

Men and women in situations of violence assisted in sociotherapeutic groups: union, communication and relationship

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Abstract

This work was developed with men and women involved in domestic violence in Brasilia. After being individually interviewed, these people are referred by the Department of Justice or judges to groups, where women and men can be treated separately or together. The groups can be attended by both women and men, whether they are married or single, together or without their partners. All of them consider themselves victims of the other gender, and consider violence to be a mechanism of defence and an educational strategy for their children. During the socio-therapeutic work using a sociodramatic model, it transpired that the information given by these couples about their short-term relationship and their unrevealed individual fantasies inform the communication patterns of such couples, which are characterized by mutual frustration.

Keywords: Violence. Violence against women. Communication. Psychodrama.

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the 20th century an increasing interest in violence and all its forms of expression compelled professionals in the areas of health, justice, education, and human rights to study and research the origin and practice of violence against children and women. It is known that violence is a complex, multifaceted problem that deserves the attention of governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Men as well as women in situations of violence seem to feel the need to defend themselves and their position in the family, and especially in the couple, as if they were people competing for autonomy. Only by imposing themselves on the other they feel recognized; not when they see themselves in a position of equality. Especially men in the studied population feel a greater need to assert their male superiority. In this context cooperation and harmony cede place to a competition for who is in charge in the

relationship. Speech used by those involved can become a speech of aggression, which is used as a mechanism of defence and educational strategy for their children. It can turn into a pattern of communication for men as well as women in the respective couple and parental roles, thus making the respective subsystems vulnerable (RAMOS; SANTOS; DOURADO, 2009).

The sociotherapeutic interventions reported are based on this reality and present the findings of an ongoing intervention using a sociodramatic model with groups.

The Department of Justice of the Federal District and Territories (MPDFT), through the Sector of Alternative Measures (Sema) and the Court of Justice of the Federal District and Territories (TJDFT) have partnerships with local universities to assist committers of violence with legal aid and psychological monitoring. As such, the team of the Centre of Fight against Violence and Vulnerabilities of the Catholic University of Brasilia (NEVV-UCB) has been working since 2007 with men and women in situations of violence against women.

A year ago we started work with a group composed of men and women, married – with or without their partners – and unmarried, all involved in situations of violence against women, in the classes C and D, which makes up the majority of the population treated by Semas. It is this group that we refer to in this study.

ASSESSMENT

Moreno (1975) affirms that the couple relationship brings about the union of the social atoms of the partners. Even though none of the partners have any knowledge of the emotional relationships of the other, each brings into the relationship his/her own particular atoms from which the couple will form a third social atom. Additionally, both assume other roles such as the role of husband, wife, homemaker, provider.

The new roles acquired in the marriage, and the marriage itself, result in new satisfactions but also in new conflicts. These are roles and counter roles to be learned and performed without rehearsals, implying that spouses change behaviour in function of the relationships that evolve out of the new roles in the union. (MORENO, 1975)

When Moreno formulated the Theory of Roles, he conceptualized the roles as a cultural unity of conduct and presented them as a set of possible identifications of the human being. The psychodramatic roles as expressions of the distinct psychological dimensions of the 'I' represent a potential versatility of the mental representations. Moreno proposes, in this same theory, the role as a final crystallisation of all situations that an individual went through in a specific area of operations....' (MORENO, 1975, p. 206)

Taking into account these considerations, we realise that roles such as the ones of partner lie in the identification and the differentiation of the 'I' as well as in the relevant cultural baggage of each. The performance of the role of partner as well as of other roles can reveal or suggest mental representations about the affective relationships lived or perceived on an individual and transgenerational level as well as contain elements embodied during the psychic development. As the performance of the role is the psychodramatic expression of the learned role, it is also built on the verbal and non-verbal communication of the other – the receiver of the message. Furthermore we still have the roles that develop in function of gender, which in turn made us reflect about the relationships originating from gender roles.

In a sociocultural perspective, Madureira (2010) points out the cultural dimension

of a relational and political nature. In modern times women, who had so far been relegated to a disadvantaged position, started questioning positions rooted in gender based on the patriarchal model in which power and control is given to men and subordination assigned to women. In the middle of the 20th century, Simone de Beauvoir (1949)¹ cited by Toro-Alfonso (2010), saw women's inferiority as the result of cultural indoctrination and, making a clear distinction between sex and gender created an opening for changes in the relationships between men and women, and in the couple.

