



Growing up in the context of intimate partner violence: Experiences and meanings for adolescents in Chile

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ABSTRACT

Background: Growing up in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV) is associated with a range of mental health problems in childhood. A recent area of research in this field considers the perspectives of children and adolescents in understanding the phenomenon of IPV.

Objective: To explore the lived experiences of adolescents growing up in the context of IPV and the meanings they construct about the phenomenon.

Participants and setting: Ten adolescents (five females and five males), between 12 and 17 years old, who were attending psychosocial programs specialized in child maltreatment in Santiago, Chile.

Methods: The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and thematic narrative analysis.

Results: The results show that many of the adolescents narrate their lived experiences of severe and chronic episodes of IPV as part of their life story, and that they continue to do so even after their parents separate. It was also found that the adolescents suffered other forms of victimizations, such as physical and sexual abuse.

Conclusions: Adolescents growing up in the context of IPV are demonstrated to be not only direct victims of violence but also active agents capable of reflecting on it. The implications of children and adolescents participating in such investigations for the development of effective interventions in IPV are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the main forms of violence against women (World Health Organization [WHO] & Pan American Health Organization, 2012), and is most commonly perpetrated by men against women in the context of an intimate relationship (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; WHO, 2013; WHO, 2016). Recognized as a social problem at a global level and a priority in terms of public health, IPV is described as any behavior that causes physical, psychological or sexual injury in women (Heise &

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Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Kendall, 2020). Globally, around 30% of women who have been in a relationship have suffered physical and/or sexual violence from their partner (UN WOMEN, 2020), reporting a prevalence of 23.68% in South America (WHO, 2013). These figures are estimated to have increased during the global COVID-19 pandemic (UN WOMEN, 2020). This form of violence not only affects women's wellbeing (Kendall, 2020; WHO, 2013), but also that of children and adolescents who grow up in families where these situations occur (Artz et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2008; Kendall, 2020; Wolfe et al., 2003).

In the past two decades, the research has highlighted that IPV is associated with a variety of adverse consequences in children's and adolescents' mental health, such as emotional, social, cognitive, behavioral, and educational problems (Carracedo et al., 2018; Chan & Yeung, 2009; Evans et al., 2008; Gardner et al., 2019; Holt et al., 2008). From a developmental perspective, IPV has detrimental short- and long-term outcomes throughout the lifespan (Artz et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2008; Howell et al., 2016; Vu et al., 2016). In other words, the issue of children and adolescents growing in IPV contexts is fundamental, as the adverse effects resulting from lived experiences of IPV can be seen prenatally and continue into adolescence, with evidence of psychological, social, physical, and cognitive consequences (Howell et al., 2016; Vu et al., 2016).

While there is no current consensus, various researchers in the field believe that growing up in contexts of IPV could be conceptualized as a form of child abuse (Artz et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2019; Holden, 2003). Another domain of empirical evidence has highlighted that living in a context of IPV is a risk factor for the occurrence of other forms of violence, such as physical and sexual abuse (Devries et al., 2017; Holden, 2003; Holt et al., 2008). The overlap of IPV with child maltreatment and other victimizations has been well-documented in a nationally representative sample of youth from the United States (Hamby et al., 2010) and Chile (see Miranda et al., 2021, for more details). Such findings add support to the poly-victimization framework developed by Finkelhor et al. (2007), a framework that accounts for the exposure to multiple forms of victimization, rather than different episodes of the same victimization, which strongly predicts trauma symptoms. This also adds to the relevance of using this more comprehensive approach for exploring the experiences of children growing in IPV contexts. Consequently, the current study agrees with Hamby and Grych (2013), considering that studying the co-occurrence of the different forms of victimization –understanding that they are connected to each other– constitutes a more coherent approach to people's reality.

Qualitative research on IPV has underscored the importance of including the participation of children and adolescents in IPV research. This type of research is concerned with understanding experiences and processes by allowing participants to describe what they have lived through in ways particular to them, often through their own unique verbal, written or pictorial responses to stimulus (Harper & Thompson, 2011). In this sense, recent qualitative research on IPV advocated for the use of the terms *experience* and *children who experience violence* as concepts that position children and adolescents as active subjects, validating their perspectives and recognizing their capacity for agency in response to contexts of IPV (Callaghan et al., 2017; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009; Miranda, León, & Crockett, 2020; Øverlien, 2013).

Qualitative research on adolescents that grow up in IPV-contexts has reported that adolescents often consider paternal figures as the "bad guys", aggressive, and dangerous (Dryden et al., 2010); however, they are also portrayed as weak, powerless, and an object of ridicule (Øverlien, 2014). Mothers, on the other hand, are portrayed both as victims and as figures that resist the father's controlling behavior (Øverlien, 2014), as well as active subjects charged with the protection of their families (Dryden et al., 2010; Goldblatt & Eisikovits, 2005; Øverlien, 2014). Such findings call for the inclusion of adolescent perspectives in the academic research on IPV, with the aim of describing elements that might explain why some experiences can impact some adolescents more than others (Dryden et al., 2010).

