

SIGNIFICANCE AND FRAMING OF THE GENDER FACTOR IN THE REPRODUCTION OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE¹

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Abstract: We maintain that, although the greatest share of intimate partner violence has its origin in 'endemic' factors of intimate communication, inherent to the high investments and expectancies in which it is sustained; such violence cannot be adequately addressed and understood if severed from the socio-cultural field, where gender normativity assumes great relevance. Intimacy is characterized by a paradoxical dependency towards exterior communicative processes in which their members take part, so that, in what concerns gender, it is not just a space of reproduction of symbolic asymmetries but also a receptacle of its increasing fluidity. But if gender attributions are open to greater interactive negotiation, in intimacy there remain traditional ascriptions. Here, the romantic conception of love plays a major role, not only enhancing differentials of power and distribution of resources, but also masking practices of abuse which have their extreme (and sometimes lethal) recourse in violence.

Keywords: gender; culture; intimate violence; coercive control

Resumo: No presente trabalho defende-se que, apesar de grande parte da violência entre parceiros íntimos ter origem em fatores endêmicos – inerentes às elevadas expectativas em que está sustentada a comunicação na intimidade –, ela não pode ser adequadamente compreendida cindida do entorno sociocultural, no qual a normatividade de gênero assume grande relevância. A intimidade é caracterizada por uma dependência paradoxal relativamente aos processos comunicativos exteriores onde tomam parte os seus "membros", sendo que no que concerne aos padrões de gênero, ela não é somente reprodutora das assimetrias simbólicas, mas é também, e sobretudo, recetáculo da sua crescente fluidez. Sendo certo que as atribuições de gênero se tendem a concretizar por negociação interativa, na intimidade subsistem certas determinações tradicionais. Neste ponto, as concepções de amor romântico assumem um papel preponderante, propiciando diferenciais de poder e distribuição de recursos, mas camuflando também práticas de abuso que têm o seu extremo no recurso à violência.

Palavras-chave: gênero; cultura; violência íntima; controlo coercitivo

Introduction

In the present article we explore one of the points in which cultural schemes of gender are revealed contrary with the well-being

of individuals. The recourse to violence, despite considered ultimate and mostly associated with instrumental interactions evolving strangers, continues to be a recurrent element of intimate relations. In the course of the last decades violence among intimate partners has been increasingly acknowledge as a problem with inestimable costs, concerning public health³, but also the assurance of political rights. Intimate partner violence (IPV) must be understood as a particular form of abuse⁴, demarcated from other criminal incidences taking place in intimacy. Like child and elderly abuse, it takes place mostly, but not exclusively, in families, and in the domestic space, along the interplay of legal, economic and moral dependencies. What differentiates it from those forms of abuse (to which it remains frequently linked), derives from the original conception of love as the communicative medium through which intimacy is constituted as a project between mutually elected persons, generally involving emotional (and sometimes), economic and sexual fulfilment. In modern society such a combination of elements pertains exclusively to the family, and is so primordial to self-identity precisely because in it are comprised forms of deliberate investment and processes with limited or absent conscious deliberation, enabling a gathering of heterogeneous elements in a «unity of consciousness» (Fuchs, 1999: 23) that is the ultimate reference of self-representation.

However, if the differentiation of intimacy have been originated through a withdrawal from public space and the power from both community (relatives and neighbourhood) and religious institutions and latter by state powers⁵, which firstly regulated domestic violence, this has not meant simply the creation of a temporal process immune to external communicative processes and normativity, quite the contrary. The aim of this work is to understand how does gender, as a social category which mediates cognitive attributions, remains an important factor to be considered in the dynamics of conflict and violence among intimates. Taking into account the importance of gender as a cultural universal, we will inquire how it becomes enmeshed in intimate communication, stressing its temporal stabilization in communicative structures. As Kimmell have put it: «home is not a refuge from violence, nor is it a site where gender differences in the public sphere are somehow magically reversed» (2005: 216). This pervasiveness gender in intimate relations is perhaps more evident in the way the dominant normativity comes to ignite violence. Studying the extreme forms of IPV in cases that lead to familicides, the criminologist N. Websdale

concluded, that although power asymmetries certainly potentiate abuse, «it is the shame perpetrators felt at not being able to meet the exacting standards of dominant notions of masculinity and femininity that drove [those] tragic killings» (2010: 264-65).

