

## Intimate Partner Violence: Social Support And Coming Out

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### ABSTRACT

Violence in same sex relationships is characterized by systematic path of dominance and control, even often stigmatized by abusive and powerful behaviors; especially, in the homosexual relationships some risk factors, as the lack of balance between the couple and the threat of public outing, play fundamental role.

The relevance to identify both risk and protective factors, suggested by variable dispositions in intimate partner violence (dependence's style, violation), situational dispositions (social support homo-negativity) and factors connected to the quality and managing ability of intimate dynamics (communication, conflict, sexuality).

Some findings collected by an investigation conducted by a group of Sicilian participants (Italy) show their tendency to not have specific role, in absence of outing, in the dynamics of intimate partner conflicts. Rather, they tend to value positive aspects of the relationships, minimizing the danger of aggressive behaviors. Findings highlight the need to contrast deeply the phenomenon integrating interventions with specific actions. Especially, these actions should be addressed to social, educational, informational and political dimension, in order to fight the strong sexual discrimination in Italian area.

### INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence in heteronormative discourse has dominated researchers and interest among scholars. Particularly, violence against women predominates in epistemic understanding of culture of violence. Otherwise, there is less attention regarding violence between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) due to limitation in determining the complex phenomenon into societies which discriminate same-sex relationships forcing them to isolation, marginalization and stigmatization. Particularly, the violence in intimate relationships is part of a systematic pattern of dominance and control, and it is often characterized by the abuse of power that produces social isolation and impoverishment of social skills, participation and freedom of action. The severity of the consequences of this relational configuration on direct victims (the partner who suffers violence, and children, if there are any) required a series of surveys on the level of knowledge of the phenomenon, of preventive interventions, of taking charge of abuser and victim, of legal protection in defense of individuals involved.

Some researchers argue that the cyclical pattern of violence supported by Walkers (1979) is still useful for understanding the development and maintenance of violent dynamics (McClennen, Summers, & Vaughn, 2002; Richards, Noret, & Rivers, 2003; McClennen, 2005). According to this model, which supposes the possibility to distinguish the role of the victim and the role of the author/authoress of violence, the cycle is divided in three stages: the first - called the phase of growth and anxiety- is one where there is a predominance of one of the two components of the couple who acts through emotional abuse and evident hostility against the rules and expectations that actually are broken. In the second stage, targeted as attacking stage, not only the severity of the attack produces results physically observable but the coping skills of the victim are reduced due to the escalation

of aggression and the fear of being abandoned. In fact, the victim becomes less able to cope with situations of risk.

Reaction caused by the manipulative behavior of the author of the violence that urges the victim to doubt about her/himself and her/him judgments of reality (*gaslighting*). In the third stage ("honeymoon") it stands out a kind of rapprochement: the executioner, playing down, apologizes to the partner promising not to be more violent. The motivation of the violent act is detected by the author in external factors (situational variables) such as stress. However, it is only a short period of quiet since, after the lag phase, another cycle of violence will start. In particular, in same-sex couples the need to not reveal their sexual orientation or the presence of conditions that expose them to risk of coming out, impose additional stress of social isolation.

### **SEXUAL PREJUDICE IN ITALY**

In Italy, about one million people declared her/himself homosexual or bisexual, especially among young adults of central Italy. Another two million or so said that they had experienced in their lives falling in love, having sex or sexual attraction to people of the same sex. Data shows of course only a part of LG (Lesbian and Gay) population since it is an underestimated phenomenon; serious difficulties for the coming out- that is to say, the voluntary act of revealing their homosexual identity - emerge because of social discrimination that in Italy is also present within the natural family. In fact, about 20% of the parents know the sexual orientation of their children, unlike the brothers (45.9%), the colleagues (55.7%) and especially the friends (77.4%) are in the dark about gender identity's issue (ISTAT, 2012).

Especially, homo-negativity refers to both the aversion and to the anxiety of homophobia, as well as to the range of attitudes towards homosexuality, also including the cultural components and the social roots of intolerance (Herek, 2000; Lingiardi, 2007), also it is still present among young people, not allowing the coming out (Garro, Novara, & Di Rienzo, 2013). All this despite the awareness of the Italian public opinion of the presence of homosexual people, their needs and rights are often unknown; a reality currently subject of attention by virtue of controversy concerning the possible formation of a homosexual family, which lives an absolute anomie.

