

Structural comparison of women's and men's representations regarding violence

Comparação estrutural da representação de mulheres e homens acerca da violência

Comparación estructural de la representación de mujeres y hombres sobre la violencia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to compare the structure and content of women's and men's social representations about violence. **Method:** in this qualitative study based on the Theory of Social Representations, conducted in 2019, the participants were 150 users of the Family Health Strategy in the city of Rio Grande, Rio Grande do Sul. The technique of free evocations and recorded interviews was used, approved by the Ethics Committee. A prototypical analysis was performed using EVOG software and a similarity analysis, using IRAMUTEQ. **Results:** the common element in women's and men's core representations was violence. The women's representations were permeated by physical and verbal violence in the home. Men's were notable for urban violence in public places. **Final remarks:** the structure and content of women's and men's social representations about violence involved violence as a common element, but there were nuances as to where it occurred and the types of violence that each sex is subject to.

Descriptors: Nursing; Family Health; Battered Women; Men; Violence.

RESUMO

Objetivo: comparar a estrutura e o conteúdo da representação social de mulheres e homens sobre a violência. **Método:** estudo qualitativo fundamentado na Teoria das Representações Sociais. Participaram 150 usuários das Estratégias de Saúde da Família da cidade de Rio Grande/RS em 2019. Utilizou-se a técnica de evocações livres e entrevistas gravadas, aprovado pelo Comitê de Ética. Realizou-se análise prototípica pelo *software* EVOG e de similitude pelo IRAMUTEQ. **Resultados:** na centralidade da representação de mulheres e homens o elemento em comum foi violência. A representação das mulheres foi permeada pela violência física e verbal no ambiente doméstico. A dos homens foi destacada pela violência urbana em espaços públicos. **Considerações finais:** a representação social de mulheres e homens acerca da violência tem, em sua estrutura e conteúdo, como elemento em comum a violência, porém há nuances quanto ao local de ocorrência e os tipos de violência que cada sexo está sujeito.

Descritores: Enfermagem; Saúde da Família; Mulheres Maltratadas; Homens; Violência.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: comparar la estructura y el contenido de la representación social de mujeres y hombres sobre la violencia. **Método:** estudio cualitativo basado en la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales. En 2019 participaron 150 usuarios de las Estrategias de Salud de la Familia de la ciudad de Rio Grande / RS. Se utilizó la técnica de evocaciones libres y entrevistas grabadas, aprobada por el Comité de Ética. Se realizó un análisis prototípico utilizando el *software* EVOG y uno de similitud con el IRAMUTEQ. **Resultados:** en la centralidad de la representación de mujeres y hombres, el elemento en común fue la violencia. La representación de las mujeres estuvo impregnada de violencia física y verbal en el ámbito doméstico. La de los hombres destacó por la violencia urbana en los espacios públicos. **Consideraciones finales:** la representación social de mujeres y hombres sobre la violencia tiene, en su estructura y contenido, la violencia como elemento común, sin embargo, existen matices en cuanto al lugar de ocurrencia y los tipos de violencia a los que es sometido cada sexo.

Descritores: Enfermería; Salud de la Familia; Mujeres Maltratadas; Hombres; Violencia.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is one of the main public health problems and is classified into different types, from physical to forms that are less apparent¹. Its consequences may result in physical, psychological, or social issues, or even in disability or death². Among the obstacles to preventing violence, its early detection stands out, since the problem is a sociocultural phenomenon and there are many gaps between the recommendations of public policies and the actions carried out in the everyday work process. A study showed that primary health care should be better organized to help people cope with violence, since professionals who work in this setting have direct and continuous contact with users³.

The Family Health Strategy (FHS) favors the working process by increasing solvability and, consequently, the impact on individual and collective health. Additionally, this initiative is an evolutionary and unique process that takes

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into account and respects the specificities of each region⁴. Violence is present in the territories and is a challenge to FHS teams, which calls for intersectoral and interdisciplinary work. Therefore, coping must result from the effort of several segments such as health services, schools, social assistance, public policies, justice, and communities⁵.