The international qualitative literature demonstrates that adolescents can and do make important contributions to the investigative sphere of IPV (Aymer, 2008; Bennet, 1991; Dryden et al., 2010; Goldblatt & Eisikovits, 2005; Øverlien, 2014; Phillips & Phillips, 2010). Moreover, these studies reveal that obtaining insights as to how adolescents live with IPV continues to be a challenge for clinical investigations. Prior research has found it especially relevant to investigate this population, given the profound long term impacts that have been recounted with respect to living in the context of IPV, such as emotional (Aymer, 2008; Bennet, 1991; Øverlien, 2014) and interpersonal problems (Aymer, 2008; Bennet, 1991), the possibility of engaging in violence against peers of the same sex or against parents and/or guardians (Howell et al., 2016; McCloskey & Lichter, 2003), and the development of antisocial behavior and delinquency (Howell et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned literature related to adolescents and IPV, two recent systematic reviews of qualitative literature on the perspectives of youths in IPV contexts (Noble-Carr et al., 2019; Ravi & Casolaro, 2018) revealed that: 1) only a limited number of studies are currently available on the lived experiences of children in IPV contexts; 2) quantitative studies provide limited insights into children's own understandings of their violent experiences; 3) only a few qualitative studies described children's eyewitness experiences of IPV exposure; 4) the reviews' findings confirmed that IPV and other family violence can have a constant and enduring presence in children's lives; 5) the reviews' findings call for service responses that better understand and consider children's active roles and strengths along with their vulnerabilities and need for protection.

Acknowledging the potential for agency of children and adolescents provides a more holistic view of IPV, which positions children as direct victims as opposed to merely collateral damage (Callaghan et al., 2015; Miranda et al., 2020; Øverlien, 2010). A number of qualitative investigations have contributed to rendering visible the multiple forms of victimizations and psychosocial impacts on children and adolescents from their own perspectives (Callaghan et al., 2015; Miranda et al., 2020; Miranda & Corovic, 2019; Øverlien, 2010, 2011; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). However, few investigations have focused exclusively on the perspectives of adolescents growing up in the context of IPV. Internationally, according to our review of the literature, and in line with the two reviews mentioned in the preceding paragraph, there are only eight published articles that have addressed this issue (Aymer, 2008; Bennet, 1991; Dryden et al., 2010; Goldblatt & Eisikovits, 2005; Lamb et al., 2018; Mootz et al., 2019; Øverlien, 2014; Phillips & Phillips, 2010). These investigations have revealed, among other things, that adolescents live in a constant state of alert, perceiving episodes of IPV as life-

threatening situations for their mothers (Øverlien, 2014). Given that it is known, on one hand, that IPV experiences have a negative impact on child and adolescent development, and also that, on the other hand, qualitative research has highlighted the importance of including the participation of children and adolescents in IPV research, it is surprising that so few studies have -until now- placed children as active participants. This knowledge gap requires significantly more focused research, and this study aims to contribute to bridging said gap.

1.1. The present study

Despite the international attention on IPV and the research conducted in North America and Europe, far less is known about this issue in Latin America and Chile, in particular. Data from national Chilean surveys reveal that between 12.6% (Subsecretaría de Prevención del Delito, [SPD], 2017) and 29.8% (SPD, 2013) of children and adolescents report the occurrence of IPV in their homes. Using the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ; Finkelhor et al., 2005), a Chilean study reported a prevalence of 16.6% of physical IPV among 12- to 17-year-old adolescents (Pinto-Cortez et al., 2017), which is close to the 16.3% and 17.9% formerly reported in the United States (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Hamby et al., 2011) but much higher than the 3% registered in Canada (Cyr et al., 2013) and the 2.9% in Spain (Pereda et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding the advances in this international research field, there is still a shortage of qualitative studies that focuses on adolescents, and no such studies yet exist in Chile. This study aims to explore the lived experiences and meanings of IPV from the perspectives of adolescents, in the hope of contributing to the wider phenomenon of IPV from the point of view of youths. This study is developed within a constructivist epistemology, which understands human beings as subjects who actively construct their reality through the meanings they give to this reality (Feixas & Villegas, 2000). Meanings are understood to be the personal constructions of logical theories, reliably interpretable and systematically predictive (Kegan, 1982), about the experiences that people live. From this perspective, narratives allow people not to only give meaning to their experiences (Riessman, 2002) but also to shape how such experiences are structured (Bruner, 2004; Riessman, 2008).

2. Method

This article presents the third stage of results from a pioneering research project in Chile that seeks to integrate the perspectives of children and adolescents with respect to IPV. This work focuses exclusively on the experiences and meanings of adolescents who have lived in IPV contexts.

Table 1
Participant characteristics.

| Participant | Age | Gender | Type of exposure ^a | Other victimizations | Mother's age ^b | Type of IPV |
|-------------|-----|--------|---|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| P1 | 14 | M | Exposed prenatally, eyewitness, intervenes, experiences the aftermath | Psychological and physical abuse, violence between other family members | 42 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P2 | 12 | M | Exposed prenatally, eyewitness, intervenes, experiences the aftermath | Psychological and physical abuse, violence between other family members, sexual abuse suspicion, sibling violence | 42 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P3 | 12 | M | Exposed prenatally, eyewitness, intervenes, observes the initial effects, experiences the aftermath, victimized | Psychological and physical abuse, sibling and peer violence, sexual abuse | 30 | Psychological and physical |
| P4 | 17 | M | Exposed prenatally, eyewitness, intervenes, experiences the aftermath | Psychological and physical abuse, sibling violence | 41 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P5 | 13 | F | Exposed prenatally, eyewitness, intervenes, experiences the aftermath, victimized | Psychological and physical abuse, sibling and peer violence | 37 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P6 | 12 | M | Overhears, intervenes, observes the initial effects, experiences the aftermath, victimized | Psychological and physical abuse, sibling and peer violence | 40 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P7 | 13 | F | Eyewitness, observes the initial effects, experiences the aftermath, victimized | Psychological and physical abuse, violence between other family members, sibling violence | 40 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P8 | 17 | F | Exposed prenatally, eyewitness, intervenes, observes the initial effects, experiences the aftermath, victimized | Psychological and physical abuse, violence between other family members, sibling violence | 40 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P9 | 15 | F | Exposed prenatally, eyewitness, observes the initial effects, experiences the aftermath | Psychological and physical abuse, sibling violence | 43 | Psychological, physical, and sexual |
| P10 | 12 | F | Exposed prenatally, overhears, eyewitness, observes the initial effects, experiences the aftermath | Physical abuse, violence between other family members, sexual abuse, sibling and peer violence | 31 | Psychological and physical |

Note. IPV = intimate partner violence.

