

## FAMILY DYNAMICS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN INVOLVED IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Camilla Soccio Martins<sup>1</sup>  
Maria das Graças Carvalho Ferriani<sup>2</sup>  
Marta Angélica Iossi Silva<sup>3</sup>  
Nide Regina Zahr<sup>4</sup>  
Kátia Michelli Bertoldi Arone<sup>4</sup>  
Eliaana Mendes de Souza Teixeira Roque<sup>5</sup>

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*We sought, in this investigation, to understand the family dynamics in the view of parents and children involved in Domestic Violence against children and adolescents institutionalized in the Center of Assistance to the Victimized Child and Adolescent (CACAV), in Ribeirão Preto-SP, Brazil. This is a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews applied to parents and children from six families involved in domestic violence. The data were analyzed through content analysis. Ecology of human development was used as theoretical reference. Domestic violence was reported, though it is understood as common practice for the families. We identified that the parents' view favors the denial of the violence perpetrated. The children, on the other hand, point that love ties and affection are more significant for their development than blood relations. We believe that the knowledge acquired as how violence is experienced, can contribute with intervention strategies capable of breaking the perverse cycle of violent family relationships.*

**DESCRIPTORS:** domestic violence; family; child; adolescent

## LA DINÁMICA FAMILIAR EN LA VISIÓN DE LOS PADRES Y NIÑOS INVOLUCRADOS EN VIOLENCIA DOMÉSTICA CONTRA NIÑOS Y ADOLESCENTES

*En esta investigación, buscamos comprender la dinámica familiar para padres y hijos involucrados en Violencia Doméstica contra niños y adolescentes institucionalizados en el Centro de Atención al Niño y al Adolescente Víctima (CACAV), en Ribeirão Preto-SP, Brasil. El estudio es cualitativo, utilizándose entrevistas semiestructuradas aplicadas a seis familias, entre padres y hijos involucrados en violencia doméstica. Tratamos los datos a través del análisis de contenido. Utilizamos como referencial teórico la ecología del desarrollo humano. La violencia doméstica estuvo presente en los discursos, aunque sea comprendida como práctica usual para esas familias. Identificamos que la óptica de los padres favorece la negación de la violencia perpetrada. Los niños apuntan que vínculos de amor y afección son más significativos para su desarrollo que los vínculos familiares establecidos mediante consanguinidad. Creemos que, a partir del conocimiento de como la violencia es vivida, podemos traer posibles contribuciones para pensar estrategias de intervención capaces de romper el ciclo perverso de las relaciones familiares violentas.*

**DESCRIPTORES:** violencia doméstica; familia; niño; adolescente

## A DINÂMICA FAMILIAR NA VISÃO DE PAIS E FILHOS ENVOLVIDOS NA VIOLÊNCIA DOMÉSTICA CONTRA CRIANÇAS E ADOLESCENTES

*Nesta investigação buscou-se compreender a dinâmica familiar para pais e filhos envolvidos na violência doméstica contra crianças e adolescentes institucionalizados no Centro de Atendimento à Criança e ao Adolescente Vitimizado (CACAV), na cidade de Ribeirão Preto, SP. O estudo é qualitativo, utilizando-se de entrevistas semi-estruturadas aplicadas a seis famílias, entre pais e filhos envolvidos na violência doméstica. Tratou-se os dados através da análise de conteúdo. Utilizou-se, como referencial teórico, a ecologia do desenvolvimento humano. A violência doméstica esteve presente nos discursos, embora seja compreendida como prática usual para essas famílias. Identificou-se que a ótica dos pais favorece a negação da violência perpetrada. Já as crianças apontam que vínculos de amor e afeição são mais significativos para seu desenvolvimento do que os vínculos familiares estabelecidos por meio de consanguinidade. Acredita-se que, a partir do conhecimento de como a violência é experienciada, pode-se trazer possíveis contribuições para se pensar estratégias de intervenção capazes de romper o ciclo perverso das relações familiares violentas.*

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** violência doméstica; família; criança; adolescente

