

Chapter 32

MARITAL VIOLENCE: FROM CHILD WITNESS TO ADULT OFFENDER

Claire Metz¹ & Laure Razon²

¹High School of Teaching and Education, University of Strasbourg, France

²Faculty of Psychology, University of Strasbourg, France

ABSTRACT

Violence is inherent to all human beings and even forms an intrinsic part of individuals when establishing the first parental bonds. In this article, we seek to demonstrate the consequences of marital violence on the future of children who witness this act. Indeed, such children encounter a troubling relationship between their parents, founded on violence. In addition, they are caught up in the shock and the silence that are sources of trauma. Thrust in cross-generational issues where violence acts as a bond, putting this violence into action is one of the possible outcomes. Our research focuses on recollections of experiences by adults of their childhood, once children who witness domestic violence. The purpose of such a research is to elucidate psychic mechanisms and mental consequences for these persons. It is based on a qualitative approach with case study method. The case of Mr. Ritti enables us to highlight the conscious and unconscious stakes at play within the mechanism of cross-generational repetition.

Keywords: domestic violence, child, psychic transmission, trans-generational, repetition.

1. INTRODUCTION

International research consistently demonstrates that a woman is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by a current or former partner than by any other person¹. In France one woman dies every two and a half days from conjugal violence (Jaspard, 2000). Spousal abuse remains a serious problem in France (Jaspard, 2007) and in the world. How can we explain this?

A psychodynamic model will be used in the case of Mr. Ritti, integrating the theories of Jean Bergeret (1984) and Piera Aulagnier (1975/ 1995) and their conceptualizations of primary and fundamental violence, the theories of Anna Freud (1936/1990) and Sandor Ferenczi (1982) and their contributions to theory about trauma. Children's internal and external worlds develop from birth and, to a certain extent, these worlds are associated with violent impulses. According to these authors, violence is as present in children as it is in their parents; it is fundamental in the construction of parent-child bonds, as well as in the development of family then social ties, we will explain that later. The symbolic register guides the transformation of violence in respect to law and the forbidden; then violence is represented in imagination not in reality; for example by the wishes for death. On the contrary, real violence refers to a destructive act and to its pathogenic effects.

Within families, existent and repetitive acts of marital violence undoubtedly affect the psychological development of the child witness (Lehmann, 2000); they can also affect the representations of marital bonds for the child, and more globally, can have an impact on what constitutes the link to the other - impacts but also risks of repetition (Wood & Sommers, 2011). Witnessing and living in a marital violence environment is puzzling for a child with regard to both the perpetrator of such an act and its victim. The child is trapped when the violence is finally put into action. He is left voiceless. Stuck in a dead-end, he is unable to symbolize the violence. As a result, it acquires a traumatic dimension while symptoms and sufferings emerge. That is what we can notice when it is repeated by the following generation. In this article, we address marital violence from a psychopathological angle. In order to understand violence within the family nucleus, our work centers on the conscious and unconscious transmission of violence. "Actioned violence" as we will refer to it, is indeed characterized by the fact that it is

too often repeated by the following generation. The French Henrion report (2001) and other studies in the United States (Wood & Sommers, 2011) and Canadaⁱⁱ (Fortin, 2011) have focused on child “witnesses” or those “exposed” to violence. These studies have established the extent of the behavioral difficulties these children exhibit, and the risk of marital violence reproduction in their own generation. A child who witnesses marital violence often becomes an “adult-aggressor”. Using a specific case, Mr. Ritti, we will highlight the issues at stake during childhood, then in adulthood.

