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Domestic violence and newspaper: an explorative study.

Luca Rollè^{a,*}, Silvia Abbà^a, Roberta Fazzino^a, Elisa Marino^a, Piera Brustia^a

^a*Department of Psychology, University of Torino, Via Po 14, Torino 10123, Italy*

Abstract

The media play has a leading role in the construction of public opinion, especially in relation to sensitive issues like Domestic Violence (DV). The aim of study is to point out how the DV is represented in 2 Italian-newspapers in the years 2002/12 - both are not politically aligned. Seven keywords have been used to point out the appropriate articles, after that two independent researchers categorized the keywords into: form and content. It is observed that there is a higher percentage of DV not denounced. The results show an increase in denunciation of articles from 2002 and 2012, and of women dealing with women was evident. The data point out a change in the conception of damage and the correlation between journalists gender and victims' and perpetrators' portraits. We also observed that there is a preference to generally explain the phenomenon rather than face deeply the problem.

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1. Theoretical Review

Intimate Partner Domestic Violence (IPDV) is an endemic public health problem worldwide. The World Health Organization (2002) defined it as any type of behavior within an intimate relationship that causes harm to one or both parties; "it refers to a broad pattern of coercive or violent tactics used by one partner to establish and maintain power and control over the other" (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2008, p.1). The acronym IPDV has been used interchangeably with Domestic Violence (DV) (Berrios & Grady, 1991) and it refers

* Luca Rollè Tel.: +390116703923; fax: +390112363923
E-mail address: l.rolle@unito.it

to “assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults use against their intimate partners” (Morais Caldas, Grams, Afonso, Magalhães, 2012, p.103). DV is a transversal phenomenon that exists in all countries that is common to all cultures, class, ethnic groups, education and income levels and age groups (Romito, 2000). In Italy over 7 million women have reported to have suffered from sexual or psychological abuse by husband, partner or boyfriend, but only 7,2% denounced the fact, while the remaining 92,5% of physical and sexual violence are a hidden number (Istat, 2006). The media has a central role in both, reflecting and shaping public opinion, especially on issues which are uncomfortable or potentially unclear for the public: Intimate Partner Domestic Violence (IPDV) is one such issue (Lloyd & Ramon, 2013; Beetham, 2006; Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002; Kellie, Slater & Chakroff, 2008). The media affect public opinion emotionally, and at the same time they condition it. It is necessary to clarify that the newspapers (NP) do not operate a totalizing control, but we do not underestimate the effect of a persuasive message repeated with the same characteristics (Vives-Cases, Torrubiano-Domínguez & Álvarez-Dardet, 2009; Lloyd & Ramon, 2013). Researchers suggest that issues reported by media - health and legal implications - touch social policies and individual behaviors (Yanovitzky & Bennett, 1999; Sotirovic, 2003). The newspapers “control” the reader in different ways: selecting or omitting information and and/or where the articles have been published in the newspaper (Copeland, 2003; Goldberg, Smith-Adcock & Dixon, 2011; Dorfman, 2003) – that can effect or change the public opinion. Media (newspaper, TV, radio, etc.) sometimes offer a distorted and not so close to the reality picture of domestic violence (Consalvo, 1998; Berns, 1999; Bullock & Cubert, 2002). “The meaning of domestic violence used in newspaper articles often excludes forms of violence that are not blatantly physical” (Sims, 2008, p. 375) and in fact the emotional or psychological abuse is rarely reported by the media (Ryan, Anastario & DaCunha, 2006).

The aim of this first explorative study is to find the differences of expression and representation of the DV in the two most widespread Italian newspapers in 2002 and 2012: “Corriere della Sera” and “la Repubblica”. Following the National and International papers we hypothesize: an increasing of articles and a total change in respect of dealing phenomenon of DV, from 2002 to 2012 and changes about the type of articles’ publication; a stronger correlation between style of articles and journalist gender; a differences in the relation between the victims’ and perpetrators’ portraits written by male or female journalists.

