



# The Problematic Scientificity of Psychology in the Media: How Mental Illness Coverage Could Lead to Criminality Prejudice

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*We analysed how psychologists in the media approached a recent case of mass murder “attempt” by a university student. Contrary to previous media studies focused on the relationship between crime and mental health, we do not take for granted the scientificity of psychology in order to understand how its trembling epistemic status affects its public discourse. The case was one of the first happening in Europe during the COVID-19 crisis, an event that is known for its impacts on mental health. Using Foucault’s genealogical-archaeological method we found that there was a prominent level of speculation that, dangerously, linked mental illness with criminal behaviour, especially when*

*there was a lack of information about the student and his intentions. The pandemic context constituted a renewed opportunity for experts to talk about ‘collective mental illness’ in alarming terms. Interestingly, the experts presented naïve versions of the “magic bullet theory” to explain the power that media have on subjects with mental illness who engage in criminal behaviour. We also found that specialists proposed hypotheses that cannot be disproven, creating a dogmatic sense of a fearful inescapability from mental illness that can lead to criminal behaviour.*

**Keywords:** mental health, communication, psychology, media, crime.

**I**t is relevant to understand how psychology is publicly communicated as credible knowledge about the subjects’ psyche. In other words, we need to understand how psychology produces its own “science communication”, in the same way as physics or biology. Why? While physics and biology have public

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legitimacy as scientific disciplines, psychology, on the contrary, has been contested. One famous criticism comes from Karl Popper (1996) when he says,

What I found so striking about these theories and so dangerous, was the claim that they were “verified” or “confirmed” by an incessant stream of observational evidence. And indeed, once your eyes were opened, you could see verifying instances everywhere. (...) a psychoanalyst, whether Freudian or Adlerian, assuredly would tell you that he finds his theories daily, even hourly, verified by his clinical observations. But were these theories testable? Were these analyses really better tested than, say, the frequently “verified” horoscopes of the astrologers? What conceivable event would falsify them in the eyes of their adherents? Was not every conceivable event a “verification”? (p. 162).

Popper considers that verification and testability are not the same thing. Something that is always verified cannot be put to test because we always know what the result is. Popper is especially concerned with psychology and the topic of “suggestion”. For psychology, even if a patient claims that the analyst is wrong in his diagnosis, this negation still works as a verification of diagnosis, in the sense that the patient intimately acknowledges that the diagnosis is true because he doesn’t want to recognize a truth that is devastating for him, “[t]hus the apparent falsification turns into a verification” (p. 169). On the contrary, when a patient tries to confirm the diagnosis rather than refute it, given the power of suggestion caused by the diagnosis itself, it constitutes another verification of the diagnosis. Popper will pose thus the following question: “Should we not therefore seriously consider the possibility that some other “clinical verifications”, of which analysts like to speak, or indeed all of them, are due to a mechanism of this kind? And does not the mere possibility of such a mechanism invalidate these verifications?” (p. 170). Popper is worried about psychological theories that cannot be falsified, that is, theories that are always verified whether the patient negates or accepts the diagnosis.

The other well-known critique against psychology comes from Michel Foucault. The Foucauldian critique is particularly pertinent to approach the relationship between psychology and the judicial system:

Throughout the penal procedure and the implementation of the sentence there swarms a whole series of subsidiary authorities. Small-scale legal systems and parallel judges have multiplied around the principal judgement: psychiatric or psychological experts (...); it might be objected that none of them really shares the right to judge (...). But as soon as the penalties and the security measures defined by the court are not absolutely determined, from the moment they may be modified along the way, from the moment one leaves to others than the judges of the offence the task of deciding whether the condemned man “deserves” to be placed in semi-liberty or conditional liberty, whether they may bring his penal tutelage to an end, one is handing over to them mechanisms of legal punishment to be used at their discretion: subsidiary judges they may be, but they are judges all the same (Foucault, 1979, p. 21).

Even if they are not formally judges, the experts in mental health produce a kind of knowledge that will have an enormous influence on what happens to the criminal.

## CRIME, MEDIA, AND MENTAL HEALTH

When we couple Popper's epistemological criticism with the political analysis of Foucault, it becomes clear that we must be attentive to the ways psychology presents its claims publicly, especially when these two aspects have been absent in media studies that deal with the relationship between crime and mental health. These studies have found that, according to the audiences, media associate mental health problems with violence and criminality (Chopra and Doody, 2007; Stuart, 2006; Francis et al., 2003; Wahl et al., 2002; Coverdale et al., 2002; Philo et al., 1994). This type of negative representation is also present in fictional genres (Parrott and Parrott, 2015; Wilson et al., 1999). Even the most careful media depictions of the relationship between mental health and crime don't seem to have relevant effects on audiences in reducing stigmatization (Morgan et al., 2022). Media coverage of the mental health-criminality relationship occurs in reaction to recent mass shootings (McGinty et al., 2014). Media representations of mentally ill offenders base their stories on legal sources (Wondemaghen, 2014). Quantitative analysis shows that Whites and Latinos are more likely to have their crime attributed to mental illness than Blacks, which suggests racial variability (Duxbury et al., 2018). News reporting of familicide tends to be reduced to "psychocentric frames" of mental health, leaving aside more broad social explanations (Buiten and Coe, 2021). However, these studies tend to leave aside the problematic role of psychology as a producer of knowledge, and its function in the judicial system. Psychology, which is responsible for the definition of mental health, is taken as unproblematic as if the media were the sole responsible for the connection between mental health and crime. This is an important literature gap given that psychology produces knowledge claims that may not be easily falsified, and it is linked with institutions that have explicit political strategies for controlling individuals.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Our objective is to understand how psychology can present itself in the media as the legitimate speaker about mental health in the case of an undergraduate student that "attempted" to commit mass murder. Our guiding question is: How psychology presents itself as a producer of knowledge about mental health in the media? This question is relevant not only because it enables us to explore 1) how psychology presents itself as a discourse that has a scientific status that is not as strong as in other sciences, but also 2) how psychology talks about mental health in the context of a potential crime. In our perspective, it is urgent to understand the discourse of a discipline that struggles to produce a public sense as a producer