The imbalance in favour of men is still present and is in conformance with social stereotypes. Masculinity is linked to independence, authority, superiority, infidelity, while conformance to those masculine aspects is expected of women. This implies that women either seen either as opposing men or as adjusting to men and accepting the tenets of dependence, submission, fidelity and passivity. This binarist and reductionist view is somehow in tune with the expectations of the role of women, but could also explain the naturalization of male violence and the invisibility of the violence practiced by women.

The relationship man-woman has changed in many contexts, from the professional to marriage. The family today is arranged in the traditional configurations of father, mother and children or in mononuclear organizations headed by sole mothers (DINIZ NETO and FERES-CARNEIRO, 2005) which reveals an independence of the woman from the man.

Situations of violence in couples, however, cannot be considered exclusively gender violence, because violence as such has always been present in human relationships. Violence is, as states Mynayo (1994), biopsychosocial and needs to be studied in its socio-historic dimension. Influential factors are political events, psychological components, the individuality, the law and the institutions, and are all elements which need to be taken into consideration. When the gender perspective is used as the only explanation for couple violence, it leads to a war of sexes, which is an obstacle to self-evaluation and leads to the victimization of all involved and to negotiation impasse. In a marriage violence is linked, among others, to the expectations that the spouses have of each other, the couple dynamic and especially to the pattern of communication built during the time of the relationship. Hirigoyen (2006) assigns just as much importance to psychological violence as to physical violence and considers it even more destructive. This weighty psychological violence is also manifested through speech, which - even if more subtle - has the purpose of humiliating the other. Physical violence, in its turn, is the manifestation of an aggressive body language but is in reality the manifestation of the moral pain of debasement and inferiority. This shows that psychological violence is inherent to all forms of violence even if it doesn't leave any visible physical marks.

At this point it is important to outline some of the precepts of the theory of communication, which are also observable in situations of domestic violence or any other type of violence. We must remember that the communicational process is a result of the exchange of codes that transmit individual meanings in the attempt to maintain a linguistic interaction (GRANDESSO, 2011). Even if this code is not known to the involved parties - emitter and receiver- the communication will happen nevertheless, because according to Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1978, p.44): 'not communicating is impossible'. Under these conditions however, communication cannot be clear - even though the word 'communication' in this context cannot really be applicable as both communicators send and receive a message heavily pregnant with personal meanings, thus distorting the emission as well as the reception. On the other hand, misperceptions can still arise when

¹ De Beauvoir, S. *El segundo sexo*. Nova York: Random House Mondadori, 1949.

the code is known, because language and the comprehension of content is generated by the people in a relationship. This comprehension is achieved through the reconstruction of meaning, a process whereby an individual constructs meaning that springs out of his/her own personal development starting from birth but also out of the product of his/her relationships. Gergen (1994)² cited by Grandesso (2011, p.64) presumes that 'it is not the pre-existing individual who initiates the process of communication, but it is the conventions of relationships that will permit comprehension to be reached.'

Finally, the content of the message must be considered. Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson referred to the content and also to the relevance of the relationship of the communicators. Content and relationship dictate the definition of the 'I' and the 'other', as the communicated facts are those that happen within the relationship and not outside it (WATZLAWICK, BEAVIN; JACKSON, 1967). The acceptance of the 'I' of the other permits the acceptance of the message content and the reaching of agreement and understanding.

During the interventions some types of communication drew our attention, especially those directly linked to aggression and to violence. We started with the disqualification of the communication of the other, which implies rejection and a negation that anything this person might say –or do – could be of interest. However, even though humiliated, the disqualified person has his/her existence recognized. Another concept is the one of disconfirmation, which is considered a cruel punishment as it completely ignores the other. The disconfirmation of the other leads to total alienation and, if persistent, even to the loss of the 'I'. It is however a pathological form of communication and means: you do not exist (WATLAWICK; BEAVIN; JASON, 1967).

All interventions were done based on these concepts. Below, the methodology is presented.

METHODOLOGY

Interventions are initiated after subjects are referred by a court judge and a judge of Sema to a mixed group composed of couples, men and women. All members are in the group with the aim of dealing with issues of violence against women. Interventions are rooted on the principles of perception of self and the other and on the intra-couple and intra-family communication. The meetings prioritize issues that evolve out of the individual traits and needs of the participants. Top priority is given to situations of emergency born out of conflict or difficulties.

