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Original article

Analysis of early representations and personality among victims of domestic violence



Analyses des représentations précoces et de la personnalité chez les victimes de violences conjugales

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – This exploratory study analyses the individual elements of the victims of domestic violence through life events, early dysfunctional representations and personality.

Objectives. – This research aims, firstly, to show the existence of early traumatic experiences for the victims of domestic violence. Secondly, it aims to measure the prevalence of early maladaptive schema and identify personality traits in these subjects. Finally, our aim is to highlight that depending on the violence carried out within the couple (reciprocal/unilateral), activated schemas and personality traits are different.

Method. – Our sample consists of 80 female subjects, non-abused women ($n=40$) and victims of domestic violence ($n=40$), of which 22 victims of unilateral violence and 18 victims of reciprocal violence. Participants filled out an initial questionnaire as well as the scales and self-report questionnaires as follows: Life events (Amiel-Lebigre, 1984); TCI (Cloninger et al., 1993); YSQ-S3 (Young et al., 2005). The data were subject to statistical analysis and were processed using the software SPSS 22.

Results. – The results show that the victims have experienced more early traumas than non-victims, that schemas (emotional deprivation, mistrust and abuse, subjugation, self-sacrifice) are more active. We note also different personality traits according to the different groups (victims/non-victims) and subgroups (reciprocal violence/unilateral violence).

Conclusion. – Our study sheds light on the role of the individual elements of the victims on the perception of the relationship and on the process of engagement and disengagement of women in abusive relationships. Limits and expectations of the study are discussed.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Cette étude exploratoire analyse les composantes individuelles des victimes de violence conjugale, à travers les événements de la vie, les schémas précoces dysfonctionnelles et la personnalité.

Objectifs. – Cette recherche vise, d'une part, à mettre en évidence l'existence d'expériences traumatiques précoces chez les victimes de violence conjugale. D'autre part, l'objectif est de mesurer la prévalence de schémas précoces inadaptés et de repérer des traits de personnalité chez ces sujets. Enfin, notre objectif est de mettre en évidence que, selon le type de violence exercée au sein du couple (réciproque/unilatérale), les schémas activés et les traits de personnalité sont différents.

Mots clés :

Violence conjugale

Expériences traumatiques précoces

Schémas précoces inadaptés

Personnalité

Terrorisme patriarcal

Violence situationnelle

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Méthode. – Notre échantillon se compose de 80 sujets, des femmes non-victimes de violence ($n = 40$) et des femmes victimes de violence conjugale ($n = 40$), dont 22 victimes de violence unilatérale et 18 victimes de violence réciproque. Les participantes ont rempli un questionnaire d'entrée, ainsi que les échelles et auto-questionnaires suivants : Événements de la vie (Amiel-Lebigre, 1984) ; TCI (Cloninger et al., 1993) ; YSQ-S3 (Young et al., 2005). Les données ont fait l'objet d'analyses statistiques et ont été traitées à l'aide du logiciel SPSS 22.

Résultats. – Les résultats montrent que les victimes ont connu plus de traumatismes précoces que les non-victimes et que certains schémas (carence affective, la méfiance et l'abus, l'assujettissement, le sacrifice de soi) sont plus actifs. Nous notons également des traits de personnalité différents en fonction des groupes (victimes/non-victimes) et des sous-groupes (violence réciproque/violence unilatérale).

Conclusion. – Notre étude apporte un éclairage sur le rôle des composantes individuelles des victimes dans la perception de la relation et le processus d'engagement et de désengagement de ces femmes dans une relation violente. Les limites et perspectives de l'étude sont discutées.

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1. Introduction

The dynamics of married life and its conflicts are complex, rooted in relational movements that are not solely unilateral. Domestic violence is violence by an intimate partner, and sometimes intrusive events repeated over a long period. Systemicians distinguish two types of domestic violence: unilateral violence, which would be the expression of a need for domination of one of the subjects involved and interactive violence, the result of a dynamic of competition within the couple and dysfunctional conflict management between the two protagonists. Perrone and Nannini (1995) describe two forms of violence: violence/aggression appearing in symmetric equal relationships and violence/punishment characteristics in complementary unequal relationships with high level of coercive control. This can be compared to the two types of violence described by Johnson (1995): "Patriarchal Terrorism" characterised by the desire to dominate one of the partners and "situational violence" which corresponds to acts of violence related to moments of conflict in couples who communicate interactively.

