

About Power and Control in Aggressive Relationships

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Abstract

Power denotes the ability to take decisions for you and for the others, to influence, to control. Power is manifested in any type of relationships; it creates patterns, hierarchies, rules and models. Distributed inequitably, owned by only one family member, the power and imbalance created by it can lead to a tense, unhealthy, frustrating environment for the one or those who do not hold power. Gambling with power and the desire to control the partner, the relationship and the family life will lead, in units of time subjectively perceived by the involved actors, to an intramarital war, a battle with no winners but only with losers. The present study is based on both the theory of learned helplessness, as it is presented by Lenore Walker (1988, 2009, 2012) in her studies about the *Battered Woman Syndrome* as well as the theory of the power and control wheel, described by Dutton and Starzomski (1997) and used in the Duluth⁴ model. In this paper the power is analyzed as a form of capture of the woman in a model of control used by the man to dominate her. In this algorithm the power is not singular but preceded, accompanied or followed by other techniques such as intimidation, isolation and threat. Within the control-power dynamics investigated in the present study the fear is a winner: it takes the shape of loss, mistrust, blackmail, manipulation or compromise, fear is creating dependence, is blocking or freeing the victim from the power and control game, fear is also the key element in learned helplessness.

Key words: power, control, aggressiveness, “learning helplessness”.

Résumé

Pouvoir veut dire prendre des décisions pour toi et pour les autres, influencer, contrôler. Le pouvoir se manifeste dans chaque type de relation, crée des schémas, des hiérarchies, des règles, des modèles. Distribué de façon inéquitable, détenu par

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un seul membre dans le cas d'une famille, le pouvoir conduit a un environnement tendu, malsain, frustrant pour celui ou ceux qui ne le détiennent pas.

Le jeu du pouvoir et le désir de contrôler le partenaire, la relation, la vie de famille conduisent, dans des unités temporelles subjectivement perçues par les acteurs impliqués, à une guerre intra-marital, une guerre sans vainqueurs, seulement avec des vaincus. La présente étude se fonde sur la théorie « d'impuissance apprise » (learned helplessness) telle qu'elle est exposée par Lenore Walker (1988, 2009, 2012) dans ses écrits sur le *Syndrome de la femme battue* ainsi que sur la théorie de la roue de pouvoir et du contrôle, décrite par Dutton et Starzomski (1997) et utilisée dans le modèle Duluth. Dans cet article le pouvoir est analysé comme une forme de capture de la femme dans un modèle de contrôle par lequel l'homme essaie de la dominer. Dans cette algorithmique le pouvoir n'est pas singulier mais précédé, accompagné ou suivi par d'autres techniques comme l'intimidation, l'isolement, la menace. Dans la dynamique contrôle-pouvoir analysée dans la présente étude la peur est victorieuse, soit qu'elle prend la forme de la perte, la méfiance, le chantage, la manipulation, le compromis, la peur crée dépendance, elle bloque ou libère la victime du jeu du pouvoir et contrôle, la peur est l'élément clé aussi dans « l'impuissance apprise ».

Mots-clés: pouvoir, contrôle, agressivité, « apprentissage impuissance ».

Rezumat

Puterea înseamnă a lua decizii pentru tine și pentru ceilalți, a influența, a controla. Puterea se manifestă în diferite tipuri de relații, creează tipare, ierarhii, reguli, modele. Distribuită inechitabil, deținută doar de un singur membru al unei familiei, puterea și dezechilibrul creat de aceasta pot conduce la un mediu tensionat, nesănătos, frustrant pentru cel sau cei care nu o dețin. Jocul de-a puterea și dorința de a controla partenerul, relația, viața de familie, conduc în unități de timp subiectiv percepute de actorii implicați, la războiul intra-marital, un război care nu are câștigători, ci doar învinși. Prezentul studiu are la bază, atât teoria „învățării neajutorării” (learned helplessness) așa cum este ea întâlnită la Lenore Walker (1988, 2009, 2012) în studiile despre *Sindromul femeii bătute*, cât și teoria roții de putere și control, descrisă de Dutton și Starzomski (1997) și utilizată în modelul Duluth⁵. În lucrarea de față puterea este analizată ca o formă de capturare a femeii într-un model de control prin care bărbatul încearcă să o domine. În acest algoritm puterea nu este singulară, ci precedată, acompaniată sau urmată de alte tehnici precum intimidarea, izolarea, amenințarea.

