

# Adolescents Who Are Violent Toward Their Parents: An Approach to the Situation in Chile

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## Abstract

Child-to-parent violence has been defined as any act used by children to gain power and control by generating fear in their parents and that seeks to cause physical, psychological, and/or financial harm to their parents. This behavior puts family safety at risk due to the imbalance of power that it generates. For this reason, most abused parents feel guilty and humiliated. Child-to-parent violence has been historically underresearched compared with other studies about family violence. Most of the research conducted on this topic has been carried out in Europe and North America in the least decades. Nevertheless, in Chile, the research about child-to-parent violence has been really insufficient. This article presents the first analysis conducted in Chile regarding the prevalence of violent adolescent behavior toward parents. A total of 1,861 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 20 ( $M = 16.1$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) participated in the study (48.1% boys; 51.9% girls). Participants answered an ad hoc questionnaire on child-to-parent violence. Our findings indicate that psychological, economic, and physical aggression against the mother was more frequent than against the father. Daughters are more likely to use psychological aggression toward their fathers and mothers, whereas sons are more likely to use financial and physical aggression. Young people living in single-parent families are more likely to use financial and

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psychological aggression toward their mother. These findings reveal the impact of gender and family structure on aggression toward parents.

### **Keywords**

child-to-parent aggression, domestic violence, family violence, adolescents

Domestic violence represents a serious problem for any society due to the social, economic, and medical consequences assumed not only by families but also by the state and surrounding society (Cottrell, 2001). Within this type of violence, there is a violence that is hidden and little studied by the scientific community—at least in Chile—called *child-to-parent aggression*, defined as any act used by children to gain power and control by generating fear in their parents and that seeks to cause physical, psychological, and or financial harm to their parents (Cottrell, 2001).

The scant attention received by this type of aggression in Chile is reflected in the lack of suitable legislation and public policies to support victims and families that experience this type of aggression. It is also reflected in the lack of official statistical data to draw attention to the magnitude of the problem. The dearth of official recognition of child-to-parent aggression can be observed in the government's domestic violence policies, specifically in Law No. 20,066. For example, although this law defines all acts that impact physical and/or psychological integrity and that are performed between family members as domestic violence, protections for victims do not take into account the aggressor-child, victim-parent dyad, given that the law guarantees removal from the home and restraining orders for aggressors. These guarantees are paradoxical in situations in which the aggressor in this type of aggression—in most cases—is a minor who often depends financially on his or her victims. As such, the victim is legally obligated to live with his or her aggressor until the aggressor is either financially independent or of age. This fact is compounded by another challenge: government agencies do not produce official data, assistance, or remediation, and/or prevention policies are not enforced. Acuña and Fernández (2007) conducted a study in this vein that was based on interviews with two mothers who experienced child-to-parent aggression, but then did not provide information about the prevalence of this phenomenon in the population at large. Nonetheless, the authors comment on the distress experienced by parents who are victims of aggression at the hands of their children caused by the lack of support and interventions available to address this type of aggression, in comparison with other types of domestic violence.

Within an international framework, these studies may allow us—at least initially—to chart a panorama that will allow us to understand the reach and implications of this problem.

## The Prevalence of Child-to-Parent Aggression

Studies outside Chile have sought to understand the prevalence of adolescent aggression toward their parents as a way of approaching the situation and understanding the magnitude of the problem. The majority of these studies hail from Australia, Canada, the United States, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

The first study was conducted in 1957 by Sears, Maccoby, and Levin. They named this type of aggression *battered parent syndrome* and found that 17% of children described assaulting their parents. Subsequently, in the 1970s, the number of studies of this area increased, leading to greater interest in understanding this new type of domestic violence (Harbin & Madden, 1979). However, the bulk of scientific research has been performed in the current century (Aroca, Lorenzo, & Miró, 2014; Calvete, Orue, & Sampetro, 2011; Gámez-Guadix & Calvete, 2012).

