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## **ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE AGAINST PARENTS. IS IT A CONSEQUENCE OF GENDER INEQUALITY?**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the present study was to explore the psychosocial profile of juveniles reported for violent behaviours against their parents, as well as the extent to which the phenomenon of violence against parents (VAP) can be explained by the hypothesis of the bi-directionality of intra-family violence. For this purpose we selected a sample of 103 juveniles classified in three groups –(a) VAP offences, (b) VAP offences and other types of offence, and (c) other offences. In total we analyzed 413 files from the office of the Public Prosecutor for Juveniles in Bilbao (Basque Country, northern Spain). We extracted personal, family context and judicial variables for the juveniles. The results suggest the existence of a specific profile of juveniles reported for VAP, and also show that through the hypothesis of the bi-directionality of intra-family violence it is possible to explain one-third of the cases analyzed.

**Keywords:** juvenile offender, violence against parents, psychosocial profile, intra-family violence, judicial measures.

### **Resumen**

El objetivo de este estudio era aproximarse al perfil psicosocial de los menores de edad denunciados por conductas violentas contra sus ascendientes, y conocer en qué medida el fenómeno de la violencia filio-parental (VF) se puede explicar por la hipótesis de bidireccionalidad de la violencia intra-familiar. Para ello se seleccionó una muestra de 103 menores clasificados en tres grupos –(a) delitos de VF, (b) delitos de VF y otro tipo de delitos, y (c) otros delitos-. En total se analizaron 413 expedientes judiciales de la Fiscalía de Menores de Bilbao correspondientes a esos menores. Se extrajeron variables personales de los menores, de su contexto familiar y judicial. Los resultados sugieren la existencia de un perfil específico de los menores denunciados por VF y que a través de la hipótesis de la bidireccionalidad de la violencia intra-familiar se podría explicar un tercio de los casos analizados.

**Palabras clave:** menor infractor, violencia filio-parental, perfil psicosocial, violencia intra-familiar, medidas judiciales.

## **Introduction**

Violence is not simply a behaviour, nor an emotional response, but rather a psychological strategy for achieving a given objective (Pueyo & Redondo, 2007). Violence against parents, understood as any act by children that intimidates the parents and is aimed at hurting them (Cottrell, 2001), is a phenomenon that has become high-profile in recent years. In the Spanish context, it suffices to consult data from the Director of Public Prosecutions to confirm that parents' reports of violence by their adolescent children are on the increase. Data from Canada and the USA reveal that between 7% and 18% of parents have been the victims of physical violence from their adolescent children at some time, a figure that rises to 29% in the case of single parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cornel & Gelles, 1982; Pagelow, 1989; Paulson, Coombs, & Landsverk, 1990; Peek, Fischer, & Kidwell, 1985). In the Spanish context, Romero et al. (2005) point out that the 2003 annual report from the General Directorate of Juvenile Justice of the Catalanian Regional Government notes a progression in the number of reports of violence against parents according to age: for 14-year-olds, 7.8% of cases referred to this type of domestic violence, whilst for 17-year-olds this percentage increased to 39.7%.

Research indicates that the majority of aggressors are males aged between 10 and 18, who attack their mothers; mainly in one-parent families and/or where parents are older than average (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Harbin & Madden, 1979; Kumagai, 1981; Paulson et al., 1990). However, some authors (Bobic, 2002; McCloskey & Lichter, 2003) report similar representation of males and females. Although this type of offence is committed much more by males than by females, if we isolate the group of boys and that of girls,

the proportion representing violence against parents with respect to the total offences committed by juveniles in each group is equivalent. In this line, Romero et al. (2005) observed that the distribution balanced out among the two genders if the juveniles' ages were taken into account.

