Chapter XI

Reprimand and Respect, Love and Fear, in Experiences of Violence in Colombia

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Violence as Lived Experience

A good deal of thought regarding violence in Colombia assumes that the intensity and frequency of violent actions lead to indifference or, further, assume its incorporation in daily life by way of the cultural acceptance of violence. These assumptions overlook the social relationships and cultural meanings present in acts of violence. A certain normative bias clouds violence by excluding the matrix of meanings which allow actors to overcome their suffering, and which guide their daily actions. A certain fatalism ascribes the extreme and cruel aspects of acts of violence to “Colombian culture.” Diverse forms of violence are thus converted into one, violence, the product of a macabre tendency in Colombians. It then becomes extremely difficult to understand the mechanisms behind individual expressions of violence, and to identify common threads among them.

Everything in this approach points to confusion of the explanations of violent events provided by actors, and the cultural and psychological mechanisms used to overcome suffering, with indifference and habit. This is probably due to close proximity with the phenomenon and to the enormous impact that acts of violence can have on the conscience of individuals. Analysts, just like cultural natives, move jointly with their referential systems, so that external cultural complexes are not easily perceptible, according to Lévi-Strauss (1983). But in this case it is not a matter of distance and contrast, whereby others are traveling on different roads at different speeds, but of precisely the opposite: we are so involved we cannot focus. If we distance ourselves from the most common stereotypes seeking to explain violence in Colombia as social pathology (rooted in history or other features of our make-up), and if we likewise distance ourselves from a certain fascination with reaffirming Colombia as a violent nation, then we may advance in understanding the violence which effectively strikes at us daily.

Society and culture create conditions, such as the need to continue working, which help mitigate critical situations and provide new tasks and goals for people. It also reminds us that the need to understand the meaning of life, its organization, and the significance of social actions “do not disappear under horrible conditions” (Peacock 1986).

An inquiry into the events regarded as experiences of violence by individuals from low-income sectors of Bogotá, and on the ways in which they explained them, was conducted between 1993 and 1994. This paper summarizes the results of the Estudio Exploratorio de Comportamientos Asociados a la Violencia [Exploratory Study of Behaviors Related to Violence], conducted jointly by the author and Drs. Ismael Roldán (psychiatrist), David Ospina (Ph.D. in statistics), Luis Eduardo Jaramillo (psychiatrist), Jose Manuel Calvo (psychiatrist), professors of Universidad Nacional de Colombia, and Sonia Chaparro (anthropologist) (Jimeno 1993). Research was supported by the Universidad
Nacional, COLCIENCIAS, and ACAC. The goal was to understand the dynamics involved in these events, the interpersonal relationships present, the psycho-cultural points of reference, and their relationship to specific institutional configurations. The methodology sought to understand the psycho-cultural significance of experiences of violence for a low-income urban population, rather than focusing only on cases of extreme violence.

Violence was understood as a social fact that discriminates between scenarios, chain-event situations, relationships, actors, and cultural apprenticeship. Thus there are people, beliefs, values, expectations, forms of communication, and individual and institutional actions that are specifically associated with violence. Violence is therefore not an inexorable factum which has always hounded us; it becomes possible to recognize its expressions and to locate critical areas, critical actors, critical relationships and perceptions, and eventually to act upon them. If violence is a specific form of interaction between individuals and groups in specific environmental contexts, characterized by the intent to harm others, we can relate its occurrence to certain elements of the cultural orientation and social organization.

As with other forms of human interaction, violence may be seen as the oneness of situations comprising a series of observable events, cognitive cultural frameworks which assign meaning, and the specific motivations of social actors (see Gibbs 1986; Barth 1992; Bateson 1991). Thus, violent interaction is produced where socio-environmental settings, circumstantial structures providing the opportunity or direction for violent interaction, and culturally constructed cognitive complexes, converge.

Socio-structural or psychological factors cannot monopolize the explanatory power in violent interactions. They are not reduced to social needs, psychological disturbances, or access to material goods, power or prestige. More than understanding violence as an abstract notion, the goal is to characterize experiences of violence in their specificity and particularity. Identifying the distinctive features of specific forms of violence, and the physical, cognitive and emotional contexts associated with them, makes it possible to discover common traits and to identify the elements which structure them.

