

## THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD ON ADULTHOOD

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the ways in which experiences of domestic violence in early childhood shape adult relationships and sense making of violence in adult life. Our data consists of interviews with 10 people who experienced domestic violence, most of them before the age of 9 and who also experienced inhibition, depression, anxiety, relationship conflicts with parents and partners in their adult life. Relationship with parents were severed; gender differences in couple relationships manifested in men interviewees trying not to be aggressive, while in women interviewees struggling with being the target of violence in their relationships. All interviewees believed that violence is not a way to solve problems.*

**Key words:** *domestic violence, trauma, aggressor, victim*

### 1. Introduction

Violence is one of the worst social problems in the world today, insidiously permeating all aspects of our lives, including parent-child relationships. To have a harmonious development children need the love and support of their parents. The attitude that parents manifest towards children as well as towards each other will often be reproduced in the child's behavior. Thus, the parents' model is often followed. Family violence affects the child both at the time of its realization and during life. If one of the parents is aggressive with the other, the child can understand that this is a normal reaction and will imitate this behavior. Indifference, neglect, violence, or abuse are just some of the negative types of behavior that have long term effects on a child's life. Most of the time, parents adopt inappropriate types of behavior without realizing the effects they will have on their children, and often following a pattern they learned in their own families.

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### **1.1. General Aspects regarding the Concept of Domestic Violence**

According to Law no. 183/2020, regarding the amendments and completions of Law no. 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence, Art. 3, domestic violence is defined as any inaction or intentional action of physical, sexual, psychological violence, economic, social, spiritual or cybernetic, which occurs in the family environment or domestic environment or between spouses or ex-spouses, as well as between current or ex-partners, regardless if the aggressor lives or has lived with the victim. Domestic violence has been given social recognition due to its negative spatial and temporal effects on society. Stark and Flitcraft define this concept: "Violence is a threat or challenge, present or past, to physical injury in the relationship between the social partners, regardless of their legal status or of domicile. Physical or sexual assault may be accompanied by intimidation or verbal abuse; of destruction of property belonging to the victim; isolation from friends, family or others potential sources of support; threats made against other significant persons for the victim, including children; theft; control over money, things personal data of the victim, food, travel, telephone and other sources of care and protection" (Stark and Flitcraft, 1996 in Muntean, 2004). Abuse within a family can manifest in several forms: verbal abuse, money management only by the aggressor, isolation of friends and family members, threats and attacks that can sometimes lead to the death of one of the partners.

### **1.2. The Child as a Witness of Domestic Violence**

The family is the decisive factor in the development of children. Seeing their parents in conflictual situations, the child is affected being a direct and indirect witness. The roles in the family fall apart and in the child's perception authority is replaced by terror. They will learn to avoid aggression at all costs, that the one with the greatest strength will win, and the weakest must obey (Muntean, 2004). Children will learn that conflictual situations are resolved through violence and communication skills. Compromising as a strategy to resolve conflict and the value or affective relationship are not developed. In their relationships with groups of friends or family they will react aggressively and avoid solving problems (Muntean, 2004). Although the breakup of families traumatizes children, most often the conflicts between parents are those with more severe negative consequences in the child's development (Pelsser, 1989). Hence, of the reasons while parents may resort to domestic violence against each other is related to the relationship of the parents. Since, the quality of the relationships between people can influence their well-being and happiness (Coman, 2018a, p.245), if parents do not have a qualitative relationship, in time, they may be determined to act violently against one another.

### **1.3. Causes and Consequences of Violence**

Focusing on the characteristics of family and social systems, Strauss (1991) presented five factors that can be the cause of domestic violence:

1. intra-family conflicts - the same elements that contribute to intimacy and affection

between family members can also trigger the conflict.

