Child and partner abuse: Self-reported prevalence and attitudes in the north of Portugal☆

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Abstract

Objectives: To determine the self-reported prevalence of child and partner physical and emotional abuse in the north of Portugal and to investigate attitudes about these forms of family violence.

Methods: Data were collected by questionnaire from a representative sample of parents in two-parent families with children under the age of 18 years. A total of 2,391 parents participated (1,057 males), aged 20–67 years. Four questionnaires were used, one behavioral and one attitudinal, for each of the forms of abuse: child and partner.

Results: At least one act of emotional or physical abuse towards a child during the previous year was reported by 25.9% of participants (12.3% reported physically abusive and 22.4% emotionally abusive acts). Abuse of a partner was reported by 26.2% of participants; at least one act of physical abuse during the previous year was reported by 12% and of emotional abuse by 23.7%. The attitudinal data, however, showed general disapproval of the use of violence, both for disciplining children and within marital relationships. The degree of self-reported support for physical punishment was higher in participants who reported using abusive behavior. Females more commonly reported acts of child abuse, and males reported acts of partner abuse. Both forms of self-reported abuse showed an association with low educational and socio-economic status.

Conclusions: This is the first study in Portugal to analyze family violence through self-report using a representative sample. The findings indicate that child and partner abuse constitute a significant problem in the region of

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northern Portugal. The discrepancy between the self-reported behavioral and attitudinal data may reflect conflicts
in Portuguese society, which is undergoing substantial cultural changes.
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Keywords: Child abuse; Partner violence; Attitudes; Family violence

Introduction

Scientific studies on family violence, initially conducted mainly in the USA, England, and Canada, and approaching child and partner abuse separately, have in recent years extended to many other countries and started to explore interrelationships between forms of family violence. Three main areas of research can be identified: (a) the prevalence of child and partner abuse, (b) the causes of abuse or, at least, its socio-demographic correlates and attitudes towards it, and (c) the impact of abuse on victims, both short and long term. This study, conducted in Portugal, addresses the first two issues.

Background

A recent review of US studies (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004) indicates that the rates of child abuse vary, depending on the approach to measurement, between 1.2% (cases reported to the police) and 10.7% (self-reported episodes of abuse in community surveys). Rates of partner violence vary even more widely, from .6% (obtained by the National Criminal Victimization Survey) to 17.4% (victimized women, obtained by the Conflict Tactics Scale). Retrospective studies concerning life-long victimization provide even higher numbers; for example, in the US National Violence Against Women Survey the self-reported history of abuse by a partner was 25.5%. European data on partner abuse provide similar ranges, with a history of victimization by partners being reported by 23% of English women, 4% in the year previous to the inquiry (Mirrlees-Black & Byron, 2001 cited in Donovan, 2004); 32% of Spanish women, 14.3% during the previous year (Ruiz-Perez et al., 2005); almost one-third of German women (Leembruggen-Kallberg, Rupprecht, & Cadmus, 2004); and 20% of Greek women (Stathopoulou, 2004).

The variations in reported prevalence rates are likely due to methodological differences, including differences in the criteria used to define violence and abuse, the time frames for reporting (retrospective or present time reports) and time intervals, the sampling methods and sampling bias (over-representation of clinical and poor populations), and the sources of data and strategies of inquiry (self-reports of victims, self-reports of offenders, or reports by professionals).

At the attitudinal level the few studies conducted in European countries show an inconsistent picture. Although women are perceived as having rights and significant legislative advances have been made towards gender equality, females continue to hold a subordinate social status in most countries, and beliefs that support or legitimize partner violence towards women persist (Ruiz-Perez et al., 2005). For instance, in England, 50% of young men and nearly 33% of young women think that physical or sexual violence may be acceptable under some circumstances (Ruiz-Perez et al., 2005). For instance, in England, 50% of young men and nearly 33% of young women think that physical or sexual violence may be acceptable under some circumstances (Donovan, 2004), and in Greece, nearly 50% of the respondents in a survey think that partner violence is caused by women’s demands for equality and independence (Antonopoulou, 1999).

