

University of Dublin, Trinity College
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**A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Super-ego in
the Postmodern Era**

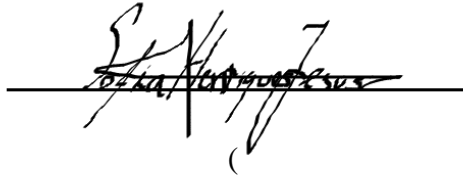
by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree to any other University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sofia Jesus', is written over a solid horizontal line. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Sofia Jesus)

10 July 2020

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how the postmodern era may have altered the functioning of the super-ego. Authors such as Žižek, George Frankl, Lieberman and other contemporary psychoanalysts have produced several hypotheses to describe how the Freudian super-ego has been modified by the postmodern era, creating a new, postmodern super-ego. The aim is to create a discussion about which super-ego features may have disappeared, which may have been modified and which may have remained unaltered. The following propositions are considered: the break of the bond with the authority; the empowerment of the ego-ideal; the lack of a moral compass; the exemption from guilt; and the liberation of the instincts of the id. Each proposal is discussed while bearing in mind the difficulty of disturbing what is intrapsychic and the challenge of distinguishing mere cultural modifications from changes in the functioning of a psychic agency. Some of the hypotheses concerning the postmodern super-ego are illustrated through the discussion of the George Floyd protests. The analysis of the proposals and the discussion of the civil protests suggest that certain structural functions of the super-ego are no longer active, namely, the repression of the aggression towards paternal or authoritarian figures and the acquisition or application of firm notions of right and wrong, good and bad. On the other hand, it also suggests that the ego-ideal remains active, possibly even more active than before and that the feelings of guilt and shame persevere. In sum, the end of prohibitions and obligations brought upon by postmodernity is likely to have modified certain aspects of the super-ego, promoting emancipation and the reduction of repression. However, it seems to have generated uncertainty, new anxieties and an unconditional obligation to conform to an unrealistic ideal of happiness and freedom.

Introduction

It is an ever-lasting challenge to estimate the influence of culture on human beings. Culture seems to be continuously evolving and changing, whereas human nature has demonstrated a surprising consistency in its most profound features. Some argue that history is only repeating itself and so are we. The purpose of this work is to discuss the possibility of postmodern culture altering the super-ego. For that purpose, the words “change”, “modification” or “alteration” are used several times. The super-ego is likely the most culturally-influenced of the three Freudian psychic agencies, which reinforces the need for constant revision. However, it will not be argued that the super-ego has been permanently modified. Instead, this is a study of how the super-ego may have responded to the particular conditions of existence of the postmodern era, rather than a suggestion of a permanent and stable alteration of a complex set of ideas.

There are few works updating psychoanalytic concepts in the light of the 21st century culture, particularly, concerning the concept of super-ego. This century, an heir of the many conflicts, wars and social challenges of the 20th century, carries a spirit of change; an insatiable desire for freedom, relativism, subjectivity and a wish to break with past traditions. This change in the Western culture is bound to modify mentalities, behaviours, emotional experiences and relationships between people, especially between people of different generations. If culture is no longer repressing individuals through prohibitions and commandments, if God is questioned and authority figures have lost public trust, then how do postmodern subjects decide what to do or what is right and what is wrong? When Freud, Klein, Bion, Winnicott and many other psychoanalysts of the 20th century helped elaborate the concept of super-ego, society was highly repressive, individuals lived guilty and ashamed, and authorities such as parents, governors and educators were held in high regard, feared and admired for their power and knowledge. This repression, alongside a code of moral conduct and an ideal of what one should become, were introjected in infancy. Individuals felt guilty or ashamed whenever culture or their parents said they should feel that way. However, in the 21st century, for many who have experienced war and others who do not wish to experience it, authority represents fascism, therefore, it is refused and fought against. What then of the super-ego? What happens to the psychic agency Freud claimed to be created to repress the anger against a more powerful figure, a paternal figure? Or what happens to the structure Klein believed to be shaped from the relationship of fear, aggression and love towards a parental figure? Furthermore, should

this shift in the relationship of individuals towards the authority alter the way some offences are judged by the criminal justice system? It was the lack of answers to these and other questions that prompted the idea for this dissertation. The choice of these topics comes from a deep interest in the analysis of unconscious processes in groups and societies. The idea of a collective unconscious and how it may change from a century and a culture to another might be one of the most interesting and relevant subjects to explore and to further the comprehension of human nature. This interest was combined with a concern for the subjects of morality and repression, particularly, about how they have evolved and how society reflects upon them, as well as the extent to which society should adjust itself and its organisms to its variations in order to assure justice for everyone at all times.

Some authors, such as Žižek, Lieberman, Lipovetsky and George Frankl addressed the changes of the 21st century culture and its impact on the behaviour and the psyche of Western individuals. Frankl described the postmodern behaviour and argued that the super-ego was being annihilated while Žižek coined the term postmodern super-ego and focused on the overturn of parental authorities. These authors have pinpointed the changes, however, it was necessary to systematically deconstruct their propositions, distinguish cultural changes from changes in the functioning of the super-ego and compare these suggestions to what had already been said in the field of psychoanalysis.

In order to achieve this aim, this dissertation is organised in three chapters. The first chapter presents a review of the psychoanalytic literature on the concept of super-ego. This review focuses mainly on the contributions of Freud and Klein, which are discussed, enriched and criticized with the help of other authors such as Bion, Winnicott, Britton, Fairbairn and more recent contributors such as Lieberman and Lansky.

In the second chapter, the concept of postmodern super-ego is presented as well as the context in which it has emerged. This is followed by a description and analysis of the behaviour of postmodern Western individuals and the possible causes for the changes in their comportment and attitude. Then, the proposals made by contemporary authors in favour of a new super-ego are analysed. The following hypotheses are discussed: the break of the bond with the authority; the changes in the ego-ideal; the lack of a moral compass; the exemption from guilt; and the liberation of the impulses of the id.

In the third chapter, the George Floyd protests and the behaviour of the protesters are used to illustrate the changes that may have occurred in the super-ego. The behaviour of the protesters is analysed and divided in the following aspects: the revolt against the

police; the lack of super-ego censorship over the id during the protests; the strength of the ego-ideal demonstrated in the pressure of postmodern ideals, guilt and shame; and the uncertainty, anxiety and reflexivity surrounding both protesters and bystanders. Finally, in the conclusion, there is a discussion concerning the aspects of the super-ego that are considered to have been modified by postmodernity and those that were preserved. From this conclusion was acquired a new comprehension of the concept of super-ego, as well as a comprehension of the current state of postmodern individuals in what concerns their emotional experience of guilt and anxiety; their ethical decision making process; their freedom and happiness; their relationship towards powerful figures and the new importance of the self and its ideals for the constitution of a different super-ego.

Chapter One: Review of the literature on the super-ego over the history of psychoanalysis

The concept of super-ego has been a central point of attention in the psychoanalytic theory and, as so, it carries with it a long and intricate history. It was developed from the observation of a complex set of experiences and it has been mentioned in many contexts, by several authors to our present day.

The super-ego as the heir of the Oedipus complex

The idea of the “super-ego” emerged from the necessity to name and make sense of a set of shared experiences and feelings. Freud explored these experiences separately until he began to perceive them as being inter-related and circumscribed them to an all-encompassing concept. Hence, the abstract concept of super-ego comprises a set of different, autonomous and complex experiences, such as the experience of guilt; censorship; self-criticism; the experience of love, hate and fear between a child and his first object-choices; the idea of ego-ideal and of moral agency. Once these ideas were traced to a common denominator, the term “super-ego” was coined. It took Freud several years to develop this polymorphous concept. His development of the different ideas that compose the super-ego is spread across several of his works, which made it difficult to summarise it. These multiple ideas are discussed and clarified in the following paragraphs. Firstly, the super-ego is presented in the context of Freud’s second topography, which allows for an understanding of its level of consciousness and its rapport to other structures of the psyche. Secondly, the connection of the ego-ideal with the super-ego is discussed. Thirdly, the importance of the idea of the super-ego as censorship is made clear. Next, the aspect of moral agency is explored. Finally, the super-ego is presented as the generator of the experience of guilt and self-criticism.

In *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923), the super-ego appears as one of the three agencies of the psyche, alongside the id and the ego in his second topography, i.e., his second attempt to create a model of the human psyche. These three agencies are similar in that they are abstract constructs which enclose complex processes of mental life and human behaviour. They can be distinguished by the different functions attributed to them, as well as by the level of consciousness they exhibit. Freud describes the super-ego as a less conscious division within the ego. In other words, a structure situated somehow between the unconscious (the id) and consciousness (the ego).

In *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923), the author speaks of the super-ego and of the ego ideal (how the self wishes to be) as if they were interchangeable. The ego-ideal consists in the process of the child setting up an ideal in himself, to be sought after, through which he measures his actual ego. The ideal the child sets up in himself is a result of the identification of the infant with his object-choice, for example, his father or mother. The non-alignment of the ego with the ideal, or with the introjected identification, produces feelings of guilt (characterized by anxiety and remorse) and shame. Feelings of guilt can be conscious, as in people mourning the loss of a loved-one; or unconscious, as in with melancholic patients. That is why the super-ego is also mentioned in *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1914) in relation to states of melancholia, self-deprecation, feelings of guilt and inferiority. In this work, Freud also relates this identification mechanism with the mourning process by admitting the possibility of the recently lost love-object being introduced into the ego and altering its character. Even though the super-ego is intimately related to the concept of ego ideal they are not identical (Freud, 1933) – since the ego-ideal is a part of the abstract concept of super-ego instead of being side by side with it.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), the author focused on the super-ego's function of censorship, which aims to repress or prohibit id's instinctual wishes from becoming conscious or fulfilled. Thus, the super-ego acts as a contact barrier that regulates and selects the contents to be repressed from the ones that are allowed in consciousness. The function of censorship is fundamental in the super-ego since it constitutes the main reason why the super-ego appears in the first place - it appears with the purpose of repressing the Oedipus complex. It does so by censoring the feelings the child experiences towards his early love-object and by controlling the ego through categorical imperatives. The super-ego protects the infant from becoming overwhelmed with prohibited desires while, at the same time, it is the one that forbids them - which makes the super-ego the protector from anxiety and also its generator. This contact barrier is programmed by cultural impediments which, even though they prohibit the expression of instinctual desires, they do not prevent the feeling of guilt caused by these desires. The repressed wishes can emerge from the unconscious in dreams, where censorship is numbed. The level of censorship is as high as the level of distortion of the dream content found during dream-work. Similarly, the stronger are the instinctual wishes and the Oedipus complex the faster they will be repressed.

