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Conjugal violence

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Abstract

Scientific knowledge of different aspects related to conjugal violence is highly important for people directly involved, such as researchers, practitioners and the entire society. In this respect, globally, specialised studies continue to advance, offer correct definitions, clear descriptions, convincing assessments to certain issues, encouraging thus long-term research, since some specialists have managed to overcome restrictive or ideological methods and explanations. Moreover, in practice, debates reach almost all social, political and legal dimensions regarding appropriate and efficient forms of preventing conjugal violence. Unfortunately, in Romania there are fewer research and prevention approaches of this social problem. In general, attention is directed to domestic violence and conjugal violence is dealt with only implicitly. Considering the given context, the aim of the paper is to outline, by analysing specialised literature, a new research direction and implicitly, social intervention. I specify that this article represents a stage in the ongoing postdoctoral research project, entitled “Conjugal homicide. Aggressors and victims”.

Keywords: conjugal violence, research, social intervention.

JEL classification: A10, H10, O10

1 Introduction

Conjugal violence has many faces and arises in countless ways. This social problem is cumulative and affects all mankind at a certain level, even if we do not realise, feel or hear pain in another part of the world. Discovering people's experience with marital violence can be extremely disturbing. Even more, it is possible that each and every one of us finds oneself in certain situations, as victims, aggressors, children, parents, friends, neighbours or colleagues. Life stories of people involved in violent conjugal relationships complete statistics with human dimensions help us understand the reality and can even change family, cultural and institutional models. Of course, under this premise, it is important to recognise emotional, physical or spiritual wounds, try to avoid them and at the same time understand our purpose in violent manifestations around us.

The opinions presented in this article do not aim at outlining an unwanted image of couple love but to suggest collaboration in fighting against an issue that requires huge efforts in order to be reduced. Given the fact that society tolerates violence in couple relationships, we can say that to a large extent it contributes to its perpetuation, however, I consider that we had better not focus on the society, but on us, the people. Violent couple relationships are often hidden behind personal life and are frequent enough at society level, that they are considered familiar or even natural.

In the given context, it is important to realise what is truly happening and if it can contribute to a small extent to the evolution of our own conscience, self-knowledge and understanding of our conjugal relationship, it is enough to create a wave of change. Although these observations emphasise the importance of knowing and understanding the approached subject, specialised research in Romania is in contrast with the higher literature assessing rates, forms of manifestations, effects and dynamics of conjugal violence.

2 Conjugal relationships

Conjugal relationships involve endless interactions, responsibilities and compromises that evolve in time, by means of energetic, emotional and spiritual resources. It is important to give and receive without losing ourselves and without trying to change the person next to us. Involvement and further existence as a partner in a marital relationship is a permanent process by means of which the story takes a life shape, an entity and develops its own history. Allowing time and space needed, happy marital relationships re-adapt themselves at any time, stabilise themselves and continue in a normal and healthy environment for both partners. They represent a deepening of the soul, the mind and the self, and thus, they can make life more meaningful.

Yet, there are also relationships that change and transform themselves in traumatising experiences. “In such situations, partners can often blame each other for the failure of the relationship and thus, they become aggressor and victim and act as *guilty*” (Brown Miller, 2007, p. 78). If they do not accept the notion of renunciation, many people spend their entire lives in difficult, extremely abusive emotional, physical, spiritual and thus, dangerous marital relationships, lacking sensitivity or love. “Anguish and suffering eventually become a way of life and it can sometimes transfer to children, parents and friends. After a while, partners tend to believe that they have adapted themselves and feel the pain in a more profound way” (Brown Miller, 2007, p. 124). Starting with such a pattern, the spirit, the will, confidence and self-esteem are practically killed, before the fatal fact that life itself is lost.

