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The banalization of symbolic violence and its relationship with hate crimes

Abstract

In contemporary society, the subtle and often overlooked phenomenon of symbolic violence has profound implications, especially concerning the proliferation of hate crimes. This form of violence refers to the imposition of meanings onto a group that are accepted as legitimate, often to the detriment of that group. Although not manifested physically, symbolic violence can have devastating psychological and social effects. Simultaneously, hate crimes, which are criminal acts motivated by prejudice against certain groups, have been increasing globally. In this context, the following article proposes a comprehensive reflection on this issue, integrating different theoretical perspectives and concrete examples for a better understanding of the phenomenon.

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Introduction

According to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic violence refers to the imposition of meanings and values that people internalize without questioning, thus perpetuating inequalities and social hierarchies.[1] Unlike physical violence, symbolic violence is exerted through language, symbols, and social norms, often invisibly, coercively, and dominantly perpetuating inequality and reinforcing social hierarchies. Historical examples include the marginalization of minority cultures and languages, such as historically promoted government policies that contributed to the marginalization of indigenous languages. In the Brazilian context, the imposition of Portuguese as the official and dominant language, along with educational practices that devalued indigenous languages, can be seen as a form of symbolic violence. These policies not only limited the use of indigenous languages but also devalued their cultures and traditional knowledge, perpetuating social and cultural inequalities.[2] Moving into contemporary times, examples can be seen in media representations that stereotype or demean certain groups. This dynamic not only affects individuals involved but also has broader social repercussions. Media stigmatization brings harmful conditions upon specific groups, feeding prejudices and systemic discrimination. In contexts where structural inequality is already entrenched, such representations can intensify power disparities and the marginalization of entire communities, thus the impacts of symbolic violence are profound, leading to internalized oppression and the perpetuation of inequality.

Development

The Internet and social media have become a double-edged sword in the context of symbolic violence. While providing a platform for marginalized voices, they also facilitate the spread of hate speech and extremist ideologies. Online anonymity and echo chambers allow individuals to propagate hate without immediate consequences, leading to the normalization of toxic discourse. Social media algorithms often amplify sensationalist and divisive content, further reinforcing symbolic violence and increasing the risk of offline hate crimes. Many countries have adopted specific legislation aimed at combating hate speech on online platforms. These laws typically define what constitutes hate speech and establish sanctions for those who propagate it. For example, in the European Union, the Directive on Combating Racism and Xenophobia sets clear rules on online content that incites violence or hatred based on characteristics such as race, religion, or ethnic origin, and some jurisdictions have pushed for stricter regulations for social media platforms. Platforms are often encouraged to develop algorithms and policies that identify and remove harmful content more efficiently. The fight against symbolic violence on social media often raises complex issues related to freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is a fundamental right that ensures people can express their opinions and ideas freely, even if controversial. However, this freedom is not absolute and can be limited when it conflicts with other fundamental rights, such as protection against discrimination and the preservation of human dignity.

The Recreational Racism Law, passed in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2023 in Brazil, represents a significant milestone in the fight against manifestations of discrimination and racism disguised as humor or entertainment. This fight is important because several comedians and public figures resort to this type of humor and contribute to the normalization of prejudiced attitudes. In the populist discourse of current politicians, this type of humor is often used to garner support by ridiculing political correctness and minority rights. This not only perpetuates symbolic violence but also legitimizes hate speech, making it more acceptable in public discourse. Today's politicians often use the cover of humor to make inflammatory statements, while participants in this media consumption or "filter bubble" add an entertainment twist to serious political rhetoric. This symbiosis serves to desensitize the public to hate speech and diminishes the perception of the seriousness of discriminatory language and actions, and the consequences are far-reaching, as the normalization of symbolic violence can create an environment in which discriminatory attitudes and behaviors are seen as acceptable. The result is a society more tolerant of violence and consequently hate crimes. Hate crimes are defined as criminal acts motivated by prejudice against a person's race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sex, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. The connection between symbolic violence and hate crimes lies in how symbolic violence dehumanizes and delegitimizes targeted groups, making it easier for individuals to justify acts of aggression against them. For example, if a community is constantly portrayed as dangerous or inferior, individuals from that community may become targets of hate crimes.

From a sociological perspective, the perpetuation of symbolic violence and the consequent increase in hate crimes can be seen as a failure of social structures to promote equality and justice. Public policies aimed at reducing symbolic violence and preventing hate crimes are crucial. This includes the implementation of stricter

regulations on hate speech, the promotion of media literacy, and the promotion of inclusive education. Education plays a fundamental role in addressing the roots of symbolic violence, encouraging critical thinking and empathy among individuals throughout the socialization process.

In Brazil, the interaction between symbolic violence and hate crimes is further complicated by the militarization of public schools. This trend, framed as a measure to improve discipline and security, often results in the reinforcement of authoritarian values and the marginalization of already vulnerable groups. The presence of military personnel in educational environments can normalize a culture of fear and obedience, stifling democratic principles and critical thinking. This environment can exacerbate the effects of symbolic violence, particularly against minority students, and undermine efforts to promote human rights and social justice.[3–9]

Conclusion

In summary, the banalization of symbolic violence significantly contributes to the increase in hate crimes. By understanding and addressing symbolic violence, society can take essential steps to mitigate its harmful effects and prevent the escalation of hate-motivated violence. The Brazilian context, the role of the Internet, and the influence of public figures such as politicians and comedians highlight the multifaceted nature of this issue. Future research and political efforts should focus on comprehensive strategies that encompass legal, educational, and social dimensions to effectively combat both symbolic violence and hate crimes.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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