Dialogues on the notion of victim and identity construction

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ABSTRACT
This study was developed because of the need to analyze and question the notion of victim, in the context of the emergence of use of this term over recent decades, as an identifier for subjects and experiences. While conducting a research project dealing with victimization resulting from *lightning kidnapping* and its repercussions on the victims' health, we were faced with the need to discuss the use of this term and other intertwined issues: "would this be a lifelong identity attribute?" and "what importance does victimization have on people's lives?", among other issues. In this regard, we proposed this paper in order to analyze and question the notion of victim, and to discuss this as an identity trait, with the intention of stimulating possible reflections on this topic.
Keywords: Victim. Identity. Interaction. Narrative.

Victims and identities

Within a more juridical perspective, the victim would be the one who suffers – the passive, offended subject – the author's action or omission derived from any offense – the active subject. (Kosovski, 2012). This definition has some limitations, since it carries a dichotomous and stagnant outline of tort dynamic – the active and passive sides of an action – and fails to comprise more subtle elements, such as the social construction of these roles and possible overlaps among them, these actors' subjectivities or even the experience arising from their interactions.

In a thorough discussion on identity, Mendes (2002) stresses that, according to Stuart Hall, in his work "Stitching yourself in place", identity would be an important concept, functioning as an articulator between discourses and practices that interpellate us. Identities would be relational, multiple and

narratively constructed, whereas interactions would have a key role in the process (Mendes, 2002).

By bringing to light the importance of interactions for this discussion, Mendes (2002) puts on evidence assumptions of the symbolic interactionism, a theoretical orientation which emphasizes the relevance of the meaning things have for human behavior, conceiving meaning as derived from the interaction process between people. As Haguette (2005, p. 35-6) stated, "the actor selects, verifies, interrupts, regroups and transforms meanings due to the nature of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. Hence, interpretation is a formative process, and not a systemic application of already established meanings."

The above excerpt highlights the construction of senses and meanings as procedural and ongoing, in which the action of the other is crucial for changing meanings. Thus, for Mead, the precursor of Symbolic Interactionism, "the action of each one would only have sense through the action of another" (Carvalho, Borges and Rêgo, 2010, p. 150-1). We can understand that the recognition of a subject as a victim would not be something given and established, but a dynamically formulated and redefined meaning in the interactional process.

For Goffman (2009), human behavior would be analogous to a stage performance, where each interaction actor would act aware that the other actor will try to anticipate his acting decisions. Therefore, the "courses of action or moves will then be made in the light of one's thoughts about the others' thoughts about oneself." (Goffman, 1969, p. 127). In this sense, information would have a pivotal role in interaction, since it "helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him" (Goffman, 2009, p. 11).

Imagine the following situation: a five-month pregnant woman returns from her Pilates class and goes to the bank to make a payment. Upon exiting the bank, by 7.00 P.M., she is kidnapped by two men who keep her captive for over two hours. She is the (direct) victim of the so discussed criminality in the current days. It is expected that she gets angry and feels wronged and aggrieved, and demonstrates it thorugh verbal and non-verbal communication/behavior" (such as in ways she dresses up, observes and uses body language). This would be the personal facade explained by Erving Goffman (2009, p. 31), who refers to the "expressive equipment of an intentionally standardized type or unconsciously employed by the individual during performance." Without that facade, the individual's performance as a victim becomes incongruous, and the *face* of victim must be maintained and believed.

However, up to what extent does the facade and keeping the victim's face persist and become part of these subjects' identity?

Goffman, cited by Mendes (2002, p. 506), points out that "identities are multiple, fluctuating and situational." Our above mentioned character is real, portrayed in Azevedo (2011) as Milena. She is married, almost a mother, has a

certain skin color, has a given social position, is a sociologist and a teacher, has a religious belief, is part of a particular family, lives in a neighborhood, likes certain things and dislikes others, has chosen some paths in life and abandoned others, and so forth. Some of these traits are more fluid and manageable than others, but Milena is the result of this relationship network or matrix of a relational scenario (Somers, 1994) in a "relational conception of sub-identities plurality" (Mishler, 2002, p. 110).

All these previously mentioned elements reflect on the notion our character has and will have about "being a mugging victim differs", "not being a victim", or any other gradation between these two extremes. So, according to Schwalbe, cited by Mendes (2002, p. 509-10), she would be in a constant movement of "integration of the many social belongings and roles under which she is submitted."

