Variations of the Self: The Continuity of Life after Contact with Violent Death

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Por meio de um trabalho de campo com pessoas assistidas por um núcleo que oferece apoio a parentes de vítimas de trânsito; policiais militares afastados do trabalho nas ruas devido a problemas físicos e psicológicos; e pessoas que se tornaram cadeirantes devido a acidentes, e agora treinam em um projeto voltado ao esporte, analisa-se suas lembranças de dor e a pujança dessas na efetivação de ações presentes. **Variações do self: A continuidade da vida após o contato com a morte violenta** discute como essas pessoas lidam com mudanças em seus "esquemas de relevância", suas relações com terceiros, ambientes e objetos, o que indica profundas mudanças em si mesmas após o (e devido ao) contato com a morte. Destaco como as distintas concepções de self são geridas pelos estudados na tentativa de dar coerência a si mesmos e de estabilizar suas emoções.
Palavras-chave: memória, self, violência, pragmatismo, efetivação

Based on field research with a support group for relatives of road traffic victims; military police officers withdrawn from working on the streets due to physical and/or psychological problems; and people forced to become wheelchair users following accidents and now training in a sports-related project, the article analyses these actors' memories of pain and the impact of these recollections on their everyday activities in the present. It discusses how these people have coped with changes in their 'schemes of relevance,' their relationships with third parties, environments, and objects, which point to profound changes in themselves after (and due to) encounters with death. I highlight how distinct conceptions of self are managed by these interlocutors to give coherence to their sense of self and to stabilize their emotions.
Keywords: memory, self, violence, pragmatism, effectuation

Introduction[1]

Joana's[2] only daughter was run over on one of Rio de Janeiro's main avenues in 2011. She died at the scene of the accident. Joana was a single mother and had supported her daughter and her own mother. She says that she lived for them. All the activities, plans and affects that made up her everyday life were torn apart forever by the event. After the death of her beloved child, she became 'another person,' she says: fretful, struggling to avoid 'falling into depression,' coping with the memories of her daughter and the accident, while also suffering changes to her body, such as some of her teeth suddenly falling out. Joana says that she only regained a degree of 'equilibrium' after frequenting a support group: she did not forget or smother her experience but instead turned it into a source of motivation for raising public awareness about traffic dangers and helping other mothers going through similar experiences. From being a single mother and worker, she was transformed, first into the 'living-dead' and now into a 'fighter' or 'warrior' (*guerreira*).

The circulation of memories (as a set of images, affects and emotions) of those left in the wake of an 'extreme experience' (POLLAK, 1990; TALONE, 2020, 2022a) influences how they comprehend themselves as the same person over time. Here I analyse the specific actuation of memories in terms of the variation felt by subjects in their own selves,[3] based on research with three different groups: 1) people whose loved ones (children, spouses, parents) were fatal victims of traffic accidents in Rio, assisted by the Traffic Victims Support Unit (Navi) of the Rio de Janeiro State Traffic Department (Detran-RJ); 2) military police officers transferred to administrative work—inside the military police battalions—following extremely tense and dangerous experiences; and 3) civilians and police officers who suffered serious accidents, now wheelchair users and athletes trained by the Rebirth, Serve and Protect Project (Renascer), which operates from the Praças Training and Improvement Centre (CFAP) run by the Military Police of Rio de Janeiro State (PMERJ).

People who have lived through 'extreme experiences' strive to maintain the continuity of their own selves (POLLAK, 1990; LEMIEUX, 2008)—an idea of the self as a minimally coherent whole that, although confronting setbacks of varying degrees, endures over their lifetime. The phenomena explored in the present research centre on a context of intense uncertainties/changes/violence rather than one of stability and critical moments—in the sense of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1999,2020[1991])—in which a critique takes place. When I speak of 'extreme experience' in this article, therefore, I am referring to lived experiences (mutually non-hierarchical) of more severe and/or painful violations of the flow of experiences then those taken as 'normal'—or at least as non-ideal but acceptable in everyday life.

In both support groups and among the MPs transferred to administrative functions, we encounter people with one experience in common: all of them lived through situations involving *concrete contact with death* (TALONE, 2020, 2022b)—either directly or indirectly—caused by third parties, whether in the context of what is more commonly known as 'urban violence,' involving signs like exchanges of gunfire, physical attacks and stray bullets (MACHADO DA SILVA, 1993; MISSE, 1999; PORTO, 1999), or so-called 'road violence' (RUSSO, 2012), which encompasses collisions involving pedestrians and/or vehicles on urban roads. The image-recollection of these accidents (the body of someone lifeless, the trip to hospital, blood stains), the sensations of fear or numbness that characterize them, the subsequent emotions of sadness and anger, among other elements, all come to mark the day-to-day activities of these persons, emerging suddenly and/or in recollection exercises in support groups. For the people themselves, they are evidence of changes in self.

Through complex reconstructions and reconstitutions, memory involves processes of choice (not necessarily conscious, reflexive, or rational) that make it partial and selective (HALBWACHS, 1990[1925]; POLLAK, 1989, 1992). The distinct/stored elements are relevant to

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

support a present interpretation of lived situations: remembering is essential to what is happening currently, forming part of every action (CASEY, 2000). In this research, I explore the articulated set of memories and their different *actants*[4] (objects, sounds, persons, the unfolding of events, and so on), current experiences succeeding each other from moment to moment, while affects and emotions lived in a past unfold in parallel with the outlining of plans for a future action and the sustaining of the present action. I have called this set of elements and their actuation an *actantial memory* (TALONE, 2020, 2022b).[5]

Here, then, I seek to advance our understanding of the cognitive-affective elements that contribute to the present actions of actors and that stretch their 'notions of self,' setting out from experienced situations of injury, tension and death, and the *observation of the effects* (PEIRCE, 1998; JAMES, 1907) generated by them. The people depicted here reported having to face the 'worst moments of their lives,' whether because they lost loved ones (who gave meaning to their existence, as many of the Navi participants remarked), or because their bodies were abruptly altered (the former police officers and civilians who became paraplegic or quadriplegic after an armed confrontation or accident), or because they suffered recurrently from nightmares and were suddenly gripped by anxiety and fear following events where their own death or someone else's was a possibility, to cite a few examples. This provokes alterations in their selves and in all their relations with the outside world—the topic of the first section of this article in which I mobilize the idea of a 'biographical situation' (SCHÜTZ, 2012) accompanying memory.