As far as family structure is concerned, many studies report greater prevalence of this phenomenon among one-parent families (mothers alone with children). Specifically, Pagani et al. (2003), in a longitudinal study, found that changes in the marital sub-system (separation, divorce, new marriage, etc.) represented a risk factor for physical violence by children against their mothers. One explanation for this would be that variables associated with single-parenthood and/or separation/divorce, such as the fight over custody, financial difficulties or lack of social support, cause a deterioration of the relationship between parents and children. In a similar line, Pérez and Pereira (2006) highlight the absence of a hierarchical structure, or its inversion, within the parent-child subsystem, the effect of which becomes stronger the more the child perceives that his/her behaviours intimidate the mother and/or father (Downey, 1997; Gallagher, 2004; Harbin & Madden, 1979). These authors attribute this to current parenting styles, characterized by excessive indulgence, permissiveness and lack of boundaries, which ends up producing an imbalance in the filio-parental relationship (Cottrell, 2001; Laurent, 1997; Omer, 2000; Price, 1996).

Gallagher (2004) found two types of family with intra-family violence: one with a liberal-permissive, overprotective character and without consistent norms, and another with an authoritarian character. Laurent and Derry (1999) identified a third type, parental neglect or lack of supervision of the child, generally of low socio-economic class, and whose children were characterized by their high level of independence and responsibility in relation to their subsistence.

Some experts have suggested certain causes of difficulties for the upbringing of children in today's society (e.g., Garrido, 2005): a) children are not given guidance on matters of conscience, b) conflicts in intimate relationships (leading to mothers bringing up children alone), c) parents are subjected to high levels of stress, d) young people are not required to take on responsible roles until an advanced age, e) a consumer society, whose effects are exacerbated by a stress on instant gratification and numerous possibilities for unhealthy practices (pornography, violence, alcohol, drugs, etc.).

One of the hypotheses currently gaining momentum is that of the bi-directionality of violence. It would appear that the violence parents commit on their children is related to violence by children against parents (Hartz, 1995; Kratcoski, 1985; Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig, 1995; Mahoney & Donnelly, 2000; Meredith, Abbot, & Adams, 1986; Straus & Hotaling, 1980), this variable being more relevant than marital violence in the development of the latter phenomenon (Ulman & Straus, 2003). It has been found that the higher the rate of corporal punishment by parents on children, the greater the presence of violent behaviours by the children against their parents (Brezina, 1999; Larzelere, 1986; Mahoney & Donnelly, 2000; Patterson, 1995; Peek, Fischer, & Kidwell, 1985).

The explanation for such bi-directionality may reside in the learning of relationship models based on violence, through which children interiorize that the only form of dealing with conflicts is by recourse to violent behaviours (Barkin, Kreiter, & DuRant, 2001; Laurent & Derry, 1999; Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2001). Moreover, Peek et al. (1985) found that the frequency of violence against children is more important than its intensity. The interiorization of certain beliefs about violence and the possible modelling of aggressive behaviour is also the explanation offered for results indicating that children who witness gender violence in their homes subsequently show violent

behaviours toward their mothers (Corbalán & Patró, 2003; Cottrell & Monk, 2004). Nevertheless, it is important to avoid making simple associations between violence against parents and another type of intra-family violence, since it does not represent a *sine qua non* factor for violence against parents, nor can it be said that one leads inevitably to the other; rather, it is necessary to take into account other factors, such as the personal characteristics of the juvenile.

As regards the psychological profile of juveniles who commit violent behaviours against their parents, The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (2003) reported behaviour disorders in some adolescents who behave violently towards family members (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, behaviour disorder, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia), though the majority did not present mental illness. Cottrell and Monk (2004) also found reactive attachment disorder, disruptive behaviour disorder and learning disorder. In general, juveniles whose family and social characteristics are considered to put them at risk of social deviance present higher levels of clinical maladjustment and lower development in emotional intelligence (Arce et al., 2004).

As far as substance use is concerned, some studies have found a relationship between use of alcohol and drugs and violence against parents (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Price, 1996; Wells, 1987). Likewise, Pagani et al. (2004) found significant predictive associations between high levels of substance use and physical or verbal aggressions toward the mother.