Another idea that Freud traced back to the super-ego concerns the moral agency of individuals. The moral compass is forged through the exposure to the do's and don'ts in interaction with the parents, culture, and educators. This prolonged exposure culminates in the introjection of the parental agency – this introjection constitutes the primordium of the super-ego. It is crucial to note that Freud establishes a difference between the parents and the parental agency – since he is not referring to the parents *per se*, as much as to the parents' super-ego (Laplanche, J., & Pontalis, J., 1988). It is important to grasp this difference since it offers an insight into how the super-ego contributes to the transmission and preservation of traditional values from generation to generation. After having established its purpose, Freud (1923) concludes that the super-ego develops as a result of childhood helplessness and that it is “the residue of the earliest object-choices of the id”, as well as “an energetic reaction-formation against those choices” (p. 30). This definition carries a powerful image, depicting the super-ego emerging from and remaining in a permanent struggle towards the loved, hostile, and prohibited infantile object-relations. According to Freud, the identification with the love-objects and, consequently, the introjection of the parental agency, only take place after the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. Since the love-object is no longer libidinally invested in, this identification is a way to preserve the object-relation after the abandonment of the object-cathexis. The result of this process is stored in the super-ego, which “retains the character of the father” (Freud, 1923, p. 31).

In brief, Freud assigns multiple functions to the super-ego, such as to observe the ego and, later, judging and punishing it. The function of punishing produces the already mentioned feeling of guilt and a persistent self-criticism, which are two of the most palpable effects of this psychic structure. Freud (1923) notes that “the super-ego fulfils the same function of protecting and saving that was fulfilled in earlier days by the father” (p. 61). The super-ego's punitive agency results in feelings of guilt and shame. The generation of this conflict within the ego, regardless of it being consciously acknowledged or not, results in a splitting of the ego between an accuser and an accused. The sense of guilt is one of the most noticeable consequences of the action of the super-ego upon the psyche. According to Freud, the appearance in infants of the first signs of “guilty conscience” (Westerink, 2009, p. 254) matches the appearance of the super-ego, meaning, the stage of the Oedipus complex. This connection led him to the conviction that both the super-ego and the sense of guilt are linked to the ambivalent situation of aggression towards a beloved parent, who is both loved and admired as a role model, and

hated because he hinders the child's instinctual wishes. Furthermore, the super-ego of the external authority figure is not the only thing internalized by the infant, he also internalizes the aggressive instincts experienced towards that authority figure. According to Freud, since this internalized aggression cannot be turned outward, it turns inward, generating the super-ego and the feelings of guilt and shame.

Before the Oedipus complex, Freud argues that the child's actions are not a result of a "guilty conscience" but, instead, are a result of a fear of punishment or a fear of loss of the caregiver's love, which is dramatic for the infant, who is in a position of complete dependency. At this stage, the child is controlled and intimidated by the super-ego of his caregivers and not by his own. This situation takes a turn for the worse when the authority is internalized by the infant. At that moment, since nothing can be concealed from the super-ego, the child is overwhelmed by the fear of the omnipotence of his thought. The sense of guilt does not get relieved by the renunciation of instincts, it persists in thought, creating an inescapable "permanent internal unhappiness" (Freud, 1930, p. 74). Thus, Freud concludes that the sense of guilt is not just an individual symptom, but a cultural and religious collective problem (cultural super-ego). The internalization of the super-ego can be problematic if it becomes too overpowering, as in cases of hysteria and obsessional neurosis, where the super-ego tyrannizes the psyche.

Freud's theorization of the super-ego as being composed of internalized aggression suggests he sees this agency as a sadistic and death driven entity (Freud, 1923). On other occasions, Freud contradicts himself by considering the super-ego as a prosocial structure that raises the moral value of men and prepares them to live in civilization (Carveth, 2013, p. 11). He seems unsure about how to qualify the super-ego. In truth, it is difficult to morally qualify the super-ego, as it is difficult to judge its level of conscious awareness. The idea that the ego and the super-ego are moral structures, while the id is an animalistic and malevolent structure has been shown to be oversimplistic. In *The Immoral Super-ego* (2015, p. 6), Carveth quotes the work of Robert J. Lifton (1986) to present the argument that individuals responsible for atrocities in the 20th century were not acting on the impulse of the id. They were, on the contrary, "super-ego-driven 'do-gooders' who employed sophisticated ego function in the service of mass murder". Carveth argues that psychoanalysis has tended to overlook both the depravity of the super-ego and the morality of the id. Regardless of the super-ego being good or bad, Freud thought of the super-ego as a narcissistic structure and one that is never wholly given up.

Following Freud's theoretical views, Anna Freud (1936) focused on the impact of the super-ego in the formation of neurosis, and its analysis as an essential part of therapeutic work. The author argues that the super-ego acts by setting an ideal standard that constrains the expression of sexuality and violence. However, when the ego obeys the super-ego's commands, it can become "incapable of enjoyment" (1936, p. 58). The analyst's role is to relieve the ego by controlling the super-ego's demands and seeking a reduction of its severity. This description conforms to the features of the super-ego already identified by Freud: censorship and ego ideal. However, Anna Freud did not just limit herself to reiterating her father's claims, she has also contributed to the subject by further developing a theory, originally presented by Sandor Ferenczi (Ferenczi & Dupont 1995), concerning the mechanism of identification with the aggressor. According to Anna Freud and Ferenczi, this mechanism is a primordium of the super-ego. This ego mechanism is called into action when the child's wishes are hindered by an external object, towards whom he feels aggressive impulses on the one hand, and a strong libidinal attachment on the other. The ego's response to this conflict is to identify with the aggressor, thereby internalizing the criticism, as well as introjecting the characteristics and opinions of the external object as if they were his own. It is the identification with the aggressor that will promote the introjection of the contents which will later form the super-ego. The author argues that identification is one of the most powerful mechanisms of the primitive ego against anxiety from an external object. The internalized criticism is not right away set against the self and converted into self-criticism. Instead, the self-criticism is preceded by a projection of guilt, that is, an externalization of the criticism onto the external world. In Anna Freud's (1936) words, "Its intolerance of other people precedes its severity toward itself" (p. 111). This initial phase, consisting in an externalization of aggression, can offer an explanation to the early sadistic and narcissistic behaviours of children. The scenario in which this mechanism takes place corresponds to the stage of the Oedipus complex and, consequently, it is consistent with Freud's hypothesis that postulates a connection of this conflict with the formation of the super-ego.

In the contemporary Freudian tradition, the Sandler's have described the super-ego as being composed of imperatives which, together with moral standards, ideals, and desired goals transmitted by the parents and other important figures in the child's life, form the super-ego system (Sandler & Sandler, 1998). They argue that the super-ego is not a steady set of values but, instead, "a full and harmonized organisation of divergent

trends” (Tyson & Tyson, 1990, p. 201). They have also provided a clarification that was lacking from Freud’s previous work, namely, a necessary distinction between an introject – which should be limited to the internalized prohibitions and imperatives; and an ideal – the desired standards of the individual. Furthermore, Sandler & Sandler (1998) have shown how approval can have a very significant positive effect on the super-ego. They have shown that whenever the ego and super-ego are in harmony, a “feeling of being loved” is produced and the capacity for autonomy is reinforced (Barnett, 2007, p. 87). On the contrary, when the child is in constant need of care and reassurance from his caregivers and fails to obtain it, he might become overly attached to his super-ego introject as a way to stay in control and to reach his ideal standards of the self. Considering the aspects of the super-ego as theorized by Freud, the most emphasized aspect by the Sandler is of the super-ego as the ego ideal, or an ensemble of ideal representations. On this subject, they have argued that the ego ideal should be subdivided into *ideal object representations*, *ideal child representations* and *ideal self-representations*. The “ideal object representations” are formations in which the parents are perceived as perfect and omnipotent by the infant, forming strong standards against which later perceptions are measured. The “ideal child representations” are composed of the actual parental standards or parental fantasies about their ideal child. These representations are mainly derived from the parents’ super-egos. The “ideal self-representation” has several sources and is considered as the most sophisticated of all (Sandler & Sandler, 1998, p. 12).

The early twofold super-ego

Making up for the overly narcissistic super-ego created by Freud, the Kleinian tradition helped dissipate some of it by preferring to focus on the relationship between the ego, its internalized objects, and their formative value. From her observational analysis of children of a young age, Klein managed to uncover primitive impulses of love on the one hand; and hatred, aggression, and guilt on the other. From this extensive clinical experience, Klein (2002) proposed significant revisions to the classical theory of the super-ego. She identified pre-oedipal phantasies¹ and anxieties regarding authority figures in children under the age of two, which led her to the conclusion that a primitive form of the super-ego was already present in the first year of life, contrary to what had been previously argued by Freud. In other words, the formation of the super-ego preceded

¹ The concept of “phantasy” is here distinguished from “fantasy” in order to designate deeper unconscious processes that aim at satisfying instincts by converting them into ideas and images.

the Oedipus complex rather than appearing because of it. Furthermore, Klein argues that the primitive super-ego is much harsher, phantastic and sadistic than the one appearing in children after the fifth year of life. Freud's hypothesis of a super-ego that is formed with the resolution of the oedipal complex is the final stage of a more complex developmental process, associated with part and whole-object relationships. Another possibility is to consider the existence of a much more primitive and earlier form of the Oedipus complex that would appear at the same time as the primitive form of super-ego. Essentially, both authors agree that the super-ego is composed of both aggression and remorse, although the crucial difference (the aspect Freud failed to see) is that these two feelings do not necessarily surface at the same time. It is possible that an aggressive and primitive facet of the super-ego will appear first, and a more mature and remorseful facet later. For Klein to come to this discovery, she first had to develop the concept of position (paranoid-schizoid and depressive) and revisit Freud's theory of anxiety - restructuring it to integrate the concepts of persecutory anxiety and depressive anxiety (which was the first major allusion to guilt as a genuine concern for the well-being of others).

According to Klein, the early formation of the super-ego system begins with the weaning process (Barnett, 2007, p. 94). This process creates in the child aggressive phantasies towards his mother's breast and other part-objects. On the one hand, the child projects bad part-objects onto his parents, elicited from his own aggression; while, on the other hand, he introjects them as "a bad persecuting internal breast" (Klein, 1934). For Klein, the super-ego of the child is formed of monsters and terrifying creatures which symbolize his parents, despite the fact that they do not coincide with the real image of the parents. In short, it is composed of a split-off part of the ego into which good and bad aspects of the object-choices are projected. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the child fears retaliation and experiences persecutory anxiety - fear of being attacked by projected "bad" part-objects. This fear that follows the introjection of the bad object is the first form of the super-ego. In other words, the child has introjected the super-ego, and now feels an even bigger amount of fear than before, since he is now persecuted from inside. To get rid of this anxiety, the child attempts to destroy his objects, which only increases the persecutory anxiety he is experiencing. At this stage, we find a preliminary portion of the super-ego in action, namely, its feature of aggression. In brief, this early and primitive super-ego relies on the identification with internalized phantasy part-objects and possesses powerful, destructive qualities, which act unconsciously to punish the child.