În dinamica control-putere, analizată în prezentul studiu, frica este învingătoare, fie că îmbracă forma pierderii, a neîncrederii, a șantajului, a manipulării, a compromisului, frica creează dependență, blochează sau eliberează victima din jocul de putere și control, frica fiind elementul cheie în „învățarea neajutorării”.

Cuvinte cheie: putere, control, agresivitate, „învățarea neajutorării”.

⁵ <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels>, Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs

Introduction

Human aggressiveness is both a phenomena as well as process whose understanding is focused either on the psychological typology of the individual, or on the influences of the environment or the cultural footprint. Human aggressiveness can be perceived from two large perspectives: a positive one – in order to survive, to self process different abilities necessary for the social and family assertion and a negative one causing physical, moral, psychical, family and social damages (Bonea, 2018, p. 8).

Taking into account the second context, of the negative effects and damages, we shall present the aggressiveness against the woman in her conjugal space.

Over the last years, within the researches on the women as victims of violence, there were identified elements, met also at those people repeatedly exposed to different traumas. For the measurable psychological changes appeared after the exposure to repeated abuses it is used the expression *Battered Woman Syndrome* (Walker, 1988, p. 142).

The *Battered Woman Syndrome* is considered a subcategory of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and it is included in the third revised edition of Psychiatric Statistical Yearbook (DSM-III-R).

If a person was exposed to a traumatic event, generator of a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, will present three symptomatic areas: cognitive disorders (memory disorders, intrusive repetitive memories with or without exposure to stimuli, denial, minimization, repression, attention deficit, lack of concentration – especially for the women who faced multiple abuses from different partners but also from childhood), hyper-excitability / high anxiety (panic attacks, phobic answers, sleeping disorders, eating disorders, compulsive-repetitive behavior, intrusive thinking) and avoiding symptoms including depression (refusal, minimization, repression, isolation, loss of interest in normal activities, susceptibility, disapproval, mistrust). Lenore Walker, who has done multiple qualitative studies and developed the Cycle of abuse theory and „learned helplessness”, is mentioning that most of the women victims of the aggression are easily fulfilling the above mentioned criteria, but the author is warning the professionals upon the threat of an erroneous understanding of the diagnosis, of an over-examination, ending in diagnosing these women as people with mental disorders (Walker, 2012, pp. 326-329).

„Learned helplessness”, the mode of never going away from an aggressive relationship is, in Walker’s opinion (2009), determined by achievement of the following dimensions: emotional – dominated by fear, cognitive – dominated by the ratio knowledge – lack of knowledge, contextual – dominated by decisions and cultural – dominated by the lack of knowledge of their rights and myths (Bonea, 2012).

In the opinion of the same author, the factors contributing to „learned helplessness” are to be found in different stages of development, both in childhood,

due to exposure to violence within the family environment, sexual aggressions, frequent family crisis (repeated domicile changes, parent’s divorce, abandonment, addicted to alcohol parents, parents with serious illnesses, school troubles) as well as in the marital relationship, accepting a violent pattern in her own family, isolation, possession, pathologic jealousy, sexual aggressions, death threats, the use of guns, psychological torture, cruel acts performed on other people or upon the animals (Walker, 1988, p. 145).

The violence against the woman can be defined as „an abusive use of the power in order to deny the rights and the freedom of choice of the other person, in order to dominate and control the partner and to restrain her choices and freedoms. The perpetrator can use control and domination tactics such as threatening, intimidation, economic control, minimization and deniability” (Vrasti, 2012, p. 288).

