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RECENT TRENDS IN EUROPEAN RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AND DEVI- ANCE IN SCHOOLS

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In the 1990s, most European countries and other rich countries outside the European Union witnessed an explosion of violence at school, As a social problem it was accompanied by a large number of measures purporting to deal with it. Researchers firstly tried to assess its scale and nature from a descriptive perspective. The task of explanation was generally slotted for the next stage. Can it be said that research on violence in schools has achieved a certain maturity? How is it structured in Europe? What are the principal results? What are the shadow areas? Have scholars managed to liberate themselves from the issue of the social problem of violence in school and the categories and interpretations that it imposes? Is the subject “violence in school” still feeling its way? How is it structured today, in



terms of definitions, concepts, methodologies? Which theories and disciplines have been given priority? Does public response take into account the knowledge produced by scholars? These are the main questions that researchers from ten European countries sought to address, namely from Germany, England, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal and Czech Republic¹. Whether they are European Treaty of Rome countries, or former East European countries, having recently joined the European Union, all these countries constitute a spectrum enabling one to gain an idea of the prevailing trends in European research on violence in schools and its varied development.

This text is not so much a catalogue of country-specific overviews (which we intend to publish later) or a reconstruction of results than an attempt to put into perspective European research trends, the underlying issues, the type of data available and what should be collected, but also questions and problems, which in some instances led to sustained exchanges during the workshop held in Paris from 8th to 10th January 2009², in the presence of all the rapporteurs of the above-mentioned countries. To put into perspective means sacrificing details and nuances but enables one to highlight the lines of force and examine the implications. Such are the objectives.

I - THE PRIMARY CONCERN : QUANTIFYING VIOLENCE

In view of the media hype on this subject, researchers sought to assess the scale of the phenomenon. To do this, the first reflex is to refer to institutional data, mostly judicial, and less to scholastic data, for it rarely exists. When it is available, it is insufficient or irrelevant for researchers who then try to come up with their own statistics. In the 1990s statistics that were primarily descriptive in nature were formulated, which borrowed the categories highlighted by public debates, politics and educational institutions... thus introducing in the classification of violence, behaviours whose modalities were conceived outside the scientific field. The correlations are moreover not often questioned, thus imposing an interpretation in terms of causal relations. The surveys that follow will be more attentive to these pitfalls, ranging from the production of descriptive statistics to explanatory statistics, in an attempt to objectify the phenomenon.

If today statistics provides more ample data on violence, it has not yet systematically started looking at violence *in school*. In some countries researchers use statistics enabling them to identify violence by adolescents, whether these deeds were committed in school or out-

1 We thank the contributors for their participation in this phase of the work, the preparation of the country-wise reports and for their active and constructive participation in the seminar.

2 This workshop was coordinated by Cécile Carra and Maryse Esterle-Hedibel (CESDIP-CNRS, IUFM-University of Artois). It is part of the study Coordinated Action for Assessing Deviance, Delinquency and Prevention in Europe [www.crimprev.eu]. This study, financed by the European Commission, has been conducted under the direction of René Lévy (CESDIP-CNRS).



side it. This approach, although it highlights the lack of statistics, often shows the secondary role attributed in general to contexts, and especially to school. The underlying problems are thus of juvenile delinquency highlighted by international surveys on self-reported delinquency (ISRD³ 1 and 2) or those on health disseminated by epidemiological investigations and international programmes (ESPAD⁴, HBSC⁵). Those that try and objectify the phenomenon within the context of the school are rare. We must however emphasise the importance of surveys on school bullying, particularly Olweus' (1999) questionnaire on "bullying/victims" and its variants. Even fewer are those that take into account not only the location of the school but also its role in engendering violence : we can however mention Debarbieux' (1996) questionnaire on victimization and the school environment, administered in France but also in other European countries: Germany, Belgium, England, Spain and Czech Republic.

