Psychoanalysis and low-income populations: Territory, uprootedness and the production of subjectivity

Junia de Vilhena

Clinical work in psychoanalysis carried out with low-income communities is a new field in both work and research and, at least in Brazil, the endeavor has been accused of being ineffective for poorer sectors of the population. According to certain conservative views, there are two problems at stake. As they have it, not only has Freud's theory been unable to provide a theoretical basis for working with these sectors of the populations; in addition, the poor simply cannot afford the "luxury" of coming into contact with their "desires," but only with their most pressing needs. In this article we describe our experience with poor sectors of the population in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Based on our practice, we will indicate certain aspects that should be taken into account when working with this type of population. We will also show how psychoanalysis does truly provide appropriate tools for establishing a multidisciplinary approach. Any number of aspects involved could have been gone into here, but the author decided to focus on the importance of the concept of "territory" in the construction of subjectivity.

Key words: *Psychoanalysis, low-income populations, territory, uprootedness, violence.*

Introduction

Clinical work in psychoanalysis carried out with low-income communities is a new field in both practice and research and, at least in Brazil, psychoanalysis has been accused of being ineffective for poorer sectors of the population. According to more conservative points of view, there are two problems at stake. Not only was Freud's theory unable to provide a theoretical basis for working with these sectors of the population, but neither can the poor afford the "luxury" of coming into contact with their "desires," but only with their most pressing needs. The length and cost of treatment, different linguistic codes between analyst and patient, as well as social deprivation, have also been pointed out as making it impossible to apply psychoanalysis to poorer populations. Based on our experience with lowincome populations, we discuss certain aspects that should be taken into account when working with them. We also show how psychoanalysis does truly provide appropriate tools, especially in dialogue with other fields of knowledge. Any number of aspects involved could have been gone into here, but we have decided to focus on the importance of "territory" in the construction of subjectivity.

As former Head of the Psychology Clinic at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, where approximately 10,000 psychotherapy sessions per year are provided and where many students of psychology take their clinical training, it has been noted, over a period of some 40 years of existence, that there is a very high rate of patients who abandon their treatment. In view of the seriousness of this factor, we decided to investigate the possible reasons for this phenomenon. One of our first findings was that more than 70% of the patients who left said they had achieved what they were looking for when they first came in. In general, expectations for longer treatments came from the therapists, rather than from the patients.

We have also observed that students are often greatly moved by the poverty and violence described by the patients, and thus tend to focus on the concrete aspects of their patients' reality. Thus, they often fail to listen for latent aspects of the discourse. In addition, they are sometimes unable to perceive the effects of culture on the production of subjectivity. We have also noted that some students use psychological categories without taking into consideration the environment involved.

In this article we describe our experience in treating patients belonging to this population in Rio de Janeiro. One important factor is that work with low-income populations requires certain specific approaches that should be taken into account. In addition, we intend to show how psychoanalysis provides appropriate tools when working with a multidisciplinary approach.

The outskirts of citzenship

One of the most unfortunate aspects of Brazilian urbanization is its complete failure to incorporate urban poverty, and this factor interferes significantly in the social dynamics of the many large cities in Brazil and in the production of the subjectivity of their inhabitants.

Social relations among different social segments are basically mediated by fear and distrust. The upper and middle classes generally see members from the lower classes, especially blacks, as being dangerous and associated with crime. Slums are therefore frequently considered places of danger, marginality and drug dealing, as if the vast majority of the populations who live in these areas were not honest, blue-collar working people.

It is therefore essential to analyze the role of territory in the construction of identity. According to Augé (1994), territory is essential because it is identitary, relational and historical. A place can be symbolized, and it establishes representations in the imagination. People become attached to their territory, build up their history from it, and recognize themselves there. Territory symbolizes where you were born, where you work, the place you come from and regularly return to.

It is in territory, as social construction, that an individual produces his subjectivity. Territory also enables one to reflect on life, work and social bonds, and to identify with the rest of mankind. It is from such place that we speak and are heard, it is there that we respect and are respected, and where we feel part of a whole, or else completely excluded from it (Vilhena, 2002).