**Situations of Violence**

The majority of the individuals studied (264 adults over age fourteen) were women living in Bogotá for over five years. Recent decades brought them significant changes: reduced illiteracy, a drop in the number of formal marriages, fewer children per couple, a decline in religious observances, and greater numbers of women employed outside the home. Many of the women migrated to Bogotá, especially from eastern Colombia (62%), in pursuit of greater economic and educational opportunities. Considerable residential mobility in the city, weak networks of support and social integration, low levels of income (minimum $150 monthly in 1996) and high unemployment were noteworthy. Four out of every five individuals have lived in several neighborhoods, and almost half do not own a home. A third are non-professional independent workers, and the majority do not have fixed monthly salaries and are not covered by social security. Eighty percent did not complete high school.

Focusing on what takes place at home, half of the men and 44% of the women admitted to abuse in their original homes and among them, 13% reported brutal punishments. In over 76% of the abuse cases the victims were children. These individuals cited varying circumstantial reasons for the violence they encountered, but it is interesting to note
that in 37% of the cases, they could not point to a clear motive: “I don’t know; I can’t understand; For no reason.” Next in line were disobedience and failure to perform assigned chores. Together, these three factors covered 80% of the responses. Other circumstantial reasons cited were seeing forbidden friends or lovers, leaving the house without permission, consumption of alcohol by perpetrators of abuse, and lack of control by the latter, whether drunk or not.

Regarding possible reasons for the behavior of offenders, these were mainly related to the fact that they had been abused, were short-tempered or ill (22%), ignorant or jealous (21%), or “because that was the way one was reprimanded then” (16%).

Seventy-two percent of the married women stated they had been abused by their spouses. Eighty-three percent of the men between 18 and 49 endured most of their experiences of violence outside the home, while women from the same age group were mainly attacked at home (55%). Although the offender was known to 48% of the male and 63% of the female victims, only 38% of the men and 47% of the women sought assistance from the police.

Forty-eight percent of adults experienced at least one hold-up, 57% of these being males. Eighteen percent regarded hold-ups as the most significant act of violence taking place outside the home. However, it is noteworthy that the second most significant response (15%) regarding major acts of violence outside the home mentioned terrorist attacks and bombs, events in no way affecting respondents personally. As prominent experiences of violence outside the home, women referred to cases reported by the media (18%), especially television. Surely this relates to the number of housewives among the respondents (43%). This category places them more continuously in touch with radio and television, but above all points to a significant responsiveness to events taking place in Colombian society.

Another aspect of street violence is directly related to abuse by authorities. Again, it is men who are affected the most. More than half of them reported abuse by authorities, especially by the police, the army, and traffic police, and to a lesser degree by teachers, the clergy, and their superiors. Only 10% of the females felt likewise. On the whole, it may be stated that one out of every three individuals experienced abuse by authorities.

Hospital care (70%), education (65%), and the church (52%) were the only three institutions deserving the confidence of significant numbers of individuals. Institutionalized justice produced results almost as devastating as those for the police and politicians (over 80% distrust). In general, over half of those who suffered significant abuse at home failed to report their aggressors. The same occurred with sexual abuse cases (14%), half of which went unreported, even though the perpetrators were relatives or acquaintances of the victims in 70% of the cases.

One-fifth of the respondents (18%) referred to hold-ups as the principal experience of violence outside the home, but four out of every ten brought up the attacks and bombings which took place in Colombia in recent years. The storming of the Palace of Justice, and television reports of violent events, such as massacres, were especially mentioned. Little mention was made of the violent period of the fifties, even if the majority knew of it one way or another, given their age bracket. On the other hand, cases of torture, kidnapping, and extortion were hardly taken into account, with the exception of a few cases broadcast by the media.
In contrast with the above, when narrating their life histories, respondents identified principally their own direct experiences or those affecting relatives and friends. The first responses may be influenced by televised dramatizations of acts of aggression. Given the relative isolation of this sector of society, especially housewives, television has probably played a significant role in the construction of representational models of violence and in the creation of images about violent acts. This may result in a polarized view of society and a simplification of its conflicts. However, it is possible that the research instrument itself may induce a change in the conceptual field, from the social to the personal.