^a Classification based on Holden's taxonomy (2003).

^b Information provided by the mothers.

2.1. Participants

The participants were ten adolescents (five females and five males) between 12 and 17 years old from the Metropolitan Region of Santiago. Participants were attending a psychosocial program specialized in interventions for children and adolescents that had been victims of child abuse.

The description of each adolescent's characteristics and the type of IPV recounted is shown in [Table 1](#). Common to all participants were that the IPV experienced by the mother was chronic and the majority of the IPV incidents were perpetrated by the biological father, except for one case that involved the mother's male partner.

The inclusion criteria for the study were the following: 1) adolescents that had lived IPV experiences (physical, psychological and sexual forms of IPV against their mothers) in the last year; 2) adolescents with a court order stipulating that they were either witnesses of domestic violence or had a documented history of living in IPV contexts, according to the psychosocial program that they were attending; 3) adolescents within the stipulated age range; 4) adolescents living with their mothers at the time of the study and had been doing so for at least 6 months prior; 5) adolescents in the diagnostic stage of the psychosocial program, so that it would not be necessary to consult them on more than one occasion about their lived experiences of IPV, and so that the collection of this information would contribute to the intervention process. All the participants in this study had to meet the 5 conditions mentioned above.

Considering the risks associated with living in the context of IPV and the ethical guidelines stipulated for investigations of this nature ([Morris et al., 2012](#)), the following exclusion criteria were defined: a) adolescents and mothers whose names and addresses were protected by the courts; b) adolescents and mothers with court orders indicating that they continued to live complex home situations (this criterion was evaluated by the program's professionals); c) adolescents who had not completed the written consent form or whose mother had not done so.

2.2. Instruments

Semi-structured interviews for the adolescents were conducted using an interview guide that had been specifically designed by [Callaghan et al. \(2015\)](#) for children and adolescents in IPV contexts. This interview guide was adapted for this same audience by the research team for a previous study (see [Miranda et al., 2021](#)), following guidelines for the adaptation and translation of tests ([Muñiz et al., 2013](#)). These interviews focused on collecting in-depth information regarding the adolescents' experiences, the impact of IPV on their wellbeing and the strategies they have employed in confronting IPV.

The mothers of participants were interviewed to provide additional information about the IPV experienced (such as type, frequency, and perpetrator) using a semi-structured interview questionnaire developed for victims of domestic violence ([Echeburúa et al., 1998](#)), and they also provided relevant sociodemographic information through a written form. This information was solely used to characterize IPV experiences, as shown in [Table 1](#).

2.3. Procedure

All procedures in this study were approved by the Ethics Committee of our university. First, the professionals of the psychosocial programs referred participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the investigators. Then, the mothers were contacted by phone and informed in more detail about the project, and asked to confirm whether they and the respective adolescents were interested in participating. If both agreed, an interview date was set up to secure the attendance of both mother and adolescent.

On the day of the interview, the adolescents and their mothers were asked to complete a written consent form before taking part in the interview. Once the documents were signed, each adolescent and mother was interviewed separately by a program professional, using the semi-structured interview formats applicable to each type of participant (adolescent/mother). Interviews were conducted in a single session for each participant, with an average duration of 24.74 min (range 9.08 to 49.45 min). All interviews were audio-recorded.

2.4. Analysis of data

The interviews were analyzed using narrative analysis. This type of analysis considers that narratives give shape and meaning to human action in the process of putting the everyday events and actions in order ([Riessman, 2002](#)). According to [Riessman \(2002\)](#) narratives are structures that construct meanings; these should not be fractured by researchers, in order to respect the way in which participants develop meanings about their experiences. In this context, [Riley and Hawe \(2005\)](#) point out that "the role of the researcher is to interpret the stories in order to analyze the underlying narrative that the narrators may not be able to give voice for themselves" (p. 229). It is important to highlight that, as researchers, we do not have direct access to the experiences of the subjects - we can only approach them through different levels of representation ([Riessman, 2002](#)). Within the narrative analysis, [Riessman \(2008\)](#) indicates three types: structural, dialogical and thematic. Thus, structural analysis analyzes aspects related to organization, gender, characters and format ([Bernasconi, 2011](#)); the dialogical analysis focuses on the interaction between those who participate within the specific context of the interview ([Bernasconi, 2011](#)); and thematic analysis focuses on the content of the narrative ([Riessman, 2008](#)), i.e., what is narrated and its meaning ([Bernasconi, 2011](#)). This research uses a thematic narrative analysis, focusing on the narratives that people construct from their life experiences ([Bernasconi, 2011](#)) and, specifically, on the meanings of adolescents who have grown up in the context of IPV. This type of analysis tries to discover the different themes that may arise from the narratives from an inductive approach ([Braun & Clarke, 2012](#)). It is appropriate for the study of a limited number of cases because it seeks to interpret the meanings

that individuals construct in a profound way, rather than to generalize the information collected (Riessman, 2008).

