



INFANCIA Y ADOLESCENCIA EN UN MUNDO EN CRISIS Y CAMBIO

## SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explored the social representations of sexual violence in Sicilian secondary schools students.

Regarding the social representation of sexual violence and its possible causes, it appears to be important the limited meaning given to sexual violence referred only to those behaviors that require physical strength, whereas sexual abuse subtle forms were not regarded as sexual violence.

Among the possible causes of sexual violence, grammar schools students more than students of technical schools believe that the causes are mostly brought back to the identity conception of predatory, to ambiguous behavior of the victim and to the lack of consideration of subjective personal rights. Males more than females, attributed the provocative posture of the victim as the main cause of sexual violence.

Furthermore the sample believes that the victim will only talk with people whom he or she feels emotionally close and that the behavioral pattern and educational goals that allow to affirm their identity in full respect of others, as very severe preventive measures on offenders, can play an important role in preventing sexual violence.

The overall framework outlines a social representation of sexual violence in adolescents that need an intense work of primary prevention.

**Keywords:** *victim-high school students-prevention-woman*



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### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The French philosopher Jean Pierre Faye noted that every society is born to its eyes in the moment where the narration of its violence is given (Faye, 1981), meaning that every society becomes aware of itself in the moment in which violence begins to be assessed, classified and distinguished, at the institutional level and human cohabitation, as a phenomenon closely linked to social relations. There is no unique definition of sexual violence since the forms and the human dimensions of possible analysis are different.

Chesnais (1981) argues that violence is a geometric variable phenomenon where it continuously changes forms depending on the ages and on the socio-cultural contexts upon realization. Instead, Sofsky (1996), believes that violence, especially physical violence, is the expression of power characterized by an intrusive action and the most intensive trial of power because it directly affects the victims at the center of their existence, the body. In consequence, violence is considered to be a protean reality that exists and persists in all the ages of our history despite different characteristics (Amerio, 1996).

Sexual violence is a phenomenon that requires a continuous cultural work where the society ends up in being aware and in charge of a problem, where self-recognition accompanied by the hetero-recognition and that suffocating spiral of abuse and violence that involves the lives of too many victims will be interrupted. Among the aspects, it is important to consider that there is a widespread awareness of the problem since violence is a phenomenon rooted in our history and in our cultural society, in which it should be unconditionally accepted and treated with superficiality and detachment (D'Cruze, 1993).

Considering the wide and deep changes that occur during adolescence as well as the complexity related to sexual violence, a representation regarding sexual violence might be of a great interest. Concerning the social representation that the adolescents already had regarding the sexual violence in a research made in 1992, it had been emerged that the adolescents consider sexual violence as a relationship imposed with physical force especially from their partners. Moreover, females more than males, believe that exhibitionism and voyeurism are suffering. Instead, only one part of the sample considers sexual violence as a sexual relationship that is initially unwanted but tends to finish with compliance and participation (Licciardello, & Sgroi, 1992).

A national survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in Italy, including a sample of about 20.000 women (14-59 years old), found out that the sample tends to consider sexual violence as the situation where women are forced to do or suffer against different kinds of sexual acts: rape, attempted rape, physical sexual harassment, sexual relations with third parties, undesired sexual relations for the fear of the related consequences, degraded and humiliated sexual activities. Instead, the verbal sexual harassment, stalking, exhibitionism acts, and obscene phone calls are not considered as sexual violence (ISTAT, 2007). The sexual violence phenomenon, especially in adolescence, has been resulted to be quite submerged or covered. In fact, regarding a study made on a representative sample of girls surveyed in various regions of the United States, the following has emerged: 12.7% have been abused during their lifetime and 14.3% have suffered sexual assault that involved physical contact or flirt but didn't end up in violence (Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders, & Best, 1993). In a research 35% of college students that had been interviewed were ready to rape a woman if they are not certain they can hang out with or acquire (Malmuth, 1981).

It's emerged, by the data collected from Koss and Oros (1982) interviewing a sample of students, that the females victim suffer from violence more than themselves can recognize or admit. Further to this data, it has been emerged that between 25% and 50% of boys have or tried to violate a girl at least one time. Some of these "date-rape" were organized in groups in which a guy dates a girl that afterwards he and his friends rape her, often in an appropriate aimed house. These data



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are impressive for several reasons: it's a widespread phenomenon, moved by "normal" guys in a superior educational contest in which a certain equality among genders can be supposed.

