The Academic culture of suffering: does it exist?

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Abstract

Teaching and research practices at the Graduate Level have been understood as an academic culture that causes suffering. The purpose of this article is to present an understanding of the suffering experienced at the Graduate Level from a cultural perspective. The paper problematizes the context of Graduate Programs and presents axioms of Semiotic Cultural Psychology that underlie the analysis of psychological processes that occur in the student's relationship with the academic environment. Academic culture is understood as the shared set of signs build and used by people in the doctoral school, which organize their internal and external worlds, regulate social interactions, and guide human actions. Thus, suffering is a cultural product of the interaction between the guiding forces of academic culture and the student's actions. It is suggested that future research can investigate empirically how graduate students create a personal synthesis starting from the academic culture.

Keywords: Educational psychology; Higher education; Psychological stress.

Recent studies have shown interest in the mental health of stricto sensu graduate students due to the increased reports of stress, anxiety, and depression among master's and doctoral students who directly or indirectly influence the academic and personal lives of these students (Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, & Vanderford, 2018; Levecque, Anseel, Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2018; Rummell, 2015; Santos et al., 2020). According to these studies, the stricto sensu Graduate Program is an environment that represents risks to students' mental health because academic demands overload the person's adaptive capacities, leading them to fall ill or quit the course (Magalhães & Real, 2020). Both consequences bring personal, academic, social, and economic losses to Higher Education Institutions. Considering the importance of Graduate Programs for the technological and scientific development of a country, it is necessary to reflect on the conditions involved in the production of the suffering of master's and doctoral students.

Arguing that academic demands pose a risk to the mental health of master's and doctoral students leads to the idea that Graduate Programs cause these sufferings (Costa & Nebel, 2018). The mistake of this type of idea is to put attention on the context – giving it some kind of protagonism – instead of focusing on

the relationship between the person and the context (Valsiner, 2012, 2014; Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato, & Dazzani, 2016). This relationship needs a thorough analysis to understand semiotic processes underlying the experiences of suffering within the academia (Savarese et al., 2019a, 2019b). Thus, the objective of this article is to present an understanding of suffering in Graduate Programs from a semiotic cultural perspective (Valsiner, 2012, 2014).

Although there is a vast literature on the challenges and mental health of Higher Education students from the perspective of Cultural Psychology (Feilberg, 2019; Madsen, 2021; Ross, 2019; Skúoy, Madsen, & Tateo, 2019; Szulevicz, Kure, & Løkken, 2019), yet studies that analyze the specificities of the Graduate Program context from this perspective are needed. Unlike a degree, master's and doctoral programs aim at training university professors and researchers (Almeida et al., 2005). This training involves the relationship with the advisor and the production of knowledge, which involves the development and improvement of specific skills. Although the academic community provides support, a part of this training happens alone, for example, during the reading and writing of the dissertation or thesis (Matthiesen & Wegener, 2019). In this sense, the graduate students' path happens in an interaction with the others and with themselves. Based on this premise we argue that suffering in academia is the product of cultural interaction. To develop this argument, the present article is structured as follows: (1) characterization of Brazilian Graduate Programs to understand the context in which the experiences of suffering happen; (2) presentation of the axioms of Semiotic Cultural Psychology that underlies this theoretical study; and (3) analysis and discussion of the Graduate Program context considering the relationship between the person and the culture.

Graduate Studies: a suffering scenario for researchers in training?

A study published in Nature Biotechnology, performed in 26 countries, stated that graduate students are six times more likely to develop depression or anxiety than the general population (Evans et al., 2018). Another study carried out in 66 institutions in Brazil found that, of the 2,157 graduate students who participated in the study, 46.8% had high or very high levels of stress (Faro, 2013). At first glance, these data are worrisome because they indicate that graduate school is a risky place for the students' mental health. However, it is necessary to consider that most of these studies use scales, questionnaires, or tests that depend on the students' perception of the Graduate Program context, which can generate overestimated responses. For example, a participant can perceive the most stressful academic context because he or she is experiencing some sort of family conflict. Therefore, the results of these studies need to be carefully considered, as stress, anxiety, and depression are different names for expressing suffering, but they can encompass a wide variety of human experiences (Costa & Nebel, 2018).

The need to carefully consider the results of related studies does not mean minimizing the problems reported by them or questioning the effectiveness of the instruments used but seeking to understand the experiences of graduate students as a product of an interaction between academic demands and individual expectations. To understand this, we will use the organization and functioning of the Brazilian *stricto sensu* Graduate Program as an example.