2. Methodology and Procedure

In this study the participants can be identify with the articles published in 2 Italian NP not politically aligned: “Corriere della Sera” and “la Repubblica”. The first is most read by men while the second by women.. The first Italian newspaper by circulation is “Corriere della Sera” with 685.519 copies daily average in 2002 followed by “la Repubblica” with 623.239 average copies. The same relation occurs in 2012: “Corriere della Sera” with 433.307 copies and “la Repubblica” with 403.086. The articles have been extracted from the online and hardcopy archives for the selected years (2002 and 2012). For the online version we used the Boolean operators “and” and “or” with seven key words: *couple violence*, *domestic violence*, *family violence*, *husband violence*, *private violence*, *stalking and wife violence*, while all singles pages of the hardcopy were checked. After have identified the articles they have been given to 2 researchers asking them to extract only those that comply with the inclusion criteria: heterosexual intrapartner domestic violence. They have been asked, than, to organize them into macro and micro categories using the criteria of form and the content. Form refers to the positions of the articles the editions (online or hardcopy), the sections and if they were in the national or local pages. Another aspect taken into account was the presence of images and photos in the articles. Finally information about the journalists’ gender. Content refers to all information on victims and perpetrators (type of hurts, perpetrators’ features and nationality of victims and perpetrators), the style of the articles, the portrait of victim and perpetrator (positive, negative, undefined and absent victim/perpetrator) and if any intervention from first aid or police services was reported; the hurts have been categorized as physical, psychological, sexual and economic, and also the presence of more than one at the same time was considered; if the perpetrators shown aggressive behaviors against their partner in the past or not and if they had some criminal reports about DV. The classification criteria for the nationality of victims and perpetrators were foreigners, Italian, not specified. The style of the articles has been categorized as *factual* when facts were described in an objective way; *denouncing* when it pointed out to inform and sensitize the public opinion about the importance of the phenomenon; *emphatic* when the author, through stylistic expedients, highlighted some aspects of

the news, considered particularly outstanding; *humorous* if the writer induced smiling in the reader; *sensationalist* when news was presented as something extraordinary and clamorous. The independent researches defined a portrait as the description about victims and perpetrators. They classified a positive portrait when the journalist described the subjects using some words to point out their good qualities; instead negative portraits were characterized by disparaging and negative adjectives. If the portrait was defined in a neutral way, it has been categorized as undefined. About the interventions from first aid or police services interventions the presence or the absence of explicit information about them was analyzed. If there was not a clear information we classified the articles as not specified intervention.