Firstly, we will base our research on the notion of the so-called “normal violence” from a psychoanalytical perspective, meaning, the violence that provides subjects with a framework defining how they relate to others. Secondly, based on our research, we will elucidate psychic mechanisms and mental consequences for an adult, once child who witness marital violence. Some of them become violent as adults (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Fortin, 2011; Razon & Metz, 2011), and we will be looking to identify certain psychic causes: how their psychological dynamics in adult development lead them to marital violence with intimate partner. This research is based on a qualitative approach with case study method, and the case of Mr. Ritti enables us to investigate the conscious and unconscious stakes at play within the mechanism of transgenerational repetition.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Violence from a psychoanalytic point of view

All violence makes reference to childhood: it is inherent to human beings; it forms the first encounter with the mother and is fundamental in the development of the first bonds. We will develop three fundamental aspects of violence: “primal violence” (Freud, 1915/1988), “primary violence” (Aulagnier, 1975/ 1995) and “fundamental violence” (Bergeret, 1984).

2.1.1. Primal violence. “We are (...) as the primal men, a horde of murderers.” (Freud, 1915/1988, p. 154). According to Freud’s myth of the primitive horde, every child has to deal with primal violence; it is primal insofar as humanization arises from this violence. The child inherits the manner in which his forefathers and his parents in particular, have dealt with violence. Have they repressed it, fantasized about it, or acted it out? From a psychical point of view, the child’s humanization goes through the internalization of the laws that allow him to handle his destructive instincts. When the Oedipus Complex is resolved, the psychical law plays a structuring role.

By taking an interest in children who grow up witnessing their parents’ violence, we seek to study how these children internalize violence in reference to forbidden acts. We will thus focus on the constitutive or normal violence in the bond between parents and children.

2.1.2. Primary violence or maternal bond. In Piera Aulagnier’s studies (1975/ 1995), primary violence is rooted in the speech a mother addresses to her baby, who is, at that age, unable to understand it. “Primary violence is the psychical act of imposing on someone else’s psyche, a choice, a thought or an action only motivated by one’s own desire.” (p. 40) It lies between a desire (the mother’s) and a need (the child’s), and is necessary as the manner in which mothers interpret their children’s needs enables these children to make sense of their experiences.

Moreover, the mother often appears as absent and dissatisfied; in this way, she makes it possible for the child to discover his/her own existence. The child’s hatred of the mother emanates from this frustration. Freud summarized this issue as: “The maternal bond leads to hatred” (Freud, 1932/ 1989, p.129); fundamental hatred which is also present in the relationship with the father.

According to Melanie Klein (2013) too, hatred is present early in the development of the child, during the paranoid-schizoid position: “the first object being the mother breast which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast; this splitting results in a severance of love and hate (p. 20). Margaret Mahler’s theory also demonstrates that

the child struggles with his ambivalence during the subphase of rapprochement (Traub & Lane, 2002).

2.1.3. Fundamental violence or paternal bond. The notion of fundamental violence was introduced by Jean Bergeret (1984). This positive violence takes place in the child's imaginary during the oedipal complex. The father appears as an "annoying rival" because he bears and transmits the law forbidding incest and murder. He hands down a law to which both he and the mother are subject to. This law is based on a fundamental principle: it forbids a destructive or possessive bond over the other. Consequently, the father reinforces the issues of boundaries and castration, already present in the mother-child bond. He compels and thus helps the child to handle his love and hate instincts. In other words, he prevents the child from yielding to his destructive impulses. He sets the containing boundaries, halting primal and primary violence.

2.1.4. When primal hatred becomes violence. "Man is rarely entirely good or bad" (Freud, 1915/2010, p.136). "Actioned violence" by a family member results from insufficiently structured interdictions that prevent the counteracting of destructive impulses. The familial bond neither depends on dialogue nor on triangulation. In a dual relationship, the law of the strongest is sovereign. This pathological mechanism is associated with failure in the initial development of the bond.

