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# Intrafamiliar abuse in the childhood of men criminally prosecuted for domestic violence

Abuso intrafamiliar na infância de homens em processo criminal por violência conjugal  
Abuso intrafamiliar en la infancia de los hombres en proceso penal por violencia conyugal

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## Keywords

Domestic violence; Child; Men's health; Nursing;  
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## Descritores

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Unveil the intrafamiliar abuse experienced in the childhood of men criminally prosecuted for domestic violence.

**Methods:** A qualitative study was undertaken, based on the theoretical framework proposed by Walter Benjamin. The data were collected through interviews with 23 men who were being criminally prosecuted for domestic violence in a Court for Domestic and Family Violence against Women in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, which were categorized with the help of Nvivo-11 and organized by means of the Collective Subject Discourse. **Results:** The statements evidenced a childhood marked by lack of affection, experiences of physical and psychological violence, expressed through body marks, false imprisonment and fear, as well as witnessing domestic violence between the parents. While appointing the trauma of this experience, the study alerts that the collective subject finds himself reproducing the same paternal attitudes in his marital relationship. **Conclusion:** The experience of a childhood marked by intrafamiliar violence signals the intergenerational nature of domestic violence, reflected in the abusive marital relationships.

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Desvelar o abuso intrafamiliar vivenciado na infância de homens em processo criminal por violência conjugal.

**Métodos:** Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, fundamentado no referencial teórico proposto por Walter Benjamin. A coleta de dados ocorreu por meio de entrevistas com 23 homens que estavam respondendo judicialmente por violência conjugal em uma Vara de Violência Doméstica e Familiar contra Mulher da cidade de Salvador, Bahia, Brasil, as quais foram categorizadas com o apoio do Software Nvivo-11 e organizadas através do Discurso do Sujeito Coletivo.

**Resultados:** As falas evidenciaram uma infância marcada pela falta de afeto, vivência de violência física e psicológica, expressa pelas marcas corporais, cárcere privado e amedrontamento, bem como o testemunho da violência conjugal entre os pais. Ao tempo que aponta para o trauma dessa vivência, o estudo alerta que o sujeito coletivo percebe-se reproduzindo, em sua relação conjugal, as mesmas atitudes paternas.

**Conclusão:** A experiência de uma infância marcada por violência intrafamiliar sinaliza o caráter intergeracional da violência doméstica, refletida nas relações conjugais abusivas.

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Desvelar el abuso intrafamiliar experimentado en la infancia de los hombres en un proceso penal por violencia conyugal.

**Métodos:** Se trata de un estudio cualitativo, basado en el marco teórico propuesto por Walter Benjamin. La recolección de datos ocurrió por medio de entrevistas con 23 hombres que respondían judicialmente por violencia conyugal en una Vara de Violencia Doméstica y Familiar contra la Mujer de la ciudad de Salvador, Bahia, Brasil, las cuales fueron categorizadas con el apoyo del Software Nvivo-11 y organizadas a través del Discurso del Sujeto Colectivo.

**Resultados:** Las declaraciones mostraron una infancia marcada por la falta de afecto, la experiencia de la violencia física y psicológica, expresado por las marcas corporales, detención ilegal e intimidación, así como el testimonio de la violencia conyugal entre los padres. Al mismo tiempo que apunta el trauma de dicha experiencia, el estudio advierte que el sujeto colectivo se percibe reproduciendo, en su relación conyugal, las mismas actitudes paternas.

**Conclusión:** La experiencia de una infancia marcada por la violencia intrafamiliar señala el carácter intergeneracional de la violencia doméstica, la cual se refleja en las relaciones de pareja abusivas.

