

A complex look at the phenomenon of violence in intimate relationships: gender specificity and methodological implications

*Valentina Feroletto**

ABSTRACT. – The complexity paradigm, thanks to its capacity to expand exploratory spaces, is the framework for an interpretation of the phenomenon of violence in intimate relationships that, going beyond the content, seeks its origins in the difficulties for partners to access the intersubjective dimension of the love experience. At the centre of the reflection is the subject, understood as a unitary reference and implicit organizer of the experience, who, by virtue of the species-specific quality of consciousness, is able to engage in reflective dialog with itself and with the other, in the direction of a qualitatively more understanding outlook about its own experience. It also looks at the cultural roots of violence in intimate relationships, highlighted in the gender approach, and exposes some of the critical issues related to operational practices in anti-violence centres. The quality of the intervention is set in relation to the theoretical significance reserved for the subject, in the absence of which the promotion of a reflective outlook on the complexity of its own experience is lacking.

Key words: complexity; intimate relationships; intersubjectivity; violence; gender approach.

The reflection that I am going to present is part of the epistemology of complexity, a paradigm aimed at extending exploratory spaces and which, in this sense, responds to the need for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of violence in intimate relations.

Delving into the complex plots of violence necessarily requires thinking in terms of complexity, a perspective of analysis that, by borrowing the words of Ferro (2007), implies '*being able to not know, being able to wait for a meaning to develop*' (pg. 53), often pausing in doubt and uncertainty.

Adopting the lenses of complexity means freeing oneself from reductionist systems, taking a dialectic view aimed at a dynamic interpretation of

*Psychologist, Psychotherapist SIPRe. E-mail: veraeffe85@yahoo.it

reality, able of grasping the links in motion between the many variables that are in play (Morin, 1982). The systemic approach derived from this paradigm has made it possible to pay attention to the process and thus to the development of complex systems, which continuously redefine themselves through creative and transformative processes emerging from exchanges with the environment (Maturana & Varela, 1980).

The historical separation between human sciences and natural sciences has ceased, the dialog between the different universes of knowledge has stimulated and enriched the study and understanding of the human subject. In recent decades, several authors have grasped the heuristic potential of complex systems theory, both from a genetic-evolutionary point of view, as well as from the process of treatment and the question of change. It is '*a construct of strong innovative impact that is shaping not only psychoanalytic science, but that has penetrated widely as an explanatory code for the phenomena of almost all sciences*' (De Robertis, 2005).

Sander (1977; 2002) is responsible for the adoption of the logic of complex systems in the understanding of psychic reality, a qualitative leap in the vision of being and human functioning that has had wide resonance in the literature. The juxtaposition of the notion of a complex system with that of a subject is clearly metaphorical in nature, an abstraction that accounts for the evolutionary complexity of the individual, without slipping into any form of reductionism. The self-eco-organization of complex systems has thus provided psychoanalysis with valuable theoretical and epistemic support for the interactive and relational factors that have challenged classical metapsychology. The system is, in fact, a weighty and intuitive image, offering a unified perspective on the individual and enhancing the interactive and procedural nature of his or her becoming. Premises from which it is possible to give a greater theoretical depth to the subject, which comes into this work intended as a unitary reference of experience (Di Francesco, 1998) that develops within the interactions with the environment in which it is immersed, reaching continuously new levels of coherence, thought of precisely as evolving.

In fact, the experiences of relationship result in psychic configurations subject to continuous transformations and alterations, by virtue of the incessant flow of stimuli, internal and external, that cross the universe of each individual (Minolli, 1993; 2009). It is a factual process, of a dynamic and non-linear nature, in which the species-specific quality of consciousness intervenes, through a progressive integration of the pre-reflective, reflective and self-reflective dimension of the subject, in the direction of a qualitatively more and more inclusive look about oneself and one's own experience (Tricoli, 2012).

It is from this conceptual framework that I intend to delve into the phenomenon of intimate relationships, exploring in a complex way the very con-

cept of violence and how it often creeps into the thick and dense plots of the love experience. Going beyond the contents and the various phenomenal manifestations, I would first like to mention an interpretation of violence that relates to the subject, in the here and now of the emotional relationship in which he/she is involved. At the basis of the discourse is an idea of subject that does not coincide with the selfish and identity dimension of the individual but has to do with the reflective gaze placed on the Ego, with questioning oneself about what one experiences and at the same time allowing oneself to be questioned by experience. A subject therefore endowed with a reflective function, a species-specific activity that allows the human being to emerge and implement himself/herself, perceiving himself/herself as an active agent and separate from the other and from reality (Cozzaglio, 2014).