<sup>1</sup> Nurse, Doctoral student, e-mail: camilla@eerp.usp.br; <sup>2</sup> Advisor, Full Professor, e-mail: caroline@eerp.usp.br; <sup>3</sup> Professor; e-mail: maiossi@eerp.usp.br; <sup>4</sup> Nursing undergraduate student, CNPq Undergraduate Research scholarship, e-mail: nideusp@yahoo.com.br; <sup>5</sup> Lawyer, Social Assistant at the São Paulo Justice Court, Doctoral student, e-mail: caroline@eerp.usp.br. University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto, School of Nursing, WHO Collaborating Center for Nursing Research Development, Brazil

## INTRODUCTION

Dealing with family violence is a complex task in the current society, with specific characteristics and dimensions regarding social, moral, geopolitical, historical, economic and psychological aspects. For this reason, studies on this phenomenon should be broadened, since it has disastrous consequences in all social segments, including those concerning health impairment.

The family has been the focus of care and concern in nursing, since it has an extremely relevant role in health prevention strategies, as well as in planning and delivering children and adolescent health care. In a certain way, family-centered care involves all the family members and special importance is given to the relationships established among them, which is understood as one of the determinants in the health-disease process.

Violence within the domestic environment can break the family structure, which is the reference for affective, psychological and social development. Domestic violence breaks the essential trust bond needed to develop family life, and affects family relationships and their meanings.

Domestic violence is generally characterized by the overuse of disciplinary and corrective power by parents or guardians, in which the victim is completely objectified, and his/her fundamental rights, such as life, freedom and security, are disrespected<sup>(1)</sup>. This violence brings about cultural and socially built notions, such as that of childhood protection, punishment as a pedagogical instrument, family hierarchy and domination of the strongest<sup>(2)</sup>.

Although this type of violence is difficult to understand due to the controversies it implies, it can be classified according to its forms and expressions. There are four main kinds of violence: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence and negligence/abandonment. All are defined as abusive practice, infringing children and adolescents' rights<sup>(3)</sup>.

Health teams, as well as other specialties, suffer the daily effects of domestic violence and its consequences, which interfere in children and adolescents' growth and development. Therefore, this study adopts the perspective of producing knowledge based on common sense, in order to systemize it from a sociologic and psychological perspective, considering the meaning of family dynamics to parents, their children and/or guardians, victims of domestic

violence, to make it possible for professionals to rethink their practice and make their work easier in terms of coping with this phenomenon.

## OBJECTIVE

To understand family dynamics for parents and children involved in domestic violence against children and adolescents hospitalized at the Center for Care to Child and Adolescent Victims (CCCAV) in Ribeirao Preto, a city in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand how a family is structured in view of domestic violence, in a broad and systemic way, the analysis in this study was based on an extract of the ecological model of human development<sup>(4)</sup>.

The study of violent social relationships within the family requires a theoretical structure capable of explaining the causal variables in their broadest context. In this sense, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory<sup>(4)</sup> provides support to understand the family in its development context and the complex relationship among its members.

The term "Ecological" refers to a natural environment, everyday life objects and activities in the context of the research. On the other hand, human development is understood as a long-lasting transformation regarding the way one perceives and deals with the environment. The human being is considered a growing and dynamic entity, which progressively penetrates the environment in which (s)he lives and restructures it.

According to this framework, the micro-system is a set of roles performed and interpersonal relationships experienced by the person under development in a certain environment, with specific physical and material characteristics.

The micro-system is the first environment in which the developing human being is inserted according to social standards. This environment has activities and relationships that are associated with certain behaviors and expectations; for instance, the mother-child relationship. Facts that occur in a micro-system are related and entwined with what happens in other micro-systems.

Similar to a system of fittings contained in each other, a micro-system is inserted in broader systems that influence and are influenced by the first. The other systems are called: meso-system, exo-system, and macro-system.

The meso-system consists of the interaction between two or more environments which one actively participates in. Therefore, a meso-system is a system of micro-systems.

The exo-system comprises the environments in which one or more family members maintain direct relationships. However, these relations indirectly reflect on the other members who do not participate in this environment<sup>(4)</sup>.

The macro-system is the broadest system, which covers all others. It is formed by a global standard of ideas, beliefs, values and common social organizations of a determined culture.