Dutton and Starzomski (1997) have presented eight intertwined categories of the wheel of power and control, and the violence against the partner is a part of this coercive model. The model is placing the violence within the forms of emotional abuse, of intimidation, isolation, denial, blaming, using the children, the male privilege, the economical abuse, the coercion and the threats (Fig. 1). This model, used also in the present study, was employed in order to identify the elements that are maintaining the woman, victim of domestic violence, in the aggressive relationship, through the power and control game.



Fig. 1. The power and control wheel

Source: Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs www.theduluthmodel.org

The design of the study

Our study was a qualitative research, situated in the spectrum of the narrative researches based on life story interview.

The life story interview can explain or confirm an experience through the moral, ethical or social context of the given situation, can provide information about how the perception, living or interpretation by the individual of events is related to his / her individual development, helping to understand life from the point of view of the one who lives it (Atkinson, 2006).

The choice of the research technique was justified by the fact that it can cover all the aspects of the investigation, on the ground that it can offer information regarding the control-power dynamics, details referring to the identification of the justification strategies created by the victim in order not to leave earlier the abusive relationship, in fact the identification of the elements leading to „learned helplessness”.

The collection period of the data was July-August 2018. The life story interview was carried on in three stages (with duration between 60 and 90 minutes) to one person exposed to domestic violence for 23 years.

The interview subject is a female person, 51 years old, secondary education, mother of three children from two marriages. The interviews took place face to face, on the basis of a previous programming between the person interviewed and the researcher, at the home of the interviewed person. The interviews recorded were answered by the respondent and later supplemented with new details.

After signing the consent form the interviews were registered, literally transcribed and submitted to the thematic analysis.

The study assumed a post-separation analysis (after 11 years since the separation), what consisted in covering, together with the victim of the domestic violence, of all eight elements of the wheel of power and control, elements identified by the respondent as being used by her aggressor to block her in the relationship.

The study had also followed to identify the justification strategies created by the victim in order not to leave sooner the abusive relationship, in fact the detection of the elements leading to „learned helplessness”.

The themes of the discussion were oriented on the dimensions of the wheel of power and control, respectively: intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, using the children, the masculine privilege, the economic abuse, the coercions and the threats.

Results

In the presentation of the results we have chosen to go through each stage of the wheel of power and control, in the personal manner that the respondent decided to employ. The respondent had identified the intimidation as a first element in the relationship power-control, characteristic which was the starting point for the interviews. We have chosen as exposure method the case presentation, in order to illustrate both our conclusions regarding the report

power-control and her blockage in an aggressive relationship as well as the life experience of the respondent, by inserting fragments from the interviews.

⊕ Intimidation, a first element of the wheel of power and control, is based on inducing fear through actions and gestures, destroying belongings, property, abusing animal and threatening to use weapons.

“They are trying with what is hurting you most ... they are trying and searching for the weaknesses ... of what you care about the most, what you think it has sentimental value for you ... is starting with those ... he starts destroying those.”

The basic emotion at this stage is fear, an emotion identified by the respondent as a constant presence in her marital relationship, both in the periods of emotional assaults as well as during the physical aggressions. Constantly maintained, at different intensities, the fear becomes, during the aggressive relationship, one of the fourth pillars of „learned helplessness”.

In Walker’s broad sense fear has multiple faces: „the fear not to abandon the aggressive partner, of not becoming alone, of having to take decisions by herself regarding her life, of having a work place, of facing the family, if this is against, of losing her children, of providing alone all those required, of not being followed by the aggressive partner, the fear of the constant threats of her partner, of her friends, of the society, of the possibility of losing her status of married woman” (Bonea, 2015, pp. 68-69).

*“I was afraid, I faced the fear all the time, I had the hatchet over my head, as they say. «Oh, what it is going to happen now?» «Oh, it is the time for the children to return from the school!», «Oh!», it was always an «Oh».
... fear is an understatement ... it was a fright which still persists after all these years.”*

⊕ The emotional abuse, a situation where the woman is humiliated, offended, had a low opinion on herself, thinks she is guilty for what is happening, believes she is crazy, represent a second stage of the wheel of power and control identified by the respondent as important in the dynamics power-control.