All population groups may experience violence at some stage of their lives. A study showed that men are the most assisted group in emergency centers because of violence-related problems, and their aggressors are strangers or friends. Regarding women, the main aggressors are intimate partners, both current or former⁶. These results indicated the differences in the types of violence that affect men and women.

With information like this as resources, several public policies have been implemented in Brazil, but the biggest challenges, especially in the primary healthcare sphere, are violence early detection and follow-up beyond the physical perspective, since it is a sociocultural phenomenon. There are many gaps between the recommendations cited in public policies and the work process that is actually carried out. Some of them are the development of a bond between patients and health teams, comprehensive care that takes into consideration the many dimensions of each individual, continuous follow-up, and recognition of violence as a public health problem³.

Consequently, the social representation that women and men who are FHS users have about violence allows researchers to know people's everyday life and common knowledge regarding this subject, in addition to understanding meanings, impressions, and beliefs about it so it is possible to demystify aspects that make violent acts natural. By doing that, the study object becomes familiar and the empirical knowledge that can be used to strengthen actions to cope with violence is reinforced. Given the exposed scenario, the following guiding question was asked: What is women's and men's social representation of violence? The objective of the present study was comparing the structure and content of women's and men's social representation of violence.

METHODS

This was a descriptive, exploratory, and qualitative study, grounded in social representation theory. Research that uses this theory as a theoretical framework focus on participants' knowledge and sees it as an important source to understand their everyday lives, the assimilation of facts that occur in the environment, and the way the knowledge built on these facts is expressed by means of communication and behavior⁷.

The study location was the 25 FHS units in the city of Rio Grande, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. In each of them, the three first women and the three first men who visited the unit spontaneously during the study data collection period and met the inclusion criterion of being 18 years old or older and the exclusion criterion of being at an urgency or emergency situation were invited to participate in the study. By applying this procedure, a group of 150 people was gathered for the evocation step, of whom 32 participated in the interviews. Data collection occurred from January to March 2019. The minimum number of participants recommended for interviews in social representation studies is 30⁸.

After agreeing to join the study, the participants registered their acceptance by signing free and informed consent forms. The free evocation step consisted of asking the participants to mention the first five words that came to their minds when they were presented to the inducing term "violence". Free evocations allow to highlight true meanings and visualize implicit elements that can get obscured during speech⁹. The interviews were conducted in a room the health team made available on data collection days and had a semi-structured script as a starting point. Their audio was recorded, and their average duration was 40 minutes.

Analysis of the evocations used EVOC software, which identifies the absolute frequency and the average weighted occurrence of each word, which allowed to design a four-quadrant chart. The words in the chart were used as a basis to obtain a corpus for similarity analysis, which was prepared by using *Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* software. This allowed to identify word co-occurrences and create the maximum tree. The interviews were treated by applying content analysis¹⁰ aiming to contextualize the words included in the four-quadrant chart.

The participants were identified by the initial "P" (for "person") followed by a number that indicated the position in the interview sequence (P1, P2, P3...). Additionally, there was a gender characterization by including the initial "F" (for "female") or "M" (for "male"). This code was used to guarantee the participants' confidentiality and anonymity. The present study observed the ethical aspects included in Brazilian National Health Council Resolution no. 510/2016, and the proposal was approved by the institution's research ethics committee as per Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Evaluation no. 03758918.1.0000.5324.

RESULTS

The participants were between 18 and 79 years old. Regarding self-declared color or race, 56.6% of the sample was white, followed by 40.6% of black people. Most participants informed that they were heterosexual (97%) and had completed middle school (50.6%). Half the sample had a paid occupation. Additionally, most participants had a partner

(81%), who predominantly (67.3%) lived in the same house. The number of children was one for 24.6% and two for 28.6% of the participants.

The corpus made up of evocations by women who were FHS users when they were presented to the inducing term “violence” had a total of 327 words, a number that reduced to 60 after repeated words were eliminated. The average order of evocation (also known as rang) was 2.8 in a scale from 1 to 5. The minimum frequency was 5 and the average was 11 (Figure 1).

