

Influencing Factors of Violent Behavior from the Joker Movie

Fatores Influenciadores do Comportamento Violento a partir do Filme Coringa

Factores de Influencia en el Comportamiento Violento a partir de la Película Guasón

Facteurs d'Influence du Comportement Violent dans le Film Joker

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Abstract

Violent behavior draws attention for its prevalence in society and for the complexity involved in understanding it. This study aimed to identify factors that influence violent behavior by analyzing the 2019 film *Joker*, focusing on the life trajectory of its main character. Films can serve as a “mirror of society,” depicting aspects of real life and reaching large audiences due to their broad accessibility. *Joker* portrays a life story marked by escalating acts of violence. Using a qualitative documentary approach, the film was systematically analyzed and multiple scenes were collected for examination. The findings identified the following influencing factors: physical violence in childhood and adulthood; physical and emotional neglect in childhood; access to firearms; neglect or disregard by healthcare professionals and by the state; social stigma; social inequality; and social exclusion. The study concludes that violent behavior cannot be understood through a single, isolated cause. Rather, it may arise from the combination of these factors — which often remain invisible to society — and from their cumulative, interlocking effects that enable violence to occur.

Keywords: violence, human rights, social vulnerability.

Resumo

O comportamento violento chama a atenção por estar bastante presente na sociedade, bem como por ser um tema complexo de ser entendido. Assim, este estudo objetivou identificar fatores influenciadores do comportamento violento. Isso foi realizado a partir do filme *Coringa*, do ano de 2019, de acordo com a trajetória de vida do personagem principal. Filmes podem servir como o “espelho da sociedade”, retratando aspectos da vida real, além de serem consumidos por grande parte da população por seu acesso facilitado. O filme *Coringa* relata uma história de vida com comportamentos violentos desenfreados. A análise desse filme, realizada por meio de uma pesquisa qualitativa documental, possibilitou a coleta de várias cenas. Do resultado, identificaram-se os seguintes fatores influenciadores: violência física na infância e na adultez, negligência física e emocional na infância, acesso à arma de fogo, descaso de profissional da saúde e do poder do Estado, estigma social, desigualdade social e exclusão social. Conclui-se que o comportamento violento não pode ser entendido por uma causa isolada, podendo ser produzido pelos fatores citados que, por vezes, encontram-se invisíveis para a sociedade. Estes se somam e se interarticulam, possibilitando a ocorrência da violência.

Palavras-chave: violência, direitos humanos, vulnerabilidade social.

Resumen

El comportamiento violento llama la atención por estar bastante presente en la sociedad, y por ser un tema complejo de ser entendido. Así, este estudio tuvo como objetivo identificar factores que influyen en el comportamiento violento. Eso fue realizado utilizando la película “Guason”, del año 2019, de acuerdo con la trayectoria de la vida del personaje principal. Películas pueden servir como un “espejo de la sociedad”. Retratando aspectos de la vida real, y son consumidos por gran parte de la población por su fácil acceso. La película “Guason” relata una historia de vida con comportamientos violentos desenfrenados. El análisis de esta película, realizada por medio de una investigación cualitativa documental, hizo posible la colecta de varias escenas. Del resultado, fueron identificados los siguientes factores influenciadores: violencia física en la infancia y en la adultez, negligencia física y emocional en la infancia, acceso al arma de fuego, descaso de los profesionales de salud y del poder del Estado, estigma social, desigualdad social, y exclusión social. Se concluyó que el comportamiento violento no puede ser la comprensión por una causa aislada. Que puede ser producido por los factores ya citados, que a veces se encuentran invisibles por la sociedad. Estos se suman, y se articulan interrelacionándose, haciendo posible la existencia de la violencia.

Palabras clave: violencia, derechos humanos, vulnerabilidad social.