“Expectations of expectations” structuring intimate communication

Luhmann have insisted that intimacy and families do not refers to biological or affective relations, nor simply to psychic states, but to communicative processes based on mutual expectations of its members⁶. However, differentiating it from all other sub-systems of society –which demand a given performance derived from a role independent from personal traits–, intimacy doesn’t have an ultimate function regulating its reproduction⁷. The reason for this is that modern society attributes to this sphere the design to pursuit particular ends whose significance is not restricted to partial roles and ends, but extends to the whole person. Of course we can posit an “abstract” ideal regulating such mutual projects, namely, that of grating one’s emotional reassurance, which is open to multiple temporal concretizations (although some cultural ideals remain dominant and the project strives for self-reproduction in another being, economic prosperity, social recognition etc.). It is in virtue of the high emotional investment in intimate life, that the phenomenon of IPV is object of multiple and overlapped descriptions⁸, trying to make sense of the apparent paradox of modern privatized family: its orientation towards emotional expression is bonded to conflict. In face of unachieved ideals, conflicts about little nothings assume an existential significance. All would be fine if one could just move away and simply “cash out” all his/her gains and losses (including here automobiles, babies and financial responsibilities).

The lack of a meta-level guiding its interaction means that in modern family we are facing the totality of one’s being⁹. This is the case, since all actions and events concerning its member’s (individual) life assume communicative relevance, and at the same time those processes cannot completely “drain” the significance which he holds to other members. In the general conditions delineated here, we may apply the expression adopted by Luhmann in a recently recovered manuscript: «marriage produces more disclosure of latent mental disorders than war» (2008: 61). This proposition is off course outdated. In today’s society, even if state regulated marriages maintain the requisite of a stable personal

commitment, they provide the possibility of dissolution, preventing – as good as (im)possible–, major damages to spouses and dependents. And yet, beyond this historically contingent fact, one must acknowledge that: 1) family, and even marriage, are not in crisis¹⁰, –despite the ever-growing weight of economic calculus and the partial openness to forms of selective kinship– they still answer a human urge to be related to the other in an unconditional way, supportive and capable of unifying all the aspects of one’s existence; and 2) sometimes domestic violence tends to be more extreme precisely because one perceives its fragility and tries to preserve an imaginary order. Between intimates this quest for stability tends to rely on stereotypes dependent on cultural normativity. Stereotypes are forms that unify around the person as a form that bundles communicative resources and individual conscious systems, fixing individual expectations that orient self-reflexivity. In the modern society, both those aspects indicate what some sociologists consider a problematic combining of disconnectedness –a lack of identity grounding structures– firstly described by Durkheim as *anomie*, and absoluteness enmeshed in communicative interaction which is oriented through basal fixing of expectancies. Historical privatization of intimacy, already propitious to abuse since it was “nobody’s business”¹¹, coincided with the gender differentiation inflating emotional incumbencies.

Among the various interpersonally invested ideals – emotional relatedness, sexual vitality, economic success...– gender keeps playing a significant role, determining the specificities of internal organization of intimate structure, and consequently, also the personal attributions of its members. Since its first theorizations in Aristotle, family is recognized as the space of inequalities, derived from nature, or at least from nature’s “rapture” and translation in communicative structures of stratified societies. But we must not necessarily assume from the start that there is an innate tendency to use and subdue the other. In various societies’ economic and sexual exploitation, tends to be communicatively legitimized, and to a certain point, the individuals unwittingly labour in their own condition of dominant or dominated.

Viewed from the point of view of ideology critique, stereotype as a communicative recourse, is not the result of social structure, but its legitimating cause. Feminist critics of functionalist conceptions of family processes are not extensible to Luhmann’s scheme of intimate space, since his conception encompasses the complexity derived

from high levels of contingency involved in the presence of sexuality and high personalized emotional expression. Although there has been some reluctance¹², only recently appeased, in adopting luhmannian corpus as guide to the analysis of gender in contemporary societies, from his approach one can extract two major consequences. One is that family, and its internal hierarchies, no longer determines the social position of individuals (Luhmann, 1990: 206-8), the other is that temporal co-orientation of the lovers is liable to “ontologize” in a complementary model of asymmetric roles (209 ff.). This latter point relates to forms of irreflexive interaction dependent on the recourse to gender stereotypes. If in other systems, recourse to gender is possible¹³, but frequently dysfunctional, a residual trace from stratified societies, it subsists as guidance of intimacy processes of interaction.

Our incursion is centered upon cultural aspects and their significance in intimate communication, however we must refer that these form part of a larger and complex model of accessing intimate violence. The ecological model of IPV developed by L. Heise (1998) has offers a multidimensional approach of the phenomenon in establishing the contingent interrelations between different etiological levels. Through a “top down” presentation we have: macrosystem (where cultural universals such as gender assume great relevance); exosystem (aggregate of systems and organizations from civil society); microsystem (the communicative integrations taking place in intimate relation) and finally the ontogenetic level (referring individual beliefs, attitudes and behaviors). Outside this scheme remain biological factors contributing to IPV. Such absence is indicative of what sometimes seems an insurmountable gap at the heart of academic community, opposing social and biomedical sciences (cf. e.g. Wahl, 2009: 5-18, 108). If one must take into account scientific theories resulting from the research fields of genetics, endocrinology, neurotransmitters, and neurophysiology, we have some evidence of the autonomy of cultural and socio-normative levels¹⁴.