This is an open group with an average of 30 participants per meeting composed of men and women with or without partners. All are involved in situations of violence against women. These groups get together on Sundays in a community school in a total of 16-18 meetings with a duration of three hours each. This corresponds to one academic semester.

Some of the participants request to continue at the end of these sessions and are always given permission to stay on. We talk about average of participants, but the attendance in some cases exceeds the number of referred persons by Sema. Only few do not show.

The intervention with the groups follows the sociodramatic model in three stages: the warm-up – moment in which their feelings, complaints and evaluations are heard –

² Gergen, Kenneth J. *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994

followed by the action – reflection on the rescue of their relationships with people and objects using dramatization and other psychodramatic resources - and lastly the moment of sharing and analysing the experiences.

The interventions are done in sociotherapeutic groups (RAMOS, 2008) using a sociodramatic approach. It is specifically tailored for people who are in conflict with the law and social conventions and with the otherness. The interventions have an investigative and preventive character with the aim of treatment and improvement of the quality of life, well-being and the social and mental health of the attendees. The focus lies on the interactions individual-law-society involving intrapsychic aspects and social identity, which will dictate interpersonal interactions and those within the community. As the problem is closely linked to these interactions, focus of attention is on the individual roles, social boundaries and treatment during the sociotherapeutic intervention.

Sociotherapeutic intervention seeks to improve awareness of the subject about social relationships and the direct and indirect consequences on the relationships that s/he develops. As interactional relationships, in most cases, involve affection, emotion and intention, the sociotherapeutic method allows the subject to engage in self- analysis and evaluate his/her perceptions. This lead – not rarely - to an understanding of the motivations, desires and the affective-emotional expressions in human actions in general and those specifically at issue.

In these interventions the intrapsychic contents are relevant as they are inherent to the attendees, but not confidential as in the psychotherapeutic processes. However, revelation can initiate personal and social change.

Guiding principles within the group work are: the subjective relationship - I with myself -; the intersubjective relationship - I and you, and I and the others/society - ; and the relationship with the law.

Another important tool used is the elaboration of the Line of Love Life, occasion in which facts of the life of the couple are told from the moment of first meeting to the present or to the separation. In this account patterns of behaviour can be observed that show attitudes vis a vis the woman, the facing of difficulties which are part of the cycle of life of a family – referred to by McGoldrick (2003) - and frequently to the pleasures that are lost in family routine or are sabotaged by the partners.

It is denominated open group because the attendees can join up to the moment in which they work on the ‘I’, the ‘you’ and the ‘we’ and the models of identification; it is also open – according to Moreno (1975, p. 237) - as the groups are formed by participants who share the same mental or cultural syndrome. Thus, as vast as the public might be, it is very much a collective patient that consists of individual components. The groups have, furthermore, a mobilizing action and serve as facilitators of interaction and learning. They engage in the discovery of subjective differences in perception and in the quality of the performance of the social roles that become clearer while recreating the facts (MORENO, 1975; BUSTOS, 1979).

The focal point of this article are the meetings in which we worked on aspects linked to the acceptance and understanding of the interventions, the couple roles and the communication between couples, and the findings.

WELCOME SESSION – WORKING THE ‘I’

The perception of the self, the complaints and understanding are inexistent in the beginning. With the acknowledgement of the space as one of listening, reflection and sharing, without judgments or censorship, the participants feel at ease to speak in the first

person.

SELF PERCEPTION AND PERCEPTION OF THE OTHER WORKING THE 'I'-'YOU', THE 'I' AND THE 'OTHER'

We reflect about the woman and the man in modern times, roles of gender and transgenerational inheritance and in the construction of the roles. The participants analyse their expectations and the expectations of the other in the relationship. They identify how they feel about their couple life and family life and how their own thoughts and feelings tally with the actions within the couple/family.

MEANING OF MARRIAGE AND THE ROLES WITHIN THE COUPLE WORKING THE 'I'-'YOU'-'HE'; 'WE', 'THE FAMILY'

We talk about the importance of companionship, the respect of one another, the differences, tasks and obligations that each demand of the other. At this stage of the group development we aim, at a deeper level, to touch upon the dysfunctional communication issues within the couple and the possible behavioural changes resulting from the changes in these patterns.