Résumé

Le comportement violent attire l'attention parce qu'il est assez présent dans la société et qu'il s'agit d'un sujet complexe à comprendre. Ainsi, cette étude avait comme objectif identifier les facteurs d'influence sur les comportements violents. Cela a été réalisé à partir du film “Joker”, de l'année 2019, qui suit la trajectoire de vie du personnage principal. Les films peuvent servir de « miroir de la société ». Représentant des aspects de la vie réelle, ils sont consommés par une grande partie de la population en raison de leur accès facile. Le film “Joker” raconte une histoire de vie avec un comportement violent endémique. L'analyse de ce film, réalisée à travers une recherche documentaire qualitative, a permis de recueillir plusieurs scènes. Les résultats montrent les facteurs d'influence qui ont été identifiés : violence physique dans l'enfance et à l'âge adulte, négligence physique et émotionnelle dans l'enfance, accès aux armes à feu, négligence des professionnels de la santé et du pouvoir de l'État, stigmatisation sociale, inégalité sociale et exclusion sociale. Nous concluons que le comportement violent ne peut pas être compris par une cause isolée. Cela peut être produit par les facteurs susmentionnés, qui sont parfois invisibles pour la société. Celles-ci s'additionnent et s'articulent entre elles, rendant possible l'existence de la violence.

Mots-clés : violence, droits de l'homme, vulnérabilité sociale.

Violent behavior traces back to humanity's earliest periods, when survival depended on force and the “law of the strongest.” People fought to secure food, territory, and the continuity of the species. Human history has thus been marked by struggles for subsistence and power, including wars and tyrannies. Today, violence appears in uncontrolled forms across diverse contexts, affecting individuals, families, and society as a whole (Freitas, 2020).

In a 1996 resolution, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized violence as one of the leading public health problems (Krug et al., 2002). In 2019, an estimated 475,000 people worldwide were victims of homicide; globally, nearly half a million people are killed each year (The Lancet, 2022).

Brazil has a homicide rate of 30.5 per 100,000 people, the second highest in South America. National rates rose in recent years — from 20–26 per 100,000 in 2012 to over 30 in 2017. Altogether, approximately 1.2 million people lost their lives to intentional homicide in Brazil between 1991 and 2017 (UNODC, 2019).

More recently, violence in Brazil has continued to increase. According to the Atlas da Violência 2021, produced by the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety, deaths classified as “violent with undetermined causes” rose by 35.2% between 2018 and 2019 (IPEA, 2021). Thus, studying the potential causes of violence is essential for designing measures to curb it and to protect individuals, social groups, and their surrounding environments.

The WHO defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a community or group, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, developmental impairment, or deprivation (Krug et al., 2002).

A single lens — psychological, biological, or social — cannot fully account for human behavior. By the same token, violent behavior cannot be explained by a single cause (Back, 2021).

Bandura (1973) notes that violent acts can hold functional value for those who use them, creating conditions that favor their occurrence. Through violent behavior — or dominance exerted by physical or verbal force — individuals may acquire valuable resources: they can alter rules to fit their interests, gain control, eliminate conditions that undermine their

well-being, and remove barriers that block or delay their goals. What punishes the victim, even in the short term, may act as a reward for the aggressor. This utilitarian value contributes substantially to the prevalence of violence in everyday interactions (Bandura, 1973).

Beyond immediate harm, violence can induce stress that disrupts the development of the nervous and immune systems. Individuals exposed to aggressive environments face elevated risks of behavioral, physical, and mental health problems both immediately and across the life course, including becoming victims and/or perpetrators of further violence. In this sense, violence is preventable; it is not inherent to the human condition (The Lancet, 2022). Its origins are often hidden in a person's life history — particularly prior exposure to violence — so that an outcome becomes a cause, perpetuating an enduring cycle.

In empirical work, Bandura demonstrated learning through observation. Children who watched films depicting violent content subsequently reproduced the violent behaviors they had seen. Moreover, children who received rewards for such behavior tended to reinforce it, whereas those who received no reinforcement tended to extinguish it (Bandura et al., 1961). Violent behavior can thus be learned observationally and strengthened through reward.

Societal functioning also matters. Systems that oppress, exclude, or ignore their members become unjust and, in turn, violent — simultaneously producing aggressive behaviors (Cappi, 2009). The more socially integrated an individual is, the greater their acceptance of social rules and laws. The likelihood of violence increases as individuals fear social disintegration, which undermines their sense of control. A lack of social recognition may be compensated through violent practices that reduce feelings of weakness and uselessness. Such practices can then be used to restore a sense of justice, obtain respect, and affirm identity (Luquiari, 2013).