Based on the comparative analysis of empirical material from a large number of countries, G. Hofstede has repeatedly proved this general theory. Concerning his conceptual model of “cultural masculinity”, he showed how biological factors are regulated by cultural schemes varying between high levels of power asymmetry and violence (in cultures of high masculinity) and cooperative and non violent (in cultures with low level of masculinity). In adopting a

universal explanatory principle from evolutionist theories –paternal investment theory–, contrary to sociobiology he has established different cultural patterns conditioning violent behavior. Presenting an explanation for the high discrepancies between cultures with high gender asymmetries with more equalitarian societies, Geert Hofstede and his coworkers (1999) concluded that if there is a correlation between high temperatures (low geographical latitudes) and aggressive behavior as the privileged way to deal with frustration, it is dependent on the mediating cultural factor.

In the next section, we will highlight some aspects distinguishing IPV where gender is accountable as a causal element to be considered, from those cases where it has not such an explanatory value. Without doing this we would risk overstate the importance of gender and also fail to account for its different implications.

Obliterations in the perspective restricted to family violence

The long process of democratization of family and the recent inclusion of women as members of the various social systems, have contributed to a challenging of static stereotypes. In the last four decades we have been witnessing a pronounced changing in the models of gender consecrated in the bourgeois family. Such a change, which accompanied the decline of its hegemony, originated the questioning of its internal organization where life courses and division of labor were deduced through a naturalization of identity that assumed the biological grounding of sexual difference as its ultimate criterion. In some occasions the diversification of familiar organization and gender identity has meant the evanescence or even the indistinctness of characteristics belonging to one of the two genders socially recognized. But despite the profound changes in the criterions of reproduction of social systems –that prescind from such personal factor– and the “experience crises” in social interaction – where the artificial or constructed character guiding “doing gender” is revealed dependent on a correct performance–, in the majority of western societies the mutually excluding models of masculinity and femininity maintain the orienting value of stereotypes.

Given such cultural assumptions, some were stroked by surprise when, starting at the beginning of the eighties, Murray Strauss and his colleagues, drawing on surveys upon couples, reported that women recurred to violence with the same frequency as men, and initiated the violent episodes behavior more

frequently¹⁵. One of Strauss's colleagues was S. Steinmetz; this author can be considered the major representative of this perspective in its strongest version. She does not simply deny the hypothesis of a patriarchal conspiracy sustained by some feminists; she also claims that women have a higher prevalence of violent behavior than men¹⁶. In face of such an interpretation of data relative to domestic violence, some were lead to put the same question as J. Fletcher: «Can our intuitions and popular stereotypes really be that wrong? Have we all been dupes of a well-orchestrated feminist plot?» (2002: 233). Since the publishing of those reports there has been a "politicization" of scientific investigation concerning IPV, which thereafter became divided between two opposite factions. Both the "Violence against Women" (VAW) and the "Family violence" (FV) perspectives were ommissive or evasive towards distinct etiological causes in the phenomenon's differently explained¹⁷. Casimiro (2008) has characterized this dispute as a "deafs' dialogue" since none of the approaches to IPV is wrong *per se*, nor are they necessarily mutually excluding, but result from the use of different methodologies, realities and aims.

To explain the inconsistency of conclusions of FV approach with dominant representations of IPV, a various authors have referred two methodological factors, namely: the demographic samples studied, and the use of Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Cf. e.g. Frieze; McHugh et al., 2008: 558 ff.; Kimmel, 2005; Dobash; Dobash *et al.*, 2007). VAW bases their conclusions of the prevalence male abuse, on qualitative interviews gathered from clients of victimization institutions (shelters, police, and the courts). This gives origin to skewed comparisons since FV approach surveys the general population and is restricted to quantitative elements. Various critiques to the deficiencies of CTS motivated the appearance of an improved model, which gave identical conclusions on the incidence of victimization. Those critiques have fall upon, not only the fact that it abstracted from access to economic resources and power imbalances, but mostly its lack of address to the context in which a discrete act of violence take place¹⁸. FV approach maintains that the problem of IPV can be exhausted in addressing the (isolated) occasions when collision of divergent interests of partners, give origin to frustration and injury behavior, *i.e.* it recognizes only expressive violence. VAW perspective inherits the feminist legacy, denouncing the cultural norms and ideological constructions, and refuses that women take a significant part on partner aggression,

centering on the instrumental aspects of intimacy violence used by male partners.