Concerning attitudes about violence against children, European studies document considerable support for physical punishment, especially in what concerns “minor forms of violence” used as a disciplinary
strategy (Hazel, Ghate, Creighton, Field, & Finch, 2003). Attitudinal data are reflected in the rates of severe violence against children: Hazel et al. (2003) reported that 9% of English parents admitted to have used severe forms of physical punishment during the previous year, Bardi and Borgognini-Tarli (2001) found an incidence of severe violence in about 8% of Italian families, and Stathopoulou (2004) observed that harsh discipline tended to be the norm in Greece.

A recent trend has been the integration of analysis of different forms of family violence, especially child abuse and abuse of women by their partners. It has been shown that spouse abuse is a significant predictor of subsequent child abuse (Rumm, Cummings, Krauss, Bell, & Rivara, 2000) and that female caregivers in families where there is a suspicion of abuse or neglect are abused by their male partners at double the rate of community prevalence estimates (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004). One form of abuse within the family increases the risk of other forms, and child and partner abuse frequently co-occur (Slep & O’Leary, 2001). Various explanations have been suggested for this association, including the presence of conditions in the family that simultaneously increase the risk for both forms of abuse, such as poverty, social isolation, and alcohol abuse (Slep & O’Leary, 2001), and the concept that one form of violence may precipitate others (McKay, 1994; Wolfe, 1999).

The situation in Portugal

Portugal is a small (about 10 million inhabitants) European country, which lived under a fascist regime from 1928 to 1974; then it went through a democratization process and joined the European Union (EU), resulting in considerable political stability. The economic and educational situation in Portugal, despite recent and ongoing improvements, continues to give rise to concern: 20% of the population live below the poverty line (Santos & Mercurio, 2004), including 15.6% of the children (UNICEF, 2005). Portugal has the lowest rate in the EU of young adults (25–39 years) who have completed secondary education (Ministério da Educação, 2005). The Portuguese level of child protection and care was considered by the UNICEF (2003) as one of the worst in the industrialized world, with a death rate of 3.7 from maltreatment and 17.8 from all injuries per 100,000 children. Even in countries culturally similar to Portugal the rates are lower; for example, the reported rate of child death from maltreatment is .1/100,000 in Spain and .2/100,000 in Greece and Italy (UNICEF, 2003).

Indicators of female discrimination show that although Portugal has the third highest rate of female employment in the EU for the 25–49-year age group (75.1%), and 63.3% of those under 30 with a college degree are women, women’s mean wages are considerably lower than men’s, and women are rarely active in the political sphere (12% in Parliament). This situation coincides with low participation of men in housekeeping activities, estimated at 26% by male self-report and 3% by women’s reports (Ferreira, 1998). These figures support the view that “although Portugal has undergone social and economic changes creating a more modern country, it is still, to some extent, a largely patriarchal society, dominated by male-oriented values and male privilege” (Santos & Mercurio, 2004, p. 151). There are some indications, however, that these values are undergoing a degree of transformation, together with changes in traditional forms of family. The divorce rate is 2.2/1,000, for a marriage rate of 4.7/1,000, and new forms of family are quite common (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2006). Increasing awareness of child and partner abuse is reflected in new legislation and public initiatives designed to protect victims. Partner violence is now a civil crime, educational campaigns on the subject have been conducted, and special police training has been provided. Reporting of child abuse is mandatory, despite the fact that there is no law forbidding the physical punishment of children.
Research in Portugal regarding family violence is small, although growing. The first attempt to identify prevalence data on child abuse (Amaro, 1986) was based on a national inquiry with community leaders, and derived what the author calls a “conservative” estimate of .1% of physical abuse, .2% of psychological abuse, and .2% of neglect. In the first direct study on child victimization, a retrospective self-reported survey of 932 parents recalling their childhood experiences, 73% of the sample reported sustaining some form of abuse in childhood or adolescence (Figueiredo et al., 2004). More specifically, 9.5% reported experiencing physical violence with sequels and 2.6% sexual victimization. There have been no published studies of child abuse admitted to by parents.

In the first and only representative study of victimization of women conducted in Portugal, 50.7% reported some form of psychological abuse, 28.1% unwanted sexual experience, and 6.7% physical violence (Lourenço, Lisboa, & Pais, 1997). This study does not, however, offer a picture of family violence, as it concerned women only and included all episodes of abuse sustained, not only those in the family context.