The prevalence data available from these studies are not at all conclusive, given the wide range of rates reported. These rates vary between 0.6% in Dugas, Mouren, and Halfon (1985) and 97% in Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957). More recent studies situate the prevalence of this phenomenon between 9% and 46% (Calvete et al., 2011; Gallagher, 2008; Gámez-Guadix & Calvete, 2012; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010; Kennair & Mellor, 2007). These differences in data can be explained by the differences in the variables studied, such as family characteristics, the type of aggression experienced, and the population studied. For example, some studies have analyzed two-parent households, whereas others have focused on single-parent families or even excluded one parent and focused on the mother. The study by Peek, Fischer, and Kidwell (1985) found that the prevalence of aggression varies between 9% and 18% within two-parent households but rises to 29% in single-parent families.

With regard to the type of aggression experienced, a number of important studies initially focused on physical aggression (Calvete et al., 2011; Pagani et al., 2004; Ulman & Straus, 2003). However, the data indicate higher rates of psychological aggression, ranging from 45% to 65% (Calvete et al., 2011; Pagani et al., 2004, 2009).

If we consider the target population of these studies, prevalence rates vary according to the sample. For example, when samples are drawn from clinical patients, prevalence rates range between 29% and 57% (Charles, 1986; Boxer, Gullan & Mahoney, 2009). When data are gathered from the population at large, rates vary between 6% and 54% (Agnew & Huguley, 1989;

Gelvan de Veinsten, 2004; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010; Peek et al., 1985). Finally, if the population studied is chosen by using parental reports of aggression, prevalence rates range between 31% and 56% (Kennedy, Edmonds, Dann, & Burnett, 2010).

In addition to the aforementioned examples, another element that influences reported prevalence rates is related to the measurement instruments used in previous investigations. Among those that stand out include information collected through interviews and self-reports, especially in clinical samples, which imply the limitation of these data due to its retrospective qualitative character (Gallagher, 2004; Paulson, Coombs, & Landsverk, 1990) and to the difficulty implicated in generalizing data from small clinical samples with specific sociodemographic characteristics (Walsh & Krienert, 2007). On the contrary, other questionnaires focus their attention only on physical and psychological violence (Calvete et al., 2013), excluding economic violence. Other studies even consider isolated aggressions—once in the previous 12 months—a bias that may overestimate the prevalence data of this phenomenon (Boxer, Gullan, & Mahoney, 2009; Calvete, Orue, & González-Cabrera, 2017; Calvete et al., 2011).

Finally, we should not forget the dark figures (unreported cases of child-to-parent aggression) regarding the prevalence of this type of aggression, especially in Chile, a country that does not have institutions and procedures that allow for reliable data collection.

## **The Characteristics of Aggressors**

The personal characteristics of aggressive minors have been an important dimension of research in that they may offer clues regarding the role that certain personal attributes can play in explaining the prevalence of child-to-parent aggression. One characteristic of significant research is the age of the perpetrator when they begin the aggression. Although some authors assert that children assault their parents less frequently as they grow older (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Ulman & Straus, 2003), other authors describe the opposite; that is, the older the children are, the higher the likelihood that they will abuse their parents (Kennair & Mellor, 2007; Peek et al., 1985). In analyzing the age range considered in various studies, one can observe that the majority report a range of 9 to 19 years (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Ibabe, Jaureguizar, & Díaz, 2007). The study by Ulman and Straus (2003) is one such study that focuses on the prevalence of this phenomenon, taking into account the age of perpetration. These authors find that 3-year-olds are the most violent toward their parents, with an assault rate of 40%. This rate drastically diminishes in 8-year-olds (10%) and remains relatively stable until the age of 17 (10%).