Given the importance of the peer group as a socializing and shaping agent in adolescence, Pagani et al. (2003, 2004) focused in particular on the socio-educational context of these juveniles, finding that disruptive behaviours as a child at school constituted an important predictive factor for aggression by adolescents against their mothers. In a study by Arce et al. (2004) on young people in situations of risk of social

deviance, they found that juveniles poorly adjusted to the family context presented, among other characteristics, low school involvement and a higher rate of disruptive behaviours in the classroom. Some research suggests that these juveniles have dysfunctional relationships with their peers (Romero et al., 2005), and tend to associate with peer groups that also display violent behaviours in their homes (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1982) or participate in other delinquent behaviour (Crawford-Brown, 1999; Gottfredson, Sealock, & Koper, 1996).

## **Objectives**

To analyze the trends in reports of violence against parents registered in the last six years in the province of Vizcaya (Basque Country, northern Spain), noting also the probationary and definitive measures taken.

To study the differential characteristics, at the psychological and family levels, of juveniles reported for violent behaviours against their parents, compared to other young offenders.

To verify whether the hypothesis of the bi-directionality of violence (e.g., Mahoney & Donnelly, 2000) is fulfilled, whereby young people who had experiences of abuse in childhood have subsequently shown violent behaviour toward their parents.

To check whether certain parenting styles are associated with violence against parents, specifically whether there is a relationship between the parental neglect and violence against parents (Laurent & Derry, 1999).

## **Method**

### **Participants**



We examined 413 files from the office of the Public Prosecutor for Juveniles in Bilbao covering the period 1999 to 2006, and corresponding to 103 young offenders. Three groups were formed, one made up of offenders reported for violence against parents (VAP) (N =35), a second group of juveniles that had committed other types of offence (NoVAP) (N = 40) and a third group made up of juveniles reported not only for violence against parents but also for other offences (VAP+) (N =33). We analyzed the entire population of juveniles charged with offences of violence against parents between 1999 and 2006 (accounting for the groups VAP and VAP+), whilst the control group, NoVAP, was selected at random.

### **Procedure and design**

This study was carried out on the basis of reports drawn up by the Judicial Psychosocial Team at the Justice Department of the Basque Regional Government, which fulfils the functions of Technical Team in accordance with Law 8/2006 (*L.O. 8/2006*) in the Juvenile Court of the province of Vizcaya. The necessary information was taken from the personal file on each juvenile held by the Judicial Psychosocial Team. These files record all judicial proceedings relating to the juvenile and any professional intervention undertaken.

For each case a series of variables were noted, which can be grouped into four blocks: (a) Characteristics of the offence, (b) Personal characteristics of the juvenile (sociodemographic, individual and behavioural), (c) Family characteristics, and (d) Judicial measures applied.

