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Beatrice IOAN, Tatiana IOV, Andrei DUMBRAVA,
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Implications of media violence on the aggression in children and adolescents

Beatrice IOAN¹, Tatiana IOV², Andrei DUMBRAVA³,
Irina STREBA⁴, Simona IONESCU⁵, Simona DAMIAN⁶

Abstract

Since the twentieth century, studies have demonstrated the impact of media channels on their beneficiaries, especially children and adolescents. From the transmission of moving images, the concept of information rapidly expanded both vertically, through technological development and improved information quality in terms of details, and horizontally, by broadening the target audience. Gradually, in the contemporary society the written press, television and radio have entered almost all the houses in various ways. The impact of mass media has evolved with technology, currently a large number of social events having the press as their trigger element. In this paper the authors start with a case study to illustrate the negative impact that violence conveyed through media channels can have on children and adolescents by generating or increasing their aggressiveness.

Keywords: mass-media; violence; aggressivity; children; adolescents; WHO; television.

¹ *Gr.T.Popa* University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iasi, Department. of Legal Medicine, Medical Deontology and Bioethics, Iasi, ROMANIA; Email: ioanbml@yahoo.com

² Institute of Legal Medicine of Iasi, ROMANIA; Email: tatianaguritencu@yahoo.com

³ *G. Georgescu* Institute of Cardio-Vascular Diseases of Iasi, ROMANIA; Email: rodumb@yahoo.com

⁴ *Gr.T.Popa* University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iasi; Institute of Legal Medicine of Iasi, ROMANIA; Email: irina.streba@yahoo.com

⁵ Institute of Legal Medicine of Iasi, ROMANIA; Email: cs_ionescu@yahoo.com

⁶ *Gr.T.Popa* University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iasi, ROMANIA; Email: si_damian@yahoo.com

Introduction

Violence was defined by the World Health Organization as the intentional use of physical force or the threat of force, against oneself, another person or group, resulting in the production or possibility of causing injury or death, psychological harm, poor development or deprivation. (WHO, 2002) Injuries caused by violence are often more extensive than the physical aspects, generating psychological damage and shaping a real social problem. Violent behavior, considered to be unacceptable and blamed in the context of the contemporary life is, however, frequently met all over the world, violence in youth being a particular concern (Omolola, 2011). Television has now become a veritable “cultural environment”, consisting of broadcast programs, meanings and pleasures they produce, as well as how they are incorporated into the daily routine of the viewers (Fiske, 2001). In contemporary society, television becomes increasingly important, more often acting as a substitute for daily experience (Coman, 2010). Relatively soon after its transformation into an industry, cinematography began to sell violence, putting into pictures the newspaper serials that illustrated the hardship of life in North American cities (for details on the commercial beginnings of cinema see Sadaul, 1961). In 1929, in response to this reality, the *Payne Fund* sponsored twelve studies that examined, among other things, the relationship between the films containing scenes of violence and actual delinquency and crime in society, as well as the influence of these films on children’s and adolescents’ behavior. (Wilson, 1995) These studies were the first to have drawn attention to the influence of violent imagery on young people, leading to improved codes and standards in the media (*Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America*), especially under the pressure of censorship threat.

With the explosion of postwar television⁷ the first concerns about the effects of this new environment on the behavior of viewers appear, especially the young ones. It is significant that, following the introduction of television in the U.S., the annual crime rate increased by 93% between 1945 and 1974, and in Canada by 92% over the same period (Centerwall, 1992). Both scientific (Carpenter, 1955) and, especially, political (U.S. Congress hearings initiated by Senator Kefauver [1954-1955]), the analyzes of the effects of television violence concluded that the excess can be harmful to children and adolescents. Such analyzes culminated in the issuing in the U.S. of a public warning regarding the fact that excessive watching of televised violence by young can encourage their development towards antisocial behavior (Wilson, 1995). Gradually, this issue has become a constant concern of the U.S. government officials, reflected in reports such as: *Television and Social Behavior: The Surgeon General’s Report* (1972), U.S.

