THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE BETWEEN "BACKGROUND AND SURFACE ATTITUDES" A RESEARCH WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The problem of "sexual violence", a central challenge of our society, keeps existing in spite of condamning stances from the institutions and the cultural world. It's a controvertial problem, especially regarding the rapists' specific behaviours and its quantitative consistence. The present paper was made with a sample of university students in order to verify the influence of gender, level and type of studies, and of psychosocial variables on the represantion of the phenomenon. The first results seem to confirm the hypotheses.

KEYWORDS: rape, social representation, gender, study

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of "violence against women" is characterized by ambiguities, in both definition and quantification (ISTAT, 2015); some Authors prefer to consider the physical abuse as the main one (Eisikovits et al. 2004) because "it is a major abuse and its effect and consequences on the abused are more significant" (Fox 1993, p. 322). Others use a broader definition, including all forms, e.g. the emotional, psychological, physical and sexual ones, as they represent "intentional assault on a female by a male dating partner" (Dekeseredy and Kelly 1993, p. 146). Specifically, some authors consider sexual abuse to be, rather than a form of violence, "an early warning sign of abuse, which often begins with psychological assaults and moves to physical and sexual assaults" (Kelly, 1994, p. 83).

The World Health Organization defines violence as: "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that

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either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevel-opment or deprivation. (WHO, 2002, p.5).

The definition used by the World Health Organization associates intentionality with committing the act itself, regardless of the outcome it produces. The inclusion of the word ''power'', in addition to the phrase ''use of physical force'', broadens the nature of a violent act and expands the conventional understanding of violence to include those acts that result from a power relationship.

In according to the WHO, the real magnitude of sexual violence remans unknown. This is largely the result of an allegedly high undeteceted number of unreported cases. Thus, sexual violence is presented as a floating iceberg (Krug et al, 2002), of which "the small visible tip represents cases reported to police. A larger section may be elucidated through survey research and the work of non-governmental organizations. But beneath the surface remains a substantial although unquantified component of the problem" (p.150). In this sense, "the line that separates the visible from the invis-ible part of the iceberg of domestic violence against women is also the line under which starts the silence of the victims as well as the silence, inhibition, and tolerance of the social environment sur-rounding the victims. By means of breaking this silence, reducing the social tolerance and inhibition, and increasing identification and reporting of domestic violence against women we will also be tak-ing steps to progressively melt the iceberg of domestic violence. This is an important challenge for western societies, but this challenge is even greater in other cultures where violence against women is seen as a natural phenomenon based in deeply rooted beliefs and attitudes, and calls for sustained and coordinate actions at communitary, national, and international levels". (Gracia, 2004, p. 536).

Some cultures justify rape as a natural consequence of the provocative behavior of a strong male and female sexual desire (Burt, 1980). These stereotypes, known in the literature as *Rape Myths*, are defined "as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists—in creat-ing a climate hostile to rape victims" (Burt 1980, p. 217). They are considered "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald 1994, p. 134).

Rape myths are thought to be used also as a cognitive tool to turn off social prohibitions (Burt, 1980, p. 282), and to trivialize and justify the sexual aggression of men against women, thereby allowing potential rapists to minimize the seriousness of their offense (Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006).

A number of empirical studies examining the relationship between sex and attitudes toward rape (e.g., Caron & Carter, 1997; Ewoldt, Monson, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000) has shown, unequivocally and consistently, "that men are more likely than women to believe in rape myths or stereotypes, express rape tolerant attitudes, and ascribe blame to rape victims rather than perpetra-tors." (Jimenez and Abreu, 2003, p.252).

The acceptance of rape myths is an important predictor of sexual violence (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Murnen, Wright & Kaluzny, 2002; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010); Empirical studies have shown that men who commit sexual violence are more likely to accept the rape myths (Burt, 1980; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; Degue & Dilillo, 2004; Loh et al., 2005; Abbey & Jacques-Tiura, 2011) and show hostile sexist attitudes towards women (Degue, Dilillo & Scalora, 2010; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Murnen et al., 2002; Abbey & Jacques-Tiura, 2011).