Further, what becomes generally evident is a cognitive distinction between instrumental violence, as in burglaries and hold-ups, and emotional violence, where feelings and relationships determine the course of action. This is the case for quarrels and national acts of violence such as massacres and homicide attempts. Delinquent violence does not seem to be as meaningful nor as oppressive as personalized, emotional violence, especially for women. Certain institutional agents, most notably the police, are even personalized and blamed for a number of wrong doings such as depraved and brutal acts, corruption, bribes, and “clientelism.”

Delinquent violence remits to a view of society as an abstract entity which one must endure, whereas emotional violence is the result of interpersonal relationships. The recurrent phrase among respondents, “I fear no one because I have problems with no one,” alludes to this distinction, and to a notion on the origin of meaningful violence in personal confrontations. A recurring reason many did not participate in neighborhood activities was “to avoid getting into trouble,” a possible result of being close to one’s neighbors. Another manifestation lies in people’s comments about a victim of non-delinquent violence, when they state, “surely there’s a reason.” Delinquent violence in society is somehow regarded as inevitable—that is, all societies are assumed to be that way.

That is why a large portion (half) did not consider Colombia to be a dangerous nation, even though many had experienced hold-ups and other forms of street violence. The other half believed it dangerous to live in Colombia because of its violence and insecurity, but only a small percentage preferred to live elsewhere, and basically for other reasons. Those who considered the nation to be violent tended to personalize this in representatives of institutional authority, who were then blamed for the state of things. In all cases, fearful individuals lacking or distrusting institutional means of protection were seen as defenseless and orphaned in the face of conflict and its dangerous consequences. They should therefore take precautions, permanently preventing and avoiding situations that could lead to violence. This, in turn, feeds passivity and inhibits individuals from reporting acts of violence and from aiding victims.

In sum, Colombians clearly identify experiences of violence and classify them according to their significance in their own lives as well as in social life. They are not indifferent to violence, and it is not an acceptable pattern of behavior. They attribute violence, as a painful experience, to a variety of circumstantial reasons related to the life conditions and characteristics of aggressors and victims themselves, in this way creating the possibility for understanding and overcoming it. Although a large number have been victimized by domestic and street violence, they single out certain experiences as the most relevant, and link them to broader features of Colombian society. But in contrast to the analysts, they do not view this society as more violent than others.
Meanings in Reprimand and Respect, Love and Fear

Experiences are layered with meanings. Notions of abuse and violence are useful to designate certain repertoires of social behavior. For those interviewed, these concepts are not so vague as to become inoperative in daily life, nor are they so blurred that they cannot be used to make conceptual and moral distinctions. For some, both notions, abuse and violence, are similar or identical and interchangeable, while for the majority they are basically distinguished by the intensity and social situation of the facts. Violence tends to be associated more with murder and extreme physical aggression, and often designates acts that take place outside the home involving serious injuries. Abuse summarizes experiences lived at home, childhood and personal histories characterized by blows, beatings, and hands placed over sources of fire. Whether differentiated or assimilated, both notions refer to interactions where there is a clear intent to harm others, and include an explicit value component. This moral dimension sanctions the actors of violent deeds even as there is an attempt to discover reasons for their behavior in certain of the internal or external circumstances of the individuals involved.

An important group of respondents (almost half) described their own childhood as hostile and abounding in suffering due to parental abuse. When child abuse was confronted with the description of current moods, a significant relationship was found between being abused as a child and describing oneself as an adult who is often nervous or sad. There is also a close statistical relationship between the description of the mood, admitting the need to commit abuse in the current home, and having been abused as a child. Feelings of sadness, distrust, and loss of control thus seem to take root in the violent conditions of family life. In spite of the fact that child abuse meant suffering and injuries to all respondents, some of them attribute it to special conditions such as stress due to poverty and scarcity, infidelity, disobedience, or drinking. Others point to attributes of the aggressors themselves: irritable, nervous, short-tempered, mean, unpredictable. Both, however, coincide on the shared notion of the need for correction or reprimand, given the paternal/maternal need to maintain control of family life and instill patterns of behavior. In the most extreme cases, however, victims clearly feel that the abuse exceeded this purpose and even had a destructive intent. The whole cultural complex indicates that family life is perceived as vulnerable, threatened by disorder and disrespect for authority. In this context, parental reprimands act as means of prevention; perhaps individuals are also perceived in the same way, always prone to exceeding their limits.