INCLUSION IN SOCIETY AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE LAWS

This topic is important for an awareness of the recognition of the illegality of the committed act. Social roles are revisited and analysed in light of their relations with social conventions and laws. We look at human rights issues, personal protection and the protection of the partner, and the needed autonomy and freedom in social interactions, especially in the marriage.

JOINT RESPONSIBILITY FOR A BETTER RELATIONSHIP

Reflections begin with the concepts of harmony, conflict and violence and how these concepts are applied to couple and family life. One of the exercises is the elaboration of the Love Life Line of the Couple – explained previously. The couple tells its history, one at a time, with special reference to the important facts of their couple life. We ask them to place memories considered positive above the line and the negative memories below the line.

COMMON PROJECT FOR THE FUTURE

Work on future projects started with a discussion about the dreams of a couple. Couples involved in situations of violence, in general, did not work on future projects before or after they united, even though these projects should have been anchored in a time preceding marriage as this concerns the future life of the family.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the Love Life Line it is common to get a positive evaluation of one fact from one party and a negative evaluation of the same fact from the other party. This leads to a discussion of the topic and to a reflection on how the problem was solved in the past and how the couple would solve it now. Both parties realize that important issues when not resolved end up accumulated in a little grudge box (this is what they call it). Sometimes, the couple proposes an alternative solution to the conflict during the exercise. Two aspects are deserving of special mention here: the circumstances in which the couple meets and the expectations that they have of one another. The couples of this and of other similar groups met in public places such as the metro or bus station; none was introduced by a friend or an acquaintance. They united on average after three months of the first meeting - either by marriage or by living together. According to the couples this time period was not sufficient to learn how to settle into common life.

The importance of the knowledge of the other is confirmed when we inquired about the couples' projects. Couples realize that future plans do not exist and that the plans they have are merely individual dreams, phantasies and expectations of the other. As they meet and unite in a very short time, very often already expecting a child, they do not have the opportunity to know of the desires and plans of the other. Life becomes an acting performance in the 'here and now' without planning and without dialogue, frequently with a lot of demands because each one expects of the other what s/he thinks is best even if these demands are not based on the interests and possibilities of the other or in the couple relationship, but only in his/her own phantasies.

While speaking about the dreams of the couple, we realized that they simply do not exist; when they united one partner was not aware of the dreams of the other. The dreams weren't shared; to the contrary, they were kept like a secret. The big issue that came up when the dreams of the partner were finally revealed were: what do I do with the dream of the other? Keep it or kill it?

The reflection on this question was exhaustive as it had to take into account the desires, feelings and objectives of both partners. It was discussed whether the dream has an expiry date, on how the dream of the other can be killed and the easiness with which it can be done. It just needs to be ignored or the right to dream disrespected. How do you know that you are killing the partner's dreams if these dreams are not known? The group understood that one of the functions of the dream is to allow for a better life for the family, because nobody dreams about a worsening of a situation or suffering. Another function of the dream is to unite the family in direction of change, because the dream of one can be the dream of the two. Some felt like assassins of dreams, others identified the dream of keeping the person they love. Some recognized that they married a dream and discovered that the partner also had a dream, but not knowing of the dream of the other couldn't dream together and still less realize that dream.

The importance of a better knowledge of the partner is reaffirmed when the couple is confronted with the roles that they need to perform within marriage - that of husband and wife for example. It can be observed that the learning of these roles for the man and the woman is more difficult today as they need to shake off a crystallized gender role and a role that is socially endorsed in order to construct a new one. As Moreno (1975) points out, each partner brings with him/her the elements with which the couple will form a third social atom, which is that of the couple and the future family. It can be presumed that the knowledge of the emotional relationships of the other and the elements of his/her own social atom are necessary for the development of the relationship. This lack of knowledge can lead to frustration about the expectations of each other in a marriage and to the non-

acceptance of the social atoms of the other. Cooperation and harmony cede place to competition for control of the relationship. Thus, communication is rooted in aggression. It seems that each expects that the other forget his/her original family in order to dedicate him/herself to the couple, which does not happen as affective ties cannot easily be cut. Another relevant aspect is the transgenerational - a legacy guiding the different forms of conflict resolutions. The legacy of our society has been that men through use of violence, power and force feel to be the rightful owners of the relationship and the head of the family.