The sexist and prejudicial ideology has been analyzed by the theory of the Ambivalent Sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1996); According to this theoretical model, male domination in society, on the one hand, and women's more equal power within intimate relationships on the other hand, produces two forms of sexist ideologies, the Hostile (HS) and the Benevolent (BS).

The hostile sexism, defined by the authors as "an adversarial view of gender relationships in which women are perceived as seeking to control men, whether through sexuality or feminist ideol-

ogy" (Glick e Fiske, 2001, p. 109), prescribes negative and aggressive attitudes towards women who deviate from traditional gender roles.

Hostile Sexism, for example, considers the women with a career as aggressive, cold and avid (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner and Zhu, 1997), in contrast with relational needs of men favoring benevolence toward women that meet those needs.

Benevolent Sexism recognizes that some forms of sexism are, for the perpetrator, subjectively benevolent, characterizing women "as pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported, and adored and whose love is necessary to make a man complete" (Glick e Fiske, 2001, p. 110); it expresses the caring attitude towards women who adopt traditional roles in the home, in this case, women are perceived as beautiful and compassionate, but fragile and need of care and protection from men.

Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism work together to maintain gender inequality. Abrams et al. (2003; see also Viki et al., 2004; Viki & Abrams, 2002) proposed that some of the commonly observed differences in blame attributed to acquaintance and stranger rape victims can be explained in terms of benevolent sexism. They based this proposal on Batemen's observation (Batemen, 1991) that women are benevolently stereotyped as "guardians of sexuality" (see also Glick et al., 2000; Jackman, 1994). Such perceptions of male–female relationships place most of the responsibility for sexual morality on women, rather than men. For this reason, when accusations of sexual assault are made, more attention may be paid to the behavior of the victim, rather than the perpetrator's intentions and actions (Batemen, 1991;Weller, 1992). It, therefore, seems reasonable to hypothesize that individuals who endorse beliefs that women should be "pure and chaste" (high BS) are more likely to blame rape victims who can be viewed as violating these traditional gender role expectations (i.e. victims of acquaintance rape) (Viki, Abrams, Masser, 2004).

Similarly, Yamawaki (2007) found that benevolent sexism moderates blame the victim is at fault in a known scenery of rape; on the contrary, the hostile (but not benevolent) one, predicts further victimization in one at the hands of a stranger rape scenario.

Rape Myth and Ambivalent Sexism are tools that accentuate victimization; the tendency to blame the rape victim (Victim Blaming), is well established in the literature in reference to women victims of rape (Whatley, 1996). Studies have found that victims of crime are often judged to be responsible of their own destiny.

The tendency to believe in a "just world" implies that there is a strong positive association between what people do and what happens to them, often prompting the attitude that someone with negative outcomes "must have deserved it" (Lerner 1965). According to Lerner's theory, the belief that rape victims are not deserving of their fate is incongruous with the general belief, to believe in a just world; therefore, in order to avoid cognitive dissonance, myths serve to protect an individual's belief in a just world.

Various empirical studies have demonstrated that the belief in a just world is an important predictor of negative attitudes toward rape victims (e.g., Aderman et al. 1974; Kleinke and Meyer 1990; Lambert and Raichle, 2000; Grubb, Turner, 2012). The belief in a just world has been found to be stronger in cultures that are more hierarchically organized (Furnham 1993) and more authoritarian (Smith and Green 1984).

Various components of hostile and benevolent sexism (e.g., need to dominate sexually, belief in male superiority) are highly similar to factors that researchers have identified as predictors of sexual aggression. These, including hostile and benevolent sexism as potential mediators between authoritarianism and sexual harassment, along with an individual's support for rape myths, integrate the literatures on sexual harassment, sexual aggression, and authoritarianism (Begany, Milburn, 2002).

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This result is consistent with the theoretical conceptualization of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer 1981, 1988). According to this model (Adorno et al., 1950; Milburn, Conrad Hall, and Carberry, 1995), negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear, shame) that result from childhood experiences have moved on objects in the environment that may be perceived as a threat or as less powerful. These may include members of ethnic minority groups, children and women, and these objects can then serve as targets for the authoritarian aggression.