Violent behavior often arises from multiple, cumulative factors. Using the iceberg metaphor, what is usually emphasized in calls for harsher criminal penalties is only the visible tip — the act itself (Back, 2021). In television, radio, and print media, there appears to be a sustained effort to attribute violence to specific social groups. Frequently, this attribution maps onto gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Through images and language, individuals become labeled and photographed in ways that strip them of personhood and turn them into categories — “slum dwellers,” “the poor,” “criminals,” “addicts,” “thieves,” and so on. Thus, forms of violence exist that are not treated as part of any necessary process of social reform (Sawaia, 2001).

The present study set out to analyze possible causes of violent behavior, acknowledging the multiple factors that may shape such conduct. By identifying the elements that contribute to the expression of these behaviors, the study informs the development of effective strategies to prevent their recurrence and supports more assertive approaches to violence prevention across diverse social contexts.

Method

Design

This study used a qualitative, documentary approach. It is qualitative because data were collected without numerical measurement and the guiding research question was addressed through interpretation. Interpretive practices make the world “visible” through observations, notes, and documents, seeking to make sense of a given phenomenon (Sampieri et al., 2013). It is documentary because it draws on diverse sources, including “first-hand” documents — materials that have not yet undergone analytic treatment — such as personal letters, recordings, diaries, and bulletins. These may be stored in public archives or private institutions. It also includes “second-hand” documents — those that have been analyzed previously — such as company reports, research reports, and statistical tables. Such documents can offer a clearer view of the issue under study (Gil, 2002).

Accordingly, a qualitative documentary design was chosen to enable an in-depth, interpretive analysis of existing materials. Using a feature film as the focal document provides a contextualized view of the phenomenon and facilitates discussion and comprehension.

Film Description

Joker, directed by Todd Phillips (2019), follows Arthur Fleck, a frustrated and isolated stand-up comedian with mental health disorders living in a decaying Gotham. Mocked by society and rejected by those around him, Arthur faces continual abuse, contempt, and a life marked by failure and alienation. His growing psychological instability is catalyzed by traumatic events and the lack of social and medical support. The convergence of these factors drives a dark and violent transformation as Arthur adopts the persona “Joker.”

Arthur's violent behavior emerges as a response to hostility and injustice. His brutal acts — such as the subway killings and the murder of a former coworker — mark a rupture with earlier attempts to maintain a conventional life. Each act both reflects his mental deterioration and functions as social critique of Gotham's pervasive indifference and inequality. The escalation culminates with the on-air killing of talk-show host Murray Franklin, cementing Arthur as a chaotic symbol of social revolt.

Instruments

Two grids were used for data organization and analysis.

1. Scene-capture grid: three columns indicating i) the start and end time of each selected scene, ii) a description of the scene, and iii) the substantive content extracted from the scene.

2. Analytic grid: two columns indicating i) the description of each selected scene and ii) the factor identified as a potential influencer of the character's violent behavior, based on the scene's content.

Data Collection Procedures

The film was first viewed in full so the researcher could become familiar with the content and record preliminary notes. The film was then viewed again for data collection (scene selection) using the scene-capture grid. Frequent pauses were made to describe each selected scene. Next, the collected material — i.e., the specific scenes — was reviewed. In total, 33 scenes were collected.

Data Analysis

Of the 33 scenes, 10 were excluded because they did not represent potential influencing factors for violent behavior or duplicated factors already captured elsewhere. Preference was given to scenes that most clearly contextualized the identified factor. Scene descriptions were grouped by the homogeneity of the factors identified as possible influencers of the character's violent behavior. Table 1 presents one illustrative scene for each factor to maintain focus and concision.

Results

Analysis of *Joker* (2019) identified the following potential factors influencing the character's violent behavior: physical violence in childhood and adulthood; physical and emotional neglect in childhood; access to firearms; neglect or disregard by a healthcare professional and by the state; social stigma; social inequality; and social exclusion.

Table 1.