The recuperation of memories allows us to trace the operations of an actor who had contact with death to maintain their sense of self over the course of life, whether by seeking to stabilize their history or by modifying it, imbuing it with new meaning, silencing it, narrating it, among many other possibilities—the topic explored in the second section. A pragmatist analysis on extreme experiences (like those presented here) makes evident how difficult it can be to maintain the continuity and coherence of the self (CORRÊA, 2021). I show how people's *mnemonic devices* act in different situations and the qualifications in which they result, affecting, altering and/or reformulating their selves.

The article's overall objective is to offer ways for us to think about selves (their distinct variations and compositions) without making it necessary to determine a primacy of the phenomena involved in their constitution—whether we understand the continuous sense of self as something developed from our emergence from the forms in which we are biologically constituted and our interaction with the external environment (ARCHER, 2000, 2003), or we consider that a human being is not just a physical object but a social self "reflected in the mind by a world of personal impressions" (COOLEY, 2017[1922], p. 178). What matters here is comprehending the self through the effectuation of observable actions and understanding how

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

these become possible (PEIRCE, 1998; JAMES, 1907; WERNECK, 2014a). I demonstrate how, according to my research interlocutors themselves, a management of memory is necessary to continue living after experiencing contact with death.

Fieldwork was undertaken as a *grounded theory* (GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967) through participant observation (BECKER, 1993), informal conversations and *comprehensive interviews* (KAUFMANN, 2013) with the different groups cited.[6] It comprised an empirical study involving three distinct groupings of persons in a *symmetrical* analysis (LATOUR and WOOLGAR, 1997, pp. 23-24), focused on the lived experiences and memories of situations involving injury, tension and violent death caused by *another*, whose consequence was contact with the death of someone close and/or with the possibility of the person's own death.

Variations of the self in post-proximity to death

It has been observed for a long time that a person, over the course of their life, is constituted by different and varying conceptions of their own self.[7] The capacity of human agency is itself intimately related to the orderings and processes of the self (EMIRBAYER and MISCHE 1998). In this section, I examine the effects of the alterations of self in a person's life after contact(s) with death caused by third parties—as corroborated and characterised as something central by themselves.

In the Navi and Renascer support groups, an effort is made—on the part of both the coordinators and the assisted persons themselves—to steer towards notions of self that provide a distance from the 'demotivated,' 'depressive,' 'apathetic' or 'zombie' self without forcing any forgetting or silencing of the pain experienced. These variations of the self are corroborated through the potentialities of action or through how certain situations are defined in the present, in stark dissonance with the effectuations of action prior to the extreme experience: the military police officer (MP) 'by vocation' can no longer work in the streets or in high-intensity operations; women become the mothers of victims[8] or mourners; former MPs or civilians are now wheelchair uses and/or paralympic athletes—to cite some more concrete examples.

By sketching plans for the future and seeking to alter their affective tonalities (CORRÊA, 2021), however, people seek to change themselves. Memory amounts to an *inexhaustible source* (BERGSON, 1999[1939]) for someone to reshape their response to particular situations and interpret their own competencies at any given moment, enabling the person to conceive new horizons. Although this section analyses the points in common between the analysed groups in a symmetrical form, below I discuss each separately in order to delineate my argument more clearly.

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

The women supported by Navi

Marcela, whose 11-year-old son died after being run over close to their home, became unable to frequent certain places or perform activities that were previously part of her day-to-day life. She felt a different person after his death. Very often she had to 'force' a form of being herself no longer present: "[*The church friends*] see a great force in me. (...) [*But*] I wanted to stay at home sleeping, in bed. I couldn't even think about church activities. But they ask for me and I go."

During the group activities, Marcela liked to joke with the other women, who seemed to appreciate it, and she was the same at the church, she said, wanting to "liven up the place," leading the way in songs and prayers, making jokes and organizing events. After the loss of her son, this form of being sometimes tires her, weighing on her day-to-day life, because her "head [*became*] bad," making her lose some of her energy and interest for a series of tasks. Added to these changes are the alterations in her body, as she describes them, with a different skin quality and an irregular menstrual cycle. As a result, she can no longer reconcile herself with her old habits (present through remembrances). Her sleep pattern altered completely, for example, leaving her feeling tired all day: "*And I'm not like that*, it doesn't suit me." For her, being tired and inert in a situation is proof of her change. A dimension of *demotivated self* (analytic term) is recognized in the aftermath of her son's death. A notion of her self that sees herself only as an ex-mother. Navi's psychologists try to work on this in individual sessions or in group conversations, making the supported women develop an *engaged self*, a 'fighter,' who still thinks of herself as a mother—although they all recognise a not always controllable fluctuation of interpretations of the self.

Soon after her daughter's death, Joana, embroiled in a lawsuit against the young man who had ran her over, became even more embittered, she says, when she found herself unable to speak to the judge appointed to her case—something she had previously thought possible. Subsequently, she claims to have battled enormously to cease being an 'anguished person' filled with a desire for justice/vengeance. To shift from a demotivated self to an engaged self, she says, "you have to think of the good moments you lived with your daughter, your son, that mother of yours, that father." The selection of 'good memories,' deliberately picked out, whose consubstantial sensations[9] complemented the desire to change her own present ability to act, marks the search for a non-anguished self. In the wake of the accident, Joana entered a very 'negative' state that she fights hard to avoid reproducing, something that depends on context: "I don't like [*being*] depressed, I don't like [*being*] down, I always try to fight against it... It's the day of her death, the anniversary of her death, that really upsets me most." As James (1890) affirms, the immediate family is also part of a person: "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. When they die, a part of our very selves is gone"

(JAMES, 1890, p. 292). At certain moments, as other mothers relate, Joana turned into a 'zombie,' the 'living-dead,' and frequented therapy sessions to work on her affects and emotions and on how she behaved in diverse situations.

