



BETWEEN DUTY AND BEING: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NORMS ON THE DYNAMICS OF TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS



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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the impact of social norms on the dynamics of toxic relationships, discusses the conflict between the duty of social conformity often imposed and the search for authenticity/personal recognition. In accordance with the theoretical review and a qualitative analysis, the study analyzes how social norms cooperate for the reproduction of abusive behaviors and for the maintenance of harmful relationships. The results suggest that rigid social perspectives can subject individuals to rudimentary roles, complicating the exit from toxic relationships. The final considerations highlight the need for cultural transformation and the relevance of advances in self-knowledge as mechanisms to acquire healthy relationships. The article also explores how social norms can silence the voices of those who suffer in abusive relationships, creating a cycle of emotional dependency and fear of retaliation. Often, society reinforces stereotypes that perpetuate the idea that maintaining a relationship, even a toxic one, is preferable to facing the social judgment that can come with breaking up. This cycle of compliance can lead to the normalization of harmful behaviors, both for those who suffer and for those who perpetuate the abuse. In addition, the study highlights that emotional isolation is a key factor that prevents the individual from seeking help or recognizing their own autonomy within the relationship. The cultural transformation mentioned in the article suggests the importance of questioning and reformulating these norms, promoting a society that values mental and emotional health. To this end, education and social awareness about the signs of abusive relationships are crucial in preventing new toxic dynamics.

Keywords: Toxic Relationships. Social Norms. Abusive Behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

Human interactions are governed and intertwined by a complex web of social norms, which shape expectations, behaviors, and often stipulate what is judged as acceptable or unacceptable in different contexts. Although intended to reinforce social cohesion and functionality, these norms can, on the other hand, perpetuate harmful practices, notably in affective personal relationships, where Duty and Being often conflict.

The essence of this research lies in the investigation of social norms that can perpetuate or intensify toxicity in interpersonal relationships. The concept of toxic relationship describes dynamics between partners that involve persistent patterns of harmful behavior, characterized by emotional abuse, manipulation, excessive dependence, and patterns of control.

According to Judith Orloff (2010), toxic relationships are those that drain emotional energy and leave people feeling drained and devalued. Orloff notes that these relationships can manifest in different ways, such as emotional abuse or manipulation, and have the potential to cause serious damage to the mental and emotional health of the individuals involved.

Toxicity in these relationships does not appear in isolation; It is often stimulated by cultural issues, strictly defined gender roles, and social norms that, whether consciously or unconsciously, favor the perpetuation of certain destructive behaviors to ensure social conformity.

This article aims to explore the convergence between social norms and the dynamics of toxic relationships, analyzing how these norms affect both the perception and experience of abusive behaviors. The research seeks to understand how social expectations, often internalized, can trap individuals in cycles of abuse and manipulation, maintaining a continuous state of emotional and psychological dependence.

In addition, the conflict between the duties imposed by social and cultural expectations and each individual's search for their true nature and individual needs can generate an internal tension that affects emotional health and the ability to form authentic relationships.

The study aims to offer a critical analysis of the role of these factors in the perpetuation of toxic relationships. Analysis seeks to investigate and clarify the processes or factors that are behind a specific situation, understanding how and why certain patterns or dynamics form and function.

In accordance with the theoretical review and a qualitative analysis with bibliographic emphasis, the study analyzes how social norms cooperate for the reproduction of abusive behaviors and for the maintenance of harmful relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The phenomenon of social conformity, in which individuals adjust their behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes to align with the norms of a group, even when those norms contradict their own beliefs, has been widely studied in social psychology. Two of the main authors who contributed to the understanding of this process were Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram, whose research demonstrates how the desire for social belonging can influence individual behaviors in profound and sometimes worrying ways.

Solomon Asch conducted, in 1951, one of the most famous experiments on conformity. In his study, Asch brought together groups of participants to perform a simple task: identify which of the three lines presented on a card was the same length as a standard line. What the participants didn't know was that all the other members of the group, except for them, were complicit in the experiment, instructed to give wrong answers at certain times.

The results showed that when accomplices unanimously gave wrong answers, about 75 percent of the experimental participants also gave the same incorrect answer in at least one of the trials, despite it being clear that they were wrong. Asch concluded that social pressure, even in situations where the truth is clear, can lead individuals to conform to the group. This suggests that the fear of being seen as different or the need for acceptance may prevail over objective evidence or the individual's personal beliefs.

Asch identified two main types of social influence that can explain this conformity: normative influence and informational influence. Normative influence refers to the desire to be accepted and avoid social discomfort, while informational influence arises when individuals believe that the group holds correct information and they do not.