3. Data Analysis and Results

At the end there were 46 categorized articles in the year 2002 and 304 in 2012 (2002: - 12 articles in “Corriere della Sera” and 34 in “la Repubblica”; 2012 - 64 in “Corriere della Sera” and 240 in “la Repubblica”). The keyword “husband violence” is the most frequently presented Boolean in the year 2002 (33%) while “stalking” (3%) is on the opposite side. The opposite percentage is for the year 2012: stalking is the most frequent keyword (29%). The percentage of articles published in local and national editions remains unchanged comparing the two years, but an opposite trend can be noted between the headlines. In 2002 the “Corriere della Sera” published the totality of national articles in the edition in hardcopy, while “la Repubblica” in the same year published 76% of the articles in local editions. An increase of articles published in national edition while reducing local articles is to be highlighted. Moreover there is an increase of 31% of the articles online than those found in hard copy. All articles examined in 2002 are published in the chronicle section, and also the majority of articles is published in the same section in 2012. In the year 2012 the 18% is divided between other sections. This points to the fact how this phenomenon is diffused in other fields, different from the “Chronicle” section, like “Diary”, “Letters, Comments and Ideas” underlying that the public opinion is closer to the phenomenon more than it was ten years ago, although the percentage is low. About the position of the articles the analysis concerns only the articles published in “national hard copy”. 57% of articles are published in 2012 in “Full Page” while only 36% in 2002 as high percentage (29%) are in the “Shoulder” position – in the 2012 the percentage is 7%. The number of female journalists is significant in 2012, 34% of the total, compared to 17% in 2002. The number of male journalists reduced, the evidence is 19% (2012) compared to 46% in 2002. The remaining 33% (2002) and 46% (2012) are related to journalists where it was not possible to define their gender. The more adopted style is the emphatic in 2002 (46%) with a decrease to 28% in 2012. The more adopted style is the factual in 2012 (32%) while it represents 26% in 2002. In 2002 the denouncing style represents only 9% and it increases significantly by 300% (27%) in 2012. We found evidence that sensationalist style represents 13% in 2002 with a decrease to 3% in 2012. We found one article with humorous style in 2002 while this style is absent in 2012. In particular denouncing style is the major writing style adopted by female journalists (41%) in both years while the style more adopted by male journalists is emphatic (64% in 2002, 45% in 2012). Although in 2002 no male journalist used the style of denunciation, in 2012 the number equals 17%. In “Corriere della Sera” the more adopted style in 2002 is emphatic 83% while in 2012 it decreased to 48%. We underline an increase of the denouncing style from 0% to 30%. Unlike the “Corriere della Sera”, “la Repubblica” represents a variety of styles: 32% factual style, 32% emphatic style, denouncing style 12% in 2002. Emphatic style decreases (26%) while factual and denouncing style increase respectively by 4% and 15%. There are 32 photos and images in 2002 and 171 in 2012. Specifically, “la Repubblica” presented more photos and images in both years. “Corriere della Sera” shows 12 articles in total in 2002: 5 articles have at least one photo and/or image, 3 don’t have any and for the last 4 articles is not possible to identify the presence or the absence of a picture due to the fact it is a local edition. “Corriere della Sera” shows 64 articles in total in 2012: 26 have at least one photo/image, 9 have no photos nor images, and 29 in a local edition. Instead, “la Repubblica” shows 34 articles in total in 2002, 10 of them with at least a photo and/or image, 5 with no photo nor images, and 19 are out of our urban area. “la Repubblica” shows a total of 240 articles: 122 have at least one photo/image, 30 have no photos nor images and 88 articles are out of our urban area. The subcategory is composed by 29 photos in 2002, 147 in 2012. Comparing the two selected years the victims’ photos increased from 14% to 43%, the perpetrators’ photos decreased from 34% to 8%. We highlight the increase of the photos that represent the Police (from 7% to 29%). There are no significant

differences in the portraits of the victim but the percentage of articles in which there is not a “specific victim” increases for 17% in 2012. The same applies to the perpetrator (5% in 2002 and 27% in 2012). About female journalists we noticed that victims’ positive portrait is absent in 2002 but is 14% in 2012, while male journalists describe victims positively also in 2002 (19%) not only in 2012 (15%). We have not found positive descriptions of the perpetrator in 2002, while in 2012 there are 5 articles in which it is described positively: 2 of which are published by the “Corriere della Sera”- one written by a male journalist and one by a female journalist. The remaining 3 articles are published by “la Repubblica” written by female journalists. On perpetrator portraits female journalist report 4% of them as positive, in 2012, while they are no one in 2002 - negative portraits represent 6% in 2012 while the 13% in 2002. In the comparison between 2002 and 2012 the percentage of the negative portrait of the perpetrator remains unchanged (19%), while the positive portrait of the perpetrator is 2% if the journalist were male. Regarding past episode of domestic violence done by the perpetrators, we noticed that the violent and aggressive men represent 50% in 2002 and 56% in 2012 respectively. The perpetrators who had no report of violent behavior are in the observed years 4% and 1%. Regarding the nationality - in 2002 and 2012 - the results indicate an increase in the specification of the foreign nationality of the victims from 6% to 16%, while the rate of the foreign perpetrators increases from 4% to 18%. With regard to the Italian nationality of the perpetrators the rate decreases to 7%. Comparing the two years there is a significant increase of 30% in physical and psychological damage in 2012. Physical hurts decrease by 46% from 65% in 2002 to 19% in 2012%. Regarding to the police intervention it’s possible to see a decrease from 95% to 72% in the years considered. In the 26% of cases the intervention of police isn’t specified, in 2012 while it represents 0% in 2002. The not specified intervention of first aid services increases by 24% from the 2002 to 2012.

