

Social precariousness and exclusion during Covid-19: A psychoanalytic look

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze the issue of the psychological impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) in view of its incidence in a context of exclusion and social precariousness. We refer to subjective experiences of rupture of social and symbolic bonds that are related to different forms of belonging: economic, political, racial, and cultural. The threat that the pandemic represents and the ways of coping with it reveal central aspects of society nowadays, considering the singularity of its different layers. From a psychoanalytical point of view, stressing the articulation of subjectivity/social bond, we study the idea that the phenomenon of Covid-19 intensifies the processes of exclusion, already present in the contemporary social scene, with nefarious consequences for the psyche of subjects whose existence is marked by social invisibility. In the context of a situation of social insecurity, exacerbated by unprecedented economic, political, and health crisis, individuals face a daily struggle for survival, which can result in a traumatic experience of subjective urgency.

Keywords: exclusion, social precariousness, helplessness, indifference, pandemic

PRECARIEDADE SOCIAL E EXCLUSÃO EM TEMPOS DE COVID-19: UM OLHAR PSICANALÍTICO

Resumo

Neste artigo, é analisada a questão do impacto psicológico produzido pela *coronavirus disease 2019* (Covid-19) tendo em vista sua incidência num contexto de exclusão e precariedade social. Trata-se de experiências subjetivas de ruptura de laços sociais e simbólicos que são relativas a diferentes planos de pertencimento coletivo: econômico, político, racial e cultural. Os modos de enfrentamento e a própria ameaça que a pandemia representa são reveladores da sociedade atual considerando-se, particularmente, a singularidade de suas diferentes camadas. A partir de um referencial psicanalítico, com ênfase na articulação subjetividade/laço social, é explorada a ideia de que o fenômeno da Covid-19 produz efeitos de aprofundamento de processos de exclusão, já existentes na cena social contemporânea, com consequências nefastas para o psiquismo de sujeitos cuja existência é marcada pela invisibilidade social. Diante de uma crescente situação de desproteção, acirrada pela crise econômica, política e sanitária, o sujeito luta diariamente pela sobrevivência física, o que pode resultar em uma traumática situação de urgência subjetiva.

Palavras-chave: exclusão, precariedade social, desamparo, indiferença, pandemia

PRECARIEDAD SOCIAL Y EXCLUSIÓN EN TIEMPOS DE COVID-19: UNA MIRADA PSICOANALÍTICA

Resumen

En este artículo, analizamos el tema del impacto psicológico de la *coronavirus disease 2019* (Covid-19) en vista de su incidencia en un contexto de exclusión y precariedad social. Se trata de experiencias subjetivas de ruptura de vínculos sociales y simbólicos que se relacionan con diferentes planes de pertenencia colectiva: económico, político, racial y cultural. Las formas de enfrentamiento y la propia

amenaza que representa la pandemia revelan la sociedad actual, teniendo especialmente en cuenta la singularidad de sus diferentes estratos. Desde un punto de vista psicoanalítico, destacando la articulación subjetividad/vínculo social, exploramos la idea de que el fenómeno de Covid-19 produce efectos de profundización de los procesos de exclusión, ya existentes en la escena social contemporánea, con consecuencias nefastas para la psique de sujetos cuya existencia está marcada por la invisibilidad social. Ante una situación creciente de desprotección, agravada por la crisis económica, política y sanitaria, el sujeto enfrenta una lucha diaria por la supervivencia, lo que puede resultar en una experiencia traumática de urgencia subjetiva.

Palabras clave: exclusión, precariedad social, desamparo, indiferencia, pandemia

The aim of this article is to investigate the processes of exclusion and social precariousness in action in the setting of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic from the point of view of its psychological impact, pointing out that its structure tends to be, in a way, hidden under the horizon of a supposed new normality. It is important to emphasize that, given the plurality of situations of social exclusion, each one endowed with its particularities resulting from different social contexts and from the singularity of each subject's responses, this analysis will be limited to a psychoanalytic view of one of the issue's many aspects. We are particularly interested in interrogating the narcissistic and identity-related resonances in the psyche associated with the dimension of social belonging. This study will explore the possibility that feelings of social exclusion were sharpened in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus is, therefore, on the deterioration of social bonds, one of the multiple psychic impacts resulting from precarious experiences of social non-belonging.

