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Essay

Power and Love in Intimate Partner Violence Theories: A Conceptual Integration

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Abstract

The field of study on intimate partner violence has long been characterized by a bitter debate between the following two opposing theoretical and ideological positions on the nature of the phenomenon: the first is typical of the feminist perspective and considers IPV as an expression of gender-based violence; the second is typical—among others—of the attachment-based perspective and maintains that IPV would be a neutral form of violence with respect to gender. The aim of this contribution is to try to show how it is possible to make a more heuristically fruitful comparison between these two antagonistic perspectives, shifting the focus on the conceptual frameworks that underlie them and on their two different corresponding key explanatory concepts as follows: on the one hand, gender-based power on which the feminist perspective hinges, and on the other, love and love-related emotional dynamics on which the attachment-based perspective focuses. Finally, we will argue how these two key explanatory concepts can be kept combined in a sort of binocular vision and integrated into a more complex "power-and-love" explanatory framework. To this end, we will refer to a systemic approach to IPV, in particular to the contribution of Virginia Goldner, who proposes a model based on the close interconnection between power dynamics and love-related dynamics in the genesis and perpetuation of male violence in heterosexual intimate relationships.

Keywords: love; power; intimate partner violence; systemic approach; the gender debate on intimate partner violence; feminist perspective on IPV; attachment-based perspective on IPV

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1. Introduction: The Gender Debate on Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence is a serious social problem that exists worldwide in all socioeconomic and cultural contexts and whose harmful effects particularly affect women. Since the 1970s, a variety of theoretical perspectives within different disciplines have been developed to provide an explanation and effective response to this problem. The field of study on the subject has long been characterized by a bitter debate between two opposing conceptual frameworks on the nature of IPV. These frameworks have been defined through a variety of semantic labels, but at first glance we could identify them as the position that considers IPV to be an expression of gender-based violence (e.g., DeKeseredy 2016, 2021; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Pence and Paymar 1993), as opposed to the position that IPV would be a neutral form of violence with respect to gender (e.g., Bates and Taylor 2019; Dutton 1994, 2010; Felson and Lane 2010). This conceptual dichotomy is accompanied by an empirical and methodological debate on the so-called

gender symmetry or asymmetry in IPV, i.e., whether violence in intimate relationships is perpetrated almost exclusively or to a much greater extent by men towards female partners (e.g., Dobash et al. 1992; Dobash and Dobash 2004; Fanslow et al. 2023; Sánchez-Prada et al. 2023) or whether the rates of perpetration of IPV are substantially similar for men and women (e.g., Archer 2000; Bates et al. 2014; Hamel 2020; Straus 2009, 2011), or whether there are different types of violence with different rates of perpetration for men and women, as proposed in the influential Johnson's typology that contrasts intimate terrorism with situational couple violence (Conroy et al. 2024; M. P. Johnson 1995, 2006, 2008). Indeed, using the semantic opposition between gender-based and gender-neutral positions is a way of conceptualizing the debate on IPV that does not clarify the nature of the controversy and ends up fostering polarization between mutually incompatible dichotomous alternatives. In fact, the controversy does not focus generically on how much gender counts or is central in understanding the phenomenon of IPV, but on the specificity of the theoretical link between gender, power, and violence. Therefore, this semantic opposition seems to us to be better illustrated by resorting to more specific descriptions, such as the following: the gender-based position could usefully be described as one that conceptualizes IPV as a form of violence that is a direct expression and consequence of male power over women in society. The gender-neutral position could instead be defined in terms of a dichotomous negation of the former, that is, based on the assertion that the issue of gender disparities and male power over women is marginal if not totally irrelevant for the understanding of IPV. Such a redefinition leads us to shift our attention to the different explanatory frameworks and fundamental theoretical constructs underlying the two contrasting positions; something that would allow us to move the debate onto a level that eliminates the intrinsic dichotomy in the opposition between gender-based violence and gender-neutral violence, replacing it with a more fruitful theoretical comparison.

The aim of this paper is to try to show how the contrast between the gender-based and gender-neutral positions on IPV can be more usefully reframed in terms of a different focus on power versus love as a key explanatory construct for conceptualizing intimate violence. Starting from this assumption, we will try to show how it is possible to fruitfully compare and partly combine the following two generally opposed theoretical frameworks on IPV: on the one hand, the feminist perspective, which embodies an emblematically gender-based position; on the other hand, the attachment-based perspective, currently the most influential among those adopting a gender-neutral position. Therefore, we will briefly present the conceptual premises of each perspective, reading them in the light of the different theoretical constructs that characterize them, respectively, gender-based power and love-related emotional dynamics. Furthermore, we will try to show how a reconciliation between these antagonistic perspectives can be achieved, arguing that the conceptual frameworks that underlie them (power vs. love) should be better conceived as intertwined and combined in a sort of binocular vision. To this end, we will refer to a systemic approach on IPV, in particular to the contribution of Goldner (1998, 1999) and Goldner et al. (1990); it will be analyzed in depth since it represents an example of how power dynamics and love-related dynamics can be combined as key constructs in the conceptualization of intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships.

2. The Feminist Perspective on IPV: The Pole of Gender-Based Power

The feminist perspective on IPV, placing the concept of power and dominance of man over woman at the center of the theory, has produced fundamental contributions to the understanding of the power relations that are involved in male violence against women in intimate relationships. This has been performed according to a double level of analysis as follows: (1) a social macro-level, relating to the analysis of the cultural premises that

justify men's violence against a female partner; (2) an individual micro-level, relating to the identification of the various coercive control strategies implemented by violent men in order to control and submit their female partners.

2.1. The Social Macro-Level: Gender Inequalities and the Ideological Justification of Violence Against Women

As regards the role of the social macro-level, Pence and Dasgupta (2006) have indicated in an exemplary way some cultural premises and conditioning that have contributed to building and maintaining the phenomenon of male violence against women in intimate relationships. First of all, there is a premise that hierarchical and therefore superiority/inferiority relationships between men and women are natural. Historically, most cultures have supported the belief that men are more rational, logical, and competent than women. Hence, the obvious and culturally actively constructed consequence is that it must be the man who holds the authority in the family. Men, being "naturally" superior to women, have the right to assume the position of authority in the family and to maintain it by any means, including violence, in many cases without arousing the slightest reproof, precisely by virtue of the social approval of male superiority over women. Not surprisingly, in traditional societies, men who dared to share power with their female partners were often made the object of social ridicule as a means of punishing transgression of gender norms and reasserting the traditional gender order (i.e., Abedinifard 2016). Then, another social conditioning is the lack of consequences for the use of violence. The physical superiority of man over woman allows him to carry out aggressive conduct without the fear of significant retaliation by the victim. Added to this is also that, since these behaviors take place mostly within the home, the extended family tends not to intervene to stop male violence, thus helping to strengthen the perception of non-punishment by the perpetrators of violence.

Furthermore, we can identify another social conditioning that is expressed along the following two related lines: the first refers to the concept of gender hierarchy and its consequences, while the second refers to the primary socialization processes that support it. In hierarchical relationships, those who occupy the top position can impose serious consequences on those who resist their authority. This phenomenon emerges very clearly when analyzing what we might call "separation injuries" of abused women; that is, the injuries that abused women suffer when they leave or are about to leave their abusive partners. In fact, several studies indicate that for abused women, the risk of serious injuries increases significantly during the process of leaving the relationship or legal action against their aggressors (i.e., Brownridge et al. 2008). In fact, while male superiority is considered natural, the resistance of women to violent male conduct of domination is conceived conversely as an unnatural transgression of social and moral codes and must therefore be strongly repressed. Male violence to suppress women's resistance is therefore often regarded as justified and necessary, or at least understandable. On the other hand, if we reflect on the primary socialization processes, we can see how they are conceived ab initio, precisely in accordance with the cultural premise of natural male dominance over women. According to gender socialization models, in almost all societies, boys are taught to dominate, and girls are trained to accept domination. Finally, we have the phenomenon of the historical and social objectification of the subordinate group, the relational and social process through which an illusory separation is constructed between the dominant group and the subordinate group. This leads members of the dominant group to view subordinates as a distinct "species," with needs, emotions, and desires distinct from their own. Similarly, violent men are socialized in cultures that promote and support the objectification of women. They quickly learn to disrespect women, internalizing the latent misogyny in society.

