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VIOLENCE IN A COMPREHENSIVE PERSPECTIVE[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some issues that I consider to be particularly important in order to better understand and possibly countervail the phenomenon of violence. It especially focuses on the following points: a) the concept of violence; b) the *Seville Statement on Violence* and the possibility of revisiting and updating it; c) emotional and cultural factors as causes of violence; d) a proposal of a new perspective on the study of the relations between ingroup and outgroup; e) the possible role of the awareness of the existence of death in the context of human violence; f) the necessity of including violence against animals in the study of human violence.

Key words:

violence, Seville Statement, aggression, human behaviour

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[1] The starting point of this article is a paper I co-authored with Francesco Robustelli and presented at the XXXIII CICA International Conference "The Seville Statement on Violence: twenty-five years later", Rome, 22–25 September 2011.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will briefly deal with some issues, which I consider to be particularly important in order to better understand and possibly countervail the phenomenon of violence.

The following are the main points I will address:

a) the concept of violence;
b) the *Seville Statement on Violence* and the possibility of revisiting and updating it;
c) emotional and cultural factors on which violence is grounded;
d) some considerations on the relations between ingroup and outgroup;
e) the possible role of the awareness of the existence of death in the context of human violence;
f) the study of animal abuse as an essential component of human violence and as an essential contribution to its understanding.

2. The concept of violence

In social sciences the study of violence has too often been identified with the study of physical violence. This fact is all the more understandable because in the English language *violence* is defined as a "behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something"[2]. Instead, in the Italian language the term *violenza* can refer both to a physical and a psychological force.

In this context, when I use the word *violence*, I will refer to a phenomenon which can imply the use of either a physical or a psychological force or both, like in the Italian language. What is more, by *violence* I do not only mean a behavior but also an attitude, a thought, or a feeling tout court. It is clear that in this way the definition of *violence* becomes much broader and much more complex.

It is my belief that in the psychological scientific literature the issue of the complex and broad semantic field potentially encompassed by the term *violence* has not been fully considered. Suffice it to mention one example. A few years ago A.E. Kazdin attempted to discuss interpersonal violence "more generally". Indeed he emphasized the necessity to focus "on commonalities that the different types of

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[2] J. Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, "Journal of Peace Research" 1969, No. 6, p. 167.

violence share"[3]. He also underlined the fragmentation characterizing the analysis of violence in the scientific literature and the interventions aiming to countervail violence itself. His view is graphically synthesized in his sentence: "Different types of violence are embedded in each other and in many other social problems"[4]. Among the types of violence, he mentions child maltreatment, domestic violence, sexual assault, gang activity, and elder abuse. These considerations are extremely important since they represent a first step towards a broader and more complex conceptualization of *violence*. However, it appears that the role of psychological violence is not sufficiently underlined. Besides, no clear and direct reference is made to violence at the level of governmental and other public institutions, and of cultures and societies at large. It also follows that no reference is made to the so-called "normative" or "structural" violence, that type of subtle and pervasive violence which is generally regarded by most people as a "normal" and "socially acceptable" routine experience. Instead, I argue that it would be particularly useful to move beyond the traditional focus of study, which has especially considered socially unacceptable types of violence, and to concentrate also on subtler and more complex forms of violence, which include "normative" violence as well. It is also imperative that these different kinds of violence are considered in an integrated and comprehensive perspective.

3. The Seville Statement on Violence and the possible utility of updating it

The story about the origins, the contents and the objectives of the *Seville Statement on Violence* are well known. Thus, I will very briefly summarize them. In 1986 an international team of specialists (biologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, ethnologists, anthropologists, and sociologists) met at the University of Seville and wrote a scientific document, which was called the *Seville Statement on Violence*[5]. The *Seville Statement* was endorsed by many important scientific associations, including the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Anthropological Association, and the International Society for Research on Aggression. In 1989 it was adopted by UNESCO.

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[3] A.E. Kazdin, *Conceptualizing the Challenge of Reducing Interpersonal Violence*, "Psychology of Violence" 2011, No. 1, pp. 166–167.

[4] Ibidem, p. 181.

[5] *The Seville Statement on Violence*, D. Adams (ed.), Paris 1991.