This brief overview of the research published in Portugal illustrates the paucity of studies on family violence, the non-representativeness of the sampling, the use of indirect indicators of abuse, the lack of attitudinal data, and the absence of an attempt to correlate child and partner abuse. In an effort to improve on the previous research, this study of parents concerning family violence in northern Portugal was designed with the following objectives:

- to determine the self-reported prevalence of physical and emotional abusive acts in a representative sample of two-parent families;
- to investigate the degree of parental approval of physical punishment of children and the perceived legitimacy of violence towards partners;
- to identify the main socio-demographic correlates of self-reported child and partner abuse;
- to determine the degree of overlap between self-reported child and partner abuse; and
- to analyze the relationships between self-reported physical and emotional abuse within the family and attitudes about physical violence against children and partners.

**Methods**

**Participants and procedures**

The study was conducted in the north of Portugal with a sample of parents from two-parent families with children under the age of 18 years. Given the objective of studying simultaneously parental and partner abuse, single-parent families were excluded. The age of 18 years is defined by Portuguese legislation as the age of adulthood, under which youngsters are protected by specific laws against abuse by their parents/caretakers. Eight geographical regions were included, two predominantly urban (Porto, Câvado), two predominantly rural (Minho-Lima, Alto Trás os Montes), and the remaining four with a mixed profile (Tâmega, Ave, Entre Douro, and Vouga e Douro). Participants were recruited according to their gender and place of residence (in each family one parent was selected) in such a way as to obtain a sample corresponding to census statistics for the north of Portugal in these two criteria. An effort was made to diversify the educational and professional status of the participants.

Data were collected between October 2004 and April 2004, by a team of eight psychologists, one for each of the eight geographical regions. They were trained comprehensively in the sampling requirements...
and technique and in the administration of the instruments used in the study. Potential participants who fit the demographic profile, identified through the local contacts of the team psychologists, were contacted by various means, including professional associations, leisure clubs, church settings, and sports and social organizations. Some were contacted directly by the research team, and other contacts were mediated through the local organizations.

In Portugal there is no Ethics Committee or other appropriate body to supervise psychological research, but for the purpose of this study informed consent was obtained from the participants. Each subject was personally contacted by a researcher and invited to participate in a study about northern Portuguese families and their ways of reacting to conflicts with children and partners by answering four questionnaires. The administration of the questionnaires was scheduled for a later date, making it possible for the subjects to decline later, even if they had originally agreed. Nearly 10% of the invited subjects refused to participate (data on these subjects are not available). No economic compensation was provided, and the participants were guaranteed full confidentiality. All questionnaires were anonymous.

The questionnaires were completed by the participant or by the researcher, if the individual claimed reading or comprehension difficulties. In completing the questionnaires, only one child per family was considered, specifically the last child to have celebrated a birthday, in order to assure randomness.

The final sample consisted of 2,391 participants (the total population in the north of Portugal approximates 3.5 million), aged between 20 and 67 years, mean age 37, SD 7.03 years. There were 1,057 males, mean age 38.5, SD 7.28 years and 1,334 females, mean age 35.8, SD 6.59 years. The participants’ educational status was distributed as follows: college education, 26.7%; completed high school, 20%; attended high school, 14.2%; completed primary school, 22%; not completed primary school, 15.9%. Occupational status was categorized into five levels, according to the Portuguese National Index of Professions, depending on status and economic compensation: very high, 1.2%; high, 29.3%; moderate, 8.7%; low, 29.9%; very low compensation, 19% (data on economic status were not provided by nearly 12% of the sample). This sample corresponded quite well with the census data in socio-economic stratification, but in distribution according to educational level, the highest level was over-represented.

All of the participants were married or co-habiting with their partners. They had an average of 1.7 children (SD .82, range 1–11). The mean age of the children considered in the responses was 7 years (SD 4.8).

**Instruments**

Child and partner abuse were investigated through a behavioral inventory and an attitudinal scale, all validated in an earlier study (Machado, Matos, & Gonçalves, 2004a). All four scales were created by the research team, as no other scales or questionnaires about behaviors or attitudes concerning family violence had been validated for Portuguese populations at the time.

