

The meaning of violence or the meaningless violence – adolescents' view on the media

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ABSTRACT

The present article is based on a qualitative study that aims to investigate the meanings attributed by adolescents to the violence in the media, especially on television, and the ways in which this group interacts with this media and appropriates its messages. The goal is to understand how the phenomenon of violence, mediated by television, is interpreted, incorporated or disapproved by adolescents in their everyday lives. Four focus groups with students from the seventh and eighth grades in São Gonçalo were conducted, in two public schools (one state and one municipal) and two private schools (one of middle-class and one of lower-class students), totalizing 33 adolescents. It was concluded that one of the challenges for the field of public health is to improve its performance in the prevention of violence, taking into account the relevance of the media in constructing a discourse on violence. We call attention for the urgent need to understand the dimension and the psychological and cultural impact of violence in the media on Brazilian children and adolescents, once this phenomenon has been creating feeling of fear, anguish, and the seek for security. The

positive aspect of the media as a potential partner in the education and promotion of children and adolescents' health is pointed out. The denaturalization of some notions of violence given by the media, and the construction of spaces in the media for the youngsters to express themselves are some ways for health promotion and violence prevention.

Key words: violence, media, adolescent, health

Introduction

This article has the goal of examining the meanings attributed by adolescents to the media violence, especially on TV, investigating the ways in which this age group interacts with this means and how they appropriate its messages. It basically attempts to investigate how the violence phenomenon, mediated by television, impacts this age group, and how this mediation reconstructs new meanings in the adolescents' everyday lives. We consider, in the scope of this article, adolescents' perceptions about the faces of symbolic violence exerted by television, along Bourdieu's lines (1997). For this author,

Symbolic violence is violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it (Bourdieu, 1997, p.141).

One aspect of the symbolic performance of television, according to Bourdieu (1997), is in the fact of this mean having an information monopoly, determining the relevance of some information over other, and dramatizing some events, vulgarizing and spectacularizing them.

We also consider the adolescents' perceptions on the representations of self-inflicted, interpersonal and collective violence, a typology used in the World Report on Violence and Health (Krug et al., 2002). Self-inflicted violence refers to suicidal behaviors and to acts of self-mutilation.

Interpersonal violence refers to family violence (abuse against children, the elderly, and among couples), and to community violence (juvenile violence, institutional violence, and violent acts such as rape). Collective violence is exerted by people who identify themselves as members of a group against another group or individuals, in order to achieve political, economic, or social goals. This violence is expressed in many ways: armed conflicts, genocides, repression and other violations to the human rights, terrorism, and organized violent crime.

The knowledge about this discourse on violence produced by television can provide elements for the elaboration of measures to prevent violence in the fields of public health, education, communication, and other areas that deal with adolescents.

Studies conducted in North American, European and Asian countries since the decade of 1960 attempt to show the adverse effects (direct and indirect) of television violence, especially on children (Von Felitzen, 1999; Wartella et al., 1999). Regarding the adverse effects, a literature review of over one hundred studies show that children and adolescents' exposure to media violence can: (a) generate anti-social and aggressive behaviors; (b) make the viewer insensitive to violence in real life, and (c) increase the feeling of fear (Strasburger, 1999). Different from this functionalist approach, there are other researches that privilege the cultural context and the processes of message reception; they are particularly influenced by branches of symbolic interactionism, English and Latin-American cultural studies. These theoretical branches consider the receptor as an active subject in the communication process (Mattelart; Mattelart, 2000).

Reflecting upon the problem of violence in the media and the performance of public health in the country, Njaine and Minayo (2004) recognize that the increasing presence of electronic media in children and adolescents' lives should be further investigated, focusing both on the relationship established between this group and this media, and on the active potential of this media in the prevention of violence and promotion of health in this same group.

