"I'm on a break…"
The contribution of taking a break to emotional coping

"Estoy en un descanso … "
La contribución de tomar un descanso para el afrontamiento emocional

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Resumen

Últimamente nos estamos volviendo cada vez más conscientes de la importancia de tomar un descanso. Considerando que el pensamiento social moderno se ocupa de la actividad, se ha prestado menos atención a las implicaciones emocionales de no-hacer, de no hacer nada. Por lo tanto, este artículo se centra en la decodificación de la noción de descanso, sus características estructurales y su significado emocional en la vida cotidiana. Las características del descanso se examinarán, así como el papel que desempeñan en hacer frente a las presiones emocionales. Por otra parte, el análisis de los componentes esenciales del descanso -corte y aislamiento- revela los mecanismos latentes que garantizan la continuidad y la estabilidad emocional.

Palabras clave: Descanso; Inactividad; Estabilidad Emocional.

Abstract

Lately we are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of taking a break. Whereas modern social thought concerns itself with activity, with doing, less attention has been given to the emotional implications of not-doing, of inaction. Hence, this article focuses on decoding the notion of the break, its structural characteristics and emotional significance in everyday life. The break's features will be examined, as well as the role they play in coping with emotional pressures. Moreover, analyzing the essential components of the break -- cutting-off and isolation -- reveals the latent mechanisms which ensure emotional continuity and stability.

Keywords: Break; Inaction; Emotional Stability.

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Introduction

In opposition to the parental perception that many of us absorbed as children that a break from activity stems from laziness, is a waste of time and a way of giving into oneself that is harmful to normal development, social science relates to taking a break as a worthwhile activity with positive added value (Simister, 2004). Taking a break takes the form of a calming strategy, a pause that makes it possible to control anger, isolate oneself from others and "take a breather" (Lundeberg et al, 2004). By means of taking a break, people can distance themselves from difficulties, potential disagreements or unpleasantness by allowing themselves to gain new a perspective (West et al., 2001). Taking a break also improves learning processes and can even help the individual face pain and loss (Golish & Kimberly, 2003). In general, it appears that taking a break is a good coping strategy in situations of emotional overload. For example, when people becomes too emotional, it is recommended to acknowledge, their emotional state in order to better deal with it. One way of doing so is to take a break from the event in question, as individuals generally become emotional when they sense that someone has overstepped boundaries and has threatened their definitions of themselves (Sager, 2005). Taking a break enables one to retreat from a stressful situation in an attempt to deal with it more successfully, while considering the repercussions of one's actions. In fact, in professional organizations and workplaces, taking a break has become an integral part of the daily routine (Lammers & Garcia, 2009). Short breaks are considered beneficial to workers' efficiency and effectiveness, thus they are encouraged by employers. Furthermore, skipping breaks or preventing them is perceived as harmful to workers' effectiveness (Gray, 1999), as this reduces their ability to cope with various pressures that build up in the workplace (Lea et al., 1999). It appears, then, that in certain circumstances, taking a break serves as a legitimate, socially acceptable technique for dealing with emotional crisis and dispute. Taking a breather can even facilitate an ongoing dialogue between warring factions (Walls & Druckman, 2003). Yet, one wonders whether going on a break is an emotional impulse, a corporate initiative or a regulated social structure.

The structure of the break

Social structures owe their existence to the routine activities that we perform on a daily basis. The social actions that we execute as part of our way of life are inseparable from the social structure in which we function (Parsons, 1937, 1951, 1961, 1966, 1967, 1968; Turner, 1991). "Structure" and "activity," then, are two entities that cannot be separated (as activity necessarily derives from structure and structure from activity) (Giddens, 1984). However, structure and activity are more than simply part of our social structure; they also help formulate the emotional structure in which we function. It is possible to identify two distinct models of activity: practical-rational activity and communicative activity. Practical-rational activity can be of an instrumental or strategic nature and is meant to aid an individual in furthering a personal or emotional interest. Communicative activity, on the other hand, is the basis of social and cultural life and involves cooperation, harmony and emotional expectations by means of achieving understanding and acceptance of mutually defined situations (Habermas, 1984, 1989). However, despite the clear importance of this activity, in the long run, in order for it to "exist" in the real world, systems must develop structural

characteristics of their own and ultimately assume control of them (Habermas, 1987).