Indeed, subtler versions of the long-standing cultural premises highlighted by Pence and Dasgupta (2006) continue to influence gendered power relations and the social acceptance of male dominance and control in intimate relationships even in contemporary Western society, seemingly characterized by more equalitarian gender attitudes and arrangements (e.g., Scarborough et al. 2019; Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel 2020). For example, despite a more widespread adherence to gender egalitarianism, women continue to contribute considerably more to household labor than their male partners (Daminger 2020). Similarly, women are disadvantaged in balancing work and family life and have less freedom in their career choices, prioritizing the careers of their male partners. Furthermore, women continue to play a subordinate role in decision-making relating to family life and children, shouldering the burden of the cognitive work involved in decision-making processes (e.g., exploring and evaluating alternative solutions) but leaving the final decision to their male partners (Wong and Daminger 2024). All these persistent elements of unacknowledged inequality can be seen as manifestations of invisible male power within the couple, which can prepare the ground for the emergence of more overt forms of male control, domination, and violence.

The essential need to consider the socio-cultural macro-level for understanding IPV as a gendered phenomenon continues to be highlighted in more recent theoretical and empirical contributions adopting a feminist perspective and arguing for the need to frame IPV as an issue of male violence against women (i.e., DeKeseredy 2016, 2021; Sikweyiya et al. 2020).

2.2. The Micro-Level of Individual Behavior: The Role of Coercive Control

The second fundamental contribution to the understanding of IPV offered by the feminist perspective concerns the level of individual behaviors and motivations of partner-abusive men, and hinges on the concept of coercive control, which, perhaps more than any other, is seen to specifically characterize male violence against women in intimate relationships, according to the feminist perspective (Crossman et al. 2016; M. P. Johnson 2006; Myhill and Hohl 2019; Pence and Paymar 1993; Robinson and Myhill 2021; Stark and Hester 2019). Coercive control can be defined as a systematic pattern of behavior typically exercised by the abusive man over the partner aimed at causing fear, punishment, intimidation, and/or domination.

According to Stark's influential conceptualization, (Stark 2007) coercive control consists of the following two main dimensions: coercion, which is used to hurt and intimidate victims, and control, aimed at isolating them and strictly regulating their behavior. Coercion involves the use of force or threats by the abusive man to induce a particular response in the victim and can be conceptualized as having the following two distinct components: violence and intimidation. Violence is represented by physical assaults against the partner, assaults that in the context of coercive control are characterized more by their high frequency and continuity than by their severity alone. Intimidation is used to keep the abuse secret and to instill in the victim fear, dependence, and a sense of loyalty to the perpetrator. It is based on what the victim has experienced in the past or believes that the partner could do to her if she does not comply with his demands. If intimidation sufficiently undermines a partner's willingness to resist, violence is unnecessary.

According to Stark, intimidation can manifest itself in the following three different ways: through threats, surveillance, and denigration. Threats can consist of a wide range of actions, from the most overtly aggressive, such as a death threat, to the more subtle, expressed through behaviors and warnings that might even appear loving to a stranger. Threats can also target the children of a woman who is the victim of violence, forced to choose between her own safety and that of her children. Then, there are passive-aggressive threats, carried out when a man frightens his partner by disappearing without warning or threatening self-harm or suicide. Another class of threats involves anonymous acts whose

authorship is easily deducible. In other words, the perpetrator is responsible for threatening messages sent to cell phones or emails, acts of damage to the partner's property, and so on. Threats are often associated with surveillance, which in the context of coercive control commonly takes the form of stalking, aimed at conveying the perpetrator's omnipotence and omnipresence. Stalking is part of a continuum of surveillance tactics that include timing the partner's activities, monitoring her communications, searching drawers, bags, wallets, etc., and cyberstalking with cameras or satellite tracking devices. Surveillance tactics allow the perpetrator to "cross the social space," making physical separation ineffective for the victim as a way to escape control. Finally, degradation refers to all those behaviors by the perpetrator aimed at establishing his moral superiority over the partner; they include insults, slurs, and degrading requests, such as asking the partner to submit to sexual inspections or participate in sexual acts she deems offensive.

Control, the other main dimension of Stark's conceptualization, is aimed at indirectly forcing the victim into obedience by depriving her of vital resources and support systems, as well as establishing "rules" of behavior in daily life, which the victim feels obliged to follow even in the perpetrator's physical absence. Control, like coercion, can be broken down into several components as follows: isolation, deprivation, exploitation, and micro-regulation of the partner's behavior. A controlling man tends to isolate his partner to express exclusive possession, prevent disclosure of the abuse, instill dependence, and prevent her from obtaining help or support. The most common isolation tactics include denying phone calls and visits to relatives, friends, and colleagues, who may also be subjected to threats and aggression. Control also manifests itself through deprivation tactics that foster the partner's dependence, depriving her of the resources necessary for autonomous decision-making and independent living. For example, the perpetrator's incursions and disturbances at his partner's workplace are often aimed at preventing the partner from working, significantly impacting her employment opportunities, performance, or promotion opportunities. Alongside deprivation tactics, we can also find exploitative tactics, expressed by denying the partner money to meet basic needs and forcing her to account for even the most trivial expenses. Finally, there is the micro-regulation of the partner's behavior in daily life, such as which television programs to watch, how to cook, how to dress, how to care for the children—all activities that specifically concern the "proper" role of the female gender.

2.3. Love-Related Emotional Dynamics as a Theoretical "Blind Spot" in the Feminist Perspective

As it is possible to see, these fundamental theorizations elaborated from the feminist perspective are centered on the construct of gender-based power as the pivotal causal factor in IPV. Gender-based power manifests itself in the dual form of socio-cultural premises and conditioning that justify male violence against women at the macro-level, and coercive control techniques that the abusive man adopts to put his female partner in a condition of submission and subjection at the individual level. No reference is instead made to the specificity of the intimate bond between the partners and the emotional dynamics of the couple's relationship. In this regard, it should be considered how the feminist perspective, at least in its most radical and orthodox versions, identifies the ultimate cause of male violence in intimate relationships with men's power and dominance over women in society. Consequently, it tends to reject the psychological explanations of IPV, as they would divert attention from the more crucial sociopolitical factors. However, the feminist perspective cannot completely abandon the psychological level of explanation of the phenomenon and therefore invokes it through an implicit a priori assumption regarding the motivation underlying violence. Implicit in feminist conceptualizations is the hypothesis that the violent man resorts to violence because he is driven by a basic motivation to dominate his

partner by any means. Therefore, the individual behaviors and motivations of the violent man tend to be conceptualized as a mere reproduction of the power inequalities between men and women and of male privilege at the social level. The only relational dynamic examined within the couple is that of dominance/submission, where the man's violence and control over his partner are seen as a tool to reassert male dominance or to counter female insubordination. Similarly, the behaviors and motivations of the female victim of violence are conceptualized primarily in terms of different responses and tactics to adapt to, avoid, or counter the violence and control of the male partner.