3 A brief statistical outline

Conjugal violence and conjugal homicide have been recognised as elements of human rights and public health that require special attention, since it arises all over the world and in all social, economic, religious cultural groups (Corradi and Stöckl, 2014, p. 601). In the beginning, it is worth mentioning that there is a considerable difference between the number of males and females who are victims of conjugal violence and conjugal homicide. World Report on Violence and Health cites marital violence as a major cause of death and disability for women between the age of 16 and 44 years old. “Results of researches conducted in several countries point out the fact that violence exercised by partners is the source of an important number of female deaths. Studies conducted in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States of

America show that between 40% and 70% of female murder victims were killed by their male partners, in the context of a violent relationship” (Krug *et al.*, 2002, p. 103).

In terms of statistical assessment, it is important to consider the socio-historical contexts of the states included in the sample, cultural differences between regions, development pathways that have influenced violence levels, gender dynamics, and the status of women in society, political and economic order and stability.

4 Violent manifestations in marital relationships

Knowing and understanding our own behaviour and that of the people around us, we can reach a high level of consciousness, as social beings. Based on this premise, it is important to make the first and biggest step towards recognising negative or even dangerous aspects of conjugal relationships, indicative of perpetuating traumatising feelings and situations requiring change.

Broadly speaking, the main forms of conjugal violence manifestations are:

„Physical violence: Occurs when a person who is in a position of power vis-à-vis another person inflicts or attempts to inflict intentional harm through the use of physical force or some type of weapon, which may or may not induce external injuries, internal injuries, or both, or may be injurious to the person’s self-esteem. Repeated punishment, even if not severe, is also considered physical violence.

Sexual violence: Every act in which a person in a position of power, by means of physical force, coercion, or psychological intimidation, compels another person to engage in a sexual act against her/his will or to participate in sexual interactions that lead to her/his victimization and from which the perpetrator attempts to obtain gratification is considered sexual violence. Sexual violence occurs in a variety of situations, including marital rape, sexual abuse of children, incest, sexual harassment, and date rape and encompasses, among other acts, undesired touching; sexualized emotional relationships; oral, anal, or vaginal penetration with the penis or a foreign object; forced exposure to pornographic material; and exhibitionism.

Psychological violence: Any act or omission that injures or attempts to damage another person’s self-esteem, identity, or development. It includes constant insults, negligence, humiliation, refusal to recognize

accomplishments, blackmail, degradation, isolation from friends and family, ridicule, rejection, manipulation, threats, exploitation, negative comparisons and others.

Economic violence: This category includes all measures taken by the aggressor or omissions that jeopardize the survival of women and their children, or the dispossession or destruction of her personal property or the joint property of the couple. This includes the loss of housing or shelter, household effects and domestic appliances, land, other property or real estate, as well as the personal belongings of the affected woman or her children. It also includes refusal to pay child support or cover basic expenses for family survival” (Shrader and Sagot, 2000, pp. 10-11).

Conjugal violence implies different legal and statutory definitions, generally reported to la temporal, geographical and cultural elements. This is but natural since what is normative and socially accepted or even allowed in certain cultures, can be rejected or even punished in another region of the world. However, even within the same society, behaviours which were accepted at a certain time, in different contexts or periods, can be considered undesirable or even illegal. It is often the case when formal laws do not reflect these socio-cultural and psychological aspects, and for this reason the defining elements of conjugal violence should extend beyond legal standards.

5 Causes of marital violence

Different academic fields render explanations on conjugal violence and therefore, these must be taken into consideration in a large spectrum, from sociology, to psychology, medicine, biology, etc. Irrespective of the scientific perspective approached, it is important to take into account that conjugal violence risk factors are not equally dispersed in all segments of society and furthermore, whereas some can be similar to those of violence committed in non-intimate contexts, others are unique in terms of intimate partner violence.

Loeber, Farrington and Petechuk elaborated a theory that integrates several risk factors, presenting a process built on several stages which can lead to violence in general and also conjugal violence:

1. Energizing stage - is characterized by the desire of material gain, holding a high social status and the desire for emotional feelings. These factors, which in the long term can lead to manifestations of antisocial behaviour, are determined according to the author by boredom, frustration, anger and alcohol consumption.