Cláudia relates her transformations primarily through alimentation, observing that she spent more than three years surviving on a diet of just water, bread and biscuits. Joana and Claudia both remark on the loss of parts of themselves, altering their own selves, leading the two women to the demotivated self of the *ex-mother*.[10] As well as ceasing to eat properly, Cláudia says that she became apathetic, "faraway, deaf, blind": "When I stopped in the world, I stopped for everything. My life stopped for everything, everything. I stopped for everything. I don't cook, the only thing I do is wash my clothes." She credits her 'evolution' to the support group, since "the pieces of the jigsaw are fitting back into place" with the new activities—she described herself as all jumbled, mixed up, in the three years following her son's death. Today, Claudia recognises and describes other changes compared to how she was before he was killed. She claims to have been "born again for life." This is how she described the process:

> — Everyone says to me: "[*Cláudia*] if you're sad, then your son will be sad. Wasn't your son happy? Wasn't he playful? He wants to see you well, then. He wants to see you happy." So I said to the psychologist: "I think my son must be very happy now wherever he is." He must have been sad because he wasn't seeing me eat, he wasn't seeing me walk about. But now he is seeing me walking about. He can see. He must be seeing me. He sees me walking about and eating properly, right? I think he's very happy. (...) *I'm very happy now. I think I'm becoming a new creature, you know?* And from here on, I want to be different. *I don't want to be how I am any longer.* I want to be different from now on. I've already put it into my head that I want to be different. (...) I just know that today I am a new creature. And I can tell you: I'm happy that I started eating again, you know? I feel that I'm happy, I know that a lot of people are happy. (...) *So, I'm changing. It's a process.*

The Navi founder, a woman who lost her mother and daughter in the same accident, says that she worries for people "who spend their whole life mulling their loss," turning to the living-dead, zombies. Claudia says that she herself was stuck in this state for some time, forever detached and numb. Going by the descriptions of the women interviewed, the zombie self is analogous to a demotivated self (here I employ these analytic categories as equivalents). 'Zombies' are people stuck in a phase of mourning a rupture with the past and the feeling of loss and disorientation.

The self as a whole—since the people concerned recognise continuities of the self over time—becomes marked by such experiences.[11] Thinking of the self in terms of memory (actantial memory, as defined earlier) allows us to comprehend how human beings understand themselves as a continuous self over their life span, but who presents variations and confronts setbacks, and who perceives alterations in their competences when no longer able to realize certain actions due to the affective tonalities marking them at that moment. People continue to be themselves in the sense that they recognize the humans, non-humans, affects, and emotions shared by and

perennially relevant to their present and past lives. Nonetheless, they identify changes caused by their definitions of a situation[12], now marked by the memory of 'something bad.' This differs from changes in the definition of situations caused by, for example, maturity, the accumulation of more knowledge, or moving locality (such as from one country to another). The alteration caused by the person's concrete proximity with violent death marks a painful limitation, at least at first, in relation to past potentialities.

Paul Ricœur (2004, p. 81) differentiates two main uses of the concept of *identity*: identity as *sameness* (RICŒUR, 2004) and identity as *ipseity* (*ipse*). 'Sameness' expresses the identity achieved through substantive constancy over time, while 'ipseity' implies an identity constructed by the temporalization of the self (a shifting core of the personality that presents a certain self-maintenance). The *idem* translates the individual as a neutral entity while the *ipse* manifests a person's presence-to-self (CORREIA, 2000). Ricœur privileges the latter notion, paying attention to the meaning of identity contained in the idea of permanence in (*despite*) time, referring to continuity or to something that can be localised through temporality.[13] Memory in the way I have analysed it, through image-recollections, affects and emotions, stretching the present definitions of a situation, enables an examination of the variations of identity 'despite time.' In the case of this study, this occurs through situations of injury, tension and death in which alterations are perceived but there is an observable attempt to maintain a coherent self.

The military police

In the PMERJ, changes are observed by the military police officers (MPs) when they are no longer able to perform *plenos* or 'fully,' as they say—the MPs interviewed were *praças*, 'troopers,' a category that encompasses the lowest ranks of the military police. Their role in the organisation is reassigned and they present harmful effects in their off-duty behaviours. One of the BPM officers in the study told me about the operations involving dangerous situations in which "nothing upsets you" but how it is difficult to emerge from this state afterwards: the concentration and fear that act in your favour at a given moment become burdens for the other parts of your life. The MP is 'transformed.' This can become an inner conflict for the MPs themselves since they harbour the idea of being police by *vocation,*[14] that is, of being people born to be police or who naturally developed the skills needed to 'do police work' (MUNIZ, 1999; PONCIONI, 2021), but who, in the face of certain situations, are no longer able to exercise this role and the actions involved.

For Weber (2004), *vocation* refers to a task entrusted to someone by an entity and the disposition to respond to a 'calling' that must be recognised by each one. The definitions provided by the MPs themselves bear close similarity to Weber's reading, as we can see in various

affirmations: "I was born for this"; "I always had the aptitude"; "I have a nose [*for this*]." They describe these characteristics as though they were innate to their selves. Or at least they were until they experienced extreme situations, since even the police self, vocational, 'alters': "These are people who handle it. It's our vocation, right? But anyone who says it doesn't mess with you is lying. It does. Your body, your gaze, it changes," remarks one MP on the changes in himself compared to the start of his career. His colleague put it as follows:

> — Many times, the guy who goes out unprepared might even imagine that he knows [*what dangerous situations are like*]. But when he confronts [*them*] for real, then he'll flip, he'll mess up, he'll be discharged. A new kid. Even *cascudos* [*experienced officers*] can get put on leave by a psychologist. Exchanging fire, putting your life on the line, isn't something you ever get used to. [But] we go everyday, it's our *vocation*, it's my profession, I'm here to protect citizens.

This shock between being a police officer as a vocation and no longer being able to work on patrol disconcerts the MPs, who perceive changes in the core of their being: these include stress tremors, cardiac arrhythmia, feelings of nervousness, muscular pains, fear of wearing a police uniform in public and so on. Similar to the 'police officer by vocation' is the idea of the 'police machine.' This modality of MP involves not allowing oneself to be shaken by anything, always willing to confront danger and 'serve society'—it is, in this sense, the complete realization of this ideal vocation. The MP self as a machine relates to an idea the MPs have of themselves about the beginning of their careers or an idea of how high-ranking officers and civilians perceive them. This 'police machine' is, therefore, someone who attains the extreme, the limit 'of their nerves,' suffering physical and above all emotional consequences (MIRANDA, 2016).