*“They are schooled in order to destroy you, first of all psychically, by saying: «you are stupid», «you don’t see how ugly you are», «you don’t see, you are a hag», «you are a cow», «you weight God knows how many kilos», «look what you’re like».
I was wondering all the time, maybe he is right ... maybe I’m the one being wrong.
I was telling you ... they have another face... they simply do not deny ... they are acting in such a way as the person next to him can state: «But you are really crazy, this man ... just look at him, how sweet he can be»”.*

Running this step is determining a decrease of self-esteem, offering the essential framework for attaining future failures of abandonment from the aggressive relationship. The reality experienced by the woman trapped in the wheel of power and control through emotional abuse is placing her into two antagonistic dimensions type love - hatred, pleasure -contempt, action – blockage,

reality which is sabotaging the self-confidence as well as the confidence in the others, as in the process of revelation.

The confusion created makes the woman victim incapable to differentiate between normal-abnormal, good-evil, and the identified solution will be to borrow quite large chunks from the thinking and judgment system of her partner.

"I had reached at some point as to believe all that he said [my husband], I thought that it was right, I believed that I was the guilty one, I thought that maybe I was not submitted enough ..."

⊕ The isolation, a situation where the woman is constantly questioned, her social contacts are limited and the jealousy is used as justification for the relationship power - control. This element of the wheel of power and control is working by blocking the woman into an aggressive relationship, restricting her social supportive contacts.

"Yes ... now I'm thinking ... talking to you ... all these things were not taken into consideration until now ... I was saying that I didn't want to remember about these situations ... much less to think about them ... to talk about them and to go into all the details ... no, no ... Now, staying with you face to face, I remember that somehow he was buying these friendships. He was buying them on purpose. In the moments the family conflicts commence, you have no one to lean on, you have no friends ... your best friends betray you."

⊕ Minimization, denial, blaming is the step where the abuse is minimized by the aggressor. He is denying the abuse, is blaming the partner for what is going on, and her worries are ignored. This dimension was identified by our respondent in the power game of her marital relationship, and the control is exercised in different forms, without (yet) resorting to the physical aggression.

"For a long time I kept hidden this [situation]. I was simply posing ... there were weekends where I went to some parties ... [and he was entering saying]: „Let me introduce you to my cow", and I was laughing and approaching another manner: But you haven't heard the new joke with ..., and I started to invent something ... in order to change the circumstance. ... in front of my close relatives I was left with, uncles, aunts, he is trying somehow to denigrate you, to present you in another image ... Defamation is [something] innate in them. [They] are always keep on trying to hang things on your shoulders, to turn you into somebody else, to make you into doing what you don't do, finger-pointing you in order to make the others believe him. I was always put in a difficult position. From the „crazy woman I took to the mental hospital Socola", „but you don't know that I took her ... I did this and that ...", I was not trying to explain the situation, how it really happened ... in fact it was a fight and I was not trying to get into ... I didn't want to know whether I win or not the war."

The process of learned helplessness, of maintaining the respondent into the aggressive relationship, is fortified by the acceptance of accuses, jokes, hostile and dissimulated attacks, a success that is strengthening in the aggressor the feeling of

power and the domination. In the same time the interpersonal reality is controlled by the aggressor by the disregard, a blockage/lack of reaction or diversions of his partner. Learning helplessness is blocking the respondent for a considerable period of time in her aggressive relationship, and one of the effects mentioned by her is the lack of self-confidence as well as in the others.

“But what I have lost and had affected me mostly is trusting people ... I cannot trust people, no matter how hard somebody may insist ...”

⊕ Using the children as messengers, as blackmail. The woman feels responsible for her children. It is the stage where the woman is using the game of power and control either to get out of the aggressive relationship or to get blocked though self-victimization.

“... knowing and seeing my weaknesses ... he was searching for my flaws, knowing that the children were the light of my life, in fact he was not hitting me ... but was hitting my children.

Nobody wants to leave home, nobody wants to leave all life savings, but I was after the welfare of my children ...”