The whole development of the child passes through this discovery of the other, alternating love and hatred. Generally, children overcome this hatred as they have everything to gain by shaping themselves differently. As we have developed above, unavoidable fear, hatred or rage can be surmounted by many but unfortunately, for some individuals these become points of attachment. It is in this impasse that we can find the roots of hatred for the other and of the violence in a relationship. When hatred is not overcome in the psychic organization of the subject, it could take the form of a pathology. Consequently, the relationship with the other, such as for a couple, essentially falls within a perspective of fusional duality, linked to the assumed violence of the other. The new relationship revives memories of this childhood violence resulting from familial ties. The violence of the unresolved childhood conflict could be transposed onto the other partner in the couple. Consequently, the violence observed in a family's protagonist results from failure to integrate impulses within the scope of taboo, taboo that is insufficiently structured to act as a barrier to destructive impulses. This imaginary fear of the other requires the installation of a relationship model to which everyone must submit. The law of the strongest is thus established and results from a dual relationship and from the absence of oedipal triangulation (Vasse, 1978; Bergeret, 1984). Children who witness marital violence are witnesses of this dual relationship dominated by the law of the strongest, generally the father, but not always. They observe two people during violent scenes between their parents: one is dominated and withdrawn, the other dominant and overwhelming. They are anxious and traumatized as the actual violent scene confronts them with their own archaic fantasies of violence. The trauma arises from acting on what was to remain imaginary. Psychic intrusion through reality prevents the child from speaking and reflecting on the event, leaving him struck by the traumatic event (Ferenczi, 1982; Fortin, 2011). There is a significant risk of the repetition of this violence across generations (Wood & Sommers, 2011). This research aims to explain the psychical mechanism at the origin of violence.

3. RESEARCH

3.1. Objectives

In this psychical context, what effect does actioned marital parental violence have on a child witness? (Freud, 1936/1990; Wood & Sommers, 2011) This is the subject we will address in the course of our research.

3.2. Design

Our research is based on a qualitative approach with case study method. We have chosen to present Mr. Ritti's testimony, obtained during a research, (works by Nancy Sawan, student at the Louis-Pasteur University of Strasbourg, under the direction of Claire Metz; Razon & Metz, 2011), carried out among five adults who witnessed marital violence during childhood. Adults are an original and particularly interesting group as they are able to detach themselves when reflecting on their past. Their discourse falls within a context which, despite the inevitable presence of unconscious issues, is no longer directly influenced by living within the family. This past is undoubtedly captured in its reconstruction but the choice of this population of adults is significant as it makes it possible to analyze the modalities and risk factors of transgenerational transmission.

Although this research cannot be generalized, it highlights the fundamental psychic mechanisms at work in trauma and repetition. It therefore enables us to hypothesize on the assistance that can be provided to deal with violence and how this violence can be prevented.

Case introduction: We selected Mr. Ritti as he is representative of this child-witness population. Aged approximately forty years old, he spoke on his past as a child, then of his current marital life. He is recently separated from his wife, who has filed a complaint against him on the grounds of marital violence. Mr. Ritti's father was repeatedly violent against his wife who then escaped with her partner, leaving her children behind. Lying about the situation, their father then forced them to follow him to his native country. He was subsequently imprisoned for the murder of his wife's partner. As a result, Mr. Ritti spent eleven years without his parents as his mother had no legal right to take her children to France. In the course of the interview, evoking these difficult moments was distressing as time had not erased Mr. Ritti's pain.

Method: We collected testimonies using unstructured interviews and carried out a content and discourse analysis. Their testimonies were recorded with the consent of the persons involved, and subsequently transcribed. The first main question was formulated as follows: "How did you experience father's violence against your mother during your childhood?" The following questions concern his married life and finally his fatherhood.

3.3. Testimonial answers

Mr. Ritti describes his child-witness situation: "*We would go see my mother lying on the ground, devastated, sometimes passed out. We would lift her up, once an ambulance came for her... we were powerless, defenseless in the face of such situations, we didn't know what to do. I often found myself alone, wondering: 'but what can I do?' My brothers and I would huddle together under the sheets and reflect on how to stop the violence. But in reality, we never intervened. The powerlessness is what annoys me. In my opinion, not assisting a person in danger is a form of failure.*" Mr. Ritti was less than six years old at the time, and when asked what he could possibly have done at this young age, he responds: "*I don't know, we could have done something, call the police or the neighbors.*"