Authoritarian aggression and ethnocentrism were both major components of authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950). They regarded the subordination of women to be an example of ethnocentrism directed at minorities (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 107), and they observed that individuals high in authoritarianism "exhibit signs of underlying resentful disrespect for women generally" (p. 866). Sexual harassment can be seen as an act of sexual aggression toward women that may be subsumed under the larger category of authoritarian aggression.

Research has demonstrated that authoritarianism is a predictor of battering (Ou, 1996) and sexually aggressive behavior (Walker, Rowe, & Quinsey, 1993; Petty & Dawson, 1989). Authoritarianism also provides the possibility that a man will have a greater likelihood to engage in sexual harassment. Furthermore, the results support that a complex mediation model authoritarianism seems to produce an increase in support for rape myths and beliefs and hostile sexism, and these factors in turn predict a greater likelihood of sexual harassment (Begany, Milburn, 2002).

In contrast, empathy "an important component of social cognition that contributes to our ability to understand and respond adaptively to others' emotions, succeed in emotional communication, and promote prosocial behavior" (Spreng, McKinnon, Mar & Levine, 2009, p. 62), was indicated as an important factor predictor of positive attitudes towards rape victims (Sakalli-U urlu, Yalçın & Glick, 2007; Smith, Frieze, 2003; Lambert, Raichle, 2000), as it can affect the perception of the subjects about blaming the victim or the author of rape (Deitz et al. 1982, 1984).

METHOD

Subjects

The partecipant of this study were 400 subjects drawn from the student population at the University of Catania (mean age 23.30 years, S.D. 4.029), with a slight predominance of the female gender (54,5%).

Divided by:

1) Type of studies:

a) Psychology: N. 201 subjects (M= 33 F= 168), mean age 23.39 years, S.D. 4.738;

b) Scientific Departments: N. 199 subjects (M= 149 F= 50), mean age 23.31, S.D. 3.166.

2) Level of studies:

a) Basic degree: N. 201 subjects (M= 100 F= 101), mean age 20.71 years, S.D. 3.313;

b) Master degree: N. 199 students (M= 82 F= 117), mean age 25.91 years, S.D. 2.825.

Measures

Participants were given the following scales:

Violsex Scale (α = .729) to explore the representational framework on sexual violence; it consists of 39 items of type Likert (1-7 with indifference point= 4). The scale is divided into six subscales, built specifically to analyze the basic attitudes of the rape; for the purpose of this paper we will further analyze the Scale A: "To you it's sexual violence : ..." (α = .867) (Gradviol).

The *Traditional Family Ideology Scale* (T.F.I.) (α = .913) Levinson & Huffman (1954), which measures the level of authoritarianism/Conformity (A/C) of our subjects. The *items* are of Likert type with a score from 1 to 7, relating to the degree of agreement-disagreement of the subject with the

statement proposed by item, without the central point of indifference. The total sum of the scores assigned to single items is the total score, which corresponds to the level A/C: minimum 40, maximum 280.

N.3 Semantic Differential: Specially designed for previous research conducted in Sicily (Di Nuovo & Licciardello, 1997); N.1 for the exploration of identity dimension: Real Self (How am I: α = .779); two to explore the gender representation: Woman (the woman is ... : α = .885); Man (the man is ...: α = .863).

The *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, Short Form* (α= .895) (IRMA-Short Form, Payne, Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999); 20-*item* scale which uses a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree,5= strongly agree) to assess rape myth acceptance. The mean score was calculated; higher scores signify more agreement with rape myths.

The *Toronto Empathy Questionnaire* (α= .895) (TEQ, Spreng et al., 2009), consists of 16 *items* (range 1-5 with the point of indifference= 3; degree of agreement 1= never, 5= always), measuring the levels of empathy experienced by the subjects of the sample; Higher scores indicate higher empathy.

Results

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for all of the scales, divided by the sociological characteristics of the respondents. The score Violsex Scale is very low (X = 04.09, S.D. = .756) and substantially comparable to the "point of indifference".

Definitely contained (scores below the "point of indifference", p<.0001) is also adherence to authoritarianism/Conformity (A/C: X = 3.21) and rape myths (IRMA: X= 2.68).

