

**Relational dynamics in same-sex couples with Intimate Partner Violence: coming out as a protective factor**

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**Abstract**

*The aim of this article is to participate in the debate on the phenomenon of violence in intimate relationships; a path of dominance and control, often accompanied by abusive behaviour and power. In particular, we would like to refer to violence in same-sex relationships, where this important role can be detected both from the relational asymmetry of the partner and also from the threat of a possible outing. It is a widespread phenomenon, yet not sufficiently taken into account, due to the invisibility in which homosexuals live. The inability to come out, is often hampered by sexual prejudices present in many societies – a situation that creates conditions for a lack of a social support network.*

*This leads to the tendency of the parties concerned to fail to occupy defined positions in the identification of the dynamics of inner conflict, as well as to highlight aspects of the couple relationship by minimising the danger of the aggressive behaviour of the male/female partner. Official data relating to the issue in Italy underlines the need to combat the phenomenon effectively by integrating interventions with timely and coordinated actions in the social, educational, informational and political environment in relation to sexual discrimination.*

**Keywords: Homosexual, intimate violence, same-sex couples, Italy.**

## **Introduction**

Violence committed in intimate relationships is part of a systematic path of dominance and control, and is often accompanied by abusive behaviour and power which produce social isolation and a depletion in social competencies, participation and freedom of action. The severity of the consequences of such a relational configuration on the direct victims (the partner who suffers violence) and indirect victims (the children, where applicable) has necessitated a series of investigations in terms of knowledge of the phenomenon, of preventive interventions, of taking charge of the abuser and victim and of legal protection to the individuals involved (Salerno, *in press*).

Some researchers argue that Walkers' cyclical pattern of violence (1979), typical of heterosexual couples, (1979), may also be useful even today for understanding the development and maintenance of violent dynamics (McClennen, Summers, & Vaughn, 2002; Richards, Noret, & Rivers, 2003; McClennen, 2005). According to this theory, which implies an opportunity of distinguishing the role of the victim and that of the author of violence, the cycle consists of three phases: the first - ("growing tension") - is one in which there is a predominance of one of the two components of the couple which acts on the emotional abuse and hostility to the rules and expectations that have been breached; in the second phase ("attack"), not only does the severity of the aggression produce physically observable results but it also hinders the victim's coping skills. Due to the escalation of aggression and the fear of being abandoned, they become less able to cope with risky situations. The reaction caused by the manipulative behaviour of the aggressor encourages the victim to doubt herself and her judgments of reality (gaslighting). In the third phase ("honeymoon") there is, instead, a sort of rapprochement: the executioner, by playing it down, apologises to the male/female partner by promising not to be violent anymore. The reason for the violent act is identified by the author in external factors (situational variables) such as stress. It is, however, only a short period of calm as another cycle of violence begins after this letup.

One model, however, which is not fully applicable to same-sex couples due to further stress dictated by social isolation, is the need to not reveal their sexual orientation or the presence of conditions that put them at risk of being exposed and being 'outed', by creating particularly risky conditions.

## **SEXUAL PREJUDICE AND COMING OUT IN ITALY**

In Italy, about a million people have declared themselves homosexual or bisexual, especially among young adults in central Italy. Another two million or so said they had experienced falling in love at some point, sexual relationships or sexual attraction to people of the same sex. The data obviously represents only a part of the LG (Lesbian and Gay) population, given that it is an underestimated phenomenon; major difficulties in coming-out, that is for the voluntary act of revealing their homosexual identity, emerge as a result of social discrimination which, in Italy, is also present within the natural family; in fact, about 20% of parents know the sexual orientation of their children, as opposed to siblings (45.9%), colleagues (55.7%) and, above all, friends (77.4%) (ISTAT, 2012).

Homonegativity, as a matter of fact, refers to both the aversion and to the anxiety of homophobia, as well as to the range of attitudes towards homosexuality (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), and also includes the cultural components and the social roots of intolerance (Herek, 2000, Lingardi, 2007). This remains present even in young people by failing to allow them to come out

peacefully (Garro, Novara, & Di Rienzo, 2013). All this, despite the awareness of Italian public opinion on the presence of gay people, whereby their needs and rights are too often ignored; a reality which is, at present, the subject of attention by virtue of the controversy concerning the possible formation of a homosexual family who lives in absolute anomie. These are also the reasons for which gay and lesbian couples, who can operate in a manner similar to that of healthy heterosexual couples (Kudek, 1994), are being forced to be invisible and are being silenced out of fear of possible episodes of violence towards them.

