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Fear - an Essential Characteristic of Recent Times

Petronela Polixenia NISTOR [1]
Oana-Andreea Neagu [2]

[1] Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iaşi, Romania
[2] PhD Student, Doctoral School of Sociology, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iaşi, Romania
Corresponding author: Petronela Nistor; e-mail: polixenianistor@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Current sociological and psychological research tends to consider fear as an essential feature of recent times, an omnipresent phenomenon of contemporary society that influences individual and collective behaviors in different fields. This theoretical analysis explores the various aspects of fear in modern society, with a focus on key concepts such as fear culture, fear sociology, liquid fear, terrorist threat, and fear of freedom. The main objective of this theoretical analysis/research/documentation is to become the theoretical framework for further research on fears and threats in a modern society.*

Keywords: *fear, culture of fear, liquid fear, terrorist threat, FoMO syndrome.*

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Introduction

A sociological approach must take into considerration an analysis of the socio-cultural elements and circumstances through which emotions are produced and channelled inside social individuals. Individual physiological aspects form the basis of a predisposition to emotional expression, which is the basis for the socio-cultural variablity of emotions. The sociological approach to emotions must take into account the resources used to express one's own emotional states and those of other individuals (Tudor, 2003).

Fear is one of the primary human emotions, over time being frequently reduced to its psychological and physiological dimensions. Reducing fear to some individual states or traits means placing it within the human being, ignoring some social and societal aspects. The causes or conditions that favour its occurrence, the forms of manifestation and its consequences outline the way to identify social aspects of fear (Tudor, 2003). Under the impact of individual psychological elements, fear is socially differentiated according to its origins, objects and forms (Schmitz et al., 2018).

This way, we understand that society intervenes in the emergencing process of fear as a social phenomenon, but also in the maintenance and spreading process at the societal level, by projecting a threatening aspect onto individuals, events or things. The way society shows reality has a significant impact on individuals, shaping and transforming perceptions of life, the world in general, or specific groups of individuals.

Fears, either real or imagined, with or without object, have accompanied mankind since the dawn of creation. Human culture invented various objects of fear, such as witches, monsters, mummies or aliens, but the most impactful fears have had real background, creatively used by the media or other organizations that could benefit, in one way or another, from the exploitation of this generalized emotion at the society level (Altheide, 2002).

In reality, individuals and societies have to cope with important everyday problems such as injustice, limited resources, incurable diseases and many other real and palpable socially constructed, excessive and unfounded fears. Fear has an impressive spread, reaching a wide range of aspects of social life and thus gaining a central position in society. This view is also shared by media reports which consider it an essential element in the contemporary world, also an important entertaining feature of popular culture (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999).

The contribution of the media in transmitting and maintaining the perception of a scary world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) has increased, with specialists identifying a pervasive discourse with major and long-term implications for individuals. Attention is shifted from the idea of concrete, coherently formulated and well-defined danger to a widespread, enigmatic, undefined and untreatable state of fear. (Altheide and Michalowski, 1999).

The dependence of fear on the possibility of controlling the process of obtaining information has been evaluated in one experiment (Restrepo-Castro et al., 2023) conducted on a sample of 53 students, between the ages of 18 and 23. The research participants were divided into two groups, which were given the opportunity to find out what information they would receive. One group received entirety real information, and the second group was provided with half-true, half-false information. The experiment concluded that individuals in the first group had lower levels of fear compared to individuals in the second group. Thus, self-reported fear was lower when complete information was provided, compared to the situation where unsafe information was provided. The high level of information and control held by the first group managed to generate a sense of control over negative affections. This is according to the premise that information enables people to prepare for unpleasant situations, resulting in a less fearful experience.

For a neutral approach to the issue, the dysfunctional aspects of fear are balanced by identifying the productive social functions of fear: practicality orientation, socialization, communication, concealment of power relations, legitimization of power relations, replacement of power mechanisms, structuring of society, realization of symbolic order and social integration (Schmitz & Eckert, 2022). Another positive aspect of fear refers to the fact that it intervenes as a tool for appropriating new knowledge in unfamiliar situations. This finding is achieved by observing the way in which the gender aspects of fear have contributed to overcoming the phenomenon of social inequality between the sexes (Moussion-Esteve, 2022).

