

Violence and Gender Power: A Theoretical Distinction between Violence and Dominance



Zineb Benjelloun¹, Hassan Zrizi²

^{1,2}Faculty of Arts and Humanities Hassan II University- Mohammedia- Morocco

ABSTRACT: Violence, dominance and gender power have been often theoretically intertwined for the intricate affinities they hold together. In this paper, we focus on the expression of gender power through violence and other forms of dominance being it verbal, physical or psychological. We mainly aim to provide a theoretical distinction between violence and dominance and how both were academically explored and presented throughout scholarly research in order to clear out any terminological confusion.

KEYWORDS: Violence, Gender Power, Dominance, theoretical background.

During and after recent pandemic lockdowns, the rate of violence and domestic abuse had incredibly increased. This change of behavior was not only exclusive to couples but it was a family matter. Human conflict became somewhat inevitable not only in the Moroccan society but also worldwide. This increase in violence and hostile behavior is what motivates my investigation. I am intrigued, both on a personal and academic level, to know why people sometimes resort to violence as a way to assert dominance especially when it comes to gender relations. The latter is in need of a clarification for it does not always represent the person's motives.

In order to understand a relatively recent interaction, one needs to explore its roots first. When speaking about domestic violence or abuse I refer to both males and females. Feminine counter-violence had always existed yet it was concealed and not often brought up for it might defy the norm of females being the victims and not the perpetrators.

Violence as a concept had been approached in versatile manners and within different frameworks depending on the discipline and field of study. It is mainly presented as a psychological component within human behavior. I consider the study of violence to be of high importance for it translates hidden aspects of human interactions. When locating violence within gender it becomes a variant rather than a motive or stimulus.

In recent times, the notion of violence gained an incredible degree of attention. A profuse number of writings, books and articles were dedicated to study the concept. The latter has been probed through surveys, studies and even gained political interest. Not to forget, media coverage as well as the contribution of the elite and intellectuals. Safe to say that violence occupies an interesting portion of human thought. Violence constantly intrigues humans for its unpredictability and that is why it is often under scrutiny to the point where it becomes a societal phenomenon. What is interesting about violence is its wide range of forms. It covers a large spectrum of different types from physical aggression to violent reaction to theft passing by physical assault and the list goes on almost infinitely.

The issue with theorizing violence is that we are immediately confronted with various types and forms which make it hard to designate and categorize let alone define violence as a whole. In his book *The History of Violence: homicide and suicide through the ages*, Jean Claude

Chesnais divides violence into three categories; first, physical violence which includes homicides, assault, injuries, rape and all sorts of bodily received aggressions. Second category is economic violence which targets pecuniary matters and ownership of material goods. Third category is what he calls moral or symbolic violence meant to attack a person's dignity and life worthiness. What is interesting in Chesnais's perspective is that he insists on using the term 'violence' only for the first category for it is meant to directly attack a person. It is somewhat accurate to only associate violence with bodily tangible attacks yet it does not include other manifestations or violent acts.

Another conflictive challenge when defining violence is that it is an elusive notion. What might be considered as an act of violence within a said society might not be perceived as violent in another one. Violence then is debatable and subjective which makes it even harder to provide an objective and exhaustive definition for the term. Before attempting any further theoretical definitions, it would be suitable to define violence literally. It is from Latin 'violentia' from late 13th century 'vehemence, impetuosity' from *violentus* 'vehement, forcible' probably related to *violare* which refers to violation. Violation in itself is originally a French word from the 1400's. It had descended from the Latin term *violatorem* which refers to 'an injury, irreverence of profanation'. Violence then is etymologically related to an action often to

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injure or harm another person or entity.

Violence is defined by the World Health Organization as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”. This definition insists on the person’s intention to use force against another person or group for it to be considered an act of violence. The use of force is then presented as a criterion of violence. This force is not necessarily only physical it could also be subtle and moral. According to the World Report on Violence and Health, violence can be categorized into three different branches depending on who the emitter of violence is.

Self-directed violence refers to any forms of self-harm. It can broadly refer to any act of self-injury that is intentional. This branch of violence is known to be complex and its causes are hard to pinpoint. However, the psychological aspect plays a pivotal role into deciphering the underlying reasons of self-directed violence. The factors of such self-destructive behaviors can be widely sorted from psychological pathologies to abuse, substance consumption, traumatic experiences, financial difficulties and social pressure. The lack of discussion around mental health and the stigmatization of such “sensitive” topic in real social life as well as the academic one increase the severity of self-directed violence which can lead to irreversible outcome such as suicide.