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## Introduction

Domestic violence has severe repercussions for the health of all concerned, especially for children and adolescents. Any means of abuse directed at children or adolescents by people who are considered a family nucleus even if they do not have a blood relation is called intrafamilial.<sup>(1)</sup> When they witness or experience the problem, they can assimilate this type of behavior as natural, reproducing it in adult life.<sup>(2)</sup>

This context further undermines these children because they remain in violent family relationships. In addition, living in an environment permeated by this problem entails serious damage to the construction of the children's personality, as this upbringing that starts from birth is often delineated based on what one sees in the parents.<sup>(3,4)</sup>

Studies reveal the magnitude of violence against children and adolescents. The United Nations Children's Fund estimates that every seven minutes, a child or adolescent dies as a result of this affront.<sup>(5)</sup> In Brazil, statistics show that, in 2015, more than 56,000 violent deaths were reported, 18.4% of which involved people under the age of 19.<sup>(6)</sup> Regarding morbidity, data show that, in 2014, more than 97 thousand cases of child/adolescent victims of violence were attended in the Unified Health System (SUS), the large majority of which were domestic abuses.<sup>(7)</sup>

Despite the high rates, the actual number of children and adolescents living in domestic violence is not known. This under-registration is related to the silence that permeates the domestic space,<sup>(8)</sup> given the scarce resources children have to ask for help. There are also feelings of fear and guilt in denouncing their parents, who are the main perpetrators sometimes.<sup>(5,9)</sup>

This reality leads to the adults' demoralization of children's speech, becoming even more pronounced the younger they are. Even if children are able to verbalize the aggressive daily life, their story may be met with disbelief, making the experience long-lasting or naturalized and reproduced in future relationships.<sup>(2)</sup>

Research across the world demonstrates the transgenerational character of domestic violence.<sup>(10,11)</sup> Nevertheless, the vast majority of studies focus on the female perspective.<sup>(11,12)</sup> Understanding the importance of research that may favor the unveiling of the transgenerational characteristic of domestic violence from the viewpoint of men, the following question is raised: how was the experience of intrafamilial abuse in the childhood of men criminally prosecuted for domestic violence? Thus, this article aimed to unveil the intrafamilial abuse experienced in the childhood of men criminally prosecuted for domestic violence.

## Methods

This study with a qualitative approach was based on the theoretical framework proposed by Benjamin, which rests on the conception that the life trajectory of people is influenced by their social relations and renewed daily through human actions.<sup>(13)</sup> Thus, one assumes that the past can influence future perspectives.

The place of study was a Court of Domestic and Family Violence against Women in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The study collaborators were 23 male defendants criminally prosecuted for domestic violence, who were already linked to the parent project, and this was the means used to approach the participants. During the hearings, the social worker of the institution mentioned invited them to join the umbrella project and, afterward, made available to the researchers the list with the names and telephone numbers of the men who accepted to participate in the project. The following inclusion criteria were adopted: responding to criminal prosecution at the court in question; having been arrested as a result of domestic violence; being in good emotional conditions to report their life stories.

After being informed about what it was, two of the possible participants did not agree to the survey, justifying that they did not like to talk about it. The study complied with other ethical precepts of research involving human beings, also recommended in National Health Council Resolution 466/12,



*by my mother and she scorned us and was aggressive every day. That marked my childhood very much! (I5, I8, I16, I20).*

## Central idea 2 – Experiencing the physical and psychological violence

The men's childhood was also permeated by the experience of physical and psychological violence, expressed by the corporal marks, false imprisonment and fear. The discourse also denotes the association between alcohol and aggressive behavior, as well as the male understanding that it consists of a way of educating.

*I was very mistreated in my childhood. My parents educated my brothers and me very severely. My father stepped on our heads, beat with wood and a belt to the extent of leaving physical marks on the body. I have marks on my body to this day. He drank a lot, then beat me up, left me locked up in the wardrobe. I was so nervous that I did my physiological needs right there. When my father came near me, I trembled with fear. [...] he liked it, he was happy to do that! (I1, I4, I3, I7, I15, I18, I19).*

## Central idea 3 - Witnessing the domestic violence between the parents

The discourse reveals that the interviewees' childhood was marked by constant marital violence between the parents, with repercussions, like the abortion and the woman's (mother) death. While appointing the trauma of this experience, the study alerts that the collective subject finds himself reproducing the same paternal attitudes in his marital relationship. Alcohol again appears as an element associated with aggressive conduct.