Another basic but no less important characteristic is the gender of the aggressor. The studies we have found establish that between 50% and 80% of children who abuse their parents are boys (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gallagher, 2008; Ulman & Straus, 2003). However, it is also possible to find other authors who assert that they have found no significant differences between boys and girls with regard to this type of violent behavior (McCloskey & Lichter, 2003; Stewart, Jackson, Mannix, Wilkes, & Lines, 2004). Similarly, a significant number of authors assert that gender differences play out most clearly when one differentiates the types of aggression used by boys and girls. For example, a significant majority of studies reveal that boys more frequently use physical aggression whereas girls more often use psychological aggression toward their parents (Nock & Kazdin, 2002; Rechea, Fernández, & Cuervo, 2008).

## **The Characteristics of Victims**

Many of the studies conducted using sample complaints suggest that mothers are the primary victims of child-to-parent aggression (Gallagher, 2008; Kethineni, 2004; Nock & Kazdin, 2002; Walsh & Krienert, 2007). The study by Kethineni (2004) is one such study and finds that 81% of cases of reported child-to-parent aggression were directed toward the biological mother. Similarly, Nock and Kazdin (2002) find that 88% of their clinical sample described having assaulted their biological mother, followed by 5% toward their adoptive mother and only 3% toward their father. Some authors suggest that the prevalence rates reported by mothers who are victims could be related to two key factors. On one hand, the mother's role as the primary caretaker and adherence to stereotypical gender roles set the stage for the acceptance of control and domination over girls. On the other hand, it is much more likely for mothers to file this type of complaint due to greater social acceptance of mothers as victims, in contrast to fathers (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Ulman & Straus, 2003).

However, other studies reveal that fathers report more episodes of aggression on the part of their children. Peek et al. (1985) find that, of the young people who had assaulted their parents, between 5% and 8% had attacked their fathers whereas between 2% and 6% had attacked their mothers. Cornell and Gelles (1982) find that, although mothers were more likely to be the victims of this type of aggression, when differences were analyzed by gender, the findings indicated that boy children tend to abuse their fathers more than their mothers.

## **Theoretical Explanation of Child-to-Parent Aggression**

In addition to the research that has focused on the prevalence of child-to-parent violence (CPV), several authors have tried to explain the causes

(both individual and contextual) of this phenomenon (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Gallagher, 2008; Routt & Anderson, 2015). In this regard, ecological theory has been considered as an appropriate frame of reference to explain the association between child-to-parent aggression and different individual and contextual variables (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Hong, Kral, Espelage, & Allen-Meares, 2012; Routt & Anderson, 2015). Specifically, it has been stated that the interaction and influence between levels of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, ontogeny, and chronosystem could contribute to the development of this type of violence.

The microsystem is understood as a set of social interactions associated with interpersonal relationships and roles that the person experiences in a specific context such as family, peer group, and so on. The interactions that occur in the microsystem shape the group and individual behavior of people, thus playing a relevant role in the presence of CPV. This is how previous research has found an association between child abuse and intrafamily violence with child-to-parent aggression (Boxer et al., 2009; Gámez-Guadix & Calvete, 2012). According to Boxer et al. (2009), adolescents who are violent toward their parents can be understood partly as a reaction associated with the mistreatment of these young people during their childhood. Similarly, Brezina (1999) suggests that the physical aggression of parents promotes the aggressive behavior of adolescents, and it is probable that the aggression exercised by the latter toward their parents inhibits the physically abusive behavior of the parents. Another significant predictor associated with the level of microsystem is exposure to intrafamily violence. According to Bandura's (1978) aggression theory, social learning of aggression is through indirect experience (see violence between the parents) and direct experience (being a victim) of the violence, in such a way that the aggressive behavior the adolescent is usually the result of experiences with his or her parents (Edenborough, Jackson, Mannix, & Wilkes, 2008).

The mesosystem is composed of interactions between two or more microsystems within which the person participates. An example of this is the influence of the peer group on the behavior of the adolescent in the family system. Previous studies have found that the peer group is a predictor for CPV (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Kratkoski & Kratkoski, 1982). Specifically, it has been found that CPV can be a means to compensate for feelings of impotency felt by adolescents when they experience conflict between peers.