Central core			1st periphery		
Freq. \geq 11; Rang $<$ 2.8			Freq. \geq 11; Rang \geq 2.8		
	Freq.	Rang		Freq.	Rang
Physical violence	26	2.308	Violence against people	46	2.870
Violence	17	2.118	Moral violence	13	3.462
Verbal violence	14	2.143	Sadness	12	3.083
Substance dependence	11	2.273			
Contrast			2nd periphery		
Freq. $<$ 11; Rang $<$ 2.8			Freq. $<$ 11; Rang \geq 2.8		
	Freq.	Rang		Freq.	Rang
Domestic violence	10	2.000	Mistreating animals	9	3.778
Disrespect	10	2.000	Character	8	3.375
Fear	10	2.800	Impunity	7	3.286
Sexual violence	9	2.778	Prejudice	7	3.571
Homicide	7	2.571	Psychological violence	6	2.833
Robbery	6	2.500	Urban violence	6	2.833
Negative	6	2.167	Family	5	3.200

FIGURE 1: Four-quadrant chart obtained as a result of women’s evocations in face of the inducing term “violence”. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2020.

The corpus produced with evocations by men who were FHS users when they were presented to the inducing term “violence” had a total of 337 words, a number that decreased to 66 after repeated words were eliminated. The average order of evocation was 2.8 in a scale from 1 to 5. The minimum frequency was 8 and the average was 17 (Figure 2).

Central core			1st periphery		
Freq. \geq 17; Rang $<$ 2.8			Freq. \geq 17; Rang \geq 2.8		
	Freq.	Rang		Freq.	Rang
Violence against people	38	2.579	Impunity	18	3.389
Violence	37	2.000			
Robbery	18	2.11			
Contrast			2nd periphery		
Freq. $<$ 17; Rang $<$ 2.8			Freq. $<$ 17; Rang \geq 2.8		
	Freq.	Rang		Freq.	Rang
Homicide	14	2.643	Substance dependence	16	2.875
Physical violence	13	2.692	Urban violence	12	3.583
Hatred	11	2.364	Mistreating animals	8	3.000
			No reason	8	2.875

FIGURE 2: Four-quadrant chart obtained as a result of men’s evocations in face of the inducing term “violence”. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2020.

The central core is represented by the nature of the described object. In the present study, this object is violence, the only one common to the two groups. Comparison of the central core of the two charts (Figure 3) showed that “violence” is the only term present in both representations. It is a general term that can encompass all types of violence (physical, verbal, psychological, patrimonial, moral, and sexual).

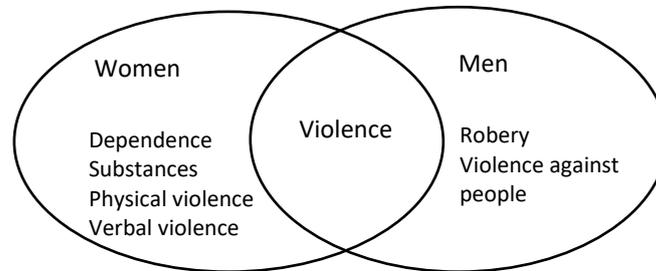


FIGURE 3: Comparison of the central core of women’s and men’s social representations. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2020.

Analysis of the terms exclusive to women’s representations showed that violence is made up of the factors that generate it, such as substance dependence. Two forms of violence were emphasized: physical and verbal. In contrast, in men’s representation the term “violence against people” emerged, referring to specific groups that differ from men: children, elderly people, women, black people, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, queers, intersexes, asexuals, and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, they evoked a specific type of violence, robbery, which possibly was present in their social context.

Comparison of the results provided by both groups indicated that women represented violence by stressing two common types, physical and verbal, which occur, among other reasons, as a consequence of substance abuse. Men, in turn, represented violence that affects people other than themselves, such as vulnerable groups, and emphasized urban violence common to public spaces. Considering that social representation phenomena are part of collective and individual spaces, filling everyday life, it was perceived that women’s and men’s representations of violence showed nuances when compared, regarding both place of occurrence and violence type.

