling did not cease to expand its sphere of action, extending throughout the life of the subjects (Mito, 2015). Of course, this increase in the length of education is a response to the considerable technological development that has been experienced, which calls for expanded education and the training of an increasingly specialized workforce. As Deleuze (1992, p. 225) observes, school is increasingly linked to the market context: "In the school system: the forms of continuous control, continuous assessment, and the corresponding abandonment of any research in the University, introduction of the 'company' at all levels of schooling."

The rise of the school can be related to a relative decrease in parents' powers over their children, particularly after the adoption of the full-time regime (Lima & Chapadeiro, 2015). Donzelot (1986) analyzed this process in which the family and school share functions or alternate in response to certain social demands. The author points out that the school has become an institution of reference for family life which led to a normalization of the family, in keeping with the new demands of capitalist societies, particularly with regard to children's professional trajectory. Taking into account the opening of the family environment to the demands of the capitalist social order, the author considers:

In short, you will be able to show the qualities that parents need to acquire in order to become true educators, capable of correcting their children's school career by the intensity of their actions and of improving their opportunities at a time when school leveling threatens them (Donzelot, 1986, p. 186).

By examining, next, the impact of technology acquisition on the institutional family environment, Donzelot dwells on the precursor to a set of irreversible transformations: the emergence and consolidation of radio broadcasts, producing effects in the hitherto closed family environment. First of all, the radio waves operate an opening by disseminating contents that can be translated as values, ideas, ways of feeling and thinking, quite different from those that circulated inside the family through the educative action of the parents. But it was also through the radio that the very closed configuration of the family started to be questioned. Different radio programs adopted as practice the exhibition of testimonies related to private life, in a process the author called "confession." This involves, then, speaking in public or, at least, to those outside the family nucleus, about private life, its problems, and dilemmas. Confession is characterized by voluntary reporting in which one's intimacy is exposed and revealed. As a widespread practice on the radio, confession became a standard procedure and played a decisive role for the family to move from a closed to an open institution. As the author observes, "form-confession is easy to be observed in all relationship technicians, whether they practice in private practices, in public institutions or through radio waves" (Donzelot, 1986, pp. 188-189).

Following this process, the second half of the twentieth century universalized television broadcasts with a family theme, thus maintaining the exposure of private life that characterized the confession, now with the contribution of the exhibition of images of an intimacy hitherto reclusive (Franca & Souza, 2016). The acquisition of a technological apparatus capable of universalizing electromagnetic transmission actually inaugurates a new stage in Western societies of the twentieth century. Through this acquisition, humans are no longer obliged to face-to-face relationships, being able to access the experiences of others by means of image and sound, connecting to a remote reality or even a fictitious pseudo-reality, artistically produced in the form of television programming.

Technological acquisitions were naturalized by entering the daily lives of a significant portion of human beings across the globe. Thus, differences in value, worldview and religious conviction were exposed. In this context, the appeal to modernity contrasted with the resistance from the more conservative segments that rightly related the arrival of the age of communications with the decline of traditional moral values.

The introduction of societies into the era of non-contact social interactions subsequently produced a series of unusual transformations. The media, until then, were only radio and television. The subsequent movement occurs already in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the first personal computers are popularized, soon to be connected in a network. In this new scenario, another rupture occurred: in the broadcasting modalities, communication always takes place in a centralized way, as the contents are diffused from a single transmission hub to the set of listeners and viewers. With the consolidation of the global computer network, this centralized and centralizing configuration of communication undergoes a sudden change. With the inclusion of billions of human beings in the usual procedures of sending and receiving data, in the forms of image, sound, and text, the architecture of non-contact interactions is significantly expanded. The effects of this process are surely not yet fully understood. For our research problem, that is, institutional changes occurred in the twentieth century, it is also reasonable to consider that a series of irreversible effects occurred.

It should be considered that social institutions were exclusively organized on the face-to-face interaction between their agents and the stakeholders of the institutional practices. In this field, in fact, a paradigm shift occurs as, for Foucault (1998), the organization of the institutional space was entirely focused on face-to-face interaction. In that paradigm, the institutions were divided into rooms that could be classrooms, cells, and offices, thus attending to a distribution of the bodies that facilitated the face-to-face interaction. In this format, still partially valid, institutions intervene in the subjects' lives, leading to the adaptation of the bodies for their total insertion in the social and economic order.