Quantitative surveys, largely favoured, are however diversely systematised depending on the country. But some have managed to construct time series enabling a response to the recurrent question of the evolution of the phenomenon of violence. The results converge showing that violence has not increased. For all that, with media coverage of school bullying, and its new forms (especially cyber bullying), the issue has resurfaced again in these last few years in all its urgency and is resulting in fresh statistics. This preoccupation with quantifying the phenomenon, accompanied by a demand for international comparisons, makes us question the definition of violence and the categories employed in the various countries.

II - THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION : INFRINGEMENT OF NORMS, ANTISOCIAL AND HIGH-RISK BEHAVIOUR

The most widespread tendency is to consider violence in the broad sense, that is to say not reduce it to physical violence alone, nor restrict it to penal categories. The definitions retained, however, are part of different sets of problems. Three of them are highly favoured today :

- Olweus' definition (1999) is based on the concept of school bullying which supposes the student's intention to hurt, an imbalance between the players and repetitiveness of the acts. It focuses on inter-personal violence between students and sets out to assess the psycho-social risks that need to be forestalled.

- The definition of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2005) along with the categories selected in terms of the prejudice suffered or the damage caused, whose human, social and economic costs should be lowered : harm to oneself (attempted suicide, licit and illicit drug consumption....) or to others

3 *International Self Report Delinquency.*

4 *European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs.*

5 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children.*



(homicide, assault...), harm to society (vandalism, discrimination...). The key concept is thus “high risk-behaviours” that we find in particular in epidemiological investigations.

- A definition based on the definition of delinquency and retaining the penal categories while extending them to include “anti-social behaviour” (physical violence or threatening people, other forms of delinquent behaviour such as theft or drug abuse, offences linked to the status of minor such as going into cafes, infringement of established rules, especially school regulations). At the centre of this approach is the author and his intentionality.

All these definitions consider violence as stemming from the individual, in this case the student or the youth, the adolescent or the minor, and tend to identify with the concepts used : interpersonal violence, high-risk behaviour and antisocial behaviour. Despite these shared characteristics, to arrive at a common definition of violence is extremely difficult : should one start with the author and his intention in order to define violence, or with the victim and the prejudice he/she has suffered? This has attracted two major criticisms: it is possible that the author is not aware of the violence inherent in his behaviour while the victim does not realise that he/she is the victim. Whichever option is chosen, the author or the victim, difficulties persist in the determination of the categories selected, the recurrent questions being the seriousness of the act and the objectivity of the categories. Are playground brawls sufficiently serious to be included in the classification of violence? Is the ostracism category too subjective? A choice has to be made, a choice which will be based on the relationship with norms and the respective or supposed weight of the members within the work groups, where the data collection tools are conceived. It is a choice which will also result from the possibilities – particularly financial – in the offing depending on the particular category selected and more generally on the approach favoured.

Whatever the definition retained, the results converge to show that the very essence of violence is present in every day life in the form of micro-violence, minor victimizations, rudeness, disruption of school discipline and, in a broader sense, social law and order. Researchers talk of low intensity violence, below the penal threshold, and note the rarity of serious offences. This statement does not for all that lead to a rethink on the social cristalisation of this type of behaviour, unless the nominal criticism of media discourse can be so considered.



III - PRINCIPAL EXPLANATIONS AND UNDERLYING ISSUES : LACK OF SOCIALISATION, INADEQUATE INTEGRATION AND STAKEHOLDER STRATEGIES

Although there are more studies on violence in school since the 1990s, all research, especially in the beginning of this period, did not adopt an explanatory perspective but collected data from a descriptive point of view. Not having a theoretical framework, this data is generally constructed by making an inventory of problematic behaviours.