The IPE (Inventory of Educational Practices, Gonçalves, Machado, & Matos, 2000) is a behavioral inventory that asks parents how frequently during the past year they used 29 specific disciplinary strategies with the study child. This inventory uses a 4-point response scale: “never used,” “used only once,” “used less than once a month,” and “used more than once a month.” A panel of four experts in clinical psychology and child abuse were asked to classify each disciplinary strategy as physically abusive, emotionally abusive, or non-abusive. Six of these behaviors were consensually classified as physically abusive (e.g., “hitting the child with a belt”) and five as emotionally abusive (e.g., “insulting the child”) by the experts. Three items were classified as abusive by some experts but not by others, and those were excluded from our definition of abuse (see T1 and T2 for a more detailed view of the items included in the definition of
child abuse). Participants were considered as abusive if they reported using at least one act consensually classified as physically or emotionally abusive during the previous year.

The ECPF (Scale of Beliefs about Physical Punishment, Machado, Gonçalves, & Matos, 2000) includes 21 items, common affirmations that support, prescribe, or legitimize the use of violence against children (e.g., “Some children can only be educated by beating them”). All the items were created with the same perspective, so that the closer the agreement with the items the higher the global degree of support for physical punishment as a disciplinary strategy for children. Participants indicated their degree of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (from “strongly disagree” = 1 to “strongly agree” = 5, giving a possible maximum score of 105). Each item presents a correlation with the total score ranging from .42 to .68, and the global internal consistency of the total scale, measured by Cronbach’s alpha, is .89. Principal components analysis followed by varimax rotation gives four factors (F) that explain 49.6% of the variance: F1—legitimizing violence through child’s misbehavior, F2—normalcy and necessity of physical punishment, F3—legitimizing violence through father’s authority and punitive role, and F4—legitimizing violence through parental authority (Machado, Gonçalves, & Matos, 2003). F1 explains 32% of the common variance, while F2 explains 6.7%, F3 explains 6%, and F4 explains 4.9%. The Cronbach’s alphas of these four scales are satisfactory: .83 for F1, .83 for F2, .79 for F3, and .80 for F4.

The IVC (Marital Violence Inventory, Matos, Machado, & Gonçalves, 2000b) questions participants about 21 different acts of violence (physical and emotional) towards their partners during the past year. The response alternatives to each item were: “I never used this behavior with my present partner during the last year” or “I have used this behavior with my present partner during the last year.” If admitted, individuals are asked how frequently that happened (“only once” or “more than once”). For statistical analysis, participants were considered abusive if they reported having used at least one act classified as physically (e.g., “Throwing objects”) or emotionally abusive (e.g., “Insulting or humiliating”) during the preceding year (see T3 and T4 for a more detailed view of the items included in the definition of partner abuse).

The ECVC (Scale of Beliefs about Marital Violence, Matos, Machado, & Gonçalves, 2000a) comprises 25 items that measure the degree of support for marital violence, and the main factors that justify that support. The items correspond to beliefs that support, legitimize, or minimize partner violence (e.g., “A slap hurts nobody”) and close agreement with the items represents a higher global degree of legitimization of partner violence. Participants indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (giving a possible maximum score of 125). Each item presents a correlation with the total score ranging from .34 to .71, and the global internal consistency of the total scale, measured by Cronbach’s alpha, is .90 (Machado, Matos, & Gonçalves, 2004b). Factor analysis revealed four main factors (F) that explain 48.1% of the variance: F1—legitimizing violence through women’s misconduct, F2—legitimizing violence through family privacy, F3—legitimizing violence through external attributes, and F4—minimizing small acts of violence. F1 explains 30.5% of the common variance, while F2 explains 6.9%, F3 explains 5.6%, and F4 explains 5.1%. F1 has a Cronbach’s alpha of .85, F2 of .84, F3 of .81, and F4 of .72.

**Statistical analysis**

All analyses were conducted using the SPSS for Windows statistical program. Univariate analysis was used to identify the self-reported prevalence of child and partner abuse and to investigate the attitudinal
data. Bivariate analysis was used to investigate gender differences in prevalence and attitudinal data. The relation between age and violence legitimization was analyzed through Pearson correlations. Differences between educational and social strata were checked by one-way ANOVA. MANOVA analysis was used to examine differences between abusive and non-abusive subjects for each factor of the attitudinal questionnaires.

**Results**

**Self-reported prevalence of child abuse**

According to the IPE, 619 parents (25.9%) reported at least one act classified as emotional or physical child abuse during the preceding year. Use of physical abuse was reported by 12.3% of the participants. Table 1 shows the percentage of fathers and mothers who endorsed each physically abusive (or potentially abusive) behavior. Given the low percentages found, data on shaking children under 2 years old are not included.