Since relationships among individuals from different layers of society often

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carry with them a dose of mistrust and fear of one another, communication and common spaces are reduced, and the gap between the classes widens.

If we examine the conditions under which socially excluded groups in the city of Rio de Janeiro live, we can see that great numbers of people have been uprooted from their homes at the hands of the State itself. These experiences range from those of families who have been forced to migrate in search of work, to those who have suffered the traumatic experience of being evicted from their homes when the slums they lived in became interesting areas for land speculation. The instability caused by this uprootedness is a strong characteristic of urban Brazilian culture.

Territory, uprootedness and subjectivity

The first question that comes to mind in regard to territory is "boundaries." In what sense are geographical boundaries analogous to the all-important internal boundaries that every subject must develop from childhood on? Subjects must first gain a sense of where the self ends and where the other begins (and vice-versa). This "mapping" proceeds, but it is, of course interconnected with all others. How important is boundary, taken in the psychic sense, in relation to our growing understanding of territory? To what extent are psychic and geographical boundaries analogous to one another, and to what extent does this contribute to the problem of "projection"? Is this the case when the wealthy assume that all slum-dwellers are dangerous, and suggest ways of allaying their fears as to what lies beyond certain boundaries? Are the intra-psychic dynamics that occur in relation to environment and that help distinguish a subject from her environment analogous to the socio-political realities described above?

Another aspect that could be approached is the question of how mobile, how malleable, are these subjects? Do they voluntarily or involuntarily take their sense of boundaries with them when they move about? Do they project them, introject them, or both? What is the relationship between mobility and malleability, and to what extent is the trauma of having been uprooted the result of the difficult passage through psychically safe boundaries, to what extent are psychic and geographic boundaries (and spaces) congruent? The issue of territory also brings up the question of possessiveness: to what extent is a territory part of one's "own" self, or one's sense of self?

These questions would seem to lead us to a sort of tension, or contradiction, in our goals. On the one hand, we seem to make broad claims as to intersubjectivity and shared responsibility – which everyone in the city, or

community, shares in some way or other. Intersubjectivity and responsibility are constructed jointly, for better or for worse. At the same time, we argue forcefully for the singularity of each subject, specifically in relation to the singularity of those belonging to the low-income brackets, whom the affluent tend to indiscriminately grouped into a single broad category, using racial, geographic or other categories. We seem to want to use the argument for singularity to bolster the idea of intersubjectivity, and the idea of intersubjectivity to bolster the existence of singularity.

What we are in fact trying to point out is that at the deepest levels, these aspects are coconstitutive, although they also must be seen as negating one another. As Mezan (1997) shows, the word *subject* itself expresses a place of constant tension. This means that the individual lives a double, and paradoxical condition, of being. On the one hand, he or she is submitted to the injunctions of both external and internal powers (conscious and unconscious instinctual drives) and, on the other, endowed with initiative and freedom, for instance, as the subject of rights. The polarity between submission and autonomy reveals the complex plurality of the meanings these forces have in individuals. The production of human reality in social life has to do with the connection between existence and its meanings, between reality and the corresponding sense that individuals attribute to it. In the process of constructing subjectivity, we can observe a *"condensation or sedimentation, especially on the individual sphere, of determinations that are rooted before or beyond experience per se, and that in a certain way conforms or at least designates certain limits and conditions" (p.13).*

Subjectivity is not immanence; it is intersubjectively produced. The elements of this production are articulated in a culture which individuals share with one another within a determined social structure and during a clearly limited historical period. From this perspective the cultural environment becomes the locus where subjectivity is produced (Vilhena & Santos, 2000).

These determinations are not absolute, however, nor are social relationships supra-individual. The singularity and universality of relationships are mediated by the interplay of identifications and relations, as they establish an area of juxtaposition between identity and alterity. In order to conceive of this relationship in a non-paradoxical logic, Winnicott (1975) – the thinker of paradoxes – created concepts such as "transitional object" and "potential space." Potential space is the place where creative interplay takes place, with the use of symbols. It is mediation through language and everything that constitutes cultural life. It is the space of illusion that promotes creative experience, thus extending to the entire field of culture. Sharing this environment is inevitable for creating analytic space, especially when one is dealing with lower-income sectors of society.