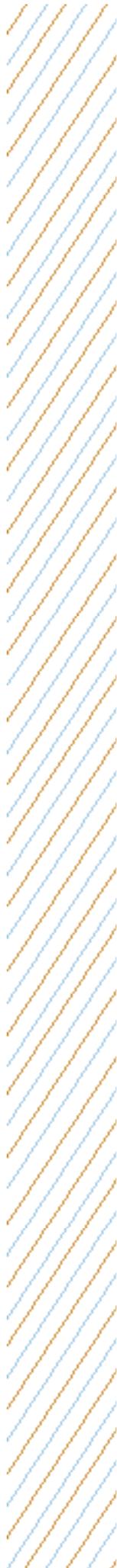
Research that has an explanatory focus is divided between two central issues. The first, the more classic one, is constructed on the paradigm of norms and deviances. At the centre of these problems we find anomie and social disorganisation, a lack of socialisation and inadequate integration resulting in the infringement of norms. Also on the margins can be seen cultural conflicts and stigmatisation that help in the construction of deviance. The second issue which is picking up rapidly has risks and prejudices for paradigm.

The player develops strategies on the basis of his interests, but these strategies stem from an inappropriate risk. This risk-taking is thus considered as a pathology that causes harm – ranging from self-harm to harm caused to the community – individual pathology (maladjustment of the individual, disrupted personal development) or social pathology (deficiency in the family environment, criminogenic environment). With regard to the first problem, the social order is ruled by norms; violence is an attack on the social order through the infringement of norms on which it is founded. As regards the second problem, the social order is based on inter-relations and violence is detrimental to this negotiated order.

Transversally, positivism and etiology are characteristic of the most stated trend. This involves finding out what distinguishes deviant individuals from others, deviance being considered as an attribute of the person. This trend coupled with the practical finalities of prevention and safety no doubt explains the success of the risk-factor approach. The acknowledged legitimacy of the social order shows implicitly.

IV - A MARKED INTEREST FOR THE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILIAL FACTORS BUT MUCH MORE MODERATE WHEN TAKING CONTEXTUAL FACTORS INTO ACCOUNT

The predominant tendency in research is to concentrate on individual and family-related factors. There appears to be a significant correlation between familial factors such as parental criminality, intra-family conflicts, parental violence, lack of control and a haphazard education (alternating between rigidity and indifference or permissiveness) or the poverty of the household, and the problematic behaviour of children. Gender (male) and age (between 12 and 16



years) are two factors on which there is consensus in the research on over-exposure to violence. Scholastic difficulties and membership of a delinquent peer group seem strongly correlated with the problematic behaviour of the individual. Some currents also highlight the correlation between low intelligence or socio-cognitive deficiency in individuals and their exposure to violence.

The introduction of contextual factors is today more frequent but few agree on the role attributed to them. Certain approaches attribute a minimal role to them. If we however examine the factors selected, they do not so much characterise the context as they refer to the individual. Thus, the factors selected for school are often confined to school failure, little attachment to the school, to absenteeism or dropping out, changing schools frequently, recurrent disciplinary problems and low participation in school activities. We thus learn nothing about its staff, its functioning, its organisation, its handling of violence, its atmosphere, etc., dimensions that are nevertheless important if we refer to sociological studies on education and organisations, studies that have enabled the sociology of the “school effect” to progress. They show that given a sociologically comparable environment, the school can make a difference by helping to minimise or exacerbate this phenomenon. These works, however, do not really appear to exercise an influence on the principal directions taken by research in terms of definition and explanation. On the contrary, the role of the school with regard to prevention is acknowledged at the outset, not only through the processes of socialisation which are at work, but also through the considerable development of programmes and actions that take place in school to prevent, detect, monitor, remedy high-risk behaviours. The principal representation, albeit implicit, is that of a school subject to violence which is extraneous to it and which it must deal with.

In many research studies the socio-political and economic context is also neglected and this non-contextualisation constitutes an obstacle to understanding the emergence of the social problem of violence in school. In such studies that speak of it certain elements are recurrent: educational reforms, with violence being interpreted as one of the effects of the mass man phenomenon; migratory flows, violence as the mark of a defective integration, a lack of socialisation and sometimes as a cultural characteristic; change in political systems and the problem of adjustment of values; globalisation of the economy and increasing social inequality. Links between the evolution of violence and disparities between countries, on the one hand, and the evolution of political and educational systems, on the other, need to be examined in greater depth.