Learning helplessness up to this stage of the wheel of power and control has brought in the luggage of our respondent the following elements: *fear*, with its multiple facets, felt in different frameworks as well as diverse family and social contexts, *confusion*, due to the simultaneous placement into two antagonistic dimensions type good-evil, *doubt*, in her own thinking system and *borrowing* from the aggressor the thinking and justification algorithm of his violent aggressions, *reducing* the supportive social contacts and social *isolation*, *accepting* an interpersonal reality created and controlled by the aggressor where she fits, without elements of opposition or analysis.

“... at a certain moment you reach a point where you cannot speak, you get to a moment where you cannot tell about these things ... they are just too painful ... now it is calloused ... I have tears in my eyes because even if it is calloused ... even if the wound was sewed... in there the prints remain ...”

The identification of the effects over her own children made by the woman victim of the aggression, can be the elements, as they appear in Kirkwood (1993, p. 144) contributing to the decision to leave the aggressive relationship, can become predictors of the departure, anticipative elements of the exit from an aggressive relationship.

“... the child was so marked and from a normal, typical child, who spoke normally ... he stopped talking until the 2nd grade. He was around 2 years old and he was not able to speak until he reached 8-9 years old. All right, now he is 15 years old and he [still] has a small talking deficiency when he is not very confident in himself, or when he is hearing swearing or bad words, he is acting ... he starts to stutter.”

⊕ The masculine privilege – the woman is treated as a servant, she is forbidden to take important decisions. The aggressor is the master; he is the one defining the roles in the family boss.

“We were not talking about who is or who is not the boss... He was based on the premise that the man is the master of the house, and nothing else.

As manager he had to be always all dressed up. He went by car and he had at all times a hanger with washed and ironed clothes.

I remember some episodes in which I was not able to look into his eyes ... I just couldn't, I had all the time the head down.”

In this stage the woman's acceptance of one or several cultural models promoting the woman's obedience towards her man, no matter the consequences, listening the man no matter the relations between them, the duty to keep the marriage in order to offer a father for her own children, accepting the nonintervention model according to which nobody is allowed to intervene in the affairs of a family, as it is capable to solve them on its own, constitute basic elements of learned helplessness in the aggressive relationship and is valuing the myths with regard to domestic violence. These models accepted and followed by the woman trapped in the wheel of power and control will strengthen her conviction that getting out of the aggressive relationship is a chimera.

⊕ Economical abuse – by power and control is created an addiction to the aggressors' incomes, the victim has no access to the family funds and is not allowed to work.

“You will starve ... you'll never work again, you'll never get a job ... and he tried this, as it turned out ...”

I had a job and ... he had the intention to take legal action, to set me up for a theft I haven't committed ...”

The process of learned helplessness, identified in this stage of the wheel of power and control, is reaching a decision-making dimension, a feature that is opposing two elements, convenience and action, as referred to by Walker (2012) and Bonea (2013). Thus it emerge contradictory elements such as: to have a job – to be financially dependent, to look for another house - to share the same house with the aggressor, to lose some formed along habits – to keep them, to go to Court – to give up the trial, to have a new lease on life – to return in the aggressive relationship. These elements can be seen as relapses, elements that maintain the victim in her aggressive relationship or elements for establishing future success strategies, as in the case of the respondent.

“... I was working in three places... if you'll ask me where did I get that much power I'll tell you that I don't know ... I am wandering myself, where did I get that much power ... I don't know if I could start again, but probably the answer would be yes ... I got off work at my first job at 3 p.m., I was going to another company working for other eight

hours and in the weekend, twice a month I was working as a housekeeper for a family ...”

⊕ Using coercion and threats – the woman is threatened to be hurt, or even is injured. The aggressor is threatening to leave her or suicide. He forces her.

“There were not only threats ... these people are made for this ... I have reached the conclusion that it is an illness ... or maybe it is an excuse I am looking for myself. They are trying in any form to harm ... At the beginning there were only verbal abuses ... Screaming ... it would be nicely said. I wouldn’t call that „shouting”, I would call them „horror ... shouting” ... and after 6-7 years the physical abuse moved in ... I had 29 forensic certificates from the medical examiner office.”