In the course of normal development, after the sadistic phase, the child will hopefully improve his adaptation to reality, as well as his social connections, which will help him to perceive his parents for what they really are - as whole-objects, instead of part-objects. This perception transforms the aggressive instincts into feelings of guilt, depressive anxiety (fear of what the infant fantasizes his “badness” could do to whole-objects) and desire to make reparations for the previous destructive attempts. Then, we find the remorseful part of the super-ego, also called the depressive super-ego (Zetzel, 1970). Freud was right to consider that this ability is out of reach for children under a certain age, however, the lack of remorse and guilt does not necessarily imply the absence of a super-ego, since this can be present initially in the form of aggressive phantasies towards the part-object parents. The achievement of this position depends not only on the weaning process, but also on cognitive development, on the integration of the good and bad breast and on a capacity to withstand frustration. With the depressive position the child will also start to perceive himself as a whole-object - the self becomes differentiated from a non-self and from the mother. These basic features of ego development are important prerequisites for a super-ego to come into existence. It is not possible to interiorize a rule, a law, or a set of values without a basic sense of selfhood, involved in simple commands such as “You must...”.

The Kleinian tradition states, in brief, that the super-ego exists from the oral phase, manifests itself in the relationship between the baby and the breast and, more specifically, from his first introjection of the bad object. In her account of the super-ego, Klein maintains the Freudian idea of a formation containing the do’s and don’ts provided by authority figures, as well as the implication of the mechanism of identification, already mentioned by him in the formation of the super-ego. However, Klein does not attribute much weight to the aspects of contact barrier and unconscious repression.

Even though authors still disagree on how the super-ego is formed, many have produced findings that support Klein’s hypothesis of a primitive super-ego. For example, Spitz (1958) has identified behavioural patterns in children under 2 years old, which correspond to the early structure formation of a subsequent super-ego. Spitz (1958) also observed that infants understand prohibitions and commands from the ninth month of life (p. 381). Prohibitions appear to leave a more lasting memory trace in infants, since they lead to frustration and are considered as uncompleted actions, which are usually better recalled than completed ones. Moreover, Spitz has managed to contradict Freud’s claim postulating that the super-ego derives from verbal claims, since the mechanism of

identification with the aggressor does not appear with the word “no” but, instead, with the gesture and head-shaking of the parents.

Besides the already mentioned authors, many others have attempted to contribute to the already existing theories on the super-ego. Ronald Britton (2003) wrote extensively on the concept of the ego, on how it can emancipate itself from the super-ego, as well as how it can be destroyed by it. In short, he explores the relationship between the ego and the super-ego. The super-ego is said to derive its energy from the id, even though that is not the only thing that it takes from the id. When the id’s love-object is transformed into a part of the ego, the latter gains knowledge of the id’s experiences and weaknesses. Since the super-ego is a part of the ego, it also benefits from this knowledge which strengthens its dominance over the id. According to Britton, the ego must not be considered as a helpless entity against an overpowering super-ego since it is equipped with the means to fight back. He contrasts two types of authority within the psyche, one belonging to the ego and another to the super-ego. The ego has an authority based on knowledge from experience and from reality-testing and, thus, it can question the unrealistic emotions or ideas originating in the super-ego. This knowledge is necessary for the ego to be able to negotiate its way out of the schizoid-paranoid position. In this position, the super-ego has the upper hand and it is crucial to reverse this situation as soon as possible. The super-ego has an authority inherited from the parents and educators, and from culture and religion. Therefore, while the ego judges and observes the self; the super-ego observes others and judges based on that observation. So far, most authors have argued about an over-powering super-ego, whereas Britton gives an equal if not a superior power to the ego. He argues that a mature and autonomous ego can judge and question the super-ego, causing it to lose its persecutory aspect and to adopt a more flexible form. This process puts an end to super-ego punishment and replaces it by remorse and wish for reparation. If the super-ego is too powerful or the ego is deficient, the latter can become subdued by the former. When the ego manages to balance its relationship with the super-ego, a question emerges: did the ego become stronger, or did the super-ego become weaker?

So far, the authors that were mentioned in this dissertation have focused on studying the super-ego and guilt on babies and children, overlooking them in adults. Bion, mainly inspired by Klein’s theory concerning the primitive super-ego, has distinguished what he called the moral impulse (corresponding to an early, primitive, pathological super-ego) from a more sophisticated and rational super-ego and “systems of morality”, appearing only at a later stage in life (Barnett, 2007, p. 95). Bion is known for his research

on the psychotic personality and functioning which, when applied to infants, he connected to Klein's paranoid-schizoid position. In infants, he distinguished a normally developing super-ego from a psychotic destructive super-ego that turns against the self. He explained this decompensation through an unsatisfactory containment. In health, the infant projects his beta-elements - chaotic emotions and anxieties ("the contained") into the "good breast" ("the container") and later receives them from the caregiver in a tolerable, processed form (Bion, 2000, p. 28). Bion shows how in a deficient relationship between container and contained the thinking apparatus of the child can become obstructed and the alpha-function hindered. When this occurs, ideas remain persecuting things-in-themselves that must be expelled, namely, through an excessive use of projective identification. The relationship of the child towards the caregiver will be obscured by envy² and aggression. When a super-ego of this kind becomes established, the psychotic part of the personality becomes dominant (as opposed to a normal coexistence of psychotic with non-psychotic parts), leading to the formation of a powerful, perverse, and destructive super-ego, also called, a "super-super-ego" (Etchegoyen, 1991, p. 752). In other words, it becomes a "perverse super-ego guiding, and guided by, a corrupt sadistic³ morality" (Barnett, p. 96).

Although the normal super-ego and the super-super-ego both initiate feelings of guilt and remorse, the latter is responsible for a higher intensity of persecutory anxiety, illustrated in patients who perform "attacks on linking" relationships (Bion, 1967). Etchegoyen (1991) also took interest on the subject of the super-ego. He links the narcissistic self to the super-ego, due to their similar dynamic with a masochistic ego. He argues that Bion's psychotic super-super-ego possesses the features of a narcissistic self. These are manifested in the ideas the super-ego implants in the ego, which are often disguised with an ethical moral character, used to manipulate and undermine the ego, just like the disguise used by the narcissistic self when it attacks the ego. These ideas are typically undermining thoughts such as: "I do not deserve anything good" or "I am not

² Envy should be distinguished from "jealousy" (Rosenberger, 2005) since the latter is considered more socially acceptable. The etymological root of envy is *invidia* from the Latin verb *invidere*, meaning "to look maliciously upon". The definition of envy includes "the feeling of mortification and ill-will occasioned by the contemplation of superior advantages possessed by another" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

³ According to Rosenberger (2005), sadism is a bifurcated concept since it can be used with two different meanings. Firstly, sadism can be thought of as a perversion, where it assumes a defensive function - that of repairing a loss, resolving a separation, and projecting aggressive impulses by inflicting pain. Secondly, it can be used when referring to behaviour thought to be motivated by hate and destructiveness. The latter was the meaning intended by Freud in his concept of the death instinct; and by Klein, when she mentions hate and destructiveness.

worthy of good things” (Etchegoyen, 1991, pp. 752-753). By setting aside the normal super-ego from the envious *super-super-ego*, Bion contributes to maintain the duality of this entity as conceived by Klein: either there are two super-egos (a healthy one and a pathological one), or the same super-ego has two positions or moments (a paranoid-schizoid and a depressive one). Herbert Rosenfeld (1952), through his work with schizophrenic patients, has reinforced this duality by contrasting a cruel, sadistic, murderous, super-ego with a merely accusatory and critical one which only asks for reparation.

Fairbairn (1943) contributed to maintain the duality of the super-ego by postulating the existence of a primitive super-ego, which he called “internal saboteur”, and a more mature structure, a super-ego composed of internalized objects. Firstly, he postulates that the super-ego is built up in layers corresponding to the stages in oedipal development. This suggestion, which extends the timeline of both the super-ego and the Oedipus complex, is consistent with Klein’s theory. Secondly, the super-ego is composed of multiple good and bad internal objects, contradicting Freud’s hypothesis that the super-ego is merely composed of bad objects. The existence of multiple and opposite objects within the super-ego may lead to ambivalence and a bigger chance of negotiation. Despite these contributions, Fairbairn is best known for his revision of the Freudian theory of drives. The author defied the classical theory by proposing that individuals are more object-seeking than pleasure-seeking, since separation anxiety is a much more powerful anxiety than, for example, a frustration of instinctual wishes. Unlike Freud and Klein, Fairbairn rejected the idea of a death instinct. He considered that aggression only occurred when contact with the object was hindered. Thus, Fairbairn’s claim seems to suggest that the super-ego’s initial main function is to ensure that the dependent subject does not lose the caregiver’s love. Interestingly, Freud’s theory fits in perfectly with Fairbairn’s claim, despite the fact that they have different premises. According to Freud, the super-ego appears to repress the Oedipus complex, saving the subject from having to deal with his prohibited desires. However, this repression also helps to maintain the caregiver’s love by avoiding a major family conflict. This suggestion shows how Anna Freud’s mechanism of identification with the aggressor can appear as an absolute need for the infant.

Winnicott’s theory concerning the super-ego assimilates former theories while it presents an original perspective. Winnicott sees the super-ego as an internal empathetic authority that disciplines and regulates the character of the individual. For this authority

to be obeyed by the other structures of the psyche (the ego and the id), the individual needs to feel secure and must have a certain degree of maturity. This authority must follow the social laws while being flexible and sensitive when needed. The author distinguishes *true morality*, associated with a healthy development, from *false morality*, a pathological development of morality, typically found in cases of melancholia and obsessional neurosis. In these cases, the individuals have lost their battle against anxiety and have not managed to transform it into guilt. For Winnicott, a healthy super-ego implies an ability to compromise, and to accept the values of the community as part of the self. Compromising also constitutes an essential element of work and play. In his view, a capacity for concern is essential for a healthy super-ego. To develop a capacity for concern, the infant must be in a “facilitating environment” (Winnicott, 1963, p. 103) that allows him to acquire a degree of emotional growth, ego health and hope. It is only when the infant is capable of tolerating ambivalence and of recognizing the object mother and the environment mother as one, that reparation and a capacity for concern become possible - guilt is merely tolerated anxiety (Winnicott, 1958). This stage fully portrays Klein’s concept of the depressive position. Thus, if a sense of guilt has been developed, it means the infant’s ego has “employed certain controlling forces” against anxiety (Winnicott, 1958, p. 17). Winnicott identifies these forces as the super-ego. For this developmental process to occur, the child must introject a pre-oedipal, maternal super-ego that is intimately connected with the capacity for concern and with Bion’s concept of container/contained. A super-ego is mature when the individual is capable of exercising control over the present and future anxieties. A mature super-ego also implies ego strength, controlling id drives and taking responsibility for one’s actions. False morality is represented by an immature or absent super-ego, which is due to a loss or absence of a reparative capacity. Winnicott’s theory focuses on morality and self-development and clearly differentiates a good from a bad super-ego, whereas most authors agree it is either just evil, or good and evil at the same time.