Self directed violence is not only tangible and physical; it can also be symbolic and moral as the person in question might be harming themselves emotionally by succumbing to feelings of guilt and shame causing them to sink deeper into isolation. In the Arab sphere, in general, and Moroccan field, specifically, the literature surrounding self-harm is very scarce if not completely absent that is why I base my theoretical knowledge on Western writings. In attempting to provide a holistic reading of suicide, Klonsky (2016) along with his colleagues provided an insightful article in suicide theory. The results attained help understand the ideation of self directed violence. The main aim of the study is to accompany suicidal attempts from ideation to execution.

For example, it is becoming clear that depression, hopelessness, most mental disorders, and even impulsivity predict ideation, but these factors struggle to distinguish those who have attempted suicide from those who have only considered suicide. Means restriction is also emerging as a highly effective way to block progression from ideation to attempt. A third key development is the proliferation of theories of suicide that are positioned within the ideation-to-action framework. (Klonsky, 2016).

Studies conducted within suicidal theory often base their sampling and target population on young adults. I think it is an exclusive way of leading empirical work for suicide victims can range from all age categories starting even at infancy. In order to bring back the topic of violence into my theoretical background, I interrogate myself surrounding the position of gender when it comes to self directed violence. Is gender a considerable factor in self directed violence or is it a mere variable? If so, do suicide theorists take into account the gender dimension or do they discard it altogether?

Gender is a significant element when it comes to violence in general and self directed harm in particular. Empirical studies show that gender differences can in fact impact patterns and rates of self-directed violence. It is found that males are more inclined to terminate their lives by committing suicide while females are less likely to undergo lethal self directed acts. In a study by Hawton and Harriss (2006), gender difference is analyzed within over 8000 patients who were hospitalized due to self-directed harm. Results showed that women go for more subtle suicidal methods such as poisoning and cutting while men opt for more violent acts such as jumping from high surfaces, rope hanging or even self shooting using arms. This proves that gendered socialization and social expectations can even influence violent and harmful behaviors.

In another study by Canetto and Sakinofsky (1998), gender differences showed an interesting cleavage between suicidal ideation and execution. For women, they reported a higher rate when it comes to having suicidal intentions while men have higher rates of suicidal completion. The researchers interpreted the data collected by stating that men and the male gender might have less access to coping mechanisms as opposed to women. Gendered studies on deliberate self-directed harm also show that individuals who do not conform to gender standards have higher chances of engaging in fatal self-harm. While the correlation remains unknown between gender conformity and suicidal ideation, scholars suggest that the stigma surrounding gender, social discrimination and bullying might be direct contributors to suicidal ideation among gender non-conforming individuals. Generally speaking, gender differences remain a considerable factor when it comes to understanding deliberate self-harm with women engaging in less fatal acts while men having higher suicidal rates. These disparities can be

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Traced back to the gendered nature of socialization and societal regulation of behavior.

Interpersonal violence is the second branch which stands for any type of harm targeting an individual or a group of people which is caused by an individual or a community. Interpersonal violence covers all sorts of harm that can be emotional, psychological, physical or other. Domestic violence for instance is a kind of interpersonal violence that can occur within households and is known to be one of the most prominent manifestations of gender power. Bullying, on the other hand, is a form of interpersonal violence that can happen within different settings such as schools, work spaces and currently virtually most commonly known as cyber bullying.

When it comes to interpersonal violence, gender is also crucial for a better understanding of ideation mechanisms. Research found that women and genderless individuals are most likely to be victims of violence in comparison with men. For example, women are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse such as rape, molestation, harassment and other types of verbal assault. Men, on the other hand, have lower risk of sexual violence. Nonetheless, men can also be victims of sexual assault.