The communication scholar Vicente Romano García points to some aspects of the interaction with the media:

These means entertainment can serve both to promote an escape from reality, from obligation and responsibility, and to trigger a social encounter, the temporal discharge of asocial tendencies; it can serve as subject of a conversation, to relax, to relieve, to trigger emotions, to stimulate illusions, to offer directions, to confirm everyday knowledge, and so forth. These are all normal processes, often therapeutic ones. With two limitations: 1) that the mediatic messages only perform this function temporarily, in a transitory fashion; and 2) that all excessive mediatic consumption is dangerous and possibly present adverse effects, that is, that the use of these means can also be 'dysfunctional' to the individual. (García , 2002, p.18)

Much of these effects interferes in the individuals' socialization process, and occurs in a subliminal way (Ferrés, 1998). This perspective results in investments in new studies on the media effects, which are often "*latent, implicit in the ways how distortions in messages production reflect themselves in the recipients' cognitive patrimony*" (Wolf, 2001). The information "massacre", according to Levinsky (1998), through images and sounds, can often interfere in a negative way in a child's psychic apparel, letting him/her passive, dependent, irritable, intolerant, and with language problems, especially when an adult is not around. For this author, the violence content in the media does not reflect itself only in the physical action against the body.

(The violence) is in the excessive excitement that reaches the psychic apparel, coming from the external world or from the pulsional life and threatening the individual psychic capacity to select, elaborate, and discriminate. (Levinsky, 1998, p.157)

These interferences also affect the ways in which adolescents live their subjectivity and their identification processes, restructuring their interactional spaces, and producing new meanings for the social reality (Colonnese, 1998; Spink, et al, 2002).

Violence against children and adolescents in Brazil – brief overview

From the public health perspective, considering children and adolescents as the population between 0 and 19 years-old, and the deaths for external causes as the most serious expression of social violence, Souza and Mello Jorge (2004) present an epidemiologic overview of this phenomenon that targets this age group. According to the authors, from every ten children and adolescents who die in the main capitals of the country, seven of them die from violent causes or accidents. In 2000, male children and youngsters represented 84,1% of all deaths, and their female counterpart represented 15,9%. In terms of their profile, these victims are usually from low level of schooling, live in the outskirts of big cities, belong to the most impoverished groups, are black or have black heritage. The main cause of death are transit and transportation accidents (38,8%) and homicides (24,6%), which represent together more than half of the general mortality (63,5%) of children and youngsters. Between the ages of zero and four years-old, domestic accidents are the main responsible for mortality, revealing the hidden face of family violence, expressed in the form of negligence from the parents or from those responsible for children's care. Between the ages of five and nine years-old, transit accidents are the main responsible for children's deaths. However, in adolescence the cruelest side of violence expresses itself in the homicides. Among the potential factors that trigger violence against children and adolescents, Souza and Mello Jorge (2004) points to the use of alcohol and other drugs, and the use of fire guns. These expressions of violence, in real life or in fiction, are presented in the communication means in a decontextualized way, detached from their causes and consequences.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that has its interpretive basis in the methodological referential of in-depth hermeneutics (Thompson, 1995), emphasizing the process of comprehension and interpretation of the symbolic forms of violence, mediated by television and interpreted by adolescents.

In order to approach the adolescents, we adopted the focus group technique, which seeks to contemplate the opinions, values and perceptions of a certain group that shares similar identification features (Krueger, 1994). The aim is to understand the meanings attributed by adolescents to the violence presented in the media. For such, an interview protocol was designed, containing questions related to the habit of watching TV, to their preferred TV shows, to their opinions about the images of youngsters portrayed on TV, to the consumption relationships, to the family mediation, and specific questions about the meanings attributed to the violence featured in the media.

Four focus groups were conducted with students from the seventh and eighth grades in São Gonçalo, Rio de Janeiro. The study was conducted in two public schools (a state one located in a neighborhood where frequent violent events occur, and a municipal one located in a safe neighborhood in the same city), and two private schools (one of middle-class students, and the other a religious school that serves students from a lower economic status). The field work was conducted in April 2003, covering a total of 33 students (17 boys and 16 girls), ages between 12 and 14. Three groups were composed by four boys and four girls, and one group was composed by five boys and four girls. Students in one public school had a delay in relation to the grade they should be taking; they had ages from 15 and 17. The groups were conducted by a researcher and an assistant, and took approximately one hour and a half each.

A pre-test was conducted with students from a private school, ages 12 and 13. The adolescents' participation in the focus group occurred after them signing an informed consent, according to the resolution number 196/96 from the National Council of Health. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee in Research, under the report number 08/03.

The analysis of the qualitative data was conducted after the transcription of the interviews, fluctuant reading, and categorization of the themes.