of legitimate knowledge, especially when it has to talk about a criminal case, given the role that psychology has in the judicial decision.

## METHODOLOGY

We analysed the discourse of psychology in the media regarding a recent case of an “attempt” of mass murder by a student in Portugal in the context of higher education. The case is relevant given that it happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that is known for its impacts on mental health (Vindegaard and Benros, 2020). Additionally, this is a relevant case because Portugal is not known for mass-murdering attempts, contrary to the United States (Gammell et al., 2021), which allows an understanding of how experts deal with a new phenomenon. It is important to refer that a similar case happened in Portugal in 2013 when a 15-year-old high school student stabbed three colleagues and a school worker (Ferreira, 2022). However, the act didn’t happen in the context of higher education where mental health disorders have increased during the pandemic (Laranjeira et al., 2022).

Based on the media report of the case, on February 10th of 2022, the Portuguese police announced that prevented a “terrorist” attack on a university campus, the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon (FCUL). João, an 18-year-old Caucasian arrested by the police at his home, was a university first-year student attending the informatics engineering undergraduate course. The police, with the help of the FBI, find out that he was planning an attack on his colleagues. The movements of the suspect were being monitored by the police, including his online behaviour on the dark web where he followed sites about mass shootings and talked about his plans. Police searched his bedroom, located in a house that was shared with other students, and discovered arms (crossbow, knives, incendiary material, but not guns), and written plans for the attack. The subject is now arrested preventively in a prison hospital, where he awaits the development of the judicial process and its final decision.

In order to answer our research question, we analysed the media coverage of the case. We obtained the news pieces with the CISION clipping platform, a paid online archive of news, from February 10th until February 28th to analyse the first month of reporting to understand how experts deal with something new. The collection of news pieces was made by searching the terms “Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon”, “Faculty of Sciences” and FCUL, which stands as the acronym of the faculty. We also searched for Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon without quotation marks in order not to prevent the CISION platform to find news that only mentioned “University of Lisbon”. These keywords allowed us to gather the highest number of news pieces (n=1394) in the case the journalist has not used the entire name of the faculty. In order to focus on the news with the potential of reaching larger audiences, we restricted our investigation to the national media (n=493).

The news media outlets that figure in our sample are: CNN Portugal (TV and online), Rádio Renascença (radio and online), *Diário de Notícias* (newspaper and

online), *Jornal de Notícias* (newspaper and online), *Público* (newspaper and online), *Observador* (online and radio), *Nascer do Sol* (newspaper and online), *Correio da Manhã* (newspaper and online), SIC Notícias (TV and online), RTP1 (TV and online), Antena 1 (radio), *Expresso* (online), and *Sábado* (online). These outlets are representative of news consumption at a national level in several types of media. We explored, afterwards, the pieces that have references to the language particle “psy” to catch discourses that mentioned “psychology”, “psychological”, “psychologists”, “psychiatrist”, etc. We obtained 459 words with the letters “psy” but only 29 news pieces refer to experts talking about the case in a sample composed of 493 news<sup>1</sup>. This is one important first result: the media presence of medical specialists in mental health is reduced. Most of the news about mental health is about the psychological support that the faculty is trying to provide to the students. It is also admissible that many references in the media to “doctor”, “specialist”, “neurologist”, “expert”, etc., have been left out of our analysis. However, given that we are concerned with the production of psychological discourse in the media, one of the important aspects of this discourse is the fact that is enunciated by a specialist that is presented as a “psy” expert. We are, thus, interested as much in the enunciation as in the enunciator. A “doctor” or “specialist” can talk about the mental health of the student, but they do not contribute, in our view, to form a coherent discourse about the *psyche* as enunciated by a specialized professional order, because they refer to an abstract entity like science or medicine.