V - SOLUTIONS: BETWEEN SOCIAL PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF RISK

The solutions for handling violence in school have increased in the last two decades, from the management of intra-class conflicts to the implementation of national or federal programmes and also governmental plans, from the policy adopted by the school to the creation of experimental schools, from team work to the partnership between school-police-justice, from citizenship to laws, including internal regulations... Political, institutional and professional mobilisation seems important even if it is differentiated and is sometimes reduced to declarations of intent or to vague local efforts.

Some of these solutions are closely linked to research such as programmes for preventing school bullying initiated by Olweus and adapted to other national contexts. The implementation of these prevention programmes has been extraordinary in European countries, including in the former East European countries, and beyond. Other solutions have apparently looser links with research just like safety measures, which have increased in several European countries as can be seen from the judicial production of the last few years with regard to juvenile justice. These solutions are in line with the radicalisation of professional practices, accompanied by an excess of regulations, tougher sanctions and greater referral of the cases to the courts. This last approach is an important dimension of the problem conceived in terms of risk management. It involves dissuading individuals from resorting to certain behaviours by making them aware of the risk they run of being awarded a heavy penalty. This punitive prevention is often coupled with situational prevention that attempts to prevent dangerous situations from occurring through the development of technological and human surveillance methods; this involves simultaneously preventing the risk of victimization. The assumption is that a high-risk individual carries out a rational analysis in terms of costs and benefits and because the repressive threat will make the costs side much heavier it will stop him/her from taking the ultimate step.

A third dimension is added to the risk management issue, namely prevention based on the identification of high-risk individuals, whose negative psycho-social evolution has to be rectified by acting on their direct environment. The assumption here is that the causes of high-risk behaviour are a dysfunctional individual and family. It is surprising to note in the context of risk management, the coexistence of an apparently contradictory conception of a high-risk individual, a rational agent in some cases, an individual whose behaviour is determined by individual and family deficiencies in others. Be that as it may, in each of these dimensions risk has to be managed from an essentially defensive posture.



At the same time, tending moreover to merge with the largely predominant approach of risk management, actions in line with the logic of social prevention are implemented. With regard to the latter, very diversely developed in the various countries, the alleged causes of the problem are dealt with by combating social and urban exclusion, school failure and dropping out of school. The idea behind this approach is that problems of violence arise from the living conditions of individuals. These solutions are accompanied by actions meant to contribute to the socialisation of the students as well as the parents. The acquisition of behavioural adequacy becomes a recurrent aim in a context where problems of violence are interpreted as relational or communicational problems. The shift is the made from social prevention to general prevention – or primary prevention – of high-risk behaviours.

VI - BY WAY OF CONCLUSION : PROBLEMS AND AVENUES FOR RESEARCH

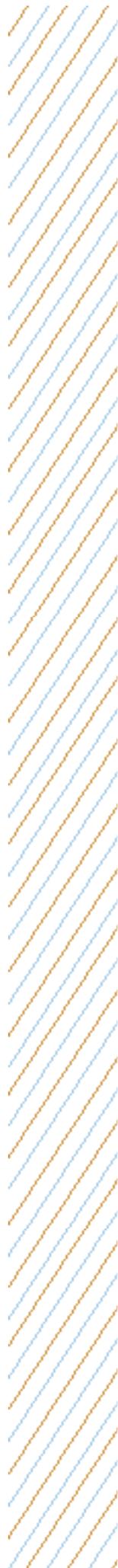
1 - Broaden the spectrum of populations to be surveyed

The focus on students, especially high school students, and the methodologies used explains the availability of data on him/her: age, sex, scholastic profile, ethnic affiliation... This latter variable however poses a problem in some countries while it constitutes a key criterion in others. Political controversies around this variable, contrary to others, weigh on its utilisation. Where data on this variable is available results tend to converge: students belonging to a particular ethnic minority are significantly over-represented in victimization, which is not the case among the authors of violence.

