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Domestic violence analysed from the perspective of women's tolerance and its harmful effects on children

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the tolerance of women and the harmful repercussions that domestic violence has upon children. It is part of the comparative European research project 'VICTIMS', which investigates the indirect harmful effects of violence: victimising the child and re-victimising the woman-mother through the child's exposure to the violence perpetrated against her. In Italy, fifty-eight testimonies from women that had suffered violence in front of their children were collected and analysed from Police reports. The content analysis highlighted how women's tolerance of violence is linked to various factors: emotional, such as the disappointment of a failed relationship; social, the dishonour, for instance, brought upon the entire family; ethics and values, with specific attention to the child's future; psychological, including self-blame. In all the cases examined the woman's awareness is present in the form of fear for the child's life; being in a continual state of alert in order to defend the child and conscious of the psychologically harmful effect of violence upon the child. Age, education, occupation, quality of life, duration of violence, are all variables that define both the degree of tolerance and the level of awareness of the harmful effects, or damage, caused to the child. Although reports faithfully transcribe the woman's experience they scarcely refer to the indirect harmful effect caused to the child. Research findings permit the construction of a basic typology of awareness, identifying four main types: objective-phenomenological, related to the child's actions; subjective-hermeneutical, linked to the mother's assessment; socio-biological, with regard to the effects on the child's intellectual and social maturity; pedagogical, referring to the child's school performance.

Keywords: *domestic violence, women's tolerance, indirect harmful effect on children, comparative research*

Introduction

The European research, DAPHNE III JLS/2008/CFP/DAP/2008-1, conducted in 2010-2011 in four countries, Cyprus, Italy, Romania and Slovakia, introduces updated data for the study on domestic violence and allows the international scientific community to share new thoughts (Koutselini, Agathangelou, Chistolini, 2011). The title of the research is: "An indirect harmful effect of violence: victimizing the child and re-victimizing the woman-mother through her child's exposure to violence against herself. Sensitizing and creating awareness through research-product material, both transnational and differential according to the partner-context. The project uses the Acronym

VICTIMS (VI-ctimizing C-hildren T-hrough I-njuring M-otherS) which helps to succinctly set out its position. The most innovative aspects of the research concerns a European comparison done through the use of pre-defined qualitative and quantitative tools; the population investigated was made up of mothers of all ages; the participation of children aged 9-11; and, the involvement of relevant social institutions, such as schools.

Scientific literature (Roberts, 2002) shows that domestic violence is being studied all over the world. Research points out a steady rise in cases reported to the police and renewed social attention to the problem. Various theories analyse the violence and its generative process. This contribution describes the theory of *tolerance of the woman,* chiefly defined as protection of the child. From the diffusion and increase of the phenomenon, the following work premises can be constructed: the domestic violence experienced by the mother damages the bio-psycho-physical development of the child and compromises the minor's relationships. The widespread myth is that children are protected by their mothers, who bear the brunt of the violence and tolerate violence.

The research defines the multiple effects produced by violence and examines how educational processes are put under a strain. Although such processes are thought out for the good of the person and improvement of civil life, their realisation is blocked by a state of violence. Dividing the democratic educational principles and concreteness of a life of bio-psychic-physical violence of the person and childhood requires the definition of new pedagogical tasks, separated into three stages: a) knowledge of the problem b) preventive intervention and c) formative action.

The documents we began with, for the pedagogical thoughts proposed herein, are: a) narratives gathered from testimonies and interviews with women; b) symbolic representation of the violence suffered by a boy or girl, who experiences it at home and then brings it to school in various forms. These two planes of the research, concerning mothers and children, lead to two statements: the woman feels she is protecting her child through the tolerance of violence; the children manifest their intolerance of violence in general malaise. Schools and society must render a more effective commitment and actions against violence to both defend the human rights of the person and remove the obstacles hindering the complete development of childhood and adolescence.

The pedagogic standpoint

The study being briefly illustrated here reflects an interdisciplinary formulation, hereby favouring the pedagogic nature of the subject-matter constituted by the problem of teaching minors from deprived environments, in which there is no action supporting widely understood human growth. The considerations appearing in the last paragraph of this article are intentionally placed at the end of the scientific recognition pertaining to the research and are not, in themselves, a product of the research itself. They should be read as thoughts about the purposes of education, with respect to which phenomena, such as that of domestic violence, tend to stray away.

Derived from this process, which ascertains the difficulty in pursuing the ideal nature of education, is taking charge of 'interventions of understanding and transformation'. One can begin with the negative signs, then structure a positive proposal for better educating the person, within the ambience in which each one lives his/her own existential dimension.