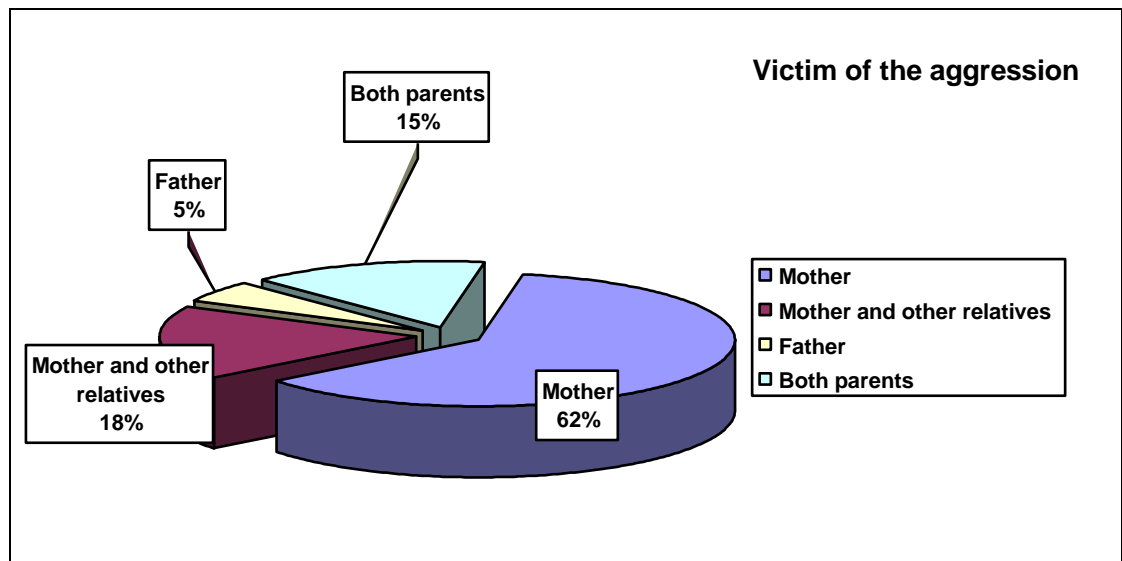
## **Results**

### **Characteristics of the offence**

Analysis of the trend in the number of VAP cases registered reveals a considerable increase in reported cases especially from the year 2002 onwards. In 2006 there was a certain decrease, both in the number of reports of this type and in the number of young people reported by their parents for the first time.

The most frequent victim of this violence is the mother (95%), though in 33% of the cases analyzed the violent behaviours were generalized to the rest of the family (see Figure 1). In 80% of cases sons were the perpetrators of the abuse. It should be borne in mind that the statistic of the greater proportion of violent acts against the mother may be biased by the type of family – clearly, in the case of single-parent families the mother is the victim because there is no father to attack. It is for this reason that we selected those juveniles living in situations of nuclear family (father and mother), and who had been reported for violence against parents, to check who the victim was according to sex of the child. Our results show that 100% of boys displayed violent behaviours toward their mother, while the figure was 80% in the case of girls. This indicates that although children may live with both parents, their aggression is directed against the mother.

In the cases of offences of violence against parents, the reason for reporting the child tends to be both physical and psychological violence. Thus, it was found that in 48% of the cases both types of violence had occurred, but that 38% of the reports were exclusively for psychological abuse. It was also observed that 3% of reports were for neither physical nor psychological violence, but rather for material violence (destruction of objects or property).

*Figure 1. Victim of the aggression.*

### Personal characteristics of the juveniles

Taking into account the whole sample, the results show a considerably higher percentage of male young offenders (85%, as against 15% of females), with larger numbers in the 14 to 16 age range. In the VAP group, 77% of the juveniles had been reported just once, 14% twice and 9% more than twice. In the VAP+ group 58% had been reported just once for violence against parents. However, in the NoVAP group 31% had been charged just once and 20% more than 8 times.

As far as school record was concerned, 52% of the young people had difficulties of school adaptation. Moreover, the chi-squared test was statistically significant for difficulties of adaptation in the different groups [ $\chi^2(2, N = 88) = 29.58; p < .001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .52$  adaptation,  $.32$  group<sup>1</sup>], with the VAP+ group presenting more problems of adaptation (54%) than the other two (VAP = 39%; NoVAP = 6%). Likewise, it was the VAP and VAP+ groups that presented most cases of learning difficulties [ $\chi^2(2, N = 88) = 26.07; p < .001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .44$  learning,  $.29$  group] and of disruptive behaviours in the classroom [ $\chi^2(2, N = 77) = 18.6; p < .001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .22$  disruptive behaviour,  $.30$  group]. Together with this result, disruptive behaviours in the

classroom were found to be significantly related to use of hashish [ $\chi^2(1, N=60)= 8.84$ ;  $p<.05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .16$  disruptive behaviour, .16 hashish] and of cocaine [ $\chi^2(1, N=60) =3.77$ ;  $p<.05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.00$  disruptive behaviour, .00 cocaine]. Substance use was fairly generalized across all the groups studied, since 86% of the total sample used some type of legal or illegal substance on a regular basis. However, it was found that juveniles with violence-against-parents offences were significantly more likely to use cocaine [ $\chi^2 (1, N=74)= 4.80$ ;  $p<.05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .00$  cocaine, .00 group] and hashish [ $\chi^2 (1, N= 74)= 4.03$ ;  $p<.05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .00$  hashish, .07 group] than the other juveniles.