By drafting the *Seville Statement* scientists set out to criticize the instinct theory of human aggression and to summarize the latest scientific results concerning the study of aggression and violence. In short, the *Seville Statement* maintains that aggression, violence and war are not biological necessities and, therefore, are not unavoidable, as so many people all over the world still believe. Consequently it is possible, through specific educational action, to countervail the sociocultural factors that determine such destructive behavior (see more e.g.: Groebel & Hinde[6], Ramirez et al.[7]). A colleague of mine, Prof. Francesco Robustelli, was for many years the Italian representative in an international network created by UNESCO for the dissemination of the *Seville Statement on Violence*. For some years Prof. Robustelli and the present author were engaged in a research project on education against violence, the starting point of which was the *Seville Statement*. One of the aims of this project was to establish a real collaboration with public institutions with the purpose of fostering the concrete implementation, which is limited the world over, of the results of scientific research in the field of human violence. Official collaborative relations were established with the Italian Ministries of Education, of Justice, of the Interior, and of Social Affairs. Among these public institutions, school played a major role.

Though it may be justifiably claimed that after almost three decades the scientific results illustrated in the *Seville Statement* are still valid, in the last few years some scholars have underlined the importance of revisiting and, in case, updating this document.

An international conference on violence, with the participation of a multidisciplinary group of scholars from five continents, was held in Rome at the CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche – National Research Council) headquarters between 22nd and 25th September 2011. It was organized by the present author and by J. Martin Ramirez (Universidad Complutense Madrid).

The conference, entitled "The Seville Statement on Violence: Twenty-Five Years Later", was the thirty-third of the international workshops that CICA (Coloquios Internacionales sobre Cerebro y Agresión), an international group of experts coming from various disciplines, holds regularly twice a year. The international, interdisciplinary, comprehensive approach characteristic of these meetings provides a useful bio-socio-psychological focus by bringing together a number of disciplines to more effectively analyse the complex relationships among brain,

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[6] *Aggression and War*, J. Groebel, R.A. Hinde (eds.), Cambridge 1991.
[7] *Essays on Violence*, J.M. Ramirez, R.A. Hinde, J. Groebel (eds.), Seville 1987.

aggression, and society. The conference was held in concomitance with the 25th anniversary of the *Seville Statement on Violence.*

At the end of the conference, at the present author's suggestion, participants discussed the opportunity of re-examining and, in case, improving the *Seville Statement*. In the end they agreed on the opportunity of writing a new scientific document. Indeed, though the fundamental thesis enunciated in the *Seville Statement*, whereby human violence is not unavoidable, as it is not biologically determined but is basically related to socio-cultural factors, is still valid, nevertheless participants considered it to be useful to further develop this thesis also in the light of the new research findings that had been obtained in the twenty-five years following the birth of the *Seville Statement*.

The multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary group of experts who have been involved in this complex and delicate task and who are working on it was set up. Members of this group are, among others and besides the present author, J. Martin Ramirez (Stanford University), Piero Giorgi (University of Otago, New Zealand), Roberto Mercadillo (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), and Douglas Fry (Åbo Akademi University, Finland & University of Arizona). Though the new document will be strictly scientific, its style and form will be such as to make it perfectly comprehensible for the general public, so that its impact on social reality will be even stronger.

Here are a few considerations that might contribute to ameliorating the Seville Statement:

– a clear definition of "violence" should be provided;
– it is now clear that it is necessary to enlarge the focus of study, which has traditionally and too often been related to the analysis of physical violence, and to more deeply concentrate also on subtler and more complex forms of aggression. Besides, not only the importance of war should be stressed. Also the role of aggressiveness, including "normative" aggressiveness in interhuman relationships, and "normative" violence in state institutions, should be more deeply analyzed;
– the role and the analysis of socio-cultural (including economic) factors should be more attentively emphasized. In particular, this analysis should be more stringent, more scientifically correct and devoid of ingenuous beliefs and attitudes that have sometimes characterized some psychologists' views and especially their views regarding the role of politicians. The analysis should also focus on the quality and degree of reciprocal interactions between violence at a macro-level (state, public institutions) and violence at a micro-level (individuals, families, local communities);

- some of the conceptualizations in the scientific literature regarding the purported differences in individuals' attitudes towards the ingroup and the outgroup should be more attentively examined;
- the field of human-animal studies can be extremely useful in the study of interhuman violence.