Most of the research done on the interpersonal violence is dedicated to “intimate partner violence” referring to the harm that can take place within the couple. Often times, the targeted subjects are women with the aim of understanding the mental repercussions of violence. Violence against women continues to prevail nowadays regardless of the efforts dedicated to abolish it. “Worldwide, over a quarter (27%) of women aged 15–49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner” (World Health Organization, 2021). In Morocco, violence against women is considered to be a socioeconomic burden as well as a societal pandemic that hinders the country’s development. To help end domestic violence, the Moroccan government created systematic and legal changes. These changes help promote equality between men and women. The Moroccan constitution forbids any sort of gender based discrimination that might cause physical, emotional and or mental harm:

In 2014, paragraph 2 of article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which until then allowed a rapist to escape proceedings by marrying his victim, has been definitively repealed. In August 2016, law 27-14 on human trafficking was adopted and offers for the first time a legal framework to address this issue. Finally, Law 103.13 on the violence against women came into force in September 2018 and defines violence against women as “any act resulting from gender discrimination and causing physical harm to women, psychological, sexual or economic”. (HCP, 2019)

However, these initiatives did not completely eradicate violence against women, especially in rural areas where there is a certain reticence and inhibition towards gender equality.

Last but not least, collective violence, as the name suggests, is a kind of violence led by a collectivity such as violent protests, political riots, political violence and the list goes on.... Politics is known to be a possible area for violence and a conflictive domain. Wars, for instance, mass the highest rate of victims who are either deceased or injured in the name of violence. Thomas Hobbes notoriously stated that politics and violence go hand in hand while speaking of the state of nature: “Thomas Hobbes famously depicted the pre-political ‘state of nature’ as a place of violence, where everyone endeavors to destroy or subdue one another, making life solitary, nasty and short.” (Bufacchi, 2005)

In the same token, other philosophers joined Hobbes’s idea entertaining the thought of violence being omnipresent and unpleasant. John Locke states that indeed violence is problematic and is one of life’s inconveniences. Even the majority of political theorists perceive violence as a vital component of politics. If the state of nature was inherently violent and politics call naturally for violence then the latter becomes both the issue and the remedy. In order to contain violence, a high authority is put in place regulating human behavior somewhat violently. We then transition from a natural unregulated violence to a legitimate one. The institutional power of politics makes violence socially normalized. Often times, collective violence is fueled by the feeling of rejection, marginalization and injustice. When minorities feel oppressed, they resort to violence as a way to reclaim the narrative and seek political power. Economic frustration can also lead to collective violence; that is to say when governments face economic hardships resulting in poverty, hunger and lack of income, the people might seek violence as a way of expression.

One of the most common forms of collective violence throughout history is genocide. Genocide is the extermination of an entire population based on a racial, religious and or ethnic discrimination. The term genocide appeared with Raphael Lemkin in 1944. In 1948, it was considered as a crime in United Nations Genocide Convention. Genocide is characterized by the extreme use of violence but it can also be less pronounced and more slender in subtlety.

To sum up an almost comprehensive understanding of violence, we need to admit its versatility and wideness for it can take many shapes and forms. Violence can also be a way to assert dominance and to claim power. An abundant literature was and is still being dedicated to understand and probe the term within different fields and domains. However, these attempts often fail to take into consideration the cultural particularity of context. Virtual violence can express real societal frustration. Virtual violence is also various and it ranges from cyber bullying to actual death threats. While virtual violence might not cause tangible physical harm it can definitely cause mental and psychological discomfort and or harm.

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Virtual violence can also be self-directed, interpersonal or collective. The use of new technologies to cause harm or injury ranges from a small scope to a much larger one, for instance organized crime and terrorist organization. Virtual violence can also be projected onto real life which might contribute into the normalization of violence creating a sort of social numbness towards discrimination and harmful acts.

Dominance, on the other hand, is considered by some as a natural human aspect that helps regulate social behavior. However, when it is not moderated it can lead to severe repercussions similar to the ones resulting from violence. Etymologically speaking, the word “dominance” has descended from the word “dominare” in Latin which translates to “to rule” or “to govern”. “Dominare” is extracted from “dominus” meaning “master” or “lord”. The latter was used in Ancient Rome to refer to rich proprietors of land. Social dominance theory is one that considers dominance as a crucial element of social organization.

Social dominance theory is a multi-level theory of how societies maintain group-based dominance. Nearly all stable societies can be considered group-based dominance hierarchies, in which one social group – often an ethnic, religious, national, or racial one – holds disproportionate power and enjoys special privileges, and at least one other group has relatively little political power or ease in its way of life. (Pratto and Stewart, 2011).

