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Opinion

Intimate Partner Violence between Power and Love: Reconciling Feminist and Attachment-Based Perspectives

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Abstract

Intimate Partner Violence is a serious social problem which for decades has been at the center of a scientific and ideological debate between two opposing conceptual frameworks: the feminist perspective and a series of so-called gender-neutral perspectives, among which the most influential is the one based on the application of attachment theory to violent romantic relationships. From a feminist perspective, violence in couple relationships is essentially a matter of gender and power. Conversely, according to the attachment-based perspective, IPV is a gender-neutral phenomenon which derives from dysfunctional ways of seeking the satisfaction of affective needs within intimate relationships. The objective of the present contribution is twofold: to highlight how each of the two perspectives mentioned above is incomplete and complementary to the other, and to suggest how the construction of a broader and more complex conceptual framework for the understanding of IPV, cannot ignore the integration of power dynamics and love/affective dynamics that characterize couple relationships.

IPV is a serious social problem which in recent decades has constantly been at the center of a bitter scientific and ideological debate, still ongoing, between two opposing conceptual frameworks [1-5]. On the one hand, the feminist perspective [6-9], which conceives IPV as gender-based violence, more precisely as a form of violence perpetrated by men against women and directly deriving from gender inequalities linked to the patriarchal structure of society. On the other hand, a series of so-called gender-neutral perspectives [10-12], which tend to research the causes of IPV in factors and processes that are supposed to be substantially unrelated to gender. Among them the most influential is certainly the one based on the application of attachment theory to violent intimate relationships [13-16].

At first glance, therefore, it is customary to conceive the contrast between these perspectives as hinged on the dichotomy relating to centrality vs. irrelevance of gender in the explanation of IPV. On this theoretical-conceptual dichotomy an empirical controversy is closely grafted; the one related to gender asymmetry vs. gender symmetry in IPV, i.e., whether in intimate relationships it is almost exclusively men who perpetrate violence towards their female partners [17,18] or whether women are equally violent towards their male partners [19-21], or whether there are different types of violence characterized by different rates of perpetration and victimization by gender [22-24]. This framing of the controversy between the feminist perspective and the attachment-based perspective as hinged on the gender-based/gender-neutral dichotomy has helped to convey the idea that such perspectives are logically incompatible, mutually exclusive or irreconcilable, often making the debate acrimonious and heuristically fruitless.

On the other hand, an analysis of the vast scientific literature on the subject of IPV, far from resolving the controversy, returns the image of a complex, multiform and transversal phenomenon. Violence in intimate relationships refers, in fact, to a universe of contradictory experiences, emotions and meanings, but not for this reason mutually exclusive: coercion, abuse, cynicism often painfully coexist with a sense of protection, responsibility, attachment [25-27]. Such a finding suggests how power, love and violence are closely linked in IPV, and at the same time helps to highlight the presence of another opposition, often completely implicit but equally crucial, in addition to the one on gender, between the feminist perspective and the attachment-based perspective. While the first conceives IPV essentially as a question of power, the second conceives IPV essentially as a question of love, of affective dynamics. Shifting attention from the gendered vs. gender-neutral dichotomy to the different focus that the two opposing perspectives adopt on power vs. love as a fundamental theoretical nucleus for understanding IPV, thus allows us to highlight a more complex conceptual contrast: the feminist perspective conceives IPV as a matter of power dynamics linked to gender and gender inequalities; the attachment-based perspective, on the other hand, sees IPV as a matter of love/affective dynamics unrelated to gender. In the light of this more complex contrast, it is possible to imagine and hope for an integration between the two perspectives as each of them appears incomplete and complementary to the other. In fact, the opposing focus on power and love as the theoretical nucleus for understanding IPV does not represent a dichotomous opposition between incompatible alternatives, but is likely to produce a fruitful and mutually enriching theoretical comparison.

