Doctoral School of
Social Communication

SUMMARY OF THESES

Andrea Rajkó

The communicational mechanisms of modern age taboo

Ph.D Thesis

Consultant:

Zsuzsanna Szvetelszky, Ph.D

Budapest, 2016

Institute of Behavioural Sciences and Communication Theory

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Contents

1. Research objective

The objective of the dissertation is to examine a social phenomenon, a communicative situation, and the definition, interpretation and functioning of this phenomenon, which is ambivelent and scarcely existent in everyday communication, while at the same time is an almost axiomatic part of our social code-system: the existence, formation, communicational mechanisms and reasons for the operation of modern age tabo,o particularly in the circles of college students between the ages of 19 and 25.

The dissertation offers a brief overview of the works of researchers of social science regarding the subject of taboo, focussing on the newest, most modern meaning and use of the word and particularly on the ways in which various kinds of taboo (using but a few types from an otherwise exceptionally wide typological system) exist and constitute a part of our lives in overt or covert ways.

However, it is not the objective of this dissertation to list all existing taboo-typologies that appear or can appear in relation to today's Hungarian society, as the emphasis here is not on the history of the concept of taboo as much as on the communicational aspects of the subject which are emphasized in the research demonstrated here.

I propose an interpretation of the current social-communal function of modern age taboo and also its significance in everyday communication, as well as explore the social-communal regularities of its operating mechanism.

Members of the community mentioned in the final chapter of the dissertation (following the chapters regarding the theory of the subject), are college students between the ages of 19 and 25, who have been participants of courses I have given or moderated over the past five years.[1] Besides the perusal and moderated discussion of the literature set forth in the syllabus, as well as interaction within the class, the area of analysis in the examination was the exploration of 20th century and modern works of art and various multimedia products, performances, photos, especially items with a lesser focus on aesthetic value and more of a bias toward potential taboo themes. The aim of this practice was to examine whether there are any themes that students perceive as taboo and if so, whether it influences them to recognise/disregard, internalise or use the taboo, or whether it leads them to reframe their concepts.

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[1]   Title of the course: *Communicational Alayses: social mechanisms in the operation of secrecy and taboo*. One semester course, total number of participants: 164.

In the dissertation I define and draw up the current notion of taboo and 'tabooification', definitions already discussed in this discipline. I also attempt to accurately pinpoint the process of its emergence and the regularities of its operation. The author of this dissertation researched primarily within social circles where there is a strong preconception that taboos no longer exist: the circle of college students between 19 and 25. I believe that this social group, although all the means are available to help accept, discuss and interpret events, actions and things that are believed to be taboo, there are in fact still a number of taboos active which had existed in our society before the political transition of 1989 and the appearance of the internet.

2. Research methodology

During the process of communication our options are not restricted to speaking or listening. Our language offers many means and opportunities with which to treat sensitive topics, so that we can communicate about them without breaching putative or real, subjective of objective (genuinely socially accepted, not merely supposedly accepted) conventions. As we can see, besides refraining from discussing taboos (silence, breaking of conversation, physically keeping a distance), there are a number of levels of openness for the participants of communication to choose from (changing or concealing the subject, euphemisms, evasion, or renaming). Taboo themes can be freely discussed, even on different levels of openness: 'quarter-', 'half-' or 'three quarter-openness' (Günther[1992]) – discussible, suggested or completely avoided, in other words, explicit, implicit or absolute taboos (Krajewski [2002]).

From the point of view of researching modern age taboo, including the research I wished to conduct, a very particular methodological problem arises: how should we examine something which is primarily revealed by not wanting to express itself, something that finds every way of slipping from the grasp of the observer, evades communication and cunningly camouflages its true content?

Due of the particularity of the theme, special methods were required. Using an anonymous self-administered questionnaire, as is often the case with sensitive topics, proved to be problematic (samples with an adequate number of elements, technical apparatus, material requirements, costs, etc.). However the greatest drawback of the questionnaire technique is the vast loss of information entails: it only presents a more or less genuine snapshot of the current situation in a given moment at the time, using a statistical method.