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Great numbers of people who now live in the slums of large Brazilian cities are migrants from the northeastern region of the country, who came in search of a better life. The process of uprootedness they consequently underwent led to the loss of important identificatory references, as well as to a feeling of not belonging to the new urban social space, which is often strange and hostile to them. Walking through the streets of poor communities, one can easily observe many symbols of northeastern Brazilian culture. Those objects point to separation, discontinuity and uprootedness, but they also help re-establish continuity through the juxtaposition of the original culture with the local culture. These transcultural aspects, including those related to language, are thus created in this potential space where experience and transitional phenomenon predominate – especially when one is dealing with marginalized populations. As Santos (2000) pointed out, this juxtaposition establishes an intermediate area where the subjective from the Northeast meets Rio de Janeiro, creating an allegorical mosaic. Many verbal expressions used by the local population come from the Northeast, and are very different from those typically used by the populations who have lived in Rio de Janeiro for generations. Girls do not get pregnant, for example, they "are expecting," one might say. Children "take on" these expressions like they take on their transitional objects (Santos, 2000).

Simone Weil (2001) brings an important contribution to our discussion. She says that rootedness "is perhaps the most important yet the most unfamiliar need of the human soul" (Simone, 2001, p. 43). She adds that the uprooted "have only two possible behaviors: either they fall into an inertia of the soul almost equivalent to death,... or they rush into some type of activity that always tends to uproot, often through the most violent of methods, those which are not yet violent or are only partly so" (Weil, p. 46-47).

According to Calligaris (1996) subjects not only pre-exist the network of relationships. They are also effects of them. The lack of symbolic cultural references produced in complex societies generates the feeling of not belonging, of not having family ties. The children of this social situation are disturbed, often in a desperate search for a reference that will afford them a feeling of belonging, of inclusion.

Dealing with violence

Psychotherapists who have contact with low-income patients must be attentive to the fact that care for the mentally ill extends far beyond the consulting room, beyond the psychotherapeutic alliance. We must often enter our clients'

lives, their homes, their families, their communities, and sometimes share with them the death of loved ones. The comforting rules of psychoanalytic training and practice – the 50 minute hour, for example, the sophisticated office environment, regular intervals of contact, verbal interchange, questions, interpretive comments – all diminish as the imperatives of daily life intrude. Instead, we find ourselves acting as both therapeutic agents and participants in the patients' daily lives, and become involved in communal relationships that may involve elaborate interpretations one day and very mundane tasks on another. But none of this diminishes our therapeutic function.

All this points to an analyst who is empathic, participant and capable of identifying himself with the patient. But this analyst also becomes an observer who can apprehend the meaning of the affective phenomenon he takes part in. In Winnicott's terms, this is one's availability to adapt and change.

Empathy is the ability to change places with someone else. It means feeling what another would feel, a notion that Freud (1920-21) termed "empathic projection." According to him, our ability to understand someone else's ego and mental life depend on this ability for empathy.

When Winnicott created the concept of *primary maternal concern* he described the regressive state a mother finds herself in after giving birth. Empathic communication occurs as a result of this state, and allows the mother to "be with" or to "feel with" her baby. A similar situation can be seen in analysis. Without "primary maternal concern," an analyst would miss most of a patient's primitive communication, especially that which precedes the acquisition of symbolic verbal language.

Some authors, including Hanna Segall, and Madeleine and Willy Baranger (cited by Santos, 2000), describe Klein's (1982) concepts of projective and introjective identification as the most primitive form of empathy. It consists of enabling the analyst to put himself or herself in the position of observer/participant in the analytical field. This switching of positions, as well as empathy, were described by both Freud and Ferenczi (1992).