Recent contributions to the concept of super-ego

More recently on the subject of the super-ego, in *The Super-ego* (2001), Priscilla Roth poses the question of “What good is a super-ego if it only makes you feel bad?”. In 1992, Nina Coltart had already answered this question by having identified some of the positive aspects and functions of the super-ego, such as “self-observation, self-reflection, kindly criticism... appreciation, esteem and love” (pp. 109-110). Another recent

contribution was given by the work of Ann Hurry (1998), which is a good illustration of the importance of play and compromise for a healthy super-ego. The psychoanalyst described a more practical work around the super-ego by narrating an experience with a ten-year-old presenting a pattern of an automatic super-ego condemnation. Her strategy to alter this pattern was to implicate the child's super-ego in a game of compromise. The game was called "Heaven's gate" and the patient was the "Gate's keeper". The child would decide who deserves to be in heaven and who is not worthy of it. While at the beginning the child projected a lot of guilt and aggression into the analyst and refused to let her through the gate, he eventually improved his capacity to play and allowed her in. Through play, Ann Hurry turned his super-ego into a more benign, and self-questioning entity.

In another recent reframing of the super-ego, Melvin Lansky (2004) explores the benefit of the super-ego concept in both clinical and research settings. Lansky calls for an integration of the existing knowledge on the super-ego and presents several contemporary objections to this concept. After examining the flaws and the contributions of the super-ego, the author concludes that this structure should be thought of as representing the entirety of consciousness, as it was initially conceived by Freud in 1923. He considers the super-ego to be indispensable as long as it is considered outside of the topographical model, diluting its association with the Oedipus conflict and the castration complex. Not far from Lansky, Lichtenberg (2008) set out to determine in what context the super-ego can be considered vital and in what context it is supplanted. He concludes that it is vital whenever morals and feelings of guilt and shame can be explained through a conflict between psychic structures or when an analyst wants to refer to the concept of conscience; and that it is supplanted in a context where morals, values and ethics are considered multifactorial, in need of constant revision and never fully determined throughout life.

An additional recent contribution to the exploration of the super-ego is given by Lieberman (2019), an experienced clinical psychoanalyst, who became motivated to write about the super-ego after having noticed that an increasing number of her patients' issues were associated to a "new super-ego" phenomenon (p. 26), produced by contemporary culture. According to her (2019), patients now present different values and morals than what they presented in the 1970s when they reflected the "old classic superego". She remarks the prevalence of symptoms of guilt, anxiety, extreme boredom, "psychic emptiness, powerlessness, and despair" (p. 26). Lieberman argues that the "new superego" is marked by an increased narcissism, greed, and envy. Her clinical

observations concur with others from several authors who have written about postmodern culture and its impact on both the super-ego and the psyche. Her contribution is discussed in-depth in the next chapter, alongside other recent contributions by authors such as Žižek, George Frankl, Herbert Marcuse and Lipovetsky.

Discussion

Throughout this literature review, the concept of the super-ego has been described in many ways, some features have remained, while others were lost on the way. Some which were lost concern Freud's theory of repression and the Oedipus complex – ideas which have suffered a great deal of transformation. The idea of the super-ego as censorship or a contact-barrier, permeating the content that transits from unconscious to consciousness, becomes either neglected or attributed indifferently to one or other structure of the psyche. On the other hand, all authors agree that the super-ego is a major generator of anxiety, guilt, and shame; they all agree it is composed of aggression (amongst other things) and that it is an introjection of an identification with the parental agency, which translates into an ensemble of commands and prohibitions. Most authors agree that the super-ego strives for an ideal and observes, judges, and punishes the psyche to attain it. Most authors, after the Kleinian tradition, also agree that there are two super-ego positions - an early aggressive sadistic one, and a depressive one. This concludes the revision, analysis, and comparison of the psychoanalytic concept of super-ego as seen by the Freudian tradition, the contemporary Freudians, Kleinians and post-Kleinians and, finally, by some independent contributors.

Despite the numerous contributions of multiple authors for the development of the concept of super-ego, there is a lack of recent contributions updating this concept in relation to the twenty-first century culture. Lieberman (2019), who has done extensive research on psychoanalytic literature on the super-ego censures this lack and accuses recent papers on greed, envy, and the super-ego of being vague and nonspecific (p. 26). The 21st century society is marked by the horrendous wars that happened in the 20th century - an era characterized by an unprecedented number of deaths during conflicts. It also carries a new attitude towards existence on earth, due to an unparalleled technological advancement that has come to change the way people learn, spend their time, think, and interact with each other. This society carries the spirit of change and revolution, and that is the reason why it challenges the super-ego, who is a carrier of tradition, fear, hate, love, guilt, aggression, and obedience. The encounter of a traditional

and ancestral entity such as the super-ego with a fresh society that discards all figures of the past is a phenomenon that will be examined in the following chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter Two: A Psychoanalytic Examination of the Postmodern Super-ego

The aim of this chapter is to examine the plausibility of the proposals made by several authors concerning the phenomenon of the postmodern super-ego. Authors such as Žižek, Lieberman and George Frankl postulate that certain cultural and social changes that occurred from the beginning of the twentieth century until the twenty-first century caused significant changes in the human psyche, specifically, in the super-ego. The main purpose of this dissertation is to determine the influence that postmodern culture may have had and continues to have on the super-ego and to what extent it represents an actual change in the super-ego (in relation to how it was described by Freud, Klein and the other mentioned authors), instead of a mere shift in our attitudes and mores. In other words, to what extent can we consider that the 20th century social reality has influenced what is intrapsychic? This analysis consists in an in-depth examination, seeking to present arguments against and in favour of each of the major proposals being posited, while keeping in mind the ancestry of the foundations of the super-ego, and the inherent difficulty of disturbing them. As the super-ego is based on the super-ego of the parental agency, it tends to perpetuate culture. However, if we accept this premise, what culture is the super-ego perpetuating and can this cycle be disturbed? Before attempting to provide an answer to these queries, it is necessary to first introduce the concept of postmodern super-ego and the context in which it has emerged; followed by the description of the behaviour of the postmodern individual that has caused authors to postulate a change in the super-ego in the first place, as well as the possible causes of this behaviour.

The path to the postmodern super-ego

The concept of postmodern super-ego was coined by Slavoj Žižek (1999) to introduce the transformations that he observes in the moral behaviour of Western societies by the turn of the new millennium. First, it is important to clarify what postmodernism is and how it prompted the transformation of Western thinking. Postmodernism, initially a mode of discourse used in literary criticism, became an intellectual stance, a social and cultural attitude towards life and knowledge. This school of thought can be found as early as the 1940s, however, it is only in the 1960s that it becomes a powerful force across multiple cultural and academic fields such as philosophy, literature, art, architecture, music, etc. Postmodernism emerged as a reaction against modernism and against the

rational assumptions of the Enlightenment. In architecture, postmodernism was formed as a reaction against the austerity, excess of regulation, and lack of originality of modern architecture. Some architects such as Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, and Michael Graves were essential in the introduction and development of this style, which later gave rise to other revolutionary styles such as the deconstructivism (Rattenbury & Hardingham, 2007). According to Postmodernists, our rational and scientific values have only managed to lead mankind to wars and to an even greater state of poverty, prejudice, and oppression. Postmodernism is characterized by a sceptical and nihilistic attitude towards universal notions, such as the notions of truth, reality, and knowledge (Bauman, 1998). Instead, Postmodernists promote relativism: they consider all fields of knowledge as culturally-conditioned and arbitrary, and they deny a distinction between reality and virtual reality by arguing that “the real” is nothing more than a subjective and biased construct. Since postmodern thinkers reject the possibility of reliable knowledge, they tend to turn inwards and investigate themselves and the conditions for their existence. In brief, they have a tendency for self-referentiality, pluralism, and irreverence. In a world where it is agreed that nothing can amount to anything trustworthy and that the multiplicity of particular sciences have confused and obscured our knowledge more than added to it, self-fulfilment and self-knowledge seem to be the only thing left to do (Cassirer, 1953).

In this social and cultural context, the psychoanalyst George Frankl, in *Foundations of Morality* (2001), identifies a series of mostly negative behaviours and attitudes that characterize the postmodern subject. The author identifies the increase of tendencies such as the emergence of limitless greed - defined as an “oral-cannibalistic drive” (p. 13) - the prevalence of selfishness and the liberation of sadistic-destructive impulses. In her first chapter entitled “Analyzing a ‘new superego’? Greed and envy in the recent age of affluence”, Lieberman (2019), agrees with Frankl’s depiction of the postmodern society, even though her focus is mainly on the interrelations between greed, envy and narcissism and how the new socioeconomic situation activates these tendencies. Similarly, Žižek (1999) describes the postmodern subject as being increasingly narcissistic, obsessed with freedom, self-realization, and enjoyment. The three occurrences pinpointed by Frankl coincide with Žižek’s general illustration of the state of morality: when Frankl speaks of greed, Žižek speaks of the fixation with the “here-and-now” experience of life, guided by the commonly accepted premise that “life is nasty, brutish and short” and survival is the law (Hobbes, Oakshott & Peters, 1997, p. 78).

While Frankl prefers to focus on the problem of the uncensored release of instinctual impulses, Žižek emphasizes the postmodern cultural ideology that underlies these impulses. The latter perceives these changes as embedded in a continuous cultural evolution, while the former seems to consider that these changes are not only outside of culture but also constitute an attack on culture and on the established order. Albeit the two opinions are not contradictory. Both authors agree that there has been an overturn of traditional values and parental authority for the sake of freedom and liberation.

This dismissal of authority and tradition in favour of a personal and subjective code of conduct, susceptible to change from situation to situation, is characteristic of postmodern thought and has created a climate of moral uncertainty, in which every value, rule and moral code is constantly questioned and doubted. The reasons that motivated our behaviour in previous ages are now being disclaimed on the basis of a generalized nihilistic disbelief towards the values promulgated by the Enlightenment. However, as Frankl (2001) insists, we are not more certain of the reasons for our behaviour or about the values we should adopt than people of previous ages. Even though we have renounced the old ways, we have not created new purposes to replace them. The difficulty in creating new values in the 21st century comes from a widespread “state of helpless confusion” (Frankl, 2001, p. 03), disenchantment and cynicism in which people find it hard to believe that anything can be true or certain. Since tradition can no longer be relied on, everything becomes a matter of individual choice and mental life becomes dominated by an excess of possibilities. This reality relates to the contemporary phenomenon of “reflexivity” (Žižek, 1999), according to which every impulse is a matter of choice and everything is up for discussion.