Love as a theoretical concept is not completely absent from the feminist perspective on IPV but takes on a narrow and specific meaning: it is seen as a powerful cultural discourse that pressures women to remain in a violent relationship by tolerating abuse and makes it easier for abusive men to justify their controlling and manipulative behaviors (i.e., Jiménez-Picón et al. 2023; Lelaurain et al. 2021; Towns and Adams 2000; Wood 2001). The above effects of love as a social discourse are certainly at work in abusive relationships, and it is essential to recognize and counteract them. However, the love relationship, the relational premises that characterize it (first and foremost, the emotional interdependence and the expectation of mutual care, trust, and support between partners) and the consequent love-related motivations of each partner are substantially overlooked in theorizing violence. This is particularly evident for the male perpetrator of coercive controlling violence, who is often depicted solely as a strategic enslaver, deceiver, and exploiter of his female partner—which is certainly accurate in some cases, at least in the more advanced stages of coercive control dynamics. However, this depiction seems to imply, almost by definition, that he has not any feeling of love nor any emotional dependence on his partner, even if this assumption is never clearly stated.

However, can we really a priori consider the perpetrator of coercive controlling violence to be completely detached from the emotional needs that drive people to form and maintain romantic relationships? And if not, do these needs have any influence on his violent and controlling behaviors beyond his power-based motivation to dominate his partner and exploit her materially, economically, and sexually as a woman? In this regard, it is important to underline that love as a theoretical construct should not be equated exclusively with its idealized and romanticized representation found in social discourses, nor with its strategic use by perpetrators as a form/instrument of abuse (i.e., Donovan and Hester 2010). Rather, love might be best characterized as a highly complex phenomenon, a set of psychological and socio-cultural premises underlying intimate relationships that need to be investigated through a broad and multidisciplinary perspective (i.e., Sternberg and Sternberg 2018).

By electing gender-based power as the sole pivotal construct for conceptualizing and explaining violence in intimate relationships, the feminist perspective unfortunately ends up expunging the entire conceptual domain of love and love-related emotional dynamics from the explanatory field of IPV.

3. The Attachment-Based Perspective on IPV: The Pole of Love-Related Emotional Dynamics

If the feminist perspective on IPV places gender-based power at the center of theorizing and postulates a need for dominance over the partner as a fundamental motivational factor of the male abuser, the gender-neutral perspectives repudiate this theoretical assumption and instead refer to a multiplicity of factors in the explanation of the phenomenon (e.g., Finkel 2008).

The most influential IPV theoretical framework among those that share a gender-neutral position is currently the one based on attachment theory (Bartholomew and Allison 2006;

Velotti et al. 2018). The attachment-based perspective presents a conceptual framework of the IPV phenomenon largely detached from the dynamics of gender and power, as it refers to emotional needs, expectations, and relational dynamics that can indifferently characterize partners of both sexes within an intimate relationship (Dutton and White 2012; Gormley 2005). In fact, it identifies the key explanatory frame of reference for understanding intimate violence not in gender-based power, but in love itself; that is, in specific features of the romantic bond between the partners, considered as a fundamental premise of an intimate relationship. Starting from the conceptualization of romantic love as an attachment process (Hazan and Shaver 1987), the mechanisms taken as triggering violent behavior against a romantic partner are seen to reside in dysfunctional ways to deal with unmet attachment needs and insecurity in the love relationship to the partner.

3.1. Dysfunctional Attachment Styles and IPV: Proneness to Perpetration and Vulnerability to Victimization

From the attachment-based perspective, violence is closely linked to insecurity regarding one's partner's love and commitment and uncertainty about the strength of the intimate bond. More specifically, it is seen as a dysfunctional response to the difficulty of effectively maintaining the desired level of physical and emotional closeness/distance from the partner. The source of this difficulty is, in turn, identified at an individual level by referring to the attachment history of the partner-abusive person; specifically, to experiences of inadequate caregiving by insensitive and/or unresponsive parents or other childhood attachment figures. These experiences form the basis for the development of dysfunctional attachment styles in adult romantic relationships; that is, dysfunctional patterns of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors towards the partner. The central element of such dysfunctional attachment styles is defined as attachment insecurity and varies according to the following two main dimensions: (1) attachment anxiety, marked by the tendency to consider oneself unworthy of love combined with fear of abandonment by the partner and worry about the partner's availability and reliability as an attachment figure; (2) attachment avoidance, marked by the tendency to experience discomfort regarding intimacy combined with distrust of the partner and difficulty accepting dependence on him or her, as well as accepting the partner's dependence on oneself (i.e., Feeney 2008; Mikulincer and Shaver 2012). It follows that individuals high in attachment anxiety (that is, characterized by an anxious style) exhibit a propensity to excessively seek closeness, attention, and reassurance from their partner and may use violence as a way to forcefully maintain closeness when they fear being rejected or ignored by them. Conversely, individuals high in attachment avoidance (that is, characterized by an avoidant style) exhibit a propensity to physically and emotionally withdraw from their partner and may use violence as a way to restore distance when they fear losing their independence/autonomy in the face of overwhelming demands for support or intimacy from their partner. Depending on the different attachment styles, violent behavior also tends to take on distinct and specific features. In the case of anxious attachment, violence is more characterized by displays of anger, jealousy, and obsessive control aimed at forcing physical proximity and relational engagement from the partner. In the case of avoidant attachment, violence is more characterized by hostility, ostentatious disinterest, contempt, and cold detachment, taking on a more instrumental nature aimed at disengaging from the partner, making him or her desist from their requests for closeness and intimacy (Babcock et al. 2000; Bartholomew and Allison 2006).

Such an explanatory framework allows us to shed a different light on some paradoxes that characterize violent intimate relationships; for example, the fact that an individual can become violent towards the person he or she cannot bear to be without, or conversely that the victim can love, defend, and remain attached to a partner who is physically or

psychologically violent. These IPV paradoxes can be understood by considering two fundamental principles of attachment theory. First, attachment satisfies a basic need for survival; therefore, the strength of the attachment bond does not depend on the quality of the attachment relationship (Bowlby 1982). In fact, when individuals feel threatened, they will be led to seek proximity and support from their attachment figure, even when the latter is the source of the threat itself, which can lead to a further strengthening of the emotional bond. Second, individuals whose attachment needs have been frustrated throughout their relationship history and who feel particularly vulnerable to the potential loss of an attachment figure may perceive violence as a way to regain the preferred level of closeness/distance to an intimate partner (Allison et al. 2008).

For example, in one of the first applications of the attachment theoretical framework to IPV, Dutton and colleagues (Dutton et al. 1994) have hypothesized that, based on early attachment difficulties, abusive men develop hypersensitivity to signals that they believe indicate an impending abandonment or rejection in adult romantic relationships. These threats, real or imaginary, produce pain and anger, which lead the perpetrator to resort to extreme measures to reduce them. The threat of suffering the loss of the relationship generates anxiety in the perpetrator, converting it into anger and control behaviors, aimed at regaining stability in the relationship with romantic partner. Based on the same principles, we can also understand how the victim can seek proximity to the partner as an attachment figure, even if abusive, thus activating the attachment system and strengthening the loving bond. Subsequent research has found that there are differences in vulnerability to victimization between anxious and avoidant individuals and specific mechanisms have been hypothesized to explain this (Cataudella et al. 2023). The strongest links with victimization have been found with individuals characterized by an anxious attachment style, which has been explained by invoking the role of its most typical attributes as follows: on the one hand, fear of abandonment and separation anxiety that would make the prospect of leaving their partner, even if violent, intolerable; on the other hand, the image of oneself as unworthy of love that would favor attributing responsibility for the violence suffered to oneself, fueling the hope that the partner will change.