2. patriarchal structures - the dominant role society grants men in the family and in society.
3. cultural norms that allow domestic violence – parental rights as proprietary rights over children rights as illustrated in the old saying “Eu te-am facut, eu te omor” (“I gave you life, I can take it away”)
4. family socialization in violence - children imitate the behavior of parents, see violence as a way to solve problems and take this concept from one generation to another, communication being non-existent
5. the omnipresence of violence in society – especially popularized through extensive media coverage and its oversaturation in violent acts, normalizes violence as a way of being in the world. (Turliuc, 2009)

According to Bandura, aggression tends to influence behavior patterns, with children and young people identifying with the aggressor, and clinical observations support the idea that boys of abused mothers tend to behave aggressively with them: "The father provides a violent role for the sons, while the mothers provide an appropriate role model for the girls" (Turliuc, 2009). Even more, in today's society, people in general and business men in particular, have less time for family life, a thing that leads to children growing up without the support of their parents (Coman, 2007, p.15). In this regard, being often stressed and too tired to deal with the needs of their children, parents can tend to engage in aggressive behavior towards them. In the context of the causes of domestic violence, the role of mass – media as an institution which not only informs but also shapes the perception of the public is very important. Thus, the violence related messages reported by mass – media channels, especially Television, can cultivate attitudes which are more aligned with the messages sent than with the reality (Coman, 2018b, p.89), and sometimes parents' violent attitudes may also come as a result of the exposure to violent messages and to violent situations.

## 2. Method

This paper explores through qualitative interviews the ways in which experiences of domestic violence in early childhood shape adult relationships and sensemaking of violence in adult life. Our data consists of interviews with 10 people who experienced domestic violence, most of them before the age of 9 and who also experienced inhibition, depression, anxiety, relationship conflicts with parents and partners in their adult life. The themes we explored through our interviews are: the traumatic effects of experiencing domestic violence in childhood that manifest during adulthood; the generational reproduction of domestic violence (to what extent do children who experience domestic violence engage in abusive behaviour as adults). We also strive to understand forms of violence experienced by our interviewees during childhood, how the age of the child at the first encounter with violence influences the perception and sense-making of violence in adult life.

A small number of people, former victims of domestic violence are willing to participate in the research process due to low self-esteem, fear or misperception and

discrimination. Our sample consists of 10 people, 5 women and 5 men, aged between 21-33, from various counties: Gorj, Dolj, Tulcea, Timiș, Alba, and from both rural and urban areas. The sample is non-probabilistic. Regarding the data collection procedure, participation was voluntary, and the subjects were assured from the beginning of the confidentiality of the data, and they were asked for consent to record the interview. The interviews were conducted in an informal environment after which they were transcribed and analysed according to the main themes.

Five interviews were conducted face-to-face in an informal setting, and the others were conducted by telephone. To maintain the confidentiality of the subjects, codes (S) numbered from 1-10 were assigned. The interview guide included five topics: 1. Definition of the concept, 2. Childhood, 3. Domestic violence (during childhood and adulthood), 4. Effects on development, 5. Effects on human relationships.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. Defining the Concept by the Subjects**

As a multitude of definitions of domestic violence have been encountered, the first theme identifies the ways in which our interviewees define the concept of domestic violence. Although domestic violence is manifested in several forms: psychological, economic, cyber, spiritual, social, sexual, physical, most of our interviewees addressed only physical and psychological aspects. For example, one interviewee discussed killing a person as part of the concept of domestic violence: "Domestic violence is beating or even killing a person" -S1

#### **3.2. Childhood**

Our discussion of childhood experiences is informed by the assumption that "childhood events are important for further harmonious development" (Morand de Jouffrey, 1998). The main personality traits are determined both by the genetic constitution and by the experiences lived in the first 3 years of life. The relation of the individual to himself and to the others is sketched in the first 6-7 years of life. Thus, the psychological structure, emotional intelligence, control of instincts, the ability to love, well-being, tolerance, depend largely on the history of this stage. (Senger and Hoffmann, 1998).

During the discussion about childhood in our interviews, feelings of sadness, as the best way to capture this period were shared by some participants:

"I don't know, negligence, that's how I can describe my childhood" -S4

"It was a childhood I don't want anyone to have. I can't say that I missed anything I needed, but what does that matter when you see your mother, whom you love so much, crying, suffering ..."- S5

Parental responsibilities not honoured through neglect, direct violence against children, or due to the abuse of one parent was a common way our interviewees saw their childhood.