We start from the hypothesis that the threat posed by the pandemic and the ways of coping with it reveal central aspects of Brazilian contemporary society. Following the spread of the virus, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued guidelines for social distancing that shifted the forms of sociability towards a remote setting, predominantly sustained through virtual interactions, thus, producing an increase in the work from home model. In spite of the rapid connections enabled by the technological advancements, making this a very different society from the one that faced the Spanish flu in 1918, the present society has paradoxically demonstrated vulnerabilities on the grounds of social bonds, expressed in a wide abyss between its social groups. As Santos (2020) states, a pandemic is not simply a biomedical phenomenon. Since the virus is transmitted through social interactions, its proliferation will not be aleatory but conditioned to specific social structures and organizations. While some social groups remain socially visible and integrated to support networks, living with dignity and freedom, others cannot even satisfy their most basic survival needs.

While the "new normal" has come to be used to refer to a different post-pandemic world, the new reality created by Covid-19 seems to emphasize already existing social gaps, leaving a growing number of individuals without access to public services that could guarantee their physical, psychological, and social needs. First, this analysis will examine the measures and discourses that emerged in response to the pandemic in order to point out what they reveal about the underlying dynamics of exclusion. We develop the idea that, far from inaugurating a new social structure, the phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic actually intensifies, under a new garment, already existing processes of exclusion in the contemporary scene.

In addition, this paper will focus on the psychological impacts, specifically the indifference and psychological vulnerability issues. The idea that social recognition of the other is a fundamental aspect of an individual's sense of dignity, mental health, and belonging is a key concept in the argument we develop in this paper. We will emphasize the role of

otherness in the subject's constitution, understanding primary dependency and helplessness as unavoidable aspects of the human condition. The purpose is to shed new light on how the threat posed by the virus recreates the very threat established by the understanding that the attachment to the other is a fundamental part of what composes the subject. Narcissism and violence are considered, acknowledging the importance of the individual's symbolic recognition in society and the effects of its lack.

Methodological considerations

Regarding its methodological aspects, our analysis has a fundamentally theoretical character. Although seeking to contemplate the intertwining elements between subjectivity and social bonds, the methodological model that guides this article is of a qualitative nature, effectively delimited in psychoanalytic theory. Due to the complexity of the theme, our analysis will dialogue with other discursive fields, which allows us to revisit some fundamental psychoanalytical concepts taking into account social, historical, and cultural aspects. We examine the dimensions of belonging in its articulation with the concept of narcissism, a psychoanalytic concept from which we analyze certain impasses placed in this important sphere of human subjectivity by broad, contextual, and environmental situations. The prevailing relationship of such analysis is the nature of a person's insertion in society, its quality and durability, having a fundamental impact on a person's self-image and psychic experience.

We analyze the relationship between social exclusion and the feeling of uncanniness, as described by Freud and later developed by contemporary psychoanalysts, in terms of a status subjectively assigned to a person according to his/her position in society. In critical situations – as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic –, this assigned stranger position tends to be exacerbated by other people's projection of their own experience of strangeness. When the stranger in us cannot be supported, it is often projected outside. The psychological impact brought about by the violent situation of Covid-19 is analyzed through these lenses, which constitute important theoretical tools in our study.

We consider the following three main theoretical dimensions of psychoanalysis fundamental in this study's approach: economic, topographical, and dynamic. We work with issues related to economic and psychic dynamics that represent the very locus of the social exclusion phenomenon. Finally, the subjectivity of an individual whose status is attributed by the projection of another's own personal experience of the uncanny is closely looked at in this analysis. The way these three dimensions affect each other is inherent to the psychoanalysis field's construction and evolution, and it represents the fundamental uniqueness of its method.

Moving beyond the metapsychological approach mentioned above, this study also considers the psychopathological aspects involved in the central issues being addressed, when psychoanalytic-psychopathology concepts are useful in understanding the phenomenon. It is worth pointing out as a methodological caution that psychopathological aspects were only

raised when they seemed necessary for our analysis, as we were careful not to enter theoretical fields that we are not sufficiently instrumented to use. This article contemplates the interface between psychic and sociocultural dimensions considering the articulation between subjectivity and social bonds. Individual issues are necessarily related to a specific historical context, directing our attention to the interface between individual psychology and group psychology.