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed by members of the investigative team using the program ATLAS.TI (versión 7.5.4). The current study followed the recommendation published in qualitative research to address the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Martínez-Salgado, 2012; Morse et al., 2002). This work uses the same analysis strategy described in previous studies under the major pioneering project mentioned at the beginning of this section (see Miranda et al., 2020). As prior researchers in the field of children in IPV contexts (Ravi & Casolaro, 2018) have done, our study followed the guidelines of the widely recognized three-stage strategy for analyzing qualitative data (Creswell, 2007): 1) preparing and organizing the data; 2) reducing the data into themes/subthemes across coding and summarizing the codes; and (3) representing the data through discussion. The interview transcripts were analyzed by four members of the research team, and the following steps were taken: a) each member of the research team conducted an intra-case analysis, by coding and code condensing each adolescent's interview; b) the codes of each interview were discussed among the authors of this work, implementing analyst triangulation (codes were reviewed, compared, discussed and re-codification was conducted, as necessary); c) an inter-case analysis (an integrated analysis of all interviews) was performed by the same researchers, separately; and then d) analyst triangulation of the codes of inter-cases analysis was carried out, discussing and organizing themes and subthemes. This last step was conducted by the authors, and later discussed by all members of our research team until consensus was reached. The triangulation of the researchers reinforces rigor and quality in the process (Martínez-Salgado, 2012), and increases trustworthiness in qualitative research (Patton, 1999). The data released in this study are results of an exhaustive analytic process, which involved a systematic check over the fit of data and the conceptual work of analysis, and a constant monitoring and confirmation of interpretation (Morse et al., 2002). All the members of the research team are specialists in child clinical psychology and child victimization, which provided greater conceptual rigor to our results (Riessman, 2008). We used Mayan (2009)'s saturation criterion, requiring the results to reveal something novel regarding the phenomenon in study. For this work, the focus is around adolescents' experiences and meanings regarding IPV.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Given the complexity of the research subject, the present investigation drew heavily from the published literature referring to the ethical challenges inherent in research involving children and adolescents that live in complex situations such as IPV (Eriksson & Näsman, 2012; Morris et al., 2012). The psychosocial program professionals were trained in the selection of participants using the exclusion and inclusion criteria, in the administration of the semi-structured interviews and given protocols for assessment and emotional support. Such training was intended to be of service in detecting and responding to any emotional distress that might be triggered during the investigation. In addition, before beginning the interviews, a process of assessing potential situations of high risk to personal safety was undertaken by members of the research team and program professionals, with the aim of ensuring that adolescents in high-risk contexts did not participate in this study (Morris et al., 2012). The names of the participants were replaced by codes (P1 to P10) to protect their anonymity.

3. Results

The narratives of the adolescents were organized into three themes: 1) Lived experiences of IPV; 2) Other forms of victimizations; 3) Meanings of growing up in the context of IPV. Each of these themes included various subthemes, for which examples of the statements from adolescents have been included.

3.1. Lived experiences of IPV

3.1.1. Perception of the cycles of abuse

The narratives of IPV recounted by the adolescents were corroborated by accounts given by their mothers; just one adolescent declared an inability to describe the violence due to not having witnessed it. The majority of the adolescents characterized the IPV as episodes of physical and/or severe psychological violence perpetrated by the fathers against the mothers. In this context, IPV is often described as a chronic occurrence within the family dynamic, in which many other apparently unrelated events are linked to the cycle of partner violence. There were references to stages such as 'the honeymoon period', 'the building of tension', and the 'explosion of violence'. With respect to this, P1 proposed that:

Yes, my dad came and he hit my mom many times, and she threw him out, and after that he came back being all nice, and then the same thing happened again, so the time came when I was just sick of it.

(14 years old)

Below, P10 refers to an awareness of the violent dynamic between the couple, describing the cycle of reconciliation as being associated with the positive changes with respect to the paternal figure's behavior, as perceived by herself and her mother.

My parents were going to divorce... and then my mom decided to give him a chance... because he said that he was going to change... and now he...he's supporting us... uhh... with... the program.

(12 years old)

Likewise, the episodes of IPV were understood in terms of escalation, with descriptions of physical violence understood as cumulative

events and inflection points that permanently transformed the family structure. P4 refers to his experience thus:

My mom always said that the day my dad hit her, she would end it all. And that day, my dad hit her, so my mum kicked him out...my dad didn't want to go.

(17 years old)

While such narratives allude to overarching cycles and general periods, some adolescents referred to the effects that particular episodes of IPV had on their mothers in great detail, from physical wounds to mood swings. P6 explains:

I would say 'What is going on with mom, there?' ... because sometimes a bruise would appear on her leg and I'd ask, 'What happened to you?' 'Ah, he hit me', and I would think that that was weird.

(12 years old)

3.1.2. Adolescents' experiences with direct and indirect forms of IPV

The adolescents in this study referred to their experience with IPV differently depending on whether they were present during episodes. Their experience was expressed in terms of their role in the dynamic (for example as victim or protector) as well as in terms of the emotional effects on them and their family members (mother/siblings). Direct experiences of IPV were classed as negative, associated with significant emotional distress that included states of high alert and anxiety, along with effects on their behavior. P10 refers to this with respect to how her brother and she react during an IPV episode:

Yes, my brother is the same, like... I don't know if John remembers, but that night he was crying... he cried because he felt that my Dad grabbed something and... he heard the wall, my brother went downstairs straight away... He went down and I ran out... and like we stayed there in shock and we stayed on the stairs and we kept watching.