In summary, since these early contributions, most attachment-based research on interpersonal violence has focused on the role of insecurity in adults' romantic attachment styles in making an individual prone to using violence against their partner as well as vulnerable to victimization by their partner. Subsequent research has confirmed early theorizations, showing that the two main dimensions of attachment insecurity. attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, are linked to IPV perpetration and victimization in different specific ways (Spencer et al. 2021; Cataudella et al. 2023; Velotti et al. 2022). Another interesting line of inquiry concerns the identification of specific processes and mechanisms mediating the link between attachment insecurity and violence against the partner, such as dysfunctional communication patterns (Arseneault et al. 2023), destructive conflict strategies (Bonache et al. 2019), and difficulties in regulating emotions (Guzman-Gonzalez et al. 2016).

3.2. Dyadic Combination of Attachment Styles and the Resulting Couple Dynamics

The contribution offered by the literature on attachment styles in violent relationships is not limited to emphasizing only the characteristics of each member of the couple. Rather, various studies (Allison et al. 2008; Doumas et al. 2008; Oka et al. 2014; Sommer et al. 2017) also focus on the combination of the attachment styles of both partners, which builds a self-regulating couple system that is more than the sum of its parts. We can thus move from a viewpoint that focuses only on individual contributors to partner violence to a viewpoint characterized by an interactional frame that highlights the interpersonal context

and dynamics in which the violence occurs (Bartholomew and Cobb 2010). For example, the Allison et al. (2008) studies, in accordance with what was underlined by gender-neutral studies based on attachment theory, have shown that high attachment anxiety is predictive of partner violence for both men and women. They also showed that the association between abandonment anxiety and the use of violence is stronger if a partner with a high level of attachment anxiety pairs with a partner with a high level of attachment avoidance. This is due to a circuit that is created between the two partners of the couple, which we could schematize as follows: the partner with a high level of attachment anxiety actively seeks the proximity of the partner who, however, being an avoidant, can only react to such a request for closeness by withdrawing. Faced with such withdrawal behavior, the anxious partner, in an attempt to engage her and get her attention, may become violent towards the avoidant partner. Such violent behavior, in turn, will further distance the avoidant partner, who will respond with an even greater distance, setting in motion a cycle of self-sustaining positive feedback.

Such a dynamic helps us understand the importance of broadening the field of observation to the couple, understood as a superordinate context within which it is possible to conceive the contributions of each partner. In fact, this can help us enrich our understanding of the phenomenon of violence in intimate relationships, as a dysfunctional strategy to regulate the closeness between partners. Now, we will see how this can be performed. The strategies that are usually used to regulate the distance from the partner are pursuit and withdrawal, where violence generally appears when other non-violent pursuit and withdrawal strategies do not work. In this regard, we must consider that the same behavior can have opposite meanings for the partners, depending on the motivations of the individual and the relational context; for example, involvement in an extra-marital affair is sometimes a strategy aimed at getting closer to the partner to regain his attention by arousing his jealousy; at other times, it is a withdrawal strategy, aimed at disengaging from a partner who makes excessive emotional demands. In the literature, there are contributions that associate distance regulation strategies, including violence, with certain attachment orientations. In particular, pursuit is more typical of an anxious attachment style, while withdrawal is more typical of fearful and avoidant attachment styles. If we focus on Allison and colleagues' study (Allison et al. 2008), at the level not only of the individual attachment profile, but rather at the level of the interaction of the attachment profiles of both partners, we can reach a more complex classification. In fact, we can observe the following two common interactional patterns in couples made up of partners with the above-mentioned attachment profiles: pursuit/withdrawal and pursuit/pursuit. The pursuit/withdrawal pattern tends to occur in couples with incompatible attachment needs (i.e., closeness vs. distance). This pattern can generally be observed when anxious individuals enter relationships with avoidant individuals. Anxiously attached partners tend to become violent when their non-violent search strategies (e.g., requests for attention, attempts at communication) have failed. In turn, avoidant partners feel overwhelmed by the search for closeness expressed by the partner and try to distance themselves from them through emotional, verbal, and physical disengagement. When their non-violent distancing strategies fail, avoidant partners tend to react with violence to push their partners away. Conversely, the pursuit/pursuit pattern tends to occur in couples where both partners show moderate to high levels of attachment anxiety. In this case, partners tend to compete for each other's support and attention, but fail to recognize and meet each other's needs, which leads to mutual frustration and then violence by one or both partners.

3.3. Gender-Based Power as a Theoretical "Blind Spot" in the Attachment-Based Perspective

As can be seen from this brief overview, studies based on romantic attachment theory refer to an explanatory framework of IPV that is completely different from the gender-based power framework proposed by the feminist perspective. According to the attachment-based perspective, IPV is primarily a question of love, of dysfunctional romantic bonding, i.e., deriving from maladaptive ways of seeking the satisfaction of emotional needs within an intimate relationship. In particular, violence is understood as an extreme attempt to restore the preferred level of emotional closeness/distance from the partner when other non-violent methods have failed or exceed the perpetrator's emotional regulation capacities.

Certainly, the attachment-based framework's greatest strength is that it provides an explanation of IPV that focuses on the specific nature of the intimate relationship. Indeed, the mechanisms that lead to violence are seen as directly attributable to the dysfunction of the romantic relationship itself, which is based on emotional interdependence and the expectation that partners will care for each other's attachment needs. However, this is accompanied by the implicit a priori assumption that intimate relationships are by definition characterized by the equality of power or that any disparities in power are rendered irrelevant or neutralized by the presence of the loving bond between the partners. One further assumption is that intimate relationships are intrinsically egalitarian, free from any motivation to achieve and maintain hierarchical power and dominance over the partner. Therefore, this exclusive emphasis on the emotional bond and attachment needs of each partner led to interpreting IPV as a gender-neutral phenomenon totally disconnected from gender-based power dynamics. Consequently, the influence of contextual factors such as gender-based differences and inequalities in the couple's relationship, and how they impact differently on the attachment/caregiving behaviors and expectations of each partner depending on gender, has been largely neglected. Indeed, since each partner's attachment needs are socially defined by gender representations that characterize men and women differently in terms of relational aptitudes and capabilities (e.g., men portrayed as emotionally illiterate and women as naturally gifted at responding to the needs of others), the "mutual satisfaction" of each other's needs can constitute an unfair and unbalanced exchange in favor of the male partner. This can translate into a series of gender-based inequalities in different areas of couple functioning, with respect to the right to pursue one's personal goals within the relationship, the willingness to accommodate to one's partner's wishes, and the attention and emotional responsiveness towards one's partner (i.e., Knudson-Martin 2013; Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009).

More generally, the dimension of power within romantic relationships (i.e., Kim et al. 2019), which is expressed, for example, in who has the power or right to choose and decide for both on common issues, has not been adequately considered. Indeed, power dynamics between partners are a fundamental aspect of intimate relationships, even the most balanced, egalitarian, and satisfying ones. This occurs precisely because intimate relationships are characterized by a high level of interdependence accompanied by varying degrees of uncertainty about the partner's reliability and commitment. Since romantic partners are highly dependent on each other for the satisfaction of basic emotional needs, but those needs are often not perfectly compatible, they will engage in a series of attempts to influence each other. This is where gender-based power inequalities come into play. In fact, these attempts are likely to be based on the gendered resources (power base) each partner possesses and can be used to persuade the other to act in a way that satisfies their desires or at least does not hinder them. Influence strategies can be positive (promises or provision of rewards) or negative (threats or implementation of punishments), and the latter may include coercion, intimidation, and violence. However, these power-based processes are

generally overlooked in romantic attachment theory and are consequently not considered where it would be most necessary to do so; that is, in the explanation of intimate violence.