Emotional abuse was reported by 22.4% of the participants. Table 2 shows the percentage of parents who endorsed each emotionally abusive behavior.

**Attitudes about physical discipline of children**

The mean score on the ECPF scale was 45.3, $SD = 12.7$, on a possible range of 0–105. This score is roughly equivalent to a mean score of 2 (“disagree”) to each of the items on the scale. Given that all items support the use of physical punishment, this response tendency shows a relatively low level of support for physical violence as a disciplinary strategy with children. More specifically, 12.9% of subjects strongly disagreed with the use of physical punishment, 53.9% moderately disagreed, 20.9% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 2.4% agreed with physical punishment of children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Used at least once during the last year Father ($n = 1,057$) (%)</th>
<th>Used at least once during the last year Mother ($n = 1,334$) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hitting the child leaving physical marks$^b$</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punching or kicking the child$^b$</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitting the child with a belt$^b$</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitting the child with an object (other than on the child’s bottom)$^b$</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throwing an object at the child$^b$</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitting the child causing injuries$^b$</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapping the child’s face, head, or ears$^c$</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving the child a spanking$^c$</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving the child several slaps in the face$^c$</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ Missing values vary between .5% (hitting the child with a belt) and 3.1% (hitting with object, other than on the bottom).

$^b$ Items reaching a 100% consensus among experts as physical abuse.

$^c$ Items not reaching expert consensus as physical abuse; excluded from further statistical analysis.
Table 2
Emotional abuse of children reported by parents (n = 2,391)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Used at least once during the last year</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father (n = 1,057) (%)</td>
<td>Mother (n = 1,334) (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulting the child</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling the child you do not love him/her</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling the child she/he should never</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have been born</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing the child in a room</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing the child in a dark room</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All items in this table reached 100% consensus among experts as emotional abuse.
* Missing values vary between .5% (closing the child in a dark room) and 1.1% (insulting the child).

Self-reported prevalence of partner abuse

According to the responses to the IVC questionnaire, 26.2% of the participants reported committing at least one act of abuse towards their partner during the preceding year. Physically abusive acts were reported by 12.1% (Table 3) and emotional abuse by 23.7% (Table 4), some participants reporting both forms of abuse.

Table 3
Physically abusive acts self-reported to have been used against partner (n = 2,391)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Used at least once during the last year</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n = 1,057) (%)</td>
<td>Female (n = 1,334) (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapping face</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing violently</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throwing objects</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulling hair</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punching</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening with weapons or physical force</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clasping neck</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Items reported by less than 1% not included.
* Missing values vary between 2.9% (punching) and 3.9% (slapping face).

Table 4
Emotionally abusive, controlling, or coercive acts reported to have been used against partner (n = 2,391)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Used at least once during the last year</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n = 1,057) (%)</td>
<td>Female (n = 1,334) (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulting or humiliating</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelling or threatening in order to cause</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberately breaking objects or</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>throwing food on the floor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbidding contact with other persons</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Items reported by less than 1% not included.
* Missing values vary between 3.0% (forbidding contact) and 3.5% (insulting or humiliating).
**Attitudes about partner abuse**

The results concerning attitudes about partner violence follow very closely those on child physical punishment. The mean global score on the ECVC was 52.7, \( SD = 15.5 \), in a range of 0–125. This score is roughly equivalent to a mean response of 2 ("disagree") to each of the items of the scale. Given that all the items support, or at least legitimize, the use of partner violence, this response tendency indicates a global disagreement with the cultural myths that support partner abuse.

A more detailed breakdown of the data shows that 15.9% of subjects strongly disagreed with partner violence, 50.8% moderately disagreed, 19.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 1.7% agreed, and only .2% expressed strong agreement with violence against partners.

**Attitude-behavior relationship**

When comparing parents who reported committing at least one act of emotional or physical abuse towards their child in the previous year with parents who reported no such acts, the former showed a higher degree of support for beliefs that legitimize the use of physical punishment. This is demonstrated both on the ECPF total score (means 50.32 vs. 43.22, respectively, \( p < .001 \)), and on the four component factors (MANOVA, Wilks’ Lambda = .94, \( F = 35.02, p < .001 \)).