The philosopher and sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky devoted his career to research the postmodern society. In his multiple works, he identifies in this society tendencies for exacerbated consumerism, hedonism, individualism, and a loss of meaning of the major moral, social, and political institutions. As Žižek, he also refers to the obsession with the here-and-now experience of life and defines individualism as the desire to break with past tradition and focus on personal pleasure. By the end of the 2000s, he argued that the term “postmodern” had become obsolete and incapable of describing a fast-moving and ephemeral era like the current one. He then proposed the term “hyper-modern”, which integrates the modern and postmodern but elevates them exponentially to include new technologies, markets, and global culture. However, Lipovetsky does not reduce the current society to a complete deregulation of moral values and to a refusal of all past

institutions like Frankl tends to do. On the contrary, he acknowledges in this society a deep and complex paradox: “What defines hypermodernity is not exclusively the self-criticism of modern knowledge and institutions; it is also the revisited memory. (...) No longer just the deconstruction of traditions, but the re-employment of it without institutional imposition, the eternal rearrangement of it according to the principle of individual sovereignty” (Lipovetsky, Charles & Brown, 2005).

He identifies a contradiction in the current society that neither Frankl nor Žižek explore and that is essential to comprehend the complexity and the state of confusion hovering over hyper-modern societies. In the *Crépuscule du devoir* (Lipovetsky, 1992), the author identifies in these societies a collective concern for morality, a concern for solidarity and righteousness, a struggle for ethical causes in a truthful demonstration of generosity. According to the author, this behaviour is in contradiction to the self-interested, ego-centred culture in question. Hyper-modern societies are often concerned about the future; about social minorities and human rights; about climate change and other environmental causes. They are politically engaged and are capable of organizing rallies that could last for days, in defence of a single individual who suffered an injustice at the hands of an authority figure. An example of this can be found in the recent protests led by the “Black Lives Matter” movement, against the death of George Floyd, on the 25th of May 2020. This depiction of reality does not necessarily contradict George Frankl and Žižek. In truth, it supports the idea that the postmodern subject is obsessed with freedom, self-realization, and enjoyment, even though it apparently contradicts the feature of selfishness and narcissism. However, it is possible that individuals will act in an extremely selfish and narcissistic manner if their freedom is being threatened. This seems to indicate that moral values persist in the current societies and that, in addition, they remain quite severe. However, they impose freedom instead of repression and containment. It is also possible that the imposition of freedom is still an imposition and may quickly turn into repression. Hence, on the one hand, we find a flexible, pragmatic, and liberal dialogue about morality while, on the other hand, we find binary, rigorous, and unrealistic claims that cause repression instead of realistically opposing to it. An example of the latter is the concern with political correctness that reveals a “moral neo-conformity” (Lipovetsky, 1992) that adopts rigid strategies to dogmatically defend minorities.

Unlike Žižek, George Frankl (2001) offers multiple explanations and possible causes for this generalized transformation of behaviour. According to Frankl (2001), this

new morality is a result of the colossal failure of traditional values during the twentieth century, which is exemplified by the numerous wars, increased poverty, unemployment, prejudice, oppression, and extermination camps. Frankl (2001) argues that “(...) we cannot trust our judgements or even our perceptions because we cannot trust the concepts of our civilisation which have determined our judgements” (p. 07). These events of the twentieth century have brought upon a wave of disenchantment that has corrupted the bond between individuals and authority figures. The authority figures under consideration here are not just governors and law enforcers, but also God(s), parents, teachers and anyone who might be in a position of power over us. This relationship, instead of being marked by respect, fear and admiration, is now characterised by anger, scepticism, and uncertainty. This patriarchal bond is at the foundation of the super-ego and that is why Frankl (2001) claims to be witnessing the “murder of the super-ego” (p. 29). Frankl’s decision to blame the war events of the twentieth century for the new century’s morality is thought to be oversimplistic, even if it holds true. The author has neglected many other possible factors, which are admittedly difficult to account for in its entirety, such as the increasing disbelief in formal religion, technological advancements, globalization, and many other possible factors. Furthermore, the events of the early 20th century have already been exhaustively explored, as argued by Lieberman (2019), whereas the state of the world post-1950 has received far less attention and is “taken for granted rather than examined as a causative factor” (p. 29).

It is also interesting to question how Freud might have contributed to this “state of helpless confusion” and uncertainty of the postmodern society. One might assume that psychoanalysis is not postmodern in its nature or, at least, that it has not been so far, since it hypothesizes about universal tendencies in human motivation and behaviour. However, some of the aspects in Freud's theory of the psyche are sympathetic to postmodernism (Horrocks, 2014). Particularly, the hypothesis of the unconscious suggesting that we can never be sure about the reasons that motivate our behaviour. This fundamental Freudian idea, which may also be a result of the consequences of the war events in Freud himself, has contaminated the minds of the postmodern subjects with doubt, nihilism and disbelief. Furthermore, several of Freud's ideas met the post-modern ideals, namely the subjectivity he attributes to mental life when he argues we perceive the representation of things rather than things themselves (Casey, 1972). Similarly to postmodern thinkers, he places great emphasis on the individual and his inner struggles. Even psychoanalysis as a discipline is

becoming postmodern and “preoccupied as never before in studying itself” (Lansky, 2008, p. 155).

Regardless of the causes of postmodernism, Frankl, Lieberman and Žižek postulate that the super-ego has undergone significant alterations, which are at the origin of the behaviour of the postmodern subject, and that these are not mere cultural changes. Some of these alterations influence not just the super-ego but the entire balance of the psyche. The most radical hypothesis was suggested by the Austrian-British psychoanalyst, George Frankl, who advocated that the super-ego has been annihilated. Žižek, in a less radical stance, argues that there has been a disintegration of the old stability and a decline of parental authority which have significantly altered the super-ego.

The super-ego in the postmodern era: a static, renewed, or annihilated structure?

The following paragraphs present several proposals concerning the ways in which the super-ego may have been altered by the postmodern era. In order to do this, the concept of the super-ego is again disassembled to reveal the multiple ideas it encloses. Each of these ideas is revisited in the light of the 21st century culture with the purpose of discussing which features persist unaltered, which have been modified and which may have disappeared. This analysis begins with the proposal of the break of bond with the authority, where the current state of the rapport between individuals and authority figures is reviewed. Afterwards, a review is made of the state of the ego-ideal. Thirdly, the proposal of the liberation of the repressed instincts of the id is presented. After that, the argument of the lack of a moral compass is analysed. Finally, the problem of guilt is discussed, where authors’ opinions diverge between a social increase in guilt or an exemption from guilt. While George Frankl postulates that the corruption of all of these ideas has taken place and constitutes proof of the annihilation of the super-ego, other authors argue for a less radical idea, the one of “a new super-ego” or an altered super-ego which has lost some of its components and amplified others.

It is George Frankl’s (2001) contention that, while traditionally aggression towards the authority and the super-ego was repressed and projected against the ego or against others, as postulated by Anna Freud, now it is directed at the super-ego with the purpose of annihilating it. Frankl posits that the savagery displayed by the two world wars and by the horrors of Auschwitz has brought disappointment and apprehension towards the future. Most of our current disappointment is due to the excessive expectations held

in the past regarding science, reason, and the wonders of industry. In addition to this disappointment, these events also elicited anger and aggression against the “father-figure which promised so much and failed so miserably” (Frankl, 2001, p. 7). According to Freud, one of the aims of the super-ego is precisely to repress the anger against the “father-figure” and help preserve the relationship with the love-object. If the anger is such that the super-ego is destroyed, there is nothing preventing the subject from acting-out his aggressive impulses. George Frankl applies this paradigm to the Middle Ages when people admired and glorified their king while, at the same time, they hated the power he had over them and envied his wealth and his privileges. The people’s love for their king was usually strengthened by killing the king’s enemies and by hating other kings. This displacement mechanism allowed citizens to discharge their aggression and not incur in the forbidden murder of the ‘own father’. According to contemporary Freudian theory, the current lack of displacement that Frankl points out, or the directness of the aggression, means that the pressure to express the anger has surpassed the benefits or the capacity to suppress it. In that scenario, the individual is thrown into the middle of an active and uninhibited Oedipus complex which could have catastrophic consequences. In this scenario, the annihilation of the super-ego is favoured, on the one hand, by the increase in aggression towards the father figure and, on the other hand, for the lack of inhibition of the Oedipus complex.

Nonetheless, the super-ego is not restricted to the functions of suppression of the Oedipus complex and regulation of the relationship with the authority. If that were true, the damaging of that relationship would be enough to annihilate the super-ego. On the contrary, the super-ego also includes a self-observing and self-criticizing agency – the ego-ideal – which, even though it is formed in the relationship with the other, it mostly manages the relationship of the individual with himself. That agency alone can generate a great deal of shame and anxiety. Furthermore, if the super-ego were no longer a structure in the psyche or if it had been modified, then likely we would note the absence or the modification of the ego ideal, as well as of the feelings it produces. The relationship between the super-ego and the ego ideal is still uncertain: at the beginning of his career, Freud spoke of these concepts as interchangeable, even though he later began to differentiate them. It is unclear whether the ego ideal is a part of the super-ego or whether it is a different entity, one that is created through the same bond as the super-ego – a bond of love, admiration and envy with someone considered superior – and that shares similar mechanisms to it, such as the punishment of the ego. An indication of the state of the ego

ideal could be provided by the preponderance of shame in society. Shame is commonly associated with embarrassment, shyness, and humiliation. While the ego ideal qualifies behaviours in terms of “good and bad”, the super-ego measures them in terms of a “right–wrong” scale. This distinction brings shame closer to the ego ideal and guilt closer to the super-ego (Rosenberger, 2005).

On this subject, while Frankl would probably be of the opinion that shame is experienced less often and with minor intensity; Žižek is likely to argue, in view of the increase of opportunities for social comparison on social media, that shame is on the rise. Consequently, it is possible that the ego ideal is becoming stronger while the super-ego is weakening, causing individuals to feel shame rather than guilt. In addition, considering the fact that the ego-ideal has recurrently been associated with narcissism in the past (Freud, 1991; Rosenfeld, 1992) and that the postmodern society has been described as predominantly narcissistic, it could suggest that the ego-ideal has taken command of the psyche in detriment of the super-ego. This hypothesis could explain how anxieties can persist even though the bond with authority has been damaged.