In summary, the role of gender-based power, whose importance in explaining some crucial IPV dynamics such as coercive controlling violence has been unquestionably highlighted by the feminist perspective, appears to find no space as an explanatory construct in the attachment-based perspective.

4. Combining Gender-Based Power and Love-Related Dynamics: Insights from Goldner's Systemic Model of IPV

The third theoretical perspective on IPV, although certainly less widespread and influential than the previous ones, is offered by the application of the systemic approach to the problem of violence in intimate relationships.

4.1. The Systemic Approach and Its Application to IPV

The systemic approach is the clinical and theoretical movement, developed in the United States in the 1950s, born from the need to revise the conceptual models with which mental illness was explained and treated. From this point of view, the contribution of Bateson was crucial; with his double bind theory (Bateson et al. 1956), he argued that mental illness, far from being a prerogative of the patient who carries it, is actually an adaptive communicative response to the dysfunctional interactions that characterize the family system from which it is generated. Starting from these conceptual premises, in the first phase, the systemic approach was thought of as a radical alternative to traditional explanations of psychological problems, as it drastically repudiated individual intrapsychic constructs in favor of holistic explanatory concepts deriving from cybernetic models and general systems theory, such as interaction patterns, circular causality, and family homeostasis (i.e., Watzlawick et al. 1967). However, Bateson's (1972) epistemological framework can be considered as the initial source of inspiration for a more complex attempt to combine the subjectivity of the individual and his "historicity" with the historicity of the family system, of its communications and interactions, reconstructed through the generations. This intuition would later find one of its theoretical developments in the integration between the systemic model and attachment theory, which occurred at the end of the 80s (e.g., Byng-Hall 2008; Dallos and Vetere 2009; S. M. Johnson 2004).

Still, how does the systemic approach fit into the IPV controversy on gender and the contrast between feminist and gender-neutral perspectives? Since the early 1980s, a period in which the awareness that IPV represented a social problem has increased thanks to feminist activism, the systemic approach has been applied to violence against partners (Giles-Sims 1983). However, due to its peculiar theoretical and epistemological characteristics, the systemic model was prematurely made the subject of criticism in the context of the debate on the topic of IPV; in fact, supporters of the gender-based position on IPV believed that the epistemological (circular causality) and operational (couple sessions) assumptions of the systemic approach made it inadequate to deal with the phenomenon. In particular, according to Bograd (1984), systemic language, by its very characteristic of focusing on the recursive character of interactive sequences and on homeostatic mechanisms within the couple, would lead to blaming women victims of domestic violence and justifying male perpetrators. Not only that, but the idea has also been established that those who work following a systemic approach are more interested in preserving the relationship at all costs over the dissolution of the relationship and the safety of the woman victim of violence. The challenge of a systemic explanation of IPV has therefore become that of incorporating feminist notions about the role of gender-based power, without denying the epistemological principles that guide the systemic understanding of the problems and psy-

chopathologies that arise within couple- and family relationships (George and Stith 2014). Since then, despite the ongoing criticism from the radical feminist perspective, several systemic intervention models for intimate partner violence, in particular based on conjoint couple therapy, have been developed in recent decades (Cooper and Vetere 2008; Slootmaeckers and Migerode 2020; Stith et al. 2011; Stith et al. 2020). These models try to combine feminist assumptions about the role of gender-based power inequalities in IPV with a systemic framework which incorporates attachment-based and/or behavioral constructs to explain the genesis of violence in couple relationships.

4.2. Goldner's Model of Male Violence in Intimate Relationships: A Multilevel Explanation

As we will try to highlight, among those systemic models, Goldner (1998, 1999); Goldner et al. (1990) is the author who proposed an interpretation of the IPV phenomenon, particularly suited to combine the theoretical assumptions of the systemic approach mentioned above with the feminist perspective on the one hand, and the attachment-based perspective on the other. We will try to show how Goldner's model can offer valuable insights for the integration of their respective key frames of reference—power and love.

First of all, it is useful to underline how Goldner's perspective appears to be an expression of different souls that have historically been constitutive of the systemic model and of the potential, typical of systemic thinking, to combine different conceptual frameworks and explanatory levels in a multiple and complex vision. In fact, Goldner's model consists of the following four points of observation of the phenomenon: the psychodynamic, the social, the sociopolitical, and the systemic-interactive in the strict sense. The psychodynamic viewpoint concerns the investigation of ideas, beliefs, and, more deeply, internal representations of oneself and others, which are often totally implicit; however, when made explicit, they account for the premises underlying the strong attachment in couples characterized by IPV. The social learning viewpoint shows how men who are violent towards their partner and women who suffer violence from their partner have been socialized, on the basis of precise cultural premises, to specific gender roles, which are then played in the couple's relationship. The socio-political viewpoint makes it possible to highlight the differences in power between men and women, including the subjective sense of privilege and the right of men to dominate women and the subjective conviction of women to serve men. Finally, the systemic-interactive viewpoint highlights the role of positive feedback loops, which are the immediate "cause" of the escalations that lead to violence, as well as all the double bind relationships between the couple, extended families, and care contexts, which help keep the problem going. Thus, let us consider some aspects of Goldner's model which, through the interaction between the aforementioned viewpoints, deepen the interconnection between gender-based power dynamics and love-related emotional dynamics in IPV.

The first aspect of particular interest is Goldner's emphasis on gender prescriptions that support the relational premises of the man who is violent towards his partner, and correlatively of the woman who tends to remain trapped in a relationship in which she is the victim of violence. For the purposes of our analysis, we could assimilate the concept of relational premises to that of adult attachment styles. In the model proposed by Goldner, both the attachment style of the abusive man and that of the woman who suffers his violence are linked to internalized premises relating to the maintenance of a sense of personal value. This is consistent with the attachment perspective—to maintain a sense of security in the relationship, one must perceive oneself as worthy of love, and therefore able to maintain an attachment bond with the partner. However, this is subject to certain conditions, linked to one's own sense of personal value. According to Goldner, one's sense of personal value is in turn related to the ability to conform to gender prescriptions, such as "I am worthy of love if I behave like a real man/a real woman". Furthermore, these prescriptions are different

and tend to be opposite and complementary, for men and women. Men are expected to be tough, dominant, and invulnerable; women, on the other hand, are expected to be gentle, submissive, fragile, and sacrificial. These prescriptions are believed to be transmitted through cultural models, which is in line with the feminist perspective on intimate violence. In addition, according to Goldner, they are directly learned and embodied not only in the attachment relationship with each parent but through the positioning of the boy or girl within the relationship between the parents, also characterized by a specific combination of attachment-related dynamics and power dynamics. This is especially true when the interparental relationship is also strongly marked by the dominance and possibly violence of the father over the mother. Let us illustrate this point in more depth.