Classical theories about violence

Studies on 'violence' show a range of disciplinary approaches and theoretical positions that reflect cultural-anthropological, ethic-moral, socio-political, ecological-demographic, clinical-psychological, socio-environmental and pedagogic-didactic nature typologies. The following are some of the major contributions in the various fields of scientific investigation. The cultural anthropological studies conducted by Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1971, 121) examine the subculture of violence and note how this subculture may arise *in* the generalised culture or be derived *from* the generalised culture. Violence is not a cultural pathology from which societies must save themselves. Persons using violence do not feel guilty, because they see violence as a way of life, as a normal action in daily contact and social relations. Graham, Davis, Gurr (1969) see violence as the use of physical force and moral and social coercion to oblige someone to do something that he/she would not do of his/her own free will. Threats fall within this type of ethic and moral violence against the person or against what is important to the person. In the field of studies on socio-political violence, Brown (1969, 43-80) distinguishes between negative and positive violence.

The first, negative, is destructive, such as harassment, in family and clan feuds, racial, ethnic and religious conflicts, massacres and political assassinations, with no social change. Positive violence, on the other hand, is that of the police, army, civil and border wars, and worker and landowner struggles that rise to meet political and social plans for safety, order, control and change. Lorenz (1966) and Leyhausen (1965) conducted ecological-demographic studies on aggressive behaviour in defence of one's country and living space. Schulman (1968) emphasised how the possibilities of conflict and violence were growing between groups living in close proximity to each other. Such conflicts and violence are due to the extreme differences in levels of well-being, power and opportunity for social ascent.

The psychoanalytical hypothesis of Freud (1976, 102-118) reasoned about human aggression as a constant battle between life and death instincts. Here civilisation is the result of the prevalence of the life instinct, Eros, which manages to channel aggressiveness towards constructive, collective ends. Love, usefulness and education have the task of helping overcome violence through the education of feelings and development of the capacity to reason. The psychology theories of Dollard *et al* (1967), Bandura and Walters (1963), and Berkowitz (1962) show how frustration is at the bottom of aggressive behaviour; learning, environmental contexts and interaction between the organism and environment explain the psychological and social origins of violence. The sociology of deviance studies the state of anomy as the absence of norms, integration and balance (Merton, 1971). According to Coser (1967, p. 180) the conflict is

not always dysfunctional to society, but could, in fact, be a safety valve: when the conflict is known, it can be prevented and corrected.

The pedagogical studies that deal with the subject from the point of view of education to peace (Montessori 1986, p. 177; Brundel, Hurrelmann 1994; Pati, 2006), justice and equality of opportunity for the construction of a democratic society, in which the freedom of each person is exercised in the form of solidarity and sharing a common project of life.

Descriptions and explanations

Psychological theories about personality disorders, sociological theories on family planning models and feminist theories about male dominance over women describe domestic violence and are partially linked to classical studies. Domestic violence initiated by one partner against the other manifests itself through physical aggression, threats, emotional and verbal violence, humiliation and persecution. The theories explain the reproductive cycle of violence and the victimisation process as related to the woman, couple and children.

Walker (1979) describes the cycle of violence in three stages: the first stage is threats, above all verbal, followed by the second stage, in which the woman tries to pacify the man to no avail, and, finally, the third stage in which the man tries to gain forgiveness through excuses and gifts. The woman thinks she is loved and continues the relationship. The cycle takes up its course again and the stages described are repeated. Various theories explain the following:

- learned helplessness, that is, the incapacity to help oneself get out of the cycle of violence
- battered woman syndrome, explained as the fear of the woman to leave the relationship
- Stockholm syndrome, described as a situation in which the woman is living as a hostage or prisoner of her partner and the relationship
- traumatic bonding theory, shown as fear of abandonment
- psychological entrapment theory, describes the strong existential investment in the relationship and sense of failure if the relationship comes to an end.

The various theories do not completely explain the reasons why women remain in situations of violence. For this the *Multifactor ecological perspective* (Crowell and Burgess 1996) seems to be the one that best describes the typology of permanence within a state of violence. This theory recognises that people's actions are determined by several factors that involve each other: families, social structure and socio-cultural environment.

The ecological model is composed of three levels: personal history, microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The personal history level studies the biography of violence of the woman and children and tries to describe the correlations between the experience of domestic violence and its reproduction in the children's behaviour. The

level of the microsystem examines the factors describing the violence: power of the partner, conflict within the couple and use of alcohol and drugs. The level of the exosystem considers the factors of social structure and institutions that have an impact on violence, such as unemployment, peer groups, social isolation and adhering to persons and groups that justify the use of violence. The macrosystem analyses cultural factors, values and beliefs that are at the basis of the other three levels; the traditional sexual roles are described as well as the sense of the man's possession of the woman, approval of physical punishment and the resolution of the conflict through violence. Pointed out is that examination of the individual factors does not permit the explaining of the phenomenon. The ecological model is deemed the most suitable for understanding the overall interaction of the factors that contribute to determining domestic violence.