One MP, Eduardo, describes these characteristics in detail. In his view, what motivates MPs to continue in their career—even after experiencing situations of proximity to death—is the vocation. As he explains, in moments of danger, those "without [*a vocation*] run. (…). But [*for those with a vocation*] something happens, you see it, doing nothing is impossible, you know? At least it's impossible for a real police officer. (…). *So, it seems like it runs in the blood.*" However, these selves can put themselves in extreme situations, altering their own affective tonality: "The police officer isn't a machine, he can't operate 100% on the alert all the time, otherwise the pressure cooker explodes. This causes health issues that alter the person." To this are added the personal characteristics shared by the police machines, who think of themselves as superheroes (MUNIZ, 1999; ROCHA, 2013), unshakable,[15] serious, and who, therefore, refuse any psychological help. Eduardo argues: "Because there's that thing of 'I'm a police officer' (...), 'I'm not weak,' 'I don't cry,' and it's a lie. We cry, we feel pain, we feel scared, you know? Like anyone else in any other profession."

Psychological/emotional problems, those leading an officer to be evaluated as Aptitude B or C,[16] for example, mark the breakdown of this MP as a machine acting by vocation; it is the moment of a new comprehension of the self marked by limits in terms of one's own action and in terms of situations safely effected in the past, due to an alteration of 'nerves.' The MPs, like the women supported by Navi, administrate these changes in the course of their everyday lives, seeking minimally to effectuate actions and situations like before—sometimes with the intent of concealing their states of mourning/breakdown from others.

As Muniz (1999) and Rocha (2013) show, it is normal for police officers to fear becoming and/or being identified as 'crazy' within the organisation—the fate of some of those evaluated as Aptitude C. The MPs studied here also talk about 'crazy' colleagues, seeking to disentangle themselves from any association with these *loucos* (madmen) as they describe them. The desk officers, who try to avoid wearing uniforms on the streets and becoming involved in dangerous activities, perceive the 'crazy' officers as completely 'dysfunctional,' lacking a permit to carry firearms and incapable of relating even minimally with anyone else. This comprises a more extreme alteration of the self than the kind experienced by them, although they recognise differences in their own selves after situations of injury, tension, and death. The *crazy MP self* is thus the potentialization of the physically or emotionally *destabilized MP self*.

In her doctoral thesis, the psychologist Letícia Rocha (2013) analysed a MP who once thought of himself as a 'tiger' but became a 'kitten.'[17] This was a change observed by himself after a situation involving an imminent risk to life, which altered his self both as a police officer and as a civilian (in comparisons with recollections of 'potentialities' now in the past):

> At the entrance to the firm where I worked as a security guard and after I'd returned from withdrawing the staff pay from the bank, I was ambushed with a gun to my face, but it misfired, so I wrestled with the guy. I managed to run behind the vehicle; when I went to draw my gun, I saw that it had fallen where I'd been wrestling with him; then he fired another shot, with my own gun, and I clearly saw that yellow light, the fire that emerges from the muzzle, beautiful, dazzlingly gorgeous when it's on the other side; when it's pointing towards us, it's not in the least beautiful or gorgeous. So I ran to the corner, I returned and I went to the station to register the incident. I spent ages recollecting, flashes and more flashes kept coming back into my head. A colleague took me home and I drank. I sat in the corner bar and got blind drunk to try and forget because everything came back very clearly, it was difficult. This time I felt it a lot, I felt impotent. The impotence came at the moment I was ambushed, the impotence came after I followed the work norms; I took cover before drawing my firearm, and then I saw my gun had fallen out, I felt impotent twice over. The moment I had to react; my gun was lying there on the ground. (…) The next day, I realized that I had not turned up for work that night, so I went to the battalion, shaken up, startled, scared. I met [*a colleague*] who, seeing me so nervous, asked what was up. When I told him, he asked whether I didn't want to talk to the psychologist and I ended up here with you because she straight away made an appointment for the next day. (...) *You sent me to the psychiatrist immediately, there they gave me 15 days medical leave, and it was renewed and renewed and renewed; after that they classified me as Aptitude category C – that is, psychiatric, crazy* (ROCHA, 2013, p. 106, my italics)

This police officer's entire history of fearless and intense actions became a depiction of the characteristics of a past self. Although he carries memories of his 'normal' days and wishes for an affective tonality like that of the time when he patrolled the streets, he now feels insecure in diverse situations and has even become Aptitude C—he went from the MP machine self to the crazy MP self and lives with memories and lived experiences of both.

A clearer understanding of this self that varies according to the actuation of its actantial memory can be gleaned from exploring Schütz's concept of *biographical situation*. According to the author:

> Man finds himself at any moment of his daily life in a biographically determined situation, that is, in a physical and socio-cultural environment as defined by him, within which he has his position, not merely his position in terms of physical space and outer time or of his status and role within the social system but also his moral and ideological position. To say that this definition of the situation is biographically determined means to say that it has its history; it is the sedimentation of all of man's previous experiences, organized in the habitual possessions of his stock of knowledge. at hand, and as such his unique possession, given to him and to him alone This biographically determined situation includes certain possibilities of future practical or theoretical activities which shall be briefly called the 'purpose at hand.' It is this purpose at hand which defines those elements among all the others contained in such a situation which are relevant for this purpose. This system of relevances in turn determines what elements have to be made a substratum of generalizing typification, what traits of these have to be selected as characteristically typical and what others as unique and individual… (SCHÜTZ, 1953, p. 6).

For the purposes of my own research, it was more appropriate to focus on actantial memory than the 'stock of knowledge,' since the former involves sudden image-recollections, affects and emotions not necessarily 'at hand' or habitually available to the person. What interests me here, though, is thinking about how the variation of selves, revealed in the definition of a situation or in the distinct form in which they are effectuated in relation to past, can be enriched by the idea of the biographical situation. This implies the notion of a variable being ('despite time')—albeit with a constant comprehension of self—in terms of the *schemas of relevance* at any given moment. For a destabilized MP self, going to work meant taking the bus/train/car and travelling through the city to the BPM. Now, after experiencing tensions, it has become a period of time in which the person is exposed and death is a concrete possibility. A stranger's belt buckle, visible under his shirt, once simply part of his clothing, is now potentially a concealed weapon. As Schütz (1945, 2012) observed, the past 'I' is merely a partial aspect of the whole realized in the on-going experience; new 'relevances' (new 'attention to life') take shape through the new experiences and memories, directing the definitions of any given situation.