This dynamic applies both to educational processes and to prisons; but it is also found in hospitals, nurseries, factories, and nursing homes. Without advanced communication technology, the institutional model was entirely dependent on face-to-face interaction. The legal system and the internal regulation of each institution, which sanctioned the practices established therein, also referred exclusively to the face-to-face. When the technological devices of computerized communication are consolidated, which enables institutional interventions at a distance, institutions receive material and immaterial support for the advent of this new reality. The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed a process of gradual enlargement of the accomplishment area of social institutions that reformulated procedures and regulations. These also come to rely on the legal standards that sanction the new practices, which are now non-contact. What are the consequences of this process?

Let us analyze some of the main institutions present in modern society by this criterion of inclusion among their procedures of practices carried out at a distance and

mediated by the computerized technological apparatus of communication. Let us begin with the school, the most recent institution that has become ubiquitous and whose importance has not ceased to grow. As is well known, a significant portion of higher education in countries such as Brazil today is carried out at a distance. Millions of students get their undergraduate and graduate degrees without having attended the classroom in the strict sense (Chaquime & Mill, 2016).

The transformations resulting from the paradigm shift here are quite visible. Teacher and student are at a distance, but the socialization experienced in the classroom under the face-to-face model also ceases to exist. Guattari observes that institutions engendered coexistence territories that will cease to exist, "especially in the contemporary context where the primacy of the information flows generated by machinery threatens to lead to a generalized dissolution of the old existential territorialities" (Guattari, 1992, p. 31). The author's contributions are incisive: we are in the midst of an accelerated mutation provoked by the advent of non-contact relations that can turn the institutional practices and their corresponding affective territories archaic. A change of this magnitude can only be understood if historically evaluated, given the long period these institutions (such as the family, for example) have fulfilled social functions and shaped shared lifestyles (Zani & Mansano, 2017).

This is just one of the questions the transformation of institutional spaces poses to us. Basic and intermediate schooling, which apparently remains dependent on the classroom, has also been profoundly modified. Everyone in a classroom has electronic devices connected to the world wide web. The contents disseminated in the educational process, previously presented by the teacher, now come from anywhere on the planet, provided that they have been made available by another network user. The social function of the teacher became another, more related to the selection and organization of the material the students researched on the subject in question (Rosa & Trevisan, 2016).

Going to prison institutions and establishments (Foucault, 1996), also present in all Western societies, the emergence of non-presence was absorbed as a resource to face these institutions' chronic problems of overcrowding. Distance monitoring devices have been established and legally enacted by which the subject is monitored and permanently located. Pressured by costs, a large number of countries quickly embraced the mode of non-contact imprisonment, characterized by Deleuze as part of the contemporary scenario: "In the prisons regime: the quest for 'substitutive' punishment, at least for petty delinquency, and the use of electronic collars that oblige the condemned to remain at home at certain times" (Deleuze, 1992, p. 225). In this case, the distancing among the condemned provoked by the advent of non-presence was considered an additional gain by the managers of the prison system, as the contact and the bonds built face-to-face among prisoners were identified as factors that contributed to the maintenance of criminality.

Also, the family institution, which throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century became open and whose members already admit that they expose their private existence, increasingly

adopts non-contact interaction. This is mainly due to the distance from the labor market, which offers a satisfactory position to the subject in a context far from his home. For work or study, parents and children move around the city, the country and the world. As a result, the affective and relational experiences of the family group also take place in the non-contact mode. Through the cameras and computer screens, the subjects of the group that formerly defined itself as inhabiting the same space now see themselves and talk at a distance, exercising their father, mother, son or daughter roles through the digital apparatus.

Thus, the family institution was significantly transformed by the advent of the media. On the one hand, its most intimate questions started to be exposed and evaluated in the mediatic contexts in the form of confession, serving as a vector of normalization for family relationships. On the other hand, the coexistence among its members became rarefied and replaced, in part, by non-presence contact. The contemporary family actually lost its autonomy as it began to meet the social demands formulated outside it. It also partially lost the ability to intervene in the formation of its members, due to the reduced contact in function of the lack of non-presential relationships. Due to this emptying, Donzelot (1986) will characterize the family, in its current configuration, as a "functional semblance" (p. 203), that is, an institution that remains only in appearance, as a "constellation of images" (p. 203). This set of images referred to the family environment supports the conviction shared in the social environment that the family institution continues to play an irreplaceable role in the socialization of the new generations. But the undeniable fact is that education occupies more and more significant space in this process.