Over direct effect of sexual violence (Lesserman, Li, Drossman, Toomey, Nachman, & Glogau, 1997; Dansky, Brewerton, Kilpatrick, & O'Neil, 1997; Griffin, Resick, & Mechanic, 1997; Ford, 1997) literature have analyzed secondary victimization, that is effect of psychological reactions to sexual abuse and it have linked to justify of sexual violence, e.g. provocative woman (Traverso, & Marzi, 1986; De Grada, & Ercolani, 1987, 1989a, 1989b). Victim who blamed herself or himself for sexual violence could experience insecurity, lower self-esteem, guilt, lack of family and social support (Dansky, Brewerton, Kilpatrick, & O'Neil, 1997; Campbell, R., & Raja, S., 1999).

In relation to what has been mentioned, a fundamental role is attributed to prevention intended as education, that is realized through a collaborative work in a relation that gives value to everyone's potential. Prevention, in its physiological and educational sense, means to have as a primary objective the elaboration of the effective meanings of experiences to improve the consciousness of itself and support the development. That can bring to encourage the deepening of psychological motivations that can lead to a misinterpretation or to a behavior that goes against the development (Maggiolini, & Pietropolli Charmet, 2004). To this purpose, a central role is entrusted to the school that constitutes the second agency in the socialization process, devoted in a specific way to the cultural and educational transmission.

The scholar institution is a resource that offers space for listening and upholding discomfort, a place where minors can unfold, tell what happens, and especially find support (Montecchi, 2002). But it is very important to remember that you cannot produce a significant mental and cultural growth and awareness of subjects in the evolutionary stage in children during the learning process in the area of sexuality and affection, the issues of intercultural conflict and violence, in response to discomfort and mal-treatment, if not produced first in the same field, a mental and cultural growth of educators (Foti, & Bosetto, 2000). The complexity of adolescent development, and the effective-relational characteristics of adolescents, require the school to fulfill its institutional mandate didactic and evaluational integration with new and more complex educational tasks. The school's experience can decisively help in the formation of the Self in parallel to finding a social Identity in the outside world (Maggiolini, & Pietropolli Charmet, 2004).

## OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

Considering that violence isn't only characterized as an objective or subjective fact, when we study a representation we should attempt to find the unusual feature that has been motivated and absorbed. But, it is particularly important that the development of this feature is observed just in the moment in which it emerges in the social sphere (Moscovici, 1989).

The present study aimed to explore the social representations of sexual violence in adolescents of the Secondary Educational Hinterland Sicilian Schools and whether these representations was affected by the social context of membership.

We assumed that:

behind the manifested or shown attitudes of sexual violence, attitudes of entitlement was hidden; sexual violence attitudes was more evident in males, in younger boys, and in ones with a typical technical schooling.

## METHODOLOGY

The research sample consisted of 240 subjects, belonging to the first and fifth year, of which N. 115 were males (47.9%) and N. 125 were females (52.1%), with an age ranging between 14 to



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20 years. The sample is equally divided between grammar schools students (GS) and technical schools (TS) ones.

We used Likert scales (gamma 1÷7) to explore the social representations of sexual violence. In particular, scales explored representation of sexual violence, its possible causes, victim of sexual violence, victim as a woman, sexual violence prevention. We used background questions for the characteristics relative to the interviewee (Licciardello, 1994).

We have carried out the following statistical analysis:

- Analysis of Variance (with n. factors within) related to the comparison of the results regarding the Likert scale;

- Students' t-test for Independent Samples to verify the incidence of independent variables.

We have analyzed data by using the SPSS 15.5 for Windows.

## RESULTS

### Representation of sexual violence

In general, sexual violence has been considered above all ( $p < .001$ ) as an imposed sexual act with physical force ("impose sexual act with physical force",  $M=5.49$   $SD=2.18$ ; "impose libidinous behavior with physical force",  $M=5.03$   $SD=2.11$ ) instead, the possibility that the victim can gradually participate during the violence to the act ( $M=3.16$   $SD=1.79$ ; One test compared to indifference point,  $p < .001$ ) has been less considered.