While Asch focused on conformity to social norms in group situations, Stanley Milgram, in 1963, investigated a related phenomenon: obedience to authority. His experiment, inspired by the horrors of the Holocaust and the advocacy of many perpetrators that they were "just following orders," sought to understand the extent to which people would obey instructions from an authority figure, even if it meant causing pain to another human being.

In the study, participants were assigned to administer electric shocks (which were actually fake) to a "learner" whenever the learner got a wrong answer. Despite the cries of

pain from the learner (an actor), most participants continued to administer shocks at higher and higher levels when encouraged by an authority figure (the experimenter). Surprisingly, 65% of the participants obeyed orders to the maximum level of shock, even when they expressed discomfort and hesitation.

Milgram's results reveal that obedience to authority figures can lead individuals to act in ways that are contrary to their moral and personal convictions. As in Asch's experiment, the power of social context and authority figures demonstrates the strength with which norms can shape human behavior, even when such norms conflict with individual beliefs.

Both Asch's and Milgram's experiments demonstrate that social context and group dynamics have a significant impact on individual behavior. Conformity and obedience often emerge from a psychological need for acceptance and to avoid conflict, either with the group, as in the case of Asch, or with an authority figure, as in the case of Milgram.

These studies raise important questions about individual autonomy and the limits of social influence. In contexts where social norms or the orders of authorities are ethically questionable, such as in authoritarian regimes or in group dynamics that promote discrimination, the power of conformity can have serious consequences.

Research on social conformity, initiated by Asch and expanded by Milgram, remains relevant today, as it addresses core questions about the nature of human interaction and the influence of social context on behavior. Understanding how and why people conform, even against their personal beliefs, is crucial to dealing with social problems that involve prejudice, blind obedience, and mass manipulation. In this way, by analyzing human behavior in the light of social norms, we are encouraged to promote a culture of questioning, resistance to injustice, and respect for individuality.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NORMS ON THE PERCEPTION OF HEALTHY AND TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS.

Social norms play a key role in how individuals perceive and behave within intimate relationships. These norms are understood as implicit rules and expectations that regulate social behavior, guiding what is considered acceptable or unacceptable within a given culture or social context. When it comes to romantic relationships, social norms influence conceptions of healthy and toxic relationships, shaping expectations, behaviors, and dynamics between partners.

Healthy relationships are often idealized from social norms that promote equality, mutual respect, and open communication. These norms, in many contexts, are based on principles of reciprocity and equitable partnership. According to Nascimento (2014, p. 28), "the norms

that regulate healthy relationships involve the promotion of supportive behaviors, cooperation and the ability to deal with conflicts constructively". However, these norms are profoundly influenced by cultural and social factors, which means that different societies may have different expectations about what constitutes a healthy relationship.

The literature points out that positive social norms, such as those that emphasize the importance of dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution, are associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction and the longevity of relationships (Souza & Hutz, 2008). On the other hand, the absence of such norms can contribute to the maintenance of dysfunctional behaviors, where communication is scarce and conflicts are poorly resolved, predisposing the relationship to toxicity.

Social norms also play a key role in the formation and perpetuation of toxic relationships, especially in contexts where there is an emphasis on traditional gender roles or unequal power hierarchies. Patriarchal norms, for example, can contribute to the acceptance of abusive behavior, justifying control, submission, and violence within the relationship. According to Andrade and Garcia (2011, p. 58), "cultural norms that favor male domination and female passivity can legitimize domestic violence, making it difficult for victims to recognize the signs of abuse and seek help."

In many cases, social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities can shape expectations of behavior within the relationship, suggesting that the man should be the "provider" and the "authority" in the relationship, while the woman should be submissive and accommodating (Grossi, 2013).

This dynamic can lead to the perpetuation of toxic relationships, where violence or emotional control are naturalized as part of everyday interactions. Internalizing these norms can lead to a greater tolerance for abusive behavior, making it difficult for victims to recognize the relationship as toxic or to disengage from the relationship.

THE EXPECTATION OF ROMANTICIZATION AND MAINTENANCE OF THE RELATIONSHIP.

Another social norm that influences the perception of relationships is the romanticization of love and the idea that relationships should be maintained at any cost. Ferreira (2012, p. 35), argues that "the romanticization of love relationships, rooted in cultural and media narratives, tends to glorify sacrifice and tolerance, often promoting the idea that suffering is a natural part of the love relationship". This norm can be especially dangerous in abusive relationship contexts, as it reinforces the idea that the partner must

be "saved" or that true love is one that resists all adversity, even if those adversities include harmful behaviors.