Higher Education Institutions seek investments and resources – human, technological, informational, and financial – for their research, which depends on the result of the Graduate Program Assessment carried out by the *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (Capes, Coordination for Higher Education Staff Development, 2017). The Capes assessment system is based on the Program Proposal, the Faculty, the Student Body, Theses and Dissertations, Intellectual Production and Social Insertion (Capes, 2017). For this, the Programs will need, among other things: to have infrastructure for teaching, research,

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and extension; to hire professors with adequate degrees, with experience in teaching and research, and with relevant scientific publications; to produce quality dissertations and theses in the regular course time. When hiring professors, these professionals are expected to help Graduate Programs to maintain or achieve the excellence of their courses. These professionals need to continue producing, teaching, and guiding young researchers, who also need to produce and need to complete the course on time for the program to be well assessed (Capes, 2017). Under these conditions, a cycle of requirements that is self-managed by the assessment system is created.

As a result of this cycle, coordinators and professors of Graduate Programs can create a high level of demand so that the students' answers meet the Capes assessment criteria. These requirements are manifest, above all, in interactions with advisors and teachers, who demand papers and articles for publication, require a large volume of reading and writing, and meeting deadlines (Faro, 2013; Costa & Nebel, 2018). These are the main sources of anxiety, stress, and depression reported by graduate students, which can be enhanced when the quality of the interaction with the advisor is unsatisfactory (Halbert, 2015; Noy & Ray, 2012; Santos, Perrone, & Dias, 2015). In addition to these sources, the difficulties of reconciling academic demands with those of personal and professional life are pointed out by other studies as stressful situations (Kernan, Bogart, & Wheat, 2011; Rummell, 2015). Examples of this are the health problems, illness, or death of loved ones, family conflicts, and financial difficulties, which are some of the common concerns that can influence both the health and academic performance of graduate students. This means that the experiences of academic life are intertwined with the experiences of personal life; it is not possible to separate them, the student transits in these different environments, carrying his or her experiences.

So, on the one hand, we have academic demands arising from an assessment system based on a production logic and which is expressed in the behavior of teachers and advisors; and, on the other hand, we have a student who needs to meet these demands in some way to complete the course, but who also has his or her personal issues, expectations, and demands that needs to be dealt with; these people find themselves in an academic context, producing different forms of experiences. When we look at these experiences without considering the interaction, or just from the perception of students or professors, we tend to understand suffering as a consequence of the context or as an individual problem. By this logic, it would be plausible to think that, if all Brazilian Graduate Programs are submitted to the same assessment system, then all students would suffer, fall ill, or quit their programs. However, if this were true, there would be no reports of successful experiences in graduate school (Lemos, Gioda, Martinhago, Bueno, & Martinez-Hernáez, 2017; Lima & Leite, 2019). On the other hand, it would also be plausible to defend the idea that the suffering, medical problems, or giving the academic career up is an individual problem of graduate students who are unable to meet their academic requirements. In our understanding, both explanations simplify complex academic experiences, placing them in a linear logic of causality that does not improve the understanding of the suffering experienced by graduate students. As a result, we propose a model for explaining academic suffering from a cultural semiotic perspective.

Culture and people from the perspective of Semiotic Cultural Psychology

The choice of Semiotic Cultural Psychology to discuss suffering in the academia is based on the conception that human beings are symbolic beings that co-build their worlds (Valsiner, 2012, 2014). We organize, regulate, and give meaning to our feelings, thoughts and actions through the creation and use of signs. In this sense, the chosen perspective offers a set of tools that allows us to understand the semiotic processes underlying the suffering produced in the academic environment.

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The culture as a process

The term *culture* "undoubtedly implies some form of constructive change in the natural course of things" (Valsiner, 2012, p. 21, our translation)[3]. This constructive modification involves any type of alteration caused to the environment, either by building or destroying the environment. For example, creating sophisticated techniques for planting, organizing education systems to build knowledge, emitting gases contribute to global warming, *etc*. Since it is the human being who carries out these constructive modifications, then, this means that culture is the action of the human being in constructively modifying his or her environment.

This human action is not without purpose. It fulfills a purpose, it has intentionality. The education system of Graduate Programs, for example, aims at training university professors and researchers, who will contribute to the country's scientific and technological development (Almeida et al., 2005). In this way, people modify the environment to satisfy their needs, therefore, culture is goal oriented.

Orientation implies that people assign senses and meanings to their world and their relationships (Valsiner, 2012, 2014). These senses and meanings organize our reality by assigning values, principles, beliefs, rules, and ways of acting. For example, a university can be a symbol of prestige at one time, be devalued at another time, and decades later acquire the status of intangible heritage, recovering its historical value. Thus, culture is dynamic because the senses and meanings are constantly transformed over time.

