Abstract of the Doctoral Thesis

THE ATTITUDE OF THE AGGRESSORS TOWARDS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN SOCIETY

Scientific supervisor:
Prof. dr. Petru Iluț

PhD-Candidate:

Lupșe (căs. Zglobiu) Cecilia

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Key words: ecological approach; violence circle in family and school context; violence factors; social learning; methodological mix; traditional vs. modern model in domestic space; psychological-social profiles of victims and aggressors; community and institutions role; strategies against violence.
The social relevance of the topic of domestic violence and child abuse

From the end of the XXth century the topic of domestic violence and child abuse has turned into a more and more complex scientific endeavor both within sciences like sociology, psychology, social psychology and applied areas of social work, social policy and intervention (Humphreys and Absler, 2011; Kriszan and Popa, 2010; Popescu, 2009; Roth, 2005; Rivett and Kelly, 2006). However the phenomenon existed in our country as well, well before 1989, the attention towards the topic began to rise after 1990. Together with the transition to democracy, the accent on women’s and children’s rights, intra-familial aggression and domestic abuse turned to be public issues within the Romanian society.

The general theoretical and conceptual framework and the statistical data

The First Chapter of the thesis deals with multiple theories in connection with violence, beginning with biological theories, then classical psychological theories (e.g. psychoanalysis) followed by modern psychological theories (frustration-aggression and social cognition) and ending with comprehensive theories which combine more factors centered around psychosocial variables. In this part I presented a more recent, cognitive-ecological approach which tries to explain the interrelation between cognition and attitudes on the one hand and the nearest social environment, on the other hand, the latter having the role of aggression intensifier of diminish.

The Second Chapter comprises the analysis regarding the specificity of domestic violence, and underlines especially the structural patterns of the modern family compared to the traditional one, respectively some psychosocial anomies existing in the modern family. Within this chapter I developed a quite extensive analysis in relation with those risk factors, on the one hand, and those protective factors, on the other hand, which are involved in the structuring of the intrafamilial violence.

In the Third Chapter I’ve described different forms of domestic abuse towards the children, beginning from physical violence and neglect which negatively influence children’s biological and psychological development. I made a reference to the Romanian case, and presented several statistical data, some of them especially concerning the case of Maramures county, the territorial framework of my empirical research, but also a detailed comparison between Maramures and Vrancea county, respectively commented a number of previous Romanian and international studies in relation with the studied phenomena.
The Fourth Chapter deals with the relationship between violence and the domestic space, respectively the educational context. Here, I made an analysis regarding the sources of the violence inside the school environment, for instance the abusive and aggressive implication of parents in their children’s school activities, in the form of aggression towards their children’s colleagues or teachers. Of course, in this part of the thesis I’ve discusses also about the violence existing among pupils, the violence of teachers towards pupils and vice versa.

In the Fifth Chapter there are presented the psychosocial characteristics of the aggressors and victims, through which we are able to develop some specific profile, in accordance with the international literature.

Objectives and methodology

As far as I work within the framework of the Baia Mare General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection, I had the opportunity to develop a systematic research, from inside, in connection with domestic violence and child abuse. This research had the following major objectives:

- To circumscribe the most important social representations, attitudes and judgements towards victims, aggressors and non-aggressors, in connection with a) the nature and forms of the intra-familial violence (verbal, physical, psychological, social and economical); b) the intensity of these different forms of abuse; c) the most important reasons of such abuse; d) the role of tradition and community level factors in generating or diminishing the phenomenon; e) differences between men and women in this regard.

- With the help of factorial analysis I tried to identify the most representative profiles of aggressors as function of several psychosocial characteristics.

- To circumscribe the relationship between intrafamilial education and punishment in the case of children.

- What are the intersections between domestic abuse of children and violence within the school environment.

- Which are the perspectives of those five institutions which are involved into the problems of domestic violence and child abuse, i.e. The Baia Mare Directorate General of Social Assistance and Child Protection; the County’s Hospital of
Emergency and Legal Medicine, the police, the court of justice and the Center for Violence Prevention and Fight Against Violence – Artemis.

- Based on the research findings, on international literature and also on my position as an insider, I tried to circumscribe an integrative action plan in order to optimize the prevention of and fight against domestic violence.

In order to fulfill the above mentioned objectives and in order to offer answers on the research questions, a relied on the following methodology:

1. I’ve applied a standardized questionnaire on a sample of 154 subjects (victims, aggressors and non-aggressors); 52 high-school students as well as a questionnaire among 52 high-school teachers. All these respondents are from Baia Mare, and samples were not probabilistic, but were based on the logic of the theoretical sampling (Chelcea, 2006) and on that of contrasting samples (Radu, 1994; Rotariu and Ilut, 2006; Ilut, 1997).

2. I’ve registered open and deep interviews with representatives of the above mentioned five institutions involved in the considered phenomenon.

3. I’ve relied also on my personal observations and fieldwork notes which I obtained during my nearly two decades of working activity within the Baia Mare Directorate General of Social Assistance and Child Protection.

