

15. Child-to-Parent Violence—Raising Preventive Awareness

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Abstract: Child-to-parent violence refers to a type of intrafamily violence of an ascending nature, characterized by aggressions perpetrated by children against their parents. This phenomenon has deserved exponential interest among the academic community and society in general, as a result of the greater visibility it has received. It was referenced for the first time in the late 1950s, when it was originally called “battered parent syndrome”, and predominantly focused on the permissive attitudes of mothers in response to the aggression of sons and daughters. Despite more than half a century having passed, this type of violence still constitutes a rather hidden problem. This chapter aims to synthesize the main research findings on the phenomenon and contribute to making this social and public health problem visible. It is concluded that the phenomenon emerges from the complementarity of a set of family, educational, social, and personal risk factors on which it is necessary to act.

1. Introduction

Child-to-parent violence (CPV) was defined between the 1950s and 1980s as “battered parent syndrome” (Harbin and Madden 1979) and comprises a subtype of intrafamily violence that has only recently, per some international studies, been unveiled. Accordingly, several definitions have been proposed (Cottrell 2001; Cottrell and Monk 2004; Ibabe et al. 2007) and their combination allows for the phenomenon to be conceptualized as ascending violence perpetrated by children against parents, including all acts of psychological, physical, or financial abuse to inflict pain or suffering and gain control (Cottrell 2001). It manifests itself repeatedly, excluding all isolated cases related to substance use, the presence of mental illness, and mental disability (APAV 2015).

CPV, given its complexity, is a phenomenon of challenging conceptual delimitation, particularly regarding the phase of the life cycle (i.e., what is meant by normative or disruptive behaviors associated, for example, with adolescence or childhood). Indeed, this phenomenon has mostly been investigated from samples of families with adolescent children (e.g., Eckstein 2004) and has been punctuated in the context of youth violence (e.g., Rossi and Rossi 1990; Ulman and Straus 2003). The predominance of discourse and institutional and legal practices also seem to contribute to ignoring the possibility of parents experiencing violence from their children (Holt 2009). Moreover, all violence phenomena are demarcated by a succession of previous, multicausal indicators, in which intrapersonal, family, and socio-community variables interact.

The literature on CPV has mostly focused on predictive and risk factors (Ibabe et al. 2013), family characteristics (e.g., Cottrell and Monk 2004), and prevalence. Notably, some have focused on children aged between 10 and 18 years (Ibabe and Jau-reguizar 2011), indicating that the quantitative and qualitative increase in antisocial behavior is more frequent in the middle period of adolescence (Vázquez 2003).

Further, the international guideline of the World Health Organization (WHO 2002) regarding the risk of fragmentation of intrafamily violence phenomena through

their specialization seems to constitute one more factor for the concealment of the phenomenon. However, it seems to be extremely important to analyze the differences that CPV presents relative to other types of domestic violence.

Despite the almost totality of available data relating to childhood and adolescence, this study will examine the phenomenon across the different stages of the life cycle, similar to the Portuguese Association for Victim Support (APAV 2015), holding that violence persists throughout the various stages of the family life cycle, although the problem may have emerged in childhood or adolescence and there are other specializations; that is, violence against the elderly.

2. Components of Child-to-Parent Violence

The literature adopts a set of components associated with CPV: acts of psychological abuse (verbal, non-verbal, and emotional, which implies attacking a person's feelings and affective needs, causing personal conflicts and frustration, including ignoring, humiliating the parent, threatening, lying, and insulting), physical abuse (which integrates behaviors that can result in bodily harm, such as hurting someone through objects, weapons, or using body parts to slap, hit, and push), and financial abuse (which includes conduct such as theft, sale or destruction of objects, and unauthorized and abusive use of bank cards by children) to inflict pain or take control (Cottrell 2001; Eckstein 2004).

In the Portuguese national context, the registered criminality regarding CPV distinguishes it as a form of domestic violence that can be understood in the "broad sense" (e.g., robbery, theft, rape, violation of correspondence, violation of the home, and disruption of private life) or in the "strict sense," including threats and coercion, insults or defamation, physical abuse, and psychological abuse (APAV 2017b).