Protection and exclusion

Arendt (1979), a noteworthy political thinker, remarks that the hallmark of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ratified in 1948, was followed by the emergence of “the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics” (p. 277), composed by millions of people who had lost their rights and could not regain them due to the new global political situation. We are particularly interested in Arendt’s developments on the paradox represented by the concept of human rights as she studied the situation of people considered *stateless*, during the interwar period in Europe. Human rights, considered inalienable, inherited by any human being, were being challenged by the dramatic situations of thousands of people displaced by the armed conflicts and that found themselves in a position of *outsiders*, without a homeland. Arendt (1979) observes that *stateless* seemed surprisingly enough incapable to assert their rights based on their human condition itself. She emphasizes, then, that the fundamental human right – to which other rights are conditioned – is that of belonging to a given political community, a condition, therefore, basic, and essential to assure human dignity. This scenario became considerably more severe and complex most recently, as neoliberal globalization policies increased, overflowing the borders of nation-states and increasingly prevailing in different societies worldwide.

Wacquant (2009) shows that the effects of neoliberal policies did not limit themselves to the economic sphere, revealing an underlying political project represented by the emergence of a government of social insecurity. With neoliberalism spreading through the globe, the nation-states gradually lost political power over economic decisions, which contributed to the emergence of a market-centered society in which only minimum protection against economic and social risks is given. As a result, the social insecurity is widely disseminated throughout society, leaving large groups of people on their own, not being able to rely on governmental institutions and increasing the expendability of those who do not produce or consume anything of value in the world market. In the face of the logic of “individual responsibility”, and within the imaginary of a supposedly equal society, the author argues that the individuals are held accountable for their own social condition of poverty and misery. If the author points out that neoliberalism is not limited to an economic project, it seems to us important to complement, as stated by Revault d’Allonnes (2010), that, beyond the sphere of the market, neoliberal policies re-signify the social narrative, affecting people’s behavior in relationship with others and themselves.

Inspired by the work of Castel, Carreteiro (2003) points out the emergence of new forms of exclusion that creates specific values within a social imaginary of *uselessness*: disqualification, failure, and isolation. Living at the margins of a new global market, these groups of people cannot or face difficulties in having access to major social institutions – such as education, safety, health, and work. Thus, it becomes hard to find zones of inclusion capable of creating meaning and promoting the feeling of belonging to the social organization. According to the author, the only form of sociability to which they have access is characterized by instability – *floating sociability*. The resulting precariousness of community ties critically limits the sense of belonging and worthiness, as well as access to basic human rights – an exclusion from legal protection that is no longer exclusive to the said “stateless”.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, tensions in contradictory narratives intensify: on the one hand, there are those people that appeal to the affirmation and preservation of life while, and, on the other, those who defend the end of the social distancing and protective guidelines and a quick return to “normal” life in order to halt the economic collapse. The Covid-19-related crisis triggers predictions on what a post-pandemic world will look like, with many people having the expectation that lessons will be learned by humanity and civilization with more solidarity will emerge. Birman (2020) proposes that the idea of a “new normal” attempts to define a discontinuity with the pre-pandemic world. Nonetheless, not only what was considered pre-pandemic normality did not constitute a dignified life for many, but also what appears as novelty and discontinuity conceals the continuity and intensification of social inequalities that were product of the market-oriented reform policies we had in the past.

According to data released by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2020), the jobless population in Brazil increased from 10,1 million in May 2020 to 12,9 million – an increase of 27.6%. Unemployment has a direct effect on food security, as demonstrated by the Brazilian Food and Nutrition Security Research Network (Rede Brasileira de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional [Rede Penssan], 2021). The data reported that the number of people living in serious food insecurity rose from 10,3 million, in 2018, to 19,1 million, in 2020. The Covid-19 Bulletin by Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz [Fiocruz], 2020), regarding the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro, clearly identifies the unequal way the virus is spreading in the city: neighborhoods with a high concentration of slums show a higher mortality rate (19,47%), about twice the number of those with no slums (9,23%). The same Bulletin also shows that the percentage of lethal Covid-19 victims is higher among black (48,2%) people than among white (31,12%).

