

*Domestic violence: from gaining awareness of victimization to requesting help**

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Summary. *Emilio Viano (1983) defines a crime victim as «any individual that has been injured or that has suffered wrongdoing on the part of others, and that perceives themselves as a victim, who shares the experience with others that are looking for help, assistance and compensation, who is recognised as a victim and who presumably is being helped by public, private or collective agencies/structures» (p. 54). The theme of awareness of victimization is central to any victimological discussion; it is only through awareness that a victim may request the help he needs. Other times it is the contact with the victim support centers and a discussion with their staff that makes the victims themselves become aware of their status. The path of empowerment opens the door to the path of help, which has as its ultimate goal the restoration of the status quo ante.*

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The victim according to Emilio Viano

Emilio Viano, teacher of criminology and victimology at the University of Washington and director of the International magazine *Victimology* defines a victim of abuse as

Any subject injured or that has suffered wrongdoing on the part of others, who perceives herself to be a victim, who shares the experience with others looking for help, assistance and compensation, who is recognised as a victim and who presumably is being helped by public, private or collective agencies/structures (Viano, 1983, p. 54)

According to the author, the elements that make up the definition of “victim” are the following:

- **the sustained damage**

Damage refers not only to financial damage, viewed only in monetary terms, but any form of damage, from financial, to physical, biological, psychological, and moral, as well as the much discussed and now reformulated existential damage. Fortunately, in recent years, it has become more apparent that «wounds that don't bleed (emotional wounds) are often more painful than wounds that bleed (physical wounds)» (Amodio, Bondonio, Carnevali et al., 1975. p.94);

- **awareness of victimization**

Many individuals suffer unfair treatment but, for various reasons (cultural, religious, social etc.), they don't perceive themselves as victims; not only do some of these not view themselves as victims but, sometimes, they tend to blame themselves for the situation in which they have to live in and put up with (Vezzadini, 2006).

It is important, therefore, that the victim recognises herself as such, because this is the first and necessary step in order for them to be able to ask for help and strive to get out of the situation of victimization. Awareness cannot always be taken for granted, but sometimes it may require a course of awareness, a course by means of which the victim can gradually understand her status and personal situation. An obstacle to awareness is without doubt represented by a cultural system of silence, that

legitimises and justifies the victimization, that presents such behaviour as tolerable or as “not so bad after all”, and this complicates a situation which is already complex and painful itself;

- **the request for help**

Sometimes the victims, fearing retribution or reprisals that could be worse than the actual abuse, even though they know their rights, tend not to report the abuse and, more generally, tend not to ask for help. By this time they have sunk into a strange reality that legitimizes their status, and are “accustomed” to living in a situation of unjust suffering and submission, and rather than risk making the situation worse, they prefer to continue living a life of pain but that at least is “secure” in that they know what will happen tomorrow.

Becoming a victim is not a reality that we normally have to face (we are more likely to say: «it will never happen to me»); before it happens, victimization is considered to be only a vague possibility.

Victimization is a “dynamic” experience, that evolves in a particular way; it’s not an instantaneous experience, even when it is, unfortunately, it is no longer a vague possibility but a living reality.

In order to begin a “liberation” movement from a given type of victimization (whatever it may be) it is necessary, first to create adequate situations (financial and social) in order to be able to implement and sustain a certain type of project;

- **the ratification**

The ratification, suffice to say, the “formalization” of the status of the victim on the part of the relevant institutions, is a necessary prerequisite before the victim may benefit from the help and the facilities provided for by law and which are reserved for those who meet the criteria (Monzani, 2011);

- **assistance (aid)**

If the victim does not report the situation, and/or if people around her do not recognize her status as victim, the victimization and the blame could multiply and thus increase the negative effects.

Often the first help rendered on the part of significant figures re-establishes in the victims a sense of trust in society and neighbours and this helps them to take that indispensable step in overcoming the situation; that is, reporting it to the authorities (Saponaro, 2004).

If one fails to overcome the acute phase of victimization, one risks having to live life, or a good part thereof, with difficulties that may

powerfully limit the persons self-realization. Or more simply, that might impede the woman from living a “normal” life; in the world, to quote the ‘World Health Organization’, that could provoke a significant worsening in the quality of life (1948).

