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Conjugal Homicide¹

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Abstract

Compared to various forms of manifestation of violent crime, familial homicide has a special psychological, social, moral and cultural meaning, given both by the relations between the aggressor and the victim (conjugal homicide, maternal or paternal filicide, matricide, patricide, uxoricide, etc.) and by the prejudices to the familial institution. In this context, I shall focus on conjugal homicide and shall identify in scientific literature studies on aggressors and victims, the characteristics of the relations where violence occurs, as well as some risk elements. As for prevention, this is associated to the results of our own research regarding homicide and, implicitly, conjugal homicide. Thus, we have noticed that the results achieved within international research projects have had a significant scientific contribution for sociology, criminology, psychology and criminal law. In the following, I think that new directions of analysis of conjugal homicide should be outlined in Romania, able to ensure the development of effective social and criminal policies. For instance, the identification of etiological elements associated to the relationship between the victim and his/her aggressor helps us identify the types of risk in terms of perpetration of the crime (low, medium or high), as well as suitable social and legal protection actions.

Keywords:

Etiology, Conjugal homicide, Aggressor, Victim, Prevention.

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Introduction

Like any human interaction, conjugal relations imply emotional and spiritual investment and, from this point of view, partners should equally contribute to their construction and support. Moments of frenzy and moments of drama are always determined by how they understand to undertake responsibility and behave to one another. In the given context, the idea of conjugal relation may raise a range of issues. For instance, which pattern triggers stressful, abusive, violent relations? Who or what gives birth to such situations? How can love be associated to physical, emotional, psychological danger? What small step and to what direction manages to trigger the vulnerability of a relationship that culminates in a homicide? Such questions indicate the need to focus on the knowledge and explanation of conjugal relations in general and conjugal relations with violence in particular. For starters, it is important to understand that we are all *victims* of human condition. “To this purpose, both partners are *victims* of the biological and cultural parameters by means of which they use forms of violence and aggressiveness in order to respond to certain stimuli or overcome conflicts, tensions, disputes, etc.” (Browne-Miller, 2007: 93). For instance, in some cases they choose to have an abusive behaviour towards one another because they do not find another solution or they cannot face changes, stress and inevitable problems. Of course, very frequently, the involved actors blame one another for the failure of their relationship and, thus, the aggressor and the victim become and act as *guilty*. Starting from such a pattern, spirit, will, confidence, self-respect are practically killed before the fatal act that results in loss of life. The issue of conjugal relations that culminate in the homicide of one of the partners is often hidden behind violent behaviour, which is found rather frequently at the level of society, so that it is considered *familiar* or even *natural*. Actually, the problem is the infringement of the fundamental rights to life and personal safety and freedom.

Outline

Partner violence and conjugal homicide have been recognised as human rights and public health issues that require a special attention, since they are found all over the world and in all social, economic, religious and cultural groups (Corradi, Stöckl, 2014: 601). In the given context, we observe that violence is associated to conjugal homicide as a major risk factor. From this perspective, the results of a recent study including data from 66 countries are highly relevant, showing the issue of bi-directional violence that frequently results in the loss of life of one or even both partners. “14% of intimate

partners perpetrate homicides (39% of women victims and 6% of men victims). In countries with high revenues, the rate of conjugal homicide is even higher, with 41% murdered women and 6% murdered men” (Stöckl *et al.*, 2013: 859). Of course, one cannot overlook the significant statistical gap between the number of women and number of men who are victims of conjugal violence and conjugal homicide. For instance, Krug *et al.*, within the World Report on Violence and Health, quote conjugal violence as a major cause of death and disability of women aged between 16 and 44 years. “The results of research in several countries show that partner violence underlies a significant number of women deaths. Studies performed in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States of America show that 40%-70% of the women victims were murdered by their partners in the context of a violent relationship (Krug *et al.*, 2002: 103)”. Unfortunately, no relevant statistical data on conjugal homicide are available in Romania so far.

On Signs

How is conjugal homicide perpetrated and which signs indicate the occurrence of such an action? In order to provide an answer to such questions, since my approach is primarily theoretical, in the following I propose the analysis of an integrative model regarding the risk factors of violence and creating a range of connections with the aetiology of conjugal homicide. Originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner and adapted by Krug *et al.*, the ecological model of violence underlines the idea that, when explaining human behaviour, one should know both the features of an individual and the influences of systems composing his/her environment. More exactly, Bronfenbrenner considers that people are influenced by five components of the ecological environment: “microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem” (1977: 514-516). The microsystem refers to relations between an individual and his/her close persons (family, friends, school or work colleagues). The mesosystem includes relations between various social environments where the person is involved, e.g. between the family environment, work and other available services. The exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem, including different social (formal or informal) structures that are external to an individual, but which can still influence his/her conduct (media, governmental agencies, informal networks). The macrosystem includes all cultural, social, educational, legal, ideological and political models specific to the society where the individual lives. Finally, the chronosystem includes all the events taking place in the life of an individual and his/her family (the birth of a child, the death of a relative, the first school celebration, etc.). The integrative character of the ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner is given by how

it includes both the influence of immediate factors (microsystem and mesosystem) and external factors (exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem).