Being a street assault victim differs from being a sexually abused child victim. The victim identity construction is likely to exist for both subjects previously exemplified; however, the legitimacy of this identity, as well as this identity performance and its maintenance may have quite distinct intensity and "appearances". Consequently, the notion of "being a victim" brings together an endless spectrum of possibilities – the experiences are varied. A given situation may be translated into a victimizer event for some, but not for others. In the same manner, one who feels himself/herself as a victim in a particular situation, may be the offender in another situation and vice versa.

As an example, Marongiu and Clarke (1993) explain the kidnapper/kidnapped relationship as being moved by "envious hostility" of the first regarding the second one. Because of that, the kidnapper may employ the disproportionate use of "irrational violence", with the objective of leading the envied object (the kidnapped) to his/her economic, psychological and physical destruction, who then would cease to be envied. The kidnappers would perceive themselves as victims of political, social or economic problems produced, or represented, by the kidnapped. In this sense, the kidnapper depersonalizes the kidnapped, perceiving him/her as the reason for the kidnapper's condition, afterwards entering a cycle of "justifiable" brutal violence.

It seems to us that anyone can, to some degree, be perceived as a victim (perhaps less often, people perceive themselves as offenders). The status of "being a victim" – e.g. a victim of urban crime, a victim of domestic violence, a victim of abuse of police authority, a victim of workplace harassment, and so on – represents a status, currently legitimate, of a violated right.

> In an era of globalization, i.e., a time of intensification of economic, political, cultural and symbolic flows worldwide, people and collectives see the broad range of opportunities and resources available for preparing arguments that justify their identities and identification processes. (Mendes, 2002, p. 503-4)

This is how, in contemporaneity, public policies and movements for the defense of violence victims represent this political and symbolic flow intensified in the realm of violence. If for a century no one talked about children's and adolescents' rights, the Child and Adolescent Statute today protects them as subjects of rights and knowledge, making any kind of violation of these rights punishable by the State. For Sarti (2011), the notion of victim in contemporary society is a response to the "democracy concerns" and emerges as a "moral legitimacy form of social demands" (p. 51). Consequently, the notion of victim is strengthened in a new social conjuncture arising from developments in the field of human rights and violence and gains political force. Under these circumstances, the notion of "being a victim" is not accidentally built, it is part of a situated "social and historical construction" (Sarti, 2011, p. 51).

Likewise, Mendes (2002, p. 505) emphasizes the importance of power and inequality issues in the identity process: "The position in the social space, the symbolic capital of who says what, conditions the identities construction, legitimation, presentation and maintenance." On this subject, Sarti (2011, p. 55) elucidates that the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis is an "important ideological articulator for producing the notion of victim of violence in the contemporary world." It is the political, moral and social legitimacy of violence and the consequences to the subjects who experience it.

In this regard, there was also the need to name this experience of "victimization" and being a "victim". It is this name that allows the subjects to give meaning to what they have experienced, as they reframe the meaning of this term in a fluid process of reinterpretations. It is also the possibility of this designation that approximates subjects with similar violation experiences seeking for reparation – as the search of the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" for their missing children during Argentine dictatorship, as well as the Brazilian versions of the "Mothers of Praça da Sé" in São Paulo, who established The Brazilian Association for the Defense and Search of Missing Children (ABCD), and the "Mothers of Cinelândia" in Rio de Janeiro.

Therefore, we recognize that the notion of victim arises as a "social recognition for suffering (...), a way of giving intelligibility to the suffering of specific social segments in particular historical contexts, (...) giving moral legitimacy to their claims" (Sarti, 2011, p. 54).

Victims, identities and narratives

Narratives would be a "fundamental human way of giving meaning to experience" (Garro and Mattingly, 2000, p. 1). They are constructed and construct (Garro and Mattingly, 2000) and they can be a form of access to the subjects' symbolic system, pointed by Sarti (2011) as essential to the analysis of suffering associated with violence.

Central narratives and public speeches would provide "individual and collective resources to state or reaffirm these identities" (Mendes, 2002, p. 506). Public narratives would be those "attached to cultural and institutional formations

larger than the single individual." They range from the narratives of one's family to those of the workplace (organizational myths), church, government and nation (Somers, 1994). Therefore, the current conceptions on victim and victimization comprise the contemporary public narratives and, in the relational dynamic of interactions, end up providing the "resources" to individuals so that they continuously construct their identities through their ontological narratives. According to Somers,

> Narrative location endows social actors with identifies - however multiple, ambiguous, ephemeral, or conflicting. (...) ontological narratives can only exist interpersonally in the course of social and structural interactions over time. To be sure, agents adjust stories to fit their own identities, and, conversely, they will tailor "reality" to fit their stories. (Somers, 1994, p. 168)

The author puts in evidence, among other things, the narratives temporal dimension and, consequently, the identities dimension. In this regard, we can think that the ontological narrative of subjects involving their victimization experience guides them in understanding themselves as "victims". Notwithstanding, this identity of victim suffers changes, it is reformulated with the innumerous biographical narratives of these subjects. In other words, "(...) ontological narrativity, like the self, is neither a priori nor fixed. Ontological narratives make identity and the self something that one becomes" (Somers, 1994, p. 618). Narratives always renew themselves, renewing with them the subject's identities and vice versa, in an endless flow of coming and going. In this sense, the victim in me of yesterday is different from the victim in me today, which, in turn, is different from the victim in me tomorrow.