These are also the reasons for which gay and lesbian couples are forced to invisibility and silence in case of possible incidents of violence within them.

### **VIOLENCE IN SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIP**

The theme of violence in same-sex couples seems to have no mutable content by the violent dynamics in heterosexual couples. In fact, as Ristock and Timbang (2002) claimed, according to the conducted surveys among homosexual people the heterosexual paradigms of domestic violence cannot fully explain the experience of same-sex couples where partners cannot always tell who is the victim and who the perpetrator.

In fact, the power is managed depending on the interpersonal and social context in which it develops in alternately way from both partner (ibid.). Considering that discrimination, negative stereotypes and prejudices are regularly directed to anyone who is not part of a dominant cultural group, for LG people may be more difficult, compared to heterosexuals, to address violence in intimate relationships and to get the support that they need to deal with it.

Further, the mainstreaming of same-sex intimate partner violence into public discourse presents critical questions about the purpose of dominant gender paradigms such as gender categorization and sexual orientation applied to understand heterosexual intimate partner violence. Problematic results the use of heterosexual language to describe and frame homosexual reality. Few studies have stressed the relevance of differences between homosexual and heterosexual community highlighting the impact of social, political and geographic contexts. Several important studies have stressed specific abusive behaviors that reflects context of homophobia, threats to reveal the sexual identity of a partner to family, friends or workplace or threats to reveal HIV/AIDS status of a partner (Ristock and Timbang 2005). For these reasons it is important to consider contexts and spaces in which violence is experienced so as the relevant role of specific risk factors as the stigmatization of illness such HIV/AIDS, the effects of alcohol or drug use, the social isolation in rural communities, the experiences of immigration or general moving so as different structural factors that produce and reproduce inequalities and disadvantages (ibid). Recent studies have interrogated critically the concept of being "at risk" (Hiebert-Murphy, Ristock and Brownridge 2011) for violence among relationships of same-sex, so as the nature and consequences of violence in the lives of same-sex couples using a postmodernist intersectional framework in order to overtake heteronormative construction of violence concerning the understanding of nature, consequences, risk factors and protective factors (Davis, Glass 2011).

In Italy studies that examine homosexual relations are not abundant because it is an underestimated phenomenon due to sexual prejudices and gender stereotypes. As consequence, LG subjects are obligated to live in the invisibility and silence. For this reason, the research sector, relatively new, on violence in same-sex intimate relationships is often examined, as well as in international level, in master Thesis and dissertations that often are

not readily available to the public (McClennen, 2005; Rohrbaugh, 2006). From the silence escape only the members of the association Rainbow Families that since 2005 represents in Italy those who have realized their project about parenting, or who aim to create family based not on biology or on the law but on the responsibility, daily mutual commitment, so as on the respect and love ([www.famigliearcobaleno.org](http://www.famigliearcobaleno.org)). However, the data obtained through international investigations reveal that the phenomenon of violence in same-sex relationships seems to revolve around the balance of power, inextricably linked to socio-cultural, education, employment status and state of health partner. In addition, another risk is the possible presence of threats of homophobia – i.e. the set of feelings and negative attitudes towards homosexual characteristics in themselves and in other people - that is associated with low quality of the couple relationship and the high levels of relationship conflict (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Frost & Meyer, 2009). Furthermore, several aspects as guilt's experience and the hope of a change of partner violence are recurrent emotional responses elicited by the victims, both homosexuals and heterosexuals, as well as it is revealed a constant cyclical nature of the abuse, the intensification of harassment over time, the issues of power and control, social isolation and the minimization of suffered violent act (Elliott, 1996; Walsh, 1996). The possible transition from violence to abuse, or intimate terrorism (Johnson, 1995; Rohrbaugh, 2006), takes place instead in the presence of a relational model based on humiliation, control relied on shame, even on intimidation ( Neilson, 2004). In fact, a partner can threaten the other to coming out, revealing to social community the sexual orientation against the own will (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Moreover, he/she can convince the victim that precisely because of such compulsory disclosure, he/she will lose the opportunity to receive material and psychological support by those who are unaware of his/her sexual orientation, including the original family or friends. Social isolation and the threat of "outing" are extremely powerful factors. Therefore, revealing both the personal sexual orientation and the sexual violence is equivalent to a double *-double closet-* coming out that it often provokes further isolation and psycho-physical vulnerability (McClennen, 2005).