(12 years old)

When she learns of IPV occurrence after an episode, P10 emphasizes that both parental figures communicate details about the episode of violence that took place at different times:

Because my mum told me after... Yes, I was with my granny, I was staying with her in winter... I had stayed there... with my granny... and then my dad started telling me and then my mom came and started telling me too...

(12 years old)

3.1.3. Lived experiences of post-separation IPV

In these narratives, two brothers (P1 and P2) report the IPV episodes they experience after the definitive separation of their parents, the departure of their father/aggressor from the house and the end of family life as they knew it. The adolescents describe new episodes of IPV in the context of paternal visits, an example of which P2 describes:

As soon as we got out of the apartment, we had to get into his car (referring to his father's car) (...) and while we were walking towards his house (...) he would always say really nasty things about my mum... that she was a witch, that it was her fault that we separated, that she was a bad person.

(12 years old)

In this new context, both young people highlighted the discord their father attempted to plant in their relationships with their mother. According to P1, such actions triggered emotional distress and family tension, and deteriorated the established relationship they had with their mother.

So, when we got to our house, we had to get it off our chests and my mum like... didn't take it very well... so it kind of wrecked the relationship I had with my mum.

(14 years old)

In the narratives of the two brothers, it is important to highlight the different perspectives each held regarding the divisiveness of the father. One described how he had discredited his father's account against the mother from the beginning, while the other reported that he had initially believed him. P2 had this to say about his father's vitriol against his mother:

No, I didn't believe it, my father was always saying that he was the good one and my mum was the bad one...he would only say nasty things about her.

(12 years old)

P1 however, explained the distrust he felt toward his mother owing to the constant pejorative discourse of his father:

Yes, my mother tried to help me but... with all the stuff my dad was saying about her, I did not trust her.

(14 years old)

3.1.4. Emotional distress associated with court orders

Another element that emerged in the narrative of the two brothers with respect to their experiences of post-separation IPV was the

feelings of emotional distress associated with court orders. They described the court order permitting continual contact with the father-aggressor as creating the conditions for undermining the protection of children and their mothers. With respect to this P1 explains:

Because, for example... now it's only the suspension of visits, and they can be renewed at any moment (...) But (interrupted) (...) It's not good that we keep seeing him... enough already.

(14 years old)

3.2. Other forms of victimizations

3.2.1. Paternal abuse

In most of the adolescents' narratives the occurrence of other forms of victimizations were also found in conjunction with IPV incidents, revealing episodes of severe physical and psychological abuse predominantly perpetuated by the paternal figure against them and their siblings. With respect to this, P4 describes two events, one where the father hit him and another when he physically assaulted his younger brother:

When I was 12, 13 years old, he hit me when I was coming back from soccer training until I bled. Uh... and with my brother, when my mom received government financial support, we went to get it at La Moneda (seat of the Chilean President), and my little brother must have been 7, 8 years old and he took him by the arm and threw him through the air.

(17 years old)

It is worth mentioning that some of these situations of physical abuse occurred during IPV episodes, while the adolescents were in the role of actively attempting to protect the maternal figure. In this context, an adolescent narrates episodes of physical abuse perpetrated by her father against her sister, an episode that generated extreme emotional distress, disgust and rejection.

Yes... because as well... I never liked it when my dad hit my sister because my sister got in between them trying to defend my mum.

(P7, 13 years old)

Many of the narratives of the adolescents refer to episodes of physical and psychological abuse within the context of parental visits. Particularly of note within the narratives was an awareness of the danger associated with visiting the home of the father and their psychological distress associated with it, clouded by feelings of helplessness and defenselessness. In this context, the father was perceived as an omnipotent and violent figure, someone who generated feelings of worthlessness and vulnerability in the adolescents. With respect to this, P2 remarks that:

Umm when we went walking to the beach to buy bread... or we were passing and we were in a bad mood... umm he would kick us... in the butt or the legs, so that we would walk faster... he didn't like it when we walked slowly if we were in front of him.

(12 years old)

3.2.2. Maternal abuse

Contrary to the perception that abuse is only inflicted by males, in a few cases, accounts alluding to abuse on the part of the maternal figure have also been revealed among the adolescents' narratives. Such recounting has tended to minimize the severity of the violence, possibly in comparison to that suffered at the hands of the father-aggressor which has led to a normalization of the use of physical punishment as a disciplinary measure.

When I got a bad mark, I'd get the sandal (...) (?) I mean, she'd hit me with it if I was being naughty. Yeah, nah... so slowly, you know, she'd get angry with me.

(P6, 12 years old)

However, there was one adolescent who did not minimize the abuse she suffered and referred to what she saw as the psychological impact of the abuse perpetrated by her mother.

I have something of a reflex... it stays with me from the past... so each time my mum gets angry with me it's like... she's trying to get something out and I put my arms up to protect myself... and when she is angry with me whatever I do... I... I... do this... to protect myself.

(P10, 12 years old)

3.2.3. Exposure to violence, maltreatment and sexual abuse within the extended family

Several adolescents described having experienced violence in some form among the paternal extended family, referring to grandfathers and uncles, among others, as the aggressors. They also describe episodes of exposure to verbal abuse among other members of the family, most commonly against them and their siblings. With respect to this P2 remarks that:

They (referring to the paternal grandparents), when they got angry... or got really angry and started to insult each other... they would say angry swear words... they would speak really harshly.

(12 years old)

In this context, the narrative of one adolescent reveals that she was sexually assaulted by her paternal uncle. According to information

given by her mother, her mother filed a report against the uncle, against the wishes of her father. The adolescent associates the reporting of the sexual assault as the catalyst for episodes of IPV exercised by the father against the mother.