That way we would have learnt nothing about the dynamics of taboo-discussion, nor the effects and consequences of communication regarding taboo themes, despite the fact that these are the most exciting aspects of the question at hand from the point of view of my theme.

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The solution was finally placed in my hand by the fact that experiences drawn from the first two semesters of working in seminars proved conspicuously similar. In the two groups with identical academic objectives but a different combination of students, the same processes played out in the course of a general discussion of the topic and specific debate about certain taboos specifically chosen by the students themselves. Their opinion regarding taboo changed spectacularly, as did their awareness about the set of taboos that influence their peer group, their closer or wider circle of friends and family, and as a result, the effect of many taboos became reduced, while students even managed to break down certain taboos irrevocably.

It was this spontaneous observation that inspired me to reform my work in seminars to do genuine research in a conscious, pre-planned form, adequately conceptualised and documented. From this time on, participating students received the same introductory questions (pilot research), the same literature, the same individual tasks and the standard features and rules of discussion also remained the same. I created far more detailed documentation of these occasions. Qualitative content analysis of the data gathered as a result of these seminars (detailed minutes of meetings, personal reports handed in by students) lead to the most important conclusion of this dissertation.

The main characteristics of this participant observation based research as descrbied above were the following:

- **Partially fixed** observation:
    - the theme and framework of the course (that are in this instance beside the point), as well as the academic objectives were fixed and predetermined;
    - at the same time, however, some themes were based on students' choice, keynote presentations, there was minimal moderation by the head of the course (who was head of research as well), as spontaneous, free communication was encouraged between students;

- **Partially open** observation:
  - it is open because the students all know about the recorded minutes, and even helped with the process of creating it,
  - it is also covert, however, because the students were not aware of the (originally unplanned) use to which later the document would be put in scientific research, of which the students became a part anonymously and with maximum respect for their personal rights;
- **Causal** observation:
  - whenever the objective was the exploration of causal links or development processes.

From one point of view the observational situation was natural, from another point of view, however, it was artificial. As the participants were college students, a seminar was a natural life situation for them that does not require any unusual patterns of behaviour or attitude, any new communicational strategies or styles. At the same time it is an artificial situation, because avoiding the discussion, remaining silent or exiting the situation were not available options.

As a consequence of the circumstances mentioned above, a unique trait of the research and observational situation is something we may call 'forced awareness'. Although the head of research participated as an unbiased observer, at the same time she could not detach herself from the academic objective, namely that students should learn, get to grasps with, correctly define, and through examples, illustrate and actively discuss taboos as a social-communicational phenomenon. As a result of this basic situation, students participated with an attitude full of awareness, reflection and self-reflection and discussion as well as the readiness to draw conclusions, all which was forced by the nature of the basic situation. Discussion was a basic expectation and consequently verbalisation (written or spoken), and the resulting raised sense of awareness, were a given.

Since 2010 in all semesters my course has born the title: 'Communicational analysis - current themes: social mechanisms in the operation of taboo'. My analysis is based on ten semesters of work with a total of 164 participants between the ages of 19 and 25, who were BA or MA students at Budapest University of Technology and Economics, the Department of Sociology and Communication and who had chosen the course as a compulsory optional subject.

The group's composition was mixed (as a result it is particularly indicative of how similar reactions could be observed throughout as a reaction to the constraint of awareness during the course):

- there were slightly more female than male students;

- ages ranged between 19 and 25;

- diverse origin and family backgrounds;

- different motivations to participate in the course (some participants joined as a result of serious interest and often a personal involvement in the subject, while others joined the course out of a more superficial interest, and some only to collect credits).

The framework of seminars was based upon extracts from the literature, which would be read out by a participant of the course; after this another student would give a presentation about the same extract. Besides this we would also discuss topics chosen by students in the group, based on their personal involvement in the chosen theme. Students would present the problem using relevant works of art, after which they would write a report.