This data can also be applied to the family background of the student. We are however likely to be surprised by the quantity of data on the parents, especially as the latter are rarely investigated directly, in contrast to the students. It is true that access to families is difficult. Nevertheless, their role, especially of working class families, is greatly questioned in the genesis of violence, contrary to other major institutions of socialisation, such as school. Probably that is why the data on teachers is so scanty. In addition, there is also the fact of the strong resistance in professional circles to any investigation on teachers and their methods. Existing research however highlights the importance of the role that he/she plays, contributing to the process of construction or deconstruction of violence in teacher-student interactions.

2 - Diversify the theoretical-methodological approaches and re-open the issue

The quantitative approach is predominant, statistics plentiful. For all that, longitudinal surveys are rare. When they do not merely have a descriptive purpose, it is in their interest to objectify the phenomenon, identify the correlations. In the current prevailing trend, these



correlations are interpreted as just so many factors of risk – or protective factors. But this approach does not allow one to open the “black box”, to question the processes at work, to highlight the situations in which behaviours will be qualified as violent, to give an account of the interactions that promote violence. Qualitative research should be undertaken that is most suitable for describing these levels of analysis and which will help to enrich the explanatory perspectives.

In the present state of research on violence at school, the most interpretive currents, the most critical perspectives are marginalised. The social order and the inequalities that it produces, the ensuing social effects, are not sufficiently questioned in the production of violence. It is probably for this reason that data seems diversely contextualised. What role do the macro-social variables play in the phenomenon of violence? Here too, research is necessary to throw light on these questions, especially with regard to the comparative approach to national contexts. Responding to this questioning does not merely signify the additional research that should be conducted, especially as a certain number already exist, but it also involves theoretical reflection. The absence of theory, which we note in certain countries or in some research studies, fragilises the causal imputations that we can make on the basis of the correlations observed, without sophisticated statistical calculations being able to remedy this fact.

3 - Reviewing the categories of violence in order to rethink the definitions

A major concern surfaced during the seminar: to arrive at a common definition and homogenise the categories of violence in order to undertake comparative research. Common definitions exist nevertheless, especially those promoted by supranational bodies. If we think that the definition of violence is – too – broad, its theoretical aspect is quite poor, without taking into account the structural, symbolic and institutional violence. The categories retained are little subjected to deconstruction, the implications are not sufficiently examined. What do they reveal with regard to the functioning of our societies, the conceptions of childhood and the relationship with our youth, the role of the school, our relationship with deviance? Behind these words, categories, interpretations, solutions, it is the visions of the world, the normative and cultural patterns that are insidiously imposed on researchers. The constitution of the social problem of violence cannot be understood merely through changes in the students’ conduct. It assumes meaning within a context, constructs itself in the midst of social relationships where it becomes a stake in the ongoing power play, power to define what is violence, power to qualify what is violent, and power to determine the answers to be produced. Today violence in school which, let us remember, refers to everyday disorder in school and society, is essentially interpreted as an individual pathology, reassessing what was hitherto considered an achievement of multi-disciplinary research : the normality of deviance during adolescence....



Country-specific overviews :

Germany: Marek Fuchs, University of Kassel.

England: Carol Hayden, University of Portsmouth.

Belgium, Flanders: Johan Deklerck, Catholic University of Leuven (KULeuven).

Belgium, Walloon: Marie Verhoeven et Eliz Serhadlioglu, Catholic University of Louvain (UCL).

Spain: Anabel Rodríguez Basanta, Association Centro de Estudios de Seguridad.

Franc : Yves Montoya, University Victor Segalen, Bordeaux 2.

Italy: Franco Prina, University de Turin.

Lithuania: Robertas Povilaitis, President of the Lithuanian Association of Psychology.

Luxembourg: Georges Steffgen, University of Luxembourg.

Portugal: Susana Carvalhosa, University of Lisbonne.

Czech Republic: Magdalena Kohout-Diaz, IUFM d'Aquitaine, University of Bordeaux 2 and 4.

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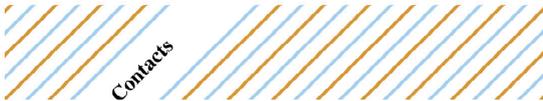
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