Other participants will recall their childhood in more ambivalent ways, with positive feelings being associated with moments when violence stopped, or before became part

of their family experience:

“My childhood was good and bad; I was beaten even with my hair” –S1

“My childhood was quite controversial.” – S7

“Yes, apart from those moments, yes, it was ok.” – S9

“When I was little, I had a very happy childhood.” – S10

“From the age of 3 I was placed in foster care. I went to school at the orphanage. The orphanage uplifted my life.” –S2.

Positive attitudes and evocations of childhood despite experiencing violence, were associated by one interviewee with being removed from the violent environment and being able to maintain relationships with a supportive parent. Our interviewee S2, for example considers that he had a good childhood because his mother made the best choice – placing him in an institution, to protect him, while also visiting him frequently.

### **3.4. Domestic Violence (from its first Manifestation during Childhood to its Current Forms in Adulthood)**

All our 10 interviewees recognized and recollected experiences of violence against their own person in their early childhood, between 3 and 9 years of age.

“Violence against me started in kindergarten.” – S1

“I have memories of when I was very young, 3-4-5 years old, I remember scenes of violence, of beatings.” – S4

“I noticed it since childhood, somewhere at 6-7 years I think, at least since then I remember it.” S7

“Then they started, 8-9 years old.” – S8

“Ever since I started remembering 4-5 years, physical [violence] has been somewhere around 11 years old.” – S9 ”

Some of interviewees mentioned witnessing family conflicts as the first form of violence they encountered and recognized as damaging. Also, histories of violence in their family predating their birth were shared by several interviewees, as key to making sense of violence in their lives:

“[Violence] Had been present in the family before my birth.” – S1

“My mother told me that my father beat her just before I was born.” – S7

“I understood that when he came out of prison he became human garbage ... When my mother met him, he was not violent, he was not aggressive.” – S5

The most common forms of violence recollected by the interviewees were psychological, physical and verbal:

“Verbal, many swear words, words that should not have been said around a child.” – S1

“Psychic violence I remember that I was very small, too small to realize what was happening, but I simply woke up at night and heard her screaming, my mother crying.” – S3

“Indeed one evening my grandfather came more tormented than he usually was and he had some quarrels with my grandmother and raised his hand.” –S5

According to Steele and Conger (1979) people who abuse other family members have low self-esteem, feel helpless, and use violence to gain a sense of dominance and power. Patriarchal values legitimate man's violence within the family against wife and children as well as in society to achieve and maintain status and power. Our interviews showed a gendered pattern of domestic violence with sons abusing their mothers, husbands abusing their wives and children of all genders:

"My father is an alcoholic, very violent with my mother. Blows with fists, palms, my mother often cried." S3

"My mother was washing my feet and I started making noise because she was tickling me, and my father was watching TV and I remember that he kicked my mother in the ribs so that he broke her rib." S4

"When I wasn't home, I always found my mother with red eyes." S7

"It first started with a push, and then things degenerated." - S6

The theme of violence as discipline, perpetuating from one generation to another and creating a vicious cycle of abuse (Rosner) was also part of our interviewee's stories. Violence as a way to teach discipline, obedience and inspire respect, to punish wrongdoing has been part of our interviewees' education. However, violence for educational purposes indicated a different gendered pattern, with the mother punishing, physically abusing the children:

"My mother beat me ... it was that classic beat, you know ... let me teach you a lesson" -S3

"My mother beat me when I was little ... I know that since I was 7, I didn't want to go to school because she went to work, I didn't want to write without her ... sometimes she beat me when I wasn't listening, or when I was "doing something naughty" -S7

"He beat my mother and us many times. I had a broken lip, a broken head ... My mother followed in my father's footsteps; I was beaten until I was 20 when I left home." – S8

"My mother came to school, and she beat me with a belt in front of my classmates.... without hearing what I had to say." –S1

These stories show how patriarchal values, including the use of violence are upheld by both men and women, mothers and fathers, as well the gender division of labour in the family – with mothers responsible for children education.