The expectation that women, in particular, should be the "guardians" of relationships is also reinforced by social norms that romanticize the role of caregiver and peacemaker. This phenomenon was described by Diniz (2009, p. 42), where he points out that "the norms that define the role of women as the ones who must endure and fix the relationship can lead to the perpetuation of toxic relationships, in which emotional and even physical suffering is seen as part of the process of loving maturation".

The above quote highlights the false belief that emotional and even physical suffering is an inevitable and necessary part of love. This romanticized view of suffering can lead to a minimization of the severity of abusive situations.

Historically, women have been seen as responsible for maintaining harmony and resolving conflicts in a relationship. This expectation can lead to an imbalance of power and a dynamic in which women end up suppressing their own needs.

Expectations and rules about how men and women should behave in a romantic relationship are deeply ingrained in the culture and influence the dynamics between partners.

By normalizing suffering and tolerance for abusive behavior, these norms contribute to the maintenance of toxic relationships. The idea that love is synonymous with suffering can cause women to stay in abusive relationships for longer.

Feminist theory (Bem, 1993; Fraser, 1997) argues that traditional gender norms perpetuate power inequalities, often placing women in positions of submission and acceptance of abusive behaviors, while men are socialized to dominate.

The expectation of romanticization and relationship maintenance points to a social and cultural problem, the perpetuation of toxic relationships, in part, stems from gender norms that place a disproportionate burden on women, leading them to accept abusive behaviors as part of love.

SOCIAL NORMS AND COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN RELATIONSHIPS.

Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) is a relevant concept to understand the dynamics of attributions in toxic relationships. When the person is abused and faced with behaviors that clearly contradict their expectations of a healthy relationship, psychological strain can occur. To relieve this tension, the individual can alter their beliefs or attributions, justifying or minimizing the abusive behavior to maintain internal coherence.

Cognitive dissonance can also arise as a consequence of the conflict between internalized social norms and the reality of the toxic relationship. It occurs when individuals experience discomfort when they realize that their expectations or beliefs about the relationship (influenced by social norms) do not correspond to the reality they are experiencing. Festinger (1957) proposes that individuals attempt to reduce this dissonance by adjusting their beliefs or behaviors to align with internalized social norms.

In toxic relationships, cognitive dissonance can lead victims to rationalize abusive behaviors as "normal" or "acceptable" within the social context, making it difficult to identify the abuse and seek help. In a study with women victims of violence, Souza (2015, p. 28) reports that "victims tend to minimize the severity of the abuse, reinterpreting the aggressor's actions as a reflection of stress or frustration, rather than a persistent characteristic of toxicity in the relationship".

A Brazilian study on domestic violence, Santos (2011, p. 38) reports that "women who remain in abusive relationships often reinterpret the abuser's behavior as being 'less severe' than it really is, a way of alleviating the dissonance between their perception of the relationship and the abusive behaviors they experience." This coping strategy ends up working as an emotional survival mechanism, but it also hinders the ability to break the relationship.

According to Durkheim (1893), social norms are tacit rules that guide the behavior of individuals in a society, playing a crucial role in maintaining order and social cohesion. These norms profoundly influence interpersonal interactions, setting expectations about gender roles, power, and communication.

Social norms play a crucial role in how individuals perceive and experience relationships, shaping both the expectations of a healthy relationship and the dynamics of a toxic relationship.

While norms that promote equity, respect, and communication are essential for developing healthy relationships, patriarchal norms or norms that encourage the maintenance of relationships at any cost can contribute to the perpetuation of abusive dynamics. Therefore, it is essential to develop social and educational interventions that challenge harmful norms and promote a more balanced and healthy view of relationships.

CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS AND TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

Causal attributions directly influence how individuals perceive their relationship. In toxic relationships, where emotional or physical abuse is present, the cycle of justifications for abusive behavior contributes to the normalization of violence. Santos and D'Affonseca

(2012, p. 58) point out that "distorted attributions, such as blaming the victim or externalizing the causes of abuse, are unconscious strategies that facilitate the continuation of abusive behaviors."

In addition, the cultural model of relationship influenced by patriarchal norms and gender expectations can also exacerbate these dysfunctional attributions. In Brazil, studies on conjugal violence indicate that many victims tend to accept abuse as an integral part of the relationship, either due to emotional dependence or social pressure to maintain the marriage at any cost (Grossi, 2013).

Causal attributions in toxic relationships play a central role in perceiving partner behavior and maintaining the relationship. In many cases, people who are in abusive relationships make distorted attributions that justify or minimize their partner's behavior, perpetuating the cycle of abuse. These attributions are influenced by psychological factors, such as cognitive dissonance and learned helplessness, as well as by cultural and social factors.