But how is it that violence is manifested in the plots of the love relationship, a relationship that as such calls for the dimension of choice?

Every emotional relationship implies, in fact, a choice of investment by each partner towards the other; however, our own choices always reflect a series of complex limitations that are beyond our conscience. Indeed, each choice moves from more or less broad margins of freedom, which have to do with what Mitchell (1993), in investigating the relationship between will and unconscious mental processes, defines as the '*disorderly accumulation of derivatives of past choices*' (pg. 271). The other on whom we choose to invest is therefore inevitably linked to our past history and its unresolved issues, that is to say, to our desire which, as in a sort of dialog between two unconscious, finds in the relationship correspondence with that of the other, giving rise to that secret understanding called collusion.

Moreover, the desire evoked by the love encounter is by its very nature inseparable from our vulnerability. The desiring dimension exposes the subject to the feeling of being at the mercy of the other, arousing a state of inevitable tension that can be perceived as a real threat. In a fascinating essay on love discourse, Roland Barthes (1977), in giving voice to the emotional experiences encountered by a lover, states that '*the loving subject feels dragged by fear of danger, of a wound, of abandonment, of a sudden change-feeling that he/she expresses with the word anguish*' (pg. 27). An anguish with evidently subjective meanings, which also calls into question the issue of dependence on the other as an inescapable dimension of the relationship, that each partner needs to confront following the fusion-symbiotic phase of falling in love. As Aron (1996) states, intimacy is a delicate path that involves risks and arouses anguish, due to the inherently elusive nature of the human being, which makes the search for the object and access to the bond intricate.

However, it is also true that the same tension inherent in the love process encompasses a potential openness to the future, constituting as a possible transformative experience for both subjects involved. As Cozzaglio (2014)

states, the relationship can in this sense be understood as a *'tension that takes us out of our selfishness to invest creatively in the world'* (pg.116). The other therefore offers us a valuable evolutionary opportunity, which opens up within a dense shared experiential-emotional field and which, as such, can allow each partner to expand his/her historical meanings, reorganizing himself/herself into a new level of coherence (Tricoli, 2012).

But what happens when partners fail to seize the relationship as an evolutionary opportunity, yet still get caught up in it?

It is because of the deep implications described, whose complex issues cannot be resolved, and yet they now hold the two partners firmly together. This is why the affectionately dense relationship can become perturbing, that is to say, a hostile territory and as such can become a source of violence. Violence that will inevitably reflect the deep dynamics kept alive by the two partners, as long as both remain anchored in them and feed on them. In these complex circumstances, the possibility of accessing an intimate and profound dialog with the other appears in fact to be alien to the quality of the love bond that unites the two partners. The relationship then becomes a territory of non-recognition of the feared and denied otherness, that is, a place where the other cannot be fully there, insofar as I myself do not recognize myself through the other.

Returning to the topic of the subject, therefore, the impasse in which the couple find themselves reflects the profound difficulty of the two partners in accessing the intersubjective dimension of experience, a process that calls into question the reflective gaze on the Ego and which starts only in dialog with otherness, in the dialectic between similarity and divergence. The resulting disturbance reveals opportunities for growth for the subject over time, as well as for evolution for the relationship itself; it is in fact through this dialectic mode that the subject experiences in depth greater reciprocity and, above all, two subjectivities that come together.

Cozzaglio (2014), in exploring the qualitative evolution of the relationship between patient and analyst, approaches the intersubjective relationship precisely as *'the conscious love relationship between Subjects in which the two recognize each other as one, identical and different at the same time'* (pg.116), because they are aware that they are reflecting in dialog before another subject of equal dignity, albeit in divergence.

Therefore, starting from the subject and his/her ability to engage in a reflective dialog with himself/herself and with the other, I believe that the origin of violence in intimate relationships, in its various forms, nuances and intensities, is precisely a profound denial of otherness, it also leads to an unrecognition of the other in his/her capacity as a human subject, made therefore *object* in this sense, through which to confirm and reaffirm his/her own selfish dimension, which is evidently absolutized. Despite the high levels of relational suffering that afflict both partners, the continuity of the

bond appears to be based solely on the rigid maintenance of roles, or else their experience of dissolution of the Ego.

