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Teaching with Media Violence to Explore a Public Health Problem: A Qualitative Study

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Keywords: media violence, critical media literacy, nursing education

Abstract: This action research study engaged students in a collaborative examination of the construction of knowledge about violence, by introducing critical media literacy through viewing and analysis of a violent film in the context of a class considering multiple aspects of violence as a public health problem.

Overview and Purpose

This study began when an English as Second Language (ESL) educator viewed an unapologetically violent film, *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006), and observed, “I don’t like violent films, but I can take the violence when it is from someone else’s perspective.” This aroused curiosity about how we construct knowledge of violence through media viewing. A family and community health nursing instructor shared her classroom to explore this question.

Critical education scholars argue for teaching critical media literacy skills, since media consumption is a significant part of contemporary life (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000), and they note the powerful way in which we learn about identities through our watching, sometimes in liberating ways or recreations of the status quo (Guy, 2007; Yosso, 2002). Adult education is beginning to explore the intentional use of media and popular culture for knowledge construction around gender, class, race and sexual orientation (Tisdell, 2007; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007). But this body of literature does not address violence, a ubiquitous aspect of popular media, and therefore, of our daily lives.

Research on media violence has focused on children for whom it has been declared a public health problem (Muscari, 2002; Rosenkoetter, et al, 2004; Trend, 2007). Although adults likely recognize the media violence as fabricated, there is no understanding of the effects of the bombardment of these clearly constructed images that reference nothing (Wright, 2007). The National Television Violence Study (Trend, 2007) revealed a complex picture that not all media violence is the same, and multiple factors influence our reactions, such as past experience and character likeability (Lachlan, 2005; Ruiz, 2001). Film use in the classroom to address violence is likely to arise as part of a peace curriculum (Gill, 2000), and films used, such as *Ghandi*, typically have a PG rating. The educative use of films with “problematic content” (e.g. sex, violence, and profanity) rarely appears in the literature, except for a reference to use in second language classes (Gareis, 1997) for learning about the dominant culture.

With worldwide violence identified as a major public health problem (WHO, 2002), there is a need for research on how people construct violence knowledge from media. The purpose of this study was to engage students in examination of the construction of knowledge about violence. This was done by introducing critical media literacy through viewing and analysis of a violent film, *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006), in a class considering multiple aspects of violence as a public health problem.

Theoretical Framework

Violence has a growing place in the nursing curriculum (Ross, Hoff & Coutu-Wakulczyk, 1998; Woodtli & Breslin, 2002), and research on effective teaching of nursing clinical thinking recommends interpretive pedagogies (Ironside, 2004). An ideal violence curriculum begins by exploring attitudes, providing an interactive environment, and acknowledging that students' attitudes arise from past experience. This means there is analysis through critical reflection on nurses' judgments about: society at the macro level, victims and perpetrators at the individual or interpersonal level, and nurses themselves at the professional level (Blair & Wallace, 2002; Fisher, 2002; Woodtli, 2000).

Such a curriculum was trialed in a previous forensic nursing course, to teach the ways violence changes people (Swartz, 2006). Those students watched and critically analyzed violent films. Students identified intended audiences, messages, and interests served, and analyzed the social implications through a lens including diversity and positionality. The films provided a counterpoint to readings on violence and healthcare, and supported processing of emotional reactions. There were no serious reactions to the film violence, and emotional responses were all managed through written responses to students' answers to critical media questions and during classroom discussions of the films.

The current study utilized critical media literacy theory (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000) and Yosso's (2002) perspective on media analysis. This assumes that media images are constructions, media makers bring experiences to their constructions, and consumers interact with media to construct meaning. Our action research also reflected postmodern and feminist post-structural concerns as we wanted students to: 1) realize differences in individual responses, based on interests and positionality relative to the dominant culture, and the historical and social contexts, and 2) consider how film contributes to relations of power and gender, since these are essential to most acts of violence. These theoretical groundings harmonized with the nursing theory already in use, in which health is a social construction that evolves from family, community, and environment (Denham, 2003).