Medium-high level of Empathy score (3.98); medium-low those relative to the size of the Self (Real: X=4.90) and the representation of women (X = 4.77) and, especially, of man (X= 4:36), significantly lower than the previous three (F= 54.401 , p<.0001).

Tabella N.1 –Medium Values Scale- Total Sample (N=400)

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	Violsex Scale (Range 1-7)		**A/C** (Range 1-7)		**Empathy** (Range 1-5)		**IRMA** (Range 1-7)	
	X	ds	X	ds	X	ds	X	ds
Males	**3.73°**	.759	3.51**	.864	3,77	.528	2,95	.959
Females	4.39**	.610	**2.97°**	.710	4,16**	.383	**2,45°**	.771
I year-Base	3.94	.772	3.33**	.868	3,95	.530	2,77*	.941
2 year-Mag.	4.24**	.709	**3.09°**	.770	4,01	.455	**2,59°**	.830
Psichology	4.46**	.531	**2.89°**	.694	4.10**	4.14	**2,46°**	.779
Scient.Dep.	**3.71°**	.762	3.54**	.826	3,86	.538	2,90**	.943
Total	4.09	.756	**3.21°**	.828	3.98	.494	**2.68°**	.891
°Score below the "indifference point" (p<.0001) **p≤ .01; *p≤ .05								

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Interesting that the males, compared to the females, attribute less significance to the items of the scale of violence Violsex (M= 3.73 Vs 4.39; p< .001), being more oriented (albeit in a very limited scores) to A/C (M= 3.51 Vs 2.97; p<.001) and more responsive to IRMA (M= 2.95 Vs. 2.45; p<.003). This framework, however, is largely shared by the students of the basic degree (M= 3.94 Vs. 4.24 , p<.001; A/C: M=3.33 Vs 3.09, p<.001; IRMA: M=2.77 Vs 2.59, p=.044) and Scientific Departments of subjects (M= 3.71 Vs 4:46; p<.001; A/C: M=3.54 Vs 2.89, p<.001; IRMA: M=2.90 Vs 2.46; p<.001).

The females, on the other hand, compared to males, as well as psychology students (compared to the Scientific dep.), show higher scores Empathy (Sex: M=4.16 Vs 3.77; p<.001; Departments: M=4.10 Vs 3.86; p<.001).

In contrast, males show a slightly better representation of Man (M: 4.53 Vs. 4.22; p<.001); Similarly the ratio of students in scientific areas than those of psychology courses (M: 4.48 Vs. 4.25; p=.001).

The analysis of the Euclidean distances also indicates that males are more distant from the females (p<.001) and vice versa (p<.001). The students of the scientific departments , more than those of Psychology Courses represent the Real Self far from Woman (p<.001) and the Man away from Woman (p<.001).

To test whether the scores to Violsex Scala recall the psycho - social characteristics of the subjects in our sample (level A/C, Empathy, adherence to myths about rape, Euclidean distances: Real Self/Woman, Real Self/Man and Woman/Man), we used the bivariate correlation analysis (*Pearson's r*).

On the merits, regardless of gender, the type and level of education, data indicate a negative correlation between the score at Violsex Scala, the levels of A/C and those of IRMA (p<.001). On the contrary, there was a positive correlation between the score and that of Violsex Scale and Empathy (p<.001); except the females, for whom the assessment of violence would not seem to invest the sphere of feelings and emotions.

Finally, about the Euclidean distances, the greater the distance between the self and the woman and between the woman and the man, the lower the evaluation of subjects Scala Violsex (p<.001). Even in this case, the framework remains unchanged relatively to the sex, the type and level of study (always p≤.001).

SEXUAL VIOLENCE: WHICH BEHAVIOR AND TO WHAT EXTENT?

The previous part was the more general analysis; what follows is a more detailed approach to the Scale A, centered about the attribution of violence to specific behaviours. In general, when it's specifically considered in the subscale that we called GRADVIOL (α = .867) it's medium/medium-high level (X= 5.32), significantly higher (p.<001) in females than males, in psychology courses compared to those of scientific areas and among students of Master degree compared to those of basic courses.