4. Emotional factors and cultural factors on which violence is grounded

Although the study of cultural (social, political, economic) factors on which violence is grounded is a matter of the highest importance, the study of emotions, like for example shame, fear, anger, hate, envy, and resentment, that produce and accompany violence, is no less significant (e.g. Pagani[8]). Besides, most importantly, the relationships between emotions and cultural factors should be identified and explained. For instance, war can be regarded, in a way, as the macroscopic expression of individuals' various personality traits, which are the expression of specific cognitions and emotions and which contribute to the construction of the social contexts where wars develop. On the other hand, these social contexts, once they have been established, deeply affect each individual's personality. This means that there is a reciprocal interaction between individuals' psychological reality and social contexts.

According to T.J. Scheff[9], most members of modern societies overestimate the role of "material" factors and deny the importance of the social-emotional world in producing violence, as they assume that "causes lie in the material world, and/ or in thoughts and beliefs" (p. 458). He believes that both social scientists and citizens should try to make "the social-emotional world visible and as important as the political-economic one"[10]. For example, referring to World War I, he argues that "The basic cause of the war […] was not economic or *real politic*, but social/ emotional. The German and French people seem to have been caught up in alienation and shame spirals" (p. 457).

He also points out that the study of the motivations of terrorists especially illustrates the role played by emotions, in particular by the experience of humili-

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[8] C. Pagani, *Violence in Cross-cultural Relations as the Outcome of Specific Cognitive and Emotional Processes*, "The Open Psychology Journal" 2011, No. 4 (Suppl 1-M2), pp. 21–27.

[9] T.J. Scheff, *Social-Emotional Origins of Violence: A Theory of Multiple Killing*, "Aggression and Violent Behavior" 2011, No. 16, pp. 453–460.

[10] Ibidem, p. 458.

ation, in generating violence and war. In this connection he quotes the answer of the then prime minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, to a reporter who had asked him why Palestinians crossing the border were kept waiting for so long: "We want to humiliate them"[11].

5. Ingroup and Outgroup

In a comprehensive analysis of violence it is also important to, at least briefly, refer to the more significant views in social psychology research regarding the relations between ingroup and outgroup. It is well-known that social scientists have usually assumed that social cohesion in the ingroup is frequently accompanied by its hostility or indifference towards the outgroup, and that, consequently, "ingroup love and outgroup hate are reciprocally related"[12].

The present author has elaborated a theoretical proposal (Pagani, in press) that develops and partly contradicts this thesis. Obviously, it is a proposal that needs to be further investigated in future research. However, it is useful to mention it here, as it could enrich the theoretical framework regarding our views on violence.

Though the assumption that ingroup love presupposes outgroup hate and vice versa has been challenged by some authors (e.g., Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch[13]), it is important to point out that, in order to support their views, these authors especially referred to concepts like concentric or multiple group loyalties, cross-cutting or multiple social identities, complexity, and complex social system. In sum, they opposed complexity to clear-cut and over-simplified oppositions and justly underlined the importance of the individual's awareness of the complexity, that is of the interior differentiation, of her/his personal identity and of the identity of her/his ingroup. Consequentially, they argued that this way the individual is more capable of identifying not only differences, but also hybridizations and similarities among people and among groups. Thus, the individual will more frequently avoid simplistic and Manichaean juxtapositions between individuals and between groups and will develop a more positive and tolerant attitude towards outgroups. Undoubtedly, this is a valid and very important thesis.

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[11] Ibidem, p. 458.

[12] M.B. Brewer, *The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate?*, "Journal of Social Issues" 1999, No. 55, p. 429.

[13] L. Cameron, A. Rutland, R. Brown, R. Douch, *Changing Children's Intergroup Attitudes toward Refugees: Testing Different Models of Extended Contact*, "Child Development" 2006, No. 77, pp. 1208–1219.

My proposal, which might integrate these authors' thesis, is based on the following lines of argumentation: a) social cohesion in the ingroup is also grounded in the awareness and in the understanding of the various individual diversities of the members of the ingroup; b) inevitably, this kind of awareness and understanding contributes to fostering the awareness and the understanding also of the various diversities related both to the outgroups in general and to the individual members of the outgroups themselves; c) this means that, consequentially, diversity, like for example cultural diversity, pertaining to the outgroups and their members, is acknowledged and accepted to the extent that diversity among the members of the ingroup is also acknowledged and accepted. In other words, the two phenomena – understanding and accepting the diversities within the ingroup and understanding and accepting the diversities of the outgroups and of their individual members are closely interconnected. This means that positive relations among the members of the ingroup can be generalized to the relations with outgroups. This point of view contradicts one of the traditional theses in social psychology research according to which positive relations within the ingroup are usually accompanied by hostile attitudes towards the outgroup (e.g., Brewer[14]).