⁷ It is estimated that in 1945 in the USA there were slightly less than ten thousand TV sets; during the next five years their number came close to six million, and in 1960 it reached more than 60 million. (McCutcheon, Schaffer, Wycoff, 1994)

Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence (1984) and reports sponsored by the National Institutes of Mental Health (1972, 1982) (Wilson, 1995). Based largely on data reported in these documents, in 1975 Rothenberg published "Effect of Television Violence on Children and Youth" in JAMA, an article which signaled the medical world on the effects of the television violence on children by increasing their levels of physical aggression and violence. This article had the desired effect, so that a year later, the American Medical Association (AMA) issued Resolution 38, which shows: „[...] TV violence threatens the health and welfare of young Americans" and also declared its opposition to TV programs containing scenes of violence and to their sponsors (Centerwall, 1992). This view was gradually shared by other medical professional organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, which in 1990 recommended that parents should limit the time spent by their children watching TV to 1-2 hours a day (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1990).

In Europe, the issue of the impact of television violence on young people became a systematized concern much later than in the U.S. For example, France became concerned about this issue in the second half of the 1990s, with the liberalization of the broadcasting licenses for independent TV channels. After nearly a decade of analysis and debate, a Parliamentary report (Boutin, 1994, as quoted in Lazarus, 2003) avoided clear conclusions on a possible relationship between the "consumption" of television violence and increased aggression in French society.

But violence has not made its presence felt only in film and television. With a slightly less attention from the authorities, violence massively penetrated current music both in lyrics content and images of the accompanying videos. Under public pressure, a number of TV channels specialized in broadcasting contemporary music (eg, MTV, BET) launched anti-violence campaigns; however it remains unclear to what extent these campaigns manage to balance the effects of violence that sweeps the programs of these channels. The transmission of visual violence has become increasingly sophisticated, more realistic, especially in the last 20 years, by the introduction and refinement of video games, which, in addition to classic television, allows the active involvement of players, which could lead to a significant growth of aggressiveness in children and adolescents (Kronenberger et. al, 2005).

Without having the same impact as that of moving images or music, violence finds a large place in the written press as well. Constrained by the necessity of daily issuance, the written media is seduced by the spectacular morbid, emphasizing excessively the violence in the existence that it claims to illustrate.

Methodology

This paper is based on a case illustrating the influence that television violence can have on children and adolescents. Using a case study to integrate issues arising from media violence among children and adolescents has allowed us to assess in depth the real context in which the facts occurred from the perspective of the actors involved (Rădulescu, 2010). The case was analyzed from a grounded theory approach, as it allows the generation of a theory for a „particular process, action or interaction”, starting from the point of view of the participants to the events described (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011a; Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011b). The data used in the case presentation, namely the context in which the facts occurred as resulted from the investigation conducted by the Police and from the perpetrator’s and witnesses’ statements and the aspects resulted from the forensic expertises that helped solving the case (the autopsy of the victim and the forensic psychiatric expertise of the perpetrator) were obtained and used with the approval of the Prosecutor’s Office of Iași.

Case presentation

In early spring, a 11-year-old boy disappeared from home. His brother found, shortly after the disappearance, a note on the front door into the family apartment:

1., We have your son. The ransom is 100.000.000 lei. It is useless to call the police, because we will release your son after our man gets back with the money without being traced. We will watch you 24 hours a day. If you inform the police both your sons will be dead. If you inform the police we will know immediately because we have our people inside the police. By six o'clock on Tuesday evening, when we'll contact you, make sure that you have the money in bills of 10,000 and 50,000, placed in a shoe box. We advise that you not to risk, as the innocent lives of your children can be destroyed.”

Right after receiving this note, the disappeared child’s parents alerted the Police, who began the investigation. Two weeks later, after intense searching, the case prosecutor was informed by the police dispatcher that in the basement of a flat a dead body was found, looking like that of a child. On the spot the Police noticed that the basement was divided into three rooms. The body was found in the middle of the third room, lying on its left side, facing the entrance, knees bent, the left arm flexed at the elbow and placed under the left part of the thorax and the right arm flexed at the elbow and twisted back. The face and the hair of the corpse were covered by sand and soil particles. Its left shoulder and the left part of the thorax were placed over the opening of a siphon channel through which

waste water was running. On the back of the jacket with which the corpse was clothed and on the floor of the room white hair locks were found, which were harvested for laboratory examination. Proceeding to identify the corpse it was found that the corpse belonged to the child who had disappeared two weeks before.