The DAPHNE III research confirms the tendency of women to remain in an abusive situation, but, unlike American studies, the prevalent reason for this tolerance within the Italian context is represented by "protection" of the children. The theory of the tolerance of violence by women is explained through cultural, religious and educational reasons as well as the credibility of institutions.

Tolerance of the woman and intolerance of the child

Reading the testimonies brings to light the phenomenology of violence against women and mothers decidedly supported by their children. The violence is described with many particulars and the events that triggered the man's aggressiveness against the woman are portrayed in great detail. The woman's submission reinforces the man's power. What is noticeable is the state of deep prostration of mothers who never decide to report their 'violencers', or 'tormentors'. The first sign of outrage against their persona is supported in silence and with a sense of sacrifice. A lot of time passes before women come out in the open. The main reason for the silence is represented by the children. Protecting the children is the inner voice, the ethical imperative that governs the mother's feelings. In order not to put their children's lives at risk and for them not to suffer the same injustices, insults and violence, the women support it all up to the limits of human tolerance. They do not kill themselves for their children and almost implore their 'violencers' to not involve the children in the violence, but sacrifice themselves mentally and physically.

> I was terrified and did not react at all; I actually apologised and begged him not to hurt me and the children. He also pointed the blade of the box-cutter at the children, who were crying and frightened, while their father yelled at them to keep quiet because otherwise he would kill them. He kept hitting me and didn't calm down until my children and I had sworn and repeated that we would always be quiet and would never again interrupt him while he was talking; only then did he have us get into the car and go home. He told us, he was leaving because he was tired of me and the fact that I was good for nothing; the children begged him to stay, but he repeated that he had decided and even gave me the ATM cards, adding that he would pay the rent for the current month. That night he slept downstairs. Towards four in the morning, while I was sleeping with the children in the master bedroom, my husband came into the room. I heard him

> open the door of the wardrobe and take out some clothes, which he put into a bag. I tried to hush the children, who had awakened, because I was afraid their father might get nervous again; but they got up and went to their father, begging him to stay, but he left anyway. Almost immediately afterwards, he came back with the excuse that he had forgotten something. Hearing the children's pleas not to leave, he stayed in the house, saying that he was only doing it for them, to the point where, to make them happy, we went to sleep with them in the same bed.

The community is often impotent. Relatives, neighbours, school and friends do not manage to help, even knowing the facts. Protection of the woman also indirectly extends to the internal and external context of the family. In order to avoid the violence affecting other people, the woman closes herself off in a kind of resigned martyrdom. The clearest contradiction is her wish that the children maintain relations with their father and continue to spend time with him; years may pass before the woman understands the damage caused to the development of a daughter. The cycle of damage follows three stages: the first, in which the woman shields the child, by taking all the attacks upon herself, but does not keep the child from having contact with her father; the second stage is that of the child fearing violence and the mother trying to reassure him or her; and, finally, the third stage of the mother asking institutions for help.

> We never went back to living together, but the girl always spent time with her father. I made myself let him see her as often as possible. I didn't want the little one to suffer from missing her father. Then something really serious happened. I received a phone call from the child, telling me through tears to pick her up at her grandparents' place because she was afraid I was going to die at the hand of her father. I was alarmed because the child began to fear for my safety and was always very frightened. She didn't want to be away from me and kept me constantly in view. Then she started having nightmares ....I no longer forced the girl to go to her father's home. My daughter was aware of the danger and understood her father's aggression perfectly. Now she is not longer affectionate towards him like she used to be. Yesterday, her father called to talk to her, but she refused, saying that she never wanted to see him again.

Indirect damage

There are three levels of the mother's awareness of the indirect damaging effects on the children, caused by domestic violence. The *lower level*, characterised by the sole mention of a child's presence at the time of violence: 'It happened in front of my daughter. The *medium level*, characterised by a brief description of the reaction of the child if present during the violence:

> During the facts just related, the little one....was there. In fact, that day the girl was in the charge of her father and, instead of leaving her at home, he decided to take her with him and watch so much horror. Throughout the entire aggression and afterwards, ...she continued to sob without stopping.

The *upper level*, characterised by the complete awareness of the damage caused to the child present during the violence:

> My son has a good understanding of the situation, but all of the verbal and physical mistreatment and violence, which he is forced to witness, can certainly upset the developmental growth to which a child of his age has a right.

