

To face up to hazing and violence in universities: what more is needed?

We begin with shortcomings, and we must state outright that we are under no illusion that we can fill this hole with what we intend to discuss here, or that everything will settle into long-lasting unbreakable order after this filling has been set forth. We merely aspire to indicate possibilities that perhaps have not been tried out yet. This is just a desire, but with a strong conviction that there is no full objective, but that the shortcoming favors the condition of making desires possible.

According to Lacan, shortcomings are central to psychoanalysis¹, in its task of unveiling desires. Thus, this allows us to be bold and undertake the conceptual studies that are necessary in order to correlate the shortcoming with a concept that is a novel objective. This is very ambitious, because novel objectives do not exist, but rather, are announced as hopes.

Recently, the topic of hazing and violence within the academic setting reemerged strongly, after some medical students at the University of São Paulo (USP) broke their silence to make the medical school's malaise public. There was an outcry from society and a parliamentary commission of inquiry (CPI) was even set up in the state of São Paulo's legislative assembly to investigate these complaints of human rights violations that had occurred in this state's higher education institutions, through hazing, parties and day-to-day academic life.

The professional councils cried out about the breakage of the codes of ethics of the professions implicated in this violence. Heads of academic departments had made little movement towards avoiding that such acts might occur again within their territories (or at least towards avoiding leaks). Academia announced some initiatives towards formation of research groups, and the printed and digital media was inundated with reports and testimonies expressing surprise, protests and disbelief that the events had really taken place, especially in relation to careers in which the mission is to care for people.

Despite all this movement, we raise the hypothesis that although this violence is going to diminish in intensity initially, it will flare up again over time, as the headlines fade away and the force of tradition lights up again.

According to Paulo Freire, activism only occurs through adopting practical actions. If interventions in problems that need to be faced consist only of theory, this would be verbalism. Moreover, Freire reminds us that possibly no praxis, i.e. no powerful device combining practice and theory with creative efficacy to modify the reality, has yet been produced.

The root of the problem has to be sought out and crushed. We have to take up the challenge of reflecting about which analysis categories have been put into play, and whether these have dealt with the issue of hazing and violence within the university environment in a sufficiently radical manner.

As our starting point, we will take the debate published by this periodical in August 1999, in which there was a series of articles dealing with hazing in universities^(a). This was an edition full of meaning, because six months before its publication, the medical student Edison Tsung Chi Hsueh, aged 22 years, had died during hazing at the medical school of USP (FMUSP).

In total, there are ten texts, written by three physicians who were university professors, two medical students, one educationalist, one psychologist, one anthropologist and two philosophers who debated the reference text of a teacher and an academic at FMUSP². This last text made an analysis on the death of this student and qualified it as "a lamentable accident". In our view, this was a hurried

^(a) See: Interface (Botucatu). 1999; 3(5):111-62.

conclusion that does not contribute towards making a more radical analysis of what occurred. On the contrary, it draws us away from this objective and directs our gaze towards chance.

The imperative of taking an interdisciplinary approach towards this subject emerges as the first message from this collection of articles. Particularly among the authors who were physicians³⁻⁵, it transpires from the debate that there is antagonism regarding the perception of what hazing is, raised by the “necessary” respect for traditions and hierarchies. There are those who “do not hate” hazing, set against those who “abominate” it, alongside the “sly critters”. Eradication versus control, including through using a statement adapted from free and informed consent, also marks out this antagonism. Some authors have attributed this lack of control and violence to external social, political and cultural determinants^{6,7}. Only a few of those debating this issue have turned their gaze towards the interior of the teaching institution: (1) when there was mention of “suggestive vectors” in the mechanisms for hazing and violence, as indicative of the formation of “initiation fraternities” with their own “tribal codes”⁸; or (2) when the precariousness of academic training is analyzed, with regard to dealing with human suffering and as a result from “the pain of dealing with extraneous pain when “we are dehumanized in order to tolerate the extreme of the human condition”⁹.

From what was found by the CPI regarding violations of human rights in universities in the state of São Paulo^(b), it was proven that the universities had a hidden face¹⁰, which had deep roots in the medical courses. Through the complaints gathered together from the main medical schools of São Paulo, it was noted that there was a recurrent paradigm: a culture in which violence and torture gained space as a way of demonstrating “affection” and “love” for the institution in sports competitions and as an instrument for forming fraternities for promoting professional advantages.

This reality, according to the complaints to the CPI, forms a dialogue with another, even more disturbing reality: the perverse machismo of these institutions. The numbers involved not only speak out regarding the lower female representation among university leaderships and professional gender inequality, but also relate to a frighteningly large number of cases of sexual violence within day-to-day academic life. Furthermore, in the light of the commonplace manner in which violence occurs within student culture, all the victims emphasized this aspect in their testimonies, i.e. that they were held to be at fault for the violence perpetrated against them. Thus, repression and fear were imposed on the victim, and not on the aggressors^(c).

Even after the CPI, episodes continued to fill the media, with cases of excuses for rape, racism and hazing at university parties. This demonstrates the cultural resistance even when faced with the political pressure from the state legislative assembly and the legal pressure from the state attorney’s office, in which the perpetrators’ defense on social networks was that such behavior was harmless and only frightened people because it was placed “out of context”, as if certain situations relativized the meaning of their actions, in the perpetrators’ view.