We approached our sample with the qualitative discourse analysis proposed by Foucault in his methodological book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) could be also a strong candidate to approach our sample, especially when one of our theoretical presuppositions is indebted to Foucault. Albeit the importance of this method, we believe it is incompatible with the Popperian and Foucauldian presuppositions about psychology. CDA has a relation with the psy-sciences that is itself a problem and not an established matter, especially concerning the role of psychology in explaining linguistic behaviour (Billig, 2008). More importantly, there is no robust literature about how the problematic scientificity and politics of psychological knowledge affect the psychological presuppositions about language in CDA. We believe that it is necessary to make

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1 When the radio, TV or newspaper piece was reproduced online without modifications we just counted it as if it was one occurrence. We also excluded two repetitions (Rádio Renascença, 11.02.22, online). Unfortunately, due to CISION platform technical problems, it was not possible to access the video file for the psychiatrist Carlos Farate (CNN Portugal, 12.02.22, TV and online), the psychologist Rosa Amaral (CNN Portugal, 14.02.22, TV and online), the psychiatrist Fernando Vieira (SIC Notícias, 11.02.22, TV), the psychologist Rute Agulhas (SIC, 11.02.22, TV), the psychologist Carlos Poiars (CNN Portugal, 11.02.22, TV), and the psychiatrist Susana Almeida (CNN Portugal, 10.02.22, TV). However, we still added these six experts to the number of specialists talking about the case to understand their representativeness in the sample. We should mention that we analysed the discourse of Agulhas, Poiars and Almeida in other news outlets.

a CDA of the discourse of psychology before integrating it into CDA<sup>2</sup>. Instead of using CDA, we used Foucault's methodological approach to discourse laid out in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). In that book, Foucault is trying to escape the psychological theories of linguistics and the phenomenological method to analyse discourse. That is, Foucault is not interested in how linguistic rules allow subjects to say things to achieve certain objectives, but in how the proper discourse about the psyche of subjects is possible. That approach is highly convenient to study the public discourse of psychology because it is a discourse that produces the language about subjects' psyches.

Foucault's archaeological method suggests that we have to look for "concepts", "objects" and "subjects" of discourses that have the status of knowledge. However, this analytic simplicity should not mislead us because it presupposes a matured approach to mediation, and it is a robust communicational theory that avoids crude psychologism. The way Foucault analyses "concepts" is based on the work of Canguilhem, who proposed that the historical analysis of scientific concepts cannot be made in an isolated manner, but always in relation to neighbouring concepts. However, Foucault also applies this conceptual relationality to objects and subjects. That is, concepts, objects and subjects of knowledge can only be understood in a networked relation. Foucault is, thus, avoiding the phenomenological method of approaching the object in an isolated manner by a pre-constituted subject that, with sovereignty, assigns unilaterally meanings to concepts and objects. That is, Foucault is renouncing a psychological theory of discourse. We can claim that, for Foucault, the "concept" of the psyche, the "object" of the psyche and the psyche of the "subject" emerge in an inter-relational manner that forms the discourse of psychology. Additionally, this triad of 'concept-object-subject' also detects regularities and differences in the various experts' discourses, just like the language rules (nominalization, modality, metaphors, speech-acts, etc.) used by CDA, with the advantage of being a triad that focuses on the minimal discursive requirements of a discourse of knowledge: the conceptual apparatus, the objects of study (e.g. instruments), and the subject of study.

We already presuppose a mediated approach to psychological discourse. What we mean is that this discourse is not the same that is used in the clinic or the court, its enunciation in the media changes its character, forcing it to be a "discursive event", that is, something that is not just a scientific discourse or simply a journalistic discourse; otherwise, there would be discursive incommensurability. An "event" in the sense that it must *become something else*, something not completely *pre-visible* and that will be *transformed by the proper act of enunciation* of psychological discourse in the media. Following an excellent interpretation of an anonymous reviewer, this is a study about the discourse of psychology in the media and not a study about

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2 One case in point is the separation that CDA, following Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, makes between the "ideational" meta-function of language and other functions (Wodak, 2002), which presupposes a differentiated place for the subject's psyche in language, a differentiation that should be analysed by CDA instead of taking it for granted.

the effects of the media on that discourse. This does not mean, however, that we are not doing communication research. When we are approaching the case with the method of archaeology of discourse, we are using a mediation theory that is extended. That is, psychology does not become mediated solely when it has to be adapted to the journalistic discourse. The fact that psychology has to make a mediation between objects, concepts, and subjects in the discourse, especially in the context of mass media beyond the limited frontiers of the clinic or the court, shows that it is already producing discursive events, that is, singular mediations that combine in transformative ways the objects, concepts and subjects of discourse.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RELATION BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND CRIMINAL INTENT

Some specialists, like Gustavo Jesus, a psychiatrist, presented bold psychological claims about the case:

From the present data, the most likely is that it is not a psychotic illness, in the sense that this was a highly planned thing, with extensive documentation and plans that lasted a long time. The planning points to “psychopathic” personality traits, which make the person feel no empathy for others (CNN Portugal, 11.02.2022, online).

The specialist claims that the “most likely” diagnosis is an absence of “psychotic illness” (concept) given the careful and long planning of the act (objects). The planning is presented as evidence that justifies “psychopathic personality traits” (concepts) that make the person non-empathic (subject). It is interesting that, without talking with the subject, it is possible to display nuanced distinctions of psychological concepts (psychotic illness, psychopathic personality traits, lack of empathy), based solely on the time invested in the production of a plan (object). This is an interesting claim given that a psychological analysis demands a conversation with the patient. We have also to acknowledge that, a day later, Jesus claimed that it is necessary to “evaluate the young person properly, without making much more speculation about whether or not he has a diagnosis, which diagnosis he may have, whether or not it is a neurodevelopmental disorder or a personality trait or both” (CNN Portugal, 12.02.2022, online and TV). The expert recognizes that we are in the presence of “speculation”, admitting that the suspect can have no mental condition whatsoever.