4.3. The Male and Female Sides of the Couple: Complementary Gender Premises and Individual Psychodynamics

As for the male side, the sense of personal worth appears to be anchored to the aforementioned socio-cultural gender premises relating to masculinity, in particular to the requirement that men must be stronger than women and that they must never show themselves weak, sad, or afraid. These premises are not only adopted in a particularly rigid way in the families of origin of men who tend to become violent against their partners but take on different specific declinations in the attachment relationship with the father and with the mother. On the one hand, therefore, to the extent that these men as boys have grown up according to the imperative of being "men" in the terms proposed by male gender ideology, to be considered worthy of their father's love, they had to deny themselves their vulnerabilities and the need for emotional connection with others in general and with these same fathers in particular. This, according to Goldner, involved replacing an identification with the father for a real emotional relationship with him as follows: instead of "being with" the father, "being like" the father. In the extreme, becoming a man that his father would have loved and respected meant becoming just as violent. On the other hand, the emotional bond of this man as a child with his own mother (subjugated and often victimized by his father) resulted in a real mother–son coalition against the father. This contributed, most of the time in a completely unconscious way, to fueling a triadic relational configuration that reinforced in the future abusive man the same values and models of violent masculinity that he should have resisted. In fact, although he still needed his mother's care and protection and therefore wanted her closeness, the boy was often called upon by his mother to act as her "little man," in order to credibly support her efforts to oppose his father. In this way, the mother conveyed the message that in order to be considered worthy of her love, the son had to become as strong and invulnerable as his abusive father, so that he could defend her from him. In other words, she made her son feel loved by appreciating and valuing his strength and independence, but for this same reason, she felt exempted from the task of protecting her son from his father, something she would not have been able to do anyway due to her level of victimization. In a complementary way, the boy, having perceived the injustices and abuses suffered by his mother at the hands of his father, felt called to come to her aid. However, at the same time, he feared that his bond and his feelings of protection towards his mother would make him appear feminine and "not man enough" in his father's eyes; he craved his father's approval, an approval that could only be maintained by denying what he was doing, which was helping his mother.

This complex learning context based on the conflict between loyalty to the mother and loyalty to the father helps explain the cycle of violence and contrition that the abusive man engages in towards his partner. On the one hand, it allows us to understand why for the man, the increase in closeness and intimacy with one's partner can be so dangerous for one's sense of worth, thus triggering violence. In fact, when the man experiences himself as dependent and in need of protection from his partner, he is terrified of not being

different enough (in need of affection, protection, and tenderness) from "his" woman, and violence becomes a means to reaffirm the gender difference and his masculine power. On the other hand, it also allows us to understand how the woman's needs for autonomy and the consequent loosening of the bond of intimacy represent another context that can easily trigger violence in this type of man. In fact, this man tends to establish an emotional bond with his woman by "protecting" her; in this, it is as if he were re-proposing his emotional bond with his own mother who was submissive to her husband and often victimized by him. However, by its very nature, this bond is questioned whenever his female partner exhibits independent behaviors. This is because, when the woman expresses needs for autonomy, she tends to experience the "protection" of the man as controlling and intrusive and to distance herself. According to Goldner, in such situations, the conformity of the man's and his partner's relational premises to gender prescriptions along the lines of a "knight and damsel" relationship is violated and a struggle for control ensues. The man, momentarily "unhooked" from the romantic bond, appeals to the male bond that symbolically ties father and son and sets himself the goal of reaffirming his "manhood" and subduing "femininity" by any means necessary, including violence.

Turning now to briefly illustrate the female side of the relationship between the man who is prone to resorts to violence and his female partner, we can see how it exhibits complementary characteristics. Similarly to what has been highlighted with respect to the male gender ideology, women trapped in the relationship with a man who is violent towards them appear to have built their sense of personal value in a way that strictly adheres to gender prescriptions relating to femininity, particularly the ability to form and maintain relationships and to provide care and assistance to others. Many women who suffer violence from their partner report the feeling of not being significant in their family of origin unless they were dedicated to the needs of others; additionally, they report that their attempts at autonomy or separation were instead labeled as destructive. Furthermore, similarly to the male side, these prescriptions have been learned within one's relationships with both parental figures, in contexts often characterized by the violence of the father against the mother, where the latter has often totally consecrated her identity to the imperative of preserving family relationships, enduring all kinds of abuses. Consequently, for these women, not leaving a partner who is violent towards them represents the expression of the feminine ideal learned from their mothers according to the following traditional gender ideology: to maintain the bond, take care of the partner, and try to heal him, regardless of the personal cost involved in this objective. Moreover, since these women learn from an early age that being female means being able to tune in to the needs of others as a condition for a positive model of the self, their capacity for "gender" empathy gives them a subliminal knowledge of the fragile dependence of their partner. This often means that, by leaving him, they cannot escape the feeling that they are betraying the couple's alliance. Staying despite the violence suffered protects the woman from the sense of guilt and collapse of her self-esteem that would result from giving up her caregiving role towards her partner.

4.4. The Intertwining of Power and Love in the Couple Dynamics and the Recursive Cycle of Violence

So far, we have illustrated the male and female sides of the couple in which the violence of the man towards the partner is more likely to occur, according to Goldner's model. That is, on the one hand, we have highlighted the relational premises that make a man inclined to use violence towards his female partner and trigger his violent actions in specific activating relational contexts; on the other hand, the relational premises that make the woman devoted to remaining in the violent relationship and lead her to excuse or justify the violence of her male partner, seeing it as an expression of weakness and dependence. Still, how do the male and female sides of the couple fit together in order

to create a recursive circuit that makes male violence toward the partner a recurring and self-perpetuating phenomenon within this kind of intimate relationship? This is a less extensively developed point in Goldner's conceptualization. However, we can sketch a scheme of the feedback loops that perpetuate male violence within the couple at the level of dyadic interaction patterns. This scheme is partly analogous to dyadic patterns highlighted in the attachment-based literature, yet more complex, because it describes a dyadic pattern in which attachment dynamics are closely intertwined with power dynamics.

As we have seen, according to Goldner, the male partner resorts to violence as an assertion of power in the face of the woman's temporary emotional unavailability and/or her demands for independence/autonomy. This occurs partly to hide his own vulnerability and sense of powerlessness; in other words, he disguises the emotional dependence he feels towards his partner as a right to reaffirm his male hierarchical superiority. Indeed, according to the fundamental premises of an intimate relationship, for this man, being loved means being cared for and being able to depend on his partner. However, if he openly displays weakness and dependence, in addition to feeling stripped of his own image of masculinity, he will feel unworthy of his partner's love. Consequently, he must at all costs transform his need to be cared for by his partner into the ability to be obeyed, to assume a dominant position, so that he can think and feel worthy of her love again. In other words, he must transform a request for help ("I need your support") into the issuance of a command ("You must meet my needs, so do as I say"). After all, we could argue that it is precisely his rigid adherence to gender norms regarding male dominance over women and the requirements of masculinity that led this man to develop an insecure attachment to his partner. This is what has made him fragile in his compulsive self-sufficiency (which equates to his inability to turn to others for support) and dependent on his partner's ability to anticipate his unexpressed needs to the point of being unable to ask for help directly. For this reason, he cannot experience the open expression of his emotional dependence on his partner as a condition that allows him to benefit from her support without undermining his sense of personal value. Instead, he experiences it as a degrading inferiority that is perceived as unacceptable and must be denied through violence.

When the man, by resorting to violence, recovers a position of dominance over his partner, he restores his own positive self-image in reference to the gender prescriptions relating to masculinity. However, he is faced with the relational consequences of his actions, i.e., with the fact that his violent behavior emotionally distances his partner. By recovering his self-image as a proper male, he jeopardizes the emotional connection with his partner and must therefore take action through demonstrations of repentance and contrition. He can now pine for the loss of the bond with his partner and beg her to forgive him because he has subjectively denied his emotional dependence, re-established his own sense of masculine value, and now no longer perceives himself in a position of demeaning inferiority (he begs her to forgive him for proving to be the dominant one through violence).