These data exemplify the unequal impact of Covid-19 in the Brazilian society, intensifying already existing patterns of exclusion and racial discrimination resulting from governmental policies characterized by a higher emphasis on economic growth instead of human life (Birman, 2020). In the sight of the fundamental imbrications that exist between

subjectivity and the social-political scene, we believe that an analysis of the political management of minority groups must go beyond its material and practical dimensions. In this sense, we ask ourselves what do the policies targeted at managing the new forms of exclusion made worse in the Covid-19 context say about our social organization? What can they reveal about the way minority groups are perceived and addressed by governmental policies?

According to Preciado (2020), the way our community constructs its political sovereignty tells us what forms our plagues will take. In other words, a society's response to an epidemic will mirror the way the community organizes and defends itself in sociopolitical and cultural contexts. The author's argument relies on Roberto Esposito's analysis of the complex relationship between the political notion of community and the biomedical and epidemiological notion of immunity. Both terms share the root *munus*, which, in Latin, means the tribute that someone must pay to live within or to be a part of a community. A hierarchy is established between those who are privileged ("immune") and those who, deemed a threat, become the target of an "immunological reaction" by society, and are therefore excluded from the same protections offered to those within the community. (Preciado, 2020).

It is worth emphasizing the existence of a conjunction between protection and exclusion within which we see an expansion of measures of confinement in the dealing with Covid-19 taking different forms, from national borders to frontiers of any individual's home. The body, your individual body, as a life space and as a network of power, as a center of production and of energy consumption. As the author shows, the pandemic allows the extension of violent border politics that have been designed and tested on "others", such as migrants and refugees, to be applied to all individuals, now taking the form of containment measures and of a war against the virus. In this sense, the author affirms that the new necropolitical frontier has shifted from the coast of Greece toward the door of people's homes (Preciado, 2020).

The pandemic reveals that being a part of humanity requires meeting certain criteria. Government social distancing guidelines expose and cause the proliferation of the context of those that would be outside. The quarantine seems to only apply to a narrow group of individuals, which have the privilege to stay home and follow the social distance recommendations. The protection boundaries end up becoming ambiguous, coinciding with their opposite, in the sense that they actually leave many lives unprotected.

According to Revault d'Allonnes (2010), wanting to get rid of the heterogeneous in order to make the subjects governable is nothing less than an attempt to re-substantialize society and the democratic man, who is divided and plural, therefore, ungovernable. The author denounces the idea of *control* and *uniformity* immersed in the neoliberal agenda, which implies interim measures of eliminating and getting rid of what does not belong. The problem, in accordance with the author, is that the idea of democracy encompasses elements of diversity, plurality, and indeterminacy. The author proposes that a totalitarian ghost of an undivided society, transparent

to itself and ruled by the regime of the One, has always haunted the modern and contemporary democracy. The regime of the One seems to be the basis of management policies that make the difference a threat to be confronted on the behalf of the community as a whole. Revault d'Allonnes (2010) points out that the intention should be to dissolve an irreducible aspect of democracy, the one that precisely links it to its opposition: a common space that must not be anything other but a space of doubt, conflict, and unpredictable invention.

The reflections addressed above enable us to look deeper into the aggravated phenomenon of exclusion, worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic in society nowadays, resulting in a growing population of individuals and groups who fall outside the protection of any organized community structure. The logic of immunity becomes a logic of homogenization, either through the affirmation of individual or national identities or the affirmation of a global identity. In Arendt's (1979) denunciation of a "One World", a completely organized society in which the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity, we find the acknowledgment of this structure that is, paradoxically, exclusive/inclusive. The author reminds us that during the interwar years, policies tried to manage the stateless and the minorities by determining that only people of the same national origin could enjoy the protection of legal institutions, while others needed a specific exception law, which granted them some warranties until they could be integrated into their assigned communities. Such policies were referred to as a "painless and humane method of assimilation" (Arendt, 1979, p. 272).

Made invisible by a universal humanism, the excluding dynamics continued to operate and, strained by the Covid-19 pandemic, are revisited under the perspective of a supposed new normal. The concept of universal humanism seems to coincide, to some extent, with the processes of social exclusion to which it was intended to oppose. In its concealed face, universal humanism hides an identity strategy that aims at abolishing the differences and the multiplicity of the social arena and creating a sole and dominant human model. The same logic of social protection ruled by the values of humanism and the universality of human rights creates and, at the same time, conceals an excluding structure that produces an irreconcilable excess.