In a similar manner, when comparing the subjects who reported at least one act of emotional or physical partner abuse in the previous year with subjects who reported no such acts, the former showed a higher degree of legitimization of partner abuse, on analysis of both the ECVC total score (means 56.8 vs. 50.74, respectively, \( p < .001 \)) and the four component factors (MANOVA, Wilks’ Lambda = .94, \( F = 29.42, p < .001 \)).

**Association of different forms of abuse**

There was a significant association between child abuse and partner abuse (\( p < .001 \)): 259 subjects self-reported at least one abusive act against their children and at least one abusive act against their partner. It must be noticed, however, that 627 subjects committed only one form of violence (partner or child abuse).

**Socio-demographic correlates of abusive practices**

**Gender.** Concerning parental behaviors, there were significant gender differences (Table 5): women reported more abusive acts towards their children, both overall and physical and emotional abuse separately. In the attitudinal dimension, however, no gender differences were found, except for the support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-report of at least one abusive act</th>
<th>Self-report of at least one physically abusive act</th>
<th>Self-report of at least one emotionally abusive act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men (n = 1,057) (%)</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (n = 1,334) (%)</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( p )</td>
<td>&lt;.005</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
<td>&lt;.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the father’s authority and punitive role (F3), men obtaining higher scores than women on this factor ($p < .005$).

Regarding partner violence, men showed a higher degree both of violent behavior, namely physical abuse of the partner (T6) and of legitimizing beliefs ($p < .001$). No gender difference was found regarding emotional abuse (Table 6).

**Age.** Comparing acts of abuse reported in different age groups (20–30, 31–40, more than 40 years), no significant differences were found for abuse of either children ($p = ns$) or partners ($p = ns$). A significant correlation was, however, found between parental age and beliefs sustaining physical punishment of children, with older parents scoring higher, both on the total ECPF scale ($r = .05; p < .05$) and for two of its component factors: F1 “legitimizing violence through child’s misbehavior” ($r = .06, p < .01$), and F4 “legitimizing violence through parental authority” ($r = .05, p < .01$). Older participants also showed a higher degree of support for beliefs that legitimize partner abuse: ECVC total score ($r = .08, p < .01$), especially F1, blaming women for violence ($r = .08, p < .01$); F2, defending family privacy ($r = .10, p < .001$); and F3, ascribing the blame to external forces, such as alcohol or unemployment ($r = .07, p < .001$). Despite the statistical significance of these results, it must be emphasized the low variance explained by these correlations.

**Educational status.** Significant differences of educational status were found between self-reported abusive and non-abusive parents, both overall ($p < .001$) and individually for physical ($p < .001$) and emotional abuse of children ($p < .001$), abusive parents being less educated. Partner abuse, both physical ($p < .001$) and emotional ($p = .005$), was also significantly lower in those of higher educational level. Specifically, the proportion of physically abusive parents varied from 1 in 10 in the higher educational level to 1 in 5 in the lower level group. Concerning partner physical abuse, the proportion ranged from 1 in 15 in the higher level to 1 in 3 in the lower educational level group. Emotional abuse of both children and partners varied from 1 in 4 in the high to 1 in 2 in the low educational level group.

Similar results were observed for the attitudinal scales, with less support for both physical punishment of children ($F = 178.7; p < .001$) and partner abuse ($F = 191.9; p < .001$) reported by those with higher education.

**Occupational and social status.** The findings according to educational status were replicated in the significant differences in occupational and social status found between self-reported abusive and non-abusive parents, both overall ($p < .001$), and individually for physical ($p < .001$) and emotional abuse of children ($p < .001$). Concerning physical partner abuse, reported violence was significantly lower in the higher social status levels of the sample ($p < .001$).
A significant relationship was also found between occupational and social status and support for both physical punishment of children \((F = 109.33; p < .001)\) and partner abuse \((F = 116.63; p < .001)\), which decreased with an increase in status.

**Discussion**

This is the first study conducted in Portugal about child and partner abuse using a representative survey and the first to address both forms of abuse. The self-reported prevalence rates for north Portugal provide tentative estimates of the dimensions of these problems.