Social policies for combating violence and promoting education and health are examples of macro-systems that directly influence the family system development. Domestic violence is inserted in the micro-system because it appears in parent-child relationships. However, its causes and consequences may appear in the subsequent system, or even in the macro-system.

In the present research, it is considered essential that not only parents, but also children and adolescents understand how the family environment is experienced at the different levels of ecological development.

## METHODS

The authors chose the qualitative analysis, which includes all human beings, and concentrates on human experience. Research using this approach believes that unique human beings assign meanings to their experiences which result from the context of life<sup>(5)</sup>.

The present study sample was selected at the Center for Care to Child and Adolescent Victims (CCCAV), located in Ribeirao Preto, a city in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil. It is a shelter for children and adolescents (2 to 17 years old), victims of domestic violence who are at serious risk. According to the theoretical framework, shelters are the immediate micro-system of these victimized children and adolescents. It is believed that, based on relational

and behavioral aspects, the micro-system outlines these social actors' comprehension of family.

The subjects involved in the study were members from eight families with children and/or adolescents institutionalized at the CCCAV in 2004, due to their involvement in domestic violence. These social actors are essential for the present research because each represents one side of the domestic violence issue under study.

Data were collected through semistructured interviews. Interviews with children and adolescents' parents/guardians and siblings were marked with the letter F to indicate family. Interviews with institutionalized children and adolescents were marked with the letter A.

Data were treated by means of the content analysis technique, thematic mode<sup>(6)</sup>. This technique consists in classifying the elements that compose the interview, thus composing thematic groups under a generic title, putting common subjects together.

The present research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Sao Paulo at Ribeirao Preto College of Nursing, under protocol number 0120/2000, according to National Health Council Resolution 196 of 1996. All interviews used in this study were duly authorized.

## RESULTS

### Thematic group - the family context

In the attempt to elucidate the dimension and complexity of the item presented through the statements of the interviewed subjects, this group consisted of two sub-themes: Ideal family; and Real family.

#### Sub-theme 1 - ideal family

In this sub-theme, the authors attempted to group definitions of family identified in subjects' statements, from an ideal perspective.

Regarding family configuration, the perspective of the aggressor parent is that of a nuclear family, that is, the idealization of a family bonded by biological parents and blood bonds. It is also noted that there is a hierarchic relationship of parents over children. In a study with low-income Brazilian families, it was observed that the idealized family model is

based on kinship, on the bourgeoisie nuclear family, in which the father-mother-children structure prevails. Only this model would be capable of promoting the necessary conditions for a child's development<sup>(6)</sup>. The following statement shows that idealization.

*A group of people that are related by blood (F5).*

Some studies in Brazil about family show the diversity in organization, composition and form of sociability. There are currently different family structures in our society, including spouses with children from previous marriages, young single mothers, and divorced parents sharing the costs and responsibilities of raising their children<sup>(8)</sup>. These changes in family composition significantly affect domestic life and structural relationships and define the family model. Nonetheless, aggressor parents maintain the nuclear family view, that is, one that consists of a father, mother and children. It is understood that this family conception remains socially and culturally established in our society.

On the other hand, most interviewed children and adolescents consider that family members are all those people towards whom they nurture any feeling of affection and trust. They are more linked to love than blood connections. This is reported in the following statements.

*I consider my family to be all those who help me, and also have some hope towards me (A1).*

*People whom I live with and I consider a brother or sister to me, like people here at the shelter (A4).*

Analyses of the interviews suggest that, due to domestic violence or to the fact that they had already been institutionalized, children and adolescents built a certain family view that is based on an ecologic and psychological perspective.

Regarding family function, children and adolescents as well as their parents and guardians bear a load of expectations. They hope their family is capable of providing all the affective and social support needed for their members' development. At the macro and micro-system levels, the family is perceived as a sound and healthy institution. This is evidenced in the statement.

*...family is union, love, tenderness, it is comprehension and respect... (F3).*

Social and economic crises can cause changes in the accepted social pattern, especially regarding family identifications. This can be evidenced in the statement.

*I would like to have a family like before, my father was rich and I had a bike, and Santa Claus visited my house and left two boxes of cookies (A6).*

The relation of material goods with the family concept can be explained in the context of institutionalization, which often includes having a background of financial difficulties, which determine the dissolution of the family union.