The exosystem is understood as social environments wherein the adolescent is not directly included; however, they can have an impact on the immediate environment of the adolescent (e.g., place of work of the parents, influence of the media). Likewise, they are understood as social

structures that influence individual and personal functioning, creating a context that enhances violence. An example of this is the exposure of violence through the media and its relationship with youth violence (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006).

The macrosystem is understood as those cultural and ideological frameworks that may influence transversally in the micro, meso, and exo systems. Specifically, we refer to cultural, political, and ideological values of a specific society that make it different from other societies. For example, the socialization of traditional gender roles that are culturally defined affect the particular conditions of the microsystem. In this sense, it has been found that violence toward mothers done by boy adolescents was significantly associated with violence from father to mother (Cottrell & Monk, 2004).

Ontogenic factors refer to adolescent variables such as attachment styles, alcohol and/or drug use, and mental health problems among others, which could have an impact on the presence of child-to-parent aggression. For example, from the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, various researchers found that children with insecure and avoidant attachment had violent behaviors toward their parents and classmates during childhood (Erickson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 1985; Fagot & Kavanagh, 1990). Even in a longitudinal study with children whose type of attachment was identified as disorganized, it was found that at 6 years of age, there were signs of conflicts characterized by certain ways of controlling the behavior of children toward their parents, in addition to observing coercive behaviors in these cases (Main & Cassidy, 1988; Wartner, Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, & Suess, 1994).

Finally, the chronosystem is understood as how the dimension of time affects individuals and how the degree of stability or change in the world of adolescents affects their development. That is, the effect of time on other systems is analyzed, such as family changes, place of residence, wars, and economic cycles, among others. Previous studies have found how divorce (change in family structure) can generate negative results in the development of adolescents. Specifically, it was found that those mothers who had spent a long period of parenting alone had greater difficulty in disciplining their children (Stewart, Burns, & Leonard, 2007).

In summary, the present model accounts for a variety of factors in the different systems that could interact in the emergence and development of CPV and, therefore, better understands the individual, interpersonal, and social dynamics that promote CPV. Specifically, this model assumes that the more the factors present, the greater the probability of occurrence of this type of violence, especially when it comes to variables of the broadest level (macrosystem), given the greater influence of this level and its impact on the other levels (Cottrell & Monk, 2004).

## Purpose or the Present Study

We have four objectives for this study:

1. To analyze the prevalence of CPV in Chile, specifically in the Metropolitan Region, where more than 40% of the country's population resides. We tackle this objective while taking into account that, to date, there are no official data on CPV in Chile.
2. Analyze the gender differences between the victims (mother and father) and the perpetrators (girls and boys) for each of the types of aggression (physical, psychological, and financial).
3. Analyze the relationship between CPV and family structure (single-parent, two-parent household, extended, and reconstituted), as previous studies have found contradictory results regarding the presence of parental violence in different types of family structures.
4. Analyze the directionality of violence committed by adolescents toward their parents. In this study, the term directionality will be used to analyze whether the perpetration of violence is used exclusively toward the mother, toward the father, or toward both equally. Therefore, we analyze whether adolescents who are violent with their parents direct their aggression exclusively toward their father or mother and if they differ in the types of violence (physical, psychological, and financial) used toward each of the parents.

## Method

### *Participants*

The target population for this study was composed of secondary school students within the Greater Santiago Metropolitan Region between the ages of 13 and 18 years. The total number of secondary educational institutions in Greater Santiago was 811 (119 public schools, 513 subsidized private schools, and 179 private schools requiring tuition), with a student population of 221,368.

This study used a multistage sampling design, stratified into proportional clusters. The proportions of different types of educational institutions (public, subsidized private, and private) were maintained. The clusters were composed of the appropriate number of units from each type of educational establishment.

To calculate the size of the sample, a sample error of 0.05 and a 95% confidence interval were used. The total sample was composed of 1,861 adolescents, of whom 48.1% were boys ( $n = 898$ ) and 51.9% were girls



( $n = 963$ ), with an age range of 13 to 20 years ( $M = 16.1$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). Youth in our sample reported living with a mother and a father (36.9%); with only one parent (30.9%); with a grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, and cousins in addition to the parents (13.7%); and in a reconstituted family (13.4%), and only a small proportion (5.1%) reported that they did not live with their parents.