The whole group would participate in the process of interpretation. At the end of every session we drafted minutes which would include the statements, questions, key words or problems that emerged or led to heated debate, as well as the taboos on which the group managed to reach a consensus. The minutes enabled us to continue group work later on.

Raw material for the subsequent analysis consisted of the papers submitted by students throughout a semester (reports, analyses, essays), as well as the minutes of the in-class debates. The method of analysis I chose was qualitative content analysis (with some quantitative supplements, indicating frequencies wherever possible, primarily with regard to the questionnaires of the pilot research.

In the material I collected I tried to identify which are the taboos that are most likely to surface within the observed group of participants; which of these can be raised to the level of group consensus or, potentially, even of social consensus; what happens to the personal taboos of participants if they are placed in a context where some type of communication *must* begin, and silence, evasion or escape are not viable alternatives.

'Triggering' communication is not easy when the subject is (supposed to be) taboo themes. This methodological problem, as well as the approach we developed jointly in order to overcome this challenge, also led to important results.

If we view the events observed in a more dynamic fashion, as a process, we find that the following two main questions emerge: what precedes verbalisation – and what happens afterwards?

In more detail:

1. *How can I induce someone to start thinking consciously and to communicate about the general concept of taboo and also about specific taboos in the living context of their own age-group?*
2. *What is the second step, after all this has happened: if the participant has gained awareness about a certain taboo, i.e. has realised that he or she treats the given subject as taboo and communicates (ore refuses to communicate) about it accordingly and has now raised all of this to a level of conscious awareness?*

The answer to the first question was **visual communicational stimulus**. I find it important to emphasize that participants did not use a pre-selected set of images from the fine arts as stimuli. The precise instruction they received was to bring visual illustrations to the taboo that was the subject of their presentation. They were free to browse and search for images anywhere (mostly from the internet) and could freely choose the visual stimulus from the material they found. Interestingly, it was always fine art (primarily paintings) that worked best and proved most effective in starting discussion of the given theme, while other art work (such as photographs, videos, performances, movies) were consequently naturally eliminated. This phenomenon spontaneously engendered visual-communicational analysis of the set of stimuli used, and the impact they had, first in the form of spontaneous reactions, and then of reflected and verbalised content.

The answers to the second question came from analysing the taboos that surfaced as a result of verbalisation. There were multiple potential outcomes of the awareness-raising process based on the strength of the given taboo: total dismantling of the taboo is possible (and on many occasions this is exactly what students reported to have experienced), while on other occasions the participant as an individual would cease to perceive the given subject as taboo, but out of respect for the sensitivity of the group would not pursue discussion of the problem (which is no longer taboo, but more like a phenomenon in the circles of tact and good manners).

3. Results

3.1. Research hypothesis

H1: In the hypothesis stated in my dissertation I state that in micro-communities, subcultures and within the family a completely we find highly different sets of attitudes and behaviour patterns concerning the same behaviour, habit, norm or prohibition.

Taboos experienced on the level of an individual or of a small community, but often internalised silently (without discussion or openly following a pattern), as well as the active behaviour patterns that accompany them often create situations in which the processes of discussions on the social-cultural-scientific level break down, because there is no receiving agent who has been 'liberated' from the grasp of taboos and is therefore open to discussion.

H2: The majority of present-day taboos are not based on solid consensus, related consequences and potential retributions are not clear. In our modern and individualistic world, where values have become pluralised and social functions have lost their previous roles, the non-explicit forms of taboo and prohibitions have also become reinterpreted and confused. We can only guess what counts as taboo and what does not, but seldom can we be sure, as these are almost always dependant on context and are mere notions.

H3: The dissertation shows how in the social group under observation many taboos are still active that had already existed in society before the post-communist transition and the widespread use of the internet, despite the availability of the means with which to resolve, discuss and interpret the events, actions and things that are considered to be taboo.