From that emerges another interesting question: Would the existence of the "victim" category be a lifelong identity trait?

Some authors (Mendes, 2002; Mishler, 2002; Somers, 1994) seem to agree on the inexistence of a single, essentialist, stable identity of a subject. Indeed, there are multiple and continuously changing identities, formed in the subjects' relational scenario in live interaction with others.

> The dialogue with others is essential in constructing the conscience of each individual, being multivocal and produced at the intersection of centripetal forces (need to connect to the other) and centrifugal forces (need to differentiate from each other). (Mendes, 2002, p. 505, 518)

Suffering some type of violence, whether in a single event or in a continuous and long lasting way, becomes part of the life experience of victimized individuals. This has implications that affect the identity construction in the extent that it contrasts with the past-self (the self-not-victim), the other-non-victim, the other-offender, the many others of this self. It is this dynamic that allows subjects to give meaning to their experiences and constitute themselves.

Let us go back to the previously mentioned Milena's case. She expresses having undergone a *lightning kidnapping* with attempted rape. Before that event, she had tried to get pregnant for some consecutive years and was finally able to get pregnant when, in her fifth month of pregnancy, she underwent episodes of psychological violence aggravated by a series of physical abuse and sexual violence (Azevedo, 2011). Suffering such violence in those circumstances – "feeling vulnerable for being a woman and for being pregnant" (Milena) – could lead to the loss of her yet unborn son, the result of a great deal of emotional and economic investment. Milena reports a persistent deep suffering which she believes to be misunderstood both by her family and by strangers. Lastly, she believes having left behind the "*bold woman*" she used to be (and recognized as such), and starts identifying herself as "*paranoid*" (Azevedo, 2011, p. 159).

Would then this narrative be representing the "true" Milena? The paranoid Milena? Or would she, "deep inside", still be the angry woman? Mendes (2002, p. 506) tells us that "the personal identity hinges on the temporal dimension, on a life project. This permanence in time, the relation between personal identity and time, can be understood as a steady work in a range of variations, as a synthesis of the heterogeneous."

Sarti (2011, p. 57) also brings into evidence the temporal dimension and the narrative context, arguing that "the pain of violence, as a traumatic experience, can (...) be resignified at later times of elaboration, what makes relevant its manifestation and elaboration contexts from the speaker's speech." Identity and time go hand in hand. If Milena used to be *bold* and today she is *paranoid*, tomorrow is still an unanswered question. (1994, p. 621) adds that

> The narrative identity approach embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space. It thus precludes categorical stability in action. These temporally and spatially shifting configurations form the relational coordinates of ontological, public, and cultural narratives. Within these temporal and multilayered narratives identities are formed; hence narrative identity is processual and relational.

Mishler (2002) proposes that narratives should be analyzed in the light of the "double arrow of time", leaving the linear temporal-order causal model. Therefore, the end of a narrative is vital to understanding the narrative as a whole. Likewise, the present self may give a different meaning to experiences than the past self.

> It is an inherent and unmanageable characteristic how we remember our past continually re-historicizing it, varying the relative significance of different events according to the person we have become, finding out connections from which we were not previously aware, repositioning us to ourselves and to others in our social network. The past is not engraved in stone, and the meaning

> of events and experiences is constantly being reframed within the contexts of our current and ordinary lives. (Mishler, 2002, p. 105)

Mishler (2002, p. 107) also emphasizes the importance of turning points, defined as "incidents that often happen suddenly and unexpectedly," being similar to biographical disruptions. The turning points refer to events – somewhat epiphanic – which foster a change in the subjects' understanding over their past experiences, leading them to re-historicize the past and to adopt a new identity. There is also a change in the way the person interprets life, and the experienced life story is revised in order to make sense (Mishler, 2002).

For Milena, the *lightning kidnapping* was the turning point in how she understood herself and her relationships, what does not mean that the way she sees herself today is definite and changeless. In the same way she saw herself as paranoid in 2010 (when the interview was carried out), this understanding today, and within a few years, will no longer be the same. Other life events will comprise the matrix of lived biographical experiences, possibly with new turning points that enable the formulation of new "endings" of her ontological narratives and new forms of understanding herself as a victimized subject.