Among the psychological variables considered by the members of the Judicial Psychosocial Team in the interview with the juvenile were self-esteem, aggressiveness and empathy. Those in the NoVAP group had higher self-esteem than those in the VAP and VAP+ groups [ $\chi^2 (2, N= 69) =13.18$ ;  $p<.001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.23$  self-esteem, .22 group]. Given the nature of the offences, it is relevant to note the level of aggressiveness of these young people: 9% presented low aggressiveness, 40.3% a medium level, and 50.7% a high level. It is interesting to consider the differences by group, since in the Kruskal-Wallis H analysis the group factor almost reached significance [ $\chi^2 (2, N= 67) =5.6$ ;  $p =.06$ ], the NoVAP group showing the lowest level of aggressiveness. Specifically, significant between-groups differences were found for violent behaviours toward peers [ $\chi^2(2, N=70) =6.78$ ;  $p<.05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.11$  peer violence, .05 group] and violent behaviours toward adults [ $\chi^2(2, N= 69) =21.52$ ;  $p<.001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .33$  adult violence, .20 group], in both cases those in the VAP+ group presenting most violent behaviours. As regards empathy, the levels found for the whole sample were low, with those in the VAP group showing significantly lower capacity for empathy than

those in the NoVAP group [ $\chi^2(2, N=71) = 6.6$ ;  $p < .05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .00$  empathy, .09 group].

Finally in this block, it was found that 77% of the juveniles had received psychological treatment prior to the first report of VAP. Those who had received some treatment of this type were more likely to belong to the VAP (43%) and VAP+ (43%) groups than the NoVAP group (14%) [ $\chi^2(2, N=74) = 17.75$ ;  $p < .001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .44$  treatment, .23 group].

### **Family characteristics**

With regard to type of household, the highest percentage (51%) of one-parent families corresponds to the VAP group, compared to 26% in the case of the VAP+ group and 23% in that of the NoVAP group [ $\chi^2(8, N=102) = 34.18$ ;  $p < .01$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .09$  household, .31 group]. The NoVAP group, in turn, is that in which there are most juveniles living with members of their extended family or in correction centres. Position among siblings also appears to be an important aspect, with that of first-born the most conflictive. The data from the present study support this, since the juveniles in the VAP and VAP+ groups occupy higher positions than those in the NoVAP group [ $U(N=67) = 800$ ;  $p < .05$ ]. As far as quality of family relations is concerned, we should highlight the high percentage of broken homes in the VAP (76%) and VAP+ (91%) groups, compared to the NoVAP group (20%) [ $\chi^2(4, N=68) = 40.3$ ;  $p < .001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda = .46$  family relations, .37 group].

In the analyses related to parenting style, we checked whether the father's or mother's style (authoritative/affirmative, authoritarian, liberal-permissive or negligent-absent) changed depending on the group studied, but the chi-squared test did not reach significance for either of the cases [father,  $\chi^2(6, N=59) = 9.5$ ;  $p = .15$ ] [mother,  $\chi^2(6, N=$

