



# The Influence of Bidirectional Intimate Partner Violence on the Parent-child Relationship

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## Abstract

**Purpose** Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a public health issue and a human rights violation. Recent studies have revealed that most IPV is bidirectional rather than unidirectional, which can result in serious consequences for those involved. However, the impact of bidirectional violence (BV) on parenting, and more specifically on the parent-child relationship, is understudied. Thus, this study aims to understand the impact of BV on the parent-child relationship and analyze the differences in the perceptions about the quality of the parent-child relationship between parents involved in unidirectional IPV, parents involved in bidirectional IPV, and parents without IPV.

**Methods** The sample comprised 138 participants of both sexes, aged 18 years or over, and with underage children. The study was conducted online, and data were collected through a sociodemographic questionnaire, the Inventory of Marital Violence, and the Inventory of Parent-Child Relationship.

**Results** Parents (male and female) involved in bidirectional IPV reported that the communication dimension was the most impacted and presented perceptions of lower quality in the relationship with their children than parents involved in unidirectional IPV perpetration.

**Conclusions** These results suggest that individuals involved in BV might transpose the dynamics they establish in their marital relationship to their relationship with their children, resulting in less positive parent-child relationships. A new perspective on victim and perpetrator profiles emerges from this study, which should be considered regarding parenting intervention.

**Keywords** Intimate partner violence · Bidirectional violence · Parenting · Parent-child relationship

## Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is defined as a pattern of abusive conduct behavior to inflict physical, psychological, or sexual harm (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023) to the partner or former partner, regardless of their sexual orientation (Sugg, 2015). This behavior can vary in terms of its intensity, severity, and frequency (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). IPV is widely acknowledged as a significant societal concern, a public

health issue, and a severe violation of human rights (Rollero & Piccoli, 2020).

Data from the National Survey of Intimate Partners and Sexual Violence (CDC, 2023) revealed that about 37.3% of women and 30.9% of men had suffered sexual or physical violence or persecution by an intimate partner, and 23.2% of women and 13.9% of men experienced severe physical violence. A literature review developed by Desmarais et al. (2012) estimated that approximately 1 in 4 women (23.1%) and 1 in 5 men (19.3%) suffered physical IPV. In Portugal, data on the prevalence of IPV is provided by Annual Report on Internal Security (Internal Security System [ISS], 2023), reporting a significant discrepancy between male and female victims in 2022 (27.6% of male victims vs. 72.4% of female victims). According to the official statistics, IPV is the most reported crime in Portugal (Capinha et al., 2022), with 30,488 complaints registered in 2022 (ISS, 2023).

Victims of IPV may exhibit physical symptoms, including but not limited to bruises, fractures, as well as digestive

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and cardiac health issues; in more severe instances, it can lead to fatality (WHO, 2021). The repercussions on mental well-being are equally well-documented, encompassing the emergence of conditions like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and instances of attempted suicide (e.g., Chandan et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2019). Additionally, individuals may experience sexual difficulties, such as sexual dysfunction, susceptibility to infections, and sexually transmitted diseases, along with challenges related to alcohol and substance use as coping mechanisms (e.g., Stubbs & Szoek, 2022).

### Bidirectional Intimate Partner Violence

IPV has been mainly associated with men as perpetrators and women as victims, i.e., a patriarchal and unidirectional perspective (Anderson, 2013). This conceptualization of IPV has influenced both attributions about male and female violence and victimization experiences (Hine et al., 2022), limited the implementation of interventions targeting other victims and perpetrators (Barocas et al., 2016), and neglected violence against men (Machado et al., 2019; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012) or violence perpetrated by both partners (Capaldi et al., 2007). Different typologies of violence were identified, showing other patterns of IPV than unidirectional ones (Bates, 2016). As an example, Johnson (1995) formulated one of the extensively examined typologies of violent relationships, classifying them into four distinct types of violence: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, situational couple violence, and mutual control. Only intimate terrorism involves unidirectional violence and a high level of coercive control; the other typologies were more likely to involve bidirectional violence (Bates, 2016). However, there is evidence that men can also be victims of intimate terrorism, challenging the traditional view of intimate violence as a gender issue (Bates, 2020; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Ridings et al., 2018). Nowadays, it is accepted that both men and women can be victims and/or perpetrators of intimate violence (Machado et al., 2019).