At the same time, taking a break both from activity and structure has an influence on the living world. The break can best be understood through its most basic characteristics: emotional cutting off and emotional isolation. Emotional cutting-off involves interrupting the dynamic of practical-rational and /or communicative-emotional activity. Emotional isolation involves the individual's entrance into an environment that is cut off from a sphere of activity (emotional, social, political or other). This means that structural characteristics have developed around the break, making it essential for the continued existence of the living world. The mutual connection between "break," "activity" and "structure" makes a significant contribution to an individual's emotional stability. Indeed, just as daily routine is what perpetuates social structure (Giddens, 1981), so the habitual break is what perpetuates emotional social structure. Furthermore, it has a significant influence on the story we tell ourselves: by taking a break we pause from the emotional dynamics shaping our world in order to re-examine the set of rules and behaviors that equip our emotional toolbox.

However, there are those who claim that the break can actually result in a sense of emotional alienation, as isolation and loneliness can damage the mutual ties between one individual and another and harm the emotional interaction taking place on various levels. Social structures are in fact networks of social connections in which social and emotional interactions take place and determine individuals' and groups' social and emotional positions within them (Blau, 1960, 1964). In fact, the structure of the break might symbolize the unraveling of these social networks. An illustration of this delicate fabric could be illustrated in individuals' participation in social networks on the internet. The internet constitutes and also provides ICT (Information and Communications Technology) convergence platforms designed to enable discourse between individuals or virtual entities on the basis of shared interests that are defined beforehand or on the mutual desire of both sides to maintain emotional ties by means of such a platform. The most frequent entities participating in social networks are individuals, groups and businesses. Social networks have gained both academic and practical interest: research has shown that social networks are important for carrying out work projects, seeking employment, achieving professional advancement and developing both personally and professionally. The importance of social ties has been demonstrated by studies indicating that people having large social support networks can find employment more easily than those with sparse social networks. They will also advance further in the workplace and earn better wages.

Social networks have their basis in the "small world" theories formulated by sociologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s (Milgram, 1967). The principal underlying them is simple: any two individuals are divided by six degrees of separation. In other words, everyone has an acquaintance who knows somebody who knows somebody else, etc., thus there will necessarily be some kind of connection between every first and sixth person. Transferring this idea to the internet has made it possible for surfers to meet new people easily through their existing connections; however most of the networks are open to members only, based on the principle of one friend bringing another. Surfer are invited to join the service by a friend, adding their own friends and creating their own personal networks, which function parallel to the existing network that they have joined. In this context, Christakis and Fowler's (2007, 2008) studies have demonstrated how the spread of influence in social networks adheres to a principle named "the law of three degrees of influence". According to this law, we are influenced by and influence our friends and their friends that are three degrees distant from us. This principle has an impact on a variety of relationships, emotions and behaviors and the spread of various phenomena relative to the degree to which we are "infected". Its influences spread gradually and also ultimately "infect" people beyond specific social boundaries.]

This being so, taking a break from social networks means temporarily relinquishing social services and connections with people who resemble us and constitute our support group and emotional environment. If the time invested in developing social and emotional ties contains the promise of a better economic, social and cultural future, then a break from such activities constitutes a form of emotional and social risk. The promise of "a secure future" is replaced, even temporarily, by the threat of "a socially precarious present". Another way of understanding this is to relate to taking a break as a temporary cutting off from around-the-clock mutual communication.

When presenting themselves, individuals generally attempt to control their emotional and physical attributes in various ways. They attempt to make an

impression and tend to track themselves closely in order to ensure agreement between the message they wish to convey and their audience. That is, they often make an effort to supervise their behavior in such a way that renders it compatible with the social situation in question. Thus taking a break from social network activity allows them to gain better control over the emotional impressions they make.

The break as a form of emotional cutoff

In addition to the notions of practical-rational activity and communicative activity, the structural-functional approach also established the idea that one of the basic roles of mass communications is spreading information (Merton, 1957; Schramm, Lyle & Parker, 1961; Wright, 1959). It claimed that by means of acquiring information, citizens as media consumers can acquire tools for actively participating in social, communicative, cultural and political life (Cammaerts, 2009; Carpentier, 2009). However, the theoretical basis for the participatory function (i.e. involvement) does not always correspond with the media consumer's actual behavior (Sparks, 2007). It appears that media consumers are not necessarily interested in participating in civic activity, but simply need a break from the pressures of personal, social, political or other activity and from emotional obligations. Thus this kind of break may also be taken by means of media consumption, whose chief aim is emotional cutoff.