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

Renascer's wheelchair athletes

In the case of the people supported by Renascer, the change in self is conduced by the substantive alteration of their bodies, which now require mediation by objects or third parties, since functions previously under their control are no longer managed autonomously (or at least, compared to before). Based on her own experience, the project coordinator observes:

> — [*The*] paraplegic doesn't just have a problem walking; they also have urinary problems, infections, that's the most common issue. Being unable to do a number 1, a number 2, obtain an erection, sores that spread. Many come here and want to talk about this [*in the conversation groups*]. Because the person can't control this aspect, the most immediate effects on their body. The person thinks: 'there's nothing more for me to do here [*in the world*],' 'I won't be able to do anything.' So the person ends up not wanting to do anything, unable even to control their own body. They wake up having wet or soiled the bed, they feel [*sexually insecure*].

The participants commonly describe feeling apathetic or suffering from these profound changes in their body and, consequently, in their relations with others and in performing diverse kinds of activities. Fred, a former MP who was shot and today is a paralympic medallist, claims to be the same person when he thinks about the time before and after his injury, yet he is also a 'rebooted person': the body is rediscovered, its new limitations and possibilities, which changes the person's motivations and life objectives. As he says: the "[*post-accident*] moment is really one of deep emptiness. It's an overnight deconstruction. (…) He [*the wheelchair user*] no longer does what he used to do, he's no longer the same person, he doesn't have the same relations he had before, everything changes after that kind of accident." There is the old self, possessing the physical capacities prior to the injury; the demotivated self, focused on wanting to be like before, marked by fear or apathy (someone who avoids venturing outside, who does not perform activities); and the *resilient self*, who sees a "light at the end of the tunnel with their peers" and seeks out new activities.

Stimulated by Renascer, these selves look to alter the affective tonality of their memories and no longer be bound by recollections predating the accident. The demotivated self would take the term 'wheelchair user' negatively and feel ashamed; the resilient self assumes this label with pride, sometimes including a self-recognition as an athlete. A transition between different selves is always possible over the course of the activities and situations experienced during a single day, but one of them becomes more constant than the others (a process applicable to any of the groups studied): the environment and its relevances, as emphasized by the person, appear to limit the emergence of certain selves (JAMES, 1890).

Some of the athletes from Renascer initially disliked practicing sports or performing any physical activities. But following the insistence or concern of their families and/or the efforts of the

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

Renascer coordinators themselves—worried about the possibilities of depression or even suicide of the demotivated selves—they became engaged in diverse activities. The coordinator speaks about wheelchair users before and after accepting their own condition: while refusing to admit the change, they remain in deep suffering; after assuming their status as wheelchair users, they come to give new meanings to things and acquire a new power to act. Fred, for example, as a resilient self, reformed his house, built a swimming pool, made the entire environment accessible and likes to receive visitors. *Resilience*, as communicated by the coordinators and athletes, is taken to be fundamentally positive for the person's autonomy and self-esteem. It is through contact with others, observing people in similar or worse situations, and through the attainment of a series of objectives previously imagined to be 'impossible,' that the resilient self is reached.

Lucas, a former safe deposit security guard shot while working, says he is now a paralympic athlete. When demotivated after the injury, he just stayed at home in bed on his computer all day, 'always stressed,' and entirely dependent on others. Now he is autonomous and independent thanks to sport. After he was first injured, he sought to stay at home out of shame; he changed only after joining Renascer:

> — If you don't adapt to yourself, it's over. Nobody has to adapt to you, you have to adapt to you. If you stay like that: "I'm ashamed to do this," "I'm ashamed to do that," brother, you'll stay at home for the rest of your life [*with*] your health deteriorating. [*By adapting to yourself*] you'll look at people normally. In the past, people looked at me and I lowered my head. Today I lift my head. I don't owe anybody anything (...). We change.

Lucas describes how on arriving at Renascer he discovered another world where he learnt new possibilities for action and life objectives, self changing (physically and emotionally) in relation to his new condition:

> — I weighed a lot... I didn't fit in this wheelchair. I didn't fit in this wheelchair. I was very fat. After my health improved, my self-esteem improved. I couldn't pick up anything on the ground; today I can. I spent all my time lying in bed. On the computer. I ate lying down, I drank lying down. I couldn't urinate alone. I needed help with everything. Today I drive around in the car on my own, I go out in my wheelchair on my own (...). Because stuff I didn't do before, I do today. I couldn't brush my teeth alone, man. I needed help. I couldn't move my arms. Today I do everything. (...) Hey, man, life didn't end.

Melissa, another athlete from the project, was run over and the accident injured her upper spinal cord. She became infected with the human T-lymphotropic virus (HTLV), a rare disease, and ended up in a wheelchair. She was the group member who most expounded on the *stigmatized self*, in which there is a crystallization of the identity projected by others in relation to the injury or the wheelchair. This involves the labelling (WERNECK, 2014b) of a recognizable trait presented by a self to an observer who interprets the self in negative/reduced form because

of this attribute (GOFFMAN, 2008). It is a relationship possible solely because this element of recognition (here, the wheelchair) defines the expectation of the person and their other attributes, an index prompting third parties to interpret something in such a form (that is, to select this meaning to be apprehended among various other possible meanings). As Goffman (2008) emphasised, the discrediting effect is considerable and constitutes a discrepancy between the *virtual social identity* (imagined by the other in the interaction) and the *effective identity* (demonstrated in the defined situation)—hence, a discrepancy between the selves contained in the same person. This becomes concrete principally in the building where Melissa lives:

> — Man, the building administrator called me defective. 'Defective,' man? That's what hurts us most, the way others look at us. And the worse thing, you won't believe: we discovered his wife is disabled. When I learnt that, I wanted to collapse on the floor and cry. If he is like that with me, imagine with her. People say she doesn't like wheelchairs, she's ashamed, she think's it's giving up. (...) So, the guy must think that's life. That's how it is. If she doesn't want a wheelchair, then I'm lazy. I've already heard that too. It's laziness, my lack of willpower. Even more so because of my type of injury. (...) I've [*also*] heard people say: 'Wow, she's crippled'; 'She's half a woman'; 'How does she satisfy her husband?' I've heard it. I've heard it. Right? Because it's really bad, as though I was half a person. Hang on, I'm a complete person. Okay, so some parts don't function properly, but I'm a complete woman like any other. It's normal. But they don't look at me normally; they have a look of pity.