Finally, outing instead of coming out means the voluntarily act to disclose the own homosexual identity, a necessary condition to achieve coherence between public and private identity, social and personal identity (Smart, Marasco & Baiocco, 2011). Relationships with family and friends could be irretrievably damaged if the partner's sexual orientation is revealed or announced in a hostile manner (Rohrbaugh, 2006). Generally, then the revelation of sexual orientation of a child is hardly welcomed by his/her family; It can be accepted only in the course of daily interactions through a process of adaptation. In addition, the existing resources within the family system play an unique role in producing certain developmental outcomes than others as a result of coming out. In such logic, adaptability and family cohesion, understood as the emotional bond, are protective factors (Olson, 1996). In summary a positively coming out processed by the family system can be conceptualized as a series of mutual adaptations between all members of the family and it involves: self-acceptance and affirmation by the son/daughter of his/her homosexual identity, the promotion of well-being and emotional growth of all members of the family, openness of the family system to the outside and the involvement of origin's families and the wider social context (Baiocco, Marasco, Smart, & Lonigro, 2012). Finally, the decision to leave or report the abusive partner depends often even on the possible lack of internal and external resources, on shame about the possible disclosing, the feeling of putting a bad light on the entire gay community, increasing prejudices about homosexuality (Brown, 2008). Therefore, specific attention should be paid to work on the emotions because the victims often do not appear able to react on the basis of how they feel; in fact, they spend their whole energy to understand the meaning of the violent behavior of the partner, to prevent violence and the possible isolation, thereby also minimizing the amount of violent conduct.

### **IPV IN LG'S RELATIONSHIPS: THE CASE OF ITALY**

The analysis of the phenomenon of violence in intimate adulthood homosexual relationships, show the presence of dispositional variables (style of attachment, violence) and situational (socio-economic status, homonegative environments, perceived and received social support) and still variables associated to the quality and the management of internal dynamics (communication, conflict, sexual life), that influence the couple dynamics so as possibly decision by the victim to denounce the suffered behaviors. The possible use, in fact, of the social support network (family, friendship, or significant other) is a protective factor; an opportunity of which enjoy only those who have revealed their sexual orientation (coming out).

This is what has been shown in a preliminary analysis of the results obtained by a qualitative survey. We conducted the study on 502 subjects components of the Sicilian communities LG (185 females and 317 males; mean age = 37.96; Education = 58.4 % Bachelor's degree or higher; 67.9% coming out) that experienced, or were maintaining, or cohabiting relationship at the time of the survey (46.6% cohabiters), and actually it is currently being processed. In Italy, investigations with homosexual participants present some difficulties caused not only by the lack of validated instruments on homosexual couples, which is why one have to borrow self

report questionnaires from research conducted between heterosexual couples (Coker, Smith, Thompson, McKeown, Bethea & Davis, 2002; Ridley & Feldman, 2003; Stith, Green, Smith & Ward, 2008; Goldenson, Spidel, Greaves, Dutton, 2009; Stith & McCollum, 2011), but also because of the small number of subjects to involve due to the invisibility to which the same are forced.

Italy, in fact, is a country where the negative attitude is widespread, peculiarity which explains the presence of 32% of subjects involved by us who are forced to live in invisibility because they are unable to unfold. These are also who claim to live a relationship at times violent and who are forced into silence because, having not done the coming out, they do not have a social support network. In contrast, 67.9% of the participants who completed the come out claim to have the opportunity to take advantage of a valuable support not only by friends or significant other, but rather by the family whose emotional closeness, for example, is generally more stable over time compared to that of strangers.

Furthermore, it has been possible to highlight the position of those who report the presence of violent dynamics within the intimate relationship, but that tends to enhance all the positive aspects of the report (72%). It seems that the subjects involved tended to minimize the danger of the aggressive behavior and to amplify the magnitude of the external support received especially in cases where the unveiling did not take place. Strong emotions that characterize the pair bond, in fact, urge not to end the relationship because, as some theorists claim, the emotions are most frequently and intensely experienced in the context of close relationships (see Ekman & Davidson, 1994). Lazarus, for example, states that "most emotions involve two people who are experiencing either a transient or stable interpersonal relationship of significance" (1994, p. 209). Balsam (2001) suggests that in such relationships a risk factor for the increase of severity and frequency of violence is the degree of dependence on the abuser; this, according to Peterman and Dixon (2003), makes it even more difficult for victims to end the relationship. Similarly, the anxiety and the fear of being abandoned are associated with violence (Rholes & Simpson, 1998). Consequently, it seems necessary to devote space to the profile of the personality of those involved; potential violent dynamics reside, in fact, in the sphere of the individual characteristics of the protagonists of violence (perpetrators and victims), and not only in the possibility of getting support from their families of origin or in the peculiarity of intimate relationship (McKenry, Srovich, Mason, & Mosack, 2006; Salerno & Giuliano, 2012).