The four-quadrant chart for women (Figure 1) showed that the centrality of their representation stressed the terms “physical violence” (most frequent) and “violence” (highest rang), which reinforced how much the physical category stood out. Verbal violence and substance dependence were also mentioned. In the central core of men’s representation (Figure 2), the terms that emerged were “violence against people” (most frequent), “violence” (highest rang), and robbery.

Violence means every form of physical violence and discrimination. (P9-F)

I believe that there are factors that influence occurrence of violence, such as alcohol and substance dependence (...). (P2-F)

Everything bad that happens is violence, theft, robbery, extortion, everything is violence. (P29-M)

I was a victim of armed robbery when I was younger. (P14-M)

The elements in the first and second peripheries allow personal modulations that originate individualized representations and, consequently, admit integration of information into the central core. The terms “violence against people” (most frequent and readily evoked), “moral violence”, and “sadness” emerged in the first periphery of women’s representation, pointing the people susceptible to violence, violence types, and feelings originating as a consequence of the phenomenon. In the first periphery of men’s representation, in turn, the only term that emerged was “impunity”, related to lack of punishment and/or noncompliance with the laws, suggesting that these should be more rigid to people who cause violence.

At the time people use violence (...) it is already something unacceptable, violence is tragic, sad. (P28-F)

They [prisoners] have even access to the internet, that is not punishment, I think the law had to be more rigid. (P11-M)

Rethinking the possibility of implementing death penalty, I think it would minimize violence a lot. (P14-M)

The right lower quadrant (second periphery) of women’s representation included the terms “mistreating animals” (most frequent), “character”, “impunity”, “prejudice”, “psychological violence”, “urban violence”, and “family” (highest

rang). It showed violence types, groups likely to be affected by it, and variations on aggressors and their acts. In men's representation, the second periphery was made up of the terms "substance dependence" (most frequent and highest rang), "no reason" (highest rang), "urban violence", and "mistreating animals", the two latter related to violence generation and violence types.

Drug addiction is one of the factors that originate a lot of violence. (P11-M)

In my opinion, violence means intolerance and hatred that people have for each other, but it can also happen for banal reasons. (P14-M)

There are these men who work with me who beat animals up and I do not understand why to do that. (P16-M)

Violence means something very bad, both domestic and urban violence. (P3-M)

The contrast elements, which make up the left lower quadrant, can reinforce the first periphery. In women's representation, it featured the elements "domestic violence" and "disrespect" (most frequent and highest rang), as well as "fear", "sexual violence", "homicide", "robbery", and "negative". These items support the elements in the first periphery, since they are related to violence types and sentimental issues. Men's representation, in turn, brought forward the terms "homicide" (most frequent), "physical violence", and "hatred" (highest rang), which also reinforced the expression of feeling and violence forms.

I have faced situations of domestic violence. I grew up with a stepfather who drank. Some days, he crossed the line and got home restless, fighting with my mother. (P23-F)

Violence affects men and women as a result of disrespect, men do not respect women and women do not respect men. (P1-F)

To me, violence is both physical violence and robbery. (P15-F)

He beat her up, men are stronger, so she nearly died. (P7-F)

Animals kill to survive, and human beings kill as a sport. (P30-M)

Men feel more hatred, you see more men robbing, violating women, doing harm to other people. (P14-M)

Similarity analysis was carried out to obtain a second indicator of the representation's centrality. It was based on the evoked terms' connectedness and co-occurrences and was performed by using *Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* software (Figure 4). In women's representation, the term "physical violence" remained central and showed remarkable connectedness with "violence against people", "verbal violence", "sexual violence", and "moral violence", reinforcing the most common types of violence and those that stand out in general when the subject is brought up.