Results and interpretations of the empirical work

The results of the empirical research are comprised within the Sixth, Seventh and Eight Chapter of the thesis.

The Sixth Chapter – Representations, social judgments and attitudes towards domestic violence. Statistical Analyses – comprises the major conclusion in relation with gender roles and domestic life (e.g. who is the leader of the household), and the mix between traditional and modern household arrangements. In the studied context, it was observable, that in spite of female’s emancipation there continue to exist traditional roles as well, especially in terms of females’ submission and elements of patriarchy.

Regarding the violence towards children inside the family, a general conclusion is that in this case we can find also a strong mix between traditional and modern: on the level of the whole sample, 85% of the respondents are considering that beating does not constitute and adequate method of disciplining children, however the percent of those respondents who consider this method as adequate is quite high (e.g. 30% in the case of male aggressors).
Of course, we should not forget about the role of social desirability when answering questions like this. I succeeded to reveal some kind of openness in terms of a democratic attitude towards children’s rights. Regarding those factors which are involved in children’s exposure towards domestic violence, the first two are represented by material and financial difficulties, followed by parents’ low level of education.

Regarding the linkage between community, tradition and religiosity, I succeeded to reveal three conclusions:

a) The majority of the respondents (80%) declared that in their community (their flat, street or neighborhood) there exist different forms of violence.

b) There is a reproduction of those behaviors which consider the intra-familial behavior of parents towards children, in the sense that traditional, patriarchal roles are still persistent (Vlasceanu, 2010).

c) Regarding religiosity, there occur no important differences between the three subsamples, in the sense that aggressors appear as equally religious as victims and non-aggressors.

In the case of each three subsamples (of course, in a lesser degree in the case of non-aggressors), physical violence is disapproved, while verbal abuse is considered acceptable. It is interesting that the aggression of parents from the part of children is not labeled as a serious attack (Morrison, 2004).

The investigation of the relationship between domestic and school-based violence, has revealed also some conclusions: one of these is that the more negative children’s attitude towards the school is, the more intense the violence of from the parents towards their children is. Another conclusion is that the less parents are interesting in their children’s educational evolution, the greater is their violence towards these children.

In the Seventh Chapter - Profiles of the Aggressors, Victims and Non-aggressors. A multi-criteria Analysis - I developed a factorial analysis, resulting in five factors which explain appreciatively three quarters of the variance of the 17 items measuring domestic violence. The analysis of the profiles revealed, among others, the following: a) As expectable, the intensity of the effective and declared violence is much higher in the case of victims, with a value of 40 on a scale from 0 (no violence) to 100 (maximal violence). b) Aggressors and non-aggressors show a quite similar intensity of the suffered violence (23 on a 0-100 scale). This is quite interesting, as far as we could also see from our analysis that aggressors declared that they have been aggressed as well. It is also important to mention, that the
content of violence is different among the three groups. In the case of the non-aggressors, the most frequent violence is “isolation”.

The most dominant profile in the case of the victims is characterized by two important patterns: financial problems and alcoholism (Figure 1).

In the case of the aggressors, the most frequent profile is characterized by male gender, alcohol consumption and jealousy (Figure 2).

In the case of the non-aggressors, it is more difficult to reveal a dominant profile, since they are a more diffuse group, however we could reveal here as well the lack of financial resources.

The data of the qualitative research (Chapter Seventh – The consensus of the specialists. Qualitative investigation) based on interviews and discussions with specialists
from the part of the institutions involved in the studied phenomena, as well as on my personal field-work observations, reveal the following more important conclusions:

- Victims, who are in the majority of cases, women, contact institutions not so for an ultimate solution, but because they hope that institutions can temperate the aggressor, so that he is going to be less aggressive in the future.
- Victims contact institutions only in cases of physical abuse, but even in such cases they are reluctant toward written declarations.
- Some of the women, in spite of the fact that initiate divorce, after all give up this choice, since they do not want their children to grow up without their natural father.
- The key-informators accentuate that in order to handle the phenomenon in a more effective manner, we need a better collaboration between those institutions which are involved in the case of domestic violence (cf. Hestler, 2011).
- In the final part of the thesis I presented a more detailed way of integrating the efforts of the state, social policy and NGOs in order to help diminishing the phenomenon of domestic violence.

The last chapter (Chapter Eight – Conclusions and openings) represents a synthesis on the most important findings and interpretations of the research. In this part, based on the result of the empirical research and the conclusions of the scientific literature I tried to integrate my research within the framework of this flow of works and tried to outline some further openings, for instance the importance of violence prevention through differentiate strategies targeting several specific groups. In this sense, I outlined the content of “primary prevention” concerning large groups (e.g. countries, counties, cities) and “secondary prevention” directed towards smaller communities with specific aims and socio-demographical patterns.

Finally, I have to mention some limits of the investigation as well: 1) the lack of a large, probabilistic sample; 2) the appreciative patterns (due to the small number of subjects) of the developed profiles; 3) the less strong linkage between the theoretical and empirical part. These shortcomings are going to be improved in further works I intend to publish based on the major conclusions of my thesis.


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