A neuropsychiatrician, Nuno Lobo Antunes, also made bold claims about the young student: “I immediately thought of it (...). The probability of suffering from Asperger’s is enormous” (*Jornal de Notícias*, 13.02.22, online and newspaper). The information that circulates in the media serves as the basis to produce *live diagnoses* in the media with a high “probability” (concept). These claims can produce a connection between criminal intent and mental health when there is no data available to advance such bold claims. This is the perspective taken by Sílvia Botelho, a clinical psychologist:

It is not just playing video games that make a person bad, there has to be a set of signs, including the rage this young man has inside him, to the point of wanting to kill people. This behaviour is completely out of the norm. (...) This young person may be a psychopath or a sociopath. It is alarming to already have such a violent and obsessed instinct (*Correio da Manhã*, 12.02.22, newspaper and online).

The psychological concepts used by the expert seem oddly “untechnical” and with moral overtones: “bad person”, “inside him”, “a violent and obsessed instinct”. The diagnosis of sociopathy and psychopathy (concepts) appear in the young person as if he was a social atom, whose ‘evilness’ grows “inside him”. This individualization of the mental health problem calls, thus, for individual solutions if we take into consideration the words of Raquel António, a psychology researcher:

The school has a fundamental role in the issue of prevention. It is also very important to develop issues related to empathy and issues related to the management of emotions, because a lot of what happens, and in this specific case, has to do with not being able to manage your own emotions (Antena1, 11.02.22, radio).

This “specific case” (subject), and “a lot of what happens”, is an incapacity to “manage one’s own emotions” (concept). The school only appears as giving tools for self-management. This powerful narrative about an individual that has a problem that happened because he was unable to manage his emotions characterizes the explanations that psychology offers to the case. We can say that experts reduce the case to “psychocentric frames”, leaving aside more broad social explanations (Buiten and Coe, 2021).

The fact that the act was planned constitutes one of the strongest pieces of evidence to justify that the subject is someone with mental health problems and criminal intent. Rute Aguilhas, a justice psychologist, claims that “the fact that it is a premeditated crime announced on the networks implies an emotional coldness and some need for recognition”, pointing toward “a more narcissistic personality” (Rádio Renascença, 11.02.22, online). The “premeditated” and “announcement” (objects) of the act in the dark web makes the specialist advance the hypothesis that the subject has “emotional coldness” and “need of acknowledgement” (concepts). The acts of planning and communication of the plan in an online environment led to an apparent contradictory subject that has a lack of emotion and, simultaneously, a need of being recognized. This contradiction lends itself to a Popperian type of critique, in the sense that psychology cannot be falsified, because psychology will always be right in its hypothesis: the criminal behaviour was explained by emotional detachment and the need to acquire acknowledgement.

These speculations, which will be constant in the media, are not just mere diagnoses of the mental health condition. They constitute a kind of first trial that is made live on the news because they point toward the student’s level of responsibility. When a journalist asked the neurologist Nuno Lobo Antunes if the decision to send the young student to a prison hospital was relevant to

treat the individual he answered “he is not in the prison to be treated” (CNN Portugal, 12.02.2022, online and TV), which is an interesting claim given that the mental health condition of the suspect is unknown and can be crucial to determine if he deserves to be treated or punished. What psychology says about the individual constitutes an evaluation of his criminal status. The clinical and forensic psychologist, Rute Aguilhas, claims, “It does not seem to be a behaviour resulting, for example, from a psychotic break, from a break with reality. It seems to be something more coldly thought” (SIC Notícias, 11.02.22, online). The “psychotic break” (concept) is what determines if the suspect is linked to “reality” (object), that is, if the act was “coldly thought” (concept) and, thus, linked to criminal intent. Another psychologist, Tânia Gaspar, on the contrary, suggests, “What was reported may point to an obsessive condition (...). At some point, [thoughts of wanting to kill] do not even feel bad anymore” (*Público*, 12.02.2022, newspaper and online). But how can we know all this without interviewing the subject? These pronouncements seem quite dangerous given that psychology is an essential element in the judicial decision about the culpability of the subject, which makes these diagnoses in the media a kind of a live trial. The experts know the importance of the psychology-judiciary connection. For instance, according to the psychiatrist Andreia Lopes,

there are situations in which the patient, due to this illness, most of the time in the phase of decompensation, practices illicit acts typified as a crime, but within the mental illness, it would not be any mental illness the one that in psychiatry we understand as serious, (...) an illness serious enough to undo the subject's ability to act otherwise. It is as if it were the illness that acted and not the subject, and in this case, they are not imputable, an expression often heard by now (Antena1, 11.02.22, radio).

This connection of psychology with judicial power demands a more cautious approach by the experts when they venture into such speculative diagnoses of the young student.

It is relevant to see that, given the connection between the diagnosis and the culpability of the subject, experts are actively engaged in “boundary-work” (Gieryn, 1983) to separate psychology from judicial decision. Cátia Moreira de Carvalho, a psychology researcher, claims that if we consider

the activity that people have on social networks (...), the comments that people leave are often indicators of people's level of radicalization or even of other types of intentions and this can indeed serve to signal some behaviour, something to which we must be attentive, and I believe that the security forces take this into account when considering how to deal with these cases. I do not know to what extent this counts as evidence, it is no longer up to me (SIC Notícias, 11.02.2022, TV).