The desire for emotion arises especially in individuals coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, who feel that their life is more boring than that of others or “are not that able to delay immediate gratification for long-term goals (which can relate to the cultural importance of lower classes towards the concrete and the present, as opposed to the abstract and the future)” (Loeber *et al.*, 2003, p. 680).

2. Directing stage - refers to the choices that individuals make in achieving their goals. For instance, if those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the possibility to obtain material goods, social status and emotion by using legal methods, they can choose to adopt criminal behaviour in order to achieve their goals. We must stress the similarity of this presumption to social adaptation based on *innovation*, as described by Merton in his theory concerning social anomie.

3. Inhibition stage - empathy, as a result of affection from family members and observing legal norms is important in rejecting criminal activity. On the other hand, delinquent behaviour of family, friends and neighbours can make the individual commit various crimes and murders. “In the inhibition stage, antisocial tendencies can be inhibited through internalized beliefs and attitudes which have developed in a process of social learning as a result of a history of reward and punishment” (Loeber *et al.*, 2003, p. 681).

4. Decision making stage - “implies the interaction between the individual and the environment, whether a person with a certain antisocial tendency commits an antisocial act in a certain situation depends on the perceived possibilities, costs and benefits, and the subjective probabilities of different results” (*Ibidem*). Although in general people have the tendency to act rationally, those who are impulsive or familiar with certain delinquent behaviours can choose to take a risk and steal, for instance, for the sake of material gain, ignoring the risk to answer legally for this.

We notice that the authors built their theory starting with the existence of certain predisposing or inhibiting factors of delinquency which *compete* in the process of development. In the given context, the typology of these factors is important, as they are structured by the author in terms of socialising instances: *factors related to the individual, family, kin, school and community* and which arise in different stages of child development (see Table 1).

Table 1. Approximate Developmental Ordering of Risk Factors Associated With Disruptive and Violent Behavior

Risk Factors Emerging During Pregnancy and From Infancy Onward	
<i>Child</i>	<i>Family</i>
Pregnancy and delivery complications; Neurological insult; Exposure to neurotoxins after birth; Difficult temperament; Hyperactivity/impulsivity/attention problems; Low intelligence; Male gender.	Maternal smoking/alcohol consumption/drug use during pregnancy; Teenage mother; High turnover of caretakers; Poorly educated parent; Maternal depression; Parental substance abuse/antisocial or criminal behavior; Poor parent-child communication; Poverty/low socioeconomic status; Serious marital discord; Large family size.
Risk Factors Emerging From the Toddler Years Onward	
<i>Child</i>	<i>Family</i>
Aggressive/disruptive behavior; Persistent lying; Risk taking and sensation seeking; Lack of guilt, lack of empathy.	Harsh and/or erratic discipline practices; Maltreatment or neglect.
	<i>Comunity</i>
	Television violence.
Risk Factors Emerging From Midchildhood Onward	
<i>Child</i>	<i>Family</i>
Stealing and general delinquency; Early onset of other disruptive behaviors; Early onset of substance use and sexual activity; Depressed mood; Withdrawn behavior; Positive attitude toward problem behavior; Victimization and exposure to violence.	Poor parental supervision
	<i>School</i>
	Poor academic achievement; Repeating grade(s); Truancy; Negative attitude toward school; Poorly organized and functioning schools.
<i>Peer</i>	<i>Comunity</i>
Peer rejection; Association with deviant peers/siblings.	Residence in a disadvantaged neighborhood; Residence in a disorganized neighborhood; Availability of weapons.
Risk Factors Emerging From Midadolescence Onward	
<i>Child</i>	<i>School</i>
Weapon carrying; Drug dealing; Unemployment.	School dropout.

<i>Peer</i>	
Gang membership.	

Source: adapted from Loeber R. and Farrington D. P. Approximate Developmental Ordering of Risk Factors Associated with Disruptive and Delinquent Behavior. In: Loeber R., Farrington D. P. and Petechuk D. (2003) *Child Delinquency: Early Intervention and Prevention*, U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, p.9.