A clear picture emerges from the results, which suggest that physical and emotional abuse of children and/or partners may affect nearly one in four families in the north of Portugal. The prevalence of child physical abuse reported in this population, 12.3%, is higher than that found in studies in other European countries, such as England (9% according to Hazel et al., 2003) and Italy (9% according to Bardi & Borgognini-Tarli, 2001). That of partner physical abuse, 12%, is slightly less than the 14.3% reported for Spain (Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2005). Even if these data are not strictly comparable, because of the different measures used, it is clear that abuse occurs in many Portuguese families, as in other parts of Europe. Both child and partner abuse were reported by 10.8% of the families in the study.

These problems, as is widely documented (e.g., Wolfe, 1999; Wolfe & McEchran, 1997), affected to a greater extent educationally deprived families. This pattern tended to be replicated according to the socio-economic status of families.

A clear gender pattern was demonstrated: women more often reported abuse of children. This result probably reflects the predominantly traditional gender roles in Portuguese families, where mothers are still the primary care providers for children, making it understandable that abusive practices, often used in the course of previously failed attempts to discipline the child (Wolfe, 1999), are mainly perpetrated by women.

This study also showed a clear gender difference in partner abuse, male partners reporting more violent acts, in contrast to other community “family conflict” studies which found equal levels of violence for men and women (Straus, 2000). This finding is not a function of the questionnaires used, as studies in Portugal on dating violence in younger populations using the same instruments (Machado, Matos, & Moreira, 2003) showed a pattern of gender similarity. A possible interpretation is the traditional male-dominated gender structure in Portuguese marital relationships (Santos & Mercurio, 2004), reflected in the greater male support for the father’s authority and legitimizing beliefs for partner violence elicited by the attitudinal questionnaires.

Concerning the relationship between self-reported attitudes and behaviors, our results showed two main tendencies: (1) a higher degree of violence legitimization among abusive parents and partners, similar to that reported in previous studies (e.g., Brownridge, 2002; Levinson, 1989; Qasem, Mustafa, Kazem, & Shah, 1998) and (2) an apparent contradiction between a disapproval of physical violence and its wide use by parents and partners. This latter finding deserves closer scrutiny, taking into account insights from research on the connection between cultural attitudes and violent behaviors. Some authors (e.g., Parke & Lewis, 1981) draw attention to the extreme cultural and economic diversity that occurs within the same society and the frequent coexistence of “conflicting values and attitudes” (p. 173) towards family violence. This conflict is enhanced by rapid cultural transformation, especially in traditional societies such as Portugal, under the influence of the media, increasing education, population movements, and
globalization. In Portugal, such changes have been particularly noticeable in the last three decades, in parallel with the democratization of the society and of family relationships. Many of the parents in this sample were raised in an authoritative political regime, characterized by a very traditional family structure. It is quite probable, although this was not specifically investigated, that participants had been subjected as children to physical punishment and to cultural messages that legitimized it. In recent decades, family violence has become a topic of social, legal, and political concern in Portugal. An explanatory hypothesis for the apparent contradiction between attitudinal and behavioral data is that individuals face a dilemma between the cultural messages with which they were raised and in which they believe and the cultural messages they receive now, and in which they also believe. Such ambiguity may lead to positions such as Straus (2000) documents, that “hitting is bad, although sometimes necessary” (p. 1112).

This study has several limitations. The first is the self-reported nature of the data, although it can be claimed that, given the “dark” nature of this kind of problem, self-reports may be a better indicator of family violence than the so-called “objective” numbers (police reports, local protective agencies numbers, records of hospital admissions). The representativeness of the sample was limited to its correspondence with the census data for the region according to sex, zone of residence, and economic status, but a wide spread of age and educational level was covered. A second limitation is the fact there is no information on the characteristics of those who declined to participate. Third, the classification of physical and emotional abuse of children among the items on the IPE scale may constitute a point of controversy, but it was decided for the purposes of this study to use a conservative criterion, the consensus of four experts. This may have resulted in lower rates than would be calculated using criteria of other studies.

In summary, this study has provided valuable quantitative information on child and partner abuse in northern Portugal, through self-report, indicating the need for increased attention to this problem. Desirable modifications would include introducing assessment procedures in the healthcare services that take into account the possibility of family violence and developing effective programs of child and partner abuse prevention. Concerning research, two fundamental developments of the study are due: the extension of this study to the national context and the understanding of the contexts, motives and interpretations of the reported episodes of violence.

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References