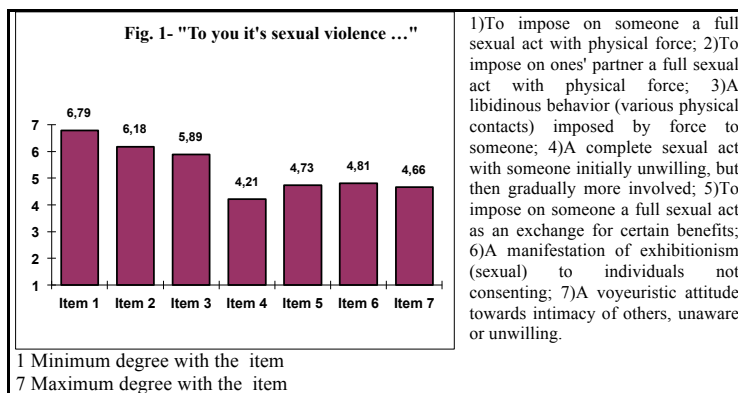*Tab. N.2: Medium Values GRADVIOL: Sex; Kind of Studies; Level of Studies*

Tab. N.2: Medium Values GRADVIOL: Sex; Kind of Studies; Level of Studies				
	X	**ds**	**t**	**p**
Males	5.08	*1.30*	-.349	**.001**
Female	5.53	*1.27*		
Psychology	5.62	*1.19*	4.698	**.001**
Scientificic Depart.	5.02	*1.35*		
1 year Base	5.06	*1.35*	-4.192	**.001**
2 year Master	5.59	*1.19*		
GradViol mean "*Gradient of Violence*" and indicates the degree of violence attributed to the behavior shown by the items in the subscale A.				

Within this framework it is possible to detect two different positions:

I-on the one hand, the subjects of the sample associated violence, especially, to the use of physical force: the imposition by physical force to have sexual intercourse received higher scores, both on anyone (*item* 1: X= 6.79), and on the "partner" (*item* 2: X= 6.18). In this case, however, the assessment of violence, although significant, is significantly lower (X= 6.79 Vs 6.18, *"t" for paired sample*: 10,707, p<.001).

II-on the other, it also deserves attention the lesser attribution of violence to situations characterized by ambiguity. In the case: "to impose on someone a full sexual act as an exchange for certain benefits" (X= 4.73, S.D. 2,169); "A manifestation of sexual exhibitionism": (X= 4.81, S.D. 1.949); "A voyeuristic attitude towards intimacy of others, unaware or unwilling" (X= 4.66, S.D. 1,990); "A full sexual relationship with someone initially unwilling but then gradually more involved" (X= 4.21, S.D. 2.061).

Fig. 1- "To you it's sexual violence …"

1)To impose on someone a full sexual act with physical force; 2)To impose on ones' partner a full sexual act with physical force; 3)A libidinous behavior (various physical contacts) imposed by force to someone; 4)A complete sexual act with someone initially unwilling, but then gradually more involved; 5)To impose on someone a full sexual act as an exchange for certain benefits; 6)A manifestation of exhibitionism (sexual) to individuals not consenting; 7)A voyeuristic attitude towards intimacy of others, unaware or unwilling.

1 Minimum degree with the item
7 Maximum degree with the item

These *items*, however, are characterized by a high S.D., that appears indicative of poorly uniform scores, and in this sense of diversified attitudes on the part of the sample. The analysis of the frequencies indicates that a substantial percentage of the sample attaches to "Imposition of a complete sexual act as an exchange for obtaining certain benefits" values below the "point of indifference" (Tab. 3). This is true even for female, as it is possible to detect, and 21% of women (as such, directly involved in the phenomenon of violence) views this situation as poorly violent.

With reference to individual items (Study Type: MANOVA F= 3.881, p<.001; Liv. Studies: MANOVA F=2.999, p=.004):

a) Students of psychology compared to their colleagues of scientific areas, showing higher scores than all the items that make up the scale A (with the exception of item 1; item 2: X= 6.28 Vs 5.91 F= 5.203, p=.023; item 3: X= 6.21 Vs 5.47 F= 14.398, p<.001; item 4: X= 4.47 Vs 3.94 F= 4.083, p=.044; item 5= X= 5.21 Vs 4.36 F= 10.206, p=.002; item 6: X= 5.12 Vs 4.46 F= 7.680, p=.006; item 7: X= 4.95 Vs 4.34 F= 6.203, p=.013).

b) The subjects of Master Degree, compared to those of the Triennial, give a higher rating to item 2 (X= 6.30 Vs 5.89 F= 6.460, p=.011), and those with higher ambiguity: items 5 (X= 5.14 Vs 4.43 F= 7.279, p=.007), 6 (X= 5.27 Vs 4.32 F= 15.737, p<.001) and 7 (X= 4.94 Vs 4.35 F= 5.631, p=.018).

