

## **IN THE NAME OF VIRTUE**

**Thoughts about the polarizing effect of violence:  
Its impact on therapists and organisations**

**Steven Bélanger**  
Psychologist  
Clinical Coordinator

**PRO-GAM Inc.**  
1453 Beaubien E., #205, Montreal (Quebec) H2G 3C6

### **Ending violence in relationships:**

**A conference on research, practice, and theory  
addressing the issue of violence and abuse in  
intimate relationships**

**Vancouver, British-Columbia  
November 5 & 6, 2004**

## **Introduction**

I would like to bring forth in this article an indissociable aspect of violence, in particular of spousal violence or abuse, its moral dimension. Because no one can remain "neutral" when confronted with violence. Violence has a polarizing effect on individuals, an effect that is more or less notable according to the individual.

More precisely, violence induces opposite and sometimes extreme moral positions. We have a tendency to operate a cleavage of reality when facing the anxiety and discomfort generated by violence, to divide reality into antagonistic and mutually exclusive categories, into "all good" vs. "all bad", "the one who is right" vs. "the one who is wrong", "victim" vs. "aggressor", compassion vs. punishment, "woman" vs. "man", "danger" vs. "security."

This polarizing effect of violence may influence the different interveners who deal with this problem. It may also influence the choice of strategies aimed at countering the problem. In a time of greater global political instability, where a certain obsession with violence and consequently a certain obsession about security could lead us to take disproportionate measures to insure our protection.

In our work to assist men in ending their violent behaviors, it appears important for me to consider the ways we counter spousal abuse as well as to prevent recidivism against the victims.

My goal is to draw attention to the possible traps peculiar to individual and collective motivations aimed at imperatively endowing ourselves with a "zero-risk society", with a society shedding any violence, with a world that is completely secure.

In my opinion, such an inclination presents the risk of leading us away from an objective and realistic reading of the problem, of making us choose means ill-adapted to the needs of individuals and the community.

Having a moral position is not the problem, since we inevitably have one. What appears important to me is to question our own moral position, and what this could lead us to do in the name of Virtue.

## **Some observations**

Ever since I began in this field, I was struck by the fervour and devotion with which the actors of all sectors approached this problem. Feminist militants had denounced this social scourge and made conjugal violence their "battle horse" for the fight for women's equality. They put pressure on the government who put pressure on the judicial system. The resources for violent men, for their part, were made the object of pressures from women's groups and the judicial system in general.

Everyone had to work in the same way, with the same ideology, the same theory. An indisputable dogma was set and has since served as a reference to the discourse and the practice in spousal abuse. A "decree" was dispatched to all interveners to denounce, condemn, eliminate spousal abuse. The slogan "zero tolerance" brought together all partisans of non-violence and inspired all intervention fields, from the school yard to the municipal Court. Henceforth, any expression of aggressiveness had to be sanctioned.

The 1995 Quebec government policy (1) ruled that spousal abuse is criminal. From a strictly legal point of view, unless it concerned criminal harassment or death threats, psychological, verbal and economic violence, which are an integral part of spouse abuse, cannot be considered criminal from a legal point of view. Rather, it has automatically acquired criminal status because violence has been declared morally unacceptable.

Thus, the judicial system was mobilized in its role as representative of authority to stop and punish aggressors. Moreover, the idea of criminalization and judicial administration of spousal abuse had any opponents. On the other hand, the idea of establishing aid services for men with spousal abuse problems met strong opposition. This may illustrate quite clearly the moral, social and institutional polarization which states that violent men deserve more to be punished than to be assisted.

Research did not escape this polarizing effect surrounding violence. Scientific objectivity appeared to me at times to be a priori tainted by generally incontestable beliefs and set up as irrefutable scientific facts. It was ordered, for example, that there was only one cause of spousal abuse and that any other explicative element was decreed as an associated factor, without having been demonstrated beforehand by any research. This gave birth to theoretical contexts whose foundations were not quite sound and which were based in part on ideological considerations.

With respect to the organizations and interveners working with men, ever since their inception, they walled themselves within these same principles of intervention, which, from a moral point of view, were unassailable, but whose clinical application was certainly questionable. Over the years, during my activities in training, supervision and clinical intervention, I very often witnessed the difficulty counselors experienced in trying to maintain their therapist role without assuming the functions of representative of the law or of moral guardian.

We thus witnessed a massive mobilization of an arsenal aimed at counterbalancing spousal abuse; a problem located from the start at the opposite end of the moral continuum where we find individuals who use violence by legitimizing it at the time of enactment. Those located at either end of the continuum believe their cause is just and that the means they use are legitimate.