After the long and intense debate over the hypothesis of gender symmetry in IPV¹⁹, the proposal firstly made by M. Johnson, distinguishing between “common couple violence”²⁰ and the instrumental type, which he named “intimate terrorism”, keeps enjoying large acceptance. The first type designates situations of conflict where both partners hold positions of equality and has not a systematic or recursive character. As providing occasion to emotional expression this type of violence constitutes what R. Collins terms “protected fair fights” since they do not produce humiliation of personal dignity (which is considerably dependent on intimacy), or menaces to existential security (2008: 142). In the second type, one can find traces of subordination, and one of the partners is deprived from his basic rights, living under the constant threat of not corresponding to the projected expectancies of his/her partner. If the assumption that intimate violence is always caused by men was unsustainable –and it was pointed that they reinforced stereotypes of defenseless and impotent women²¹–, to argue that IPV is independent of gender personal attributions, and their dependence on stereotypes, would be insensitive to the quality and context in which violence comes to take place. But in IPV it is frequent that both aspects –expressive and instrumental– are sometimes enmeshed in one another. In the conclusion of his extensive research, E. Stark reveals his ethnological doubts: «it was often hard for me, as an outsider, to distinguish where the animus carried by normative sex hierarchies ended and personal hatred of women began» (2007: 392).

A significant aspect in FV approach is that most its surveys were made upon young populations, and a high percentage of cohabitating couples. Precisely due to its inherent instability, such relations, as it happens also with dating relationships, tend to be gender neutral. Investigations have documented how after cohabitation tends to stabilize relations through an adherence to traditional division of roles, that make it possible to dispense with the recourse to violence (Stark; Flitcraft, 1988). In this sense, physical subordination is an epiphenomenal occurrence which does not enable the access to structural and contextual elements characteristic of masculine domination. Such elements tend to mold the historic of a relationship. In this sense, the non physical dimension must be «treated as profoundly more important than the

physical because it both sets the context for and determines the meaning of the physical» (Reece, 2009: 46). The fact that with cohabitation (and principally with birth of the first child), mutual passion and romantic ideals are bound to stabilize in recursive processes, frequently means not only that women assume the majority of domestic and emotional unpaid labor, but also that their behavior tends to conform to prescriptions derived from patriarchal societies. Some theoretical and practical approaches to IPV reinforce these normative prescriptions; M. Bograd (1986) emphasized how in some couple therapy there is a clear tendency to adopt traditional models that prevent violence from arising. As noted by E. Stark (2007: 119), this configures a *quid pro quod* situation where women are required to dispense with their self-determination so that their husbands can find no motive to aggressed them. That is, adopting self-abnegation cooperating with coercive control prevents the appearance of its last resource, physical and emotional violence.

Despite the agreement in the conceptualization Johnson presented as providing guidance to empirical work, his terminology is questionable. That is the case with the recourse to the term “terrorism”; contrary to the everyday use of the word, in gendered IPV the effectiveness control is assured not by impersonal or anonym terror, but through the inter-personal tearing of the other’s emotional stability, through the imposition of one’s legitimized power. Such power has clear patriarchal traces Stark forged the term coercive control. Although coming against the dominant flow, his suggestion to restrict the use of the term violence to its “visible” dimensions (physical, sexual and verbal) has the advantage to present aggression as a consequence of a much more extended paradigm of subordination. This perspective, by which Stark tried to change the paradigmatic approaches to IPV, enables to (theoretical and practically) distinguish between the immediately criminalized aggression and some patterns of behavior with greater probability to be dissimulated as normal because legitimized by gender stereotypes. Such a conceptual mindfulness is more than a multiplication of a unitary phenomenon. It allows us a repositioning of the emotional and physical violence; they are no longer taken to be restricted to the criminal order, but concern primarily the political one²². In his words: « the primary harm abusive men inflict is political, not physical, and reflects the deprivation of rights and resources that are critical to personhood and citizenship» (2007: 5). Here, a distinctive characteristic is that, contrary to the rules sustaining

common violence, coercive control tends to be fixed in communicative processes which grant recursivity and enhance increase of subjugation and dependency. In this sense: «coercive control hope to suppress conflict or keep it from surfacing or to punish a partner for some perceived hurt or transgression, (...) by imposing the victim's compliance with gender stereotypes» (2007: 105).