Research findings have demonstrated that if people are categorized into different groups, even in those cases where the differentiation is weak or artificial, this situation is alone sufficient to elicit ingroup favoritism (e.g., Lonsdale and North[15]). These findings can be explained by the influence of the competitive life pattern now prevailing all over the world and in many ways affecting individuals' attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Pagani & Robustelli[16]; F. Robustelli[17]). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that ingroup favoritism is especially caused by people's widespread competitive attitudes and not to their being part of a particular group. In fact, we can presume that the mere belonging to a group *per se* does not produce any hostile attitude towards an outgroup (Pagani[18]). I argue that a debate on this issue might expand and enrich the more general debate on the causes and other significant aspects of the phenomenon of violence.

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[14] M.B. Brewer, op.cit., pp. 429–444.

[15] A.J. Lonsdale, A.C. North, *Musical Taste and Ingroup Favouritism*, "Group Processes & Intergroup Relations" 2009, No. 12, pp. 319–327.

[16] C. Pagani, F. Robustelli, *Young People, Multiculturalism, and Educational Interventions for the Development of Empathy*, "International Social Science Journal" 2010, No. 200–201, pp. 247–261.

[17] F. Robustelli, *La competitività nella ricerca scientifica*, "A" 2007, No. 37(2), pp. 29–30.

[18] C. Pagani, *Diversity and Social Cohesion*, "Intercultural Education" (in press).

6. The possible role of the awareness of the existence of death in the context of human violence

In the last few decades a number of studies have been dedicated to the effects of death thought (the so-called *mortality salience*) on some specific attitudes, for example on reactions to those who validate the cultural worldview and to those who threaten the cultural worldview (e.g., Cohen, Soenke, Solomon, & Greenberg[19]; Greenberg et al[20]).

The issue of the awareness of the presence of death in human life and in nature in general in connection with the problem of violence has been seldom examined from a psychological point of view (Pagani[21]; Robustelli[22]).

As a matter of fact, life *per se* is also violent just for the presence of death alone. Indeed, most human beings probably perceive death, and in particular their personal death and the death of their loved ones, as a form of violence.

This can pose one important question: "Can the perception of death as a form of violence affect people's attitudes and behaviors as far as violence is concerned?" And if "yes", in what ways? Can this perception contribute to inducing, at least in some people's minds, the fatalistic view that violence is pervasive and unavoidable in many other aspects of human life? Or, alternatively, in other people's minds, can this perception have an opposite effect and act as a sort of resistance and reaction to the reality of violence and as a propulsive force, leading to fight violence and to envisage a new and more peaceful social reality?

These questions are all the more dramatic if we also consider the presence of violence in nature in general. Suffice it to mention food chains. Carnivores feed on herbivores. From this point of view most human beings are violent.

It is my view that if natural death is the most extreme form of violence, to which all living beings are subjected, the other forms of violence can nevertheless be analyzed and, at least in part, neutralized by human beings through the adop-

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[19] F. Cohen, M. Soenke, S. Solomon, J. Greenberg, *Evidence for a Role of Death Thought in American Attitudes toward Symbols of Islam*, "Journal of Experimental Social Psychology" 2013, No. 49, pp. 189–194.

[20] J. Greenberg, T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon, A. Rosenblatt, M. Veeder, S. Kirkland, D. Lyon, *Evidence for Terror Management Theory: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Threaten or Bolster the Cultural Worldview*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1990, No. 58, pp. 308–318.

[21] C. Pagani, *Perception of a Common Fate in Human-Animal Relations and Its Relevance to Our Concern for Animals*, "Anthrozoös" 2000, No. 13, pp. 66–73.

[22] F. Robustelli, *Ordine naturale e ordine umano: spunti educativ*, "Scuola & Città" 1995, No. 12, pp. 528–532.

tion of rational and firm attitudes and behaviors. As F. Robustelli[23] wrote when addressing the problem of violence and of the consequential suffering connected to it:

> *To a reality that is fundamentally characterized by suffering we can only oppose our revolt and base this revolt on our refusal to produce further suffering*[24].