The resulting cycle of violence is self-sustaining because, on the one hand, the female partner who endures violence cannot give up her role of sacrificial caring in the face of the vulnerability of her partner who appears repentant and contrite after yet another outburst of violence. This would mean demolishing the pillar on which both her lovability as a partner and her sense of personal value as a woman rest. On the other hand, once reconciled with the repentant partner, she cannot give up expecting and asking him again to recognize and support her aspiration to autonomy and self-determination (a form of power assertion) as a fundamental premise of their love relationship. Giving up on this would mean having to admit that the partner is no longer worthy of being loved and considered a soulmate, and the relationship would be devoid of any loving meaning. In fact, the woman chose her partner precisely because she believed he was capable of recognizing, respecting,

and supporting her right/aspiration to autonomy and self-determination, unlike what happened in her family of origin. Indeed, as mentioned, the fundamental premise of a loving relationship concerns the mutual satisfaction of emotional needs. In other words, to the extent that the loving bond with her partner persists, the woman cannot be content with simply becoming independent from him (i.e., simply leaving the relationship after yet another episode of violence, assuming she has the material means to do so). Rather, she longs for her partner to recognize her right to be autonomous and self-determined within the relationship, and for this reason too, she is committed to staying. Thus, the entire cycle is destined to repeat itself. Therefore, even at this level of systemic interaction, we can appreciate the intertwining of power dynamics and love dynamics implicit in Goldner's model.

5. Conclusions: The Need for a "Power-and-Love" Explanatory Framework for IPV

As we have tried to argue, the ongoing debate on gender in domestic violence, which hinges on the opposition between gender-based and gender-neutral positions, can be more usefully understood and reframed by focusing on the different key constructs underlying the following two main corresponding theoretical frameworks for IPV: specifically, gender-based power in relation to the feminist perspective vs. love-related emotional dynamics in relation to the attachment-based perspective.

According to the feminist perspective, which epitomizes a gender-based position on IPV, violence in heterosexual couples is essentially a matter of men being violent with their female partners. Male violence is seen as a direct consequence of the power inequalities between men and women and of male privilege at a social level, which linearly translates into the male partner's motivation to dominate his partner by any means, including violence. Therefore, what matters in explaining IPV is gender-based power, which is rooted in the structural inequalities of power between men and women and the gender ideology that justifies and perpetuates them, and especially manifests itself in coercive control techniques that abusive men exert toward their partners to gain and maintain dominance over them. Violence in same-sex relationships is also recognized and there have been contributions that provide a compelling reading of it from a feminist standpoint, such as the works by Donovan and Hester (2010, 2014). Perhaps because they depart from a traditional focus on heterosexual relationships, the above contributions are a rare example of feminist theorizing on IPV in which the role of love is considered in some depth. However, here too, the key explanatory framework for understanding violence remains centered on power, since "practices of love" are seen primarily as a discursive tool that the perpetrator can strategically use to manipulate the partner by instilling feelings of guilt and obligation in order to perpetuate control and abuse. Overall, there appears to be little room for love and love related-dynamics as explanatory concepts for the genesis of violence in intimate relationships in the feminist theoretical framework.

According to the attachment-based perspective, which takes a gender-neutral position on IPV, violence is caused by dysfunctional love-related dynamics that are unconnected to gendered power and centered on romantic attachment and emotional interdependence. In particular, violence is seen as a consequence of an individual's insecure attachment to his or her partner and is conceptualized as a dysfunctional reaction to a perceived threat to both the loving bond and the sense of personal autonomy within the intimate relationship. According to the attachment-based perspective, therefore, in explaining interpersonal violence, what matters is love, the intensity of the emotional attachment bond to the romantic partner, which makes individuals particularly vulnerable to the partner's failure to meet their emotional needs, triggering reactions that can result in violence. This

is particularly true for individuals who, starting from their inadequate experiences with caregivers throughout their attachment history, have developed insecure adult attachment styles based on negative expectations regarding their lovability and/or reliability of their partner in intimate relationships. The role of gender-based power inequalities between partners within the romantic couple and the resulting power dynamics is almost totally neglected in the explanation of violence in intimate relationships through an attachment-based theoretical framework.

Goldner's model, rooted in a systemic approach to intimate violence, offers some illuminating insights for bringing the two opposing perspectives (feminist vs. attachment-based) into dialog. This goal can be achieved through a systemic vision that seeks to integrate their respective key concepts into a more complex "power-and-love" explanatory framework. It is the combination of power and love as explanatory constructs that can allow us to more accurately explain the genesis of male violence in intimate relationships. On the one hand, violence is a phenomenon intrinsically linked to power, since it is both one of its potential manifestations and a way to achieve and preserve it. On the other hand, intimate relationships are supposed to be based on love and the related emotional dynamics. Therefore, violence in intimate relationships can be better understood by studying how power dynamics intersect with love-related dynamics.

This involves understanding how gender-based power dynamics that socially define the relationship between men and women in terms of dominance/subordination are modified by the presence of love-related dynamics that delineate the relationship between intimate partners in terms of mutual satisfaction of emotional needs. Conversely, we should also try to understand how the aforementioned love-related dynamics are modified by power dynamics, as each partner participates in the relationship with different gender-based resources and with specific expectations regarding the hierarchical relationship between the genders. More precisely, in order to explain intimate violence, on the one hand, we cannot ignore the role played by power inequalities between partners and by the rigid adherence to gender prescriptions that establish a gender-based dominance/subordination dynamic. On the other hand, we must also consider the intensity of the attachment bond typical of an intimate relationship, which produces a strong emotional interdependence between partners. It is the combination of these two sets of relational premises that constitutes the most favorable terrain for the emergence and perpetuation of male violence towards the partner in heterosexual intimate relationships.

Let us try to better illustrate the differences between these explanatory frameworks through a brief example of an episode in which a man is violent to his partner. For simplicity's sake, we will focus only on the intrapersonal level; that is, on explaining the perpetrator's behavior. Imagine a situation where a man comes home from work and dinner is not ready yet because his partner went out with friends and came home late; he reacts by insulting her and slapping her.

From a feminist perspective, this situation could be interpreted as a typical manifestation of gender-based violence, rooted in the male entitlement to be served and put first by his partner and to have jurisdiction over her personal autonomy. This man might think: "My partner doesn't respect me, doesn't put herself at my service, neglects her duties, takes too many liberties: she deserves to be punished and put back in her place." Violence is seen as an instrumental act to punish a transgression/insubordination, to impose future obedience, and to reaffirm male dominance within the relationship.

Instead, from an attachment-based perspective, the same situation could be attributed to the man's insecure attachment style, which causes him to perceive the incident as a sign of his partner's lack of love and devotion and a threat to the attachment bond. This man might think: "She doesn't care about me, she doesn't show me affection. She doesn't really

love me." Violence is seen as an expressive act of protest, a reaction to an emotional wound, an intrinsically dysfunctional way of seeking reassurance and attempting to reaffirm and strengthen the emotional bond that has been called into question.

From an integrated "power-and-love" perspective, the two alternative explanations (feminist vs. attachment-based) are not seen as incompatible, but as incomplete and complementary, because each is able to capture only a part of a more complex (in this case, intrapersonal) dynamic.

The power-based feminist explanation of this example appears blind to the possible existence of underlying emotional dynamics, unable to explain them because it excludes them a priori from its explanatory framework. The explanation only makes sense if it assumes that this man's sole concern is finding his dinner ready and, by extension, obtaining the services and obedience of his partner, whose role becomes indistinguishable from that of a servant. However, this equation between a partner and a servant completely eliminates the emotional complexity of the intimate relationship. Indeed, unlike the demand to be served, the need to feel loved can involve the expectation of being cared for and even revered by the partner, but only if this happens voluntarily, not if it is coercively imposed. The relational premise "you are a/my woman and you must serve me" is very different from the relational premise "you are my partner and if you love me, you should take care of me."