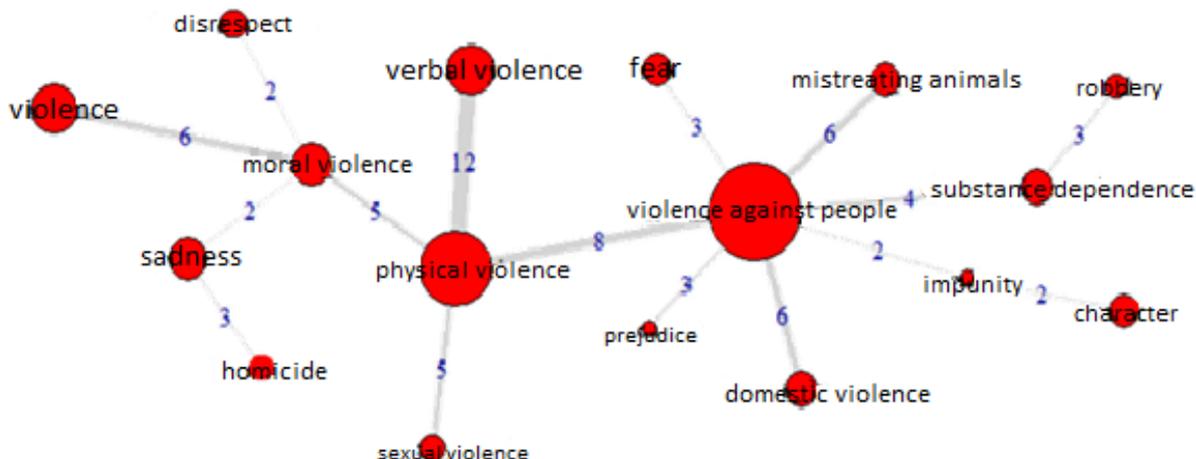


FIGURE 4: Maximum tree for similarity analysis of the most frequent evocations in women's representation of violence. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2020.

Men's representation (Figure 5) indicated that the term "violence" is strongly connected with "robbery" and slightly less connected with "violence against people", all of them central elements, strongly stressing the most common violence form in men's everyday lives and the groups that are most affected by it, such as women, children, elderly people, black people, the LGBTQIA+ population, and animals.