Violence, helplessness, and indifference

In the pandemic phenomenon, the setting up of measures that aggressively expurgate more and more individuals to the margins of society precisely reaffirms a protection system that benefits only a small portion of society. Those measures protect the individuals who belong to the civilized world, whose lives and rights are preserved, at the same time that neglect others, whose tragic fates are kept at a safe distance and disregarded. It is through these processes in which different values are attributed to lives in a society that important psychological impacts operate upon individuals. Indifference and social precariousness are important notions to address the issue of determining factors underlying states of psychological vulnerability and conditions that may result from it.

The protection of human beings has been diminished, induced by the confrontation of economic, environmental, political, and health crises, related to the flare-up of Covid-19, which has also threatened the foundations of the social contract. Granemann (2020) and Praun (2020) show, in their research, that the sharpening of social inequality due to the measures undertaken during the pandemic – such as working from home, online schooling, and delivery services –, in addition to the cutback of public social services and unemployment increase, allowed for a higher rate of infection and social-economic impact of the virus over certain groups of people. While *Forbes* (Calais, 2021) announces an increase in the number of billionaires in Brazil from 45, in 2020, to 65 people, in 2021, there is an increase of 44% (19.1 million Brazilians) experiencing hunger (Rede Penssan, 2021). As the social institutions fail to guarantee the necessary basic human physical, psychological, and social needs, we see the radicalization of the bipartition between us and them.

The dynamic composition of the duality us as opposed to them could be analyzed in the light of what Freud (1921/1964, 1930/1961) stated in terms of the *narcissism of minor differences*. Through this notion, considering the weight that the dimension of otherness has in subjective life, Freud (1921/1964) describes a readiness for hatred that would be in the “undisguised antipathies and aversions which people feel towards strangers with whom they have to do” (p. 102). Such readiness for hatred is related to the expression of self-love (Freud, 1921/1964, p. 102), situating the problem precisely in the articulation between narcissism and violence.

The social phenomena contain, in a latent state, the hallmark of the psychic ambivalence, in a way that “it is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (Freud, 1930/1961, p. 114). Freud’s (1930/1961) perspective reminds us of the difficulty that human beings face in renouncing their inclination to aggression, in such a way that “the advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing this instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised” (p. 114). The author continues by pointing out that it constitutes “a convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression, by means of which cohesion between the members of the community is made easier” (Freud, 1930/1961, p. 114). This dynamic fosters isolation under the affirmation of one given identity and the rejection of the others in the name of forged differences.

The hostility towards these strangers ensures harmonic and stable relationships within the groups and within individuals themselves, free from the conflicts of ambivalence, as hatred can be exteriorized against others, outlining the contours of a previously invisible and unassignable threat. Furthermore, Freud’s (1919/1968) thought-provoking notion of *uncanny* – the idea that there is always something familiar secretly hidden within what we experience as *unsettling*, *strange*, or *unknown* – constitutes a very rich tool when trying to understand hate

and discrimination towards minority groups, as developments in psychoanalytical research have shown. According to Freud, the uncanny is not new or in any way foreign, but a result of an operation of exclusion that leaves its tracks in the feeling of uneasiness that emerges from it. In being unable to recognize the stranger in us, feelings of uneasiness are projected outwards in the direction of others, to whom aggression is justified by a broad narrative that does not compromise my place within society.

Freud's reflections shed light to our understanding of the processes of belonging and exclusion of a group inspiring further studies and much-needed theoretical developments in this prominent phenomenon. Kaës (2018) supports our understanding when he states that it is from new contemporary investigations in addition to the expansion of psychoanalytic clinical methods beyond the traditional setting that the theorization of the phenomena of social bonds and group dynamics was made possible. The author explores the issue of cultural diversity by showing how the psychic's development involves the assimilation of what is foreign and unfamiliar in the narcissistic space. What he calls cultural affirmation is a consequence of the simultaneous recognition of us and what is perceived as different.