When we enter the institutional field of health, we can see that, in that area too, the non-contact interactions gradually occupy the space previously exclusive to work meetings. Several procedures are adopted, always justified by the speed and efficiency with which they are performed. Such practices are increasingly distant from the doctor's appointment. These are laboratory tests that go via the internet to the doctor's office, who evaluates them and contacts the patient only when necessary. The patient does not return to the appointment, following the medical instructions received by computer or telephone.

In the field of health, one can also say that professional work at a distance has gained an even clearer profile. Through that work, the physician has direct access to the patient's body without any conscious participation of the patient. To give an example, mobile phones are used to monitor vital signs by transmitting them directly to the doctor, who contacts the patient only if necessary.

Finally, Psychology itself, which consolidated its psychotherapeutic intervention tools based on the face-to-face relationship, suffers a shock due to communication technologies. In Brazil, psychotherapy procedures at a distance are being tested on an experimental basis and professionals increasingly expect the regulation of these procedures (CFP, 2012).

If we consider that the contemporary capitalist reality has the universalization of access to electronic means of communication as a horizon, we are obliged to recognize that the gradual abandonment of face-to-face relations for institutional purposes is something that has to continue to occur. In what way could this process be characterized? According to Guattari (1992), it is about recognizing, in the relative abandonment of relations in the institutions, the voiding of meaning and value of that space, which marks the possibility of experiencing a mutation today. This can radically impact the network of institutions that support life in society, making it dysfunctional.

As evidenced in the institutions already mentioned, we are faced with a set of mutations that affect the ways of organizing life in the contemporary world. This finding supports the formulation of a series of problems. Let us look at some: can we talk about sociability in non-contact relationships? Does this kind of relationship have the same affective value as a meeting? Does the intermediation operated by the technological apparatus not create the necessary conditions for remote monitoring of these relations? Beyond the mere signaling of these mutations, these should be characterized in terms of the political effects they produce, more particularly of the forms of domination and control that are based on universalized technologies (Mansano, 2009). One of the decisive effects is the passive and non-critical acceptance of the emergent scenario in the form of naturalization of ruptures, which common sense names modernity, thus implicitly calling for insertion into new modes, under penalty of being identified as obsolete.

The analyzed institutions (family, school, prison, and labor organizations) show the consistency of the process now underway. The same movement can be identified in countless other institutional contexts though. In each of them, one can understand which practices and procedures are in decline and which are emerging, allowing us to identify the new institutional configurations.

The emergence of the non-contact and its dissemination in different institutional contexts foreshadows new ways of life, in which the mediation made by the technological apparatus replaces the physical presence of the subject. As a result, the set of institutions that historically performed functions in the face-to-face mode began to show signs of dysfunction and obsolescence. The realization that a generalized crisis of institutions is underway, due to the steep technological advance that the present time incorporates, can lead us, however, to another type of problem, that of the relations of power and their performance regimes. This is what Deleuze (1992) considers when saying that the current change has very broad and political implications. In his words:

We are in a generalized crisis of all means of confinement, prison, hospital, factory, school, family. The family is an "interior," in crisis like any other interior, school, professional, etc. The competent ministers do not stop announcing supposedly necessary reforms. Reform school, reform industry, hospital, army, prison; but everyone knows that these institutions are doomed, in the longer or shorter term. It is only about managing their agony and occupying people, until the installation of the new forces that are announced. These are the control societies that are replacing the disciplinary societies (Deleuze, 1992, p. 220).

This is a significant shift in our understanding of the social and institutional transformations we witness today. More than a continuous modernization of the technological apparatus, the contemporary capitalist societies now generate a device aimed at executing new forms of control to be used over the populations in the four corners of the planet. About the crisis experienced in each of the social institutions, Deleuze (1992, p. 225) observes: "They are fragile examples, but they would allow us to better understand what is understood under the institutions' crisis, that is, the progressive and dispersed implementation of a new regime of domination." The technological apparatus that enables the emergence of new forms of control can already be found in a multitude of everyday situations. To maintain our focus on the most evident aspect of control, it is enough to point out the omnipresence of surveillance by cameras that are distributed throughout the social fabric, being operated by different instances of power, which dispenses with the use of any face-to-face strategy for monitoring (Nascimento & Justo, 2016).