H4: **A f**urther hypothesis of the dissertation is that works of art, depictions, posters, pictures, performances constitute communications, verbal, medial and textual components which are suited to bring to the surface existing taboos and are even able to shift long-cemented taboos. A further statement of the dissertation is that artists not only draw attention to what are the taboos of a given society, but also act as catalysts for the public discussion of taboo themes or the revival of seemingly failed discourses (for example on xenophobia, violence, social traumas and problems). They help us understand the emergence of prejudiced forms of behaviour, the reasons for their existence, and can increase or decrease the number of taboos 'in circulation'.

The dissertation also defines and formulates the notion of taboo and taboo formation, reviewing the definitions previously discussed in the social sciences; this way we attempt to

give the most accurate description possible regarding the process of emergence of taboos and the regularities of their operation.

3.2. Summary of the results

The most widely referenced definitions in general knowledge usually narrow down the notion to the level of verbal and tactile use, disregarding the rich layers of meaning within the visual sphere, in intuition, thought, habit, gesture-based communication, behavioural and emotional regulations. Moreover, the perception of the concept is also often unclear, with a number of boundary-line phenomena and concepts becoming mingled with the process of definition, such as, for example, the concepts of secret, prohibition, rule or regulation, public and private affairs, publicity, courtesy, silence, concealment, non-speaking, euphemisms, rites or prejudices.

The notion of taboo cannot be confused, for example, with a direct prohibition. A prohibition requires an open and accurate definition, including awareness of the retributions and sanctions or non-compliance, as well as the actions, the moral or punitive implications that it entails. As regards taboos, we usually start by making assumptions only, as we cannot clearly determine in every case (and often we receive no guidance either), as to what constitutes a taboo theme in the given situation, context or community. As a result, if someone breaches a taboo, there will not be any overt discussion or debate about this, consequently whoever breached the taboo will get no opportunity to defend themselves – indeed, often they are not even notified about the fact that they had breached a taboo and what that particular taboo was. As a result there is no direct 'learning' process included in the situation.

The notion of taboo in this discussion marks the part of society's code system that is determined or shown through any kind of communicational strategy by an individual or collective agent, in an implicit or explicit way in space and time, to be an undesirable mode of behaviour, action, verbal or visual content or form. One of its main characteristics is its 'user'-*adaptivity*, meaning that its content can be amended in concurrence with the changes of social/cultural conditions.

Nothing is 'originally' taboo (neither objects, nor concepts, notions, actions, words, or norms), but come to be taboo as a result of some kind of process, decision or event. This can be the result of religious (individual or communal), tradition based, imported, invented or

reinterpreted processes. It can be an individual decision that affects its environment and replicates itself without any underlying rational decision, it can be based on collective consensus or an event, which means that the process of taboo formation can be mechanical, learnt or inherited.

Taboo formation in this discussion means the communicational strategy or process when an individual or collective agent makes a rational or irrational decision, in relation to a subject or subjects, to physically, verbally and emotionally disregard the given subject, and if not, does deliberately not reflect upon the subject (event, action, visual or verbal manifestation) prohibited to them by themselves or others. Possibly the person will narrow down and formalise the frame for reflection (euphemism, silence, evasion, avoidance).

H1:   The fundamental claim of this dissertation is that with regard to modern age taboo we are unsure what may or may not be taboo based on the consensus of the given social group, and as a result we often try to tread carefully because we have no solid knowledge about what the other person is really thinking; only a conceived knowledge exists, a picture (virtual or contextual, created by us) about the world that surrounds us.

Reflections by students participating in the research also revealed that in the case of taboos a shared base of knowledge is merely a supposition based on which we can state that the common norms and moral claims are consensus-based; they are specific values that we are expected to have or that are worth holding and which we probably internalised during our own socialisation process. In the case of taboos, however, the shared knowledge base is related only to the conceptual basis of the taboo, while in terms of content, structure and operation we found differences and even oppositions.

H2:   Naturally, fear has played a defining role in the operation and formation of today's taboos, too. However, today the source of fear is not dread of the deeds of spirits from a magic-based, abstract world, but of the condemnation of another person or of the community, which can lead to exclusion. This fear is often based on false preconceptions which could be dismantled primarily by verbalisation and substantial discussion. It is partly the lack of this that often turns a temporary prohibition into taboo.