### Instruments

To assess *child-to-parent aggression*, an ad hoc questionnaire, composed of 30 parallel items, 15 referring to the mother and 15 referring to the father, was built. In each 15-item block, five items corresponded to physical aggression, five to psychological aggression, and five to financial aggression. Physical aggression is defined as behavior causing or threatening physical harm toward others. It includes hitting, kicking, biting, using weapons, and so on, without forgetting, as mentioned by Aroca et al. (2014), that all physical abuse involves emotional and psychological components (e.g., humiliation, impotence, and helplessness). An example question is "Have you hit your mother/father in a fight or argument?" Psychological aggression (including verbal, non-verbal, and emotional) involves behaviors that threaten the feelings and emotional needs of a person, causing personal conflicts, frustrations, and traumas of emotional origin that may become permanent (Aroca & Garrido, 2007). An example question in this dimension is "Did you refuse to talk permanently with your mother/father to get what you wanted?" Economic aggression refers to behaviors that restrict the possibilities of income and savings of the parents through theft, sale, or destruction of objects; generation of debts and use of bank cards by children; and causing economic damage that must be assumed the parents. Many times economic violence is accompanied by psychological violence seen in behaviors such as threats, lies, emotional blackmail, extortion, coercion, and manipulation (Aroca et al., 2014). An example question is "Have you stolen money from your mother/father?"

The adolescents were asked to respond to each item with the frequency with which they had exercised that type of violent behavior during the previous 12 months; questions were answered on an 8-point Likert-type scale: 0 (*never*), 1 (*almost never*), 2 (*occasionally*), 3 (*sometimes*), 4 (*regularly*), 5 (*frequently*), 6 (*almost always*), and 7 (*always*). An analysis of the questionnaire's reliability gave suitable results. The alpha coefficients were .81 and .80 for physical aggression toward the mother and the father, respectively; .73 and .75 for psychological aggression toward the mother and the father, respectively; and .73 and .72 for financial aggression toward the mother and the father, respectively.

## Procedure

Once the study was approved by the ethics committee of the university, educational centers were invited to participate. The adolescents were informed of the study's objectives and the voluntary nature of their participation, following authorization from their parents to participate in the study. The questionnaires were administered at the educational institutions during the school day under the supervision of the lead researcher. Once the data were collected, a report was created for the educational centers that exhibited the most notable results. In addition, the centers received an informative lecture on the characteristics of child-to-parent aggression.

## Results

### *The Prevalence of Child-to-Parent Aggression*

A frequency analysis was performed with the aim of providing descriptive statistics regarding the prevalence rate of child-to-parent-aggression. We found that 86.1% ( $n = 1,603$ ) of adolescents described using some type of aggression toward their parents at least once in the previous 12 months. When we examined the type of aggression used, we found that psychological aggression was the most prevalent, at a rate of 82.2%, followed by financial aggression, at 52.2%. Only 20% of adolescents described using physical aggression against their parents. These percentages included isolated cases of a single experience at least 12 months before.

However, in our analysis, we estimate the prevalence of severe, moderate, and low psychological, physical, and financial violence. Thus, to create the variable that measures severity of violence (severe, moderate, and low), we considered the following cutoff points in the scores for each case:

- a. Between one case and up to the average was considered as low violence.
- b. Above the average plus one standard deviation was considered moderate violence.
- c. Above one standard deviation was considered severe violence.

Aggression percentages fall considerably when using this criterion. Table 1 shows the prevalence of CPV in the previous 12 months. We found significant differences for the physical violence exerted toward the father,  $\chi^2(2, N = 1861) = 13.54, p = .001, r = .07$ . Specifically, more boys exercise low and severe physical violence, compared with girls. No significant differences are found for physical aggression toward the mother.