One of the precautions taken by Melissa and her family is to defend themselves from offences, to stand up to the stigma employed by others, avoiding a situation that leads her to assume a demotivated self, sometimes, with a "desire to abandon everything." For James (1890), a person has as many social selves as they are individuals who recognise the person and possess an image of them in their mind: "To wound any one of these his images is to wound him" (JAMES, 1890, p. 294). In this sense, although it took her some time to accept herself, Melissa identifies 'being a wheelchair user' as the least of her concerns, since the human being who offends her[18] destimulates her: "The person sees the wheelchair uses, the disabled person, like it was a disease. It's not a disease." The person feels the discrepancy between the selves experienced and those indicated by others, which becomes part of their image-recollections, altering their emotions/affects and their current expectations.

Despite these experiences, Melissa wants greater autonomy, assuming the wheelchair as part of her own body, her self: "The wheelchair is also my body, so I really don't like people touching it. It's like they're touching me. (...) Yes, it's an extension of me." Finally, Melissa says that becoming a wheelchair user allowed her to do new things: she recalls that in the past she only ever worked, her husband went four years without taking a holiday, which they do now ("we enjoy life"). She also says that she has won over significant people in her life who previously did not 'get along' with her, like her mother-in-law; as a result, she says, she has gained another family, always there for her and helping her.

Variation of the self and memory

As Pollak (1990) emphasizes, extreme experiences lead actors to seek out elementary forms of adjusting subjectively and in relation to other people and environments. Certain changes that affect people are uncommonly brutal and radical, requiring huge effort from them to avoid the complete annihilation of their selves under the pressure of contradictory internal tensions. In the present research, I locate a *trial* (LEMIEUX, 2008), a moment in which human beings, their respective statuses and qualifications, their mutual relations and the social order itself are all profoundly transformed.[19]

The communication of accounts and their comparison (within the support groups or among colleagues, family and so on) enables an elaboration of what is now 'normal/healthy'—the stabilization of their demotivated selves, for example—by the research subjects themselves, allowing them to "[*feel*] and be at peace with the world (or more precisely with this or that group of belonging). This is how the individual, through a work of identification, makes their own sense of self, their identity, coincide with what is socially considered normal" (POLLAK, 2010, pp. 45-46).

Through Navi's work, many of the supported women cease to see themselves as ex-mothers or the living-dead, something effectuated in their difficulties in performing certain activities and through the emergence of certain reminiscences, and become mothers of victims instead—a label assumed even by those who have not lost children. The women become engaged selves, whose meaning, filling their everyday actions, is linked to raising awareness about traffic safety, remembering the loved one with joy, providing support to people in mourning, among other possibilities. The assisted women say that an accident can snatch away 'how we are,' something that can be transformed in actions like the 'mother of victims'—a long-term process with highs and lows.

At Renascer, the demotivated selves seek to transform themselves, for example, into athletes— or at least into contented wheelchair users. The objective is to put aside remembrances and affective tonalities characterizing the shame of having no movement in the lower limbs and to confront those who characterize and diminish them with stigmas ('crippled,' for example) since these people contribute to the feeling of sadness and suffering. An athlete is someone with the strength to carry on with life, challenging themselves and attaining their objectives. For their part, the MPs on active duty, the police officer by vocation, sometimes the police machine, find themselves destabilized, 'haunted' by memories of danger that affect their immediate activities—sometimes, according to colleagues in the organisation, making them similar to the 'mad man' or the 'coward'—forcing them to administrate their affective tonalities in an attempt to remain constant in their form of being.

The recollection of situations involving danger, extreme tension and proximity to death float through the minds of those studied by means of a variety of actants: uniform; wheelchair; the dead

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

person's clothes; sudden feelings; intense physical changes; loud noises; sadness or anger in response to religion, among various other possibilities and combinations. The circulation of these actants affects immediate lived experience in certain situations, leading the people concerned to conclude that they have undergone changes, in the sense of no longer being the same self. Although Joana has a solid idea of herself, at least due to the memories-habits that constitute her and the reminiscences effected at each moment with the actants relevant in her life, she reveals that she is different today, something is 'missing.' Her 'sensation-of-self' is other; her current 'biographical situation' and her schemas of relevance have changed. This may act in her mind or not, depending on the context experienced, indicating a 'total self,' but one that oscillates, composed of diverse possible selves 'generated' in specific situations. Memory, in its role of defining a situation, identifies and constitutes this alteration and its dominant element(s), something under the constant management of the actors after their contact with extreme experiences.

Extreme experiences highlight the difficulty of maintaining the continuity and coherence of the self, whether that of an individual or a group (POLLAK, 1990). Just like social order, mental order is the outcome of a permanent work of management consisting of interpreting, ordering or repressing (temporarily or definitively) "every lived experience in a way that accounts for it coherently with the person's past experiences, as well as with the conceptions of self and of the world that they shaped: in the name of the future, it is about integrating the present in the past" (POLLAK, 1990, p. 258). Stabilizing the self means stabilizing relations with other selves (present, at least, in recollections), with other people and with the environment. The stability of 'identity' depends on an environment capable of providing the person in question with "references that allow them to anticipate reality and act [adequately] as a consequence" (POLLAK, 1990, p. 261).

As we have seen in the work of the groups studied here, the present-current self (or selves) is also a source of creativity and innovation, exercising powers of transformation. The potential future selves are those that will assume the position of the agent 'I' (PEIRCE, quoted in CHALARI, 2009). As I have shown here, new selves suddenly or urgently demand space when someone deals with situations after a moment of intense rupture, perceiving the changes in their own self and seeking to adapt both to them and the environment or to change the latter.[20]

In view of my field research and the *substantive and formal theories* (GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967) presented, I think it is unnecessary for us to approach the 'social reference' as a preamble to the constitution of a total self. Such a construction is central, for example, to important studies such as those of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934). For the former, the social reference takes the form of the self's imagining of how it appears in a particular mind, meaning that the *social self* can be referred to as a *looking-glass self*. For Mead (1912), selves are social objects, related "to that peculiar conduct which may be termed social conduct" (p. 402). For the

author, the form of an object must be encountered first and foremost in the experience of other selves, since reflexive consciousness takes the social situation as its precondition (MEAD, 1909). The mechanism of introspection is itself given in the social attitude that human beings assume in relation to their self. The self corresponds to a social process: it is the organised community or social group (the 'generalized other') that offers the individual its unity of self.[21]

Archer (2003), by contrast, posits subjectivity as a personal inner property that possesses a subjective first-person ontology with causally effective powers in relation to itself and society. Hence, "our continuous sense of self, or self-consciousness, emerges from our practical activity in the world" (ARCHER, 2000, p. 3). Our 'inner conversations` are the process of mediation through which agents respond to social forms, something genuinely interior.