With respect to our sample, without representing sexual violence, the imposed sexual act (scores attested significantly below the indifference point,  $p < .001$  in all cases): to obtain benefits ( $M=3.49$   $SD=2.11$ ), that in which the victim participates gradually to the act ( $M=3.16$   $SD=1.79$ ), for exhibitionism ( $M=3.68$   $SD=1.94$ ) and voyeurism ( $M=3.14$   $SD=2.08$ ). In particular, it has been emerged that the imposed violence to its partner ( $M=4.74$   $SD=2.19$ ) is considered significantly lower than that imposed to foreigners ( $M=5.49$   $SD=2.18$ )  $t=-7.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . It has been emerged, also, that the imposed violence to its partner ( $M=4.74$   $SD=2.19$ ) is considered significantly lower than libidinous forced behavior ( $M=5.03$   $SD=2.11$ )  $t=-2.46$ ,  $p=.014$ .

This framework is influenced by the variable level of education: students of the first year, more than those of the fifth one, attribute low scores in almost all the items in which our society considers sexual violence (Tab. 1).

	First year		Fifth year		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1	<b>4.83</b>	2.44	<b>6.15</b>	1.63	4.94	<.001
2	<b>4.06</b>	2.22	<b>5.43</b>	1.94	5.07	<.001
3	<b>4.37</b>	2.28	<b>5.68</b>	1.69	5.09	<.001
4	3.06	1.80	3.27	1.79	-.90	<.37
5	<b>2.96</b>	2.03	<b>4.02</b>	2.05	-4.01	<.001
6	<b>3.33</b>	2.02	<b>4.03</b>	1.79	-2.84	<.005
7	2.96	2.1	3.32	2.05	-1.34	<.18

1) impose sexual act with physical force; 2) impose sexual violence to its partner; 3) impose libidinous behavior with physical force; 4) complete sexual act in which the victim participates gradually to act; 5) impose complete sexual act to obtain benefits; 6) exhibitionism imposed by force; 7) voyeurism imposed by force.

There were no significant differences related to the various types of schooling and gender.

Variables type of schooling and gender had a significant impact on the representation of the possible causes of sexual violence.



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Grammar schools students attributed higher scores than students of technical schools with respect to the items concerning: the possibility that the victim might have an ambiguous attitude (GS  $M=4.75$   $SD=1.65$  vs TS  $M=4.27$   $SD=1.82$ )  $t=2.16$ ,  $p=.03$ ; the conception of his or her identity as predatory (GS  $M=4.39$   $SD=1.74$  vs TS  $M=3.88$   $SD=1.71$ )  $t=2.28$ ,  $p=.02$ ; the lack of general consideration of the subjective rights of the person and the respect of his or her will (GS  $M=4.90$   $SD=1.94$  vs TS  $M=4.02$   $SD=2.11$ )  $t=1.93$ ,  $p=.05$ ; the negligence of the existence of the sexual violence concept (GS  $M=4.77$   $SD=1.94$  vs TS  $M=4.26$   $SD=2.12$ )  $t=1.93$ ,  $p=.05$ .

Males more than females, believe that the possible causes of violence can be mainly attributed to the provocative behavior of the victim (Male  $M=4.53$   $SD=1.84$  vs Female  $M=3.87$   $SD=1.93$ )  $t=2.70$ ,  $p<.01$ .

There were no significant differences related to the level of education.

*The representation of the victim*

In general, the fact that the victim of sexual violence talks with persons whom he or she feels emotionally very close is mostly appreciated ( $M=5.38$   $SD=1.20$ ); while the possibility that the victim can not talk with anybody because he/she considers the phenomenon "physiological" is rejected ( $M=2.02$   $SD=1.61$ ), ( $p<.001$ ).

The items relative to "physiology" of the phenomenon within the couple ( $M=4.06$ ), to the possible help of social workers ( $M=4.08$   $SD=1.96$ ) and police ( $M=3.90$   $SD=1.96$ ) were superimposable to the indifference point.