**Table 1.** Prevalence Rates of Physical, Psychological, and Economic Child to Parent Aggression in the Past Year.

Type of Aggression	Low			Moderate			Severe		
	Total	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys
Physical aggression against mother	11.9%	12.6%	11.2%	0.8%	0.9%	0.7%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%
Physical aggression against father	5.8%	4.3%	7.5%**	0%	0%	0%	6.5%	5.4%	7.7%**
Psychological aggression against mother	41.7%	41.1%	42.3%	20.8%	21.7%	19.8%	14.1%	16.7%**	11.4%
Psychological aggression against father	24.0%	21.3%	26.9%*	22.9%	23.8%	22%	11.4%	12.6%*	16.2%
Economic aggression against mother	18.4%	17.9%	18.9%	18.3%	18.2%	18.5%	10.6%	8.3%	13.0%**
Economic aggression against father	12.4%	11.1%	13.7%	11.2%	11.0%	12.0%	12.6%	11.5%	13.7%

\* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

Regarding psychological violence toward the mother, we found that significantly more girls,  $\chi^2(3, N = 1861) = 17.66, p = .001, r = .10$ , mention exercising this type of violence in a severe way compared with the boys. No significant differences were found for the other types of severity (low and moderate).

Regarding psychological violence exercised toward the father, we also found significant differences,  $\chi^2(3, N = 1861) = 9.28, p = .026, r = .02$ . Specifically, when the type of psychological violence is severe, more girls mention that they conduct this type violence. However, when the type of violence is low, more boys mention psychologically assaulting their father.

Finally, in terms of economic violence, we find only significant differences when the violence is done toward the mother,  $\chi^2(3, N = 1861) = 13.39, p = .004, r = .08$ , and more boys mention exercising severe economic violence compared with the girls.

### Child-to-Parent Aggression and Family Structure

When we analyze the relationship between the presence of parental violence and the type of family structure (see Table 2), we find that young people from single-parent families mention more experiences of moderate and severe psychological violence toward the mother,  $\chi^2(9, N = 1767) = 19.87, p = .019, r = .08$ . However, when psychological violence is exercised toward the father, young people from traditional families mention that they exercise significantly more of this type of violence in a low and moderate way, compared with young people from other families,  $\chi^2(9, N = 1767) = 70.88, p = .000, r = .14$ .

**Table 2.** Prevalence Rates of Physical, Psychological, and Economic Child to Parent Aggression and Family Structure.

Type of Aggression	Low			Moderate			Severe					
	Two Parent	Single Parent	Extended	Reconstituted	Two Parent	Single Parent	Extended	Reconstituted	Two Parent	Single Parent	Extended	Reconstituted
	Physical aggression against mother	37.6	32.4	10.5	19.5	33.3	40	0	26.7	50	50	0
Physical aggression against father	41	29.5	15.2	14.3	0	0	0	0	38.6	32.5	16.7	12.3
Psychological aggression against mother	40.8	30.2*	16.1	12.8	33.8	38.6*	13.7	13.9	36.6	37.4	10.6	15.4
Psychological aggression against father	47.4*	25.1	16.4	11.0	43.8*	26.6	17.2	12.3	42.7	28.2	14.1	15.0
Economic aggression against mother	40.7	27.8	14.5	17	34.9	37.0*	14.1	14.1	30.3	38.8*	13.6	17.6
Economic aggression against father	45.8	26.4	15.3	12.5	43.3	28.4	16.9	11.4	37.7	30.0	17.5	14.8

\*p < .01. \*\*p < .001.

Regarding financial violence toward the mother, we find that young people from single-parent families mention exercising this type of violence more severely,  $\chi^2(9, N = 1767) = 19.04, p = .025, r = .09$ . We did not find significant differences for the financial violence exerted toward the father nor for physical violence exerted as much toward the mother as toward the father.