Results and discussions

In the relationship established between adolescents in São Gonçalo and the television, a fictional show and a news program were pointed as the youngsters' preferred shows. The preference for the soap opera "Malhação" from Rede Globo (the main Brazilian TV station), a production especially targeting the adolescent audience, supports the results of a research conducted with 1.220 youngsters in the city of Rio de Janeiro (Minayo et al., 1999), demonstrating the catalyzing effect of this show on youngsters' lives. In terms of the ways in which risky situations are approached in this program, the students in São Gonçalo support the opinion of students in Rio de Janeiro, who believed that the soap opera treats in a superficial way themes such as drugs and adolescent pregnancy. Another complaint was that many of the fictional situations do not correspond to real life, since the experiences with drugs or adolescent pregnancy are much more complicated and conflicting. Despite the criticism about this soap opera, adolescents claim to like the show because it is entertaining and much of the plots are similar to aspects of their lives.

The non-fictional show, *Jornal Nacional*, also from Rede Globo, was mentioned as the most seen by the youngsters. In the interviewed students' understanding, this news program helps youngsters "to react to some life problems" (seventh grade student/ public school), such as violence and unemployment, and "it is a way to protect ourselves from things" (eighth grade student/ public school). This news program is seen as helping them to prevent risks such as violence and diseases. The featuring of certain problems that constitute risks to life and health are constantly repeated through the use of images and news. The youngsters' opinions indicate how the media can reorganize the recipients' everyday lives and their physical-temporal space, through the circulation of certain concepts, such as riskiness. Spink et al. (2002) attested the growth of a *riskiness language* in the press in the 90s, especially in the economy, sports, and public security sections. The concept

of *risk* is also directly applied to refer to situations of danger to people's life and health. Frequently, this concept is used in the perspective of blaming and holding the individual accountable for his/her health and safety. This way of appropriating the concept of *risk* figures in the interviewees' discourse, and indicates a way of apprehending the meaning of violence, mediated by television and decontextualized from the field of public health. This concept of *risk* is related to the individual's responsibility for his/her feeling of fear and insecurity, not indicating how these risks can be prevented from the perspective of social institutions and public policies.

In terms of the way television interferes in adolescents' daily lives, two relevant aspects can be understood from the discourse of students in São Gonçalo. First, the adolescents perceive the media as constructing distorted images from adolescence, represented in the fictional programs through the supremacy of white boys and girls, who have life styles very different from most of the Brazilian population. In the symbolic sphere, this form of exclusion is almost invisible, if it was not for the ways in which it negatively affects the process of social identity construction of children and adolescents. In relation to the electronic media, the adolescents (particularly those from lower economic status) observe that their image portrayed on television is often associated to delinquent acts. In sum, the adolescents in São Gonçalo perceive that television, when representing violence involving youngsters, makes a radical distinction between the upper and lower economic statuses of the population, when the adolescents are both victims and perpetrators of violence. The students illustrate this perception with a real case of an upper-class young woman from São Paulo, accused of brutally killing her parents. This case was treated by the media, in general, as an act committed by a *psychologically ill* person. Despite the theories that do attribute hideous crimes to serious pathologies, for the adolescents in São Gonçalo if the crime had been committed by a poor youngster, the event would have been attributed, by the media, to the youngster poverty situation. This discrimination face, naturalized by some entertaining and news programs, is perceived by the youngsters in this way:

(...) the youngster who does the right thing and who is featured on television is not the youngster who we see in our daily lives. Sometimes the boy has a dyed hair, is a nice person and the television does not show it. The youngster who is on television is a white boy, wearing polo shirt, with blue eyes (...).

(...) sometimes there is a group having fun, not doing anything wrong, then the police says 'look at the druggies'. Then [the television] says that it is a gangster".

(seventh grade students/public school)

Another form of media interference, verified in the adolescents' discourse, occurs in the social behavior, particularly in the media stimulation to consumption, in the fashion, and in the personal style. Canclini (1999), investigating the relationship between consumption and citizenship, affirms that identities today are defined by the ways to consume, materially or symbolically, in terms of what one has or has the potential to acquire. Half of the students believe that because of the consumption impulse, the media is able to stimulate delinquent behaviors of some adolescents who wish to obtain material goods, most of the times inaccessible to them. The behavior of imitating violent attitudes from the media (more frequently seen among small children exposed to real life violence), was also mentioned by one public school female student as a form of influence from television. This student claimed that her four years-old nephew was watching a violent movie while witnessing the police chasing a man who had tried to hide in his house. The child's reaction was to say that he wanted to be a "gangster" to "kill everyone". The constant exposure to violence in real life and in fiction impacts children and adolescents' lives in a negative way, generating intolerance and other feelings. In these cases, the presence of an adult is fundamental in order to help the youngsters to make sense of live events (Levinsky, 1998). Part of the students do not believe that television has the power to influence adolescents, although they agree that there are some distortions in the ways the media portrays the phenomenon of violence. Programs about police cases, such as *Linha Direta* and the auditory program *Ratinho* cause contradictory reactions in the interviewed adolescents. With discourses that support justice and truth, these programs at times