The notion of seeking to “correct” individuals also has a significant emotional effect. Reprimanding is closely linked to the notion of the “respect” primarily owed parents and secondarily to the male spouse. This permits a better understanding of the contradiction manifested by the majority of the abused, who judged their experience as painful, even unfair, without clear motives, but who nevertheless felt that there was fondness in the relationship, and that the intention to reprimand was what moved the parents. Reprimand and respect act precisely as mediation mechanisms, as mitigating factors that help individuals understand experiences that seriously question the love and concern of parents towards their children. Excesses are therefore seen as deviations from the intent to reprimand, due to circumstantial or personal reasons. In this context, abuse is blamed on ignorance (the view of the majority), drinking, nervousness or anger, or even on the belief that “that was the way one was reprimanded then.” All these reasons become protective screens for the victims. Acceptance of the intent to reprimand gives rise to respect, which
in no way morally legitimates the use of violence, but which permits the experience to be integrated under an essentially ambivalent code. Hence respect appears as the reason behind violent interactions and hides as its cognitive product. Respect is simultaneously love and fear, and in the memory of the abused, they are intertwined, yet contradictory.

A smaller segment of the sample, however, recognized a destructive intent in abuse, and blamed it on lack of affection. Behind abuse they saw hatred, animosity, and jealousy. Parents loathed their children for their sex, attitude, or their relation with the other parent or stepparent, or were jealous of their qualities or position in the family. Here the painful experience is more crude and simple in the minds of respondents, but some continue to question the reason for this hatred. Also, a few within the group favored the use of violent punishment when reprimanding, and openly justified it (see Montañez 1996).

The privileged settings for violent interactions at home are those where social control of the family unit is at play. Both manifest and potential behavior matters for the intent to regulate. A considerable number of cases of abuse took place for no apparent reason. Sometimes it was linked to situations where control of the family unit was challenged in very subtle ways, for example with minor tardiness in returning home, slightly rude answers, or even small gestures of disrespect. In the dynamics of violent interactions, obedience and its opposite, disobedience, are central. As a result, apparently trivial acts judged as disrespectful to parents or spouses unleash excessive reactions such as complaints or questions about the conduct of the parent or spouse. Obedience is expected in cases of excessive chores and absurd commands, as are strict compliance with established time frames and consulting about relationships outside the home; one does not challenge the exercise of domestic control with gestures, words, acts or omissions, but rather one explicitly indicates submission.

"Reprimanding" operates as a cognitive interpretation of the ultimate purpose of the offender, and as such, guides the perceptions of specific interactions. For its part, "respect" points to the behavior of abuse victims, inhibiting their answers—but at the same time providing a broad value framework with which to judge relationships with parents and between spouses. Both inform and structure the situation. Anger, fear and sadness, associated with the situations and present in their effects, are modeled in a tense and relative way on the reprimand-respect cognitive complex. "Reprimand" and "respect" guide (punctuate in Bateson’s terms, 1991) the dynamics of interactions in situations of violence, in a game of actions and responses.

Now, a still-incipient generation change was detected in the use of the reprimand-respect complex as justification for the use of violence at home. Brutal punishments were offered mainly by respondents over the age of 30, whereas among the young there was greater influence of a referential system that disapproves of brutal punishments and recognizes the right of children not to be abused. Some of the respondents see this change as confusing, as they now have doubts, not previously considered, about the punishment of children and parental rights. Some even attributed this change to delinquency and violence in society: “Well, since you can no longer correct them...” For the majority, these changes in the reference pattern are experienced ambiguously. On the one hand, the majority regarded dialogue as the proper means to solve interpersonal conflicts at home. On the other hand, although only a few justified the use of violence in reprimanding, many employ it at home, sometimes without motive, and don’t see themselves as abusers. The victim’s condition as the target of abuse is easily recognized, whereas that of the offender
tries to conceal itself, not only due to social sanctions but mainly because of a still inadequate use of alternate methods of correction. The broader cognitive framework points to a model for interpersonal relations between the members of a group with unequal positions (parents-children, male-female). It thus constructs a larger concept with which to grasp domestic personal experience as well as a wide range of relations with others, especially those liable to end in open conflict.