### **The polarizing effect of violence**

An awareness campaign launched in the Quebec media circulated the message that “Violence hurts!”. Here is exactly the heart of the problem. Even though every human being has made others suffer, no one wants to suffer. Fundamentally, violence produces fear, fear of being hurt, fear of suffering.

We cannot be impassive and insensitive in face of violence. Anything that represents a threat, real or potential, to our physical or psychological integrity, necessarily calls for protective strategies that vary according to the situations and the means at our disposal.

From the point of view of the victim, potential or real, any means, including violence, are legitimate when the goal is to counter fear and pain, to combat evil. We praise the merits of those who have the force or courage to defend themselves. We are overtaken by indignation when faced with suffering victims and by the imperious desire to compensate the harm that was caused to them.

Things become more complex on the moral plane when we observe the same reality from the point of view of the aggressor. The latter often justifies his acts from the same rationale as the eventual

victim, who is perceived, justifiably or not, as a threat to his person, to his psychological, narcissistic and sometimes physical integrity. Thus, he also perceives himself as a victim, potential or real, whom he has to protect.

Who is right? Who is wrong? From a moral standpoint, we can easily answer that it is the one who acts in the name of Virtue who is right. Therefore, no matter what the position is, we always have the impression of legitimacy when acting in the name of Virtue and of Justice.

The phenomenon becomes even more complex when we consider the situation from the perspective of the observer, who is viscerally and morally prompted to take position in favour of one or the other of the parties. I say viscerally because our moral position is influenced by our personal and emotional experiences in relation to violence. These experiences have shaped the way in which we come to terms with violence, whether it originates from within or from outside our Self.

It is sometimes difficult to admit, however, that in each of us coexists, at the same time, an aggressor and a victim which are inevitably solicited by the situations that we encounter or are described to us, and which prompt us to take a stand. As in theatre or cinema, where we identify more with certain characters than with others, we cannot avoid our tendency to identify with the aggressor and with the victim; to imagine ourselves in one place or the other, in variable positions according to the personal experience of every individual.

A problem arises when our personal experiences impede us from taking the necessary psychological distance to avoid lapsing into massive identifications that lead us to support extreme moral positions. The legitimate desire to take care of our own suffering may lead us to illegitimately do so at the expense of others by prescribing inappropriate solutions to their needs.

It seems, in fact, that we need to see the bad outside ourselves, and the thought that we ourselves could be bad is intolerable. By a mechanism of projection and denial, we manage to free ourselves from too great a feeling of guilt resulting from an « aggression of the bad self » by a merciless moral authority. Once projected on others, we can legitimately combat it and simultaneously be confirmed in our own goodness and our moral superiority.

The suffering of the victim awakens compassion and the desire to take care of him/her. Such altruism attracts recognition and gratitude, in addition to reassuring us of our own value. By proxy, our impulses for solicitude also have the goal of taking care of our own suffering and to draw relief and consolation from this solicitude.

At both ends of the moral spectrum, the good and bad, we find advocates of the saying "the end justifies the means". In both camps, very categorical and intransigent positions can be adopted.

### **The risks inherent to polarized moral positions**

Our moral positions, as institutions and interveners involved in the problem of spousal abuse, may make it such that we may compromise reaching our objectives from the very outset. Worse yet, we may, through our views and attitudes, generate the opposite of what we are aiming for. Paradoxically, we may end up doing a lot of harm in the name of Virtue. Though virtuous at the outset, our good intentions may not always be judicious when translated without nuance into concrete actions, when they are not freed from our personal need to do justice.

By limiting ourselves to theories <sup>(2)</sup> which only take into account part of the factors that explain the phenomenon, and by generalizing them, we cannot structure services that are adapted to particular situations and needs of individuals. Common sense teaches, and research is increasingly confirming this, that reality, relationships and life are more complex than we would like to believe.

Awareness and prevention programs which convey an ideology dividing reality into two clearly opposing parts, namely "totally bad male aggressors who deserve to be punished" and "totally good and powerless female victims who deserve compassion", miss an important part of the reality of individuals, who would not recognize themselves in what is presented to them, because the vast majority position themselves somewhere between those two extremes.

Also, the more moralizing the discourse becomes, the more it prompts those who feel singled out to hide and feel ashamed and apprehensive, rather than to confide in people they feel close to or to ask for help. For this reason, in some cases, the decision to consult a specialized service would only be made belatedly, in a context of legal constraint, after the situation has seriously degenerated.

The more ostracizing the position becomes, the greater the risk that spousal abuse services for men become negatively perceived by the potential clientele. "Labeled" men are more reluctant to consult, out of fear of being judged and condemned by the counselor. They associate these services even more directly to judicial authority. In the end, it becomes difficult to establish a working alliance with some of these men, and this contributes greatly to reducing the possibilities for change.