Starting from Bronfenbrenner's viewpoint, Krug et al. have developed an ecological model according to which violence is the result of the influence of factors manifested at an *individual, relational, community* and *social* level (see Table 1).

Table 1. Risk Factors Seen in the Case of Violence

Individual level	Age Instruction level Psychological or personality disorders (impulsiveness) Substance dependence Aggressive behaviour Victimisation (abuses, maltreatments)
Relational level	Relations with family, friends, partners or colleagues are significant factors that influence an individual's violent or non-violent behaviour
Community level	Social relations with neighbours, work or school colleagues Frequent changes of address Population density Local drug traffic High unemployment Community features (social isolation, low living standard)
Social level	Social and cultural guidelines (attitudes that consider suicide as an individual act, not a preventable violence act; guidelines asserting men's domination on children and women; guidelines encouraging political conflicts, etc.) Social factors including economic and social policies in terms of education, health (gaps between social groups)

Source: adapted from Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, A. J., Zwi, A. and Lozano-Ascenio, R. (2002) *Rapport mondial sur la violence et la santé*, Organisation Mondiale de la Santé, Genève, pp. 13-15.

The authors state that some of the presented factors are specific to all forms of violence, while other factors can only be associated to certain types of violence (familial violence, school-based violence, etc.). In the given context, the use of this explanatory model is recommended on various levels. "The connections between violence and the interaction between individual factors and the economic, social and cultural context generally make us think that the approach of risk factors across various levels of the ecological model should help reduce several types of violence" (Krug *et al.*, 2002: 16). As it is built, the ecological model proposed by Krug et al. helps us identify several risk factors that can be associated to familial homicide in general and, of course, conjugal homicide. As previously mentioned, a range of specialised studies present conjugal violence as the major risk factor in the murder of one of the partners (Mucchielli 2002, Cusson and Marleau 2006). However, when referring to signs indicating the risk of conjugal homicide, it is also important to envisage elements associated to: depression, the presence of a fire arm, alcohol and drug consumption, separation, financial difficulties, conflicts on child care/custody, the culture of male violence.

To Have and To Hurt

Relating to the previously presented theoretical model, I agree with Miller and I consider that, when knowing and explaining conjugal homicide, it is important to understand the contextual meaning of violence manifested within a relationship and, at the same time, "to deepen the idea of victimization of the partners until the crime has been committed" (Miller, 2005: 10).

For instance, we must find answers to a range of questions. Is there an aggressor? Who is the dominant aggressor, the one who hurts most? What happens when the abuser blames the victim? Why do intimate partners persist in such a situation?

- The experience of our own studies and the results obtained by other researchers show that, in general, partners have different versions and viewpoints on victimization within conjugal relations. The dominant aggressor, who most frequently or most visibly shows a violent behaviour, victimizes himself/herself and tries to project his/her own *reality* in relations with his/her family, friends and law representatives, since s/he is not willing or cannot undertake responsibility. When such situations persist, there is a high risk that the relationship becomes more and more dangerous and only ends when either of the partners dies. For instance, in a recent paper, Browne-Miller states that "some relations are so out of control that homicide is an actual risk and when it is not, accidental death during the violent act surely is" (2007: 140). To the same purpose, Duncan and Duncan describe conjugal homicide as "an attempt to

solve a devastating intra-psychological conflict, triggered by the incapacity of maintaining a relationship that has become intolerable” (1978: 174). Of course, the partner’s motivations for homicide are different from one case to another. However, scientific studies show that most of the times the final act is preceded by episodes of violence and conflicts (Mucchielli 2002; Cusson, and Marleau 2006; Clinard and Meier 2011). In such a context, the tolerance of one or both partners towards violence can be highly dangerous. Pauses of days, weeks or even months may appear and the victim sometimes hopes that violent behaviour might disappear for good. Indeed, happy situations may occur when the aggressor takes a peaceful attitude. Most of the times, however, this does not happen; on the contrary, everything turns into a vicious circle that may be associated to existence itself and becomes the partners’ lifestyle.

Moreover, living such situations, through constant exposure to violence, the victim’s reactions may decrease. “Sometimes, people who are involved in violent relations, be it emotional, physical violence or both, begin to adjust. This adjustment may appear because emotional and physical pain is too hard to bear. In any case, it is incredibly dangerous when perceived as an ability to adjust. Adjustment prevents us from understanding the seriousness of the situation, as well as feeling the intensity of pain” (Browne-Miller, 2007: 119). Moreover, adjusting to violence, the victim becomes less and less conscious of the danger s/he is exposed to. In this context, one may speak of the *tolerance* that arises when physical, moral and/or emotional response to violence decreases. Obviously, negative effects are not less important; on the contrary, they increase and they can be associated to the victim’s decay from all points of view. “If we consider the idea of experience regarding violence, we might say that, while the intensity of violence increases, the conscious sensation of victimization or aggression decreases. The word *conscious* is used in this context with the meaning that, the more they adjust to pain, the more affected they are” (Browne-Miller, 2007: 119). Hence, the victim no longer realizes and consciously feels his/her own pain. Of course, it is important to mention that such feelings and thoughts can also be found in the aggressor, since sometimes s/he may not be aware of the true impact of his/her behaviour towards the victim.