While emotional cutting off might open the door to a wide range of positive added values, there could be some negative effects and repercussions to such detachment. In fact, there is evidence that cutting off by means of media consumption (especially the internet) is perceived by individuals who actually cuts off (especially young people) as an unfavorable, undesirable activity that damages interaction with their surroundings (Sourbati, 2009). The act of cutting off is accompanied by adverse, violent contexts and connotations (Groebner, 2004; Shenhav, 2008). Indeed, when people cut themselves off by means of various media, they are in effect isolating themselves, for a specific time interval, from both practical-rational and interpersonal-communicative activity. In any case, it appears that cutting off from activity arouses fears of group rejection, loss of social acumen, etc.

In the present era we are generating information at a rate faster than our ability to absorb it. As a result, we experience emotional distress stemming from "information overload", "data smog" or "infoglu" that builds up emotional overload that undermines individual and organizational quality of life, especially in the workplace (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Hahn & Lee, 1992; Shenk, 1997; McShane & Von Glinow, 2005; Thomas et al., 2006). Thus when a person takes a break from various media, he or she cuts off, for a specific time, from the flow of information that constitutes the "backstage" of practical-rational activity and/or interpersonal, emotional, communicative activity. There are some who would claim that the sense of pressure originating from "center stage" in the time allocated to gathering information will also find its way "backstage" during the break; individuals might perhaps cut themselves off from the flow of information, but not from the sense of emotional strain. Thus, although emotional stress generates an oppressing sense of loss of control, when individuals decide to take a break they are in fact exercising rational judgment by making a deliberate choice. Furthermore, it is well known that taking a break helps lighten emotional burdens and contributes to mental clarity (Berman & West, 2007). It can promote a sense of calm (Lundeberg et al., 2004) while reinforcing a sense of self-control and the ability to deal with difficulties (West et al., 2001). Therefore, it appears that the break makes a significant contribution beyond what must, can and should be done. Taking a break reduces the tension between the spontaneous self and social obligations, as well as the discrepancy between what people expect of us and what we wish to do.

However, it seems that in the present era some of us are no longer interested in relieving the weight of the encounter between our spontaneous selves and our social obligations. An example of the unwillingness is typified by Twitter, the on-line social network that makes it possible to send and read short 140-character messages and functions on the basis of on-line tracking of users' activities. Twitter basically acts as a communications channel that maintains constant contact between the center stage and the backstage of our lives. No longer do we construct temporary "boundaries" between the immediate present and the near future or between the private and the public. This means that cutting off has lost its capability to function as a survival tactic and that in the 'new' world, in the ICT era, the need to be socially acceptable demands of us to constantly perform onstage, front and center. As a result, we "tweet" our personal and emotional schedules to the world and place ourselves under constant

surveillance and evaluation. Moreover, this tears down the wall separating center stage (on which we present our positive social face) and backstage (the private sphere that in the past was separated from society and allowed us to simply be ourselves). This blurring of boundaries between "backstage" and "center stage" serves to rip off the social masks that we once worked so hard to create.

The duality regarding taking a break from social and emotional life – pro and con – also appears in various forms of participation in political life. Lately there has been an upsurge in information technology use by those opposed to political regimes as a tool for organizing and initiating political revolutions. The political "backstage" is revealed and moves to the political "center stage" by means of technological "tweets" (as occurred in Moldavia in the spring of 2009 and later in Iran, Egypt and other Muslim countries in waves of revolution starting from 2010). "Twitter revolutions" that make it possible to organize activists more quickly for a defined purpose express in fact a deep desire for immediate collective action rather than a break from such a commitment. Nevertheless, a lack of organizational and hierarchical depth has curtailed these preliminary protests' ability to lead to long-term social change.