The resulting violence, whether veiled or more concretely and seriously acted out, is undoubtedly never an expression of love; it is perhaps an extreme desecration of love, an attempt to resolve the anguish that the other arouses when we are unable to disengage ourselves from the selfish dimension that, once again, forces us within our own limits. The rigidity of the solutions adopted precludes the subject from giving his/her experience new subjectual meanings and can be read as an expression of a block in the qualitative development of self-consciousness (Minolli, 1997).

Although the adoption of a complex gaze at phenomena encompasses in itself the multiplicity of variables at stake, the gender specificity that characterizes violence in intimate relationships cannot be disregarded. It is indeed a phenomenon of significant dimensions, which today more widely questions our collective consciousness at a social and political as well as psychological level, highlighting the need for a comparison of different knowledge and skills, as well as the need for concrete responses in terms of prevention, the protection of women and the interventions aimed at abusive men.

When we talk about gender specificity, we are talking about violence by men towards women as such, as belonging to the female gender, within intimate relationships. This is a very serious form of discrimination, recognized internationally as a violation of fundamental human rights, which has to do with the physical and psychological safety and security of women.

The United Nations defines gender-based violence as '*any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*' (Art. 1, UN Declaration on the Elimination of violence against Women, Vienna, 1993).

As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1999) states, it is undeniable that male dominance over women is among the oldest and most persistent forms of oppression, which for the author has to do with what, since the 1970s, he called *symbolic violence*. With this insight, Giudici and Bourdieu (1994) intend to hone in on a form of subtle, invisible violence, expressed through the imposition of a worldview, or arbitrary and historically constituted mental structures. According to the authors, symbolic violence takes place insofar as it rests on the very complicity of the sufferer, in an evidently unconscious way and by means of deeply embedded cognitive structures.

I intend to explore the specific issue of gender-based violence, drawing on my own experience as an operator, which took place in the centres that offer shelter and support to women who are victims of violence. The rich experience in the field has prompted inevitable critical reflections on the

quality of the interventions provided, in relation to what is my theoretical framework of reference, as set out in the first part of this work.

Indeed, the broad network of anti-violence services is based on the gender perspective, an approach that is historically and ideologically placed in the feminist movement and that over time has given rise to a specific methodology of intervention adopted in anti-violence centres and shelters that are based on it. The movement's roots lie in the early self-consciousness groups, in which women shared their own life experiences, carrying out a historical-political analysis of male domination and their condition of subordination.

Within the framework of gender interpretation, the root of violence in intimate relationships is patriarchal ideology, that is, the presumption of an ontological primacy of one sex over another: that of the male over the female. The gender perspective therefore highlights the relationship between the violence perpetrated by men against women and the imbalance of power that originates, is conveyed and legitimized by the patriarchal culture itself, which is profoundly masculine and misogynistic, in which we are all immersed.

The procedures adopted in most anti-violence centres therefore refer to this interpretative framework, a cross-cutting approach that has been developed over the years from bottom-up experiences, based on an active, empathetic and non-judgmental listening relationship, which takes place from woman to woman, in a relationship that is born as horizontal as possible.

This is an integrated approach, which may involve different types of action; firstly, welcome meetings, through which to collect the history of the woman, in order to co-build a project in response to the specifics of the shared situation. The meetings are configured as listening spaces, the frequency of which is established on the basis of the specific needs of the woman, and in which ample space is given to the sharing of experiences and the reprocessing of any traumatic episodes. The meetings also aim to re-interpret one's history from a gender perspective, that is, to place violence in a cultural dimension and to recognize the similarity of one's experience with that of other women who have been victims of the same phenomenon. This passage is considered fundamental for the awareness of the cultural origin of violence, and the loss of the sense of guilt and subjective inadequacy that pervades the intimate life of the woman who is being welcomed.

In addition to meetings, accompanying interventions of social and health services, legal support, professional/housing guidance, support to parenthood and possible psychological counselling are evaluated and possibly implemented. Every action, including the choice to press charges, to separate or to involve the wider network of welfare services, is always undertaken with the consent of the woman. Freedom of choice and self-determination, in fact, are values that are considered fundamental, underpinning the

conscious definition of one's own specific path of escape from violence.