The variables of type of schooling and level of education had a significant impact on representation of victim's reaction to sexual violence.

Grammar schools students with respect to students of technical schools, gave higher scores to the possibility that: the victim feels the necessity to talk only with someone whom he or she feels emotionally close (GS  $M=5.68$   $SD=1.70$  vs TS  $M=5.07$   $SD=2.07$ )  $t=2.52$ ,  $p=.01$ ; nobody is able to help themselves to overcome the disgraced suffer (GS  $M=4.71$   $SD=1.97$  vs TS  $M=3.93$   $SD=2.17$ )  $t=2.92$ ,  $p<.01$ ; the phenomenon is physiological if occurred within the couple ("not talking with nobody because consider physiological the phenomenon occurred within the couple", GS  $M=4.37$   $SD=1.99$  vs TS  $M=3.76$   $SD=2.12$ )  $t=2.29$ ,  $p=.02$ .

The students of the first year compared to those of the fifth one have attributed the following : higher scores to the possibility that the victim feels the necessity/need to talk with the operators or sector specialists (First year  $M=4.37$   $SD=2.01$  vs Fifth year  $M=3.79$   $SD=1.88$ )  $t=2.29$ ,  $p=.02$ ; lower to the idea that the victim prefers not to tell anyone because he or she believes it is impossible to find support and understanding (First year  $M=3.94$   $SD=2.12$  vs Fifth year  $M=4.69$   $SD=2.04$ )  $t=-2.79$ ,  $p<.01$ ; fear from the judgment of people (First year  $M=4.15$   $SD=2.15$  vs Fifth year  $M=4.88$   $SD=1.96$ )  $t=-2.73$ ,  $p<.01$ ; considers physiological the phenomenon occurred within the couple (First year  $M=3.71$   $SD=2.08$  vs Fifth year  $M=4.42$   $SD=2.02$ )  $t=-2.73$ ,  $p<.01$ .

There were no significant differences related to the variable of gender.

The overall framework shows a representation of the victim as a woman who is unable to defend herself and is slightly refused, on the contrary, the stereotype of the victim as an available and provocative woman ( $p<.001$ ).

Specifically, students attributed medium-low scores to the representation of the victim where a woman was not able to defend herself ( $M=5.02$   $SD=2.08$ ), conversely negative scores are assigned (i.e. significantly below the indifference point, in all cases  $p<.001$ ) to the representation of the victim as: a prostitute ( $M=3.18$   $SD=2.07$ ); a woman "that goes for looking" ( $M=3.32$   $SD=2.04$ ); a woman who has a very "free" life ( $M=3.37$   $SD=1.79$ ); a show woman ( $M=2.90$   $SD=1.63$ ); a woman whose profession evokes the stereotype of availability ( $M=3.00$   $SD=1.87$ ).

The variables of type of schooling and gender had a significant impact on the victim's representation as a woman.



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Students of technical schools more than grammar schools ones identify the victim of sexual violence as a woman that: have a very liberal life (GS  $M=3.12$   $SD=1.65$  vs TS  $M=3.62$   $SD=1.88$ )  $t=-2.19$ ,  $p=.030$ ; the spectacle (GS  $M=2.58$   $SD=1.50$  vs TS  $M=3.23$   $SD=1.70$ )  $t=-3.14$ ,  $p=.002$ ; ones whose profession evokes the stereotype of availability (GS  $M=2.77$   $SD=1.83$  vs TS  $M=3.24$   $SD=1.88$ )  $t=-1.98$ ,  $p=.05$ .

Males more than females, identified the victim as a woman that: has a very liberal life (Male  $M=3.68$   $SD=1.76$  vs Female  $M=3.08$   $SD=1.76$ )  $t=2.62$ ,  $p=.01$ ; the spectacle or the entertaining (Male  $M=3.20$   $SD=1.65$  vs Female  $M=2.62$   $SD=1.57$ )  $t=2.62$ ,  $p=.01$ ; ones whose profession evokes the stereotype of availability (Male  $M=3.51$   $SD=1.89$  vs Female  $M=2.54$   $SD=1.72$ )  $t=4.19$ ,  $p<.001$ .

There were no significant differences related to the variable level of education.