Culture is not only about modifying the environment or assigning senses and meanings, but also in our interaction with others and with ourselves. This interaction is mediated by signs (Branco & Valsiner, 2010; De Luca, Martino, & Freda, 2018). A sign is anything with the property of representing for someone a certain aspect of an object, which can be a word, an image, an event or even another object or sign (Pierce, 2005). In this perspective, scientific values, norms, deadlines, are types of signs that regulate the academic life of students. Signs like this are continually constructed and conveyed when people meet in classrooms, supervisions, research groups, course activities, among other kinds of meetings. In these meetings, people are able to negotiate – with themselves and with each other – new signs, reconstruct, enhance, weaken, or deconstruct signs (Valsiner, 2014). In this sense, culture is a dynamic process of semiotic mediation that guides, but does not determine, people's actions.

The person as an agent

If we take culture as a process, then the word culture is closer to a verb that indicates an action than to a noun that indicates the subject of a sentence. By this logic, it is plausible to think that culture does not cultivate itself, but that someone cultivates something. In this way, culture is not an agent with the capacity to reflect, to make decisions and to change; the ones who have this capacity are the human beings, and, therefore, the person is the agent of this process (Stetsenko, 2020; Valsiner, 2014).

Cultural Psychology emphasizes that the person is the agent because there will always be the possibility of innovation or resistance in the interaction with the world (Marsico & Tateo, 2018; Stetsenko, 2020). This means that, although there is strong social pressure channeling the person's actions in one direction, it is the person who chooses whether to yield or oppose social pressure (Valsiner, 2014); unpredictability is a potent and latent characteristic of human interaction, even in very controlled environments. It is because of this unpredictability that the new, the change, and transformation can emerge.

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4 [3] In the original: "*inegavelmente, alguma forma de modificação construtiva no curso natural das coisas*" (Valsiner, 2012, p. 21).

Human agency is what allows people to modify their subjective and objective realities and also to be modified by them. This means that person and world are built in a mutual process. This process occurs in a bi-directional way, from the outside to the inside (internalization) and from the inside to the outside (externalization) (Valsiner, 2014). Internalization is the process of apprehending and transforming a meaning shared by the social environment, and externalization is the reconstructed expression of that meaning in the social environment. Internalization and externalization enable the maintenance, construction, reconstruction, or destruction of meanings. In this way, the person cultivates personal and shared meanings, which will compose his or her internal and external world, and these, in turn, will regulate the person's experiences, again modifying the constructed meanings, in a constant cycle of transformations of his or her subjective and objective reality. It is in this sense that we say that culture is a co-constructed process by the active action of the person.

The person and the culture coordinating themselves

The process of internalizing and externalizing is equivalent to saying that culture regulates people's experiences with the outside world (interpsychological level) and also regulates people's experience with their internal world (intrapsychological level) (Valsiner, 2012). At the intrapsychological level, culture regulates how people organize themselves internally, thinking and feeling; at the interpsychological level, it regulates how people organize themselves externally, expressing themselves, communicating and relating to other people. In this way, culture is present both "inside" and "outside" of the person, but especially in the relationship "between" person and context.

Being "outside", culture presents itself in the meanings shared between social agents (people and social institutions), which provide the set of signs that regulate, guide, and organize human actions. Being "inside", culture presents itself through the particular meanings that people reconstruct from social interaction. These two processes were called, respectively, "collective culture" and "personal culture" by Valsiner (2012).

Collective culture and personal culture are coordinated in the construction of the social and subjective worlds of human experience (Valsiner, 2012). Coordination means that personal culture derives from collective culture at the same time that one organizes the other, and vice versa. This implies that they are different, interdependent and one does not determine the other. The coordination between collective and personal culture is dynamic, being constantly changing, in such a way that it is impossible to foresee its final configuration.

The place where personal and collective culture meet is the social environment in which the person has a main function. We participate in society from the various social institutions that organize and regulate our lives. Each social institution in which we transit and participate seeks to channel our actions through the meanings shared in that environment (collective cultural). However, this participation also opens up spaces for negotiation so that we can exist and build our reality (Marsico, 2018; Valsiner, 2014).

Cultural Psychology and Graduate Studies: a cultural look at the academia

Graduate Programs are a type of social institution imbued with shared social values that permeates our imagination before deciding to pursue a master's or doctorate. In addition, graduate students can assign a personal meaning to their university course from the suggestions coming from the society that they are inserted in, be frustrated when coming into contact with the reality of the course, (re)signify the value of the course

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because of the experience of frustration, keep suffering in the course, or quit it. Thus, the expectation with the course is confronted in this experience, reinforcing, destroying, or reconstructing the meaning attributed.

Unlike other contexts, interactions between people in graduate school are regulated according to scientific production. This production goes from the planning and execution of a project to the writing and defense of the dissertation or thesis. Delivery deadlines, for example, is a sign that regulates the student's actions so that he or she can complete the paper. If the process takes place in a planned manner, you will have a better chance of delivering the paper on time, otherwise you may feel anxious about the time limit running out. Under these conditions, you can renegotiate the deadline to reduce anxiety.