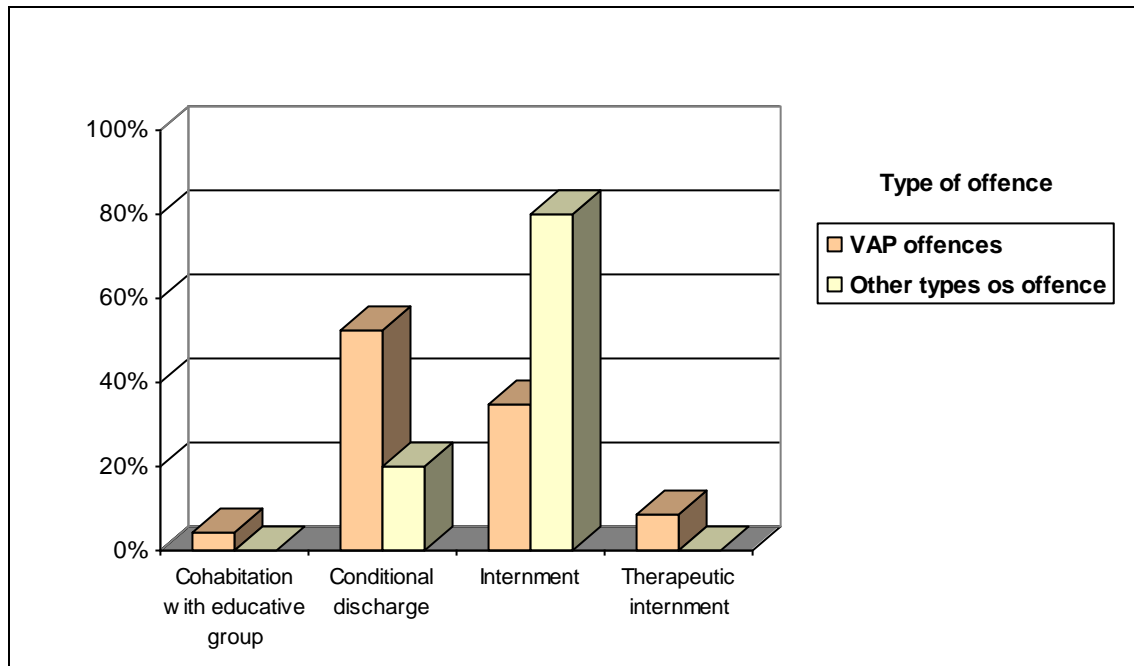
73) =6.5;  $p =0.37$ ]. However, coincidence of parenting style between fathers and mothers was what differentiated the groups [ $\chi^2(2, N=52) = 6.10$ ;  $p<.05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.29$  parenting style, .13 group]; agreement between father's and mother's parenting styles was much lower in the VAP (17%) and VAP+ (25%) groups than in the NoVAP group (58%).

As regards intra-family violence, a crucial variable for verifying the hypothesis of the bi-directionality of violence, it was found that 32% of the total adolescents in the sample had experienced situations of domestic violence at some time in their life. However, if we consider those that have been direct victims or witnessed some type of intra-family violence, it emerges that 80% of the juveniles that had experienced some type of violence within the family became aggressive toward their parents [ $\chi^2(1, N= 33) =10.9$ ;  $p<.001$ ].

### **Probationary and definitive measures applied**

For the VAP offences, more probationary measures are applied (27%) than for the rest of the offences (5%) [ $\chi^2(1, N= 413) =40.4$ ;  $p<.001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.00$  probationary, .11 group]. On analyzing the offences where a probationary measure was applied, it emerges that there are significant differences between the type of probationary measure applied depending on the type of offence [ $\chi^2(3, N= 38) =7.86$ ;  $p<.05$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.22$  probationary measure, .27 group] (see Figure 2). As regards the conditional discharge measure, it can be seen that for VAP offences (52%) it is adopted more frequently than for the rest of the offences (20%). However, internment is applied in a much smaller proportion for VAP offences (35%) than for the remaining offences (80%).

Figure 2. Probationary measures depending on the type of offence.



For the definitive measures there are also differences with respect to type of offence [ $\chi^2(6, N= 315) =38.66; p<.001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.06$  definitive measure, .02 group]. The definitive measure most frequently applied in cases of VAP is conditional discharge. Moreover, this measure was adopted more frequently for VAP offences (37%) than for the rest (18%) [ $\chi^2(2, N= 315) =14.04; p<0,001$ ; asymmetric  $\lambda =.00$  conditional discharge, .00 group].