Also emerging is the awareness of indirect damage: 'And what is worse…he often ordered the little one…to repeat such terrible things against me." In some testimonies about the violence of the same woman, gathered at different times, emerges the account of the damage caused to the daughter after having witnessed the violence against her mother.

> I saw something I'll never be able to forget. My father hit her with such ferociousness, pulling her off the couch and making her fall to the floor, continuing to hit her and kick her, insulting her with profanities and offending her dignity as a woman. I was petrified; I wasn't able to say anything, feeling impotent against such violence, and returned to my room.

Another reaction of a son is his intervention against his father, showing clear intolerance of the abusive situation: 'My son…was sickened by his father's behaviour and stopped suffering it by intervening to defend me sometimes…'.

The theory of indirect damage to a child explains the reproduction of the cycle of violence in the behaviour of children who adopt the model of their fathers to both defend and assault their mothers.

Behaviour of the children at school

The indirect damage is classified as behaviour in which the child exhibits the malaise caused by the violence and non-respect of the right to grow up serenely and happily, with a prevalently negative concern for his/her own persona and way of life. The experimental investigation, in Italian schools, of children aged 9-11, 40 exposed and 40 not exposed to domestic violence, shows how children exposed to violence have much lower school marks and think they are not as good as their schoolmates not exposed to violence.

In general, teachers evaluate the group of children exposed to violence with lower marks in four areas: school competence, social acceptance, ability at sports and behaviour/conduct. The differences between the two groups of children are not relevant in the other two areas examined: physical aspect and global perception of well being that the children themselves have expressed through the feeling of liking themselves as persons, as they are.

As for the variable of gender, one specifically notes that teachers give lower marks to male children exposed to violence. Regarding the relationship between the self-evaluation of the boy and the evaluation of the teacher, one only detects a modest

positive correlation in the scholastic competences of the two groups of children. The convergence between the evaluation of the child and judgement of the teacher has an impact on the feeling the child has of success. The use of projective tests called "scenarios" emphasises significant differences between the two groups of children in the possible use of violent behaviour as a reaction to situations in their daily lives.

The analysis of the results shows differences in behaviour with regard to a typology meant to measure three possible reactions: aggressiveness; passivity and assertiveness. Children exposed to violence have a high self-image, chiefly adopting active defence strategies when faced with violence and are more inclined to feel excluded, even if they do not want to be. As for the child's perception of his/her mother as a role model, one notes that children, above all girls, exposed to violence reach lower points in considering their mothers an ideal figure and higher points in the need to protect her. As regards the gender variable, significant differences in self-image were detected between the boys and girls in the group of children exposed to violence. The males have a higher perception of themselves than the girls. The scholastic results for girls exposed to violence are "good" and those for girls not exposed to violence are 'excellent'.

Pedagogic considerations and educational issues

On the whole, the pedagogic value of the research emerges from the investigative action and sensitisation regarding childhood and the need to follow parties at risk with materials suitably prepared and aimed at the population brackets chosen: parents, teachers and operators.

These are components that form conscious replies in specific social contexts, in which education takes on its own, precise meanings. References are to the family for the parental component, schools for the teachers' component, and associations and various types of educational centres for the operators' component. The situations of violence described reveal the urgency to coordinate educational interventions, according to a concept of cultural, pedagogic interactionism, in course of experimentation in the specific situations of study. *Give confidence* to the victimised parent, *help* minors feel they are chiefly responsible for their own fates, *appreciate* the commitment often coming from social help organisations for women, children and adolescents who explicitly, but also implicitly, seek understanding and guidance. These represent privileged moments to be interpreted within an identical proposal for realisation of the person.

One can withdraw from the existential break produced by violence, by openly offering a revival of the wish to search for the ultimate meaning towards which the person inclines. As noted by Rosmini in his *Philosophy of rights* (1967), the person who asserts him/herself is an "intelligent party" destined to enter into a moral system, to which he/she voluntarily adheres, towards a higher good that sets him or her free. It is a matter of basic reasoning and convincing ethical logic, leading back to the debate about the purpose of education and the means available to us for furthering human growth under especially difficult conditions. In the phenomenology of domestic violence, the

obstacles against development are a reason for persons and institutions initiating a new educational commitment.

The act of divulgation of the results of the European research follows after this important action strategy. The documented aim is to apply and verify the *Manuals* produced by UNESCO Chair in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, University of Cyprus (2011), to guide teachers, parents and social workers, towards reinforcing mothers and children identities and steering them towards resolving the conflict. The themes, defined as "gender identity" and "conflict resolution", are contained within international courses of study and interdisciplinary comparison to which pedagogic thought continues to relate.

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