Data analysis

Scene description (timestamp)	Factor identified as a possible influencer of the character's violent behavior
01:12:06–01:14:53 — Arthur learns he was beaten by his mother's ex-boyfriend while she remained passive; she herself was also beaten.	Physical violence in childhood
01:32–03:39 — Arthur is assaulted while working.	Physical violence in adulthood
01:15:02–01:15:20 — Arthur was found tied to a radiator in his mother's filthy apartment, malnourished, with multiple abrasions and severe head trauma. In the scene, his mother says she did not hear him cry — that "a happy little boy" is what came to her mind.	Physical and emotional neglect in childhood
16:30–17:00 — Arthur receives a handgun from a coworker.	Access to firearms
06:18–07:40 — Arthur asks the social worker to speak with his doctor about increasing his medications because he isn't feeling well; she replies that he is on seven different medications and they must be having some effect.	Disregard/neglect by a health care worker and by the state
40:05–42:13 — The social worker informs Arthur that government budget cuts will end the program; this is their last appointment.	
17:35–18:43 — Arthur's boss tells him people avoid him because they think he's strange.	Social stigma
39:12–39:40 — Thomas Wayne claims the person who killed his employees wears a mask out of envy of the more fortunate and fear of revealing his face, adding that until people "improve," the successful will look at those who haven't and see only clowns.	Social inequality
01:35:50–01:35:56 — The program director tells Arthur he should not be there and the audience will hate him, suggesting he appear only briefly rather than for a full segment.	Social exclusion

Physical violence involves actions that harm another person's bodily integrity through the use of force — hitting, kicking, striking, or slapping. In Arthur's life, this factor appears in both childhood and adulthood. Childhood violence is evident in the scene where he learns several facts about his past, including that he was beaten by his mother's ex-boyfriend. Three scenes portray physical violence against Arthur in adulthood: early in the film he is assaulted by a group of youths while working as a rent-a-clown; on the subway he is punched and kicked by young businessmen; and in another scene he is assaulted by Thomas Wayne, his presumed father.

Physical and emotional neglect in childhood refers to the absence of basic care — such as adequate food and hygiene — as well as a lack of affection. This factor emerges when Arthur uncovers previously unknown details about his early life.

Access to firearms alludes to how easily an ordinary citizen can obtain a gun. This is shown when a coworker gives Arthur a handgun. He initially refuses, but after the coworker insists, he keeps it.

Disregard by the social worker reflects a failure to fulfill professional responsibilities. Issues requiring intervention are met with indifference, inattention, and a lack of consideration. In one scene, this institutional disregard — by both the social worker and the state — is clear. Across multiple appointments, Arthur reports feeling unwell and asks to increase his medication dosage, but she seems not to listen, repeating the same questions every week.

Disregard by the state, depicted in two scenes, occurs when public authorities cease to provide what a person needs to function and develop. First, when Arthur begins to open up, the social worker interrupts to announce government budget cuts that will eliminate the social services program. She tells him this is their last meeting. When he asks how he will obtain his medications, she can only say she is sorry. In another scene, Arthur takes his final two pills. From that point on, he is left without medication or health care follow-up because he cannot afford the costs of maintaining his health.

Social stigma is a mark imposed on an individual that classifies them as devalued relative to others. Traits, behaviors, or habits — when reproduced by dominant culture — become stigmas. This factor appears in eight scenes, largely due to Arthur's uncontrollable, context-incongruent laughter, a consequence of his health condition. One example occurs when he tries to interact with a child. In another, his boss tells him people avoid him because they think he's strange. Elsewhere, people mock, imitate, underestimate, and disbelieve him because of his condition. On live television, Murray Franklin says he probably needs a doctor. In a moment of revolt, Arthur says he feels lonely, abandoned, and treated like garbage by society.

Social inequality consists of relational processes that constrain, limit, or harm individuals or groups and is marked by disparities in opportunity and economic conditions. Four scenes highlight this factor. In one, Arthur is outraged by how much attention is devoted to the deaths of three investors employed by Thomas Wayne. He reflects that if someone like him had died, no one would care — just as people ignore him every day. His notebook contains repeated phrases expressing his wish to be seen and noticed. He tells Murray that men like Thomas Wayne do not know what it is like to be in his position. In a public statement about the subway homicides, Wayne makes the inequality explicit by suggesting the masked perpetrator hides out of envy for those who were “fortunate” in life.