*My parents' life together was complicated because my father used to be drunk and very violent. He assaulted my mother a lot. My brothers and I witnessed everything, we saw a lot of her suffering. I saw my mother having an abortion because of my father's physical aggression, and it was not just once. One day, they were fighting in the street over another woman and she threw herself under a*

*car. They say he pushed her but, as I was small, I have no recollection. Seeing her under the car was the most striking moment of my life. My mother died out of love for him. All this traumatized me, but there are times that I keep thinking because I did the same: I also mistreated my wife. I think I learned to be like him (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I7, I10, I11, I13, I15, I19, I21).*

## Discussion

The discourse of criminally prosecuted men unveiled a childhood marked by domestic violations. This is so because, from an early age, they witnessed daily violence between their parents and experienced physical and psychological aggression and neglect. Those negative experiences in childhood have subjective and particular meanings, based on what each man experienced and how it affected him.<sup>(13)</sup>

The lack of affection associated with omission and/or parental hostility, revealed in the study, represented a behavior of emotional neglect and strongly marked these men's lives. Parental omission represents a violation of the fundamental rights of the child, including family life, as recommended in art. 19 of the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent; and to know their own paternity, in accordance with art. 226, subsection 7 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution.<sup>(15)</sup>

Parental absence leads to discussions about socio-affective parenting and civil responsibility for the abandonment of children. Considered as a child's right and a legal obligation of the parents, in Brazil, non-compliance with this right implies claims to compensate for emotional damage, which represents a form of moral compensation for paternal/maternal absence.<sup>(16)</sup> The right to healthy parenting is also advocated in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, which established legislation to strengthen the responsibility of parents to meet the needs of their children. It is believed that, having their rights attended to, children develop their emotional needs in a positive way.<sup>(17)</sup>

Whether committed by the father or mother, the failure to meet the affective demands of the child,



considered a severe expression of psychological violence, generates painful feelings of abandonment, insecurity, loneliness, as well as low self-esteem and difficulty to relate, behaviors perceived since childhood and which interfere in adult life, in view of the cognitive and mental harm.<sup>(18,19)</sup>

Following Benjamin's point of view, the situations of violence experienced in childhood had a singular effect on the lives of the interviewed men.<sup>(13)</sup> Some actions of psychological abuse can be evidenced in the collective discourse, such as the father's cruel intention to frighten him with his presence and arbitrary imprisonment in the wardrobe, where he came to do his physiological needs. In this case, the father's dominance over his children triggered negative feelings and anxiety, as well as fear of the paternal figure, often understood as respect.<sup>(20,21)</sup>

Respect for the father-man is related to the patriarchal model of society in which he is considered the head of the household, the highest authority of the home, and therefore has the right to impose his wishes on the other members of his family, especially his wife and children.<sup>(22,23)</sup> In the absence of the father, the mother occupies the second place in this strict hierarchy, exercising her domination over the children.<sup>(24,25)</sup> This scenario favors the perpetuation of violence, in view of the culturally sustained belief that, in the private environment, the authority of the parents is unquestionable.<sup>(26)</sup>

According to Benjamin, the fundamental issue when discussing violence is its justification as a means.<sup>(13)</sup> That is the context for the social permission to use physical aggression and punishment, reinforced by the social belief that the children are the parents' properties,<sup>(22,26)</sup> which was also revealed in the discourse of this study. These aggressive behaviors are used and justified as a pedagogical resource for educating the children, and these acts are naturalized and therefore socially accepted.<sup>(27,28)</sup> This thought, shared in different parts of the world, was revealed in research developed in nine countries that also consider that physical aggression by the parents is necessary for the educational process.<sup>(29)</sup>

It is noteworthy that one collective discourse addresses this conception, when it suggests that the violent acts he experienced were a 'severe' form of

education, also pointing to the acceptance of those who experience it. This understanding can be explained in the perspective Benjamin put forward, who defends the human capacity to reinvent his existence, pointing to each stage of life as a unique moment to be overcome.<sup>(13)</sup> From this point of view, man would rationalize the negative experience of the violence in his childhood, starting to understand it as a necessary and pertinent educational strategy. Thus, a supposed overcoming of the abuse experienced would occur.