The polarizing effect of violence is also felt in the application of a praiseworthy moral position similar to that conveyed by the slogan "Zero tolerance". Born out of good intentions and very noble ambitions, such a position could bring about a radical intolerance against any expression of aggressiveness or anger, possibly going as far as justifying the recourse to means as drastic and damaging as those we want to eliminate.

There cannot be a morality of emotions and feelings, for we cannot attach a value judgment to a natural psycho-physiological phenomenon governed by the central nervous system, which is not controlled by our free will. To classify any expression of aggression or anger as "violence", thus making it the object of severe social disapproval, is contrary to nature. Given their primordial role in the development and expression of identity, too great a repression of aggressive affects can be likened to a denial of the being and to a violation of the right to existence, and to freedom and dignity. The history of humanity is filled with great movements, sometimes very deadly revolts, generated by authoritarian repressive regimes.

We often hear the expression "we cannot take a chance", said in a coercive tone, when talking about the security of individuals. This laudable principle may sometimes legitimize means which may cause considerable harm and damage if applied without discernment. For example, through an excess of zealotry, we may violate fundamental principles of our system of law, such as the presumption of innocence and the respect for the right to privacy, and have someone arrested uselessly and wrongly. The "just in case" rule can generate situations of great injustice that nurture mistrust and legitimate revolt rather than encourage further moral reflections on violence.

In order to maximize the security of individuals, we endeavour to equip ourselves with a system that has no imperfections. We thus insist on the importance of a partnership, of a direct collaboration between the different players to tighten the links in the net and prevent any slippage

that could lead to spousal and family tragedies. Although very meritorious, this attitude has its share of perverse effects. An example of this is the triangulation of services for men by the judicial system.

Indeed, the Court's systematic referral of batterers to aid services prompts individuals to use the services strictly for legal ends. Even if it is generally possible, from a clinical point of view, to deal with this reality, we frequently trip on the impossibility of forming a therapeutic alliance.

The more we focus on exerting social control over the client-therapist relationship, the more the assistance function is weakened, and the more the possibilities of change, second offense prevention and individual security decrease. Too close an association between the judicial and the clinical fields creates a climate of mistrust, which nurtures in individuals a reluctance to consult and reduces the continuation rates in help programs.

Slogans such as « Violence is unacceptable » and « Nothing justifies violence » are proclaimed as absolute and morally incontestable truths. They, nevertheless, bring about their fair share of contradictions. In reality, violence can be acceptable, and may even be sometimes necessary, if its goal is to protect oneself and others. In the criminal code, it is called "self-defence", and is defined as the use of the force necessary to protect one's physical integrity or to help someone in danger (the principle of the "Good Samaritan"). In this case, it constitutes an obligation under the law.

It is therefore morally accepted that women become violent in countering the violence of their partners. Thus, in this case, we would be talking of "reactionary defensive violence". Also, the « battered woman syndrome » has already been evoked in Court to acquit a woman who had killed her violent partner.

In the name of justice also, violence becomes morally acceptable. By means of punishment, we inflict suffering in order to repair a mistake and dissuade one from making others suffer. In this case, it has to do with a kind of institutional or structural violence; « the violence of the good », which we honorably call Justice, because it attacks injustice, « the violence of evil ».

Even if we agree that punishment can produce dissuasive effects and re-establish a certain justice vis-à-vis the victim and society, the numerous cases of recidivism demonstrate that punishment does not always achieve its goals. The subjects, whether right or wrong, rarely have the impression of being treated fairly. The more punishment hurts, the more disproportionate and unjust it appears, and the less it discourages one to do harm. Our clients often come back from their experience in the judicial system with a profound feeling of injustice and revolt, which makes it difficult and even impossible to question the fault they committed.

Beyond influencing the organizational culture of services for men with spousal abuse problems, the polarizing effects of violence also have a direct impact on therapists. Besides the ideological and institutional pressures, therapists have to deal with their own difficulties and their own personal vulnerability zones. As a front-row spectator, the therapist cannot escape the phenomenon of the identification to the aggressor and to the victim, any more than the adoption of polarized moral positions which create as many therapeutic impasses.

With respect to our official mandate of making aggressors accountable, as outlined in government policy, our moral positions lead us to balance between two contradictory tendencies, « over-responsibility » or « de-responsibility » placed on the aggressor, or to confine ourselves in one position or the other.