3. Prevalence, Incidence, and Sociodemographic Characteristics of Child-to-Parent Violence

The theoretical-conceptual fragility inherent to the CPV, the definition of the population regarding age group, and the instruments used to assess the phenomenon justify the challenge in actually estimating this problem (Aroca-Montolío et al. 2014; Estévez and Navarro-Góngora 2009; Ulman and Straus 2003). Moreover, other related aspects, such as shame, the myth of family harmony, the fear of the child's reaction (APAV 2015; García and Tercero 2006), or the repercussions that a complaint may have for the child constitute elements that contribute to the invisibility of this phenomenon. The number of relevant epidemiological studies is also not conclusive. Nevertheless, some efforts have been made to characterize CPV and its prevalence. In a Canadian context, Cottrell and Monk (2004) estimated that 9% to 14% of the parents studied had already suffered an episode of violence perpetrated by their child.

The phenomenon was also analyzed by Cyrulnik (2005), who concluded that CPV had a prevalence of 1% in French families, 4% in Japanese families, and 6% in American families. The author adds that, in one generation, CPV "acquired global dimensions."

In Spain, and based on court cases involving adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18, the results indicate that the prevalence of CPV of the physical abuse type is around 3.1% and that of psychological abuse is 12.9% (Rechea and García 2008).

Regarding sociodemographic variables, studies, in general, indicate that CPV is mostly perpetrated by males (Aroca-Montolío et al. 2014); however, in other

studies, an equal prevalence was found in sons and daughters, with daughters most frequently using psychological violence and sons using physical violence (Gómez-Guadix and Calvete 2012).

Regarding the age of the children, it seems that the phenomenon occurs between 10 and 17 years of age (Cuervo García and Alberola 2010; Rechea and García 2008; Walsh and Krienert 2009).

For the age of the parents, the data indicate that this issue is more prevalent in parents aged between 40 and 50 years (Edenborough et al. 2008; Howard and Rottem 2008; Stewart et al. 2006), although other studies indicate that the phenomenon occurred in half of the cases with parents between 35 and 44 years of age and that in a third of the sample, the fathers or mothers were over 45 years old (Walsh and Krienert 2009).

In Portugal, studies on this phenomenon are also scarce, although there are some data available from 2004 onwards (APAV 2012). The results indicate that in a period of nine years (2004–2012; APAV 2012), 3988 CPV processes were registered. From all these processes, 81% of the victims were female. In 40% of the cases, the victims were over 65 years of age. The aggressors were mostly boys or sons (71%), aged between 26 and 45 years old (42.9%). Regarding the type of crimes perpetrated against the parents, psychological abuse (34.5%), physical abuse (28.4%), and the crime of threats or coercion (18.8%) were identified.

In the 2013–2015 period, APAV (2017b) registered 1777 CPV processes. The tendency for victims to be mostly women (83.4%; $n = 1482$) and aged 65 years or older remained. Concerning the perpetrators of the crime, the number of victims exceeded 1894, and, in more than 65% of the situations, the perpetrator of the crime was male, aged between 36 and 45 years old (93%).

Such victimization continued and lasted from two to six years (14.4%). Regarding the location of the crime, more than 60% of cases occurred in a common residence, and about 30% occurred in the victim's residence (APAV 2017b).

Considering the trend during the 12 years of analysis (APAV 2012, 2017a) regarding the age of the victim, it is useful to analyze another particular phenomenon: "Elderly people [as] victim[s] of crime and violence" (APAV 2017c). This analysis shows the registration of 3612 cases in the 2012–2016 period. Of all elderly victims, 80% were women, and, in almost 40% of the cases, they had a parental relationship with the perpetrator of the crime. The age of the victim seems to have an inverse relationship with that of victimization; that is, the registration of cases is mostly identified in the age group between 65 and 69 years and 70 and 74 years. In more than 65% of situations, the perpetrator was male (APAV 2017c). Recent data from 2021 to 2024 (SIC Notícias and Lusa 2025) reinforces and intensifies this scenario. On average, APAV supported 1730 elderly victims annually, with 76.2% being women and an average age of 76 years. Notably, 34.5% of aggressors were the victim's own children; this was a sharp increase from previous years. Male aggressors remain the majority, comprising 56.7% of the identified perpetrators.

The data illustrates that elder abuse is not only persistent but intensifying over time. As Alves and Serrão (2017, p. 1) note, this violence remains "one of the most hidden forms of conflict between families", rendering it both socially obscured and academically overlooked. Recognizing this issue as a global social concern is urgent, as it threatens "the right to dignity and the exercise of human rights" (Alves and Serrão 2017, p. 1).