Methodology

This qualitative action research study took place in a senior level, family and community nursing class with 23 (2 men, 21 women) practicing registered nurses (RN's): one Filipino male; two Puerto Rican females; one Anglo-Indian female; three women born or married into European refugee families; and the rest Euro-Americans. Action research was chosen to address a practical problem (Merriam & Simpson, 2000): helping students identify and relate violence in film to their understanding of violence as a health problem to promote action. The methodology used the four phases included in Kemmis & McTaggart's (2005) approach, a) planning, b) acting, c) observing, and d) reflecting. Half of the participants had completed an elective course in forensic nursing, which included a significant critical media literacy segment. They learned the concepts of critical media literacy, including forms of stereotypes perpetuated by media. For this project, critical media literacy concepts were reviewed briefly. Assigned readings addressed violence as a community health issue, and the media's potential influence as an informal educator. Prior to viewing the film, there was a discussion of media violence and students wrote a reflection paper on violence in relation to the nursing metaparadigm (see below), to students' professional nursing work, and to personal interactions with media violence. *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006), was chosen because of the prevalence of violence and bigotry. Following the film, students answered two additional questions related to their reactions to the film's violence and how it relates to their lives. Finally, they were interviewed by the researchers, in a focus

group setting, to discuss reactions and to elicit further information of interest regarding the students' views on violence.

Findings and Discussion

All 23 students viewed the film and participated in the focus group discussion. Five Euro-American females elected not to write the reflective paper. Two of those five were concurrently enrolled in the forensic nursing elective. The other three had never taken the forensic course.

Reflection Paper Prior to Viewing Film.

The reflection paper focused on beliefs about violence and participants' violent media viewing habits, structured on the nursing metaparadigm, since the pedagogical purpose was examination of a public health problem. Theoretical nursing science comes from seven practice models which share the concepts of person, health, environment, and nursing (Alligood & Tomey, 2006). Considering violence in relation to these concepts provided a context to think professionally, rather than respond emotionally with personal opinions. Questions about viewing habits were informed by work with the forensic nursing course, and included reflections about how the violent media makes them feel and what they might have learned.

Violence and person. Violence in relation to **Person** prompted 5 moral pronouncements that violence is always wrong, and yet one woman acknowledged that she would perpetrate violence to defend. Various explanations were offered for the violence/person interaction: evidence of a psychological/mental problem (4); expression of revenge with intent to cause physical harm (3); reactive emotional outburst involving anger (3); a natural part of human behavior/survival instinct (3); an attempt to educate and improve the world (1), presumably referring to law enforcement or military action. Most students described physical injury as a result of violence, but three expressed a more holistic perspective of effects impacting body, mind, and spirit. These holistic responses used descriptive language creating imagery of the crimes. Nine students discussed sources of this violence, agreeing that multiple environmental factors contribute, including exposure, genetics, intelligence and developmental factors, parental influences, and learning violence as victims. One participant labeled violence as a disease. Of note: Four students specified that they were answering the question based on their personal experiences with violence. These were the Puerto Rican and Anglo-Indian women and one woman married to an Eastern European refugee. They reported experiencing pervasive violence, linked with ethnic harassment and neighborhoods with shootings, and feeling anxious when thinking about this question. One would perpetrate violence in order to defend. One stated that most people avoid violence, but sports are an exception in U.S. culture.

Violence and health. Descriptions of **Health** and violence revealed the diversity of models guiding participants' nursing practice. Two-thirds implied health as a quality of the individual. Three demonstrated that this extends to families, and four described the health of communities and society, where health is linked holistically with meaning-making and racism. Only three limited their conception of individual health to the body, others noted health effects of violence on mind, body, emotions, and spirit. Six described a holistic understanding of the impacted individual. Health of victims was paramount. When perpetrators were mentioned, they were considered to have mental disorders or drug involvement. Positive expressions were outliers: two made hopeful remarks about treatment, and two noted that the use of violence can save a life. Medical concepts were psychiatric diagnoses as characteristic of perpetrators and possible effects for victims, stress as a mechanism of damage, well-being damaged, medical treatment for effects, and the burden, or the economic cost, to society.