The sociology of emotions can be a suitable context for a better explanation of social organization and a conceptualization of fear as a constitutive element of social life in all times. It is important to approach the relationship of fear with other emotions from the perspective of triggering or inhibiting it by them, but also of their transformation. From this perspective, one can mention the phenomenon of fear that can be determined by social contexts and can identify functional relationships between fear and other emotions, such as strengthening or mutual inhibition (Schmitz & Eckert 2022). The relationship between fear and social inequality (Villarreal, 2022) is highlighted by researching class differences in addressing

fear and producing social inequality through the way fears intervene in shaping social structure and social processes. We also mention how anxiety can turn into specific fear related to an object under certain cultural or affective conditions (Ducloux, 2022).

New approaches to fear in contemporary times

It is natural that war, terrorist acts, ruthless diseases, as extreme human experiences, trigger fear, but most of the time, fears are not related to personal experiences, but to the stimulation of the human imagination related to these issues. Recent researchs tend to consider fear a key feature of recent times, referring to a *culture of fear* (Furedy, 2007), a *society of fear* (Bude, 2017) or a *liquid aspect of fear* (Bauman, 2006).

Can we talk about a culture of fear?

For a better understanding of fear it is necessary to analyse the concept of fear culture, which refers to a social climate in which fear is amplified and perpetuated by various institutions and media, influencing the perceptions and reactions of individuals. Its impact on society mainly concerns issues of worry or uncertainty and is linked to a flow of information about possible threats. In order to describe fear, it is necessary to distinguish between real and imaginary risks that occur in the individual's life (De Becker, 2002).

The idea that people develop personal constructs of fear, becoming victims of their own images is found in some authors (Glassner, 2010), while others acknowledge the concept of a culture of fear, but are not convinced of its reality (Furedi, 2002). Furedy develops the idea that the reduced importance given to human subjectivity explains the emergence of risk consciousness and the culture of abuse. The reduced effectiveness of human intervention, the exaggeration of the effects of certain measures or the support for the cynicism associated with the political class and state institutions all contribute to the idea that there is no choice. The fatalism of this perspective changes human mentalities and behaviour, separating, in the minds of individuals, actions that can be taken from desired outcomes. The feeling of lack of control over one's own life underlies the culture of abuse and accentuates the experience of acute feelings of fear (Furedy, 2007).

Culture is conceived as a network of communication through certain predetermined patterns of behaviour. The components of a culture include aspects such as values or beliefs shared by members of that society. The preference to choose certain things over the others is a cultural pattern of behaviour (Hofstede, 2001). The way society encourages overreactions to

health, the environment, technology, new products or personal safety, with increased attention to negative news, refers to the concept of a culture of fear. From this perspective, fear is seen as the prerogative of people overly concerned with safety. By amplifying the state of panic on a social level, the consequences spread to any new problem or challenge that arises, making it a matter of life and death for individuals. It is the social culture that sets the criteria for understanding danger and at the same time creates the limits of tolerability and forms of management of the danger that arises. The fact that each period and each culture has major concerns on which it projects its fears is proof of the fact that individual experiences are in close correlation with the events of the time and the socio-economic and political environmental contexts (Furedy, 2007).

The faith in the future and progress that motivated people after the Second World War has gradually been replaced by a fear of the future. "It is not hope but fear that excites and shapes the cultural imagination of the early twenty-first century" (Furedi, 2007, p. 192). The differential impact of the culture of fear on societies is a topic that can be analysed from the perspective of national or regional characteristics. Thus, major contemporary events that trigger global fears, such as the economic crisis, the pandemic or the risk of another world war, are perceived and managed differently by distinct groups or societies.

The liquid aspect of fear in society

The concept of *liquid fear* was introduced and developed by the sociologist and philosopher of Polish origin, Bauman (2006), and emphasizes the fleeting and fluid nature of contemporary fears, which adapt quickly to social and technological changes. Although the dangers are and always have been multiple, stretching their tentacles from antiquity to contemporaneity, on all hierarchical levels and in all social environments, the most threatening aspect of current fears is, the very fact that now, more than ever, we do not know what are the real dangers that threaten us, nor do we have the ability to confront them all at once. The marked odds of fear, with significant impact on human psycho-social aspects, are reached precisely when fear is unidentified, uncontoured, unattached to forms or events. The inability of individuals to struggle with an indefinite form of fear is argued by human ignorance of the really important threat and lack of mobilization towards confronting it (Bauman, 2006).

The use of the concept of *liquid fear* is explained by the fact that current daily life is being overwhelmed by pervasive uncertainty and

perpetual change, which seem to affect the solid social structures on which society as a whole was built.