Trying to understand the causes and factors contributing to domestic violence in their life our interviewees presented several themes. One is the understanding of the abusive, violent behaviour as impulsive and compulsive:

"He cannot control himself...he also was very greedy and cheap"- S2

"Jealousy, my father was very jealous without any reasons, from what I know" –S8

„They cannot understand what's happening around them, cannot think of the consequences. Plus, they act like that when they are drunk" – S7

Alcohol as a precipitating factor was identified, but is has been understood as a symptom, as a defensive reaction to precarity, poverty, hardship, and life-threatening conditions:

"There were shortcomings, there were too many quarrels about" I didn't have that, I didn't have that "and excessive alcohol consumption, it's good that alcohol is actually an excuse to do certain things." –S6

"The reasons were money, cheating, paranoia, drinking and my father. They were arguing over alcohol and disease. My father had cancer" –S1

In all 10 cases, alcohol consumption was identified, but it was seen as just an "excuse" of the aggressors.

Being shamed, overwhelmed, not knowing how to solve a problem, or not seeing solutions are seen as conducive to both alcohol consumption and violence in the experiences of our interviewees.

### 3.5. Effects on Development

The interviewees discussed anxiety, depression, and drug use as problems they experience as a result of domestic violence:

"I had problems with sleep, anxiety, I woke up with shocks, I found refuge in drugs ..." - S1

"I have panic and anxiety attacks when I have nervous outbursts" -S3

"Most of my childhood, starting from the age of 12, until last year I would say, I had problems with depression, anxiety, panic attacks" –S4

"Wait, I have these losses, I have a memory, I also went to therapy. I had a wooden glass door and it was his habit to stare out the window at me. He would spy on me and he would do this quite often, and nowadays when I hear a door from my neighbors, it still scares me. ... After my father hit me, I had nightmares for a few months, years. Even when someone becomes more aggressive only verbally, I have a greater fear in me." –S9

Views and attitudes towards self, such as shyness, lack of confidence and self-distrust have been connected to experiencing domestic violence:

"From the age of 6 ... I didn't like people ... I was closed in on myself." –S7

"I developed a trauma/deep fear of saying something, of making friends with my parents" -S8

"That's why I didn't [have] friends. It has sabotaged all my trust, and this is probably why I do not trust anyone." – S10.

Witnessing domestic violence, the subjects developed a sense of guilt. They feel guilty for not being able to act against the aggressor:

"I had come to ask my mother to file for divorce, because I couldn't take it anymore ... if I wasn't there, he would beat her ... I would feel guilty when I wasn't there to defend her." - S7

Another insight offered by our interviewees is that experiencing domestic violence contributing to children maturing faster than other children their age, assuming parental responsibilities not fulfilled by their own parents and sometimes taking ownership of their own development:

"Violence against me has matured me, because I had to defend my mother and sister ... it had already become a responsibility ..." - S7

"I was affected, but as a child I forgot. I chose to develop myself ..." –S1

To manage emotions and pain experienced in domestic violence contexts, several of our interviewees engaged in self-harm and suicide ideations and attempts. Their experience shed light on how we internalize oppression, how the violence perpetrated against us in our environment mutates into violence directed by us against ourselves. Three of our interviewees discussed how they resorted to self-hurting behaviors, in most severe cases suicide attempts in response to their domestic violence experience:

"I wanted to hang myself because of the violence, I didn't have anyone, I didn't have anyone to communicate with ..." - S1

"I was breaking, I was punching the window" -S1

"I wanted to throw myself off the balcony" -S3

"I had a period in which I admit that I cut myself, I consumed a lot of alcoholic beverages and I had reached a limit point where I was to take a handful of pills"-S6"

"I tried several times to take pills to commit suicide"-S9

Reflecting on the presence of violence in their adult life, some of the interviewees found themselves engaging in violent acts:

"I even got to hit girls." - S1

"I was going to kill my mother, grandmother and brother" -S1

"Brother ... I hit him in the head with a stone and I wasn't interested" S1

"Mother ... I took the chair and I wanted to hit him in the head for a boy ..." - S1

Reflecting on these behaviors, our interviewees indicated that stressful situations, trigger impulsive responses:

"Sometimes well, sometimes volcanically, it depends." AND if I don't leave, we get into the other problem with nervous outbursts, and it's not good again, either I leave or I cry"-S3"