Stephanatos (2013) develops this idea by pointing out that hatred has a dual function: rejecting what is foreign to someone and closing oneself off, allowing, therefore, social groups to be formed. However, both tendencies create negative consequences as they represent transforming the small differences into identifiable traits of hatred. Thus, if, on one hand, social institutions can offer identifying references to specific groups of people, providing them with a sense of belonging, they can also become echo chambers, closing these groups of people to alternative beliefs and lifestyles. Minor differences become major ones and overcome the commonalities, setting the foundations for the feelings of strangeness and hostility between individuals and collectives, affirming at the same time internal unity in a radical way at the expense of creating many other divisions.

We would like to emphasize the fictional character of immune unity, which can only be sustained through the exclusion and concealment of *the remainder*. Only then, we can go beyond an essentialist conception about what defines identity, which seems to us a fundamental contribution of psychoanalytic knowledge. Otherness is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject, which takes individuals out of their sovereign position of master in their own home, exposing the undeniable condition of dependence and exposure to the other, which constitutes the inescapable state of helplessness. In this sense, helplessness opens an ethical-political dimension in which are expressed, on the one hand, the issue of the fundamental dependence of the human being, and, on the other, the imperative sensitization of the ones to whom the human beings manifest their pleas for help. Butler (2004) supports this idea arguing that "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (p. 20). The author believes that this primary vulnerability has

consequences that pertain to the sphere of politics and its implicit ethical dimension, constituting an important aspect of the subjectivity that can have meaningful repercussions on how society organizes itself.

In “Civilization and its discontents”, Freud (1930/1961) elucidates that such a condition of primary vulnerability – which constitutes the psychoanalytic notion of helplessness – will be present precisely in the collective effort to compensate it through mediations permeated by social institutions. For the author, the protection that comes from this dynamic works as a fundamental counterpart to what is implied as a loss in the narcissistic field inherently to the constitution of social bonds. The decisive step of civilization in that case lies in the replacement of the power of the individual with the power of a community. The members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, in a way that there can be an assurance that a law once in force will not be broken in favor of an individual.

In our contemporary reality, however, what we see – especially since the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic – is the fact that social systems privilege some individuals while others are unprotected and often in a situation of complete social helplessness. They are definitely deprived of the benefits of institutional resources that constitute the social life, such as health, education, housing, work, and security (Rosa, 2002). Rosa (2002) shows that what is now in question is the foundational rupture of the social contract, as there is a social organization that coexists with the transgression of elementary rules, abuse, and generalized corruption, as well as the fostering, for many, of the exclusion of access to goods and means of proper enjoyment of the neoliberal economic model. We want to stress that even if the situation of helplessness is insurmountable and common to the human condition, it is not evenly present in the social fabric, leading to greater or lesser levels of exposition to violence and abuse. In this sense, it is important to note another dimension in that bipartition *us versus them*, related to the process that resulted in others.

For the identity of us to be able to affirm itself in an immune way, it is necessary that an other sustains it. In the same direction, Ayouch (2019) will appropriately call on the mechanism of projective identification he believes is present in the constitution of a minority group treated as an other. He points out that these others only form a group because of the exclusion they suffer, which homogenizes them, assigning them negative traits and, consequently, defining the identity of the majority group (Ayouch, 2019). The minority groups would not arise from a common identity, but from discrimination that sets up a category and confers to it a different homogenous identity (Ayouch, 2019).

To some extent, being the other corresponds to a loss of assurance of one’s humanity, of their human rights. For a better understanding of the underlying logic of the phenomena of exclusion and unequal recognition of the value of human lives, Butler (2004) proposes the following analysis. For Butler, the recognition of life comes from the acknowledgement that death is the universal condition of precariousness that every living being shares. Through

the recognition of the vulnerability of the bodies – of all bodies –, the author proposes to vindicate an attitude from an ethical perspective, allowing us to broaden the understanding of this debate.

Social recognition is a key concept in Butler's work, as she points out how a person's position in society affects their possibility of being recognized for their vulnerability. By highlighting the fact that humanization depends on the recognition of a person's vulnerability, the author affirms that this process takes place differently throughout society. Butler emphasizes that, at the most intimate levels, we are social beings, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us. Society elects certain attributes to what it considers human, making it easier for certain individuals to be recognized, as opposed to others who do not fit the established framework. We agree with Butler that bringing the concept of social vulnerability to the center of the discussion around the humanization process and its impact on an affective level is of fundamental importance.