Because of the naturalization of the behavior learned, when they become adults, men use the same means to discipline their children, because having been educated by coercive force makes it the only way they have learned.<sup>(28)</sup> Similarly, they also internalize and reproduce the way of relating to one another when adults.

Thus, while the men's discourse reveals a childhood of suffering through their own experience and because they witness the violence between their parents, they also refer to the perception that these acts are reproduced in adult life. The reproduction of violence, in turn, can also be glimpsed from Benjamin's perspective. In this case, contrary to what the theoretician proposes, man would not be able to reinvent his existence, perpetuating the vicious cycle of abuse.

Considering that several generations reproduce the violent behavior in family relationships, research corroborates the intergenerational cyclical nature of domestic and marital violence.<sup>(10,11,30)</sup> International studies have revealed that children who experience and/or witness their parents' violence become aggressive adults, which reaffirms the transgenerational nature of violence.<sup>(25,31)</sup>

It is important to emphasize that a family routine governed by violent attitudes, sometimes motivated by the father's alcohol use, is revealed to be detrimental to the growth and development of children and adolescents. Based on the discourse, as children, the men did not only experience domestic abuse but also witnessed marital violence, including drastic scenes such as abortion associated with physical assault and the death of their own mother after a public fight with their father. This entire ex-

perience marked their lives, the trauma being evidenced as an emotional repercussion.

It is emphasized that it is impossible to isolate any family member from the impacts of the marital violence, as it leads to a continuous and progressive process of loss of health, with serious consequences for all those involved, especially the children. Researchers from different parts of the world have concluded that growing up in a home filled with violence damages the children's emotional, social and cognitive development. The repercussions include the following signs: hostile attitudes, aggressiveness, neurosis, anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and low school performance. In addition, they are more likely to develop childhood morbidities such as obesity.<sup>(32,33)</sup>

Considering all the damage related to the existence of intrafamilial violence, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent provides for the punishment by law, for any action or omission to fundamental rights, including: the right of the child or adolescent to a life free from neglect, violence, discrimination, exploitation, cruelty, and oppression.<sup>(34)</sup>

Understanding that the family is the main responsible for the children's upbringing and that the legacy of violence has been transferred from generation to generation, Benjamin<sup>(13)</sup> argues that it a family education that seeks non-violent forms of conflict resolution is certainly possible. Children should be included in this process so they can act differently in their future relationships, thus breaking the intergenerational cycle of family and domestic violence.

## Conclusion

The childhood of men criminally prosecuted for domestic violence was permeated by the lack of parental affection; by the experience of physical and psychological violence; and by witnessing violence between the parents. Although the men's discourse reveals suffering due to this experience, it also signals the perception that many behaviors adopted in adult life reproduced what had been experienced in childhood, such as aggression as an education-

al method and domestic violence. In view of the intergeneration characteristic of marital violence, it is essential to develop strategies that enable both the re-signification of the experiences of men with a history of childhood violence, as proposed by Benjamin, and the deconstruction of the inequality between men and women, preferably while still in childhood and adolescence. He hoped that, thus, as adults, they would be able to reproduce harmonious and respectful relations and use peaceful means of conflict solving. For the adult population, it is believed that actions are needed that encourage re-signification about the marital relationship, the role of the woman and of the conduct itself in the family relationship. This is because it cannot be denied how deeply rooted the formation of these men's gender identity is, as well as of the women. Therefore, the re-education process is slow to deconstruct the masculine belief of power over the woman and the latter's belief in subservience to the husband. The education sector is a favorable place to develop these actions. The health sector is also highlighted, whose actions can be isolated or integrated with other spaces, such as the school, in order to recognize the problem early and prevent it. This can start, for example, with the approach of alcohol use/abuse, considered a precipitator of violence, and the identification of the background history of family violence, given the intergenerational nature of the phenomenon. The study is limited because it represents the discourse of a group of men inserted in a certain cultural context of the Brazilian Northeast. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized.

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## Collaborations

Lírio JGS, Gomes NP, Paixão GPN, Pereira A, Magalhães JRF, Cruz MA, and Sousa AR declare that they contributed to the study design, data analysis and interpretation, writing of the article, rele-

vant critical review of the intellectual content and approval of the final version for publication.

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