In the social construct, people have the opportunity to transform past experiences through a process of social and cultural recycling, generating new emotions, called *secondary fears,* which have no direct connection to the actual danger. The most frightened individuals of society are precisely those individuals who have not had direct confrontations with danger and therefore, the more prone they are to making their own dangers and threats using their imagination. The liquid aspect of fear, given by the unpredictability of the world governed by the principles of globalization, is complemented by the fear of the impossibility of preventing or escaping from the fearful condition of the fragile human being (Bauman, 2006).

From this perspective we recall a classification of dangers into three main categories: 1) which target the body and personal belongings; 2) that threatens the place in the world or the identity of the person and 3) that numbs the senses and shakes the mind, which generates at every moment new sources of fear at the thought of the impact without warning. Although life can be overwhelmed by fears, modern man can learn to overcome them or even enjoy them, because living in a liquid world – as it is called– the man practices daily the *experience of not dying*, of the present, of a new day he survived and taught him to be more flexible, more determined in the face of life (Bauman, 2006).

Thus, the modern liquid society is resembled to an instrument that tries to make life easier to live in fear or, in other words, easier, a way to repress disarming fear and silence secondary, derived fears that are no longer connected by real danger. In the liquidity of modern life, the struggle with fears has proven to be permanent, and the factors that generate it indetachable from it. Liquid life ebbs and flows from one challenge to another and from one episode to another, and the fact that all things are fleeting, or better said, downright flowing, is what must be remembered. Perhaps the most profound axiom of modernity, undermined by its changing character, is that of predictability. The generated uncertainty and disorders recall an early era, when time and life itself were not predictable, aspirations were limited and planning less possible (Settersten et al., 2020).

Current fears in contemporary society

Fear of terrorist threat

The image of a society affected by a global terrorist risk is correlated with political disorientation and the state of permanent uncertainty (Beck, 2002). The phenomenon of terrorism is seen as a military strategy meant to change the political state, manipulating, more by maintaining a permanent state of fear, than by the damage caused.

Compared to road traffic accidents, which record approximately 1.19 million deaths worldwide annually, more than half of which are among non-car users (bikers, pedestrians or motorcyclists) (WHO, 2023), terrorism-related deaths amounted to 8,352 people in 2023, at the highest level since 2017 (IEP, 2024). The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) report provides an annual summary of the main trends and forms of terrorism, with a record of nearly 66 thousand terrorist incidents in the period 2007-2022. The GTI specifies that terrorism causes far fewer deaths than other forms of violence, such as armed conflict, which kills nine times as many people as terrorism, or homicide that scores 45 times higher. However, *terrorists are masters of mind control* (Harari, 2018), causing a massive disproportion between the force possessed by terrorists and the fear they manage to convey to the population.

A cautious approach in relation to a generalised sense of fear can lead to hindering both social and scientific experimentation. Although it offers a certain degree of safety, caution can also generate restlessness by communicating the existing risk (Ambroz & Bukovec, 2015). The lack of clarity and precision of the information provided by the media can generate confusion and concern among the public (Mythen & Walcate, 2006), and the mistrust generated by truncated or inconclusive messages, correlated with terrorist attacks, amplifies the atmosphere of suspicion and anxiety created among the population.

Fear of freedom

Psychoanalyst E. Fromm approaches the subject, analyzing the human being from the perspective of society, the way he develops, gravitating around the tendency of freedom. Modern history is seen focusing around the constant struggle of the individual to liberate from the political and economic noose that strangles humanity.

The formation of man, throughout history, implied certain changes of character to the given conditions, which occurred in two ways: static and dynamic. When the integration and adaptation of the individual leaves

unchanged the structure of character, adopting only new habits, it is a static adaptation, while the dynamic one involves the creation of something new, new feelings and, maybe even new fears, by adapting to new social conditions. Of major importance are the dynamic factors in the character structure of the individual, which in fascist countries, for example, led him to willingly give up his freedom. The author believes that "the experience of freedom is conditioned by the constant play of the human being between two fundamental landmarks: the thirst for power and the desire for submission" (Fromm, 1998, p. 17).

Fear of freedom reflects the paradox between the desire for autonomy and the fear of responsibility and uncertainty associated with individual freedom. A democratic society must be based on two fundamental values: freedom and security. According to Z. Bauman, these are the essential values; without them, life cannot succeed. Security must only exist alongside freedom, because "security without freedom equals slavery, and freedom without security is a total chaos" (Bauman, 2006).