However one ever-present issue in assessment of violent behavior is the absence of a "gold standard" with which compare self-report data. Even if such normative data were available, it would be difficult to draw conclusions on an individual basis regarding whether a participant has accurately reported the dynamics of couple conflict. Unlike behaviors that are directly observable, risky sexual violent behaviors are inherently private, frequently considered taboo, and with characteristics that make them inherently inaccessible to direct assessment strategies. The fact that there is no complaint that corresponds directly to frequency of violent behavior compounds the problem. There have been few studies designed to examine evidence for the validity of self-report violent behavior measures. However, methods such as comparing self-reports with partner reports and comparing self-reports of risk behavior, have been employed in several studies (Schroder, Carey, & Vanable, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

The risk of experiencing violence in relationships is reduced if the communication patterns and conflict become the objects of intervention of professional's healthcare. However, it is also useful, especially for the well-being of same-sex couples and homosexual persons, to combat the ignorance and prejudices regarding sexual orientation, integrating the individual psychological support interventions with specific and coordinated actions as social, educational and informational actions. All that in the respect of human rights with national and international legislative action. In fact, the laws, that exclude lesbian and gay people from the recognition of rights, cause stress among the interested which affects the physical and mental health of the same (Munsey, 2010).

It is clear that the IPV in homosexual relationship is a problem that must be inserted into the socio-political and cultural contexts, challenging the traditional paradigms of understanding and evaluation of the phenomenon. In this sense, it needs a research that deepens characteristics, impact and extensions of this phenomenon at the micro and macro level.

The requirement emerges for future social workers to acquire new competencies and high healthcare training to guarantee social support of ample respite to social minority groups, subjects of discrimination and stigmatization.

There is the need to get more information and education of professionals who work in this field with the specific nature of violence in same-sex couples in order to identify the role of counseling and support in dealing with victims and the offenders, in the difficult process of separation and affective emancipation.

Intimate partner violence in same-sex relationship is stigmatized deeply by homophobia, HIV and outing's threats (Craft, Serevoich, 2005). Such aspects characterize, therefore, the violence in LG's partners. It is unintelligible, therefore, how many societies generalize the problem of gender-based violence in prevention's measurements. Particularly, in Italy the campaigns about gender-based violence regard merely cases in which women suffer violence and men commit violence. As consequence, gender-based violence against men, lesbian, gay, queer and travesty remains obscured and invisible.

Moreover, it is necessary to encourage primary prevention campaigns and emotional education in order to facilitate the disclosure of homosexuals as well as the acceptance by the people significant emotionally. During the adolescent phase of the son/daughter the acceptance of the family is associated with positive health outcomes of children in terms of self-esteem, social support and general health, and it is a protective factor against depression, abuse of substance, or suicide attempts (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). All these factors are well correlated with the possibility of succumbing to violence in intimate relationships in adulthood.

In fact, violence activates more easily if it is linked to abuse of alcohol and drug, social isolation in rural communities, to immigration, to risky sexual behavior, the perception of social barriers that prevent the requests' help (Ristock, 2005; Eaton et al., 2008).

Finally, it is important to stress that "the historical legacy of Italian legislation is characterized by negation rather than repression of homosexuality. Same-sex relations, as well as homophobia, remain invisible to state regulation. The only relevant exception is legislative decree no. 216/2003 implementing Directive 2000/78/CE, where sexual orientation is mentioned as one of the grounds of discrimination. (Art.1)

Generally speaking, the Italian legal system lacks documents, statistics and case law concerning discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation. And there is no recognition of same-sex partnerships at national level and no access to adoption for same-sex couples (Art.2). And Art.3: Several LG organizations are mobilizing for the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships and against homophobia and discrimination, including speaking out against the influence of the Catholic Church in hampering new legislation on these issues (Cowi, 2009).

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