**Experiences, Situations, Representations**

It would be fitting to ask: What is the relationship between the lack of credibility, distrust, and the illegitimacy of authority figures, institutions and violence in Colombia? The lack of credibility and distrust of relationships in social life prepare the ground for acts of violence. These are not provoked immediately, in direct relationship. They are nurtured through fear, distrust, and apprehension in social life, especially in relation to authorities (people and the institutions which represent them). When they confront eventual or effective conflict situations, individuals thus feel defenseless and alone. This is why many flee from that which, in their view, might confront them with possible conflict escalation. They avoid daily interactions such as the ones of the neighborhood, refuse to react to delinquent or other acts of violence witnessed or known about, and remain passive.

Why do crime witnesses remain silent? Why do officials complain about “lack of cooperation with justice”? Is this lack of cooperation similar in other nations? Aren’t fearful silence and passivity the result of distrust of authority, and powerful allies of increased forms of violence? Aren’t they means of adapting to social life conditions in Colombia? Wouldn’t a certain ambivalence towards those who infringe norms—something which is widespread in Colombia—have to do with the notion that authorities fail to transmit regulations clearly, fail to sanction everyone fairly, and, on the contrary, are circumstantial, bribable, and bendable? Besides, reporting transgressions is not only useless but also potentially dangerous, as the reaction of authorities is unpredictable. Does this not open the door to impunity in general, an impunity that in turn reinforces extremely violent groups? Are not passivity, distrust, and fear adaptive in this social context?

On the other hand, it is known that fear can also induce attacks. Resorting to violence means anticipating an attack by another. Given the failure or disinterest on the part of authorities to mediate in conflicts, attacks can become a defensive and protective mechanism, as does resorting to private forms of “justice,” usually based on violence. Why is it that special private “justice” groups are flourishing today in Colombia, if not because authorities are not trustworthy or credible? Evidently once conflict starts it takes on its own dynamics and tends to feed on and reinforce itself. As a means, violence subjects and devours the ends for which it is used.

In conclusion, it doesn’t seem true that witnessing and suffering acts of violence makes Colombians, at least those of low income in the principal cities, insensitive to violence or unable to distinguish it from other social relationships. On the contrary, they draw subtle distinctions, they recognize the ones experienced at home or in the streets, and are moved by the suffering of others. They are hardly indifferent to the acts of violence they have suffered themselves, or to those witnessed on television. Rather, they are affected by the fact that violence and crime, as ruptures of and affronts to the collective
conscience, as Durkheim (1893) would have it, are not sanctioned adequately by institutions.

It may be said that in the Colombian case, the frailty of power is the other side of arbitrary authority, and violence prospers in its shadow. In the experiences and conceptions of respondents, in the synthesis of environmental and perceptive complexes, legitimate authority is not recognized because it does not mediate in aggressive situations. Instead, it makes an obscure and ambivalent use of violence itself. This is recognized as might, as external coercion, and as a prerogative of the individual—hence the personal origin attributed to meaningful violence. In this sense, the absence of the state or its weakness is not the reasons for which authorities are not recognized. The absence of the state forms part of the social aggregate through which authority reaffirms itself using authoritarianism, at home, on the streets, and in society at large. This is why authority, at least for the sector which was studied, is unable to transcend and secure profound legitimacy.

In this social context, the psychological tensions resulting from lack of work, low income, privations, long working hours, and those generated by social inequality, all permit credible justifications for acts of violence at home and away from home. Under these conditions, intimidation or anticipated attacks, or on the contrary, passivity and avoidance, could become adaptive mechanisms. Learning to handle conflicts sets the pattern for dealing with future interactions, where a self-reinforced circle of aggression connects violent responses to self-defensive ones.

Family life is perceived as a fragile entity. Its members are on the verge of disorder, and authority must reaffirm itself with the use of force in anticipation of disrespect. Its means are reprimand and respect. As emotionally dense, cognitive constructions, they explain painful experiences. Victims are offered a guide for action and understanding that helps them face and overcome their suffering. But its ambivalent nature, composed of fear and love, weakens credibility and compliance with authority. Does this conception of family life extend to social life as a whole? The evidence points in this direction.

In varying ritual and secular forms, social systems reiterate that acceptance of the social order goes far beyond obedience, as their permanence is based on this (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1979: 100). Ideological validation, the art of theatricality, as Balandier (1994) calls it, is not a simple subordination mechanism or instrumental resource. Instead, the very diverse staging means represent the society that is governed. They also represent its capacity to deal with disorder and with the conflict inherent to human relations. Failed validation becomes a crack between individuals and their social environment, and is an invitation to violence.

References