After saying that online behaviour (object) can point to the “level of radicalization” (concept), she says that she does not know if it counts as legal evidence. Another interesting boundary-work can be seen in the words of the neurologist Nuno Lobo Antunes when he tries to justify why the subject was detained in a

prison hospital: “The judge (...) understood that he should be imprisoned in an institution where there was also medical care. Now it is difficult, without knowing other data, to say if this is a fair decision or if he would need different care” (CNN Portugal, 12.02.2022, online and TV). It is interesting how the term “fair” and “care” appear in the same phrase, which points to an opposition between justice and medical intervention that can only be decided by knowing “other data”. The need of engaging in boundary-work shows that psychological knowledge has a relevant place in the power of the juridical system.

## POPPERIAN DIFFICULTIES

Another relevant topic is the epistemic difficulty of identifying potential young people with mental health problems and criminal intent. Rute Agulhas, a specialist in the psychology of justice, says that the school “is much more alert for young people or children who behave badly, who have disciplinary proceedings, and the one who is quiet and calm behaves well” may be growing up “with some kind of more deviant or criminal ideas or goals” (Rádio Renascença, 11.02.22, online). This constitutes a Popperian impossibility of refutation, that is, it is a hypothesis that can hardly be falsified given that any quiet student constitutes a potential criminal with mental problems, and if we cannot identify it, the epistemic burden of failing to do so is ours, and not because the individual doesn’t have a mental health condition or a criminal intent. This epistemic difficulty is repeated by another specialist, Cátia Moreira de Carvalho, a terrorism psychology researcher, who claims,

There are indeed signs that can be cast. Now it depends on the sensitivity of the people around them, in the context of this person, to be able to identify these signs and connect all the dots and understand if, in fact, this can later translate into violence or not. And usually, people are never expecting a situation like this to happen later on, are they? And so, people are always trivializing or neglecting any signs that may be given. On the other hand, it can also happen, as this person is in early adulthood, (...) is that there are a number of psychopathologies that begin to manifest only in early adulthood. In other words, this also makes it a little difficult to identify these signs that, in short, can alert you to a situation like this (*Observador*, 10.02.2022, radio and online).

People (subject) do not pay attention to the signs (objects), but the signs are not visible. If they fail to see the signs it is because they are, according to their nature, veiled and because people do not have the sensibility to identify them. We are once again in the presence of a Popperian difficulty. If we fail to identify something, it is because we lack sensibility or because the phenomenon itself is characterized by being indiscernible. In the end, psychology will have confirmed its hypothesis of the dangerousness and veiled nature of potential criminals with mental health conditions.

This Popperian difficulty makes parenting a challenging task because you can fail by not acknowledging the danger of having a quiet child, and if you acknowledge and overprotect the child, you may be taking important auto-regulatory skills from her: Ivone Patrão, a psychologist, says,

We are very comfortable having them at home because they have the console, the tablet, the cell phone (...). The majority of parents do not even know what the dark web is; they look and think that [the child] is doing research for the school (...). You have to realize that when a child is allowed to grow up glued to a screen without supervision, he is building himself from external stimuli instead of absorbing the values of those who are by your side (...), looking at theories and clinical practice, we know that there is greater overprotection of young people, which is reflected in less autonomy, and this results that, at some point, they have less experience in their self-regulation (...). Adults need to be attentive (*Público*, 12.02.2022, newspaper and online).

A quiet individual is fated to become a criminal with a mental health condition despite what the parents do or do not do if we take seriously the words of Patrão. However, the psychologist Tânia Gaspar opposes this notion that in every quiet student there is someone with mental health problems and with a potential criminal intent:

When there's a very quiet little boy, always in his corner, who doesn't annoy anyone but also doesn't interact with his peers, we must be attentive [but this does not mean that] all quiet boys have problems (*Público*, 12.02.2022, newspaper and online).

Gaspar's claim contrasts with the more alarmist tone of Agulhas, Carvalho and Patrão, which constitutes the dominant expression of psychological discourse in the media.

The alarmism of this irrefutable psychological thesis creates an environment of suspicion, insecurity, and policing in the family and society. According to the experts, the relationship between children and parents constitutes an opportunity to create a relationship of trust, whose final objective is to prevent risk and danger. That instrumental relationship of trust is encouraged by Raquel António, a psychology researcher:

It is very important to maintain communication with the children because possibly no one would know what was happening because he was a very shy young man and not very communicative. I believe that he communicated poorly with his own family and, therefore, it is very important that parents maintain a relationship of trust and communication with their children to be able to detect these risky situations and to be able to intervene before we go into danger in this case, as it would be the case with this situation if it had not been detected on time (Antena1, 11.02.22, radio).

It is relevant how this thesis contradicts a certain notion of trust, given that trust is understood by the expert as a means and not as an end of this relationship between parents and adolescents. This instrumental use of trust suggests that, according to psychology, parents have a special role in policing their children to prevent risk and danger to society. In the same line of thought, Agulhas claims that we must invest in

the issue of supervision, communication between parents and children and the promotion of a relationship of trust that makes it possible to identify as soon as possible

some of the most inappropriate behaviours, some risk situations, to intervene before we go from risk to danger and (...) situations like this may arise (Rádio Renascença 11.02.22, online).