However, while it is true that the protagonism of women is placed at the heart of the approach taken in anti-violence centres, respect for this principle often becomes, for various reasons, a challenge in everyday practice. This can happen more frequently on all those occasions when the request for help that comes to the centre is particularly urgent, in situations that are high risk, those in which minors are involved or even when it comes to women with profiles of particular vulnerability (Busi *et al.*, 2021).

The welcoming provides, in fact, a first indispensable 'risk assessment' that results from an exploration of the criticality brought by the woman and is generally based on the gathering of a plurality of elements: margins of freedom and autonomy; information about her support network; significant family problems; presence of minors; any welfare problems for the partner; particular episodes that occurred during the relationship; tendency to minimize violence and specific concerns reported by the person. This is a dynamic assessment, which needs to be carried out repeatedly over a period of time in order to monitor the evolution of the risk previously detected. A clearly complex assessment, taking into account the contrasting experiences from which the woman herself is pervaded, as well as the symptoms that often accompany the person involved in a highly critical situation (psychosomatic symptoms/ mood disorders/ post-traumatic stress symptoms).

Welcoming a significant experience such as that brought by women living in violent relationships is undoubtedly an overwhelming experience, and is even more so in situations that are deemed high-risk, where anguish, which is often a concrete anguish of death (as well as symbolic), saturates the shared space and needs not only containment, but also an inevitable proposal for intervention that involves actions to protect it, up to a real distancing from the situation of abuse. In all these urgent circumstances, the risk is that we will adopt a persuasive attitude, which once again makes us lose sight of the subject of the intervention and the complexity of her internal world.

Moreover, the adoption of a gender perspective, which underpins the training required of women in anti-violence centres, may result in an interpretation of the woman's story that fails to grasp the dimension of the woman's deep investment in the relationship that is at risk, an investment that involves and calls into question the subjective extent of its overall psychic configuration, in the here and now of its evolutionary block.

In the centres, the woman's personal life is generally traced through the steps described by the 'cycle of violence', a model developed in the 80s by Walker, an American domestic violence researcher. It is a model that contemplates the existence of specific mechanisms that are repeated cyclically, to the point of trapping the victim, who finds herself '*immobilized as in a spider web, kept available, psychologically chained, anesthetized*' (Baldry,

2008, pg. 39). The cycle consists of four phases characterizing the dynamics related to gender violence, phases that repeat over time, increasing the level of risk to which the woman could be exposed. A kind of photograph of the recurrent behaviour of violent men in a systematic manner, which highlights the alternation of moments of tenderness and sweetness with abuse; ambivalence which is considered one of the prevailing reasons why the woman would not be able to distance herself from the perverse relationship and remains harnessed there.

From a methodological point of view, the adoption of this model results in the idea that, in order to end the cycle of violence, the victim must become aware of these mechanisms; the intervention is therefore aimed at raising awareness, guided by the operator herself, of what is conceptualized as a position of subordination in the relationship with the partner.

However, when the deep and complex issues that force the subject into her reality are not touched upon, one can easily encounter unconscious resistance that either distances the woman from the call for help or, conversely, adherence may take place, but this does not emerge from the call for structural change and will inevitably have repercussions on the path taken. In this framework, the desired change cannot therefore be derived from a woman's choice, since what is missing is the promotion of a reflective gaze at the complexity of her unique experience.

It is in this sense that the quality of each intervention is, in my opinion, intrinsically linked to the theoretical importance reserved to the subject: the complexity of the other, as well as the extent of her subjective meanings, require a broader interpretation, which cannot therefore be grasped by the gender approach alone and which inevitably requires a view that is capable of holding the various instances undertaken together. This is true despite the stimuli and tools provided to women who turn to anti-violence centres may prove to be a valuable piece of baggage along the way. Therefore, the shared reflections do not seek to overshadow the value of anti-violence centres, a vital garrison for all women and at the same time a valuable resource for the whole community. Alongside their reception, these realities are also dedicated to a rich activity of prevention, awareness-raising and coordination with public and private services in the territory, which, in various ways, help provide protection and support to women in vulnerable conditions.

However, what could enrich the quality of support for women is, in my view, a prospective opening to a broader and richer comparison between the gender approach and the relational psychodynamic perspective, which could in this sense restore greater complexity of interpretation to the phenomenon of gender violence, making room for other diversified possibilities of intervention.

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