The social determinations of violence have a very broad development spectrum. Poverty alone does not explain violence, but it creates or facilitates delinquency and banditry in economy that is markedly unemploying, selective and excluding<sup>(9)</sup>.

The idealization of an absent parent's role is also a marking factor. Institutionalization, in some ways and situations, contributes to preserve the image of understanding and thoughtful parents. Children and adolescents have a constant need for valuing absent people.

Another point worth highlighting is the view, from an ideal perspective, of how children should be raised by their parents. Most children and adults stated that the best way to educate children is through dialogue and that physical aggression should never exist.

This fact is likely an indicator of protection, since it encourages these families to reconsider their attitudes toward the discipline used to raise their children, considering that they have been potential aggressors and victims.

For children, there is an expectation regarding the ways they can discipline and educate their own children in the future. Their statements show a need to break free from the education model used by their parents. They disapprove physical punishment and wish to adopt different forms of discipline, such as dialogue and restrictive punishment.

*I would treat my children differently from what my mother does, totally. I would be very thoughtful (F1).*

## Sub-theme 2 - the real family

When the studied families are observed in terms of interpersonal relationships, the initial idea of an ideal family is soon replaced by a view that agrees with the tough reality of the violence they have been subject to.

Children and adolescents affirmed, in the previous sub-theme, that family represents union and a source of affection. Statements show that the family micro-system is characterized by situations of loss, abandonment, withdrawal and abuse.

The present study findings show considerable difficulty regarding authority in family inter-

relationships. The mother figure is unable to impose authority and limits, leaving this to the father, who may not be there to perform that duty. This impairs the child's family micro-system in terms of the respect toward imposing limits.

According to the theoretical framework, it is observed that the lack of a support system, which would offer some backing through appropriate family guidance, also promotes conflicts, as shown in this statement.

*The Guardian Council told me that you can't hit and beat your child, so I don't know what we are supposed to do because the day the police brought him here, they told me I should teach him a lesson (F2).*

The support network is characterized by a set of systems and significant people who are part of a family context, which is noticed by the individual. The absence of this type of network can cause risk factors for the development of the family micro-system.

It is important to state that some of the institutionalized children and adolescents found it difficult to define family, in either an ideal or real context. This is explained by the fact that they live in a process referred to as triangulation, that is, they are constantly being sheltered or run away, from home or from the shelter. This triangular dynamics, street/home/shelter, implies a rupture with the feeling of family. It is also verified that institutionalization weakens the reference framework of origin.

Considering what has been presented in this sub-theme, thinking about reality helps children and adolescents to develop family resilience and search for relationships based on stability and reciprocity.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since ancient times, but especially at present, the family represents the priority space and the foundation on which opportunities of socialization, well-being and protection are established in human

relationships. The characteristics of each family nucleus, its composition, conditions and quality of life implies a higher or lower degree of vulnerability and, consequently, a higher or lower degree of power.

Modern life imposes a group of moral, social, political and cultural factors that compete to organize families and society, often disrespecting the essential principles and values of life and human coexistence. Hence, the family consists of a space that constantly reproduces the power of hierarchy and subordination, of dominator over dominated, of adult domination over children.

In terms of the advances achieved so far, social and political permissiveness remains regarding violence against children and adolescents. This impedes the problem from being detected, and care and intervention from being properly offered.

It was verified that family dynamics is understood based on references regarding the singularity of the experienced violence, and is expressed through denial or naturalization of that violence. Statements shift from the imaginary of an ideal family to the reality of a concrete family, which is filled with violence and usually does not have enough financial resources or a support network to facilitate the elaboration of their problems and intervention.

It is acknowledged that the health care facility is a privileged place to act on domestic violence, and that there are numerous difficulties for health professionals to deal with this phenomenon. These include the professionals' lack of knowledge and preparation to identify, assist and refer victims, and the difficulty to notify confirmed cases and deal with aggressors.

Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen and create new spaces for victim care, with multidisciplinary teams following the logic of the care and support network that, from the social actors' perspective, should include greater political effort and commitment in order to be effective.

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