Social exclusion refers to being pushed to the margins or shut out of dominant social systems for ethnic, religious, social, or economic reasons. Three scenes illustrate this factor. In one, Arthur tries to interact with Thomas Wayne's son at the gate. In another, the talk-show director says the audience will hate Arthur and limits his appearance to a single brief segment rather than the full program. Exclusion is also evident when Arthur infiltrates an event to ask Wayne about his past, believing Thomas Wayne might be his father. Wayne first offers an autograph with indifference; when Arthur mentions his mother, Penny, Wayne calls her “crazy,” says Arthur is adopted, denies paternity, then strikes him and warns him to stay away from his son.

Discussion

Violent behavior is preventable. All forms of violence are strongly shaped by determinants at the individual, relational, community, and social levels. Together, these factors create environments that enable violence to persist. Violence is therefore a multifaceted problem resulting from a complex interplay of influences (Krug et al., 2002).

This study aimed to identify factors that influence violent behavior by analyzing a film and focusing on its main character. The analysis was grounded in the character's life history and salient experiences. The following factors were identified: physical violence in childhood and adulthood; physical and emotional neglect in childhood; access to firearms; disregard by the social worker and by the state; social stigma; social inequality; and social exclusion.

The literature indicates that physical violence and other forms of coercion have been normalized as routine strategies for behavioral control. The assumption is that people “learn” more quickly when behavior is punished. Examples include parents who beat children to “educate” them; teachers who fail students to force them to study; and incarceration as a deterrent to lawbreaking. Such control strategies can produce numerous side effects that are often more harmful than the behavior they seek to suppress, potentially fostering aggression as a way of facing situations (Ferreira et al., 2022). Studies show that exposure to violence — directly or indirectly, as a witness or a victim — increases the likelihood of subsequent violent behavior compared with non-exposed individuals. Cumulative exposure, whether to multiple forms of violence or over prolonged periods, further elevates this risk (Komatsu, 2019). In this sense, people may reproduce the patterns they

have experienced (Jacinto et al., 2020). In the film, physical violence appears in Arthur's childhood, when he learns he was beaten by his mother's ex-boyfriend, and in adulthood, when he is assaulted while working, again on the subway, and by Thomas Wayne, his presumed father.

Physical neglect refers to failing to meet a child's basic needs — nutrition, clothing, personal hygiene, supervision, and medical care. Emotional neglect refers to failing to meet emotional needs — offering affection, seeking help for emotional or behavioral problems, or shielding the child from domestic violence (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). All are forms of maltreatment with lasting consequences. Children who experience neglect tend to perceive their home as negative due to emotional and material deprivation, which can impair the development of competencies and create difficulties in childhood and adulthood (Nunes, 2021; Rayane & Sousa, 2018). Consequences include a higher probability of violent behavior (Van Dorn et al., 2012), as well as anxiety, stress, depression, and delinquent behaviors. There is evidence that emotional neglect may be more damaging to mental health and deviant behavior than physical neglect, in part because physical neglect is more visible and thus more readily corrected (Silva, 2019). In the film, Arthur discovers he was found malnourished, with multiple abrasions and severe head trauma, tied to a radiator — an example of physical and emotional neglect in childhood.

The WHO World Report on Violence and Health highlights cross-cutting risk factors, such as ease of access to firearms, that are strongly associated with multiple types of violence. Roughly one in two homicides is committed with a firearm (Chan et al., 2014). Readily available guns can make urban violence more frequent and intense, as everyday conflicts — such as an argument on public transport — can more easily turn lethal. The greater the circulation of firearms, the higher the rate of gun homicides (Almeida et al., 2022). A country that legitimizes firearms as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts thereby contributes to higher levels of violence. In the film, Arthur obtains a gun from a coworker and uses it to commit his first violent offense on the subway, killing three employees associated with Thomas Wayne.