It should be considered, however, that although the historical emergence of non-contact entails the consolidation of new forms of power, we do not find in Deleuze some kind of fatalism or resignation. On the contrary, he observes: "there is no need to fear or wait, but to seek new weapons" (Deleuze, 1992, p. 220). Such a statement evidences a crucial political problem for the contemporary reality: How to resist the budding modes of domination embedded in technological modernization and in the advent of non-contact? How to reverse, even on a microscopic scale, the implementation of a power regime that is based on these new living conditions?

Guattari, who maintained a permanent dialogue with Deleuze, sees a possible resistance to the seemingly inexorable movement of contemporary institutional transformations. If institutional disciplinary spaces were introduced in dysfunctionality if they no longer serve to support the ways of life of the present period, would it not be possible to generate other types of spaces appropriate to an also other sociability, to be invented as well? For the author, it is necessary to revert the isolation and solipsism that is gradually inscribed in the daily relations we experience today. Resistance, in turn, involves the reinvention of face-to-face sociabilities. The architecture of traditional institutions, now obsolete, summons us to:

[...] build giving chances to the virtual mutations that will lead the future generations to live, to feel and to think differently of today, in view of the immense modifications, in particular technological, that our age knows. The ideal would be to modify the programming of constructed spaces, due to the institutional and functional transformations the future holds for it (Guattari, 1992, p. 176).

The possible resistance, while necessary for the time in which we live, is intended to rescue the sociabilities in a reinvented institutional landscape that permits the emergence of new modes of expression of affectivity, whether inscribed in the presence or not. As the author (1997, p. 16) points out: "The point will be to literally reconstruct the set of modalities of being in a group. And not only for 'communicational' interventions but also for existential mutations."

In pointing out the need for reconstruction of group lifestyles as well as for the creation of new institutional spaces for coexistence, Guattari (1997), in a critical analysis of the contemporary, evidences the fact that the advent of non-presence had a severe impact on the sociability that was experienced in institutionalized spaces. The possibilities of an encounter between different subjects in daily life were diminished as a result of the ascent of non-contact, which can imply an affective impoverishment and contribute to isolation and solitude, in different forms, on a population scale (Fonseca, 2013).

From the analysis proposed by Guattari (1997), we can extract that resistance, as a political operation, consists of confronting the determinations of powers without, however, adopting a refractory position, of denying the changes that have occurred. The abrupt changes that capitalism impressed in the existence of all can be welcomed, reinventing at the same time sociability directed to the new modes of expressing affection.

### Final considerations

With a certain frequency, the contemporary capitalist reality is described as a period of steep transformations, which re-establish life in society in previously unknown conditions. It can be considered that, within social institutions, these descriptions are pertinent and indicate, at least partially, the complexity of the current historical time. The plurality of records of this nature also entails a certain amount of naturalization though, whereby what is extraordinary in the ruptures and transformations that take place in the social environment quickly becomes something ordinary, another change to which we need to adapt and for which we need to enroll in the process that we characterize as social conformation. On the other hand, historically thinking about the ways of life in a society that are asserting themselves, such as the prevalence of non-contact relations, necessarily means reversing this naturalization, rescuing and highlighting the extraordinary and complex condition that is the mark of the current era. In this condition, life in society will continue to be produced.

The historical approach is the minimum condition so that, amidst changing societies, we can identify the new modes of social coercion and normalization that, up to now, have been implemented in institutions in the face-to-face mode. These procedures surely will not cease to exist due to the emergence of non-contact relationships. Normalization and coercion, in the form of social conformation, may even become more effective in the unfolding scenario.

If, in the past, the social production of the docile, adequate, and submissive subject necessarily passed through the continuous and face-to-face intervention of parents, teachers and other agents of institutions, characterizing them as mediators of social functions, a new configuration takes shape in contemporary capitalist realities, in which the instances of power act by appealing directly to the individual, bypassing institutional mediation.

Two possible destinations remain for the social institutions: either they will be re-defined by the assignment of new strategic functions to control groups, or they will experience the agony of continued voiding (Deleuze, 1992). If this happens, it is because the existing powers no longer depend on institutions for the effective exercise of domination over populations, now considered as clusters of individuals.

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