Milena herself, at the time she was interviewed, had said that she would like to have psychotherapy treatment again, which she turned to after the *lightning kidnapping*, but abandoned when she started having a risk pregnancy. Milena exposes the "need" of talking about her anxieties, listening and having a space where her narrative is expressed and reconstructed. After all,

> 'telling and retelling experiences' provide the opportunity for collaborations between therapist and client in developing 'alternative versions of stories' that 'create new understandings' while also conveying 'a revised view of self and others that not only reshapes the past but creates new paths for the future' (Capps and Ochs, 1955, cited by Garro and Mattingly, 2000, p. 7).

The therapist here would act as a guide in rebuilding the subject's narratives. We understand this as an approach to the Other of Foucault's moral subject. According to Grós (2006, p. 11), "The more I search myself, the more I obey the Other." The need to answer the question "who am I?" would imply a submission to the Other, who would be that one to indicate the way to make "increasingly coincide 'who I believe I am and who I really am'," emerging the self that I really am.

Thus, it is from the other in psychotherapy interactions (and also in interactions in general) that we seek for new senses and meanings of what has been experienced.

> Either told to themselves or told to others, narratives are part of the process of healing. When this culture work is successful, 'narrative ameliorates disruption: it enables the narrator to mend the disruption by weaving it into the fabric of life, to put experience

into perspective.' (Becker, 1997; Capps and Ochs, 1995, cited by Garro and Mattingly, 2000, p. 29)

Final remarks (though provisory)

The familiarity with which the notion of victim emerges in the subjects' ontological and contemporary public narratives reflects the phenomenon pointed by some scholars as the victim being the "revealing figure of our time" (Sarti, 2011). Koltai (2002, cited by Sarti, 2011) refers to the victim as the dominant representation of contemporary subjectivity. In Brazil, we note the term "victim" as a part of everyday vocabulary. Not all are concrete victims of violent events in urban contexts. However, would they not be the victims of crime and violence fear? To some extent, we would all be victims: victims of the concrete jungle wrongdoers, victims of the State, victims of capital, and victims of the misfortunes of life. We all look for some kind of compensation for these misfortunes. In this respect, Sarti (2011, p. 54) explains that "identifying the victim is part of democracy and justice desires within the problem of consolidation of citizenship civil, social and political rights."
With that, we understand that victimization and self-identification as victim are contemporary phenomena. The production of this victim – and of who the victim will be on life course – is social and historical, but results in unique subjects. Every one can perceive, feel, mean and perform different daily practices regarding the experience of victimization. Despite the existence of similar events and stories, the experience is unique and accessible in its completeness only to each person. Every experience is embedded in relational scenarios, forming singular subjects. Thus, being a victim becomes a lifelong trait insofar as this event intertwines to all other life events of this subject, in a dynamic web of interactions, events, feelings, knowledge and meanings. Nevertheless, the relevance that "being a victim" will have in this web as well as the way the subjects give meaning to these experiences will depend upon the peculiarities of the victimizer event(s) and the complex singularity of subjects.
In a previous study, we reported that the *lightning kidnapping* experience implies changing the way individuals live their experiences and give meaning to them (Azevedo, 2011). Many people come to believe in a much more evil social world than they would like, thus affecting their ontological safety (Giddens, 1991), since victimization may reach the stability notion and the sense of order subjects have about the social and material surrounding environment.
It is noteworthy that this notion the subject has of stability extends to identity. Despite identities being "multiple, fluctuating and situational" (Goffman, cited by Mendes, 2002, p. 506), individuals seem to seek identity permanence, "even though this is more of a subjective or imagined perception than a real one" (Mendes, 2002, p. 511-2). People wish to understand themselves from these "essence" traits. With all the inherent contradictions to ontological narratives, many people feel anguish when attempting to answer the question "who am I?"

This is a question which does not have a correct, single and fixed answer. It is continuously constructed in the subjects' life course in reference to the social interactions they have over time and social spaces. Mendes (2002), quoting Jonathan Friedman (1997) in his work "Cultural Identity and Global Process", argues that

> The constitution of identity is an elaborate and dangerous game of mirrors. It is a complex temporal interaction of multiple internal and external practices of identification to an individual or a population. In order to understand this constitutive process it is, thus, necessary to situate mirrors in space and their movement in time. (Friedman, 1997, p.532)

The victimization experiences do not determine who the subject is and how the subject sees himself/herself, but they surely help to compose the several "mirrors" that this person "is" (not permanently, but in a present transitory condition) and the person he/she "will become" (in the future).

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