have a messianic character “*because they help people*” (seventh grade student /public school) and show “*some cases that are real (...) the aggression, the killing*” (eighth grade student/public school), and some other times cause repulse among the youngsters, because of the spectacularization of violence and exploration of human suffering.

The media discourse about the phenomenon of violence produces a diffuse feeling in most adolescents. While they criticize the fictional and the news programs for the banalized way they treat the question of violence, the adolescents try to use this information to create mechanisms to defend against violence. The feelings of fear propagated by the media create destabilizing effects in the ways adolescents organize their daily routines. Some adolescents claim that they panic to watch the repeated images of criminals on television, and avoid certain places associated to the occurrence of violent events. However, they do not reflect upon the most serious forms of family and institutional violence, indicating a lack of knowledge about their rights. We found that in their life context, there is a lack of dialogue, which is fundamental in the school and family spaces. Communication as a human action essential to interaction is almost entirely replaced by the mediatic discourse, which constructs images of violence decontextualized and with no possible solutions.

Most of the youngsters interviewed recognize that the parents’ omission and the lack of an affective communication can impact children. They understand that the family conviviality is important to control the programs children watch and to trigger conversations among parents and adolescents. Rappaport et al. (2002) affirm that in family circles that privilege dialogue in conflict resolutions, and where there is an affective exchange between parents and children, the child is less impacted by the television contents. According to Orozco (1993), among the elements intervening in the relationship between television and audience, the family is the most important. As attested by the opinion of a female youngster in the research:

(...) the television can influence (...) but I have my father's advices, so I am not influenced, at least I think I am not too influenced, because I see one thing there and another thing at home (eighth grade student/private school).

Violent scenes in fiction, when featured in an explicative context, have the power to transmit to youngsters a model that should not be followed. Some students consider that certain behaviors of characters on television, however, trigger conflicts at home. This research verified that many values transmitted by the media clash with moral family values. For instance, the time to return home at night, which is determined by the parents, is questioned by many adolescents who watch a higher permissiveness for characters the same age on television.

Few students report not having the habit of watching television or not caring for the television programs, valuing most the conviviality with family and friends. Only one student from the public school claims that the media exerts no influence in his behavior: *"if the television influenced someone, I would be the biggest gangster in the world!"*. This youngster claims to fill his time with music, conversing with his father and friends, and he claims to have no interest in television programs.

The violence in adolescentns lives: the reality dimension

The violence experienced and witnessed by many adolescents in São Gonçalo surpasses fiction and facts. The majority of adolescents interviewed had suffered or witnessed some form of violence in the family, school, or community. It is the case of a male youngster who had seen a friend being killed: *"a friend I had (...) was done in front of me. The father had no conditions (...) he wanted to have a car, a motorcycle, these things that he saw on the soap operas"* (eighth grade student/private school).

Many situations of conflicts in the family, school and in the neighborhood were reported during the focus groups, revealing an intricate network of violence, in which the real and the

symbolic dimensions feed each other. Some interviewees revealed to be treated in a differentiated way by their parents, especially when their potential is compared to some preferred sibling. Disaffection with family members, particularly with stepfathers and stepmothers, are also mentioned as causing conflicts: *“I have a stepfather, but I don’t get along with him, I hate him”* (seventh grade female student/public school).

An epidemiological study in 2002, with 1.714 school youngsters from São Gonçalo/RJ, investigated the relationship between self-esteem and violence among adolescents between the ages of 11 and 19. This study verified that 55,4% of the interviewees had suffered some kind of ill-treatment during childhood and adolescence, perpetrated by their parents or by significant people around them. The research found a correlation between the violence experienced by this group in the family and the violence experience in school and in the community (Assis; Avanci, 2004).

Some adolescents in the present study claimed to suffer verbal aggression from teachers, as in the case of a teacher from a private school who used to call his students *“dumb”* in the classroom.