Each perspective offers a valuable understanding of some crucial components in the genesis of IPV (power dynamics vs. love/affective dynamics), but at the same time it appears blind and silent with respect to other equally fundamental aspects of the phenomenon and can be completed and enriched by combining it with the other in a broader and more complex conceptual framework. From the feminist perspective, violence in a couple relationship is essentially (if not exclusively) a matter of gender and power. This assumption has made it possible to elaborate theoretical constructs linked to power and to accumulate important knowledge both on the socio-cultural mechanisms that justify male violence in intimate relationships, and on the concrete strategies of coercion and control that accompany the physical aggressions of men on female partners and contribute to characterize the violent nature of the relationship [28,29]. However, from the feminist perspective, the IPV phenomenon tends to be presented as the mechanical and automatic reproduction of relationships of dominance and prevarication by men over women in the broader social context permeated by patriarchy. The specificity of the intimate relationship and the complex processes that govern its functioning are in no way taken into consideration in theorizing IPV from a feminist perspective. And this choice to expunge love dynamics from the definition and characterization of



IPV, considering love and violence as incompatible concepts, appears as the element of greatest weakness and incompleteness of the feminist perspective.

Conversely, according to the perspective based on attachment theory, IPV is a matter of love, of a dysfunctional emotional bond, that is, deriving from dysfunctional ways of seeking the satisfaction of affective needs (in particular, the regulation of emotional distance) within an intimate relationship. This perspective puts love at the center, the specific nature of the romantic relationship as based on affective dynamics. In this way, unlike the feminist perspective, the attachment-based perspective offers an explanatory framework that manages to account for the paradoxical binomial love-violence that often appears to be a defining element of IPV in the experiences of both perpetrators and victims. Symbolically, to account for why one stays together with an abusive partner or acts violence on a person who claims to love and claims they cannot do without. However, this exclusive emphasis on affective bonding and attachment patterns has meant that, within the attachment-based perspective, IPV has been interpreted as a gender-neutral phenomenon. This is primarily due to the fact that attachment models have traditionally been conceived and operationalized as gender-independent constructs, while gender studies highlight how males and females are socialized to develop different and even opposite ways of expressing their emotions and conceiving their role in interpersonal relationships [30]. Furthermore, the assumptions of attachment theory on the nature of the romantic bond appear congruent with the idealistic conception which sees the couple relationship as an egalitarian one in which the partners are called to support and complete each other [31], disregarding how gender disparities can make it difficult to accomplish this ideal within an actual couple relationship [32].

Consequently, in the attachment-based perspective, the impact of gender differences in the experience of romantic attachment and of gender prescriptions in the structuring of the love bond have been neglected; and the dimension of power in the couple relationship represented an aspect that was at best secondary compared to the centrality of the dynamics centered on the emotional attachment needs of each partner. If, having recognized its potential complementarity, we combine the feminist perspective with the attachment-based perspective, the need emerges to develop a broader and more complex conceptual framework for understanding IPV. Power and love, power dynamics and affective dynamics are not dichotomous alternatives as theoretical focuses for understanding IPV, but both need to be examined above all in their interconnectedness, while recognizing how gender-related sociocultural discourses position in men and women differently not only with regard to power but also with regard to love, shaping their experience, behaviors and choices in different ways, even in the face of partner violence [33-37]. The combination of feminist and attachment-based perspectives in a broader conceptual framework certainly entails the recognition that IPV cannot be conceived as a gender-neutral phenomenon, especially if gender is understood as a multilevel construct influencing social practices and interactions [38,39]. However it must also be recognized that IPV is a more complex and less unidirectional gendered phenomenon than the feminist perspective tends to admit, especially with regard to the gender-power-violence relationship and the roles of perpetrator and victim. In fact, if the power dynamics based on the expectations of male dominance and female subordination position men and women in an unequal way within the intimate relationship, the love dynamics based on interdependence and mutual support expectations between the partners constitute a partial counterweight to power inequality. This is one of the factors that makes IPV that multifaceted and complex phenomenon that the literature reveals in terms of the roles of victim and perpetrator, of precipitating and predisposing factors, of motivations and consequences.

Finally, it should be recognized that a further level of complexity derives from the interaction between the cultural models of gender relations and the cultural models of the couple relationship; that is, the fact that while gender relationships within our society are still characterized by evident disparities and by the dominance of men over women, intimate relationships are increasingly conceived as the place of equality between partners. These conceptually contrasting cultural models can both be operating at the same time in the life of a couple, giving rise to contradictions and paradoxes which in themselves generate violence.

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