### *The Directionality of Aggression*

In analyzing whether the direction of aggression used by adolescents is exclusively toward the father, toward the mother, or toward both equally, we found that the majority of young people who abuse their parents primarily direct their aggression toward both parents (58.6%), with 22.9% describing abusing only their mothers and 4.6% describing abusing only their fathers. As we can see, child-to-parent aggression is directed primarily toward both parents. However, when only one of the parents experiences such aggression, the mother is most often the victim.

In analyzing whether the proportions of boys and girls who use child-to-parent aggression primarily direct their actions exclusively toward their mothers or fathers, we used a chi-square test. Our findings reveal that, in cases of physical aggression, boys are significantly more likely to abuse their fathers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 512) = 5.61, p = .018$ , and girls are significantly more likely to abuse their mothers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 512) = 5.10, p = .024$ . However, when psychological aggression is used, girls are more likely to describe using this type of aggression exclusively toward their mothers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 512) = 11.83, p = .001$ . No significant differences were found with respect to financial aggression.

When we analyze the prevalence of different types of child-to-parent aggression according to family structure, we find that adolescents who live in single-parent families tend to use psychological aggression toward their mothers to a greater degree,  $\chi^2(4, N = 512) = 14.73, p = .005$ . Adolescents who live in two-parent households use the same type of aggression but do so exclusively toward their fathers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 512) = 15.11, p = .004$ . Furthermore, when the aggression used is financial, we also find significant differences. In this case, adolescents in single-parent and reconstituted families describe using financial aggression more frequently,  $\chi^2(4, N = 512) = 25.20, p = .000$ . Finally, when the aggression used by adolescents is physical, we find that reconstituted families are the most likely to be affected,  $\chi^2(4, N = 512) = 14.34, p = .006$ .

## **Discussion**

The objective of this study was to understand the prevalence of adolescent aggression toward their parents in Santiago, Chile. As in previous studies

(Calvete et al., 2011; Gallagher, 2008; Gámez-Guadix & Calvete, 2012; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010; Kennair & Mellor, 2007), we found high levels of aggression toward parents (86%), with psychological aggression being the most commonly expressed. These are alarming data, not only because eight out of every 10 young people from our sample described having abused their parents but also because such acts of aggression have serious social and medical consequences.

The findings regarding different types of aggression used against parents reveal that the use of severe psychological aggression is more prevalent among girls than either other type. Our findings were similar to those of Calvete, Gámez-Guadix, and Orue (2014) and Ibabe, Jaureguizar, and Bentler (2013). In these studies, girls described using psychological aggression toward their parents to a greater degree. Similarly, our findings are consistent with the forms of aggression that unfold in other interpersonal relationships, such as romantic relationships. In that case, it has also been found that girls use psychological aggression to a greater degree than boys (Harned, 2001; Moreno Martín, 1999).

Our study reveals that boys are significantly more likely to describe using financial aggression against both their mothers and their fathers. Very few studies have yielded prevalence rates for financial aggression toward parents, given that the majority of child-to-parent aggression studies focus on physical and psychological aggression (Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010; Ibabe et al., 2013). However, the majority of studies that take into account financial aggression use clinical and/or judicial samples (Haw, 2010; Rechea & Cuervo, 2010) or focus their analysis on the destruction of property (Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Stewart et al., 2004). For this reason, we cannot compare our results with findings from previous studies.

Nonetheless, one possible explanation of these results could be related to the unique features of this stage of adolescent development, whose primary characteristic is the formation of self-identity and a search for greater autonomy and independence, distancing oneself from one's parents and conferring greater importance to one's group of friends. As a result, one of the most common disagreements or conflicts between adolescents and their parents emerges precisely with regard to the amount of money the adolescent receives and the manner in which he or she spends it (Motrico, Fuentes, & Bersabé, 2001). From this perspective, and considering that money is a "symbol of power," it is unsurprising that money is the means through which adolescents seek to differentiate themselves, achieve greater independence, and challenge their father's and or mother's authority. Similarly, if we consider the characteristics of our society, in which having greater acquisitive power and/or more material possessions are symbols of social distinction via higher status,

it is unsurprising that adolescents attempt to persuade their parents to provide them with the latest products from socially valued brands or that many of these requests are abusive or made under threat, using parents' feelings regarding the obligation to provide everything necessary for the child's development or even requesting more than parents can afford to spend. Finally, the fact that boy adolescents use financial aggression most often could be linked to García's (2005) argument that the use of money as power constitutes a primarily masculine symbol.