These signs are present in several forms of charges that "channel" the students' actions so that they fit the Capes criteria. However, in this "channeling" process, students are able to resist these demands, deny them, or accept them (Marsico & Tateo, 2018). For example, if a student wants to pursue an academic career, he or she will need to develop his or her research experience, presenting scientific papers, participating / organizing scientific events, conducting tutorials, publishing scientific articles, etc. It is more likely, in this case, that the student will try to meet all academic requirements and, if it is not possible, he or she may suffer, fall ill, or quit the course. In other words, personal expectations regarding academic careers also guide, regulate, and organize students' actions.

Graduate Programs, with their shared scientific norms, rules and values represent a collective culture from which the personal culture of graduate students can be (re) constructed, guiding them in the face of academic experiences. This means that, in the experience of living the academic life, individuals are constantly transforming their beliefs, speeches, meanings, attitudes and perspectives of life based on what they hear from significant people, expectations, perceptions, and from what can be learned throughout the course (Marsico & Tateo, 2018; Ressurreição & Sampaio, 2018).

However, the Graduate Program context is marked by criticism, exposure, opposition of ideas, confrontation, and demands, which can be catalytic factors for the experiences of suffering. Catalytic factors are the conditions that facilitate or hinder the emergence of certain psychological phenomena or processes (Valsiner, 2020). This is equivalent to saying that Graduate Programs do not cause suffering because: (1) they have no agentive capacity; (2) personal and academic issues are intrinsically related; and (3) the context of graduate education as a semiotic mediator is always promoting and inhibiting psychological processes. The logic of causality assumes that it is possible to isolate intervening factors and determine the factor that causes something. Instead, Cultural Psychology takes a catalytic perspective, as human experience takes place under conditions that favor some processes and simultaneously inhibit others. Thus, it is impossible to establish a linear causal relationship.

Following this line of thinking, suffering at the Graduate Level can be understood as a process that promotes a cyclical relationship while inhibiting the disruption of the cycle, making it difficult for new meanings to emerge. To explain this, we will use as an example the theoretical concept of Gegenstand introduced by Valsiner (2020) to explain processes of self-generated opposites. Gegenstand's notion can be outlined as follows: two forces of opposite directions and a boundary between them ($\rightarrow || \leftarrow$). These forces represent the resistance present in the intentionality of human action, which makes up any psychological system. These forces, when interacting, intensify each other, generating a cycle that allows interchange at the boundary, while they are acting. In the case of Graduate Studies, this cycle would not allow exchange and possible transformations, and the suffering would happen due to successive unsuccessful attempts to carry out such actions. Explaining in other words, in the interaction with the academic culture, the student faces, successively and unsuccessfully, difficulties in reconciling academic demands with personal needs. This does not mean to say that personal culture and collective culture are opposing forces that generate experiences of suffering, but that the person can interpret reality in this way and be guided by this idea. Thus, they would fall ill due to the wear and tear of this cycle that does not allow a satisfactory exchange with the environment to generate new meanings; quitting would be an attempt to stop this situation.

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Final Considerations

The aim of this article was to present an understanding of suffering in graduate school from a cultural perspective. For this, we argue that (1) culture is a dynamic and semiotic process; (2) people, not culture, are agents capable of reflecting, deciding, and transforming reality; and (3) people create personal and collective cultures that are coordinated and not determined.

In this way, the context of teaching and research in Graduate Studies can catalyze certain academic experiences. Scientific production, supervision, and the assessment system are made operated by people who have interpersonal relationships, facilitating and/or hindering academic life. Thus, it is theoretically inconsistent to say that academic culture causes suffering to students.

Academic suffering, as well as its meanings, is a cultural product and not an individual problem. After all, it is in the interaction that people regulate, guide, and organize social and subjective experiences. The Graduate Program context is characteristically challenging as new skills are required amid criticism, demands and expectations. For this reason, falling ill or quitting the course are possible responses to a cycle of suffering experiences.

The relationship between collective culture and personal culture is still an aspect that needs to be further investigated in the contexts of Graduate Studies. Although Brazilian Graduate Programs are subject to the same assessment system, they do not represent hegemonic or homogeneous collective cultures, as each program has its own way of dealing with Capes requirements. This paper outlined general theoretical explanations on the subject in the context of mental health, but further empirical studies necessary to test and expand our theoretical explanations in other Graduate Programs. Since these are unique experiences, idiographic studies are recommended to understand the general cultural process underlying each case.

Contributors

A. S. P. SILVA: responsible for the conception and idea planning for the article and writing and elaborating the text. G. MARSICO: professor advisor for the article, responsible for the critical intellectual review, and approval of the final version for publication.

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