However, Archer recognises that we do not realize our personal identities under circumstance of our own choosing, since the continuous sense of self is developed through 1) the forms in which we are biologically constituted; 2) the way the world is; and 3) the need to interact with the external environment: the self is emergent and relational (between the body, nature and practice) and possesses inner freedom (CHALARI, 2009). Nonetheless, Archer asserts that the bodily practices of human beings in the world are more powerful than their social relations for the emergence of selfhood (the continuous sense of self). This sense is embedded, he argues, in our eidetic memories (images) and incorporated into our procedural memories (knowhow).

Based on the empirical work analysed over the course of this article, I propose that inner conversations, the looking-glass self, image recollections, affective tonalities, procedural memory, performance vis-à-vis third parties and the generalized other can be read as some of the forms in which new selves are awoken, created and/or stabilized, observable in how memory acts to define a situation. Hence, they constitute actants acting in people's minds, revealing to them the continuities and discontinuities of their own identities—permanences and alterations demanded or corroborated by the 'relevances' that take shape in a lived moment, in a biographical situation. In this way, we can comprehend the (continuous) effects of situations of injury, tension, and death on direct and indirect victims, affecting their lives at multiple scales, without falling into the trap of stipulating a genealogical or ontological order to the emergence of selves.

Final remarks

Considering the apparatus of the actantial reminiscences (activated through testimonies, accounts, reinterpretations of narratives and physical/affective demonstrations) of people who experienced a concrete encounter with death, I think we need to bracket off essentialist notions

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

of trauma and the incorporation of dispositions (BOURDIEU, 2002) and/or fluid identities (BAUMAN, 2001) to explore the possibilities of the continuity of the self—in the case of this study, an 'injured' self—over and 'despite' time. This does not imply, however, conceiving the 'self' as a metaphysical substance or entity (EMIRBAYER and MISCHE 1998) like the 'soul,' but as a biographical, actantial and relational framework [*arcabouço*] of the beings. The total self and the different selves that compose it are managed through an administration of the elements of memory, as Pollak (1990) already showed.

The elements of memory—how they act in each situation, in which the people in question become subject to qualifications—affect, alter and/or reformulate a person's self. But here we are not talking about an identity that is forever altering, since people may revert to feeling how they were before or even always maintain a stable notion of self, facing only 'setbacks' over the course of life. It is necessary to localize the 'biographical situations' (SCHÜTZ, 2012) of those studied, actantially tensioned by their recollections and the conditions, contexts and situations of their lives in the present.

The different selves are continuously shaped by the memory of each, by reminiscences that emerge (spontaneously or actively in group conversations, for example), by how they make people feel, by the bodily effect produced, among other elements. The actions of the women supported by Navi, the athletes of Renascer and the desk officers are based on accumulations of experience that are continually being actualized in the living present. We are not dealing with people in a fixed state of mourning or permanent suffering (i.e. 'traumatized'). The states/qualifications (the changing selves, though composing a minimally stable notion of self) vary according to the situation in which people find themselves and the cognitive-affective elements of their activated memories. In this way, I think, we can comprehend and provide richer accounts of the long-lasting effects of 'extreme experiences.'

Notas

[2] To protect their identities, the names of all my research interlocutors have been changed. The precise identity of the Rio de Janeiro State Military Police Battalion (BPM-PMERJ) could not be revealed at the request of the PMERJ as a condition for approval of my research, conducted between 2017 and 2018.

[3] It should be noted that the term *self* is also used in the Portuguese version of this research, since 1) it has been widely employed in social psychology and sociology (MEAD, 1934; COOLEY, 1902; GOFFMAN, 2008[1963]; STRAUSS, 1999; ARCHER, 2003; PORTO, 2017; PORTO and WERNECK, 2021); and 2) the Portuguese language lacks a term that covers all the meanings of the English word. *Eu* (I), *mim* (me), *eu mesmo* (I myself) and *identidade* (identity), for example, are imprecise and/or fail to substantially communicate the meanings expressed in the scientific discussions concerned. It is both

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

necessary and sociologically more productive to adopt the term in English. More specifically in terms of the relevance of the above bibliography for the research, it is worth mentioning that the self—as conceived by James and Mead, for example—is a unit of semiotic individuation composed, in turn, by other units. In this sense, both the 'I' and the 'me' are selves and component parts of the self. In a Meadian definition, the self as an 'I' is that of the image of the memory that acts in relation to itself and to others. It corresponds to the (more) inner and constant portion, encompassing forms of acting that emerge in response to the iteration of social behaviours. The me is the more variable portion, which learns about itself with the other signifiers. The 'me' consciousness emerges from the action of the other. The 'I' of introspection is the self that enters into social relations with other beings, while the 'me' of introspection is the object of the social conduct of others.

4 The idea of *actant* is taken from the semiology of Algirdas J. Greimas. It refers to someone or something that practices or suffers an action, beings or things when participating in a process (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1979), making a difference to the narrative. It is an entity (a person, idea, group, thing or so on) with the capacity to influence the actions of others. Latour (1987) uses the concept to construct *symmetrisation*: "the inclusion of all the entities contained in a situation on the same analytic plane" (WERNECK, 2014a, p. 29).

5 Actantial in the sense that its components appear as strong elements (elements with strong actancy) in the "definition of the situation" (THOMAS 1923, p. 42) in course. It is not only composed of elements of a contemplative remembering but also gives *prehension* (CHATEAURAYNAUD, 2011, 2022) to the reality experienced by each. *Actancy* (GREIMAS and COURTÉS, 1979) concerns the potential for an entity not only in terms of decision making (and, in this sense, of agency) but also of effectivity (Werneck 2012) in the situational context.