## Discussion

One of the most interesting contributions of the present study would appear to be the differential personal and family profile found for young people who assault their parents, compared to other types of juvenile offender. The results suggest that these adolescents have higher levels of aggressiveness (against peers and against adults) than those of other young offenders. Such aggression may be the result of various factors, such as the previous experience of violence in the family or the use of substances.

Cocaine and hashish use was a distinguishing variable in our group of juveniles that had been violent toward their parents. In this line, Pagani et al. (2004) pointed out that regular use of substances can increase verbal aggression by juveniles against parents by 60%.

With regard to the type of family to which juveniles who are violent toward their parents belong, the results partially ratify what other authors have reported in relation to the predominance of one-parent families (Pagani et al., 2003; Romero et al., 2005). Differences were observed between the VAP and VAP+ groups, with single-parent families being more common in the VAP group. Furthermore, our study corroborates the view that intra-family violence (basically, inter-parental violence and violence by parents against children) is an important risk factor for the development of violence against parents, confirming the results of previous research (Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Corbalán & Patró, 2003; Hotaling, Straus, & Lincoln, 1990; Kratcoski, 1985; Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig, 1995; McCloskey & Lichter, 2003; Meredith et al., 1986; Straus & Hotaling, 1980). Thus, the hypothesis of the bi-directionality of intra-family violence (Mahoney & Donnelly, 2000) is supported. In the present study 80% of juveniles who had been direct victims of or had witnessed situations of intra-family violence had been reported for attacking their parents. This result endorses the theory that children adopt the tactics used by their parents (violent tactics, in this case), and very few adopt problem-strategies that they have not experienced or witnessed in their parental home.

It would seem clear that the aggression exercised by these juveniles is both physical and psychological, and that the victims tend to be mothers. Given that in 95% of cases it is the mother who is assaulted by her male child, perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to this phenomenon as “violence by sons against mothers” than as



“violence against parents”. Moreover, such intra-family violence might even be proposed as a subtype of “gender violence”, since it occurs not only when the juvenile lives alone with the mother: mothers are still the victims when both parents are present in the household. Even so, from a legal perspective it cannot be considered as gender violence, since this is defined as violence committed on the woman by a man who is or has been her intimate partner. According to Tamarit (2007), the situation of risk for mothers is greater in those cases in which she lives alone with her son as a result of a conflictive separation from her partner. It may be that male adolescents who have witnessed behaviours related to gender violence, or simply situations of subordination to male authority, identify with the paternal figure and direct their attacks at the mother. This hypothesis is also supported by the results of previous research (McCloskey & Lichter, 2003) which found that some sons who abused their mother subsequently abused their own girlfriend/intimate partner.

In any case, we should not ignore those cases of juveniles who assault their parents even though they have not been abused by them or witnessed violence in the family. Pagani et al. (2004) argue that it is necessary to take into account certain modulating variables of the relationship between violence by parents against children and violence by children against parents. The modulating variables they proposed were family structure, parent’s involvement, disciplinary habits, supervision, and substance use by both parents and children. Three of the variables on this list are closely related to parenting style: parents’ involvement in their children’s upbringing, disciplinary habits and supervision. Moreover, in recent years it has been verified that family support is one of the most relevant protective factors against anti-social behaviour, and for the prevention of social maladjustment it is recommended to intervene in the family system (Fariña et al., 2005). In future studies it would be interesting to explore in more depth

the issues of parenting styles and quality of family relations, as risk/protective factors for violence against parents that might explain those cases unrelated to intra-family violence.

### **Notes**

- 1 Lambda coefficients provide a measure of the strength of relationship between two nominal variables and also have proportional reduction in error interpretations (Hartwig, 1973). A value of 1 signifies that the independent variable perfectly predicts the dependent variable. A value of 0 signifies that the independent variable does not help to predict the dependent variable at all. Asymmetric lambdas are calculated for each one of the variables (treated as independent variables). The name of the dependent variable is shown next to each value.

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