Other risk factors generally associated with conjugal violence refer to: genetic predisposition, hyper-masculinity, traditions regarding the superiority of men, power inequality, subordinated social status, insurmountable sexual desire, jealousy, financial or emotional addiction, alcohol or drug consumption, different lifestyle, poor involvement of institutions and responsible organizations (Ellis 1990; Archer 1994; Parker and Rebhun 1995; Daly and Wilson 1996; Jewkes 2002; Farrington 2007; Kivivuori and Lehti 2012).

6 Effects of marital violence

Violent conjugal relationships have a series of negative consequences under all aspects of personal, professional and social life. Some specialized research refer to physical injury, obesity, substance abuse, depression, low self-esteem and anxiety disorders (Campbell 2002; Coker *et al.* 2002; Wekerle and Tanaka, 2010; Wolitzky-Taylor *et al.* 2008), headache and migraine, memory loss, abdominal pain, gastro-intestinal, gynaecological problems, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide attempts (Heise *et al.* 1999; Krug *et al.* 2002; Garcia-Moreno *et al.* 2005), HIV/AIDS (Campbell and Lewandowski 1997).

If we relate female victims in particular, who statistically represent the majority, we must take into account that sometimes they suffer secondary victimization from friends, family, legal and social institutions where they seek help. "People who come into contact with the victims can leave them the feeling that they caused the violence or the severity or impact of the event should be minimized" (Johnson, 1996, p. 44). Moreover, besides health problems, violence also affects women's ability to function on labour market, finish studies, carry out daily activities or seek protection.

Furthermore, conjugal violence affects children's opinions on gender roles, family interactions and characteristics of the home where they develop.

“Children exposed to the abuse of their mothers believed in the inherent superiority and privilege of men and accepted violence as an acceptable and necessary part of family interaction” (Bermann and Brescoll, 2000, p. 604). In this context, there can arise personality and behaviour disorders, emotional unbalance, social inadaptability, etc. “Those exposed to serious abuse or who are in turn abused during violent events, can suffer more severe consequences. Children exposed to partner abuse have a higher level of other major risk factors, including poverty, low level of education, abuse, discrimination (Fantuzzo and Mohr, 1999, p. 23).

Obviously, there is a series of negative consequences of conjugal violence which need further multidisciplinary and extended research in terms of sampling as, this social problem can perpetuate in time (across generations) and space (extended family, acquaintances, members of the community).

7 Conclusions

Conjugal violence has been introduced as a priority in recent years on the daily agenda of local, national and international organizations, as well as in many social, health and legal services which developed policies and practices so as to offer support to victims and aggressors. The enhanced nature of such approaches has led to significant results, and the most important one consisted in recognizing the fact that conjugal violence is different in terms of gender. This difference in shade has determined the elaboration of programmes observing the particularities of female aggressor and female victim of conjugal violence.

Moreover, scientific research has had an important part in advancing knowledge related to this social problem. At first, preoccupations came from the fields of biology, sociology, criminology, psychology and feminine studies, but, as a result of global expansion of conjugal violence, there arose contributions from the fields of medicine, education sciences, evolutionist psychology, chemistry, etc. Of course, in order to obtain results that are both complex and with greater applicability in practice, it is desirable that specialists involved in the field conduct interdisciplinary research.

Although quantitative studies offer a wide empiric context, etiological explanations of conjugal violence are often based on general elements even if it requires thorough knowledge. I refer to outlining etiological theories that would consider subjective motivations of authors, cultural-normative elements that can be associated with the life of the couple partners and of course, socio-economic and educational aspects.

From methodological perspective, it is important to have a thorough knowledge in terms of the life of people involved in a violent couple relationship, get into direct contact with subjects, so as to know their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, lifestyle, needs, etc. Furthermore, advanced longitudinal research is required that would take into account unobservable individual characteristics. In the absence of such information, the best option is to conduct syntheses based on available data from surveys, hospitals, the police, courts and shelters for victims of conjugal violence. Thus, policies and practices can be created that could offer higher social safety and a platform for consolidating partners' possibilities to live a life without violence.

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