Social Dominance Theory SDT states that in every social structure there is a sort of illegitimate power that subdues all other groups to a certain hierarchy. For instance, the Palestinian and Israeli case is the perfect illustration of illegitimate dominance through power. “In all cases, the economic, educational, and health outcomes are superior for members of the dominant groups from what they are for members of the subordinate groups” (Pratto, 2011). These dominant parts all have in common a disproportionate amount of privileges compared to the subordinate party. In this social order, these disproportionate privileges are recognized by the law while the minorities are often marginalized if not stigmatized. This can be said in patriarchal societies regarding gender dominance and sexism where men seem to enjoy more societal privileges than their women peers.

“Social dominance theory describes how processes at different levels of social organization, from cultural ideologies and institutional discrimination to gender roles and the psychology of prejudice, work together to produce stable group-based inequality” In this context, dominance is perceived as a systematic initiative to maintain inequality and the exclusive detention of power. Social dominance theory operates by conformism and it somehow both explicitly and implicitly dictates the individual’s behaviors and experiences all in order to preserve social order and power hierarchies. To maintain power, the dominant structures often use discrimination, violence and intimidating methods as ways to solely detain power out of the other’s reach.

The process of socialization might be considered as a way to internalize social hierarchies and to conform to them. That being said, social dominance theory perceives the process of socialization and education as a manner to instill certain beliefs that individuals have to abide by. This internalization of behaviors and social hierarchies result in the development of social dominance orientations. In other words, social dominance orientations refer to the attitudes that represent an individual’s eagerness to join a dominant group willing to deploy all that it takes from oppression, aggressiveness and inconsiderate means. It is found that members with high levels of social dominance orientations have more tendencies to be violent and aggressive towards marginalized individuals.

Social theorists found that men have higher SDOs in comparison to women and that somehow explains men’s tendency to be more aggressive towards women as a way to dominate them. However, the expression of this dominance may vary according to the cultural context, age categories and social statuses.

Social dominance attempts to show that group-based inequalities are maintained through three primary intergroup behaviors—specifically: (1) institutional discrimination, (2) aggregated individual discrimination, and

(3) behavioral asymmetry. Group-based social hierarchies in human populations (as defined by Sidanius and Pratto, 1999) are based on: (1) age, (2) gender, and (3) group-based relationships (Pratto and Sidanius, 1999).

One of the leaders of the social dominance theory Pratto explains three forms of hierarchies as illustrated in the passage above:

1. Age: Adults tend to detain more power than children by nature.

However, sometimes this power is contested by the youth or adolescents.

2. Gender: It is quite common, especially in patriarchal societies for men to detain higher statuses than women. Nevertheless, in matriarchal societies for instance, women are more dominant. Nowadays, we notice a shift in roles as more women are taking on more and more power roles. However, in less developed countries the status of women is still contested by patriarchal ideologies resulting in women having limited access to power positions.

3. Group-based relationships: These relationships might not apply to all societies as they are very culturally depended. In group-based relationships, hierarchies are founded upon race, ethnic backgrounds, nationality, sexuality, religious beliefs and the list goes on.

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The basis of social dominance is deeply rooted within the conception of hegemony. Hegemony insists on the dominance of one specific group over the others. For example hegemonic masculinity is the most dominating form in certain societies which includes men with “virile” and “manly” traits. For the sake of clearing any lingual ambiguities, it is crucial to distinguish two related yet different notions: dominance versus domination. As previously stated, dominance refers to the environment where a certain group detains and exercises more power over other groups or individuals. Domination, on the other hand is that same exercise of power or supervision over subordinate groups. This exercise of power might necessitate the use of force. Domination might come in the shape of dictatorships, slavery, and colonization among others.

Taking everything into account, one could say that violence and dominance are different yet intertwined. Violence refers to the act of causing harm being it physical mental or emotional. It is a form of abuse that can take many shapes and can also be self-inflicted. The conceptualization of violence has been often related to gender power and relations as it had been a prominent element of these mechanisms throughout history. One even could say that the very survival of human beings demanded violence, violence towards animals, nature and human beings all alike. It is also a conventional political tool that helps instill and preserve social order especially in authoritarian societies.

This brings us to the basis of dominance; the latter stands for the situation that allows a certain group to prevail over others. In a hierarchal system, dominance is instilled throughout daily life. Dominance is a hegemonic systematic conception that is supposedly dedicated to maintain social order. I shall even say that dominance is a breeding field for violence as the latter can be used as a method to dominate. These two conceptions have been academically scrutinized yet one crucial element seems to be overlooked when dealing with such topics: the cultural character of societies. Perceptions and practices are often embedded within cultural experiences which might influence the results of social psychology altogether.

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