H3:   Many members of the age-group observed believe that today taboos exist no more or only in a limited sense. They usually support this opinion by referring to the spread of internet and its potential. By contrast, I have found that the internet plays a leading role in creating taboo themes and deepening the related prohibition or the process of taboo formation. It grants people a far wider access to other people's opinions, their visual reflections or the chance to read about their reactions. The plurality and contradictory nature of opinions in face

of our own opinion and judgement may change the way in which we view the taboo/non-taboo dichotomy. This might be a kind of codification of the dismantling of taboos: in an online environment opinion with regard to a phenomenon, theme, habit, behaviour or judgement that was not discussed earlier can be articulated more freely. Even extreme expressions are granted space as there is no face to face control that could activate itself in the context of another person or group (family, friends, partners), where the possible sanctions (such as the negative reaction of the community, exclusion or contempt) immediately become explicit, causing the bearer of the taboo theme to become more cautious, considerate and more secluded.

The same thing happens on online forums in an impersonal form with the options of confrontation or retreat. Naturally this space is not completely sterile either, as blogging, trolling, or more 'personal' attacks guarantee a kind of control through exclusion, contempt or correction.

H4: Works of art are the most reflective with their portrayals involving taboos, meaning that they implement pre-existent taboos. Although they could easily serve to portray social formulas that had not formerly been identified as taboo, we do not find any works throughout the history of art with this inverse creating character.

As a result of experiences and observations from the work done with students during the seminars we came to the conclusion that we can most intensely, most freely and openly debate and contextualise a taboo that had been outlined and, with consensus, accepted in the group if we 'conjure up' the given taboo in a visual form. We tried photos and motion pictures, but neither art-form was successful. In the case of works of fine art, however, it was always convenient that the starting point was the image itself, without any full-scale event. The students perceived the images seen on photos or in movies to be more realistic and as a result had more difficulty distancing themselves from the features of the genre (characters, environment, complete story). Paintings, however, did not become 'reality', their world offered the appropriate distance and the students did not feel an urge to identify themselves with what is happening in the painting. Most of the time we did not use abstract depictions, but figurative works that interpret a very concrete phenomenon or condition and which always clearly communicated something thematically, so that there was no threat of misreading the image or getting lost in it. The sight of a woman giving birth or a dying person seldom turns into the position of inverse visual analysis, however the message that it carries for the individual, the frame for interpretation, the mobilization of the taboo and its contextualisation

are all primarily personal and specified. 'The speaker is "anybody", but what they say is not coming from "anywhere".' (Foucault [2001], p. 159.) .

Works of fine art enable us to examine how people experience their roles in society. A work of art offers models to society in which new values are expressed. The impact, however, goes both ways - not only from the society into art, but also the other way round. Works of art carry new values and norms and this enables them to spread through communities and society. Lotman says: '... a work of art determines a given norm, establishes the possibilities of transgression and, at least on the level of the imagination, offers the possibility of a new norm'. (Lotman [2001], p. 211.) The age group here examined (although the same could be said of other age groups, as well), related to these themes in an embarrassed, hostile attitude, but the works of art helped fill the communicational vacuum. The realisation that many of these taboos had been accepted and frequent themes of art going back to the prehistoric ages, as well as becoming aware of the fact that pre-Christian ancient cultures thought of the bodily aspects of life as natural, and not a sin, and how this notion was just a 'minor' consequence of the development of civilisation, bashfully left out of history books, dissolved many inhibitions and grudges in the students, consequently making it possible to discuss the topics more effectively, as part of an accepted social and cultural process.

3.3. Conclusions

Focussing on modern age taboos we may declare that they are mostly implicitly defined, and the emergence of most of them (especially the ones related to the sphere of intimacy) can rarely be attributed to a major collective agent; in most cases the individual agent and the milieu expressed by their micro-environment play a far more important role.