## **VIOLENCE IN SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS: RISK FACTORS AND PROTECTION**

The subject of violence in same-sex couples, despite the above remarks, therefore, does not seem to be comparable to the dynamics of couples made up of individuals of the opposite sex. In fact, as Ristock and Timbang have argued (2002), in the light of surveys conducted on the homosexual population, heterosexual paradigms of domestic violence cannot fully explain the experience of the pairs of same-sex partners where, in fact, it is not always possible to distinguish who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. Power is controlled, depending on the social and interpersonal context in which it develops, by both partners alternately (ibid.). And as discrimination, negative stereotypes and prejudices are regularly targeted towards anyone who is not part of a dominant cultural group, it can be more difficult for LG people, compared to heterosexuals, to address violence in intimate relationships and to get the support they need to deal with it.

In Italy, there is not an abundance of studies examining homosexual relationships, since it is an understated phenomenon due to gender bias and gender stereotypes that induce LG subjects to invisibility and silence; for this reason, the research sector on violence in intimate, homosexual relationships, which is relatively new, is often reviewed on an international level, in theses or doctoral dissertations which, however, are not readily available to the public (McClennen, 2005; Rohrbaugh, 2006). The only couples to break this silence are those who have signed up to the Rainbow Families Association, which since 2005, represents Italians who have created their own parenting plan or who aspire to create families based not on biology or on the law, but on responsibility and daily commitment to one another, as well as on respect and love ([www.famigliarcobaleno.org](http://www.famigliarcobaleno.org)).

Data obtained through international investigations reveal, however, that the phenomenon of violence in same-sex relationships seems to revolve around the balance of power and is inextricably linked to socio-cultural status, education, working conditions and to the health status of the partners. Added to this is inevitably the possible presence of an internalised homophobia -that is, a set of negative feelings and attitudes toward homosexual characteristics in oneself and in other people - which is, in turn, associated with a low quality of couple relationship and with high levels of relational conflict (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Frost & Meyer, 2009). However, to experience guilt and to hope for a change in the violent partner, recurring emotional responses are elicited by the victims, homosexuals and heterosexuals, as well as the constant, cyclical nature of abuse, the intensified harassment over time, issues of power and control, social isolation and the minimisation of the violent act that has been endured (Elliott, 1996; Walsh, 1996).

With the possible transition from violence to abuse, or intimate terrorism (Johnson, 1995; Rohrbaugh, 2006), it takes place instead in the presence of a relational model based on humiliation, control, and relying on shame and even intimidation (Neilson, 2004). A violent partner, in fact, may

threaten the other from coming out, from revealing the social and sexual orientation against his/her will (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003), and can convince the victim that, precisely because of that forced revelation, that they will miss the opportunity to receive material and psychological support from those who are unaware of his/her sexual orientation, such as the family of origin or friends. Social isolation and the threat of "outing" are extremely powerful factors. Revealing their sexual orientation to the public and the violence that they have suffered is tantamount. Therefore, in coming out "double closet", this is often caused by further isolation and psycho-physical vulnerability (McClennen, 2005).

Outing, then, instead of coming out is a necessary condition for the latter to achieve coherence between public and private identity, social identity and personal identity (Astuto, 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, in fact, the unveiling of his son's sexual orientation is hardly welcomed by the family; it can be accepted, in fact, only in the course of everyday interactions through a process of adaptation. The existing resources within the family system play, therefore, a peculiar role in producing certain developmental outcomes rather than others, as a result of coming out. Family adaptability and cohesion, understood as the emotional bond, are, in this sense, a protective factor (Olson, 1996). In summary, a positive coming-out developed by the family system can be conceptualised as a series of reciprocal adaptations between all members of the family involving: self-acceptance and affirmation by the son of his homosexual identity; the promotion of emotional well-being and the growth of all members of the family; opening up to the outside of the family system and the involvement of families of origin; and the wider social context (Baiocco, Marasco, Astuto, & Lonigro, 2012).