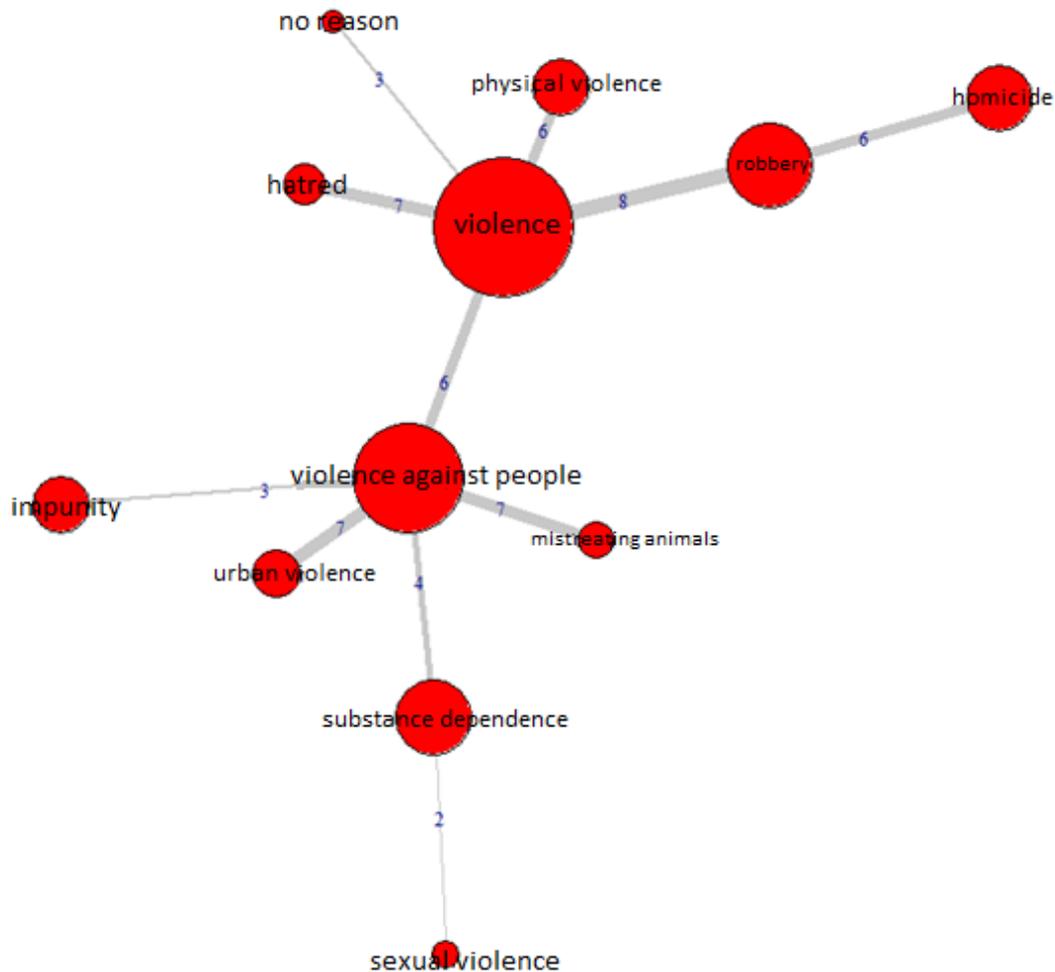


FIGURE 5: Maximum tree for similarity analysis of the most frequent evocations in men's representation of violence. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2020.

DISCUSSION

Comparison of women's and men's representations of violence showed the differences in violence types, place where violence occurs, and feelings associated with it. The only term common to both groups was "violence", evoked to cover a comprehensive, general meaning, encompassing all violence forms that happen in society. Although the physical type is the most usual, verbal violence requires special attention, given that it originates several emotional effects, such as the feeling of shame and disregard for dignity¹¹, which leave scars more deeply rooted than physical violence does. However, for verbal violence to exist, it requires the reaction of someone who feels, evaluates, and classifies the act as offensive¹².

While men referred to urban violence, related to the term "robbery", as well as to violence that occurs in other groups that differ from theirs, women represented the forms of violence that occur at home and originate in substance abuse. Regarding robbery, a study showed that when police officers and criminals react during the event and there is free access to weapons, the encounter almost always results in a confrontation that leads to the death of one of the people involved¹³. Another study, a review on domestic violence, outlined the profile of women's aggressors as men who have an emotional bond with the victims and consumed alcohol and/or other drugs a few moments before the violence episode¹⁴.

Although the present study was executed before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is extremely important to emphasize that violence against women, which is also considered gender-based violence, showed a substantial growth in number of cases. This occurred because access to public services and participation in social events decreased and time living around the aggressor increased, reducing the chances of women strengthening their bonds of trust to seek help. Additionally, people who lived together tended to show a higher level of stress, caused by either the fear to get sick or

deprivation of social interaction, which favored conflicts between victims and aggressors. Another important factor is that fear that violence can reach the children may stop women from reporting their aggressor and cause them to accept the situation, a problem that makes them even more vulnerable¹⁵.

The most reported type of violence against women is physical abuse, followed by psychological violence¹⁵. Domestic violence goes against human rights, is humiliating, and hinders development as a social being. Its consequences can be physical, psychological, and even impact the perception women have of themselves, originating insecurity and helplessness that can affect their social relationships¹⁶.

Violence against women seems to be a great taboo, because there is still a subordination involving the socially expected behaviors by women that are constructed gender roles preventing them from recognizing violence and contributing to aggressions being accepted as normal¹⁷. These historical and social gender constructions influence violence, and the roles imposed to women perpetuate the concept that they do not have freedom over their bodies and opinions, favoring violent acts, whether they are psychological, moral, patrimonial, sexual, or physical. These events often end the lives of thousands of women¹⁸.

Violence against women, brought up in both the central core by men and the first periphery by women, encompasses several groups. Regarding violence against the LGBTQIA+ community, a study analyzed the types of violence and difficulties for inclusion of this group in the work environment and showed that physical aggression and harassment were the most common practices in this context. Another type of violence experienced by this group is social stigma, which associates homosexuality with a pathology, such as infection with the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome¹⁹.

Regarding violence against children, a study identified that 63% of the children and/or adolescents have already experienced some type of violence and that, in 50.9% of the cases, the aggressors were the parents. The most common form of violence against this group was psychological, followed by negligence, abandonment, sexual violence, and physical violence²⁰. The element sadness can be a consequence of being familiar with situations of violence. Another study with adolescents showed that experiencing intrafamily violence causes, in addition to physical marks, continuous sadness, often leading to depression and self-injury as a way to relieve sorrow²¹.