Conversely, the attachment-based explanation appears blind to gender power dynamics and therefore unable to convincingly explain the transition from insecurity about a partner's affection and commitment to violence against her. Indeed, while the former would imply a need for reassurance and a search for closeness, violence is a highly aversive behavior likely to elicit reactions of hostility and detachment that can further estrange the partner. The attachment-based framework fails to explain why violence, which, by definition, is an assertion of coercive power, is specifically selected among the possible responses to a partner's behavior that arouses insecurity and concern for the stability of the romantic bond.

According to an integrated "power-and-love" explanatory framework, the man in the example acts both guided by gender prescriptions relating to the dominance of man over woman and driven by his own needs to be loved and cared for and his own attachment insecurity to his partner. To the extent that this man has been socialized according to rigid gender prescriptions, on the one hand, he feels entitled to occupy a position of superiority over his partner; on the other hand, he is called upon to conform to an ideal of masculinity characterized by strength, independence, and emotional invulnerability. At the same time, to the extent that the emotional bond with his partner is important for him, this man can truly experience a sense of threat to the stability of the relationship, capable of evoking feelings of fear of abandonment and making his emotional dependence evident. The combination of these relational premises causes the man to experience his emotional dependence (heightened by the unavailability of his partner in the episode) as incompatible with maintaining an adequate image of masculinity.

As a consequence, he is led to deny through violence (a demonstration of power) the feelings of impotence and vulnerability evoked by the perception of his emotional dependence, which the inattentive behavior of his partner has brought to the fore. He manages to do so by transforming a question of disregarded need for affection into a question of insubordination, a question of love into a question of power. It is for these reasons that for this man violence appears to be a more viable option than a reaction based on the open recognition of his emotional dependence on his partner. Through the use of violence, this man manages to recover his image of masculinity (and with it, part of his emotional security) by appealing to the male privilege of obtaining deference and

obedience from his partner. At the same time, he tries to restore a sense of stability in the relationship through a unilateral mode of control, unable to achieve it through those methods (e.g., expressing his fears and asking for reassurance) that would allow him to restore a genuine sense of trust towards his partner. Such a response pattern, if adopted repeatedly, can set the stage for a vicious circle in which, for this man, coercive control of the partner progressively becomes the only option for maintaining a precarious sense of security in the relationship.

In conclusion, the analysis of Goldner's multilevel systemic model allows us to extrapolate several key points for the construction of an integrated "power-and-love" explanatory framework for intimate violence as follows:

It is necessary to simultaneously consider power and love, power dynamics centered on hierarchical dominance and love dynamics centered on emotional interdependence within an intimate relationship.

These dynamics combine according to complex interactive patterns that refer both to the ongoing relationship between the violent man and his partner and to the historical learning contexts of both partners' attachment relationships with their respective parental figures.

An important related assumption is that these childhood attachment relationships should be conceptualized as embedded in a matrix of gendered social meanings and incorporating a gendered power dimension, such that the child's lovability is determined differently by their positioning with respect to power-related attributes (among others) depending on whether they are male or female.

Consequently, the romantic attachment patterns of each partner in a heterosexual relationship characterized by male violence are also highly gendered and closely linked to the dimension of power. They are permeated by complementary gender prescriptions that are prerequisites for a sense of personal value and lovability as an intimate partner, based on one's own and others' positioning in a gendered power hierarchy.

This translates into a gendered configuration of complementary assumptions, needs, and expectations between partners that produce complex and potentially paradoxical links between gendered dominance hierarchies and emotional interdependence in intimate relationships.

This, in turn, sets the stage for the complex couple dynamics and self-reinforcing interactive cycles underlying the genesis and perpetuation of male violence within the relationship.

6. Caveats and Limitations

First, it is appropriate to underline some caveats regarding the proposed "power-and-love" explanatory framework. The first necessary clarification concerns the possibility of misunderstanding the emphasis on love-related dynamics alongside power dynamics as implying a reduction in the responsibility of the perpetrator of violence. This could erroneously suggest that the presence of dynamics stemming from the dissatisfaction of the perpetrator's emotional needs makes his recourse to violence more excusable or more understandable or mitigates its unacceptability or severity, or, even, that it attributes responsibility to the victim for somehow triggering the violence by failing to meet the perpetrator's emotional needs, compared to thinking of violence as stemming solely from the perpetrator's desire for dominance over the partner.

In this regard, it is important to stress that gender-based power dynamics and love-related emotional dynamics are not to be understood as two alternative and equivalent causal paths leading to violence. Indeed, we believe that the construct of power is indispensable in defining violence; violence is always a question of power, and the assertion of power is always the most proximal link in the causal chain that leads to violence. Fur-

thermore, the role of gender-based power is absolutely essential in accounting for the disproportionately higher rates of victimization of women by male partners in intimate relationships. Nevertheless, as we have tried to argue, more distal underlying motivational dynamics can be multiple and complex.

It is essential to state that violence, coercion, and control must always be viewed as unacceptable forms of exercising power, never as manifestations of love, however dysfunctional. This is true even when they arise from emotional dynamics linked to interdependence and unmet attachment needs, rather than solely from power dynamics aimed at reaffirming a male hierarchical superiority. Likewise, stating that violence can also arise from love-related dynamics in no way implies that such violence is more condonable or less reprehensible than violence solely based on power, as if love were intrinsically "good" while power were intrinsically "bad". Male privilege and sense of entitlement can manifest themselves in an abusive man's highly self-centered and non-reciprocal demand to be "loved" and cared for by his partner, rather than in the demand to be served and obeyed just for the sake of being so. This in no way diminishes the unacceptability of violence nor does it attenuate the responsibility of those men who commit it, but it can certainly significantly change and complicate the subjective experience and meaning of violence for both the perpetrator and the victim/survivor.

Furthermore, it is appropriate to make some considerations on the limits of the proposed conceptual integration and its possible extensions. As we have seen, Goldner's contributions on violence in intimate relationships focus on couples in which the man is the one who commits violence against the female partner. Nowadays, even if male violence against women remains the most striking social problem, there is a consolidated awareness that IPV is a more complex, heterogeneous, and multifaceted phenomenon, which includes other configurations both with respect to gender and to the roles of perpetrator and victim. Consequently, the learning contexts and interactive dynamics described by Goldner may be different with other types of violent couple relationships, for example, with same-sex couples (Rollè et al. 2018), or where the violence is reciprocal (Bates 2016; Machado et al. 2024) or is committed mainly by the woman against a male partner (Scott-Storey et al. 2023). Similarly, it is important to underline a further limitation of the present conceptual analysis in reference to the cultural level; namely, the fact that the couples on which Goldner developed his model belonged to a specific cultural context, which we could broadly identify with the American society at the end of the twentieth century. Therefore, the dynamics we have outlined could undergo significant transformations in couples belonging to other cultures, both in reference to the different cultural models of power relations between men and women (i.e., Ozaki and Otis 2016) and to the different cultural conceptions of romantic love and intimacy (i.e., Karandashev 2016).

We are inclined to believe that an integrated "power-and-love" explanatory framework derived from Goldner's model, based on the interconnection between gendered power dynamics and love-related emotional dynamics in the genesis of IPV, can maintain its validity and utility even outside of heterosexual relationships characterized by male violence, or in couples belonging to different cultural contexts. However, it would obviously be necessary to reformulate some hypotheses with respect to the specificity of Goldner's model, to adapt them to different relational and cultural configurations, and this operation certainly requires a significant degree of further conceptual elaboration and empirical investigation.

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