Then his abused mother "*never said anything, always played down the situation to avoid frightening us and to comfort us. The next day was silent, she prepared breakfast for us, nobody spoke about it.... My mother always told us that she didn't want to leave because of us.*" However, his father justified his violence: "*He said it was because of the house, that he did not feel at ease in that house and as the neighbors often intervened, we had to move. These things have constantly been on my mind since that time, the fear, the instability, incessantly having to start over again, leaving, coming back.*"

Mr. Ritti's father aroused ambivalent affects: "*When I was young, together with my four sisters and my brother, I often saw scenes where my father was violent against my mother. He scared us, he would come home nasty, angry, and go after my mother, just like that, for no reason. The problem is that when he was upset, there had to be some form of release. He would punch her. We would hear voices rise, sometimes plates would break. It was quite often, twice to thrice a week, it was frightening; I was scared that he would turn against me, that he would hit me. He was strong, powerful, a real monster. We were a family with a large black stain, the stain of violence; horror and fear. What surprises me even today is that he never hit us, we the*

six children. I don't know, maybe he loved us, I say this without being sure. At the time, I would say to myself 'I will never be like my father when I grow up', it was a horrible, unbelievable image, he was a real monster"

Now that the children have become adults, the violence has passed onto the next generation: *"My sisters are with violent men."* Mr. Ritti himself is being prosecuted because of the complaint filed by his wife: *"It is a different story; my father beat my mother for no reason. My mother was a kind woman. My wife is dangerous, she has even filed a complaint against me, and she has hidden medical certificates. A loving wife does not hide, that is real treason."* *"I do not want to be like my parents"*. According to him, he is violent because of his wife, she is the responsible party: *"I can't forbid her from complaining because I beat her. She provoked me, she pushed me to my limits, asking to be beaten and then she went to see the doctor and cry. There is no respect; it is war, a full-blown war. Maybe this is what mankind is about: it's her or me."*

Two parts of the ego coexist separately and inconsistently, which is how Mr. Ritti explains his own violence: *"Sometimes I am a stranger to myself; there are parts in me that I do not know. I am at a loss for words"*

Mr. Ritti presents his current situation as his father used to do: *"As far as violence is concerned, I think that my children realize that I am right."*

4. CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION

Mr. Ritti describes his child-witness situation with a lot of guilt. It thus appears that Mr. Ritti is reversing the generations since as a child, he felt responsible for and guilty of witnessing his mother's aggression. He is thus parentalized, like many children, witnesses to mother assault (Fortin & Lachance, 2011).

We believe that the absence of speech has contributed to this repetition through the generations. Mr. Ritti was unable to develop a representation of the violence, to identify it or to reflect on it. He describes a helpless mother, unable to speak to her children. Although the difficulty faced by this woman is understandable, she aroused guilt in her children by telling them that she stayed for them. They had neither the words to reflect on what was happening to their mother, nor what was happening to them. They were exposed to the hard facts, as cruel as they were. This silence fuelled the confusion, making the children feel guilty. His father justified his violence, he had his reasons. The children faced the maternal silence and a father justifying his acts of violence depending on what suited him best. As a consequence, the children felt guilty. Furthermore, the case of Mr. Ritti illustrates maternal distress (Fortin, Côté, Rousseau, & Dubé, 2007).

It appears that the violence experienced in the past is repeated by the following generation. However, in his mind the violence exerted by his father and his own violence are not similar since his violence can be justified, unlike his father's. According to him, he is violent because of his wife, she is the responsible party. With her, Mr. Ritti is stuck in a logic of duel, in a power struggle similar to the one he witnessed between his parents (De Neuter, 2012). As a matter of fact, he is trapped in this confounding logic which considers that the abused wife is responsible for the blows she receives and that violence is justifiable and excusable (Grihom & Grollier, 2012).

