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### *Violence in a comprehensive perspective*

The following are the main points we will touch on in this presentation:

- a) the concept of violence and the meanings we here attach to this term;
- b) a few considerations on the four documents that have been recently elaborated by some scholars as comments on and/or updates of the *Seville Statement on Violence*;
- c) emotional factors and cultural factors on which violence is grounded;
- d) the role of death in human life and in nature in general in the context of human violence;
- e) the study of animal abuse as an essential component of human violence in general and as an essential contribution to its understanding.

#### **The concept of violence and the meanings we here attach to this term**

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 “behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something” (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2006). On the other hand, in the Italian language the term *violenza* can refer both to a physical and a psychological force. In this context we will use the word *violence* as a synonym of aggressiveness and aggression, namely as a term which involves the use of both physical and psychological force. What is more, by violence we do not only mean a behaviour but also an attitude or a thought tout court. Obviously, in all these cases we are dealing with different kinds of violence: agents, targets, motives, goals, accompanying emotions, outcomes, and levels of seriousness can greatly vary.

It is our belief that in the psychological scientific literature the issue of the complex and broad semantic field encompassed by the term “violence” has not been fully considered. Suffice it to mention one example. A. E. Kazdin (2011) in a recent paper has attempted to discuss interpersonal violence “more generally”. Indeed he emphasizes the necessity to focus “on commonalities that the different types of violence share” (p. 167) and underlines the fragmentation characterizing the analysis of violence and the interventions aiming to countervail it. His view is graphically synthesized in his sentence: “Different types of violence are embedded in each other and in many other social problems” (p. 181). Among the types of violence, he mentions child maltreatment, domestic violence, sexual assault, gang activity, and elder abuse. No reference is made to violence at the level of society, of governmental and other public institutions, and of culture at large. Most importantly, no reference is made to the so-called “normative violence”, namely a type of violence which is considered “normal”, “socially acceptable”, and as a routine experience by the majority of a population. Instead, we believe it is necessary to move beyond the traditional focus of study, which has mainly considered socially unacceptable types of violence, and to deeply concentrate on subtler and more complex forms of aggression, which include “normative” violence. It is also imperative that these different kinds of violence are considered in an integrated and comprehensive perspective.

## **A few considerations on the four documents that have been recently elaborated by some scholars as comments on and/or updates of the *Seville Statement on Violence***

In the last few years four documents have been elaborated by some scholars as comments on and/or updates of the *Seville Statement on Violence*:

- Adams, D. *War is not inevitable: Peace can be invented*
- Giorgi, P. *2011 Statement on Violence and its Prevention*
- Hinde, R. A., Nelson, R. J., & Wrangham, R. *War is not inevitable: Aggressiveness can be tamed*
- *Science for Peace Charter* – November 2010 (Pievani, T., Tonelli, C., & Martinelli, A.)

The *Science for Peace Charter* is the document that most strongly supports the scientific validity of the Seville Statement and that, in many ways, reflects its structure and theoretical framework.

We maintain that, if we intend to revisit the “Seville Statement” and, in case, to ameliorate it, we should also take these documents into consideration. Obviously, in the end, it would be desirable to agree on the ultimate goal of joining efforts and, possibly and eventually, of being in a position to open an in-depth discussion where scholars’ differing scientific perspectives and personal ideologies can be brought to light, identified and integrated. It is reasonable to hope that in the end this discussion will result in the elaboration of a new scientific document, which should be as clear and well-structured as the Seville Statement, and which should be based on a common terminology and on shared conceptualizations.

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

- not only the importance of war should be stressed. Also the role of aggressiveness, including “normative” aggressiveness in interhuman relationships, should be more deeply analyzed;
- the role and the analysis of socio-cultural (including economic) factors should be more attentively emphasized, as also David Adams points out in his document. In particular, this analysis should be more stringent, more scientifically correct and devoid of ingenuous beliefs especially as far as the analysis of the role of politicians is concerned. It 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, local communities);
- a holistic view of human beings (as also Giorgi indicates), who are considered as part of their physical and social environment, is recommended;
- some of the conceptualizations in the scientific literature regarding the purported difference in individuals’ attitudes toward the ingroup and the outgroup should be analyzed and criticized;
- concepts like creativity, human potentialities, and the possible role of local realities (as especially suggested by Giorgi) should also be taken into account;
- the field of human-animal studies can become extremely useful in the study of interhuman violence.

## **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 fear, anger, hate, envy, and resentment, that produce and accompany violence is no less significant (Pagani, 2011a). 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 Scheff (in press), most members of modern societies ("lay and expert alike") overestimate the role of "material" factors and deny the importance of the emotional world in producing violence. He argues that "Our job as social scientists and as citizens is to try to make the social-emotional world visible and as important as the political-economic one."

He also points out that the study of the motivations of terrorists especially illustrates the role played by emotions (in particular the experience of humiliation) in generating violence and war.

### **The role of death in human life and in nature in general in the context of human violence.**

The issue 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, 2000; Robustelli, 1995a; 1995b).

As a matter of fact, life per se is violent if it were not for the presence of death. 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 behaviours 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 our 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 addressed and, at least in part, neutralized by human beings through the adoption of rational and firm attitudes and behaviours. As one of us (Robustelli, 1995a) wrote when addressing the problem of violence and of the consequential suffering:

*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. (p. 74)*

### **The study of animal abuse as an essential component of human violence and the contribution of this study to its understanding**

We 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, the poor or, according to cases, the elderly, or 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 (Pagani, 2011b). 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 interhuman violence can be identified and, consequently, a comprehensive and more correct understanding of human violence, both against humans and animals, can be attained. Indeed, these similarities are far beyond those that psychological research on the "link"\* has indicated in the last forty years.

Interestingly, in research studies on animal abuse a distinction between "socially unacceptable" and "socially acceptable" violence has been made and the relations between these two forms of violence are now becoming an object of deeper analysis in the academia (e.g., Flynn 2001; Pagani, Robustelli and Ascione 2010). 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.

In conclusion, we suggest that violence can only be understood and countervailed if it is analyzed in a comprehensive perspective, which considers humans' destructive behaviours and attitudes toward 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 we 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.

We would like to conclude with the words that one of us (Francesco Robustelli) wrote in 1995:

[...] *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.* (Robustelli, 1995a)

\*The "link" has now become a very common term used in the academia, in the police and in the social services, especially in the USA and in other western countries. It refers to the association, which many research studies have indicated, between animal cruelty and interhuman violence (domestic violence, child maltreatment, elder abuse, etc.). In particular, one of the topics that has been most investigated is childhood cruelty toward animals as a potential indicator of a pathogenic existential condition and of current and future antisocial behavior.

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