I can't cope with the stress at all, I have so much, I sweat, I also have symptoms, I'm hot, I'm agitated, ."- S4

Three interviewees shared that as children they resorted to violence against their siblings. In one case, the violence was manifested only once, without continuity, and in the others, violent reactions towards the brothers were repetitive. As existing research also indicates, some people experiencing violence as children, react by making special efforts to break the cycle of violence by not using it and not passing it down. Factors that are associated with this attitude include having a trust-based relationship with at least one significant person during childhood, having a supportive relationship with their current partner, and having therapy for at least a year. (Erikson, 1989; Riedesser and Fischer, 2007). Among our interviewees, three people discussed how their personal experience of abuse made them strong opponents of violence but how the impulse to react violently surfaced:

"I have never hit anyone, and I do not offend anyone but I was tempted. And a lot of repressed anger." S3

"I argued with a few people, but I didn't get into a fight with anyone." - S9

"I would not say that I am violent, but when I get angry, I act as a 3-year-old child ... they had to hold my hands. I have bad reactions.... It clearly affected me. I would say that I can be verbally and emotionally abusive." – S9



### 3.6. Effects on relationships

Healthy relationships during childhood are the key to forming healthy relationships as adults. Among our interviewees, their relationship with at least one parent was dysfunctional:

"I tried to avoid my father as much as possible."- S3

"Well, my father was always the person I tried to avoid because of his personality." –S5

Childhood trauma can affect interpersonal relationships, with survivors seeking isolation and limited contact with the rest of the world. Distrust learned in family relationships is informing attitudes towards future relations:

"I left my brother and mother in my native village ... the relationship with friends was destroyed S? – S6

"I had a large circle of friends, but over time this circle was reduced to 2-3 people." – S6

Reflecting on their current relationships, some of our interviewees found themselves re-living, re-enacting toxic relationships and forms of relating they experienced in their childhood. We noted the same pattern of gender differences as in the original family, with men re-enacting the aggressor behavior and women the victim behavior:

"She made fun of me, talking to me like to a dog" -S1

"She hit me" -S1 "I I stripped her naked and wanted to throw her to the dogs." - S1

"I stayed with Z for 2 years, there were scandals, crazy things, after Z, I was with someone else, but it did not work, he looked like my father, and I noticed he tended to control me." S4

All our women interviewees were abused at least once by their partner, and some found several of their relationships toxic. Not having a model of a functional relationship was identified as part of the problem. Avoiding partners with personalities and types of behaviors that are like their abusive fathers was a practical solution our interviewees found successful.

Positive supportive relationships across their lifespan highlighted by our interviewees were relationships with their grandparents.

"My grandparents are like my second parents. They always supported me in my choices, they always encouraged me, especially my grandfather, he was always by my side, including at school...to me he is more of father to me than my real father..."- S7"

"My nana is very much like my mom, very good at heart, very nice and kind, very understanding. She has always been my refuge." – S5

## 4. Conclusions

What we do learn from our interviewees about the ways in which experiences of domestic violence in early childhood shape adult relationships and sensemaking of violence in adult life?

Most of our interviewees strongly believe that violence should not be used for any

cause. Violence hurts people, both physically and mentally, and it is hard to heal. Anxiety disorders, sleep disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideations, toxic relationships are sometimes life-long challenges for survivors of domestic violence.

We learned, that once they experienced domestic violence, as children, people try not to follow in their parents' footsteps, but sometimes they find themselves re-enacting that type of behaviour. Impulsivity, lack of or diminished control and witnessing mainly violent ways of relating are some ways our interviewees made sense of the contradiction between their behaviour and their values. We also learned about how violence breeds and exacerbates internalized and interpersonal violence, appearing as the only available response to insurmountable and pressing problems.

We learned about resilience, and protective factors such as trusting relationships with at least one parent, or grandparents, learning to break patterns, the will to stop the transgenerational cycle of violence in one's family.

For professionals experiencing burnout, interventions with victims of domestic violence may be difficult (Goian, 2014) and the communication process should ensure that their marginalized status is not worsened (Goian, 2010).

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