At the beginning of this article we mentioned the nearness to death experienced by persons in

lower-income populations. We should therefore emphasize that all situations of social violence can trigger off mental mechanisms such as denial and alienation in both patient and therapist. When people try to understand the psychological vicissitudes that another feels during a social catastrophe, the first response is usually to confine the problem to some distant geographical or mental region that may or may not be of concern in the final analysis. The mechanism that consists of trying to get rid of something uncomfortable is inherent to the mental

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apparatus. Expulsion, projection and self-mutilation are mechanisms recognized by different psychoanalytic theories as frequent means to allow one to deal with what would otherwise seem to be an unbearable experience.

But what about "everyday violence"? Certainly it differs according to social classes. There is no way to compare our everyday robberies, and even murders, to the violence and barbarous practices to which slum populations are submitted in their everyday lives, at the hands of the police, drug dealers and other agents.

One difficulty is related to what Puget calls "perception of superimposed worlds." This arises from the fact that both patients and analysts perceive themselves as living in the same social context as the other. This is especially true when dealing with violence in Rio de Janeiro, but most people tend not to perceive the differences between classes, as all are exposed to the same fears and the same difficulties in perceiving events. When analysts and patients simultaneously experience the same anxieties and preoccupations that arise from the context of their daily lives, we speak of superimposed worlds (Puget and Wender, 1990).

In such cases, analysts probably do not have the psychic distance and time necessary to enable them to recognize what is similar and what is different, and therefore to establish an adequate analytic relation. When certain traumatic events arising from the same shared world appear in the analytic material, they give rise to distortions and transformations in the analyst's listening and in the analytic procedure. They encourage in analysts a particular tendency to want to participate, to 'share.' But this involuntary and inevitable 'sharing,' which stimulates an ambivalent curiosity, can become secret, substitutive and shameful. It is sometimes very difficult for us to establish a clear boundary between the field of analysis and what we might call the field "of daily life," or "of socio-cultural reality." The therapeutic situation is flooded with both an abundance of information and a flagrant omission of things related to the public domain. The world of daily life, which is highly traumatic, invades the analytic situation.

But it is precisely this traumatic aspect of the material and the interest it awakens that contribute to a loss of the mystery that is needed to arouse the analyst's desire to decipher it. The analyst takes what he or she hears literally. It is no longer hieroglyphics. In these cases, analysts then unconsciously assume an anecdotal posture, and can easily fail to recognize the unconscious sources involved, thus losing all interest in a psychoanalytic way of working. They merely seek out other illusory interlocutors, whether themselves or other individuals belonging to the world of their daily lives (Puget & Wender, 1990).

Freud identified the ability for distinguishing the self from the non-self, the world from the external world, pleasure from displeasure, and passive from active, all as essential principles in the formation of the mental apparatus.

The discourse of parental figures and social discourse suggest different dialogues for the ego. We should be particularly concerned with the social discourse, on which the individual's identity depends. It would also be well to recall that the identity of the 'subject' depends on the Oedipal discourse. The latter is based on castration, the former on the rules that protect against anomie (Puget, 1990).

Conclusion

In 1918 Freud suggested new directions for psychoanalytical treatment. He described many different ways to deal with transference in psychoneuroses (such as in hysteria, phobias and obsessive neurosis), also suggesting that some patients who failed to respond to the treatment might require a different type of therapy. When referring to phobias, for instance, he mentioned that the treatment helped them pass over borders of psychoanalytical knowledge that had been delimited by hysteria. The same occurred with obsessive neuroses.

Freud was trying to consolidate the universal/theoretical of psychoanalysis with clinical practice, while keeping to the metapsychological foundation on which every psychoanalyst should base his or her work. Since psychoanalysis is a practice of singularity, the analyst, like Freud himself, will always be concerned with turning the universal/theoretical/objective aspects of psychoanalytic discourse into a particular/singular/subjective dialog constructed in the intersubjective relation with the patient.