They fought about that... about the report... because from that point on they started to call us in to testify... there in the OPD (referring to the Oficina de Protección de Derechos, a child protection services agency in Chile) ... they called us on the phone too... and... how do you say it... my father got mad.

(P10, 12 years old)

3.3. Meanings of growing up in the context of IPV

3.3.1. Life stories of abuse

The adolescents refer to growing up in the context of IPV as particularly harmful in their everyday life and throughout their lifespan, as much for their siblings as for them. Their narratives revealed the psychological damage that they suffer through living with episodes of IPV from very early stages in their life, even referring to episodes of violence during the prenatal stage of their lives, as revealed to them by a close relative and incorporated by the adolescents into their own narratives. It is worth mentioning that the significance that adolescents gave to their being harmed throughout their lives coincides with the mothers' narratives, which attest that all adolescents had a family history characterized by a chronic trajectory of IPV that included episodes of violence while the mothers were pregnant with the adolescents, or even before their births.

P8 described being aware of the implications of having been a victim of IPV while in her mother's womb. As an important meaning linked to the life review, from the subjective experience of a young person, the adolescent's narrative highlights that some kind of violence has always been a condition of her interpersonal relationships and life story.

(And do you feel that this (violence) has had at least some effect on your life?) Yes... because... I... before I was born... my dad... hit my mum when she was pregnant... my mum was pregnant, with me.

(17 years old)

With respect to psychological violence, most of the adolescents emphasized the harm suffered across their lifespan. P7, for instance, refers to the high probability of being hurt during such episodes of violence, describing attacks against her older sister, who intervened directly in the hope of protecting her mother and siblings.

Because if we got involved, he would hit us... because with me... a thousand times he tried to hit me... but he didn't hit me... because my sister was there...

(13 years old)

3.3.2. Being rendered invisible by parental figures

Some of the adolescents referred in a general, third-person manner to certain elements that are associated with the phenomenon of IPV, emphasizing that the majority of the families where such violence occurs involves children, highlighting that children are negatively impacted by IPV. One way in which they are affected negatively is through being rendered invisible by their parental figures. The narratives refer to how the parents can appear incapable of considering the presence of their children during episodes of IPV, lacking a sufficient awareness for reflecting on the emotional harm such violence causes. P5 describes this phenomenon:

For the children... because... in some cases of families... the majority have children... and what happens is that when the parents are fighting, they don't even realize that the children are there, and that affects the children.

(13 years old)

3.3.3. Mothers and maternal grandmothers as victims

In the adolescent's narratives, the mother is represented as a figure oppressed by systematic and chronic violence, to the extreme of being perceived as a potential victim of femicide at the hands of the father and/or caregiver aggressor. An example of this is presented in P7's account:

... And that was the fear that we had too... that my dad would kill my mum with his fists... and leave us all alone... because at that time my grandmother wasn't around.

(13 years old)

Another element that was revealed through the narrative of an adolescent was in relation to her maternal grandmother, who was described as another female figure who has been victimized in the context of IPV. P7 refers to the negative impact and effects of living with IPV on her grandmother and describes how the grandmother attempted to intervene in order to protect her daughter from the aggressor during episodes of violence:

Because my granny got involved too, mostly so that he wouldn't hit my mum... so he would spit in her face... all that and my granny was already pretty old at that point.

(13 years old)

3.3.4. IPV as a serious and dangerous problem

In most of the narratives, it was observed that the adolescents assessed the IPV situations that they lived with in their family according to their perception of the severity of the IPV. Adolescents tended to narrate IPV events as anywhere from normal to severe or highly dangerous for themselves, their siblings, and/or their maternal figure. With respect to their assessment of the episodes of violence, the adolescents' narratives revealed their fears about the possibility of losing a member of the family, describing certain episodes as life threatening, referring to the possibility of femicide. P7 narrates that:

.... you can lose someone that you really love because of... men that end up killing women... with their fists...

(13 years old)

In the narratives of some adolescents, IPV is construed as abnormal or incomprehensible, and there is a refusal to qualify this form of violence between parents and caregivers as acceptable or normal. IPV was often assessed in terms of the severity that is attributed to each episode, related to the type of violence, and its frequency. Adolescents tended to qualify verbal and/or psychological violence as 'less' severe compared to the physical assaults or violent episodes. Events happening infrequently were also downplayed, as P6 demonstrated:

But hardly ever... but she didn't (referring to his mother), no... he (referring to the father) never hit her, he hit her like two or three times, about that.

(12 years old)

4. Discussion

The current research is the first of its kind in Chile, and one of the few studies internationally that addresses the lived experiences of adolescents growing up in the context of IPV and the meanings they construct as a consequence. The narratives of the adolescents reveal three broad themes: 1) the lived experiences of IPV; 2) other forms of victimizations; and 3) meanings of growing up in the context of IPV. Regarding the meanings associated with IPV, the adolescents reflect on their life stories as marked by the abuse, report feeling rendered invisible by parental figures, recognize their mothers and maternal grandmothers as victims, and perceive IPV as a serious and dangerous problem. The findings emphasize the importance of exploring the perspectives of the adolescents about what it means to grow up with IPV at home, particularly given its sweeping deleterious effects on their wellbeing. In this sense, the findings highlight the adolescent's capacity to reflect on IPV and how they incorporate their caregivers' IPV experiences into their life story.