The third hypothesis being analysed also represents a structural change of the psyche. This hypothesis consists in the idea that the id has been liberated from the oppression and censorship of the super-ego. Since censoring the id is pointed out as one of the main functions of the super-ego (Freud, 1900), its absence can constitute an indicator of the disappearance or weakening of the latter. According to Frankl, this liberation is attested by the unconstrained behaviours of postmodern societies. The author entitled this phenomenon “ego mania”: a state where the id runs free. He devotes an entire chapter to the description of “the breakthrough of the repressed”, in which primitive areas of the psyche, such as aggressive, narcissistic, and sexual drives, previously repressed and sublimated, now find unrestrained expression. Frankl is not the only author claiming that there has been an increase in behavioural permissiveness and an ease of obligations and restrictions after the Second World War. This idea is supported by both Lieberman and Lipovetsky in several of their works. Žižek does not strictly disagree with Frankl’s claim, he agrees that a new array of behaviours has become available and that individuals are no longer culturally required to meet traditional expectations of society. Nonetheless, he claims that individuals often still feel an inner pressure to please by conforming to those same expectations. Similarly, while there are no longer strict cultural obligations to control instinctual wishes, there is an inner accuser that may act whenever ‘infractions’ are committed. Thus, despite the cultural changes inspiring a free expression of instincts,

feelings of guilt and shame may still apply as if nothing had changed. Žižek's divergent opinion on this matter is further explored in the next section, which is devoted to the issue of guilt. Herbert Marcuse (2002) provides another perspective for the analysis of this behavioural tendency that Frankl observes in the postmodern society – a tendency for searching immediate satisfaction of instinctual drives.

In *One-dimension man* (Marcuse, 2002), the sociologist addresses the post-technological society of the West and describes it as still feeding off the phantasies and desires of the pre-technological era, even though they are now irretrievable. This nostalgia can be related to Frankl's description of the current disappointment that people experience towards industry, mass production and technology. As Frankl puts it, this progress, despite having improved our material life, it has failed to provide the moral and spiritual solace needed in the current cynical godless society. According to Marcuse (2002), the present civilization strongly opposes to the loss of higher culture and its dilution into mass culture. However, the mechanisms being used to defend this higher culture is transforming it into goods and services, thereby accomplishing the opposite of the intended effect. Hence, there is an immense nostalgia of the feudal culture, of the pre-war values. This nostalgia creates a refusal of the reality principle and reinforces the pursuit of the pleasure principle. The author names this phenomenon *desublimation*: "replacing mediated by immediate gratification". However, Marcuse (2002) argues that *desublimation* favours social cohesion, as opposed to creating chaos and anarchy, as suggested by Frankl. This implies that what is occurring is a sort of sublimation of a desublimation, or, as Marcuse puts it a "controlled desublimation", since immediate gratification is presently enforced and welcomed by society. In the words of Marcuse (2002), "sublimation becomes the cognitive power which defeats suppression while bowing to it" (pp. 54-55). At the time when Freud wrote *Civilization and its discontents*, the demands of society and those of the individual were intrinsically conflictual, thereby generating unhappiness and social neurosis. Is it possible that, in our present times, individuals and society are being able to negotiate these conflicts and aligning their demands? If so, does that reality improve our lives and well-being? In other words, does it make us happier no longer needing to convert our instinctual desires into something else more socially acceptable and being free to express and satisfy these desires?⁴ Nevertheless, the argument of the liberation of the id does not necessarily support the idea

⁴ These and other similar pertinent questions are discussed by Fromm and Ingleby in *The Sane Society* (2008).

of the annihilation of the super-ego, contrarily to what Frankl advocates. The main reason why this conclusion does not follow from this argument is that the instinctual drives of the id are not being expressed without constraints; on the contrary, the freedom they impose generates a great deal of anxiety whenever individuals attempt to balance their obligations versus their freedom to gratify their desires.

While evaluating the state of the super-ego, Frankl postulates that in our present time there is an absence of a moral compass which relates to an alteration of the super-ego. These notions are acquired through the identification to and introjection of the do's and don'ts of the parental agency. The moral compass can be disturbed at two different moments in the life of an individual: either at its origin or later in life. Even though Frankl argues that individuals in the twenty-first century lack a moral compass, he did not explain how nor when this change came to be. If we consider that the problem of the acquisition of the do's and don'ts is a transmission problem, then there are three possible scenarios. In the first scenario, the individual has failed to identify with the caregiver/authority figure. In the second, the individual might have failed to introject the identification. In the third, it is also possible that the do's and don'ts were not presented as such, possibly because the authority figure was already troubled with postmodern doubt. If we consider that the problem with morality happened later in life, then it is a problem of application of the do's and don'ts. In that case, it means either that the individual has gone through the process of identification and introjection but later got rid of those introjections and parts of his character; or that he maintains these notions but lacks an enforcer and thus doubts every one of his notions. If we accept the emphasis postmodernism has placed on individualism and on the obligation to be free, as well as how it has overturned all moral institutions, then it is understandable that individuals feel a lack of a moral compass. The freedom to make one's own choices only increases the uncertainty and difficulty of making them, especially when compared with the simplicity of following tradition or a religious text that pre-establishes the aim of life and the way to attain that aim.

The issue of guilt

The lack of an enforcer brings us to another indicator of the state of the super-ego: the preponderance of the feeling of guilt. The super-ego produces guilt as a means to force the ego and the id into conforming to certain idealized standards. Therefore, if the super-ego has been annihilated, that should cause the feeling of guilt to disappear. The experience of remorse appears with the depressive position in response to the damaging

attacks or phantasies about such attacks done to the parental figure. The intensity of the guilt is a good indicator of how much the super-ego is overpowering and, often, an indicator of the amount of aggression that is being repressed. When guilt is experienced, the feeling of love and admiration surpasses the anger and resentment, and the individual begins to wish to make reparations for the previous sadistic attacks. However, Frankl postulates that if the bond of love with the authority has been damaged, then remorse is not experienced, and anger is free to express itself. According to Frankl, this scenario illustrates the current state of Western civilization: he argues that individuals no longer experience guilt or experience it far less than before the twentieth century. On this important topic, Žižek, Lieberman and Frankl are not in agreement. Žižek and Lieberman consider that the postmodern super-ego has generated new and increased forms of anxiety.

Even though the link between super-ego and guilt is strong and undeniable, there is another important aspect to consider. The absence of guilt does not necessarily mean the super-ego has been annihilated. If we consider the double-faced super-ego conceived by Klein, an absence of guilt could mean that we are faced with a primitive and sadistic super-ego, which has not yet attained the depressive position. Indeed, Frankl's description of the behaviours currently happening under what he considers to be an absent super-ego seem to correspond to the behaviours found under a pathological super-ego as described by Bion, or to the primitive Kleinian super-ego. Assuming the super-ego is created when the first bad object is introjected, would it still be considered a super-ego if the sadistic phase never ended and the individual was forever without remorse? If the super-ego never developed past the introjection of bad objects, would that entity, constituted by a bad thing in itself that instigates fear and retaliation, still be considered the primordium of the super-ego? If the super-ego can exist without the experience of guilt, then the argument presented by Frankl is not valid. Even though, for the sake of this argument, a pathological super-ego is being compared with the postmodern super-ego, it is important to distinguish between the two. While the former is characterized by sadism, envy and aggression, the latter does not settle for aggression or remorse, it is more often uncertain about its conduct and its true character.

In any case, this discussion is only relevant if we consider that societies are now guilt-free, which Žižek and Lieberman do not. According to Žižek, the postmodern super-ego has brought upon a peculiar and unique obligation – the obligation to be free and to enjoy life. This order, which resembles a direct commandment from the id, generates “new

guilts and anxieties, instead of opening up a brave new world in which we can enjoy shifting and reshaping our multiple identities” (Žižek, S.,1999). The previously mentioned liberation of instincts brought by postmodernity is only apparently free of restrictions. In Žižek’s publication on the London Review of Books entitled “You May!” (1999), the author argues that there are no “strong prohibitions in a society awash with permissiveness”. However, there is also no escaping from the excessive freedom it conveys. Thus, “You May!” becomes mandatory, it becomes “you must”. There is a call for an unconstrained transgression with the promise of suspension of judgement. Yet, if individuals are being encouraged to have the maximum pleasure by enjoying themselves to the fullest, then they must enjoy, otherwise, if they feel that they could have enjoyed more or feel unable to enjoy, it will result in a feeling of guilt for failing to be happy. If culture no longer imposes obligations, postmodern individuals now impose them to themselves and feel compelled to enjoy them, since they are the ones “choosing” to fulfil them. The postmodern society is falsely permissive since it is replete with regulations and impositions under the false pretence of ensuring our happiness. These new anxieties mentioned by Žižek resemble a recently conceptualized social anxiety, known popularly and in the field of psychology as *FOMO* – fear of missing out -, which is similar to *FOBO* – fear of better options. *FOMO* is described as the anxiety of being disconnected, of being excluded, of missing an opportunity for social interaction, of not making the right choices in a paradigm where every experience must be enjoyed to the fullest. *FOBO* is characterized by a feeling of anxiety, frustration, stress, and unhappiness. These result from the excess of freedom of choice, which becomes problematic for the postmodern subject because he has no fixed criteria to help him decide. These two terms, coined by Patrick McGuinnis, in 2004, are indissociable from an unhealthy use of the internet and social media.

Lieberman (2019) agrees with Žižek on the subject of guilt. From her recent clinical observations, she concludes that her patients exhibit more feelings of guilt than ever before. To illustrate this reality the author gives the example of practices of self-starvation, excessive exercise and unreasonable diets which serve to punish the ego, control the impulses of the id and force the individual to conform to an unrealistic ideal. All these practices follow the often-heard expression “no pain, no gain”.

Previously, it was shown how we could conceive the absence of guilt without that implying the absence of the super-ego. However, another scenario should be considered in which the super-ego has been annihilated, as Frankl argues, but the sense of guilt

persists, as Žižek contends. If Žižek's contention holds true and the postmodern society is suffering from additional anxieties, how can that idea be reconciled with the theory of the annihilation of the super-ego? Shouldn't the disappearance of the super-ego suppress these anxieties? In other words, is it possible to experience guilt without a super-ego? The formulations made by Freud, Klein, Bion, Winnicott and many others are not favourable to this hypothesis since the super-ego is pinpointed as the main generator of guilt.