Walker (1979) defines toxic relationships as those characterized by destructive patterns of behavior, such as emotional, psychological, or physical abuse, that result in distress for one or both partners. These relationships are often maintained by a combination of emotional dependence and social pressures.

Psychological interventions in cases of abusive relationships should therefore focus not only on the behavior of the aggressor, but also on the attributions that the victim makes in relation to the abuse. As Falcke and Féres-Carneiro (2004, p. 85) point out, "understanding and restructuring causal attributions can be an effective tool to help the victim break the cycle of violence and build healthier relationships".

The way people attribute causes to their partner's behavior plays a crucial role in how they perceive and deal with problems in relationships, especially when they are in toxic relationships. Attribution theory, a fundamental concept in social psychology, helps to understand how individuals explain the behavior of others and how these explanations influence interpersonal interactions. In toxic relationships, attributions can be distorted, leading to the maintenance of cycles of abuse and suffering.

The attribution theory, initially proposed by Heider (1958), postulates that individuals tend to seek explanations for other people's behavior, categorizing these explanations as internal (related to personality traits or intentions) or external (resulting from situational circumstances). In the context of intimate relationships, these assignments have profound implications for the dynamics of the couple.

According to Souza and Gondim (2006, p. 85), "causal attributions in love relationships are directly related to marital satisfaction, as they influence the way partners interpret each other's behavior, especially in conflict situations". In a healthy relationship, people tend to make positive attributions to their partner's behavior, whereas, in toxic relationships, attributions tend to be more distorted, exacerbating dissatisfaction and conflict.

In toxic relationships, partners often make external attributions for abusive behaviors, justifying or minimizing the other's harmful actions. For example, an individual may attribute their partner's aggressive behavior to stress or external factors, such as financial problems or family issues, rather than acknowledging the abuse as a pattern of behavior.

According to Dessen and Oliveira (2007, p. 85), "victims of psychological and physical violence in intimate relationships often make situational attributions, believing that the aggressor's behavior is caused by momentary factors and that he can change, which contributes to the perpetuation of the cycle of abuse". This tendency to justify abusive behavior can be motivated by several factors, such as fear of breakup, emotional or economic dependence, and even cultural norms that reinforce maintaining the relationship at any cost.

Another common pattern in toxic relationships is the victimized partner's internal attribution to the abusive behavior. In this case, the person experiencing abuse may believe that their own actions or characteristics are responsible for the negative treatment they receive. This self-blame is often reinforced by the aggressor, in a dynamic of emotional manipulation known as *gaslighting*, where the victim begins to question their own perception of reality and to believe that they are the cause of the conflicts.

According to Falcke and Féres-Carneiro (2004, p. 72), "blaming the victim in abusive relationships is a form of manipulation that reduces the person's self-esteem, making them more vulnerable and emotionally dependent on their partner, which reinforces the difficulty in breaking the relationship". This type of internal attribution not only perpetuates the abusive dynamic, but can also lead to serious psychological harm, such as anxiety, depression, and learned helplessness.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this study is based on a qualitative approach of exploratory character, complemented by a bibliographic research, with the objective of investigating, describing and analyzing the main concepts and theories that permeate the theme in question. The choice for qualitative research is justified by the subjective and

interpretative nature of the specificities investigated, seeking to understand the complexity of meanings, experiences and interactions.

Qualitative research, according to Minayo (2010), has as its main focus the understanding of specificities from an interpretative perspective, valuing subjectivities and the complexity of social interactions. The qualitative approach, in this context, does not seek to generalize the results, but rather to understand the depth of the experiences and discourses presented in the proven theoretical sources.

As Flick (2009) points out, qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher is interested in exploring meanings attributed to certain specifications, and is particularly useful in exploratory studies that require a detailed analysis of concepts or experiences,

Thus, the present study is guided by the investigation of theoretical and empirical works that address the theme, performing an interpretative analysis of the content found, in order to identify the patterns, contradictions, gaps and contributions existing in the literature.

Bibliographic research, as defended by Gil (2002), consists of a survey and analysis of previously published works on the topic of interest, including books, scientific articles, dissertations, theses, periodicals and other relevant materials. This type of research is justified when it seeks to explore a theme in depth based on the contributions already consolidated in the literature, enabling a broader and more critical view of the state of literature.