Historically, in my opinion, organizations and counselors who intervene with men who perpetrate

spousal abuse are located in the over-responsibility section of the spectrum. Counter-transferences of a theoretical, ideological and institutional nature has oriented intervention towards re-educative approaches. Identifying themselves more with the victim and starting off with a negative impression of the violent man, therapists have often focused more on confrontation, therefore forcing these men to reveal their violence, admit their mistakes and confess their responsibility.

In this perspective, which has acquired more nuances over the years, any attempt by the client to explain facts and situation that do not fit with the therapist's theory is perceived by the latter as a justification, a minimization or a denial of the problem. Claiming to know more about the client than the client himself, about his problem and the solutions that ought to be brought about, too often, therapists have a tendency to persuade him that he is at fault and of the so-called real causes of his violence.

Yet, in this type of dynamics, attempts by the client to oppose the views of the therapist are unavoidable and often at the core of sterile and failed therapeutic interactions. This is so not only because the client is expressing resistance, but above all because the therapist persists in trying to persuade the client that he is at fault.

Theories that are too restrictive cannot stand the test of reality. They are often shaken by the complexity of situations recounted or experienced by these men. Shaken in their convictions and forced to open themselves up to other possibilities, therapists run the risk of finding themselves confused and divided in their need to separate good from evil (the one who is right from the one who is at fault, the innocent from the guilty, and so on).

A study conducted by the CRI-VIFF (1997) about the ethical dimensions associated to the work with male batterers demonstrated that counselors often found themselves faced with the dilemmas of attributing responsibility and loyalty. Therapists asked themselves who they should believe: their client? the client's partner? the judge? the police? their theory?

Cornered in the latter moral dilemmas, therapists end up doubting the client's responsibility regarding his violence. Won over by the impression that the client's violence was legitimate, and being sympathetic to his suffering, therapists run the risk of moving from one end of the moral spectrum to the other and to lay part of the blame for the man's violence on his partner.

By wanting to relieve the other's suffering and at the same time taking care of his own suffering, the therapist can comfort the client in his position as a victim and absolve him of his violence. Moving from the therapeutic lever of the "reproaching finger" to that the "comforting bosom" constitutes another impasse for therapy.

## **Conclusion**

Beyond political and social considerations, one must take into account that violence has a polarizing effect on therapists. We too prefer to perceive the bad outside of ourselves and believe that we are different from our clients; that the therapist is good and that the client is bad. Consequently, we can easily and subtly claim to be morally superior, and present ourselves to them as being pure and irreproachable on the moral plane, exempt from all aggressiveness and malice.

Relegated to an inferior echelon on the moral hierarchy, the violent individual runs the risk of feeling that he is treated from on high, judged, blamed, scorned, denied, and refused the support, understanding and respect which are indispensable to change.

From this angle, moralization, as a discourse or a moralizing attitude, decisively appears as a form of legitimized violence that is accepted clinically and socially, under the pretense that we turn to it in the name of good. If such was the case, would we not be in the process of reproducing a relationship system that is similar to the one we want to eliminate? By responding to violence with violence? With a more sophisticated structural violence?

The inevitable counter-transferences induced by violence makes it very difficult to always maintain a therapeutically neutral position. Our role as therapist entails a duty of constantly dealing with our emotional responses, to accept the discomfort brought on by moral and ethical dilemmas encountered in practice, to lean towards a certain flexibility, which allows us to balance between opposing positions rather than rooting ourselves rigidly in positions which appear to be more comfortable, as often do the men who consult us for help. Through our attitude as therapists, we suggest to the men who consult us a different way of relating, different than the one they too often have known in their lives.

This so-called « therapeutic neutrality » is in itself not always desirable and can, indeed, be morally unacceptable according to certain more dogmatic points of view. What is politically correct may not be compatible with what is clinically correct. This in turn raises the interesting question of "Neutrality vs. Advocacy" raised by Goldner in 1992.

In our view, the neutral position sought by the therapist does not infringe on the security of individuals. On the contrary, by giving ourselves the necessary conditions to promote a changing process, and specifically by establishing a relationship of trust and respect with the client, we increase the possibilities of preventing second offenses and, consequently, the security of individuals.

## **Bibliography**

Goldner, V. (1992). Making room for both/and. The Family Therapy Network, March/April 1992.

Government of Quebec. (1995). Politique d'intervention en matière de violence conjugale. Prévenir, dépister, contrer la violence conjugale. [Intervention policy concerning spousal abuse. Preventing, detecting, countering spousal abuse.]

Rondeau, G., Lindsay, J., Beaudoin, G., Brodeur, N. (1997). Les dimensions éthiques associées à l'intervention auprès des conjoints violents. Collection Études et Analyses, n° 5, Montréal : CRI-VIFF. [Ethical dimensions associated with counseling violent spouses.]