However, in one of his writings, Žižek has managed to explain how we can conceive the perseverance of the feeling of guilt in the absence of the super-ego. In the postmodern era, with the purpose of self-assertiveness and self-fulfilment, there is, according to Žižek, a tendency for a positive rewriting of the narrative of our past, as a way to surpass traumatic or unpleasant experiences. The same solution is applied to the traditional rules of society whenever they are considered too severe. Žižek illustrates this idea with a sarcastic and rhetorical question that ridicules the priorities of postmodern thinkers: "Is one of the Commandments too severe? Well then, let's regress to Mount Sinai and re write it: adultery – fine, provided it is sincere and serves the goal of profound self-realisation" (Žižek, 1999). There is a sort of collective illusion of omnipotent control over life, rules and personal emotions. It is an illusion because the rewriting of a moral rule or emotional experience does not really erase nor alter the consequences the real experience had in the first place. In other words, "what disappears is not 'hard fact' but the Real of a traumatic encounter whose organising role in the subject's psychic economy resists its symbolic rewriting" (Žižek, 1999). This proposition is very important for the understanding of how culture can change without it necessarily altering the functioning of the psyche. For example, if we consider that post-modern ideology has changed the way the new generation cares for the elderly family members, which is an idea Žižek entertains, particularly towards a disengagement and a lack of accountability, then, according to Žižek, that would not absolve our moral conscience of the feeling of guilt. Therefore, if the super-ego has faded from our psyches there could be a time lag between its fading and the disappearance of its effect, i.e., the feeling of guilt. In addition, the fact that the learning of the do's and don'ts depends less on culture and more on the transmission of the unconscious processes of the parent's super-egos (Laplanche, J., & Pontalis, J., 1988) reinforces Žižek's proposition. In sum, the feeling of guilt may persist even after the rules that cause that feeling have been overturned and even after the psychic entity that produces that feeling has lost its ground.

Discussion

If we pay close attention to George Frankl's arguments, we realize that his hypothesis of the annihilation of the super-ego relies on arguing that the functions and consequences attributed to the super-ego since its conception are inoperative and no longer take place in the postmodern era. Even though he might have been relatively thorough, some of his arguments have found more support than others in the psychoanalytic community. Authors agree that the overturn of authority figures implies that there has been a liberation of the id from super-ego oppression. However, not all authors agree that there has been an unconditional liberation of impulsive drives, since, as Žižek observed, the postmodern subject is not entirely free from restrictions, obligations, and traditional expectations. In brief, the id may have been liberated from super-ego oppression, since it not as often repressed. However, the expression of the recently liberated instincts is not exempt from guilt and shame. Additionally, the idea according to which there is a generalized state of helpless confusion, causing individuals to doubt their concepts of truth and falsity, right and wrong, is fully corroborated by several authors. All of the authors mentioned above are also in agreement concerning the idea that there has been an overturn of paternal authority, i.e., a break of the bond of obedience, fear and love with authoritarian figures, as well as a disbelief in moral and social establishments.

Nevertheless, as already stated, Frankl's theory concerning a guilt-free society found a great deal of opposition. Finally, the idea that the super-ego has suffered changes or that it might be getting weaker is quite different from the idea of an annihilation of the super-ego, which is far more extreme and, consequently, more difficult to support. In the next chapter, these ideas are applied to a real and ongoing social problem, which is taking place worldwide. The illustration of the postmodern super-ego simplifies its analysis and puts to test the aspects said to have been modified and the ones said to have remained unaltered.

Chapter Three: An illustration of the postmodern super-ego through the discussion of the George Floyd protests

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the hypotheses presented in chapter two concerning the postmodern super-ego. The multifactorial character of the concept of the postmodern super-ego on the one hand, and the fact that it is an intrapsychic phenomenon on the other hand makes it difficult to find an all-inclusive practical example. The super-ego, as an abstract psychic agency, gives rise to internal conflicts which are difficult to exemplify. Nonetheless, it is an extremely current phenomenon that has sprouted from postmodern culture, making some of the actions of the postmodern individual a walking example of the facets of the postmodern super-ego. The functioning of this agency can become apparent in the way individuals experience guilt; in the pressure to conform to an ideal; in the acquisition of a code of conduct; and in the repression that is applied over instinctual drives. In this chapter, the challenge is to find a real and current scenario where these feelings and behaviours may surface and can be explored. The year of 2020 has presented us with many challenges so far, the most important one being the COVID-19 pandemic which is mentioned in this chapter but does not constitute its main focus. Instead, this last chapter discusses the recent and ongoing protests happening worldwide concerning racism and police brutality. These protests are an extremely complex phenomenon that erupts from a history of longstanding racism, prejudice and oppression that precedes, by far, the postmodern era. Nonetheless, there are certain aspects of these protests, and of the context in which they have emerged, that are unique and that can be seen to reflect postmodern culture and the decadence of the Freudian super-ego. The chosen example can allow the exploration of collective ethical and emotional issues concerning the relationship with paternal figures, traditional values and impulse control.

The demonstrations were triggered by the already mentioned death of the African American George Floyd, on the 25th May 2020. George was an African American man who was killed by a police officer who pressed his knee to Floyd's neck during his arrest in Minneapolis. The video of his death generated protests all around the world against the use of excessive force on ethnic minorities by the police. Most protests have been peaceful, however, demonstrations in certain North American cities, such as Minneapolis, have escalated into violent riots, property damage, looting and street fights, causing the president to declare martial law. By the 4th June, at least 9,300 people had been arrested across the US, including all four police officers involved in Floyd's death (Aljazeera,

2020a). During the protests, several demonstrators and officers of the law have lost their lives and many others were injured. The protests have also been associated with the removal and destruction of statues considered symbols of segregation. Nonetheless, this revolt has been contributing to create spaces of autonomy, social cohesion, and new collective identities; and to raise awareness for racial injustice, police misconduct and the bias in the criminal justice system. It is important to note that this unrest is occurring during the global COVID-19 pandemic, thereby facilitating and accelerating the spread of the virus.

The purpose of this chapter is then to explore how the behaviour of the protesters during the George Floyd protests can illustrate the postmodern super-ego. This chapter is not intended to examine the full complexity of the protests, on the contrary, much of this phenomenon remains to be examined since it is being considered exclusively in so far as it illustrates the ideas posited in the previous chapter. The various elements, present or past, that could have contributed to these protests and to its globalisation, such as the long-simmering, systemic racial inequities, the deep-seated racial divide in treatment by police officers, transgenerational issues, the economic and political context and even the effect of the COVID-19 on the African American community, are not being taken into consideration. In other words, this chapter focuses exclusively on what can be seen within these protests regarding behaviours that implicate changes of the super-ego.

In short, there are four main aspects in the demonstrators' behaviour that may implicate the super-ego and exemplify the changes pointed out in the previous chapter. The first aspect under analysis is the demonstrators' revolt against police officers, which is a central issue and illustrates one of the most important characteristics of the postmodern super-ego listed in the second chapter: the break of the bond with the authority. This act of disobedience implies a second aspect: the behaviour of the protesters shows a particular liberation of drives and impulses which characterizes the postmodern super-ego. The third aspect explores how the protesters' behaviour can exemplify the renewed importance of the ego-ideal and its consequences on the feeling of guilt and shame. The fourth aspect considers the state of helpless confusion, moral uncertainty, and the phenomenon of reflexivity in the demonstrators, which are postmodern super-ego traits. The third and fourth aspect do not only include the behaviour of the protesters, but also of the bystanders and the rest of society.

The Revolt against the Police

The aim of the George Floyd protests is to take a stand against the police. This confrontation marks the intention to break the bond with the authority – the authority they were supposed to respect and admire but instead are accusing of prejudice and murder. While here the authority is embodied by the police, it could just as well be embodied by the parents, educators, supervisors, governors, and so forth. The death of George Floyd merely rekindled a pre-existing disappointment, anger, and distrust towards authority figures. These feelings, which were identified by Frankl (2001), do not just concern the bond with powerful figures but, instead, are embedded in the tissue of postmodern society and are often directed towards formerly reliable social institutions, such as the media, advertisements, and many other institutions that are now considered manipulative and unworthy of public trust. Furthermore, it is clear that while some of the protesters' actions are directed against the police, such as burning the police headquarters and the police vehicles; other actions are intended against the current economic framework and the lack of measures to help combat social problems, such as setting fire to multinational corporations and looting establishments that sell expensive merchandise and that only contribute to accentuate the current social disparities.

This anger is reinforced by a feeling of helplessness and vulnerability which is a consequence of the murder of the own father and only protector. At the same time, it appears that the struggle against the authority has given individuals an enormous sense of power, representing the end of the Freudian childhood helplessness and, consequently, the independence from the need of a super-ego. The current generalized disbelief in God only adds to this mass sentiment. The chosen protectors of society have become a threat by abusing their power - a power that, ultimately, we have attributed to them, making us somehow to blame and unworthy of trust as well. Thus, the disappointment felt towards the abusive father extends to a self-disappointment and a distrust in the justice and social systems that have created this (dis)order. The self-disappointment manifests itself in a lack of confidence in decision making. The difficulties in decision making are worsened by the excess of possibilities offered to individuals, resulting in the types of anxieties referred in the previous chapter – FOMO and FOBO. The disobedience demonstrated by these protests is even higher considering that they are not only criticizing and facing the police in open conflicts, they are doing so during the epidemic of COVID-19, which prescribes quarantine and prohibits gatherings of a large number of people. Therefore,

protesters are disobeying the law and neglecting their health and the health of everyone surrounding them, risking the acceleration of the spread of the virus to fight for this cause.

At the same time, some might see the COVID-19 pandemic as a counterexample of a social uprising against authority. During this pandemic, health and government authorities have imposed lockdown orders for communities worldwide. Studies have shown that most of the public is complying to these rules, particularly when their lost wages are being compensated (Bodas & Peleg, 2020). However, the question of why most people are complying with the rules is much more complex. Is it because authorities prescribe it, or is it due to a very profound fear, in great part, spread by the media, of contracting the virus and contaminating vulnerable people around them? Would the media have needed to instigate fear in the population if the recommendations of health authorities had been considered enough to keep people in their homes? Additionally, the question of how long people will observe these rules is also very pertinent. In other words, when the fear and anxiety disappear will the public actually obey the authorities? In many countries worldwide, many citizens suspect the virus to have been a major conspiracy (Freeman et al., 2020) to, for example, bankrupt small businesses and allow big surfaces to thrive. Amongst many other theories, some also suspect that both the number of infected people as well as deaths by COVID-19 have been greatly exaggerated and manipulated. These suspicions have gradually been leading to the disregard of the health measures imposed. Therefore, the COVID-19 situation remains ambiguous and requires further investigation regarding the relationship of society with authority.

The lack of super-ego censorship over the id during the George Floyd protests

In the previous chapter, the function of censoring the impulses of the id, attributed to the super-ego, was said to have been modified in the postmodern era. The liberation of the instincts of the id is particularly visible in the liberation of the aggression towards the paternal authority. Lieberman (2019) commented on how parents have been losing their authority over their children and, conversely, how children have been imposing their will on their parents. If the super-ego appears to suppress the Oedipus Conflict and to preserve the relationship with the menacing father, it seems to no longer be accomplishing that task. In the George Floyd protests, the relationship towards the father-figure (which is here being equated with the police) stops being “ambiguous” and becomes charged with aggression and disappointment. This occurrence is motivated, in part, by the events of the

twentieth century, as Frankl claimed (2001) and also encouraged by postmodern culture and ideology.