Indifference is only understood from a certain interpretative framework, which operates "by tacitly differentiating between those populations on whom my life and existence depend, and those populations who represent a direct threat to my life and existence" (Butler, 2009, p. 42). Lives are supported and maintained differently, and some will not even qualify as *grievable*, as they do not fit in the dominant framework of what is considered human. They suffer a process of dehumanization and once they do not meet certain normative standards of what is culturally recognized as human, they are not even considered lives, they become expendable.

These propositions are in line with Sontag (2004) when she points out how the images of suffering and death of those familiar to us and those considered foreign to us tend to be treated. As an illustration of this fact, the author affirms that the most explicit representations of war, including mutilated and wounded bodies, are usually of groups of people more likely to be identified as strangers or foreigners, while with individuals closer to home, the photographers tend to be more discreet. In her words: "this is a dignity not thought necessary to accord to others. The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying" (Sontag, 2004, p. 70). Those images direct us to a double bind: they reveal unfair suffering to be healed, at the same time that they normalize it as "the sort of thing which happens in that place" (Sontag, 2004, p. 71).

In times of pandemic, considering people's tendency to break the rules of social distancing and the reopenings that occur in the midst of an alarming public health crisis, it seems to us that society is inclined to sacrifice certain lives and ensure protection to others, as its "affective" response takes on remarkable tones of indifference. The impasses faced by the model of social isolation can be associated with the weakness of collective strategies and the difficulty in recognizing the other as human.

Precariousness and invisibility in pandemic: Psychological impacts

The invisibility and indifference with which the others are treated and the standardizing of such a state of affairs in the face of the development of a global health crisis imposed by Covid-19 produce remarkable psychological impact. The silencing and the embarrassment of a representation based on inferiority leave certain subjects exposed to severe forms of violence and deprivation of their human rights. The groups of people whose humanity is not recognized can be exposed to a situation of intensified precariousness and exclusion, in which their appeal to the other is often neglected and seemingly invisible. We refer to those who are seen “as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics” (Butler, 2009, p. 31).

In relation to these situations of social precariousness, Furtos (2011) help us understand that, although psychic precariousness is inherent to the human condition, there is an undeniable correlation between social precariousness and psychic precariousness. The situation of the so-called normal psychic precariousness – whose origin comes from the state of human helplessness – should be distinguished from the intensified precariousness, very common nowadays, as suggested since the beginning of this article.

In contrast to the term vulnerability, which comes from the word *vulnus* in Latin, i.e., wound, lesion, unrelated to the dimension of otherness, precariousness (from the Latin *precari*) means something “obtained through demand” (Furtos, 2011). Therefore, in the term precariousness, the dimension of otherness is implied, highlighting the dimension of request, demand, incidentally fundamental to the reflection we propose here. Being the primal role of otherness effectively recognized, we see how important it is to affirm the place of the subject as belonging to the community and, therefore, the inauspicious effects of not acknowledging this place and how it can engender a severe impact on the quality of psychic life of every individual.

Furtos (2011) adds that when this acknowledgment is not exerted in a satisfactory way, in many cases, it tends to compromise the constitution of the feeling of confidence in a triple dimension: confidence in the presence of the other in times of need; confidence in oneself as a valuable human being; and confidence in the future, as one believes that they will be looked after and protected by social and cultural ties. Furtos’s work in the context of social precariousness has the relevance of taking into account the relationship between individual suffering and social *locus*, pointing out that the loss of confidence in social ties and the dissolution of future perspectives can lead the subject to a lack of motivation, apathy, and an existence marked by uncertainty, temporal urgency, and isolation.

This sense of urgency is closely related to one’s capacity to articulate past, present, and future: mobilizing present actions, building future projections and new meaning to past events – which are inescapably linked to collective narratives. Referring to this process, Bezerra (2005) informs of a widespread feeling of crisis in which the subject lives in permanent

alarm, in which we seem condemned to do in life little more than a discreet performance in a play whose script is imposed on us all and whose main narrative escapes us. Consequently, the subject tends to get lost precisely in what distinguishes the condition of subject and object, alienating themselves in the field of sense and history, which can unfold into the axis of passivity and immobility. Rosa (2015) argues that we are not in the face of a neurotic distress or a psychological escapism, but a condition closely associated with the feeling of the *uncanny*, in which individuals find it difficult to situate themselves. This produces important effects on the person's own subjective understanding of themselves and their position in society.