4. Conclusion

Following the hypotheses we can say that: dealing with domestic violence changes in the articles are visible from the year 2002 to 2012. The extent of the problem is evident to the fact that there is an increasing number of articles exposing the phenomenon: from 46 to 304 articles. The number of online publications increased from 2% in 2002 to 33% in 2012: the network sharing allows a greater understanding of the phenomenon. Analyzing the position of the articles in both years we hypothesized that DV is more spread and visible in 2012 from 2002, there is a tendency to publish more articles in local pages rather than national ones. The increasing of articles published in other section different from Chronicle in 2012 emphasizes that the public opinion is closer to the phenomenon than ten years ago. “la Repubblica” is the newspaper that published more articles in both 2002 and in 2012. We highlight that “Corriere della Sera” despite it presenting an exploratory report concerning DV, named “History of Violence”, it publishes fewer articles than the other newspaper. “Corriere della Sera” is the most widely read newspaper by men and the more adopted style is emphatic in 2002 and in 2012 too. Instead “la Repubblica”- the most widely read by women- publishes more denouncing articles, mostly used by female journalists. It is visible that the number of women dealing with women has increased (Lloyd, & Ramon, 2013).

As assumed, data confirmed an increasing of stalking media coverage in 2012: from 3% in 2002 to 29% in 2012. A possible explanation of why there is an increase of the percentage of articles about stalking could be the introduction into the penal code of the crime “stalking”; in the same way we observed that the lower percentage of the keyword “stalking” in 2002 is due to a linguistic problem: the phenomenon was not known by this term. In 2002 there aren’t a positive perpetrators’ portraits in the NP, while in 2012 female journalists of “la Repubblica” described them positively. We also underline the absence of victims’ positive portraits described by female journalists in 2002, observed in 2012. While male journalists of “Corriere della Sera” described victims positively in the same year, but this positive description decreased in 2012. The conception of the damage is changed: the psychological consequence in 2002 are higher than in the 2012, probably due to the fact that the psychological consequences of DV tend to be minimized in the newspapers in 2002 compared to 2012. The lack of expression of intervention of first aid or police services could prevent the reader to fully understand the seriousness of the problem. The results from the analysis exclude that the phenomenon is the product of “raptus” or acts of sudden violence, in fact there is a very low percentage of the perpetrators presented as non-violent before the episode of violence. Often journalists explain that the reason of domestic violence is a burst: this contributes to a distorted point of view of the phenomenon. About the photos there is a significant increase from 2002 to 2012. We point to the

considerable increase of the victims' photos, but the most of them are photo footage that represent the fragility and liabilities of the victim instead of the real victim. There is a high percentage of photos that represent Police services but it is interesting underline that there is no evidence of the telephone number 1522, the one to prevent and fight DV. The focus is rather on the intervention than on prevention. We suppose that this representation of DV diverts the attention from the seriousness of the problem. It seems that there is a preference to generally explain the phenomenon rather than face deeply the problem. We would like to point out once again the importance of correct information from the newspapers to avoid the misunderstanding in the reader on the significance of the phenomenon. It's important to remember that also if the hidden number is a very high percentage, in the last years the denouncing of the perpetrator increased exponentially. In the next future we think that it will be necessary to fight the silence on DV and IPDV to permit the coming out to that women that daily suffered alone. We believe that the newspapers could be a "place" where the correct information could found "the strength" of the women.

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