It is interesting to see that António and Agulhas agree on the instrumental role of trust to prevent “risk” and the “danger” associated with this case that the police stopped.

## MEDIA EFFECTS FOLK THEORY

It is curious that, after advancing the hypothesis of the danger of a quiet individual, which can be any student that doesn't behave badly, Rute Agulhas talks about a generalized sense of suspicion that is not healthy either: it is “important not to develop the idea that anyone is a potential terrorist, to the point of being afraid of their own shadow, otherwise we have young people who do not want to go to classes and who lead this situation to a more phobic reaction” (Rádio Renascença, 11.02.22, online). The psychological knowledge (concept), disseminated in the news (objects) creates the conditions to produce “phobic” adolescents (subject), which presupposes another psychological theory about the effects of communicating in the media the dangerousness of quiet personalities. It is interesting how experts advance a certain type of ‘media theory’, suggesting that audiences are highly susceptible to media effects, but that doesn't prevent them from commenting alarmingly on the case. This shows that the expert has an incoherent position about her own media effects theory. For instance, the discourse of Cátia Moreira de Carvalho, psychology of terrorism researcher, is a clear case of a ‘double bind’ type of discourse when she says,

While there is no official information, some care must be taken in the handling of this information. From what I have already read, it seems that there has been some attempt here to mimic and replicate what has already been done in other countries, namely in the United States (...). Because this is a phenomenon that not only exists in terrorism, it exists in other types of crimes, such as domestic violence, the crime of arsonists, and this is proven by science. Whenever there is a great social amplification of a type of crime then it is much more likely that in the following days this crime will be replicated and mimicked by other people, I ask once again for calmness (...). [The] mimicry is prevented with modesty in the treatment and handling of this information (...) [The] information (...) is very limited and I am also afraid of saying more than it is (*Observador*, 11.02.22, online and radio).

Agulhas and Carvalho are presenting versions of the known ‘magic bullet theory’ or ‘hypodermic needle theory’ about the unlimited media effects (Carey, 2013, p. 22). This theory is also expressed by another specialist: Mauro Paulino, a clinical and forensic psychologist, claims, “If, on the one hand, this quick and effective action by the Judiciary Police can lead to curbing this behaviour—because they perceive that the authorities are capable of acting preventively—for others, it can serve as a trigger in an attempt to be the first” (*Sábado*, 11.02.2022, online).

We also have here a Popperian problem of the falsifiability of this theory because the occurrence of the crime or its prevention contributes equally to copy-cat type behaviours. This makes psychologists' claims about media effects unfalsifiable because they can always be verified. Curiously, forensic psychologists use naively media theories of unlimited effects which are based themselves on outdated psychological theories that are limited to the behaviouristic stimulus-response mechanism (Drotner, 1999).

This linear theory of media effects is presented in a more impactful way when the issue at stake is video games. Mauro Paulino, a forensic psychologist, says that videogames "activates the same brain areas associated with real violence (...). It is expected that, with continued stimulation of this virtual violence, there will be a greater propensity for violence" (SIC Notícias, 11/02/2022, online and TV). An important concept, "cerebral zones", makes possible the mediation between "virtual violence" and "real violence" (concepts). In the brain, the media effects of video games become immediately real, which means that a growing exposition to violent video games will produce an individual that will be violent in 'reality'. Only one expert, a psychologist who specialized in video game addiction, tries to counter this unlimited media effects theory. João Nuno Faria claims,

When there are cases of terrorism and mass murder, it is very common to try to bridge the gap between violence in video games or series and overt violent behaviour. (...) But at no time, until today, has it been possible to establish a systematic, coherent and consistent line of investigation regarding [the thesis that] playing violent video games causes violence in the outside world (...), and there is a particular approach that reveals that the aggression that is channelled into a video game can serve as a "buffer", as well as a catalyst, to lessen the aggressive impulses of individuals in their day-to-day life in the offline world (*Observador*, 11.02.2022, online and radio).

In the words of this specialist, the videogames can constitute a medium that not only is not automatically linked with aggressive behaviour but can be also a way of managing violence. This is one of the rare cases where an expert contradicts the thesis that violent media simply lead to violent actions. It is instructing to see how a psychologist who studies media (videogames), contrary to other specialists, presents a non-naïve theory about media effects.

## MASS PSYCHOLOGY AND COVID-19

The experts consider that the pandemic created the conditions for the amplification of this case in the media, becoming experts in mass psychology. The psychiatrist Ana Vasconcelos tells us,

The pandemic brought the panic of the crowds. (...) We are at a time when there is a lot of emotional tension that is very contained by confinements. People are aimless and, therefore, cling to catastrophes that, sometimes, rationally, do not have the dimension they are giving them. It is an escape from collective suffering. It is the collective fear that at any moment something is going to burst (*Diário de Notícias*, 14.02.2022, online).