Life on the borderline of survival and existence can have a psychological impact of variable severity, as Furtos (2011) stressed, able to engender even a kind of invalidation in which subjects find themselves hindered to have access to their own pain. The discomfort can be expressed in various ways – bitterness, aggression, psychosomatic diseases, acute stress –, obstructing the capacity to act, think, speak, love, and situate oneself in its family and community lineage, as well as in its contextual environment. Such psychological picture can lead to self-exclusion, when the excluded subject converts suffering into acting, in order to avoid their own suffering and alienation. The possibility of demand violently fails in these instances, to the point of being refused by the subject who, through the mechanism of inversion of passivity into activity, attacks the social bond.

The condition of psychic precariousness closely relates to the possibilities of recognition and belonging to the community, and it has crucial effects on the social bonds and on the dimension of historicity. Bezerra (2005) clarifies that, associated with the radical quality of the contemporary processes of exclusion, we follow a process of emptying the dimension of historicity. The author recalls the experience of losing hope in the future as a possible horizon, which may be a more prevalent experience in times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before this symbolic discard to which these subjects are submitted, Bezerra (2005) considers a possible loss of the subject's power to yearn for the future. Therefore, the possibilities of mobilization of the psychic and social aspects are compromised, and, according to the author, they would only be renewed if individuals were able to establish collective agreements aiming at achieving common objectives, as much as investing in the present the promises of the future.

Final considerations

We indicate in this study that, far from establishing a new conformation of the social structure and social bonds, the current phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic deepens processes of exclusion already present in our contemporary society. Furthermore, we show how damaging these psychological effects are on minority groups and individuals considered outcasts. In search of exploring the nature of the impact of non-belonging in the human psychic, we revisited the frontiers of what is considered human, trying to expose the underlying

dynamic that produces the other and the relationship between us and them. This seems to us to be an essential contribution of the psychoanalytic field to the understanding of the formation and maintenance of social bonds insofar as it recognizes the intertwining between narcissism and violence in the composition of the arrangements and breakdowns that constitute them.

Our analysis was situated precisely on this axis, providing new perspectives to the understanding of strangeness, precariousness, and indifference in the phenomenon of social exclusion. Neglected groups of people often deal with rejection, silence, and indifference from the others, a situation of extreme precariousness, with no one to help them and fulfill their needs. As for the movements of political resistance undertaken by these groups, we did not intend to elaborate on it in the present study, as it was not part of its methodological delimitation and focus, but we suggest further studies on this subject.

We emphasize that helplessness and the presence of the other in the subject's constitution – key notions of psychoanalysis – are essential concepts to the understanding of the deterioration of social belonging. Thus, the role of otherness in the individual's subjective constitution and its effects on maintaining social bonds and a sense of belonging contribute to advances towards an understanding of identity that does not fall within an essentialist view. The identity construction itself implies the presence of the other. Who we are depends very much on how we are recognized and embraced by others. The Covid-19 pandemic represents a threat with which we were already confronted – the threat of the other – accompanied by a narrative of immunization against human misery that is always on the verge of invasion. The confrontation with Covid-19 and the emergence of a supposed new normality reveals the utopia of an immune community, a utopia that conceals a structure of exclusion and generation of an irreconcilable excess of those considered expendable.

We hope to offer some contribution, from a psychoanalytic perspective, to enlighten the hypothesis that the new normal repeats and aggravates familiar ways of exclusion in our societies. We emphasize the challenge represented by economic, racial, sexual, and socially produced inequalities, which attribute disparate values to human beings in society, and the psychological impacts produced by the worsening of these processes in times of Covid-19. As stated before, such a complex theme requires an interdisciplinary approach, to which we hope this article will be a significant contribution. It is our intention to expand possibilities of thinking and acting toward a more fraternal and tolerant society, in accordance with Preciado's (2020) precise statement that our health will not come from the imposition of borders or separation, but from a new understanding of community with all living creatures, a new balance with other beings on the planet.

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