Another relevant aspect which was developed by E. Stark is precious to the present work. This author sustains that violence erupting in coercive relations, victimizing mainly women, aims not just to reconstitute the intimate partner to its scripted roles. An imaginary component disjoint from the symbolic structure and functionality can be observed in the development of aggressive automatisms detached from any criterion or objectivity (2007: 280 ff.). Restricting her analysis to psychological mechanisms, Lenore Walker has firstly addressed to a vicious cycle in which abuse increases (cf. 2000: 116-38). Through time this configures "learned helplessness" by which women accept their position.

Distinctive aspects of IPV derived from the persistence of stereotypes and imaginary quality of gender

In her recent work S. Aboim has focused the fact that if there is one institution in modern society which holds a decisive role in the constitution and, *a fortiori*, in the adopting of gender attributions, it is certainly the family. The author sustains that it urges to correct the idea, presented by R. Connell, that intimate relations are "soft institutions", opened to normative changes in gender identity verified in various domains of western societies (2010: 61 ff.). Even with the appearance of new models of intimate relation, the classical roles of breadwinner and housewife hold some effectiveness in structuring intimacy.

It was through the long development of the romantic conception of love that it has been possible to remove women from a passive role –where they function as a currency between males–, and grant them a voice. But all along such complex development, the semantic associated with femininity has been anchored in the emotional connectedness and assistance, a set of qualities complementary of masculine assertiveness²³. This association is not arbitrarily imposed, but departs from stable cultural schemes historically consistent with the roles and qualities associated with one of the instituted gender categories, which in the large majority of

societies are reduced to the grounding difference between masculine and feminine. We are in face of a cultural memory inscribed in stable communicative resources, which C. von Braun have tried to conceptualize as complemented by imaginary elements, linking the socio-historical and the individual-biographical dimensions (2001: 255-86)²⁴. The reduction of complexity granted by stereotypes maintains the forms of “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasized femininity” described by Connell (1987: 183-88). After Second World War, traces of domesticity have been deeply enforced by the media; the prevailing images didn't simply associate women with the house, but expanded the specific moment in life circle historically associated with it, reproductive work. That enforcement has been assured by a high investment in all domains of women's lives, encompassing all aspects of their personality. In a way we can interpreted such expansion of maternity and child care, as enabling them to encompass also the role of a caring wife oriented by her husband's needs (Hattery, 100 ff.). It is certain that processes of socialization are increasingly detached from fix qualities attributed to each gender (Dausien, 1999). But this closing and even “indistinction” of genders in activities, beliefs and values which is present in infancy and youth, also in the recourse to violence, is not extended to the remaining life cycle (Krüger, 2001: 68-77).

Mutual vulnerability that fuels intimate relations conducts to the 1) the emotional availability, 2) sharing of resources and ideals; and finally 3) the transition from the “two of us” to the “us”²⁵. This triple anchoring is not necessarily conducive to abuse, nor is the assumption of traditional roles necessarily equivalent to subordination. However it entails a risk to feminine autonomy. If love promotes confidence and self esteem, the parenthesis it puts to individual autonomy must not be permanent. This was a point developed by the feminist philosopher Marilyn Friedman analyzing how romanticism tends to deposit in women the responsibility of the caring for others, leaving them vulnerable to forms of emotional devotion. It is certain that ideally, love promotes confidence, self esteem and self knowledge, but the surrender to the other's needs must not be persistent but transitory and self-determined (2003: 115 ff.)²⁶. Friedman also showed the way some romantic tokens are easily mistaken as simply love signs (2003: 140-59). This is present above all in manifestations of attachment which the victims accept and even invite. But the initially welcomed signs can easily turn into

intrusion (of personal and professional space), isolation (from family and friends), and obsessive feelings of possession and jealousy.

It was assuming the absence of such fetters in homosexual intimacy that Giddens come to present these relationships as illustrative of his concept of pure relationship (1992: 135). Pure relationship differs from the dominant forms assumed by romantic love, equilibrating the self-denial consecrated in heteronormative values and roles, through greater autonomy to both partners. But this hypothesis has been refuted by various authors that remark how homosexual intimacy can be as violent as heterosexual relations (e.g. Bell; Binnie, 2000: 216 ff.). We could recur to a kind of lacanian thesis concerning family organization and state that the absence of cultural norms framing interaction is worse than to be ruled by a bad (*i.e.* asymmetric) script. According to this hypothesis the symbolic gendered and eroticized patterns guiding interaction of intimate heterosexuality can prevent forms of extreme domination. However this thesis is not only proved inadequate given the importance of social stigma falling upon the denouncing victim, but mainly because interaction in homosexual relationships is not strange to gender determinations. Some research indicated that homosexual couples frequently adopt symbolic positions mimed from heterosexual relations (Cf. e.g. Stark, 2007: 395). This means that also here gender as a communicative resource remains relevant.