The forensic autopsy concluded that the death of the child had been violent and caused by suffocation. Also, the victim had suffered a head trauma, possibly produced by strike with or against a hard surface; on the left forearm a reddish stripe was discovered possibly caused by compression with a soft linear object and on the neck a reddish area was discovered, which was possibly the result of the compression with or against a hard surface. Finally, Police investigation led to the identification of the crime author, AB, a 13-years old boy who lived in the same building with the victim, the two being best friends. At the beginning of the Police investigation, AB denied his involvement in the killing of the victim, but being faced with clear evidence of guilt that he could not challenge, he admitted committing the crime, eventually giving details of how the events had taken place.

AB knew that the victim's parents had a good financial status. The idea to get money from his friend's family came, according to AB's own statements, from watching a movie. Trying to follow the script, he decided to stage the kidnapping of his friend in order to ask for a ransom from his friend's parents. The only thing left was to convince the victim to leave his home for 10 days. At the same time, without telling the victim about his plans, AB conceived and wrote a note - the one found by the victim's brother in front of the apartment door, as reproduced above.

On the day of the murder, AB was walking in the park in front of the building waiting for his friend who was out. When he returned, AB said he wanted to tell him something. Having doubts that his friend would agree with his proposal and fearing that he would refuse and tell his parents, AB invited the victim in the basement of the building to discuss things, bearing in mind the idea of killing him if he would not agreed with his plan.

The victim accepted his friend's invitation without any suspicion or hesitation and they went together in the basement of the building. Once there, AB told the victim about his plan to get money. The victim, scared by the proposal, refused, telling him that if he needed money, his father would lend him any amount, anytime, and attempted to leave. AB pushed the victim back, and he hit his back against the concrete wall of the room. The victim tried once again to leave and found himself pushed, hitting the same wall. At that time he tried to run, but AB grabbed his arms and pushed him, this time the victim stumbling and falling. In the fall he hit his head against the metal sewage cap. While the victim was lying on the floor, AB found a plastic bag that he put it over his head and face, clutching

tight against the neck till the victim stopped moving. To be sure that the victim would not survive, AB introduced the victim's head in the waste water from the uncovered sewage. Before leaving the scene, the perpetrator took the victim's money and the victim's apartment key from his pocket. In an attempt to erase the traces of the murder, the perpetrator pulled the victim's head out of the channel and removed the bag from his head. He also broke the light bulb in order to delay the discovery of the body, and then he left the crime scene.

From the accounts of AB, after he realized that his friend had died, he was afraid of being discovered. However, when he came out from the basement he met another friend and the victim's brother, and all three of them went to the slot machines, then they returned home. At home, AB washed his hands and sat in the living room to think, then took out of his pocket the ticket that he had written before and placed it at the entrance door of the victim's apartment, he rang the doorbell and ran down quickly. Then he threw the bag and the chisel he had broken the light bulb with on a vacant lot near the building where he lived.

The next morning, AB experienced a state of intense emotional tension, waiting for the phone to ring, guessing that his friend's family were seeking for their missing son. When the victim's father asked him on the phone about his son he answered that he knew nothing and went together with the victim's brother to one of the victim's classmates to look for him. AB's father did not notice any change in his son's behavior, the latter even suggesting that his friend could have been the victim of a kidnapping. Two days later, AB gave the first statement to the police, saying that he did not know anything about the disappearance of his friend, then told several variants, because of the fear of being discovered. AB had no obvious emotional reaction when his father announced him that his friend had been found dead. During the Police investigation a technical-scientific expertise was performed, which concluded that the writing on the ticket belonged to AB. Also, during the AB's body search a part of the money that he had stolen from the victim was found and in his apartment the Police found the key to the victim's family apartment, as well as the red pen used by AB to write the note for the victim's family.

The following days, AB was repeatedly questioned by the Police because there was sufficient evidence for him to be prosecuted. When the policemen promised him a lighter sentence because he was a minor, AB asked to see the Penal Code to convince himself that the investigators were right, and later admitted the murder, saying he did not think for a moment that would be caught.

The forensic psychiatric examination of AB revealed a number of important elements which, along with other aspects of the investigation, outlined his profile. The material frustration felt throughout his childhood and puberty was exacerbated, this being the explanation given by the defendant for committing the murder, in his view violence being an acceptable way to succeed in life. How to

commit the crime was inspired by the pattern seen in a movie. The whole action related to murder and request for money from his friend's parents was "like a game" for him, that had to be conducted "according to plan" with the goal of getting money. Medical and psychological examination established that AB was in the preadolescent development stage, his personality developing towards a disharmonic structure, normal IQ and immature emotional condition, all of these shaping an ideo-affective incongruity. It was also found that AB did not suffer from any psychiatric disorder and that he committed the murder with judgment. Also, given the evolutive potential of the affective defect and that of the process of personality structuring of the perpetrator, it was recommended to dynamically monitor his development throughout the institutional reeducation period.