The community violence also impacts directly and indirectly the daily lives of adolescents, especially those living close to areas where the drug trafficking acts. For some youngsters, death represents the most tragic consequence of violence and, at times, they do not recognize or minimize the impact on non-lethal violent events, emphasizing the need to increase consciousness about the consequences left by these events.

In terms of the playful relationship youngsters can establish with more creative and informative cultural products on television, in relation to risky situations, the majority of adolescents are overly critic, as claimed by one student:

The television is not informing to alert youngsters, the elderly, and children. It is exchanging information for money, because everything on TV nowadays is about the audience, it is nothing more than the audience (eighth grade student/public school).

Students from a public school located in a violent area of the city, and who are delayed in school, claim that there are no programs on television that sincerely speak to youngsters. They attribute this to the fact that these programs are not economically advantageous to the media. They contrast the lack of interaction and identification with the media to their experiences in the focus groups, where they could freely express themselves about several issues of interest for youngsters.

One most critical minority understands that in television messages *“in both good and bad (messages) there is some information that help you to converse (...) you have to be conscious that one thing is bad and the other is good. You have to know how to separate things”* (eighth grade student/private school).

Few students think that we should not overvalue the violent content in these genres, because fiction is a product of the authors' creativity. But they consider important that television show more of the *“the real life”*, because *“people's everyday lives are not a movie (...) if the guy cut someone's head off, the head would be there on the floor, bleeding”* (eighth grade student/public school).

Conclusions

Adolescents' opinions about themselves are not amorphous or without criticism. They are able to deconstruct the hegemonic image portrayed by television, and show that their identity is not exclusively determined by this image. In other words, they do not completely interiorize the negative image that, in their opinion, some medias and society in general create about youth, particularly, black poor youth.

Some adolescents emphasize the risky situations to which they are exposed, either because of them living in areas dominated by drug trafficking or because of their relationship with people involved in crime. However, the majority claims to resist to drug trafficking corruption and seduction. In contrast to this expressed adolescent resilience, television labels most youngsters living in these areas as “marginal” or “potential marginal”. This negative representation of youngsters in the media supports, at least, two forms of victimization: a) the truculence of some

policemen when approaching youngsters in general, and particularly youngsters living in the outskirts or in slums, judging them for their appearance in order to justify violence against this group; b) the prejudiced and unkind treatment given by many services (public and private) and by society, in general, particularly to groups from lower economic levels..

This is one of the most serious forms of symbolic violence, as claimed by Bourdieu (1997). In addition to this somehow invisible violence, the spectacularization of other forms of violence is also disapproved by girls and boys in the study. None of the adolescents approve the television sensationalism, but recognize in a more contextualized approach a way to learn and reflect upon the phenomenon of violence. This is the case of the social marketing seen in some TV soap operas, which has been treating the theme of family violence, for instance, in the context of health and prevention. Despite the contradictions in the mediatic production in terms of its public obligation to inform, television constitutes an important source of information to adolescents, who end up learning the sense of risk of violence transmitted mainly (or exclusively) by this mean. In the absence of preventive policies, we understand the privileged place occupied by television in adolescents' daily lives.

Why do adolescents, even criticizing some forms of representations of violence in the media, seek on television a way to protect themselves against the risky situations, such as violence? One possible explanation is in the fact that the media occupies this mediation space, considering that it should and can speak about all themes, because everything counts as "information" and all information is of public interest. Another explanation refers to the omission of the social institutions responsible to protect children and adolescents, and to these institutions' ignorance about the media hegemonic discourse on violence, and its socialization role.

As stated by Canclini (1999), when dealing with the relationship between the lower economic classes and the communication means, *"the audience appeals to the radio and television in order to get what the social institutions do not provide: services, justice, amends, or simply attention"* (1999, p.50).

One of the challenges for the area of public health in amplifying its field of action in the prevention of violence is to understand these questions. There is, for instance, an urgent need to know the dimension and the psychological impact of mediatic violence on Brazilian children and adolescents, once it has been generating feelings of fear, anguish and insecurity. In a positive way, the media should be seen as a fundamental partner in this group's education and promotion of health, as pointed by Njaine and Vivarta (2005). Relevant projects in education for the media are in course in the country, and they confirm the pro-active potential of diverse medias.

The denaturalization of some notions of violence given by the media, and the construction of collective and democratic spaces for the youngsters to express themselves and to position themselves in the world are some ways to qualify these interactions and to strengthen citizenship.

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