Gender must be taken into account in its intersection with other social factors –such as socio-economical status, ethnic group, or sexuality– which ground a diversity of typifications of IPV²⁷. But here, as it is the case in other domains of inequality, we can state that it maintains an invariable and autonomous kernel. This is clear in its transversal occurrence in different types of intimate relations. Even though it is detached from the social order that gave it origin, gender asymmetries have remained entrapped in social imaginary and remain available as a possible communicative resources. This is evident in the fact that the kind of abuse molded by gender causes «appears to continue that line of cruel and punitive marriages sometimes evident in premodern times» (Websdale, 2009: 176). A great deal of literature has been occupied with the task of circumscribe which violence is inherent to forms of intimacy generating personal forms of commitment (in its different forms of dating, co-habitation, marriage, separated and divorced couples). Russell Dobash and his colleagues, in an informative text (originally published in 1992), found that gender violence in intimate

relationships «occurs around recurring themes, especially male sexual jealousy and proprietariness, expectations of obedience and domestic service, and women's attempts to leave the marital relationship» highlighting how «in the selfconsciously gender-blind literature on “violent couples,” these themes are invisible» (2007: 182). The candid and simultaneously revealing affirmations that E. Stark said to have repeatedly heard from convicted abusers confirmed a crude truth: «there would be no need for so many men to deploy elaborate means to control female partners if women still accepted subordination as a fate bestowed by nature» (2007: 16). This is also clear in the sense making of perpetrators trying to give an account of the intergenerational character of their abuse. They acknowledge that initially they had tried to demarcate themselves from the witness horrors of a life under constant threat. But as the time goes by, they find themselves obeying to the autonomy of gender imaginary which ascribes women with a set of incumbencies. In this point, explanatory models of “transmission” of violent practices based on simple imitation of behaviour or biological and hereditary factors fail to acknowledge the autonomy of the underlying symbolic structure (Hattery, 2009: 162-3). Showing the dominant cultural schemes of gender as decisive in IPV, takes us to refuse the universal validity of the thesis that takes domestic abuse as compensation, representing the perpetrator as a frustrated male. Contrary to such view «batterers are (1) well socialized into hypermasculinity and (2) they respond to perceived threats to their masculinity.» (Hattery, 2009: 80; Cf. McClennen, 2010: 219-36).

If the dominant model of representation has until recently remain centered around instrumental and punitive violence on wife, clearly associated with alcohol consumption and more conspicuous in underprivileged social classes, IPV is by no means restricted to these. But even though such representations have fallen in disuse, they aren't completely unfounded and have clear historical roots persisting in social and individual imaginary. This persistence of traces with patriarchal origin, that despite no longer inserted on the social structure, remain associated with heteronormativity, tends to make women's self-fulfillment depend on men's realization at the distinct levels of sexual, professional and political existence. The dissemination of this cultural model, transversal to all strata of society, can give us a sense of surprise derived from the fact that violence upon women is nevertheless the exception.

Vectors to effective changes in intimate control

It is undoubtable that the overcoming of identification between IPV and “wife battering” derived from a re-mapping of intimacy, revealing the diversification of its communicative schemes and ends²⁸. Such enterprise, taking place in academic and political systems, but also in other informal mediums of society’s self-description, granted a new understanding and greater sensitivity enabling to address the entire spectrum of abusive and violent practices taking place between intimate partners. As we have tried to show briefly, beyond the violence resulting from “situational” conflicts and frustrations (which we must recognize to be inherent to an interactive system mediating deep expectations), there is a peculiar form of coercion that shares some characteristics with romantic love.

All types of intimate violence deserve public intervention, but this latter form is especially harmful, since it is prone to intensify over time, assuming autonomy over the perpetrator himself. This kind of violence is rarely practiced by women, and its gender character is grounded on a deeply rooted symbolic structure determining what the proper assignments of man and woman are. To effectively address this form of IPV constitutes firstly a public health imperative, but corresponds also to the need of granting citizens effective political rights. Despite its cultural and ethnic varieties, it is possible to adduce a set of characteristics almost universal in intimate coercive control. Such a standardization and simplification is a consequence of the effectiveness of gender stereotypes. The challenge faced by Gender-Mainstream is to base its corrective interventions in different systems, adopting guiding principles which in constituting an inevitable reduction of the complexity involved in theory, do not fall under ideology. Beyond this simplification enabling urgent interventions, we must posit what on the long run constitutes the crucial challenge, forcing to analyze the political dimension of coercive practices.