The present study limited its objectives to the review of Brazilian and foreign scientific literature published from 2003 onwards, with the aim of understanding how the impact of social norms on the dynamics of toxic relationships in relation to power and duty influenced in society and families. To this end, searches were carried out in the Google Scholar and SciELO databases, using the descriptors "Social norms and toxic relationships" and "Duty and Power".

The review covered free online studies on the impact of toxic relationships, to the analysis of contemporary studies that expand this knowledge to the area of intimate relationships and the relationship of duty and power in society and in the family environment.

For the selection of studies, the following were excluded: duplicate articles, those that did not fit the research objectives, or those that did not focus on toxic relationships based on duty and power.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The studies of Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram reveal an important aspect about the influence of social norms and authority on human behavior, which goes beyond simple conformity or obedience. They provide a solid foundation for understanding how these factors can affect social perception and interactions, particularly in situations of social pressure or power dynamics. The results indicate that norms and authority not only guide behaviors toward selection, but can also trigger responses that contradict as individuals, which is especially concerning when looking at relationship maintenance.

The intersection between social psychology and the study of interpersonal relationships is fundamental to understanding the complexity of human behavior in social contexts. The following table presents a synthesis of research that explores how psychological processes, such as social influence and cognitive dissonance, shape relationship dynamics, especially those characterized by abuse and control. The classic experiments of Asch and Milgram serve as a starting point for the analysis of broader phenomena, such as conformity to dysfunctional social norms and obedience to authority figures.

Aspects	Study/Concept	Description	Implications
Compliance	Asch (1951)	In their experiments, 75 percent of the participants conformed to the majority of the group, even when the truth was evident.	It indicates the strength of normative influence, where the desire to belong can lead to actions contrary to personal convictions
Obedience to authorities	Milgram (1963)	65% of participants applied shocks at maximum levels when instructed by an authority figure	It reveals how obedience to legitimate authorities can lead individuals to act against their moral and ethical principles.
Negative Influences	Social Norms	Conformity can be influenced by social norms that prove acceptance and belonging	Dysfunctional social norms can perpetuate toxic relationships and abusive dynamics
Informal Influences	Social Norms	Individuals believe that the group or authority has correct information that they do not know	It can lead to internalization of abusive behaviors, reinforcing the dynamics of power and control
Social Norms and Relationships	Andrade & Garcia (2011)	Norms that regulate love and emphasize harmony at any cost can legitimize suffering	Victims of abuse can internalize guilt, making it difficult to break abusive relationships
Cognitive dissonance	Festinger (1957)	Conflict between internalized beliefs and the reality experienced, leading victims to justify the behavior of the aggressor	Distorted justifications can make it difficult to perceive the relationship as toxic and seek help

Ethical Reflections	Asch and Milgram Impact	Vulnerability to social pressure and authority impacts human behavior, especially in interpersonal relationships	It is crucial to challenge social norms and promote a critical view of relationships, advocating autonomy and mutual respect
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Table prepared by the author.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study presented represents an important step in understanding the complex relationship between social norms and toxic relationships. By exploring how norms shape individuals' perceptions and expectations, the survey offers valuable insights for the prevention and treatment of domestic violence.

The literature review is comprehensive and well-founded, however, future research may deepen the investigation on the influence of cultural, socioeconomic, and gender factors on the dynamics of toxic relationships. In addition, longitudinal studies and evidence-based interventions are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of different prevention and treatment strategies. By continuing to explore this theme, researchers can contribute to the construction of a more just and egalitarian society, where domestic violence is less and less tolerated.

The research presented in this article demonstrates the complexity of toxic relationships and the crucial role of social norms in their perpetuation. By understanding how norms shape our perceptions and behaviors, we can develop more effective strategies to prevent and combat domestic violence.

This study also showed how social norms negatively influence the dynamics of toxic relationships, perpetuating abusive behaviors and making it difficult to get out of harmful situations.

The conflict between the duty of conformity and the search for personal authenticity emerges as a central factor that traps individuals in unsatisfactory roles.

Both Asch and Milgram demonstrate that social norms and authority figures have a profound impact on human behavior. Understanding these mechanisms is essential to address issues of compliance and abuse in diverse contexts, such as interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to promote a culture of questioning and resistance to injustices, defending individual autonomy and mutual respect in social interactions.

To promote healthier relationships, a concerted effort is needed to change the cultural norms that validate toxic behaviors, as well as encourage self-knowledge and individual empowerment.

Education and awareness of gender inequalities and the impact of social norms are key steps in building a society that values authenticity and equality in relationships.



It is essential that society as a whole engages in building a culture of respect, equality, and non-tolerance of violence. By challenging the norms that perpetuate inequality and violence, we can build a more just and secure future for all.



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