With regard to physical aggression, the results reveal that the proportion of girls who abuse their mothers is higher than the proportion of boys, although these differences are not significant. However, when physical aggression is used by boy children toward their fathers, we find significant differences compared with girls. These findings contradict prior studies that did not find significant gender differences for physical aggression toward parents (Kethineni, 2004), and even contradict studies showing that mothers experience more episodes of physical aggression at the hands of their boy children (Evans & Warren-Sohlberg, 1998).

Our findings regarding family structure reveal that adolescents who live in single-parent families most frequently describe using aggression (economic and psychology) toward their mother. These findings are consistent with prior studies, which highlight that this type of family is at the highest risk of experiencing child-to-parent aggression (Haw, 2010; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2010; Routt & Anderson, 2011). The reasons for this heightened vulnerability could be related to reduced social support and overwork within this type of family, given that, in contrast to the other family structures, the weight of maintaining the family falls on a single member. As other authors have argued, this situation may contribute to the breakdown of child-rearing traditions (Pagani, Larocque, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2003) and thus lead to a higher risk of child-to-parent aggression.

When we analyze in greater detail whether the proportions of different types of families differ significantly in terms of aggression toward the mother and or father, our findings reflect that, when aggression is directed toward the father, the prevalence of financial and psychological aggression is significant in two-parent household. It is difficult to explain these findings. However, following the arguments of Loeber and Dishion (1984), it seems more important to understand that variables relating to child-to-parent aggression may include child-rearing patterns or the existence of family conflicts in these types of families rather than the family structure alone.

Our findings regarding the directionality of child-to-parent aggression reveal that mothers more commonly experience child-to-parent aggression in isolation, compared with fathers, especially when the aggression used is psychological or

physical. These results are worrisome, given that when aggression becomes part of a family dynamic, mothers experience it alone. This piece of data could illustrate one more dimension of gender-based aggression. However, we understand that it would be too hasty to make such an assertion without first verifying the relationships between these variables and those that impact gender aggression, such as an adherence to stereotypical gender roles.

In closing, considering that this is the first study of prevalence rates conducted in Chile, our results provide preliminary evidence regarding the nature and magnitude of adolescent aggression toward parents. However, this study faces the limitation that the data collected were limited to Santiago, Chile's Metropolitan Region, and that, despite the great size of our sample and of the population that it seeks to represent (over 40% of the country's population), it cannot be representative of child-to-parent aggression cases documented in other parts of the country.

Also, another limitation corresponds to the self-report scales, which have received criticism such as conceptualizing violence by equating proactive and defensive aggressions simultaneously, without taking into account the context as well as the definition of the construct that could threaten the validity of the measurement (American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). A third limitation is associated with the way of reporting and analyzing the prevalence of this phenomenon in categories of low, moderate, and severe violence. It would be advisable that future studies consider the perception of parents as victims of this type of violence in addition to the perception of adolescents who perpetrate it.

Finally, we must clarify that in no case can this type of aggression be considered with characteristics similar to the aggression perpetrated by an adult toward their older adult parents. Without a doubt, the dynamics of power and characteristics of the relationship could be explained by other variables not mentioned in this research.

Nonetheless, the principal findings highlight that 81.3% of adolescents described having used aggression toward their mothers and 63.2% toward their fathers. This fact alone reveals that aggression by adolescent children toward their parents is not a minor problem. We hope that this study will constitute an empirical baseline regarding the presence of child-to-parent aggression in Chile and will lead to further studies on this topic within this country.

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