It is precisely because gendered IPV is not reducible to individual decision making, that pedagogic interventions in younger generations risk failing. Notwithstanding, some, like the philosopher S. Kappeler insisted on the irreducibility of individual responsibility for violent acts (1995: 20-3), it is unequivocal that moral formation is always on the dependency of structural factors and discursive constructions which legitimate and/or propitiate the «personal decision in favor of violence» (1995: 5). Such a voluntary dimension seems unsuitable to account for conflict and frustration that fuels

impulsive behavior as is often the case in IPV. However, in systematic violence, where the gender component is evident, personal decisions of agents must be taken into account since there is frequently a conscious and “distanciated” evaluation which takes advantage of social, economic or physical power.

Together with the highlighting of the violent and lethal dimensions of gender, it is pertinent to identify and reframe its communicative fixation around imaginaries that are liable to promote power inequalities. Only through this path will it be possible to decipher and overcome interconnected forms where abuse and love’s companionship are frequently juxtaposed. Only recently through the questioning of the distinction between the private and the public, has it been possible to achieve a new awareness that inequality results from two distinct and interconnected vectors. Referring to these two aspects Aboim also marks the persistence of gender determinations on the cultural level: «the emergence of ideals of equalitarian and caring men is less as result of men’s appropriation of stereotypical feminine emotionality than it is the consequence of a public normativity, whether legal or symbolic» (2010: 80). One vector refers to the domain of formal law, *i.e.*, the political mechanisms which directly or indirectly can alter familiar organization. In some situations, legal dispositions contribute to strength individual’s perception of rights and public recognized norms (as is it the case with the new legal configuration of domestic violence as public crime) in other cases it forces to reconsider cultural and imaginary assumptions (as it is the case in more or less traditional legislation concerning the gendered division of parental leaves). The other vector denotes the slow change of communicative time and its embedded normativity, and relies on the effective challenge of stereotypical representations and gender ascriptions. As indicated in the work of Weinbach, such effectiveness in transforming cultural schemes is possible, not in the isolated performance of the “undoing gender”, but in the domains of interaction where personal attributions, which connect communicative and cognitive expectations, are suspended (2003: 162-66; 2007: 154-6). From the point of view of intervention, and beyond the sensitivity to situations of eminent risk, revealing violence as the extreme and last resort of power asymmetries, it becomes clear that only promoting institutional changes in dominant stereotypes –especially at the level of labor legislation, but also in gender practices subsisting in school–, is it possible to decrease the

prevalence of gender violence. Changes in the incidence of IPV are already observable; this is also the case in Portugal with clear indications of a decrease of violence against women (Lisboa, 2008). But, such reduction in the number of known/denounced cases is not necessarily correlative of a decreasing in forms of coercive control, not only because of the prevalent tendency of silencing (out of shame or learned helplessness), but also as a result of the way some of the abusive practices are difficult to distinguish from intimate interaction ruled by dominant normativity.

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¹ Importância e enquadramento do factor género na reprodução da violência das relações íntimas

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³ The urge to enframe the phenomenon of intimate violence with gender causes as a public health problem has been vehemently advocated by Hattery, not (as it is usual), by stating its high prevalence and epidemiology nor by its burdensome economic costs, but establishing a intrinsic relation between the recent occurrence of a significant number of attacks on schools and colleges that had as a common characteristic the defense of masculinity values that have had its point of origin in family violence (2009: 1-9; cf. also Meuser, 2002).

⁴ Which has also been detached from the exclusive focus on physical violence and have come to encompass verbal, emotional and sexual aggression (cf. e.g Nicolaidis; Paranjape, 2009).

⁵ Although the recourse to domestic violence as a corrective and primarily as a formative of woman's moral character have enjoyed a large social acceptance, it must be acknowledge that it has almost always been under observation and regulation by the community until a late period of European history (cf. Hardwich, 2009: 188 ff.). This can be seen in the modes by which society adopts a suppletive function toward husbands inefficient or negligent in the task of keeping woman in order (cf. Walker, 2003: 86-96).

⁶ Luhmann stressed that intimate conflicts never refer to states of affairs, but always to stable communicative patterns of «expectations of expectations» (2008, 60, cf. especially 60-5).

⁷ As stated by Luhmann (1990: 217): «Family cannot, as it occurs with other organizations, react through a conditional programming or by ends of its own environment».

⁸ Such descriptions are not restricted to scientific analysis or pedagogical and judicial discourses, but are extended to informal mediums of societies' self descriptions, such as popular magazines and talk shows. Such a multiplication of perspectives has come

to constitute a kind of enhanced or magnified reality, revealing IPV as a major social trauma (cf. Websdale, 2010: 9-12).