Tab. N.3: A5-How much it's violence the imposition of a complete sexual act as an exchange for obtaining certain benefits

Tab. N.3: A5-How much it's violence the imposition of a complete sexual act as an exchange for obtaining certain benefits						
Scores	**Sex**		**Kind of Studies**		**Level of studies**	
	Males	**Females**	**Psycholoy**	**Scientific**	**I-base**	**II-Master**
1	29	25	22	32	36	18
	15,9%	11,5%	10,9%	16,1%	17,9%	9,0%
2	20	12	8	24	14	18
	11,0%	5,5%	4,0%	12,1%	7,0%	9,0%
3	26	9	11	24	22	13
	14,3%	4,1%	5,5%	12,1%	10,9%	6,5%
4	24	20	17	27	26	18
	13,2%	9,2%	8,5%	13,6%	12,9%	9,0%
5	19	24	20	23	21	22
	10,4%	11,0%	10,0%	11,6%	10,4%	11,1%
6	23	43	42	24	31	35
	12,6%	19,7%	20,9%	12,1%	15,4%	17,6%
7	41	85	81	45	51	75
	22,5%	39,0%	40,3%	22,6%	25,4%	37,7%
Totale	182	218	201	199	201	199
	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

The levels of A/C and IRMA negatively correlate with all the *items* of the scale (A/C: *item* 1 p=.049; *items* 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and /, p<.001; IRMA: *item* 1 p= .004; *items* 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 p≤.001); Empathy relates, instead, positively with all the *items* of the scale A (always p≤.003; except of *item* 2 "To impose on ones' partner a full sexual act with physical force".

This framework remains largely unchanged relatively to the sociological characteristics of the sample: interesting that, for females only, empathy correlates positively only because violence is manifest in general situations (*item* 1: p<.001).

With regard to the Euclidean distances, the greater the distance:

1) Real Self/Woman and Woman/Man, the lower the attribution of violence to the items characterized by ambiguity (*items* 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7: p≤ .001);

2) Woman/Man and Real Self/Man, the greater the attribution of violence "To impose on some-one a full sexual act with physical force" (*item* 1 respectively: p= .020; p= .037).

For females, however, the Real Self/Man distance, correlates positively with the *item* 1 (p=.034) and negatively with the *items* 3 (p = .018), 4 (p = .002) and 7 (p =. 041), while Woman/Man, negatively with all the *items* of the scale, with the exception of *item* 1 (p≤.003).

CONCLUSIONS

Generally speaking, the representation of violence seems to be influenced both by the sociolog-ical variables we considered (Sex, and type and level of study) and by psychosocial variables (Myth, authoritarism level, empathy and Self Dimension), although only marginally. In line with the results of previous researches, the levels of A/C and Irma seem to negatively correlate with the meaning of violence, while empathy increases the meaning of violence acts that are described in the scale.

About Scale A, results refer to a representational framework of traditional sexual violence, characterized, in part, by the recourse to the imposition by physical strength and on the other by considerable ambivalence. The reference to the traditional culture, however, can explain the fact that the imposition through physical force is considered as less serious when the same is directed to one's partner. In this sense, the low scores attributed to ambiguity behaviors that, though usually verbally stigmatized, broadly characterize daily life in fashion, cinema, in the media, in idioms, etc. may also be explained. A peculiar case is that of "To impose on someone a full sexual act as an exchange for certain benefits", which low scores partially come from women often not considering it as violence.

Data, though only partially elaborated, seem to indicate the need of cultural and educational interventions (directed to women as well), finalized to a better understanding of the phenomena rel-ative to sexuality and respect toward women.

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