This “panic of the crowds” is justified by the “emotional tension” and “collective fear” (concepts) which affect “aimless” people (subject) that focus on tragedies that work as an “escape for a collective suffering” (object). The individual case of João is used to explain the mind of the collective. The mental illness affects not only the young student but also all those that pay attention to the story and give it more importance than it “rationally” has. We can include in this collective panic the psychologists and psychiatrists themselves that contribute to the production of this panic. The specialists have a transcendental capacity of evaluating the collective illness while being a part of that collective. The psychology project of being an all-encompassing macro narrative about the world, which opens itself to contradictions, is present in a singular way in the words of the forensic psychologist Carlos Alberto Poiães when he says that lawyers must be attentive to the psychological dimensions of their clients: “unfortunately, many times, they still do not have this precaution to request a psychological evaluation from their clients, because it is necessary to know above all —it is not looking for a pathology— who is the individual who allegedly committed the crime” (RTP1, 12.02.2022, TV and online). Psychology is not just in the business of saying who has a “pathology” (concept) but “to know above all (...) who the individual is” (subject). It is this attempt to explain everything that can jeopardize the scientific status of psy-sciences. From media theory to sociological theories, to ontology, nothing escapes the reductionism of psychologism. It is precisely Poiães that will produce a macro psychosocial explanation that links the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health, crime, and unlimited media effects in another news piece:

Between the ages of 15 and 25, mental problems that were previously hidden can arise. And they can be triggered with greater intensity in young people who entered university three years ago and are experiencing an anomalous situation due to the pandemic. The confinement meant that people became more closed off and exposed, in addition to alcohol and drug consumption, to the dangers of the internet, which have a greater implication for those who already have a propensity for mental illness. (...) There has not been yet any massacre in Portugal, but this is an event that is served to us to the point of exhaustion. And this can have an influence on people who are already involved in a pathological condition and who seek recognition and notoriety. (...) [A]lthough the fact that this boy was caught so early may deter them. But it is necessary to maintain permanent attention, because there may be those who say “if this person wasn’t able to be the first Portuguese to commit a massacre, I will do it” (*Jornal de Notícias*, 11.02.22, newspaper).

We have the thesis that young people, between 15 and 25 years old (subjects), have “hidden” problems and are the victims of the pandemic lockdown (object), which increased the time on the internet (object). This theory is then coupled with an unlimited media effects theory, which makes the possibility of a massacre in Portugal, in the context of the pandemic, eminent, something that demands our “permanent attention”. Renata Benavente, vice-president of the Portuguese Psychologist Order, tries to contradict straightforward connections between the case and the COVID-19 crisis when she says that during the pandemic

people have been activating themselves to survive and function more or less adequately (...), symptoms of suffering that have been contained all this time are beginning to appear. (...) We are still trying to understand the real impact of the pandemic. Only with time will we understand (*Expresso*, 11.02.22, online).

This cautious approach shows that psychology does not have a homogeneous voice in the media, and there are critical voices against certain experts in the media, as we will see in the next session.

## APPEALS TO CAUTION

Albeit most specialists tend to link crime with mental illness, some of them try to be more cautious. For instance, Andreia Lopes, psychiatrist, says,

The approach that has been given to this case, especially by the media, has been uncomfortable to hear from someone connected to mental health, to say the least. I believe that some statements have been made that reflect a lack of knowledge and, perhaps more serious, a prejudice in relation to mental health (...), in my opinion, the most pernicious thing is the immediate labelling of the subject as, and I quote, “suffering from mental illness” this results in (...) the increasing stigma of mental illness as being responsible for violence (Antena1, 11.02.22, radio).

In the same line of thought, the pedopsychiatrist Paula Vilarica tries to break the connection between Asperger’s syndrome and violence: “It is very important to make it clear that they do not have to behave violently. In fact, in general, people with Asperger’s Syndrome are more often victims of aggression than aggressors” (SIC Notícias, 11.02.22, online). Similarly, the psychiatrist Ana Vasconcelos claims that it is necessary to take into consideration “the causes of the young person suffering (...). Do not give it labels (...). Asperger’s syndrome is no longer a pathological entity, it left this classification a long time ago (...), it cannot be used as a diagnosis or to explain a case as complex as this one” (*Diário de Notícias*, 14.02.2022, online). In the same line of thought, Susana Pinto de Almeida, a Forensic psychiatrist, says, “Hearing people related to mental health saying that personality deformation is schizophrenia is very serious. It is disinformation” (*Sábado*, 11.02.22, online). It is interesting to notice that experts are worried about the bad use of concepts (Asperger’s Syndrome, schizophrenia), especially in the context of violence.

In terms of scientific rationality, the forensic psychologist Carlos Alberto Poiares claims, “There are people who commit crimes who can have mental pathologies just like there are people who commit crimes who have physical pathologies, they can have the flu, a contagious illness, a terminal illness (...) so the linear association is always wrong” (RTP1, 12.02.2022, TV and online). The “physical pathology” (concept) is used to separate “pathological illness” from crime. This special caution with causality is also present in the opinion of experts like Mauro Paulino, a clinical and forensic psychologist:

We have to be very careful about the aspects we are underlining. (...) Because not all people who are isolated, or who have Asperger's syndrome, as he was said to have, are at home browsing the dark web and planning to kill. There are other conditions here that have to be duly considered (*Nascer do Sol*, 12.02.22, newspaper).