Awareness of victimization and victims in denial

Some victims deny their situation. Denying does not mean they do not realize what is happening, nor that they do not have the cognitive tools and/or the culture to understand the situation which they are in; denial means not wanting to accept what they know, and it also means “blocking out awareness”.

When one denies their actual situation of victimization, as has already been noted, one also denies the chance of asking for, and obtaining, the necessary help to get out of the situation (Monzani, 2011).

The victim in denial is in possession of all her faculties, aside from those of a cultural and social character, to enable her to understand her situation, but “she prefers” (subconsciously) to deny everything to herself, as well as to others. If she is witness to the same behaviour against other people, she recognizes it as victimization, but she denies it when the behaviour involves her. And the reasons that she is in denial should be seen, fundamentally, in the pain that she suffers as she “becomes aware” of what is happening to her; pain tied, for example, to witnessing specific sentimental links considered indispensable, crumble; to the necessity of accepting that the person she trusted until a few moments before, is in fact her predator; to the pain of having to start life anew and with all the consequential problems (psychological, economical, social, care of children etc.).

A victim can deny abuse in two ways:

- denying the *fact*;
- denying the *significance* of the fact.

According to the psycho-analytical theory, an impulse is sufficiently unacceptable because it is activated by a defence mechanism, when, according to the subconscious judgement of an individual, its expression could result in punishment or revenge on the part of the abuser, or of the internal judge, that is the moral conscience.

The evaluation of the potential consequences of an impulse reaction does not involve a conscious and intentional process. It is, on the contrary, spontaneous, automatic, and it takes place beyond awareness.

Among the more important defence mechanisms studied of 'victims in denial' are *dismissal* and *denial*.

By dismissal we mean a defence mechanism that blocks from the conscience an unbearable internal impulse, and the thoughts, imagination, emotions, and memory associated with it.

When the removal is successful, the impulses removed are completely excluded from the conscience, no sense of conflict is present, neither are any symptoms manifested (White & Gilliland, 1977).

On the other hand, denial, means the automatic and involuntary exclusion from awareness of a certain disturbing aspect of reality, or the inability to recognize its true *significance* (White & Gilliland, 1977).

The question, however, is far more complex than is proposed here.

The concealing victim

The concealing victim, as opposed to the victim in denial, denies to others what she has endured but she does not deny it to herself.

In other words, she is aware of having been abused, but she doesn't admit it to others; rather, she denies it to others, thus precluding the possibility of appealing for help.

The reasons why an individual may knowingly decide not to reveal to third parties her situation, are by nature more "concrete" when compared with the reasons given by the victim in denial; usually one deals with more pragmatic reasons, with an objective which is easy and clear to read, without having to resort to psychopathological or psychoanalytical interpretations.

The reasons that could drive an individual to knowingly deny (read: Concealed) abuse may be numerous:

- fear of retaliation on the part of the perpetrator or someone acting on his behalf; one thinks of all the cases in which, for example, victims of stalking do not report the abuse because of fear of a possible reaction on the part of the stalker; one thinks, again, of all those cases of domestic violence in which one partner decides to give a different version of events (maybe whilst visiting the A & E department) to explain the nature of specific physical injuries;

- reports of previous abuse; such reports may be based on the failure on the part of the victim to report the abuse; from the statistical point of view, in fact, the majority of abuse cases reported are those perpetrated by strangers rather than abuse perpetrated by people that the individual knows; and the stronger and more intimate the relationship , the more difficult it is for the victim to admit their own situation (Monzani, 2011 b);
- financial and logistical problems: not knowing where to go and stay, how to survive financially when one decides to admit finally that one's partner uses violence;
- the fear of repercussions in the relationship with the children (e.g. custody after separation).