### *Preventing sexual violence*

The sample has attributed medium-high/medium scores ( $p<.001$ ) to the idea of sexual violence prevention through: severe punishments ( $M=6.05$   $SD=1.61$ ); adoption of educational and behavioral models that propose the respect of their own and others' identities ( $M=5.60$   $SD=1.68$ ); avoiding risk situations ( $M=5.20$   $SD=1.82$ ).

The variable gender had a significant impact on preventive strategies. Females more than males, appreciated the following preventive strategies: the rediscovery of moral and religious values in sexual and social mores (Male  $M=4.05$   $SD=2.07$  vs Female  $M=4.63$   $SD=1.76$ )  $t=-2.34$ ,  $p<.02$ ; the prohibition of pornographic spread (Male  $M=3.19$   $SD=2.09$  vs Female  $M=4.50$   $SD=1.90$ )  $t=-5.06$ ,  $p<.001$ ; the avoidance of risk situations (Male  $M=4.91$   $SD=1.92$  vs Female  $M=5.47$   $SD=1.69$ )  $t=-2.40$ ,  $p=.02$ ; and severe punishments (Male  $M=5.80$   $SD=1.70$  vs Female  $M=6.29$   $SD=1.47$ )  $t=-2.37$ ,  $p=.02$ .

There were no significant difference related to the variables type of schooling and level of education.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The sexual violence phenomenon, as figured out from today's adolescents, is considered by researches in literature (Crespi, 2002) outlined by opposing thoughts and often contradictory to each other. As we shed the line on the data found in literature, our research has explored the social representation of sexual violence in adolescents. The results have been divided in three areas regarding the social representation of sexual violence, of victims and of preventive measures.

Regarding the social representation of sexual violence and its possible causes, it appears to be important the limited meaning given to sexual violence referred only to those behaviors that require physical strength (anyway less in case on the partner his own), without representing sexual violence, the imposed sexual act to obtain benefit, that in which the victim participates gradually to the act, the exhibitionism and voyeurism.

Among the possible causes of sexual violence, grammar schools students more than students of technical schools believe that the causes are mostly brought back to the identity conception of predatory, to ambiguous behavior of the victim and to the lack of consideration of subjective personal rights. Furthermore, males more than females, attributed the provocative posture of the victim as the main cause of sexual violence.

Regarding the social representation of the victim, the stereotype of victim as a woman is outstanding, as for her attractive features, her ambiguous behavior made; forward supporting that the victim will only talk with people whom he or she feels emotionally close, rejecting the idea to talk to anyone.

Thereupon the preventive measures towards sexual violence, the sample believes that the behavioral pattern and educational goals that allow to affirm their identity in full respect of others are important, as very severe preventive measures on offenders.



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The overall framework outlines a social representation of sexual violence in adolescents that need functional training practices of the relationship structure that make adolescent more able to expose/propose himself or herself in social life. For the severity of the phenomenon and the increased attention paid, the school and family must feel involved as promoters of preventive interventions on all levels (Montecchi, 2002). We must learn to develop a real attentive culture towards the adolescents upon their need and requests to achieve through training courses associated to an adequate information of the public opinion. Correct preventions can occur inside a schedule or a program of sexual education, in condition that the school can perform with psycho-pedagogical competence in helping the adolescents to develop a more conscious sexuality and to attribute the correct meaning of sexual behavior (Maggiolini, & Pietropolli Charmet, 2004). The adolescent assumes the inserted appearance of the environment is evident as the difficulty of long term thinking, to assume responsibility, to elaborate an ethical sense is strongly influenced by the existed distance among the youth and their future. Scholastic experience can help in a decisive way the training of adolescent Self whether in giving some useful meaning of the realization of the restructurational process of the individual's inner world, or in granting opportunities for the adolescent of auto-reflection and subjectivity in parallel to help him or her find a social identity in the outside.

The input of psychological figures and skills at school must be in tune with the aim of providing support to the scholastic education and to all its components in realization of this important task and the contrast situations that make the scholastic reality a regressive experience and an evolutive failure. The sexual violence in our society might never be prevented without an intense work of primary prevention that views or considers the sexual education as its prior dimension. This would allow changing processes through a joint work of competence even very different among them.

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