The specialist is saying that the link between mental health disorder and murder intent is 'conditioned' by other factors. We are in the presence of subjects of knowledge (isolated people), knowledge concepts (Asperger's syndrome), and objects of knowledge (dark web, killing plans), but we do not have any linear relation between them. We can say that the psychologist is blocking the production of generalizations. Cátia Moreira de Carvalho, a psychology of terrorism researcher, also claims that there are social or external dimensions that can justify this behaviour, and she is careful to point out that there is not enough information about the case:

If this person was a victim of violence, he may probably suffer from social maladjustment, from some psychiatric or psychological problems. These problems can in fact serve as a trigger (...) for violent action. But obviously, these factors do not act in isolation, that is, what I am trying to say is that there are other factors that very likely help to explain this person's motivation (...), and it still remains (...) to find out which ones are these factors (*Observador*, 10.02.2022, radio and online).

Paulino and Carvalho refrain from making a connection between mental health and criminal behaviour, claiming that something is missing that could explain the connection between the subject and the act he was planning. João Nuno Faria, a psychologist, touches on the heart of the problem of causality:

I think that our clinical director, Dr Nuno Lobo Antunes, usually approaches this issue of causality with a lot of humour and says something very funny: "when you drink more martinis it is when there is an increase in skin cancer and, therefore, martinis cause cancer of the skin". That is not true, you drink more martinis in the summer, and in the summer the skin is more exposed, and more skin cancer develops because of exposure to the sun. Therefore, the fact that they happen at the same time does not mean that they are connected, much less that one is the cause of the other (*Observador*, 11.02.2022, online and radio).

The various approaches to the issue of causality show that the presence of specialists in the media is not just to explain the event, but also an opportunity to provide explanations about the lack of explanations, a kind of a meta-discourse. Even if they are not communicating knowledge that can explain the case at hand in the media, they are communicating one important dimension of knowledge production, that is, the limit of what can be affirmed. It should be noted that some specialists that try to be more cautious with their claims are the same that made dangerous claims in the media.

## CONCLUSION

We should point out some limitations of our analysis. In terms of method, the case can benefit from a reception study, focused on subjects with mental illness and students. Additionally, by focusing on epistemological and political aspects of psychological discourse, we did not approach the effects that are proper to journalism, which selects and configures what can be said by the discourse of psychology. The reason for this decision lies in the impossibility of including in the space of an article more theoretical input. Nonetheless, these journalistic mechanisms have been studied thoroughly in the literature, while the juncture between epistemic and political dimensions of psychology public discourse on the media has been less studied. That is, it is not enough to claim, as the literature rightfully does, that mental health and crime are hastily linked in the news, we need also to explore how the problematic epistemic and political nature of psy-sciences contributes to that linkage. It is now possible to start to study the connections between media, scientificity and politics of psychology.

In terms of general conclusions, we can say that we obtained relevant answers to our research question: how psychology presents itself as a producer of knowledge about mental health in the media? These answers can be divided into “epistemic” and “political” topics. In epistemic terms, albeit there was a minority of expert voices appealing to caution in the opinions that circulate about the case, the analysis of the psychological ‘concepts’ used abundantly in a speculative way by the different specialists shows that there is a lack of care when mental health diagnoses are advanced to explain a criminal attempt. We discovered, by using the Foucauldian methodology of discursive archaeology, that the abundance of psychological “concepts” is used to explain the behaviour of a “subject” through “objects”, given that there is a lack of information about the “subject”. This simple discursive triad was useful to see that psy-sciences talk profusely about the unknown psyche of the subject. It is also interesting to see that the “objects” of psychological discourse are media objects (internet, video games), leading most specialists to present naïve theories about the unlimited power of media.

The lack of more detailed information about the case forces psy-experts to formulate highly speculative explanations about the event, amplifying the possibility of producing erroneous affirmations about the relationship between mental health and criminal behaviour. This risk constitutes a problem of health literacy because it reinforces the claim that mental health and crime have a great probability of being linked, augmenting the stigma against people who suffer mental health problems, and contributing to the deterioration of their condition (Wahl, 1992; Jorm, 2000). We believe that this risk is aggravated because psychology tries to produce its public status as legitimate knowledge in the media, a status that is problematic according to Popper. The combination of a discipline eager to defend a scientificity that is questionable, and the lack of information about the case to be scientifically explained, produced a dangerous mix. In other words, by having nothing to say when it is necessary to say something to appear

as having scientific knowledge, we see psy-experts exposing different concepts and mobilizing objects to explain what remains unknown: the subject.

In terms of political analysis of the case, the most relevant power effect is the connection between diagnosis and culpability, a connection that shows the importance that psy-sciences have in the juridical system. Albeit this important connection, the specialists do not refrain from making a diagnosis, creating a kind of ‘popular live trial in the media’. Nevertheless, the specialists also try to engage in “boundary-work” when they try to separate the production of psychological knowledge from the judicial decision. Finally, it was noticeable that some psychological theories are not prone to be falsifiable. The problem of verification has become relevant to understand how young people and their use of the internet constitute an inevitable menace. This is not just something that has epistemological effects. The unfalsifiable claims lead to an environment of suspicion and policing inside families and society: we cannot escape the violent effects of quiet adolescents and loud media.

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