4.1. Lived experiences of IPV

The results of our study support prior literature, reinforcing that women are not the only victims of IPV but that their children are, too (Artz et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2008; Kendall, 2020; Wolfe et al., 2003). The adolescents' narratives reveal a broad range of violent experiences as part of the IPV context inflicted by their father against their mother, themselves and their siblings. In the adolescents' narratives about the IPV, the "cycle of partner violence" could be inferred (theorized by Walker, 1979), since the adolescents recognized the changes in the father's behavior after an episode of violence, accounting for the co-existence of both violent and loving behavior within the violent dynamic. Moreover, the findings suggest that adolescents living with IPV have often experienced episodes of violence from a very early stage. One of the participants even reflects on her mother being victim of IPV during pregnancy and how that adolescent views her own life story as affected by violence since the start of her life.

Following the separation of the parents, it has been found that the IPV continues in the form of negative remarks and vitriol against the mother, together with the continuation of physical abuse against the children. Such results confirm findings by international literature that male aggressors develop new and diverse tactics for perpetuating violence against women and children following a separation (Beeble et al., 2007), with the aim of sabotaging the women's new lives through maltreatment of the children even after leaving the home (Peled, 2000). Our results indicate that exposure to situations of secondary victimization is often enabled by the justice system, characterized by undermining the protection of children, adolescents and their mothers through allowing continued contact with the aggressor, even while episodes of violence within the family system continue to occur. Echeburúa et al. (2004) described the deficiencies of the justice system and social services in Barcelona, Spain, as leading to an aggravation and worsening of the emotional scars and the psychopathology of the adolescents involved. Our study illustrates that the same may be said for the current Chilean justice system. There is a pressing need to develop updated protocols and training so that young people do not undergo a process of re-traumatization and further victimization as a result of judicial proceedings.

The present study's findings appear to confirm previous investigations (Goldblatt & Eisikovits, 2005), which have emphasized the multiple roles young people and their siblings take on in contexts of IPV, such as a protective role in the face of IPV and a victim role because of the abuse toward them. In the adolescents' narratives, these roles have been found to be associated with a range of negative emotions: feelings of loss, helplessness and a perception of permanently being under threat. In this regard, the meanings construed by the adolescents are catastrophic and fatalistic in tone. This is consistent with research by Margolin (2005), which has found that being present at episodes of IPV can lead to the development of symptoms often associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, adolescents in this study describe subjective experiences that are similar to some of the traumatic dynamics described in reference to sexual abuse (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), such as helplessness or defenselessness, distrust or fear toward a trusted figure, and a sense that they have lived an abnormal childhood and consequently could be stigmatized by others. Similar findings have also been found in

previous investigations with children that have grown up in a context of IPV in Chile (Miranda & Corovic, 2019; Miranda et al., 2020). Further studies on complex trauma, its conceptualization, symptoms, prognosis and treatment in children and adolescents growing up in contexts of IPV are needed.

4.2. Other forms of victimizations

Our results confirm the importance of recognizing this population as a group with a high risk of being victimized at various stages of their development and in different contexts (e.g. children/adolescents; inter-family/intra-family). Such results coincide with previous literature (Callaghan et al., 2015; Hamby et al., 2010; Øverlien, 2013) that finds that young people living in contexts of IPV endure multiple experiences of violence throughout their development, which are considered traumatic due to the high levels of coercion and violence exercised. In an extension of previous findings in this area (Miranda et al., 2021; Hamby et al., 2010; Holt et al., 2008), the results of this study further reveal experiences of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse by members of the paternal extended family. These findings highlight the need to assess for other types of violence against children and adolescents that grow up in IPV contexts. Furthermore, given the breadth of victimizations revealed in the results, the present investigation concludes that an approach centered exclusively on experiences of IPV could exclude and silence the narratives of victims with respect to the totality of their experiences of violence, precluding an integrative and holistic approach to intervention and research from both investigative and clinical perspectives.

In relation to understanding the phenomenon of IPV from a holistic approach, the lived experiences of abuse against siblings by parental figures has been found to be an important area of investigation. This finding coincides with those of Holt et al. (2008), that mothers and fathers involved in IPV dynamics tend to use more coercive discipline and physical punishment. Our study uncovered a phenomenon that has not been sufficiently explored in the literature, namely, that adolescents assess the severity of the abuse differently depending on whether it is received from the father or the mother. The results indicate that chronic experiences of IPV and direct abuse also affect adolescents' beliefs and perceptions regarding their parental figures and childrearing methods, which is relevant to explore in future investigations.

4.3. Meanings of growing up in the context of IPV

Our investigation found that, in their narratives, the adolescents position children and youths that grow up in IPV contexts as direct victims of this violence, describing multiple lived experiences that significantly and negatively alter their wellbeing. With respect to this, the adolescents emphasize the harm and trauma that IPV has caused them in their lifespan, with descriptions of emotional distress associated with the episodes of violence and with parental visitations. Their accounts coincide with the theory of trauma proposed by Margolin (2005), which asserts that children and adolescents experience feelings of loss and personal threat associated with these experiences, feelings which are exacerbated by the perception that rather than being the principal source of protection, the family is instead the origin of a range of violent experiences. However, the results also indicate that IPV does not inevitably result in a unique or specific trauma for all adolescents; on the contrary, our findings suggest that researchers and clinicians must be cautious not to make assumptions, and instead stay open to novelty and uniqueness in each adolescent's narratives.

Our findings reveal that, in the narratives of the adolescents that grow up in an IPV context, meanings are constructed by adolescents surrounding being invisible and forgotten. They position themselves as "absent figures" in the adult world, especially in the eyes of their parental figures. These findings support investigations made in the Netherlands by Van Rooij et al. (2015) with respect to episodes of IPV as perceived by parental figures. Their study also found that parents tend to underestimate the impact of such experiences on their children, a perspective that can lessen the likelihood of them offering the emotional support that their children need. These findings must be considered in the Chilean context, where institutions that intervene in childhood have historically promoted the perpetuation of this silencing of children and adolescents through adult-centered logic that does not allow space for true child participation (Miranda et al., 2017).