The majority of modern day taboos are not built on a solid consensus; consequences and potential retributions in case of breaching the taboo are unclear. In a modern, individualistic world, where values are pluralised and social functions have lost their earlier roles, the non-explicit forms of taboo type prohibitions have also been reinterpreted and confused. We can only speculate on what might or might not be taboo, but cannot find any guiding description, or transferral of knowledge between generations, or cultural milieus. Consequently we can seldom be sure, since taboos are, on almost all occasions, dependent on context and notional in character. (Typical examples are the phenomenon of breastfeeding in public, the relation to vegetative bodily functions, or social discussion of these topics). Naturally, fear has a defining role in the operation and formation of today's taboos. However,

today the source of fear is not dread of the deeds of spirits from a magic-based, abstract world, but condemnation by another person or the community, which can be lead to exclusion. This fear is often based of false preconceptions which could be dismantled by verbalisation and substantial discussion. It is partly the lack of this that often turns a temporary prohibition into taboo.

Taboos are present in a far more complex and nuanced form among students aged 19 to 25. For them, taboos are not only simple prohibitions, but complex social regulatory mechanisms which constitute a mélange of external injunctions, un-known coercive factors and restrictive mechanisms internalised by the individual mostly functioning on the level of language and the visual sphere.

Taboos expressed by student group members covered a surprisingly wide spectrum, despite the fact that at the beginning of every semester they declared that in our time there were no more taboos. This statement soon turned out to be erroneous, and it transpired that members of this age-group, despite all of their networking (or maybe as a result of it), are sitting on a host of taboos which they are incapable of discussing despite the large number of opportunities available (internet, civil organisations, psychologists, etc.). A number of taboos we discovered were behaviour patterns that the individuals had adopted and incorporated without questioning or understanding the causality of the notion and filled with a false content through a kind of reality-constructing mechanism. Other taboos are gained through experience and built on fear which students experienced in their environment and they then reinforced or supported.

The present dissertation has devoted considerable attention to the question what happens to existing taboos under the influence of 'forced' visualisation and verbalisation. In the 'experimental' groups I observed, both modalities of interpretation triggered a processes which allowed us to reveal not only the characteristic sets of taboos carried by the participants, but also the dynamics of these sets of taboos. The compulsion of verbal expression and active participation in debates helped some of the students to listen to each other. Many of them realised the differences in opinions, but they also learnt (sometimes to their relief) that many taboos they had believed to be personal and highly private also existed in other participants. Alternately, some discovered that others were quite free to talk easily and casually about something that they themselves considered taboo. At the same time, the inverse form of most of these processes was also present – as in the case when one individual realised that he was the only one not to consider old age sexuality a taboo, while all others dreaded even the thought of it.

These institutionalised conversations, which took place within the boundaries of the seminar setting, proved well suited to induce students to hear each other out and as a result undergo at least a small-scale shift in the direction of realising the taboos that they are carrying and re-activating. They also learnt to make sense of the fact that they were doing this witout direct quetioning, analysis, reconsideration or a critical attitude. They were following explicit or implicit norms and communicational patterns that many of which had long lost their significance, or certain social and cultural changes had caused a tradition to fade, transform or become obsolete.

The visual communicational stimuli clearly helped capture existing taboos and helped students overcome difficulties in verbalisation, as well as helped them understand the differences in the verbal and visual communication of taboos. At the same time there were themes, such as dying, disability, illness, rape, which they found easy to talk about – until the moment when they were visually faced with the activity or the various manifestations of the thing they did had not considered to be taboo.

We can therefore state that in our society, characterised by uncertainty and a confusion around norms, there are a host of implicit taboos that cannot be visually demonstrated or verbally discussed, and which often shackle the individual and make people act more hesitant or embarrassed. This is certainly true of the young people I examined by is probably not much different in other strata of society. This prevents us from solving such problems that endanger both our mental and our physical health, as well as jeopardise many of our communicational channels or actions, whereas the appropriate verbalisation can lead to dismantling some taboos, and therefore could be a first step toward solving the problem.

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