The consequences of concealment

The choice on the part of the victim to knowingly fail to report the abuse may have very important repercussions, above all tied to the impossibility of escape once and for all from the situation of victimization. In fact, even though at times the confirmation of abuse brings with it worse circumstances for the victim (consequences tied, for example, to retaliation on the part of the perpetrator, or someone acting for him), more often than not, however, it is the reporting of the abuse itself that represents a turning point, not only legally but also for the victim. Often, the conviction of the perpetrator breaks the ties between him and the victim, breaks the so-called 'criminal torque', and allows the victim to re-acquire her dignity and freedom (Monzani, 2010).

Above all, with regard to certain kinds of abuse, (particularly sexual abuse and general abuse committed within the domestic environment), the testimony of the victim appears to be particularly important and decisive in demonstrating the guilt of the perpetrator. It is precisely because, especially in abuse cases of this nature, the victim is often the only witness to the abuse, her testimony would be a decisive factor (Gulotta, 1976).

Lack of confirmation of the abuse on the part of the victim could result in an unjust acquittal of the accused, with notable new risks and repercussions for the victim and for society in general (one thinks again of offences of a sexual nature in which the reoccurrence rates are the highest).

The pathway to awareness

In order to ask for the help that victims need, it is fundamental, as has been seen, that they be aware of their status, and the awareness, very often, requires a gradual process of realisation. A path at the end of which a victim will be able to turn to the responsible institutions to ask for the necessary help.

Experience, nevertheless, teaches us that these two situations may also be inverted temporally; its worth mentioning that, sometimes, a visit to a center (e.g. Anti-Violence Centres) perhaps only for a first, confused and timid approach, may help the individual to clearly understand the situation and finally convince her to go through with her actions.

The pathway to help

The behaviour of the victim is influenced by the society in which she lives, but social behaviour is also influenced by the behaviour of the victim; by that we mean that society, as organized and structured today, does not go looking to help victims, but the victims themselves must call attention to the problems that society cannot handle of its own initiative. For this too, current society has a lot to answer for with regard to victims (Ponti, 1995).

There are organizations that attempt to fill these gaps (e.g. women's movements) and that have the job of helping victims understand their situation and report the abuse; in addition to supporting them physically, psychologically and financially. This can lead towards notable social and cultural change. Today, for example, reporting sexual abuse is no longer a matter of shame for the victim (at least, not to the extent that it was at one time), and this is thanks to these associations that have contributed to the understanding of specific problems, and to demolishing certain social and cultural stereotypes which were very common up until a short while ago.

In addition, this may stimulate important legislative reforms in order to adapt the legal framework to the changing common conscience (one needs

to think only of the recent reforms regarding sexual assault, or of the laws regarding so-called stalking).

The objective of the pathway to help is to restore the status quo ante, that is, to permit the individual to return to the life she had prior to the abuse.

There are various possible options, depending on the character of the victim, the type of abuse experienced, the kind of relationship she had with the abuser and, not to be underestimated, the type of service that society is able to offer in that particular historic, cultural and financial moment.

There is need to restore the world shattered by the victimisation; a need to put an end to the isolation of the victim and to establish positive contact with her so as to help her to overcome the trauma; all of which, generally, is “easier” to accomplish in big cities than in small provincial towns and villages, because in the former, there is a greater guarantee of anonymity and it is easier to find the specialised centres.

In recent years victims are becoming progressively better organised and have drawn the attention of society, engendered public opinion, and have involved institutions. This has achieved great results.

Now it is necessary to consolidate the above mentioned results, whilst guaranteeing to provide help to the victim by ensuring the presence of a local/national support network (public, private and/or private/social), that will help them and guiding them to the appropriate services, adequately financed and staffed by specialised personnel. This must be done otherwise a false expectation is created in the victim (who will wait in vain for the requested help) that will go disregarded, provoking further suffering and disillusionment: the so-called third victimisation (Monzani, 2011).

In order to implement these networks of solidarity and support for the victims of abuse, it is necessary to have an adequate allocation of funds from the government (maybe using part of the assets taken from the convicted perpetrators of the abuse), otherwise the law, even though excellent, risks becoming meaningless, nothing more than a declaration of intent. If that happens, future victims will tend to go back to not reporting the abuse, thus provoking a cycle of regrettable and painful re-victimisation, not to mention an undesirable return to the past.

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