This study found that the adolescents often attach various meanings to their maternal figure, perceiving her to be an oppressed figure, subject to a severe and systematic violence perpetrated by the father. This finding supports that of other studies carried out elsewhere in the United States and Ireland, which suggest that adolescents growing up in IPV contexts develop stereotypical beliefs about gender roles (Holt et al., 2008; Howell et al., 2016).

It has been found that, consistent with other studies, adolescents who have grown up in families with chronic IPV associate IPV with potentially highly dangerous situations. In line with previous research, they can even be prone to calculating the possibility of their mother's murder by their father (Buckley et al., 2007; Øverlien, 2013). The necessity of making these kinds of calculations amplifies feelings of fear and the state of hypervigilance in the young people who live in families with IPV. Such findings highlight the importance of exploring the adolescents' feelings, perceptions and meanings related to IPV during clinical assessments.

The adolescents in this study revealed meanings of IPV as a serious and dangerous problem, and their assessment of the severity of the IPV disclosed two contrasting positions with respect to the frequency and type of violence perpetrated. Similar to findings documented by Freer et al. (2010), episodes of verbal abuse and one-off episodes of physical abuse were recognized as less severe in comparison to situations of chronic physical violence. This study therefore points the way for future investigations that examine minimization of violence as a possible risk factor for mental health problems over a longer time period. Such a finding is consistent with those of Howell et al. (2016), who found a relation between the probability of violence emerging in relations in which the couple share the distorted belief that violence is acceptable and/or justifiable in certain contexts.

4.4. Implications

This study has important implications for the development of both future investigations and clinical interventions. Firstly, it confirms the relevance of designing studies on IPV that not only include adults but also involve the children and adolescents that grow up in violent homes. In line with what Edleson et al. (2007) proposed, our study suggests that engaging with the narratives of adolescents enables the connection to be made between IPV experiences and the psychological impact that is exhibited by this population. The adolescents of the study often described their experiences reflexively and thoughtfully, and many exhibited a certain pride in being consulted on a phenomenon that they knew intimately. Consequently, this study also contributes to the demystification of the belief that speaking about IPV experiences can only ever result in re-traumatization. The findings highlight not only the importance but also the ethical imperative of including children and adolescents in the investigation of violence, supporting proposals by other authors (Øverlien, 2010; Pereda, 2019). As our results show, future studies about adolescents who have grown up in IPV contexts should be improved by incorporating a complete assessment of other types of violence against adolescents. Also, since IPV does not necessarily end after the parents' separation, it is important to incorporate a broader conception of IPV, by acknowledging that various and subtle kinds of abuse and controlling behaviors could still be happening post-separation. Extending our knowledge about the complex interconnections between IPV and various types of violence, as well as their harmful effects on youths' wellbeing, is arguably a crucial and pressing challenge for clinical research.

In terms of the clinical applications, our findings emphasize the relevance of exploring the lived experiences of adolescents through a multitude of avenues, so that working professionals better understand what their patients might have lived through or might be living through with IPV. The study highlights the relevance of: 1) encouraging a holistic assessment of emotions and reflections about IPV as a phenomenon and as a lived experience; 2) clinicians and mental health providers who work with adolescents in IPV contexts routinely inquiring about other patients' violent experiences, such as psychological, physical and/or sexual abuse; 3) identifying individual and contextual protective and risk factors; 4) intervening in active symptomatology and mental health problems; 5) designing interventions oriented to facilitate the re-construction and re-narration of the adolescents' life story, integrating traumatic violent experiences and achieving a narrative continuity in their life stories; 6) understanding the necessity of adapting the intervention to the particularities of each case. Following previous findings (Miranda et al., 2013), the early identification of several contextual and familial factors, as important mechanisms underlying psychopathology problems in offspring from IPV homes could provide insights and suggest possible targets for healthcare interventions.

4.5. Limitations

A number of limitations should be considered with respect to interpreting the findings. The first limitation is with respect to the reduced number of participants in this study, which affects the breadth of issues that could be explored. We leveraged the small pool of interviewees to allow for an in-depth exploration of the narratives of each adolescent instead of searching for generalizations. Careful analysis of the narratives of each participant enabled an exploration not only of the lived experience of growing up in the context of IPV but also of other kinds of victimizations which occur in the heart and on the periphery of the phenomenon over the course of their lives. However, future investigations might consider expanding the criteria of the participants interviewed with respect to the frequency and type of IPV episodes explored, for instance studies examining one-off episodes of IPV in the family context. Other studies could examine the experience of adolescents relating to IPV where the male aggressors involved are not only the biological fathers, but the male partners of their mothers. Considering methodological aspects such as these could further extend our understanding of the phenomenon of IPV. Another limitation was in the narrative thematic analysis performed: only the narratives were analyzed, excluding other elements of the interview such as the context or the emotionality of the participants during the interview. These elements would be relevant to explore in other studies.

The authors of this study suggest that, in order to widen our understanding of the lived experiences of adolescents, and given that this work's results suggest that talking about IPV experiences in a carefully designed investigative context may have relevant therapeutic value for the adolescents involved, future research should include more than one interview with each participant. Further interviews would enrich our understanding of both specific aspects and overarching patterns of the phenomenon of IPV. Studies in other cultures and countries could also expand our understanding of IPV by exploring the cultural similarities and differences regarding IPV experiences and meanings by the direct victims of this type of violence.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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