The most evident common factor among all the cases of violence is that they had remained secret for all these years. In this regard, it can be understood why the main defense was always that each episode was an “isolated case” and that the complaints, when critical, were “generalizations”. In this manner, the part would not denounce the whole and thus the public image of the universities and of the professionals trained at these institutions would be preserved.

On the other hand, the witnesses at the CPI unanimously described their initiatives as “breaking the cycle of silence”. Their testimonies always emphasized

^(b) See: Final Report of the CPI on violations of human rights at universities in the state of São Paulo. [accessed 2015 Maio 19]. Available from: <http://www.al.sp.gov.br/repositorio/arquivoWeb/com/com3092.pdf>

^(c) See: <http://educacao.uol.com.br/noticias/2014/08/19/aluna-da-usp-fui-convencida-de-que-nao-devia-denunciar-o-estupro-que-sofri.htm> e <http://g1.globo.com/sp/ribeirao-preto-franca/noticia/2015/02/vitima-de-estupro-na-usp-diz-sofrer-preconceito-apos-denunciar-caso.html> and <http://g1.globo.com/sp/ribeirao-preto-franca/noticia/2015/02/vitima-de-estupro-na-usp-diz-sofrer-preconceito-apos-denunciar-caso.html> [accessed 2015 May 19].

the risk and the threats that they might suffer institutionally through exposing the innermost realities of the university. These expositions, always accompanied by a voluminous set of proof, showed that these cases were in no way isolated cases, and that the reactions to the complaints within the universities were even standardized. After the exposition, these witnesses were rigorously ostracized, threatened professionally, questioned and held to blame for their own suffering. The word consent echoed through this as a common and brutal means of silencing the victims of both hazing and sexual violence.

It is certain that the true players in this reality do not comprise the entire student body but, rather, the majority of their leaders and an important group of professors who produce their circle of influence.

The relationship between violence and professional advantage has already been much studied in relation to hazing¹¹, but never specifically in relation to medical courses and to rape culture. The archeology of the fraternities, their identification and the mechanisms that make it advantageous for this culture of violence to exist still remain hidden.

Interest in studying the hidden curriculum of medical schools has been aroused among researchers. Oriol¹² called the influence of the hidden culture a "process of professional acculturation" and Castro¹³ highlighted nine premises of this influence. These have been studies showing the role of the hidden curriculum on physicians' training, such that they have low empathy¹⁴ and are tolerant towards anti-ethical behavior¹⁵. In this regard, it can perhaps be noted that the hidden curriculum places physicians outside of the ideals of medicine and positions them as subjects traversed by aspects of social subjectivity.

Nonetheless, knowing how to reduce the mechanisms that lead to silencing remains a major question with regard to combating oppression within the university environment. What are the instruments that give rise to threats within universities? What is the standard path towards oppression that victims follow, after exposing their case and seeking justice? What role does institutional abandonment have in the formation of corporate groups?

Finally, in-depth knowledge of the hidden curriculum of medical schools and of the relationship between this curriculum and the profile of our professionals is important in relation to producing political proposals for university transformation. What is the relationship between professional corporations and university fraternities? What is the role of universities' hidden curriculum in relation to the production of the corporations? What is the relationship between violence in universities, their isolation from society and their evident elitism?

The era in which this subject is considered to be secondary and in which these observations are treated as mere "generalizations" needs to end. The opinion of those who pose the problem finally needs to be properly valued. Universities are places that eminently need to preserve their plurality and the possibility of questioning and complaining in relation to their own realities. However, it can be seen that today, within universities' hegemony, they do indeed possess the corporate qualities of being combative towards questioning and placing value on standardized behavior. This is classification, rather than generalization. Starting from identifying this, and in view of how the hidden and structuring physiology functions, elucidation becomes urgently necessary so that universities cease to be places of "you must" and really become places of transformation, freedom, ethics and social commitment.

Our "novel objective", which we want to announce with the hope that we might be able to "crush the roots", would consist of putting a hermeneutic perspective onto the research agenda relating to this topic, so as to look

inside teaching institutions. We would wish to provoke “tensions, surprise and resistance”¹⁶, through stimulating production of narratives¹⁷ by teachers and students that challenge the reign of fear that is imposed by “fraternities” of power disguised under the cloak of tradition. We would wish to break the cycle of silence and thus reveal interfaces between hazing/violence and professional corporatism and its logic of hierarchies and production of power networks, which are fed over the duration of the course and in the job market by a hidden curriculum acting as a “tribal code”.

We began and will end with shortcomings. What is still needed? Something that is missing is bound to be absent, in that this thing that is missing is what sustains the very process of continuing to ask “what is still needed?”. The story is repeated because we suppose that we are able to construct the outlines of what is missing and fill the gap starting from an idea or objective that will fit into and fill this structural hole. Nonetheless, something continues to be absent. In the case of violence, what is missing is sublimation, which would be a way of obtaining satisfaction through means that are more “noble or civilized”, guided by paternal law that imposes language as the main mediation of what is precipitated from reality.

What is missing? A objective that does not exist is what is missing. The paradox indicates that what shortcomings feed is the perspective of full satisfaction and consequently their own end.

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