⁹ For this reason follows the frequent consideration we have projected into intimacy the reminiscent experience of the sacred (Fuchs, 1999: 106; Gucht, 1994).

¹⁰ This is strongly manifested in the contemporary predominance of “serial monogamy” (cf. e.g. McKie, 2005: 3-4), which in certain cases is strongly associated with “serial abuse” of women, that moved by a compulsory heterosexually transit from through different abusive partners. A situation that is more frequent in situations of economic dependency (cf. Hattery, 2009: 33, 106-10).

¹¹ Given communities’ proximity and knowledge of intimate practices, L. Goodman and D. Epstein have proposed a return to its importance as crucial in combat against IPV (2008: 95-6).

¹² Caused by his conviction that, in functional differentiated societies, gender, among other personal marks (such as social status and ethnic group), doesn’t hold a structuring role in the reproduction of social systems.

¹³ In this sense Weinbach states that «Gender difference remains latent, even where it remains communicatively inconsequent, and establishes an interaction in the mode of structures of expectancies at least as an available resource» (2007: 142).

¹⁴ For a comprehensive and highly informed summary of the recent discoveries in each of this fields, especially the interrelation between biological determinants and environment and social factors, see Wahl, 2009: 47-60. Concerning the research on the difference of violent behaviour between males and females, also taking into account evolutionary theories, cf. *Idem*: 105-113.

¹⁵ L. Goodman and D. Epstein maintained that some of the force of theories of abused men results from the fact that they defy deeply established assumptions concerning the relation between men and women. This factor explains how they came to receive large media coverage (2009: 8-9).

¹⁶ For an extensive account of the views and historical development of this perspective, see the recent work of P. Cook (2009: 112-46).

¹⁷ But there have also survived “gender inclusive” approaches questioning the tendency to divide absolutely between victims and perpetrators, and between assistance and punishment (cf. Hamel, 2008).

¹⁸ This restriction to isolated violent acts, in which only previously indexed acts are recognize, offers an analysis incapable to address the intensity of aggression. The fact that data was gathered through interviews didn’t mean that it accepted qualitative and experiential elements. Such a lack of qualitative aspects leads to some awkward situations: two equal acts by being inserted in different communicative context have completely different meanings, but are nonetheless equally quantified. For detailed critique of CTS in its different versions see e.g. Kimmel (2005), Reece (2009) and McKie, 2005, 39 ff.

¹⁹ This debate has had special intensity in the USA but, since the last nineties, with the increasing visibility of male victims of IPV, it has produced repercussions also in Europe (see Hoffmann, 2009: 417-35).

²⁰ In subsequent moments Johnson has come to change this denomination adopting the expression “situational couple violence”, he also extended his conceptualization to address “violent resistance” (cf. 2006).

²¹ «The notion that only men use violence proactively reinforces paternalistic stereotypes that discount women’s capacity for self-interested aggression» (Stark, 2007: 98). In the same vein Reece (2009) denounced normative stances adopted by

some feminists which “higienize” intimacy from all the elements beyond formal contact between intimates.

²² This is the major thesis of a book where the author compiles long years of research: «coercive control is a liberty crime rather than a crime of assault» (2007: 13).

²³ For an extensive presentation of stereotype binaries, cf. e.g. Weinbach, 2004: 63 ff.

²⁴ In her work, C. von Braun have extended the notion of imaginary beyond its theorization in Lacan where it is restricted to the individual perception and fixation of one’s position in symbolic structure and Castoriadis focus on the fictional status of social institutions.

²⁵ Fuchs (1999: 87) noted in this transition normally occurring with the birth of a new member a transmutation of the pureness of love.

²⁶ In the same vein, working in the Portuguese case, Neves and Nogueira (2010) show how conceptions of love in new generations are no longer of total abnegation toward the male partner as it occurs in “love as essence”. This is the result of women’s participation in systems which promote self-determination outside intimacy assignments, mainly high education and professional careers. However there remain subsists which assume sacrificial love to derive from women’s nature.

²⁷ In defense of this thesis see the work of Hattery (2009: 95-6, 154), which also states that: «Though the particular constructions of masculinity may vary across race and ethnic groups, what is interesting about IPV is the degree to which it is remarkably consistent across all lines of demarcation and social status locations» (2009: 82).

²⁸ Perception of the diversity of forms of abuse taking place in the family conducted to an evolution from designations previously marked by unquestioned asymmetries in abuse, to denominations encompassing cohabitations without marriage and latter also forms of intimacy and different types of sexuality (Nicolaidis; Paranjape, 2009). It must be also stretched that «the term intimate partner includes current and former spouses and dating partners» (Shannon, 2009: 113).