Threats, coercions and physical abuse are remaining in the emotional memory of the respondent as elements of the game of power and control activate and used in the aggressive relationship, and the exit from the relationship does not secure the respondent regarding the risk of future relapses.

Do you feel like you’re threatened even now?

“Yes. Although so many years have gone by [11], although maybe the wounds have closed down, although we are calloused by all these things, sometimes, you know ... not all the time, but in general when holidays are close, because it was the worst period, when the holidays came, when for everybody it is a nice event ... we couldn’t call them holidays, we couldn’t call them nice events ... on the contrary, I couldn’t be able to name them in some way ... when it is a holiday it is really such a hard time ... I have the feeling that the door will open and the same ordeal will start again ... There are sequels, I know them ... yes ... they remained ...”

Conclusions

The aggressive marital relationships are based, almost all the time, on the game of power and the imposition of this power over the others. As a basis, the power game has a deficit – the lack of power, and the awareness of this shortfall is determining a need of affirmation, often expressed under the destructive form of abuse. Domestic violence is presenting a series of characteristics, as they appear in Vrasti (2012) such as, the existence of a certain behavior, of a wide spectrum of aggressive and coercive behaviors, physical or non-physical, isolated or associated; of a report of domination due to the usage of physical force or threatening with force; of manifestation in the domestic space or of an intimate relationship and aims to gain a dominant position of power, intimidation and control over the partner.

The power in the aggressive relationship is used via control and coercion mechanisms, gradually exercised for a long enough time period, in order to block the aggressive relationship and to create addiction.

In this paper we can identify the way in which the respondent is going through all the elements from the wheel of power and control all the way through her marriage and, especially, her role in victimization, self-victimization and blockage in the aggressive relationship.

The separation from her aggressor was a process with periods of departures and returns, periods in which the respondent developed new survival strategies. We have identified in our case, as it appears in Anderson, Saunders (2003, p. 185) the fact that the actual departure, the definitive exit from the aggressive relationship had two dimensions, an emotional and a cognitive one, dimensions including the resistance to herself and the others in the administration of the violence, and then recognition, identification, counteract, the rejection of the abuse and finally the clear breakup of the aggressive relationship and the concentration on her own needs.

During the interviews we have noticed the use of plural (“he” becomes “they” and “she” becomes “we”). “He” – the aggressor is transformed into “they” – the other. “He” – the aggressor is lost in their great mass of “them” – the aggressors. The interviewed person is still frightened by “him”, when talking about “them” the respondent can put a distance and analyze the experienced relationship. “She”, the victim, is scrutinizing her torment and is turning into “us”, the victims, who still feel, even now, the threat. The singular – plural game seems to turn into a dimension of the power – control game, but also of the relationship emotion – cognition.

In the dynamic control – power, analyzed in the present study, the fear is the constant present emotion, either taking the shape of loss, mistrust, blackmail, manipulation, compromise, the fear creates addiction, is blocking of freeing the respondent from the game of power and control, the fear is the key element in „learned helplessness”.

Learned helplessness adopted by our respondent in the game of power and control derived from her aggressive relationship with her partner, went through both the emotional dimension, dominated by fear, and the cognitive one, dominated by the report knowledge-ignorance, but also the one subdued to cultural representations and myths. The interview is often sprinkled with proverbs and popular sayings used to complete or shade the lived situation. For example: *“If there is no love, there is nothing...If you do not wet the flower can not make petals...Take water in my mouth...Each one takes his cross...Put the candy on the cage...Flesh to sit with bums, good living is seen”*.

In this study we can affirm that the power got settled gradually and had determined, for a considerable amount of time, a blockage of the victim in the game of power and control. The predictors of her exit from the aggressive relationship were the social factors (job, changing the house) as well as the psycho-social supportive factors.

Another step, not yet addressed in the present study, is the identification of the copying and resilience elements used by the respondent during the period after the separation. Which were the copying strategies used? How are they in relation with the coercive elements from the wheel of power and control? What is the period post-separation identified by the respondent as being a period of empowerment, of re-evaluation? All these are questions we would like to get answers in a future study.

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