The decision to leave or to reveal the violent partner can often be mediated, in short, from a possible lack of internal and external resources, out of shame about the possible revelation, through fear of portraying the entire gay community in a negative light and through increasing prejudices about homosexuality (Brown, 2008). Specific attention should, therefore, be paid to the struggle on emotions, given that victims often do not appear able to react based on their feelings. In fact, their energy is spent on understanding the meaning of the partner's violent behaviour, on preventing violence and probable isolation, thereby also minimising the extent of the violent behaviour. The presence of violent dynamics within the intimate homosexual relationship, in the absence of coming out, may urge the parties involved to draw on all the positive aspects of the relationship, minimising the danger of aggressive behaviour and boosting the amount of external support received, especially in cases where the coming-out has not yet taken place. Strong emotions that characterise the pair's bond, urge the partners to not end the relationship, as some theorists argue how 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) believes that in such relationships, there is a risk factor for increased severity and frequency of violence and the degree of dependence by the abuser; this, according to Peterman and Dixon (2003), makes it even more difficult for victims to end the relationship. In addition, all attempts that the victims make to increase their autonomy result in severe and prolonged forms of abuse and maltreatment. The anxiety and fear of being abandoned are, in this sense, associated with violence, as well as internal factors which can affect the dyadic system (Simpson & Rholes, 1998).

It appears necessary, in fact, to dedicate space to the personality profile of those involved in couple relationships; potential violent dynamics can exist within the individual characteristics of the protagonists of violence (perpetrators and victims), and not only in the peculiarity of the intimate relationship or in the reactions of their families of origin to their coming out (McKenry, Srovich, Mason, & Mosack, 2006; Salerno & Giuliano, 2012).

Official comparative data on violence in same-sex couple relationships urges, therefore, a discussion particularly in relation to the process of recognition and denial on the part of single individuals, the shaking action received and its efforts to minimise the facts. However, one ever-present issue in assessment of violent behaviour is the absence of a “gold standard” with which to 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 behaviours that are directly observable, risky, sexual, violent behaviour is inherently private and frequently considered taboo with characteristics that make them inherently inaccessible to direct assessment strategies. The fact that there are no complaints that correspond directly to the frequency of violent behaviour further compounds the problem. There have been few studies designed to examine evidence for the validity of self-report, violent behaviour measures. However, methods such as comparing self-reports with partner reports and comparing self-reports of risk behaviour have been employed in several studies (Schroder, Carey, & Venable, 2003).

Certainly for same-sex couples, the risk of experiencing episodes of violence is reduced if the communication patterns and the conflict become the object of intervention by experts in supportive relationships. In order to effectively combat the ignorance and prejudices regarding sexual orientation, it is also useful to combine individual, psychological support with specific and coordinated actions of a social, educational and informative nature, as well as a respect for human rights through national and international legislative intervention. The laws, in fact, that exclude lesbian and gay people from the recognition of rights are further causes of stress and physical and mental discomfort (Munsey, 2010).

## **Conclusions**

It is clear that IPV in same-sex relationships is a problem that should be inserted into the current socio-political and cultural framework, by challenging traditional paradigms of understanding and appreciation of the phenomenon. In this sense, we need a research project that examines in detail the characteristics, the extent and the impact of this phenomenon at a micro and macro level. The requirement emerges for future social workers to acquire new competencies and for high healthcare training to guarantee social support of ample respite to social minority groups, who are subjects of discrimination and stigmatisation.

We need greater information and awareness on professionals who are working in the sector with respect to the specific nature of violence in same-sex couples in order to identify the role of counseling in confronting this, and to support the victims and the offenders in the difficult process of separation and emotional emancipation.

But it is particularly necessary to promote campaigns and primary prevention of emotional education in order to facilitate the unveiling of gay people, as well as the acceptance by the affectively significant people. Family acceptance, in the adolescent phase of the son / daughter, is associated with positive health outcomes of offspring in terms of self-esteem, social support and

general health, and is a protective factor against depression, substance abuse, or suicide attempts (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010), which correlate well with the possibility of succumbing to violence in intimate relationships in adulthood. Violence, in fact, is triggered more easily when it is connected to substance abuse and alcohol, to social isolation in rural communities, to immigration, to risky sexual behaviour and to the perception of social barriers which hamper requests for 'help' (Ristock, 2005; Eaton et al., 2008).

And, finally, it is necessary to underline that "The historical legacy of Italian legislation is characterised by negation rather than the 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 a national level and no access to adoption for same-sex couples (Art.2). And Art.3: Several LG organisations are preparing 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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