Violence and environment. In almost all cases, violence in relation to **Environment** was construed as violence against individuals, but an understanding of the individual's embeddedness in the environment also existed. Three described forms of violence against nature. The group considered violence to be pervasive, existing within the environment for all society. There were no expressions of helplessness or blaming of others. Five students held our culture (e.g. social codes, expressions of freedom) responsible, and nine identified individual responsibility to choose wisely and to protect children, and consumer choices fueling what the media serves. There was general consensus that damage occurs with exposure which desensitizes, "normalizes", and teaches us how to perpetrate violence. Eleven students linked these processes to media, citing frequency of school shootings and hostage situations as evidence. One student believed that some adults do not distinguish non-news media violence as "fake", and this compounds the problem of desensitization. Another held the media responsible for creating stress in viewers, causing chronic stress. Two positive expressions were that it serves as an outlet (expressed by a male), and that people find reassurance in watching "good guys" foil the "bad guys" resulting in justice. These themes reappeared in students' media viewing patterns and informal learning from media violence.

Violence and nursing. Beliefs about violence and **Nursing** were the surprising to the ESL educator. Participants described situations in which nurses deal with violence, and their frequency; the effects of this aspect of their work; and what nursing responsibilities should include. Two students expressed frustration that nursing, centered in caring, is linked in any way to violence, its antithesis. Conception of frequency of nursing exposure was incidental, in other words, when extraordinary events occurred. Seven participants shared a similar perspective, reflecting their work outside acute care. The rest described violence as pervading their workplace, and one third noted daily exposure. Almost all identified involvement with treating victims, one third also treating perpetrators who frequently have psychiatric disorders. The surprise came with the one-third who described lateral violence (health care providers against each other, verbal or physical), and the same number noting violence against nurses by patients and family members. Three nurses asked whether healthcare itself is violent, making nurses perpetrators (i.e. surgery, multiple sticks to start an IV, etc.). Appropriate nursing responsibilities included response to disasters (3), being aware and observant to protect others and help victims escape (9), working to prevent violence and promote health (1), managing one's emotions without violence (1) and managing the workplace to discourage lateral violence and overworking (2). Stress on nurses was mentioned by 11 students. Possible consequences of stress are leaving nursing (1) or acceptance of a wrong situation such as lateral violence (1). Fourteen mentions were made of specific victim situations seen frequently and found disturbing: domestic violence, child abuse and shaken baby syndrome, drug-related crime, self-inflicted injuries including life threatening lifestyle choices, and babies born of rape.

Violence and media habits. Participants reflected on their favorite violent shows and films, showing diversity. Students are interested in crime programs and movies. 65% of TV programs fall into the crime genre (e.g. *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Prison Break*). 35% like the show *CSI* in its various locations. 59% choose the same genre in the movie theater. Other violent film choices include battles of good vs. evil (e.g. *James Bond*, *The Matrix*, *Braveheart*, *Lord of the Rings*), gangster films (e.g. the *Godfather* series, *American Gangster*), action films (e.g. *Die Hard*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Boondock Saints*), horror and psychological thrillers (e.g. *Devils Rejects*, *Saw*, *Silence of the Lambs*), one war film and one western. Whether these choices are an indication of the offerings available for entertainment or due to a real interest in these types of

programs/films is unclear. There was one outlier in the group: a woman who does not watch any TV or violent films.