The ideals defended by postmodern individuals are intrinsically conflicting with authorities and hierarchies which establish social inequalities and lead to injustices and abuses of power. In the current postmodern context, the values of subjectivity, individualism, and liberation are now social imperatives that must be defended at all costs. Since authority figures are the ones who can hinder those aims, it is natural that conflicts arise. The police represent the oppressor, the blind follower of rules, and the one that imposes limits to individual freedom and follows culturally biased guidelines. Police officers symbolize everything postmodern individuals set out to eradicate. The dismissal of authority that is implicit in these protests leads to the dismissal of the laws conceived by that same authority. This conviction of a temporary suspension of the law promotes the liberation of aggressive and instinctual drives, creating an almost state of anarchy, which is exemplified by the violence of the protests currently taking place in Minnesota. The expression of these drives is as strong as the anger experienced towards the authority. The anger against “the father” is not new, is as ancient as the beginning of family (Frankl, 2001), however, the freedom to express this anger, as well as its intensity, is a novelty. Thus, the repressive action of the super-ego fades whenever figures of authority are dethroned and its fading is promoted by postmodern ideology. Postmodern culture does not just allow the gratification of desires, but also encourages fighting against more powerful figures. The disinhibition of the Oedipus conflict, expressed in the struggle against authority, was associated, by Freud, with a lack of religion and a lack of moral restraint. Freud (1923) claimed that religion and morality, i.e., “the higher nature of men” (p. 34) were acquired through the process of mastering the Oedipus complex.

The promotion of the immediate gratification of desires is also visible in these protests, since that after watching the video of Floyd’s death a great number of people all around the world decided to immediately protest, disregarding all health recommendations and the danger of the COVID-19 virus. This decision is here being considered as an impulse rather than a premeditated action, since it was mostly motivated by a burst of collective emotions intensified by the social media. The postmodern ideology that activates the need for an immediate gratification of desires often hides behind the obsession with individualism and identity, and the “freely express yourself”, “accept who you are” and “fight for what you deserve” sort of mentality. This positive

appeal for self-acceptance and freedom of expression can also indirectly motivate the anarchic atmosphere of the protests.

The pressure of postmodern ideals as the main generator of anxiety, guilt and shame: the ego-ideal in action

While the traditional super-ego would censure culturally forbidden behaviours by producing guilt and remorse, the postmodern super-ego censures behaviours that do not fight to eradicate this censorship. Regardless of ethnicity or social class, there is a spirit of liberation and self-realization in Western societies that strives to eradicate oppression, prejudice, and outdated mentalities. The failure to conform to an ideal representation of the self as someone liberal, tolerant and empathetic, who fights for the human right to freedom and social equality may produce shame or guilt. Everyone must actively fight against oppression and injustice, otherwise they are considered by others and by themselves as accomplices. This reasoning is a product of the ego-ideal and results in feelings of shame and guilt. According to the testimonial of Edna Bonhomme (Aljazeera, 2020b), African Americans did not just experience a collective grief for the death of George Floyd, many of them also experienced survivor's guilt or shame for not participating in the protests or for feeling that they have not done enough for this cause.

The feeling of shame and guilt for not matching the postmodern standards also impacts white people. There is a common idea that white Americans and white Europeans need to reflect on their own lives and actions, to educate themselves and become conscious of their white privilege. Becoming conscious of one's own white privilege causes shame and guilt for having permitted the creation of an unjust system such as this (Hook, 2011). A relational psychoanalyst, Melanie Suchet (2004) reflects deeply on the matters of unexamined white identity and how they trigger a trifecta of guilt, shame, and blame. In her article, the author describes psychotherapy with an African American client and how her own white guilt, shame, and blame gets in the way of productive therapy. The psychotherapist Margaret Clausen (2015) also speaks of the often unconscious desire to be perceived and felt in a well-intentioned and liberal way which only amounts to a problematic and defensive invulnerability. Moreover, white attempts to guilt-alleviation are perceived as a disavowal and consequently harshly condemned.

These examples of social anxiety are products of an intrapsychic punishing agency, guided by strong ideals of liberation and equality, that accurately portray what the super-ego has become in the postmodern era, as well as the central role played by the

ego-ideal. They also illustrate which “new guilts and anxieties” brought by this new era Žižek (1999) could have been referring to. Additionally, by defending these ideals and dethroning the authority that no longer fulfils that purpose, the postmodern individuals are adopting the position of protectors. They are embodying their ideal father-figure - "the ego ideal is the individual's first and most important identification with the father" (Freud, 1923, p. 26). Freud also defines the ego ideal as a “substitute for a longing for the father”.

Reflexivity, uncertainty, and anxiety

The George Floyd protests, more than being an example of the postmodern phenomenon of reflexivity, they also highlight the moral uncertainty that troubles today’s Western societies. First, the demonstrations are a great example of Žižek’s reflexivity due to how fragile and debatable the situation inevitably is. Since we no longer live in compliance with tradition and that there is no commonly accepted code to guide our social behaviour, all our impulses, experiences, and actions have become matters to be reflected on and debated to exhaustion. In 1999, Žižek claimed that “even racism is now reflexive”. This sentence gains a new meaning in 2020 with the never-ending debate that has been surrounding the worldwide protests against racism. There are multiple questions being asked, some argue that the violent protesters are savages and do not represent the same fight as the peaceful protesters, while others simply ask how far is too far. Some people argue that suffering and protesting for the death of a single person from a different country and a different context is non-sensical, even more if you are white. Others even argue that there is no racism in their countries and, therefore, the protests are fully unjustified (The New York Times, 2020). The reflexivity applied to racism is even bigger in the matter of police brutality. As there are movements against the police, presenting proof of their continuous racist bias, there are also influential people denying this reality, such as an African American professor at Columbia University who argues that the United States has never been less racist (McWhorter, 2001). While the former presents numbers to show how Black people in the US are being shot and killed by police at more than twice the rate of white people, the latter claims that the reason for this is not the racism of police officers but rather the structural racism in the society, that preferably leads black people into poverty and, consequently, to crime. Why do we select certain information to focus on, and why do we prefer one analysis to another? After being confronted with these multiple opinions, it becomes difficult to take a definitive stand for or against something or someone.

Postmodern individuals do not know many things with certainty; however, they seem to hold no doubt towards the supremacy of human rights. Nonetheless, while the video of Floyd's death clearly incriminates four police officers, it does not necessarily make every police officer a racist criminal. The act of condemning the police as an organisation is arguable, as is the way to do it and how far to take it. Therefore, the decisions that were made after the first decision to condemn the four police officers in the video are subject to debate and automatically 'colonised' by doubt. This does not imply in any way that the protesters are doubting their ideas and their actions, however, they cause others to doubt and they can be especially susceptible to doubt when they are opposing the very same who are intended to protect them and of whom they are inevitably dependent. If individuals attempt to weigh their options, the overflow of opinions, information, and facts against and in favour of every proposal clouds judgement and leads to beliefs that can be easily shaken. This reality, instead of annihilating the super-ego, as George Frankl would argue, only augments the level of anxiety associated with constant doubting and ruminating. For every cause and every movement there is one opposed to it. There is proof of everything, which is a proof of nothing. If an individual is arrested while violently protesting for his idealized rights, it only raises doubts and questions, such as "Does breaking the law mean I have done wrong?", "Where does justice lie?" and "If the law has lost all its credibility, how to know right from wrong?". This applies not just to the protesters but to the police as well: how to know which one is the right cause to fight for? When to fight and when to join the other side? The abundance of these and many other questions is the result of a culture based on relativism and subjectivity. While under the Freudian super-ego anxiety was caused by the certainties of what we must not do, under the postmodern super-ego anxiety comes from the absolute uncertainty about what we should do.

Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to explore the influence of the postmodern era on the super-ego. To accomplish this purpose, the super-ego processes and its layers of functioning described by Freud, Klein and others were deconstructed and challenged in view of the social and cultural changes that have emerged from the problematic sequence of events of the 20th century. From this analysis were extracted certain behavioural tendencies, characteristic of the current social context, that were found to implicate and threaten the foundations of the Freudian super-ego. These tendencies include: the

aggression towards paternal authorities; the overturn of traditional and conservative institutions; the liberation of instincts of the id; a theoretical exemption from prohibitions and restrictions; and the absence of a moral compass, accompanied by a state of general confusion. The example of the George Floyd protests is used as a potential portrait of the behavioural changes that implicate the super-ego and that were brought by postmodernity. The extension of the civil disobedience and the intensity of the aggression towards the authority exhibited during the protests flag an alteration of the Freudian super-ego. The changes observed in the behaviour of postmodern Western societies suggest that certain structural functions of the super-ego are no longer operative. However, this conclusion is insufficient to support George Frankl's hypothesis of an annihilation of the super-ego. Particularly, since the ego-ideal still manifests itself and the feelings of guilt, anxiety and shame persist.

However, this does not invalidate the possibility that the super-ego may have changed its nature. This psychic agency now conjugates harshness with liberalism, and it is moved by the unconditional obligation to be free, truthful and happy. What remains in the place of the super-ego is the persistence of guilt, anxiety and shame, and the strong will to conform to a set of ideals inspired by non-authoritarian role-models. Postmodern individuals are no longer being moved by fear and blind obedience, they follow their own ideal representations and manage the satisfaction of their instincts as they see fit, within a difficult and personal balance of transgression and restraint. This conclusion points to an idea already mentioned in the second chapter, namely, the idea that the ego-ideal has taken the place of the super-ego. Lieberman's clinical observations support this claim. She concludes that "the new super-ego" is fundamentally more narcissistic and subjective – being a good person corresponds to conforming to one's ideal of good, wealth and beauty rather than from good and altruistic deeds such as helping others, following the ten commandments, respecting the elderly or being kind. Individuals are now guided by a different set of standards and values that seem to affect the nature and the functioning of the super-ego. The contribution of this dissertation is the deconstruction of the functioning of the super-ego and its revision in the light of the 21st century culture. Particularly, regarding the break of the bond with paternal figures; the empowerment of the ego-ideal and of the feeling of shame; and a reflection on the state of moral uncertainty and subsequent new social anxieties.

As a final point, there is undoubtedly a lot of room for further research on the super-ego and on how permeable to culture it can be. It is essential to understand how the

phenomena of morality, repression and guilt have evolved since Freud and how that may change the way psychoanalysis approaches the postmodern individual in terms of research, as well as in the clinical practice.

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