Despite the substantial number of recent decades, this phenomenon remains largely overlooked, highlighting a pressing need for greater visibility, understanding, and intervention.

4. Explanatory Models of Child-to-Parent Violence

Several models have been presented to explain the CPV phenomenon. In general, they can be classified into three broad categories:

- (1) Models based on Learning Theories (Bandura's Social Learning Theory; Patterson's Coercion Theory);
- (2) Models based on the Ecological Theory of human development (e.g., Cottrell and Monk's (2004) Multifactorial Model; Wolfe et al.'s (1997) Tunnel of Violence;
- (3) Models based on Aspects of Social Control, Differential Association, and stressors (e.g., Micucci's VFP Symptomatic Cycle 1995).

The first set of models includes the Theory of Social Learning (Bandura 1992), which explains the phenomenon of violence as modeling the violent behaviors observed in the family context, and the Reciprocal Coercion Model (Patterson 1992), which explains that the origin and maintenance of behavior problems are based on challenges in socialization processes. According to Paterson et al. (2002), CPV stems from the influence of exposure to gender violence, conflicts, and various family problems. This model highlights ineffective educational styles (i.e., permissiveness, neglect, and lack of affection) and exposure to violent behavior.

Considering the Social Learning Theory, Ibabe and Jaureguizar (2011) posit that the frequent observation of parental conflicts is a key dimension of the family system that contributes to the development of aggressiveness and antisocial behavior in young people. They conclude, therefore, that learning plays an important role in the acquisition of violent behavior and attitudes through vicarious learning and imitation of the behavior of attachment and authority figures.

In the second category of CPV explanatory models, the Multifactorial Model by Cottrell and Monk (2004) stands out. In this model, violence results from the interaction between the effects of culture (macrosystem), subculture (exosystem), family (microsystem), and individual/learned (ontogenetic) characteristics. In general terms, Cottrell and Monk (2004) expose different factors that seem to predict CPV, organizing them around different levels of analysis: (a) the macrosystemic level: the models inherent to gender roles and exposure to violence through the media; (b) the exosystemic level: phenomena such as poverty, family stress, peer group influence, social isolation and lack of social support; (c) microsystemic level: integrates the child's inappropriate styles, marital conflicts and problems in resolving family conflicts; and (d) ontogenetic factors: integrating elements such as poor attachment relationships between parents and children, mental health problems, and use of psychoactive substances.

The third category includes the CPV Symptomatic Cycle by Micucci (1995). Micucci (1995) argues that the family with a CPV situation is excessively concerned with eliminating or controlling the symptom, to the extent that the other aspects of family life are neglected. The adolescent child is tagged as the "problem"; thus, the family fails to invest in and respond positively to the child. The child, in turn, feels misunderstood and fails to experience the family as a source of support and guidance. These rigid interactions continue the cycle of violence.

5. Risk Factors of Child-to-Parent Violence

Accordingly, to understand the phenomenon and realize that the variables that induce a greater probability of occurrence and maintenance of CPV are multiple and interacting, several authors have dedicated themselves to its study. In 2015, Martínez et al. (2015) conducted a bibliographic review, based on the Ecological Model of Cottrell and Monk (2004), which allowed for the synthesis of individual, family, and school risk factors that commonly contribute to the initiation and maintenance of the phenomenon.

Regarding individual factors, Martínez et al. (2015) conclude that children have certain conditions such as low empathic capacity, high impulsivity, low frustration tolerance, low self-esteem, challenges in expressing emotions, little capacity for introspection, and predominance of external locus of control.

However, concerning family factors, educational styles, types of family configuration and socioeconomic levels have been studied the most. Martínez et al. (2015), conclude that the negligent style, the authoritarian style, and the overprotective style seem to be the styles that most favor violent dynamics. They also note that different educational styles used by the mother and father are, per some studies, risk factors (Martínez et al. 2015).

Regarding family configuration, some studies indicate that the phenomenon occurs mainly in single-parent families, others indicate a nuclear-type configuration, and others indicate that adoptive families bear the greater risk. Therefore, risk can occur in any family, regardless of its configuration (Martínez et al. 2015). Concerning the socioeconomic level, in the same review, Martínez et al. (2015), conclude that the phenomenon is transversal to all families, regardless of their socioeconomic levels; that is, “in relation to school factors considered to be at risk for CPV, low school performance, learning difficulties, school absenteeism, adaptation difficulties emerge” (Martínez et al. 2015).