Many participants indicated that their interest was due to the suspense or mystery of the unsolved crime (6), the fighting between good guys and bad guys (5), and the familial relationships that develop amidst the violence (3). The CSI viewers described enjoying the suspense and puzzle being solved where good guys win and bad guys are brought to justice. They expressed interest in “understanding the other side” to do their jobs better, be helpful to people, or protect themselves.

The film favorites group was referred to specific big name actors they enjoy and their appreciation for true stories and the realism of the contextual presentation in films. This is also where classic hero stories were chosen: “the one who cares more for the greater good than for self” and “protection of the innocent.” Interestingly, although almost all students described having some negative emotions associated with viewing violent media, four of them stated that the abhorrent violence was justified against the bad guys. Five others found reassurance in watching justice being served. For example, one female student indicated that her favorite movie is *Braveheart*, in which the main character fights for his country and takes revenge for the killing of his wife and countrymen. She found herself thinking that violence in this situation was acceptable. Another interesting piece of information surrounds the fiction presented on the screen. Five students described pleasure in body experiences such as an adrenalin rush and laughter. The students clearly understand that the programs and movies are fictional, but state that the films are reflecting the reality in society. One student commented that “almost everyone seemed willing to accept this movie as factual.” The most frequently named type of learning (8) was some form of learning who not to trust, to include the justice system which is seen as failing. Finally, some participants also included unsolicited remarks about the things they do not enjoy, specifically naming “gory” scenes with “blood and guts.” The responses to how they feel and what they learn when they watch the violence ranged from simply viewing an entertaining program to feeling frightened, angry, and hopeless. The two male students stood out in clarifying that they do not have emotional experiences while viewing. For them, it is an entertaining escape, a dream world, where they disconnect from practical demands. They like watching action and enjoy the humor connected with violence. What they claim to learn is that emotions cannot be controlled, but our actions can be, and to laugh at things that bother us which we can not change. These responses were not echoed by any of the female students.

Reflections Following the Film

After viewing the film, participants wrote answers to questions related to the movie and their views on the violence in the film. They commented on how the movie relates to their personal experience. This was followed by the focus group discussion, an unstructured exchange of ideas, started off by the researchers using the ideas expressed in the previewing responses.

Reactions to the violence in the film. The catalyst for this study was the ESL educator’s different reaction to the violence in *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006), compared with other violent films. The filmmakers appear to want the audience to view the violence through the eyes of the main character in most scenes, seeing his reactions to it, rather than the violence itself. Students varied in response, but this discussion opened the way for examining some past experiences. Participants reflected on this perspective and commented on their reactions. Five participants agreed with the acceptability of this violence compared with other films. Nine students experienced no difference. Other reflections were the graphic violence, not all of which was reacted to negatively. Some students were tense, disgusted, and upset, while another saw humor

in it. Two commented that they were unaffected, “not shocked anymore” and “have been desensitized by society.” Another noted that punching was not bothersome at all, but the “blood spatter” and “head shots” were more alarming. For those who mentioned the binary good guy-bad guy nature of the film, they were bothered when “good guys” were killed, but found it easy to “dismiss the violence to the bad guys.” A few participants commented on how the violence in the film was more “realistic.” Perceptions of the violence may be different for this group which observes the results of violence regularly.

Relating the violence to their professional and personal lives. When reflecting on how the film relates to their lives, many saw no connection. This was surprising to the ESL instructor, who expected nurses to relate to many aspects of the film. Only 6 participants made a direct connection. Two made indirect connections, and two connected a little to the violence. Three saw no connection to the content, indicating that there are not mobsters or gangs in this area.

Focus group discussion. This process led easily to the primary question of perspective. Two areas of thought also appeared in their previous reflections: 1) effects of environment and family, and 2) illumination into the lives of those experiencing violence. The degree of students’ frustration with workplace exposure to violence and the actions they take to avoid it and protect themselves, particularly emotionally, emerged. They appear to be using the violent media as a learning tool to inform their professional practice about issues with which they have little or no personal experience.

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The remainder of references are available upon request.