The association of the concepts of fear and freedom is realized in a different manner, by cumulating the effects produced constructively. The world after the Second World War, although deeply affected on all levels, as it had never been known before (destroyed cities and desolate localities and whole communities) managed to create the premises for an unprecedented development of society, under the sign of two great forces – *fear and freedom*, and the most important aspects that recreate of the world we live in (Lowe, 2020).

The FoMO syndrome – Fear of Missing Out

The fear of not participating/being present/being excluded from a social context is one of the most common recent social problems, especially among social media users. The name, already established, of this syndrome is Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). The syndrome has grown in our country especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when most of the activities involving human interaction were transferred to the virtual environment.

Marketing specialist D. Herman first identified the phenomenon in 1996 (Schreckinger, 2014), publishing his first paper on the subject in 2000 in The Journal of Brand Management (Herman, 2000). He believed that the use of mobile phones, text messages, and social media led to the emergence of the sentiment. Before the internet era, a similar trend was associated with the phrase *keeping up with the Joneses*. According to this philosophy, ostentatious consumption occurs when individuals are interested in their standard of living compared to that of their peers.

The phenomenon received more attention when using the term coined by Patrick J. McGinnis in 2004, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), when he received his MBA from Harvard and published the article in The Harbus (Harvard Business School Magazine). The article was called Two FOs: Social Theory at HBS, with reference to FoMO and FoBO - Fear of a Better Option (HBS, 2004). The concept was used to describe a phenomenon observed on social media sites. In 2013, the Oxford dictionary recognized it, and British psychologists defined it as the permanent fear that others might have satisfying experiences from which the person concerned is absent. The phenomenon was conceptualized using self-determination theory, which was developed (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and applied (Przybylski et al., 2013) to understand what are the factors that determine the appearance of FoMO. In the theory of self-determination, social relationship can generate intrinsic motivation, which in turn can encourage positive mental health. The mentioned studies consider FoMO a negative emotional state resulting from unsatisfied social needs.

FoMO is a relatively new psychological phenomenon that can occur in various forms: episodically in the middle of a conversation, as a long-term mood or mood that causes the individual to feel a deeper sense of social inferiority, loneliness, or intense anger (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). FoMO includes two stages: the perception of the lack, followed by compulsive behavior to return and maintain the social connections whose lack was felt.

FoMO not only leads to negative psychological effects, but has also been shown to develop negative behavioral patterns (Elhai et al., 2016), forming negative habits. The social aspect of FoMO could be formulated as a relationship related to the need for belonging and building strong and stable interpersonal relationships. FoMO is considered a type of attachment to social networks and is associated with negative life experiences and feelings, such as emotional tension, anxiety and lack of emotional control.

Currently, the term is used as a hashtag on social networks and entered the current modern language, being a topic of concern for media and specialists.

Conclusions

Our analysis reflects fear as an important influential force that frequently dominates the imagination of individuals. Real dangers that threaten the individual or the social well-being of a community, although not so many, can become source of concern and smoldering uncertainty, which holds the idea of a possible future threat. Also, distrust of others or the media and the propagation of a sense of lack of control over one's own life can create feelings

of uncertainty and insecurity, which fosters a real culture of fear. Social culture establishes the distinct characteristics of danger, outlining the limits of acceptability, but also the ways of managing them. The spreading and maintaining of a generalised sense of safety and security is essential in restoring social balance and the natural participation of individuals in social life.

We believe that, in general, people try to prevent the possibility of danger occurring and, above all, try to find ways to reduce the fear they feel. The lack of information and the impossibility of having control in fear-generating situations become thrusters in the process of searching for information. A positive reaction can be given by a sense of control over the information held, complete information generating lower levels of fear. This is consistent with the idea that information allows individuals to prepare for adverse events, which results in a reduced fear experience.

Individual and social fears, in different forms and sizes, confront, merge and transform each other, producing a real transformative perpetuum of the human being. It can also be a factor in the maturing or formation and shaping of people's personal identity.

Although the influence of culture on the perception of fear is considerable, taking into account all the influences that may arise, fear is, however, an individual experience, personally felt, maintained or attenuated by individual personality characteristics. In order to detach ourselves from the overstating influence of the *culture of fear*, it is necessary to take into account the possibility of fear to arise as a result of changes or as an intervention of the element of novelty in society.

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