On the other hand, feminist movements of today have compelled women to revisit their values and to change their behaviour, becoming emancipated and revindicating their right of being respect by men. Men find it difficult to understand this new position of women and at the measure at which women seek their rights, their autonomy in the relationship, and the construction of a professional role, a dispute for power emerges. This dispute for power is defined by aggression and mutual disrespect. The woman very often employs the same strategies – so-called male strategies - of which she complains, reacting with violent behaviour and thus disrupting the harmony of the couple. The dispute is marked by a lack of dialogue and negotiation: ‘She knows what I like and what I want. So, she has to do it....’, and the reply: ‘He can do what he likes.....he doesn’t do anything for me.....’

At the measure at which the couple gets settled in their new life and common needs make themselves felt, there are demands and responses that do not correspond to the expected. Conflicts emerge. The offenses and the aggressions keep intensifying becoming ever more scathing, more disrespectful and inadequate, disrupting the couple’s and the family’s harmony.

Another observation refers to the motivations which lead men and women to justify the violence they practice and the fight for power in the family. These actions are pregnant with personal interpretations which the other party doesn’t decode correctly. Grandess (2011) referred to this as the singularity of meanings and quality of emission and perception of messages. In this group of men and women that live domestic violence it is noted that the intra-family communication is anchored in the disqualification and the disconfirmation of the other leading to disorganization and culminating in aggression.

Several difficulties have been discerned regarding the communication between the couple. Here we keep to the concepts of Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967). In the treated couples there is frequently an agreement as to the content of the dispute, which quickly shifts to arguments criticizing the person and the relationship. The interpersonal communication of the couples taking part in these interventions is characterized by disconfirmation and disqualification, both with an aggressive note and humiliating. One example of disqualification is: ‘You only talk bullshit.’ ‘What you say one cannot put down on paper.’ Here, the woman is disqualified, humiliated but nevertheless seen as someone who is there in front of the partner; it’s a person. Different from the speech with a disconfirmation content: ‘He never praises me and never says whether he likes something I do or not.’ This implies the elimination of the other. It is as if she doesn’t exist for her husband and is not legitimated by him as a person as she doesn’t merit either praise or criticism.

Some of the crucial aspects of the couple interaction were revealed during the meetings and the main aspects were revealed in the communicational process. The couples create reasons for violence and see themselves as their victims. It is the cachaca’s fault was disclosed in a dramatization of the group in which consumption of alcohol was at the crux of the dispute and considered the culprit of all the couple’s misfortunes. In the dramatized scene, they recognized that alcohol served as the intermediary in the

relationship and as the justification for the aggression, as alcohol authorizes any action and is as thus responsible for the consequences. No concern with the partner, with the acts or with the investments in relationship, couple or family were observed.

These discussions engendered other discussions, such as the reasons to despise the other's individuality, evaluations, desires and values. Communication and its biases were the focus of the interventions; discovery as the principal cause of the couple's conflicts and family conflicts. Couple violence was evaluated by men and women differently at the end and at the beginning of the treatment. New perceptions about the established relations with the spouse were constructed, the gender roles and the individual difficulties that resulted in the conflicts within the couple.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Brasilia is a city of many cultures. Many families from different regions of Brazil with different traditions and customs and with a singular look onto life intermingle and live here. In some regions of the country violence towards women is still accepted as normal. The man is seen as being in charge of the house, the woman and the family. However, women have reacted against this situation. The different awareness campaigns of violence against women have been efficient and brought about emancipation in the relationship, especially with regard to the right of the woman to protect herself and to denounce the aggressing partner.

We were able to observe that both partners feel like aggressors and victims alike, but the aggression is justified by both. We also noted that at the measure at which the participants understand the other in the relationship they also understand their roles in the couple and in the family and learn to appreciate the interactions they have. They also start to talk with the partners about everyday life and about what they like in the relationship and what intimidates them. According to the attendees the relationship changes and they start building new ways of interacting and living together; and they start aspiring for peace and harmony. Later, around the twelfth meeting, they understand the different forms of aggression they are exposed to. The women acknowledge their actions and aggressive intentions towards their partner and become aware of the accumulated grudge in some of their behavioural patterns. These groups have been an opportunity for men and women to reflect about their behaviour and, above all, about their attitudes vis-a-vis their differences and life. These discoveries happened gradually and with a lot of pain, but each insight was followed by relief and new proposals in the relationship.

Another indicator of the importance of the intervention with the group are the discourses of the involved subjects regarding new forms of behaving in the relationship with the other: spouse, children, boy/girlfriend, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters – and even with friends.

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