Domestic violence, symmetrical or asymmetrical, occurs in the context of an interaction between two individuals in an intimate relationship. The understanding of this interaction requires, *inter alia*, the analysis of individual elements of each protagonist.

This exploratory study provides an analysis of early cognitive representations and dimensional models of personality in victims of domestic violence. It is important to consider the role played by the victim within the interactions and behaviours with its partner in order not to underestimate domestic violence (Bolgiani, 2012).

Each partner is distinguished by their history, education, and family and socio-cultural environment in which he grew up. All these entwined factors introduce many elements that affect these essential choices, particularly that of the main partner (Lemaire, 1979, p. 45, 46). According to Cottraux (2003), violent behaviour, self-harm or revictimation are often the result of early trauma. Exposure to domestic violence during childhood increases the likelihood of engaging in violent intimate relationships in adulthood (Dumas, Morgolin, & John, 1994). A study by Duggan, O'Brien, and Krone-Kennedy (2001) shows that subjects who have witnessed domestic violence will have more difficulties in managing conflict. Jaspard (2003) have also shown the impact of trauma experienced in childhood on victimisation in adulthood. Registration of trauma and the repetition that results can be explained by the conditioning process, resulting in increased sensitivity to some forms of victimisation. The memory maintains consistency of mental function, making the link between the past and the present by categorising and organising new information based on old memories. This leads us to question the presence of early maladaptive

schemas among victims of domestic violence. An individual apprehends the world through its subjectivity and does not register reality as it is but as they perceive it. "Cognitive schemas act as guide in interpreting information and in solving the problem" (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2005, p. 33–34) and are formed by diverse encounters with the environment. They are formed from early experiences and grow or continue to be fed and activated by different events throughout life. The schemas can be adaptive or maladaptive. There are early versus late schemas, positive versus negative (Young et al., 2005). Young defines early schemas as "an important and invasive model consisting of cognitions, memories, emotions and body sensations for oneself, one's relationships with others, formed during childhood, enriched throughout life and significantly dysfunctional, allowing the differentiation adaptive and maladaptive schema" (Young et al., 2005, p. 34). In this model, 18 maladaptive schemas are grouped into five categories of emotional needs (Young et al., 2005): (1) Disconnection and rejection domain (composed of schemas: emotional deprivation, abandonment, mistrust and abuse, social isolation and defectiveness/shame); (2) Impaired autonomy and performance domain (composed of schemas: failure, dependence/incompetence, vulnerability, enmeshment); (3) Impaired limits domain (composed of schemas: entitlement/grandiosity, insufficient self-control/self-discipline); (4) Other-directedness domain (composed of schemas: subjugation, self-sacrifice, approval-seeking and recognition); (5) Over vigilance and inhibition domain (composed of schemas: emotional inhibition, unrelenting standards, negativity/pessimism and punitiveness). Throughout a lifetime, maladaptive schemas are activated by life events that the subject unconsciously perceives as identical to traumatic events of his/her childhood. For J.E. Young, "maintaining the schemas would result from the need for cognitive continuity whose purpose is to maintain a stable vision of self and the world, even if it is actually inaccurate and erroneous" (Young et al., 2005, p. 34). The subject seeks in his/her current reality a situation that activates and confirms this schema and the subject tries to compensate.

In addition to the early schemas, personality also shows constant individual characteristics which organise the way a subject thinks and acts in different situations (Hansenne, 2013). Personality predisposes an individual to react in an identical way to a variety of similar stimuli; they determine unique adaptations to the environment (Allport, 1953; Purper-Ouakil, 2006). Personality develops through life events and determines, among other things, interactions with others. Several studies have demonstrated the consistency of temperament and personality from childhood to adulthood (Hagekull, 1994; Rutter, 1987). Development of personality is understood to be an epigenetic process in which temperament and character interact and influence behaviour (Luminet

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