7. The study of animal abuse as an essential component of human violence and as a contribution to its understanding

I argue that the field of human-animal studies, and especially the area dedicated to the study of violence against animals, can become extremely useful in the study of interhuman violence. And this, above all, for two reasons:

a) violence against animals typically exemplifies an essential constituent of human violence, namely the exertion of power over weaker individuals, as animals are generally weaker than humans. This fact, in turn, relates back to the competitive life pattern which now prevails the world over, whereby human societies are characterized by hierarchical structures, with animals and other categories of individuals (like, for example, the poor, the elderly, and women) on the lowest rungs;

b) violence against animals neatly underlines humans' frequent difficult and destructive relationship with diversity. Human identity is the continuously evolving outcome of humans' relationship with diversity[25]. Contact with diversity can occur both in intraspecies and interspecies relations. This contact is often negatively affected by the presence of prejudices and stereotypes through which the individual perceives others (both humans and animals) in an automatic, simplistic, and distorted way, according to cognitive and affective patterns pertaining to the individual's culture and personality.

Thus, similarities between violence against animals (and against nature in general) and interhuman violence can be identified and, consequently, a compre-

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[23] F. Robustelli, *La sperimentazione sugli animali* [in:] *Bioetica, Ricerca, e Società*, R. Marchesini (ed.), San Martino di Sarsina 1995, pp. 65–75.

[24] Ibidem, p. 73.

[25] C. Pagani, *Children and Adolescents who are Kind to Animals* [in:] *The Psychology of the Human-Animal Bond: A Handbook for Clinicians and Researchers*, C. Blazina, D.S. Shen-Miller, G. Boyraz (eds.), New York 2011, pp. 289–306.

hensive and more correct understanding of human violence, both against humans and animals (and nature in general), can be attained. Indeed, these similarities are far beyond those that psychological research on the "link"[26] has indicated in the last forty years.

Interestingly, in research studies on animal abuse a distinction between "socially unacceptable" and "socially acceptable" violence ha been made and the relations between these two forms of violence are now becoming an object of deeper analysis in the academia[27]. Besides, it is also clear that the boundaries between them are often blurred. Given the delicacy of these issues also in the context of interhuman relationships, it is no surprise that only in the study of violence against animals this distinction has so far been clearly debated. In our research studies on children's and adolescents' experiences of animal cruelty we found how deeply aware of the complexity of the concept of violence our young participants are and how often they adopt a broad definition of violence against animals which includes both "socially acceptable" and "socially unacceptable" forms of violence[28].

8. Conclusions

The paper underlines the importance of adopting a broad and comprehensive definition of violence, including both physical and psychological violence, interhuman violence and violence against animals and nature in general. The emotional and the cultural causes of violence are emphasized.

The paper also underlines the utility of revisiting and, in case, updating the *Seville Statement* and the utility of a more thorough analysis of the relations between ingroup and outgroup.

It suggests that studies on the phenomenon of violence could probably benefit from the analysis of the possible role of people's awareness of death in the context of human violence.

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[26] The "link" has become a very common term in the academia, in the police, and in the social services especially in the USA. It refers to the association, which many research studies have indicated, between animal cruelty and interhuman violence (domestic violence, child maltreatment, elder abuse, etc.).

[27] C.P. Flynn, *Acknowledging the "Zoological Connection": A Sociological Analysis of Animal Cruelty*, "Society & Animals" 2001, No. 9, pp. 71–87.

[28] C. Pagani, F. Robustelli, F.R. Ascione, *Investigating Animal Abuse: Some Theoretical and Methodological Issues*, "Anthrozoös" 2010, No. 23, pp. 259–278.

It also suggests that violence can only be understood and countervailed if it is analyzed in a comprehensive perspective, which considers humans' destructive behaviors and attitudes towards humans, animals, and the rest of the planet.

It is a fact that no life pattern based on justice and solidarity can be proposed if people continue to consider the human species as the owner and ruler of the earth. Indeed, there is an indissoluble link between believing that human beings are entitled to dominate the earth and believing that some human beings are entitled to dominate other human beings.

As Robustelli wrote:

[…] *we attack a mouse exactly as we attack a whale, a forest, or a river, and in the same way as we attacked Anna Frank and as we are now attacking the children in Bosnia*[29].

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[29]   F. Robustelli, *La sperimentazione*…, op.cit., p. 72.

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