In psychoanalysis, the subject can only be thought of in the interiority of culture. Culture is the subjects' Other, and there is no way of thinking about him apart from it. Different linguistic codes, ethos and representations are enunciations of one's singularity, regardless of one's social class. Although this logic is constructed socially, it is also ruled by the unique logic of the unconscious. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to a pre-determined category. But far from denying the different determinants of one's identity, which are undoubtedly also socially constructed, this statement turns us from ethnocentric listening and directs us to what seems so obvious when dealing with our private practices, namely, what are one's desires? Desires are polysemous, paradoxical and polyglot. They act simultaneously in the singular and the plural in a dialogue.

If we cannot ignore all the injunctions of social pathology nor erase the differences, we must nevertheless be aware that the psychic cannot be reduced to a single register. Sociology, anthropology and psychology can all serve as tools

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for us to try to better understand human behavior and social functioning, but there is no single field of study that can reduce the human being or his psychic functioning, in all its complexity, to a single representational category.

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ABSTRACT

A clínica psicanalítica com populações de baixa-renda constitui-se como um campo novo de trabalho e de pesquisa. A psicanálise, pelo menos no Brasil, é, freqüentemente, acusada de ser ineficaz no tocante a este tipo de atendimento. Segundo visões mais conservadoras, a teoria de Freud não proveu uma base teórica para tal, da mesma forma que esta população, socialmente tão carente de tudo, não pode se dispor ao "luxo" de entrar em contato com os seus "desejos", mas apenas com suas necessidades. Baseado em nossa experiência, trabalhando com baixas populações de renda, discutimos algumas especificidades que deveriam ser levadas em conta. Apontaremos, igualmente, como a psicanálise nos dá as ferramentas apropriadas, sobretudo quando estabelecemos um diálogo com outros campos do saber. Dentre os vários aspectos que poderiam ter sido privilegiados decidimos focalizar a importância do "território" na construção da subjetividade.

Palavras-chave: *Psicanálise, população de baixa renda, território, desenraizamento, violência.*

La clínica psicoanalítica las comunidades de bajo ingreso és un nuevo campo de trabajo así como de investigación. El psicoanálisis, por lo menos en Brasil, también há sido acusada de ser ineficaz hasta donde la población del ingreso baja está interesada. Según las vistas más conservadoras, la teoría de Freud no mantuvo una base teórica sólida para tal comprensión, pero también esta población no podría permitirse el "lujo" de entrar en contacto con sus deseos pero sólo con sus necessidads. El artículo describe nuestra experiencia con la tal población en la ciudad de Río de Janeiro y señala algunas especificidades que deben tenerse en cuenta. Señalaremos, también, cómo el psicoanálisis nos da las herramientas apropiadas cuando nosotros podemos establecer un acercamiento multidisciplinario. Entre los varios aspectos que podrían ser privilegiados nosotros hemos decidido enfocar la importancia del "territorio" en la construcción de la subjectividad.

Palabras claves: *Psicoanálisis, población de la clase baja, territorio, desarraigamiento, violencia.*

La clinique psychanalytique des communautés de bas salaires se présente comme un nouveau champ et de travail, et de recherche. La psychanalyse, du moins au Brésil, est souvent accusée d'être inefficace dans ce domaine. Selon les points de vue plutôt conservateurs, non seulement la théorie de Freud n'aurait pas fourni de base théorique pour une telle compréhension, mais aussi cette population privée de tout ne pourrait pas s'offrir le "luxe" d'entrer en contact avec leurs "désirs", mais à peine avec leur besoins les plus urgents. Cet article basé sur notre expérience de travaille avec les populations de bas salaires, nous discuterons quelques spécificités qui devraient être

prises en considération en travaillant dans de tels environnements. Nous signalerons d'ailleurs, de quelle façon la psychanalyse nous fournit les outils convenables, surtout quand nous réussissons à établir une approche multidisciplinaire. Parmi les plusieurs aspects qui auraient pu être privilégiés, nous avons décidé de nous concentrer sur l'importance du "territoire" dans la construction de la subjectivité.

Mots clés: *Psychanalyse, population de bas salaires, territoire, déracinement, violence.*

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