This violent father aroused fright, but also some form of admiration in his son. Mr. Ritti evokes a totalitarian and all powerful individual, unable to curb his fundamental violence. Nevertheless, this reveals a certain fascination for this father, whom he describes as strong and powerful; the fascination going along with the fright. These two dimensions - love and hate for the father - favor identification with the aggressor (Freud, 1936/1990). While love leads to identification, hate makes it possible for children to handle their anxiety when witnessing marital violence. However this identification mechanism transforms the child, making his violent father a model, and ultimately leading to the reproduction of marital violence during adulthood. On the psychic level, in addition to the identification mechanism, we observed that the dis-idealization of the father figure was not completely achieved as the fascination still

remained intact. Gérard Pommier (1999, p. 124) reminds us that during adolescence: “the death of the father is necessary (...) For the symbolic father to come onto the scene, the murder [dis-idealization] of a first father must have been expended in order for him to then appear as symbolic.” This psychic activity that is necessary in adolescence could thus avert transgenerational repetition.

According to Anna Freud (1936/ 1990), Mr. Ritti has identified with the aggressor using defense mechanisms that are easily identifiable. On the one hand is denial, he doesn't want to be like his father. This affirmation suggests that he perceives himself to be like his father, a thought that is immediately rejected. On the other hand, identifying with the aggressor is a response to trauma, through the splitting of the ego during the situation; this induces fear and extreme distress. “When that fear reaches its climax, it forces them to submit unquestionably to the will of the aggressor, to guess his slightest desires, to blindly obey while identifying completely with the aggressor.” (Ferenczi, 1982, p. 130). The aggressor and the aggressive situation thus become intrapsychical; they no longer exist as an external reality but become part of the ego. This splitting allows him to defend the paradoxical idea that although he beats his wife, he is not reproducing his father's violence against his mother.

In this man's mind, some acts of violence are justifiable, others are not. His points of reference are mixed up, the suffering and guilt once felt are of no use in preventing repetition in the next generation - the opposite is true; indeed, his guilt is only felt in relation to his mother. The real issues of violence and manipulation are therefore not recognized.

The father's relationship with the law has to be taken into account: a tyrannical father impedes the paternal function as by embodying violence, he no longer represents the law. The tyrannical father can either be on the positive side of perfection, as is the case with President Schreber's father (Tabouret-Keller, 1973). Freud (1911/2013) developed the case of President Schreber, a psychoanalytic profile of a paranoid personality. President Schreber's father was a severe and daunting personage who invented a system of corrective and educative gymnastics for children. He appears all the more ideal in having all the traits of the perfect father. The Schreber case partly is being seen as the typical result of the drill of a father education. The tyrannical father can be on the negative side of unimaginable brutality as is the case with the father of corporal Lortie (Benkheira, 2002). Denis Lortie is a former Canadian army corporal. In 1984, he stormed into the National Assembly of Quebec building and opened fire with several firearms, killing three Quebec government employees and wounding thirteen others. According to Pierre Legendre, he was under the domination of his frightening father. In the same way, as a child, Mr. Ritti was confronted with a tyrannical father laying down the law rather than representing it. It was thus impossible for Mr. Ritti to transmit it and difficult to take ownership of the law.

Before the divorce, the children were made to feel guilty and were parentalized. After the separation, they were manipulated by their father who destroyed their daily lives and their future by taking them away.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Mr. Ritti's specific case highlights the psychological risks that his children face. Silent observers of the horror and victims of mental manipulation from one or the other parent, their reflection is hindered by shock, especially when the situation is worsened by silence. This underscores the significant risk for repeated violence by the subsequent generation.

In this research direction, we continue to collect testimonies of victims of spousal violence, and perpetrators of domestic violence in the goal to explain the factors of spousal violence against women in our society, with a focus particularly on mental factors; Therefore, we try to confirm or to infirm our assumption, namely the consequences of marital violence on the future of children who witness this act. We are asking people about their past and present history, with their parents, their spouses, and their children. On the other hand, we collect contributions from professionals sharing their experiences, in the goal to investigate current practices, and thus contribute to a better prevention. With children who witness spousal violence, we offer to pass a projective test “Adventures of the Black Paw” by Corman (1961).

The test highlights the possibility of understanding pathological cases, each time putting into game the analysis unconscious conflicts of the subject, particularly the relationship to violence.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that even before being an action, violence is how one positions him or herself in relation to the other. It is essential to question the role of violence within a family and to understand why it creates a bond. This was the purpose of our article.