Discussions

The relationship between children and adolescents exposure to television violence and the later development of their aggressive behavior has been an important topic in the social, political and scientific fields for decades (Kroneberger et al., 2005), and continues to be the basis of many sociological, psychological, and medical studies. Despite the common perception of the negative influences of the violence that is largely incorporated in television programs on the aggressive behavior, especially of the young people – who are considered as being more vulnerable to such environmental influences- scientific data are equivocal in statistically supporting a clear causal relationship. However, a series of events of extreme aggression continue to occur, shocking public opinion and fueling the debate on the impact of media violence on behavior. Despite some obvious limitations, such as artificial measurements of the aggressive behavior, arbitrary exposure to materials with aggressive content etc., laboratory studies are relatively consistent in showing that patterns of aggression conveyed by visual media increase aggressive behavior in viewers, especially in children and adolescents (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2004; Santrock, 2006; Atkinson *et al.*, 2002).

On the other hand, benefiting from improved ecological validity, field studies are divergent in supporting the link between exposure to televised violence and real aggression. In a few exploratory studies (Wood, Wong & Chachere, 1991) and reviews of the results of field investigations on this possible connection (Freedman 1984, 1986), it appears that "despite considerable variability, it seems fair to conclude that the evidence indicates a positive correlation between televised violence and aggressive pursuit" (Freedman, 1984), some studies showing that short-term exposure of children to media violence significantly increases the aggressiveness demonstrated by their spontaneous behavior following the exposure to violent television scenes (Wood, Wong & Chachere, 1991). This association may lead, by mutual conditioning, to a spiral of violence, which becomes

more serious as it onsets in younger age and may end in some cases with criminal behavior. A prospective study conducted over a period of 22 years, on a sample of 875 participants, showed that the exposure of boys aged 8 to television violence can predict the severity of the crimes committed by them until they turn 30 (Huesmann, 1986).

Another study, that compared 100 inmates convicted for various crimes (murder, rape, physical attacks) with 65 men without a history of such acts, demonstrated a significant correlation between violence in adulthood and exposure to television violence in childhood (Kruttschnitt, Heath & Ward, 1986). Moreover, some surveys on children and adolescents have shown that television violence causes aggressive trends and a pervasive and exaggerated sense of danger and fear of violence (Gerbner & Gross, 1981). The impact that television violence has on children and adolescents can be best understood in the context of their normal development. The ability and desire to copy are present since the stage of newborn, young children imitating without discrimination behaviors and facial expressions, even before realizing that they have their own facial expressions that actually define them. Children aged 14 months, for example, imitate behaviors seen on television, and children up to 3-4 years cannot distinguish fantasy from reality, television being for them an important source of information about how the world works outside their parental home. In this context, they may perceive violence as a daily reality and can become quite fascinated by committing violent acts in television programs. Even though later perception of the TV programs and messages transmitted through the media becomes increasingly discriminatory, early perceptions remain engraved and can be revived in times of acute stress, when they can result in committing aggressive acts. (Centerwall, 1992) Although research in this area has identified the preadolescent period as critical regarding the association between television violence and aggression, its effect can become chronic, extending into adolescence and later into adulthood (Milavsky et al., 1982; Hennigan et al., 1982).

Observational learning, characteristic to the childhood, requires exposure to models, acquiring skills to reproduce the pattern seen or heard and accepting the model as a guide for one's own actions. In this context, children exposed to aggressive models can acquire and reproduce the aggressive behavior. On the other hand, the acceptance of aggression by children is a complex process, subject to a number of issues, such as: rewards received by the model, model perception as fantasy or reality, family situation and the situation in which the child is. This is how, at least in some circumstances, the children's exposure to television violence may lead to accepting and acquiring the behavior they watch on TV as a guide for their own behavior (Liebert, 1971). As children grow, they understand more and more the TV programs they watch, but this does not affect their aggressive tendencies favored by television violence. The aggression favored by broadcast TV violence is influenced more by the amount of violence provided than by how