6. Ethical Issues Associated with Child-to-Parent Violence

The exercise of the prescribed and explicit power that parents are expected to hold in the exercise of their parental functions is concealed by violence and the disqualification of the adult exercised by a child. Power, unlike violence, is a responsible action, where interaction occurs as an opening to the other. As Foucault (1995, p. 243) distinguishes, “a relationship of violence acts on a body, on things; it forces, it submits, it breaks, it destroys, it closes all possibilities... A relationship of power, on the contrary, is articulated on two elements that are indispensable to it because it is precisely a power relation: that the ‘other’ (the one over whom it is exercised) be fully recognized and maintained until the end as the subject of the action; and that before the power relationship, a whole field of answers, reactions, effects, possible inventions opens.”

All phenomena of violence are characterized by intersubjective social relations embodied by oppression, submission, intimidation, and fear. All violence is a violation of human rights, an annulment of dignity, and a loss of identity for the subject, as a man or woman, as a mother or father, and as a person who cares.

The data presented highlights that the female subject is the most prevalent target of the phenomenon and, thus, gives continuity to the experiences of gender inequalities. It also represents, in this form of violence, the cultural introjection of

the lesser value socially given to women, which has somewhat been acculturated and legitimized.

When children attack their mother, this violence is nothing less than an attempt to gain illegitimate power, a literal inversion of power and control, through force in acts or symbolic equivalents, exercised by the child over the parental figure.

The evoked feelings, such as fear, shame, and humiliation, characterize the great emotional tension generated in these relationships, to which feelings of guilt and hopelessness are added, enhancing inertia. The fear that this phenomenon triggers in parents, regarding their physical integrity and the effect it has on other elements of the family system, facilitates the paralysis and maintenance of violent behavior. The parent avoids sharing the phenomenon of victimization with other people given the feeling of guilt in the face of abuse and an almost global perception of lack of resources and specialized support, generating greater distance and social isolation (Routt and Anderson 2011). However, shame, fear, and guilt can function as mechanisms for minimizing or denying the situation of violence in defense of maintaining a harmonious family image, which leads to an increasingly expansive tolerance of violence before the request for help (e.g., Ibabe et al. 2007).

Feelings of shame and guilt are moral emotions, linked to self-conscience (Tangney and Dearing 2002) and the experimentation and experience of adverse situations from the violation of social and moral norms. They motivate intrapsychic suffering and occur in response to failures and transgressions—self-committed and -evaluated. They are intense, dysphoric emotions, involving serious and lasting situations, encompassing substantial feelings of responsibility (Tangney et al. 1996). Shame, when involving a negative self-assessment, questions self-identity.

Guilt occurs when there is a negative self-assessment of one's behavior and when an obligation emerges to repair the negative action. Thus, the individual recognizes the action as his own and feels responsible for the damage and pain caused to the other. In a situation of violence, the whole family system is disturbed, hindered in its developmental spiral, where the need for help is evoked amid suffering of which everyone is a part. Intervening in violence and curbing it is an act of citizenship because "from the social point of view, the opposite of violence is not non-violence, it is citizenship, and the appreciation of human life in general and of each individual in the context of their group" (Minayo and Souza 1997, p. 528).

The denunciation of this phenomenon by the mother or father also sheds light on the feeling of impotence that hangs in the relational system. Faced with all such complexity, it is necessary, when confronted with CPV, to embrace three essential ethical components: recognition of people's dignity, respect for others, and human values.

Responsibility is simultaneously assigned to the State, the family, and society. Facing the CPV phenomenon does not end with blaming the family, the child, and their punishment; it is necessary to offer opportunities for change.

7. Conclusions

Prevalence studies in the last few decades led us to conclude that the explanatory complexity of the problem translates into conceptualization and operationalization, thus constituting a phenomenon where several risk factors intervene that condition the interpersonal relationships of individuals, exposing them to acts of violence. The need for larger and higher-quality studies to obtain robust data on this phenomenon is evident. Finally, every intervention must be punctuated by support mechanisms

for the family, helping it in the multiple challenges it faces, such as financial limits and resources, availability, and emotional limits, to withstand the wear and tear inherent in life in general and family life.

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