The child who witnesses marital violence becomes helpless and is unable to work it out or overcome it. This case shows psychic mechanisms: feeling of guilt and process of parentalisation, identification to the aggressor, then denial and splitting. These mechanisms are implied in transmission of spousal violence. Finally, the father relationship with the law prevents the transformation of the child's aggressiveness when the father is tyrannical. Consequently, prevention of spousal violence requires a journey of psychic construction, with children who witness spousal violence, and naturally with perpetrators of marital violence. Preventive measures should thus aim at verbalizing this violence as early as in childhood, in order to turn identification and bonding away from violence and destruction, and prevent its repetition among the next generation. Moreover, this case illustrates maternal distress. Then it's very important to support the mother-child relationship (Bennett, Shiner, & Ryan, 2006; Shaw et al., 2006; Racicot, Fortin, & Dagenais, 2010). Of course, a prevention program relate to marital program case concern society, because "violence against women has its roots in cultural assumptions that must undergo change if the incidence of that violence is to be reduced" (Arias, Dankwort, Douglas, & Dutton 2002, p. 157). But according to this study, we can see that the three partners – child, woman, man – have to do a journey of psychic construction in order to change the relationship to violence and fear. In fact, supporting professionals, quality of relationships between professionals and women and their children, seem to play a key role.

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AUTHOR(S) INFORMATION

Full name: Claire Metz

Institutional affiliation: PhD, senior lecturer, High School of Teaching and Education, University of Strasbourg

Institutional address: ESPE de l'Académie de Strasbourg, 141 avenue de Colmar, BP 40102, F-67024 Strasbourg cedex, France

Biographical sketch: Psychologist, psychoanalyst, senior lecturer at the University of Strasbourg since 2006, She held for fifteen years the post of psychotherapist with children and adolescents in an assessment and treatment centre (CMPP) in Strasbourg. Consequently, she is interested in child psychopathology, and in transgenerational transmissions. Her researches areas also focus on divorce, marital violence, children with ADHD, and learning disorders. She currently co-leads with Laure Razon two researches, funded by the French Ministry of Justice, and by the Mustela Foundation, which focus on marital violence and children exposed. They are based on a qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews with adults involved in marital violence, and based on the Black Paw test with exposed children. The authors were both awarded the Mustela Foundation award in 2013 for the research "Support for child witnesses to marital violence and for mother/child relationship". In year 2009, she published with L'Harmattan "Absence du père et séparations".

Full name: Laure Razon

Institutional affiliation: PhD, senior lecturer, Faculty of Psychology, University of Strasbourg

Institutional address: Faculté de Psychologie, 12 rue Goethe, 67000 Strasbourg, France

Biographical sketch: Research - For more than 20 years I have been working on psychopathology in families: incest, family secret, domestic violence. My approach is psychoanalytic. My favorite authors are: Freud, Lacan, Winnicott, Mannoni, Dolto. I am also a psychologist in an institution. I work with children and parents. Publications:

Razon, L. (2013). Le lien mère-fille dans l'inceste : violence et répétition. *Neuropsychiatrie de l'enfance et de l'adolescence*, 61(2),101-105.

Razon, L. (2007). *Enigma do incesto*. Rio de Janeiro: Compantia de Freud.

Razon, L. (2002). *Secrets et transmissions*. Rencontres universités-société, Transmission: Mémoire collective et transmission, Strasbourg, France.

Razon, L., & Metz, C. (2011). Les violences intrafamiliales et leur devenir chez l'enfant témoin. *Neuropsychiatrie de l'enfance et de l'adolescence*, 59(7), 411-414.

ⁱ Rapport de l'ONU A/61/122/Add.1. 6 Juillet, 2006. Paragraphe 112, Étude approfondie de toutes les formes de violence à l'égard des femmes.

ⁱⁱ The 2006 law for the Protection of the youth, in Quebec (Gouvernement de Québec, 2009), established that marital violence is to be considered as a form of ill-treatment toward the child (Racicot et al., 2010)