The break by means of emotional isolation

The speeding up of pace and higher standard of living in our world have brought men and women to attempt to squeeze a maximum of activities into a minimum of time. Large amounts of effort, financial, physical and especially mental, are invested in coping with the abundance of challenges and possibilities that society offers us in a desire not to lose out on opportunities and experiences. As a result, commercial enterprises stay open 24 hours a day, seven days a week; people go on action vacations crammed with an endless variety of attractions and activities; telephone and internet services are available around the clock; and much more. However, the mirror image of striving to "realize the dream" and "live the moment" is simply taking a rest - either long- or short-term - from constantly chasing after lost time. This might take the form of isolating oneself from the constant physical and emotional uproar, cutting off from one's usual emotional, social or political surroundings. Whereas modern society prior to the information era made a clear distinction between people's private and

public lives, nowadys the distinctions between the private, social, professional and political spheres have become blurred. According to the principle of separation, a person's private, emotional life belongs to what has been called the private sphere, whereas his or her professional, "rational" and social life functions in the public sphere (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Friedlander, 1994). The separation between these two spheres led to the assumption that the abilities necessary for functioning in the private sphere were not relevant to functioning in the public sphere (Fletcher, 1998). Furthermore, gender differences were perceived as the cause of men's and women's differential success in each of these spheres (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). While men received recognition for their participation in the public sphere, women did not gain a similar amount of prestige due to their activities in the private sphere (Fletcher, 2005). Today this separation between the spheres is no longer valid and activities inside and outside the home are inextricably connected (Dominelli, 1991). Moreover, it has now become clear that it is virtually impossible to banish emotion from the public sphere and limit it to the private one. Thus, when individuals take a break and isolate themselves from their social, organizational and political milieu by closing themselves off, they make the transition from the public to the private sphere. By activating the principle of separation between these spheres, they draw a line, even temporarily, between their various types of experience. Conversely, advanced technological developments and the creation of the information world have made it possible for the internet to encompass both spheres, resulting in a society suffering from professional, emotional and social overload. One may view media consumption as a kind of break allowing individuals to isolate themselves from both spheres while dealing with the powerful stress is exerted by them. Indeed the information revolution and the internet economy have led to the construction of a virtual culture (Castells, 1996).

It appears, then, that the complexity of the world we live in - the combination between the modern and the post-modern, between nationalism and internationalism and between the global and the local - demands of individuals to take a break in order to cope with the multiple identities and functions demanded of them. The break does not determine or tear down the boundaries separating various structures, but it does allow more flexible movement between them. It might not help people change their social status, but it can facilitate their movement from

one social position to another. Like the elastic quality of material that allows it to revert from distortion under pressure to its former dimensions when pressure is removed, thus the break promises increased personal-social elasticity.

In conclusion

As stated above, the idea of taking a break is fundamental to the functional-structural model, according to which all social and cultural forms and structures fulfill a positive function and are combined into one complete system. The basic assumption of the functional-structural society is that the existence of a social system depends on a social structure that imposes social order and control. These can be achieved by means of necessary functions implemented by individuals, including those meant to preserve the structure. Performing these functions contributes to a positive upward graph of learning and advancement; the jobs we perform fulfill our specific needs, but also make a contribution to the collective. Thus it is clear that taking a break from fulfilling any particular role can be beneficial to the continued effective emotional functioning of the individual within the system.

It is also clear why social researchers related to taking a break as an activity having positive added value when dealing with personal and public difficulties (Simister, 2004; Lundeberg et al., 2004; West et al, 2001; Dyson 2008; Golish & Powell 2003). Furthermore, when an individual is exposed to a variety of sources that do not fulfill his or her needs, these complex structures generate weak cognition (Lang 2000; Fox 2004; Fox et al., 2007; Lang et al., 1999). Yet, when individuals are subjected to emotional stress and experience rational, emotional or cognitive overload, taking a media breather can assist them according to the model described above. Similarly to individual's difficulties in coping with burdens and distress, political, cultural and/or social organizations might also sink into an overload of demands (Rossi 2009). As a result, individuals can find themselves swamped by obligations to themselves, their families, their social milieu, and the society they live in. In such situations taking a media break appears to be a means of enabling media consumers to temporarily discontinue the stream of communication within themselves and with their surroundings. The isolation function enables them to detach themselves from their private and social environment and the delay function allows them to put off the need to act individually, professionally and politically when dealing with mental and personal overload.

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