Finally, violence may affect conjugal partners to such an extent that, at a certain point, they can no longer recognize themselves. Naturally, this state depends on the psychological, emotional, spiritual, familial, etc. resources of every individual. Some people survive physically, but not spiritually, while others, the strongest, manage to overcome the trauma of a violent relationship. In the future, for a better understanding of conjugal violence and, implicitly, homicide, one should take a closer look to the results of scientific research and reach the human condition of involved individuals.

Preventing Conjugal Homicide

In the past years, we have witnessed more and more speeches on the required prevention of conjugal homicide. Unfortunately, no scientific studies have been drawn up in Romania in order to underpin effective intervention strategies, since most relevant institutions and organisations are focused on familial violence or homicide.

Generally speaking, from the experience of my personal research, I consider that conjugal homicide prevention should focus on several levels. More accurately, one should consider *social prevention*, with a focus on reducing early school leaving rates, the psychological assessment of students irrespective of their specialisation and the protection of domestic violence victims. To this purpose, it is important that the social policies and strategies implemented by relevant organisations should aim at preventing familial violence, not only taking action in case of crisis.

Community prevention is also important, since it implies identifying individuals who are predisposed to victimisation and those with violent behaviour; cooperation between citizens and law enforcement bodies and the reduction of conjugal homicide risk factors such as controlling alcohol and drug consumption in entertainment facilities. Moreover, by involving police staff and community members, families may be identified where violence occurs or might occur. To this purpose, awareness campaigns on familial violence in Romania and campaigns for the presentation of legislation in force may be developed. The relevant institutions of local administration, along with non-governmental organisations should also implement such programmes in the rural environment, where the issue of familial violence is frequently associated to conjugal homicide.

Situational prevention can be associated to physical protection and control of access to weapons. To this purpose, the right to have weapons must be conditioned by real necessity and regular psychological assessment.

Finally, programmes for *reducing the risk of relapse* should envisage a better organisation of the penitentiary system; cooperation between probation services and institutions taking charge of persons who are sentenced to a freedom-privative punishment and the involvement of non-governmental organisations in the support of those who are not employable upon release. Thus, detention institutions should implement strategies for reducing violent behaviour. At the same time, given the low level of education of most detainees, qualification and requalification programmes are required, that would allow such individuals to develop revenue-generating activities. To this purpose, attention should be paid to the specific re-education and reintegration of the target group, rather than to the development of general activities, as established within operating rules.

Probation services should supplement the prevention measures implemented by the penitentiary institution, through the development of actions related to the risk factors of conjugal homicide, associated to the individual, his/her family, group of friends and community. Cooperation may be established at a governmental and non-governmental level with a view to ensuring the employability of persons who have served freedom-privative sentences.

“*The principles* underlying strategies for the prevention of conjugal homicide refer to:

- cooperation between ministries, national and local authorities, non-governmental organisations, the business sector and community members;
- social and economic development and inclusion of individuals with low opportunities (families, children and women with high risk of victimisation);
- scientific knowledge – prevention strategies should be based on interdisciplinary, complete and complex studies developed by specialists in sociology, psychology, criminology and criminal sciences. For instance, to my best knowledge, in Romania there is no specific analysis tool for conjugal homicide risks or a risk management tool adapted to various situations, once the danger has been detected;
- increasing the level of knowledge and understanding of legislation in the field of familial violence, drug consumption, traffic of persons, etc.;
- observing the particularities of perpetrators and victims (men, women, disabled or mentally challenged individuals, persons having served a freedom-privative sentence)” (Mihaiu, 2013: 302).

The conditions for the efficiency of prevention strategies relate to:

- the will of national and local authorities and the existence of resources;
- the adjustment of legislation, social and criminal policies, to prevention actions;
- cooperation of governmental institutions with non-governmental institutions;
- uniformisation of official statistics in several specialised institutions (police service, prosecutor’s office, courts, etc.);
- using objective criteria for assessing this social issue;
- less media broadcast on the perpetration of violent crimes;
- assessment of national, regional and local needs at the level of families, school centres, medical services, bodies specialised in social protection;
- training police staff with a view to identifying risk factors at the community level;
- involvement of the private security sector and members of society;
- monitoring and assessing achieved results;

- regular re-dynamisation of preventive action, according to the needs identified at a national, regional and local level.

The limits that involved institutions and organisations should envisage refer to:

- individuals (mental issues, high alcohol consumption and the state upon the perpetration of the crime);
- impossibility to directly control conjugal life;
- scarcity of financial resources allocated at a national level;
- social values and practices, which in some cases are favourable to conjugal homicide.

The proposals underline the necessity to adjust the action taken in Romania to the measures for life and integrity protection, as implemented in the European area and not only. With the involvement of empowered authorities and the civil society, such guidelines may become effective and concrete.

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