6 The use of grounded theory (GT) and comprehensive interviews implies that the researcher sets out to comprehend the reality of research interlocutors by understanding them as depositories of substantive knowhow to be apprehended through their *frameworks of values*, sought through in-depth research *grounded* in data collected in the field and through an understanding of the categories most proximate to the everyday world of the person who provided the researcher with the information.

7 To take an example from sociology, Simmel (1950, p. 58) wrote about an individual`s natural capacity to "decompose himself into parts and to feel any one of these as his proper self." These parts may collide with one another, resulting in a struggle for majority control of the individual's actions. Every individual consists of many different parts that are equally important and sometimes contradictory, giving rise to inner conflicts observable in their everyday life (CHALARI, 2009).

8 Adriana Vianna and Juliana Farias explore this category in their work. For further references on the topic, see the article co-authored by them (2011).

9 As I have shown elsewhere (TALONE, 2020), the affect-recollections and emotion-recollections of extreme experiences are related to the active circulation in the present of sensations and energies felt in the contact with death or in its aftermath, and not just images. These affects and emotions can affect current interactions (COLLINS, 2004; TALONE, 2020). Randall Collins, for example, explores how *emotional energies* are transmitted by face-to-face interactions: "The 'sort of electricity' that Durkheim metaphorically ascribes to the group in its state of heightened excitement is stored in batteries (...). Participation in a ritual gives the individual a special kind of energy, which I will call *emotional energy*" (TALONE, 2020, p. 38). Along these lines, within the scope of a sociology of emotions (TORRES, 2013), I explored the conceptions of affects, sensations and, more generally, affective tonalities. For specific analyses of this theme, see Corrêa (2021) and Talone (2020).

10 Cooley (1902, p. 98), describing a dimension of what he proposes as the 'social self,' proposes: "To introduce the self into this illustration we might say that the lights [*projected*] near the centre of the wall were of a particular color – say red – which faded, not too abruptly, into white toward the edges. This red would represent self-feeling, and other persons would be more or less colored by it according as they were or were not intimately identified with (...) cherished activities. In a mother's mind, for instance, her child would lie altogether in the inmost and reddest area. Thus the same sentiment may belong to the self and to several other persons at the same time." People close to us and loved ones substantially constitute our own 'self-feeling.'

11 According to James (1890), the total self is everything that causes the same emotions in a person. This total self is constituted by the following selves: the material self, the social self, the spiritual self and the pure ego. Discussing this theme, Cooley emphasizes that, for James, the self designates "all the things which have the power to produce in a stream of consciousness excitement of a certain peculiar sort" (JAMES, 1890, p. 319, quoted in COOLEY, 1902, p. 138).

12 This idea of the 'definition of a situation' implies a situational approach that studies "behavior reactions and habit formation in a great variety of situations comparatively" (THOMAS and THOMAS, 1928, p. 561). These can be studied through the visualizaion of behavioural reactions in all kinds of situations, recognising that someone's immediate behaviour is intimately related to their definition of the present situation—that is, to the 'as if' of their situational understanding.

13 These dimensions are aspects of a complex 'narrative identity,' as the author puts it. This implies a reflection on identity as a rearticulation between an entity and its trajectories. It represents a form of understanding the human being in lived

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

experience based on a tradition that takes 'personal reflexivity' as something that generates effects in intimate action. It effectively "institutes a reiterated field of renegotiation and reinvention of a biographic trajectory" (CORRÊA, 2021, p. 556). For a mapping of conceptions of *reflexivity*, see Corrêa and Talone (2021). It should be emphasized that here I am dealing with people who went through situations that 'upset,' 'modified' or 'ruptured' (among other possibilities) their histories and narratives. As Strauss (1999) writes, intimate histories are personal identities perceived analytically over time. By studying the multiple potential connections between biographies and histories, we can explore both the temporal aspects of personal identities and the flow and reconstruction of social events.

[14] An idea affirmed by the interviewees, sometimes in response to the questions "why did you decide to join the PMERJ?" or "how did you come to work here?"

[15] And this would enable them to confront the 'huge force' mobilized by *bandidos* (CAMINHAS e BEATO, 2021; WERNECK e TALONE 2019) in general, who are perceived to possess an enormous potential for adrenalin in their criminal actions (PRADO, 2020).

[16] Technical categories relating to the police officer's aptitude. Normally four types of evaluation are cited: Aptitude A refers to those officers to perform work normally; Aptitude B signifies that some restriction exists on activity, normally physical; Aptitude C applies to police officers unable to perform their core activity because they cannot carry a firearm (normally due to 'psychological' or 'emotional' issues); and LTS signifies *licença para tratamento de saúde*, medical leave—the police officer does not have to show for work.

[17] In addition to the fieldwork and the interviews that I conducted, my research included two sources of interviews/accounts not produced within its scope, one being the thesis cited above. The aim was to increase the volume of substantial material available to the research as part of an on-going comparative methodology, open to observations, interviews, documents, articles, books and every possible source of data, contributing as well as possible to a qualitative approach (GLASER, 1965).

[18] Goffman (2008[1963]) points to stigma as a language of relations, not of attributes.

[19] The idea here is less the *épreuves* linked to the principles of universal justice, as explored by Boltanski and Thévenot (2020), than the kinds of *ordeals* regarding their own humanity.

[20] Naturally, a personal biography is discontinuous, subject to breakdown, reconstitution and 'reinvention' (ARCHER, 2003). In some of her works, Veena Das (2003, 2007) emphasizes the work of a self to exist in a 'habitable everyday' and not in a 'phantasmagoric past' of the experienced traumatic event. The 'self-creation' in the everyday register is recognised as a painstaking 'putting together of life.'

[21] Pursuing this path, for Goffman (2013[1959]) it is not the human, biological or individual dimension that we take as our self, but the socialized self: "Goffman constructs a sociological notion of self as a product of social processes that does not originate in the core of individuals, but results from publicly validated performances" (VINUTO, GISI e TEIXEIRA 2019, p. 470). The self is an image that one seeks to get others to attribute to oneself.

Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

Vittorio Talone

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Vittorio Talone

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Vittorio Talone

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Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc. – Rio de Janeiro – Vol. 16 – nº 2 – 2023 – e52768

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