it is presented. Violence with a “good” motivation can generate aggression to a greater extent than the violence having a perceived “bad” motivation; also, temporal separation of the violent event and its consequences make it harder for kids to perceive the relationship between violence, motivations and consequences of the violent act (Leifer & Roberts, 1971). The aggressivity in children can be also favoured by the violence shown in TV commercials. A study in this regard, based on focus groups having as participants children aged 8 to 12 years and their parents, followed by an experimental sequence, showed that, although during the discussions in the focus groups participants were not concerned about the potential negative effect of violence in television commercials on children’s aggression, the experiment children exposed to advertisements that contained violent images generated more aggressive cognitions than when the advertisements did not contain scenes of violence (Brocato et al., 2010).

The case described above, placed under Romanian legislation as murder, draws attention particularly due to the aggressor’s and victim’s age and to way of commission, namely a model inspired by a movie watched by the aggressor on TV. Data from the psychological examination of the murderer and the details of the forensic investigation suggested the difficulty of the minor perpetrator in accepting differences between fiction and reality and in fully realizing the irreversible consequences of his actions, amid immature personality heavily influenced by movies explicitly describing criminal activities that remain undiscovered. Faced with his friend’s refusal to be part of the seemingly infallible blackmail plan, copied from an American movie, AB chose to turn his friend into a victim and to follow the film model. No moral doubt trouble him, even in moments of committing the murder or subsequently, as a witness to the tragedy that he caused. Consistent in his judgment shaped according to fiction, his only intense emotional feeling during and after committing the murder is the fear of being discovered and of failing in fulfilling the scenario. Obtaining the required reward itself does not entirely explain the murder for the amount of money stolen from the victim after killing him, much lower than the ransom asked from the victim’s family, was still incompletely spent a few weeks after the murder. We may assume that, without the extremely strong shaping influence of a “seductive”, negative, and aggressive film, on a very emotionally immature and psychologically vulnerable psyche (including individual characteristics of a developing personality) and in the presence of non-criminogenic models equally valued, it is very likely that AB would not have committed the murder.

Imitation of televised violence was underlined by two surveys performed on young prisoners for committing violent offenses (murder, rape, physical assault), that found that between 22 and 34% of the participants echoed the techniques seen on TV in committing the crimes for which they were imprisoned (Heller & Polsky, 1976). Translation into life of film scenarios (or fiction) is a natural part of childhood and adolescence, having a role in “virtual” practicing of the judgment

and of the moral conduct. The problem is, however, created by the media repertoire constantly offered to children. By non-selective appeal to movies that promote violence, Romanian televisions have transferred all the moral-educational dilemmas associated with their offer to parents. Unfortunately, the efficiency of the labelling performed by the Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului remains questionable, given that nearly 60% of the Romanians spend more than three hours daily in front of the TV⁸ (Abraham, 2009). Children and teenagers are thus exposed, more or less selectively, not just to some simple information but to real life stories that become role models for the avid developing psyche of young people. By the absurd and the gratuity of the murder, the case presented underlines the need of rethinking the ways of controlling excessive aggressiveness supplied by media in our homes, to which our children can become victims. As recommended by some authors (Centerwall, 1991), children's exposure to TV violence should become a priority public health problem whose solution can contribute to general social welfare.

Conclusions

Mass-media is particularly important around the world, representing a major force not only in informing, but also in shaping attitudes and behaviors, having the means to profoundly influence people in their way of understanding life, the world and their own existence. Mass-media offers almost daily images of violence and repeatedly exposes individuals to traumatic scenes that assault sensitivity, generating immunity to the horrors of violence. Moreover, the violence transposed by the cinematographic "art" provided by mass-media finds the modeling path more easily (sometimes only by imitation) to the developing minds of children and adolescents. Therefore, we believe that access to scenes illustrating aggressive attitudes must be controlled better. Family education should be combined with media restrictions meant to protect society from violent crimes committed by young people, many times inspired by aggressive models highly publicized.

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⁸ To compare, almost 60% of the children aged between 8 and 16 in the USA have a TV set in their rooms and spend between 12 and 25 hours per week watching TV (Sege, Dietz, 1994); in sum, this represents more than the total time spent by these children in school (Santrock, 2006). We could not identify similar data, although very necessary, for the Romanian population.

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