“Moral violence” was also present in the first periphery of women’s representation. A study with male adolescents indicated that they acknowledged the existence of violence in their amorous relationships only when there were visible consequences and made moral violence natural under the excuse that it was a resource to guarantee their authority in the relationship²². A study with the objective of analyzing the social representations of violence and physical abuse against elderly people verified that this population had an extended view of the subject and described violence as a physical act that causes pain in the form of verbal aggression, aimed to humiliate or have a moral effect in elderly people²³.

Men’s representation in the first periphery showed an element unique to it, “impunity”. It was shown that the increase in criminality can overload the police and the justice system and, consequently, lead to higher levels of impunity²⁴. These elements were reinforced in men’s contrast zone, since it expressed their concern that perpetrators of violence, including homicide and robbery, remain unpunished. Urban violence, illustrated by robbery, is related to nonfulfillment of citizen duties and uncontrolled urban expansion, which contributes to increased unemployment, hunger, misery, marginalization, and, therefore, violence²⁵.

A study indicated that murder lawsuits are slow and deficient, despite the highest level of crime severity. As a consequence, abandoning the investigation is common, since the more time goes by, the more difficult it gets to collect enough evidence to identify the authors²⁶. It is known that laws were created to support and protect victims of violence, but the slowness in case resolution is the reason, in most situations, for aggressors’ impunity²⁷.

The term “family” emerged in the second periphery of women’s representation. Other studies have shown that women who experienced domestic violence in childhood had higher chances of being victims of violence in their amorous relationships during adult life²⁸⁻²⁹. These studies have corroborated that families strongly influence the future behavior of children when they develop their adult relationships²⁸⁻²⁹.

The second periphery of both women’s and men’s representation featured the term “mistreating animals”, pointing out the need for protection against cruel and abusive acts committed against animals³⁰. The different forms of oppression, either restricted to human beings or also involving animals, bring about the reflection on the concerns we might have as moral and legal beings³⁰. The element “no reason”, which emerged in men’s representation, indicated that there is not always a motive behind violence. A study with adolescents about bullying showed that the attacks were carried out repeatedly and with no apparent reason, a habit that perpetuates power hierarchy by means of victim intimidation³¹.

The contrast elements are those that were evoked at a low frequency. However, they are important, because they reinforce the ideas present in the first periphery⁹. The contrast zone in women’s representation confirmed the notions

shown in the first periphery, which featured elements describing violence types and negative feelings and social judgments associated with the aggressor. Fear was pointed out in a study as an essential factor for women to stay in violence relationships. Fear of not developing another relationship and of making the aggressor more violent and emotional and financial dependence are some fear-related factors that discouraged women from breaking free from a violence situation³².

The elements included in men's contrast zone also reinforced the notions conveyed in the first periphery. The term "hatred" emerged, a negative feeling associated with violence and even a factor that triggers it. A literature review sought to analyze techniques used to cope with domestic violence, in which men are the aggressors and women are the victims. The cognitive-behavior approach stood out in this scenario. In addition to other benefits, it helped control hatred, lessening aggressive acts³³.

Study limitations

The geographic restriction can be pointed out as a limitation. The study location can be extended to other places and health units that are not linked to FHS. It is important to emphasize that few studies have addressed men and their representation of violence, which calls for a more numerous production about this subject and this population.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Comparison of women's and men's social representation of violence showed the term "violence" as a central common element in their structure and content. Both groups evoked sentimental aspects and violence types. However, women emphasized the private space and men mentioned the public space, with robbery situations, regarding place of occurrence of the phenomenon. In the sphere of sentimental aspects, women's representation stressed fear, and men's focused on hatred.

Understanding these differences allows reflections on how to improve strategies, prevention, early detection, and follow-up of people who experience violence. Although this is a historical subject, laws, public policies, and work processes still do not apply specific approaches for women and men, who have different needs and perceptions.

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