Neglect by state institutions and their professionals directly affects the guarantee of rights and an individual's ability to participate in society. When institutions — security, health, social services, education — operate with authoritarian or repressive practices that fail to recognize people as singular beings with expressions and subjectivities, they function violently and must be addressed to explain violent behavior (Cappi, 2009; Mascarenhas & Campos, 2021). In the film, the social worker does not acknowledge Arthur's request to adjust his medications despite repeated reports that he feels unwell. State neglect becomes evident when budget cuts eliminate the program, leaving Arthur without medication or professional follow-up because he lacks the resources to pay for care.

Social stigma arises when people with mental disorders are linked to stereotypes such as incapacity, alongside the denial of human rights related to work, education, housing, and access to treatment (Santos et al., 2016). Stigma is tied to mental illness through social distinctions that mark individuals, becoming a barrier to social inclusion (Weber & Juruena, 2017). Stigmatization can lead individuals to internalize negative labels and believe they have multiple limitations. This process — self-stigma — harms quality of life, undermines self-esteem, and reduces resilience to stress (Cassiano et al., 2019; Nascimento & Leão, 2019). In the film, Arthur is repeatedly misunderstood and ridiculed for his uncontrollable, context-incongruent laughter; some doubt his health condition and ask whether the laughter is part of his act, while others suggest he “needs a doctor” because of his sexual problems.

Social inequality is historically rooted. It concentrates wealth in the hands of a few and destabilizes living conditions for many (Ferreira et al., 2020). The link between inequality and violent behavior can be understood through relative deprivation — the gap between societal ideals of success and an individual's actual situation. People assess their circumstances by comparison; frustration and stress arise when legitimate social goals feel out of reach, creating conditions that may motivate violence (Agnew, 1992, as cited in Heidrich et al., 2016). Violence thus correlates with unequal access to rights—income, housing, and public services (Cardia & Schiffer, 2002). In the film, Arthur is treated as invisible and strange by members of the elite. Thomas Wayne publicly suggests that “clowns” are those who failed to succeed and envy those who did, making inequality explicit.

Social exclusion produces trajectories of disconnection. Weakened ties — to family, neighbors, community, and institutions — can lead to isolation and loneliness (Sawaia, 2001). One study found that social isolation stemming from exclusion is associated with a markedly higher risk of future violent behavior — about 3.7 times greater than among those not exposed (Komatsu, 2019). Excluded individuals may feel frustrated and angry, prompting a need to “discharge” these feelings, sometimes through violent behavior — either as targets or as perpetrators (Porto, 2000). In the film, exclusion appears when Arthur's attempts to interact are rebuffed: a guard at Thomas Wayne's residence turns him away; Thomas himself later dismisses and strikes him; and the talk-show director warns that the audience will hate him and limits his participation.

Final Considerations

This study set out to identify factors that influence violent behavior using the 2019 film *Joker* as its source. A figure as striking as the Joker is intrinsically intriguing; tracing the character's life course can illuminate situations that often go unnoticed.

The analysis identified the following factors along the character's trajectory: physical violence in childhood and adulthood; physical and emotional neglect in childhood; access to firearms; neglect by a health professional and by the state; social stigma; social inequality; and social exclusion. These findings indicate that violent behavior cannot be explained by a single, isolated cause. Rather, it may arise from a constellation of "invisible," interlinked factors whose cumulative effects contribute to violent conduct.

This study invites a discussion that extends beyond the points listed here. Specifically, it underscores a different way of understanding violent behavior — not to trivialize or romanticize the problem, but to emphasize that violence prevention is inseparable from guaranteeing rights, ensuring access to citizenship, fostering the participation of people in social vulnerability, and adopting a broad view of what may underlie violent acts. In other words, it points to the importance of examining the life course of those who exhibit such behavior, without exclusion and with efforts toward reintegration.

The analysis offers insights that are pertinent to professional practice across fields. Considering each factor helps clarify how they may contribute to the escalation of aggressive behaviors and challenges common, overly rigid explanations. Practitioners can draw on these insights to identify signs of psychological decline and to design preventive interventions that promote support and social inclusion.

Finally, while the study identified multiple influencing factors, this breadth limited the depth of analysis of each one. Future research should examine the identified factors more closely.

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