Bidirectional violence (BV) consists of the co-occurrence of violence by both partners (Holmes et al., 2019), who may assume the role of perpetrators, victims, or both, and occurs when both initiate and experience intimate violence (Palmetto et al., 2013; Ridings et al., 2018). International research on this topic has been increasing (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2009), and it is known that BV can culminate in more serious physical and psychological consequences and more severe injuries since violence may arise as a result of retaliation or self-defense in the context of the escalation of violence (Palmetto et al., 2013). Nevertheless, it is assumed that, in most intimate conflicts, there is some

sex asymmetry, not only due to sexual dimorphism, which favors men over women, but also in the type of violence perpetrated, motivations, consequences, experiences of victimization, and injuries inflicted (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Mennicke & Wilke, 2015). Besides, other authors claim that some studies focused on intimate BV fail to assess the context and motivations behind the abusive behaviors since only comparing the frequency of violence could lead to judging as BV a situation in which a partner acts in self-defense (Babcock et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding, systematic reviews (e.g., Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Machado et al., 2023) found that BV is the most prevalent typology in intimate relationships in different samples (i.e., clinical, community, forensic). In addition, a study conducted in six European cities revealed that BV proved to be the most common type of violence (Costa et al., 2015). In Portugal, although research on BV is still scarce, a study by Machado et al. (2019) showed a high rate of BV (73.7%) among men, demonstrating the need to explore the mutuality of victimization and perpetration. Similar results were found in the study developed by Capinha et al. (2022), in which a high prevalence of violence (suffered and perpetrated) was reported, regardless of the gender and sexual orientation of the participants (above 62.5%).

### Intimate Partner Violence and Parenting

The family systems theory explains that the relationships established within the family and their quality influence the entire family environment (Cox & Paley, 1997). Consequently, when persistent conflicts arise among couples who have children, encompassing disagreements concerning child-rearing (Chen & Johnston, 2012), or when marital stressors such as problem-solving difficulties or financial troubles emerge (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009), the repercussions extend beyond the couple and permeate into parenting dynamics (Stroud et al., 2015). Emotions like anger and frustration, along with behaviors linked to violence, are transmitted in the parent-child relationship (Cheung et al., 2016; Hosokawal & Katsura, 2019; Martin et al., 2017), thereby heightening the likelihood of children encountering adjustment problems (Chen & Johnston, 2012; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012), and potentially undermining the quality of the parent-child bond (Stroud et al., 2015). This phenomenon poses a threat to children's emotional well-being (Cheung et al., 2016; Hosokawal & Katsura, 2019), a situation that escalates when they become direct targets of violence (Chen & Johnston, 2012). Notably, exposure to intimate partner violence has also been identified as a risk factor for child-to-parent violence (e.g., Holt & Lewis, 2021).

Studies on parents' perceptions of children's exposure to conflict are scarce (Cannon et al., 2019), and those that exist show divergent results. Some studies revealed that victim mothers tend to recognize that their children witness episodes of violence (Izaguirre & Calvete, 2015). However, others showed that mothers deny this circumstance because they believe their children are more concerned with their problems (DeVoe & Smith, 2002). Regarding perpetrator parents (Zalmanowitz et al., 2013), some recognize the impact of exposure to IPV on their children and are concerned about the long-term consequences (Kitzman et al., 2003). On the other hand, Meyer (2017) showed that parents do not admit the damage caused by their behavior, as it is not directed at children. Still, parents perceived some changes in their relationship with their children (Meyer, 2017).

Perpetrator parents of both sexes tend to adopt authoritarian practices (Simmons et al., 2010), presenting negative and hostile behaviors toward their children (Chiesa et al., 2018), which can culminate in abuse (Holt et al., 2008). In these relationships, dimensions such as attention (Holt et al., 2008), affection, stimulation, involvement, and communication (Chiesa et al., 2018) tend to be deficient (Jeong et al., 2020). In cases of unidirectional violence, the perpetrator parent may even try to interfere with parenting and the victim parent's relationship with the child (Bancroft et al., 2012; Meyer, 2017). These behaviors may result from poor emotional regulation, which leads parents to perceive parenting as stressful and threatening (Gardner et al., 2014) and with little involvement in children's lives (Simmons et al., 2010). Bancroft et al. (2012) state that perpetrator fathers tend to perceive parenting as a relationship based on authority, attributing responsibility for childcare to the mother.

Low reflective functioning (Stover & Kiselica, 2014) can also explain these attitudes, as it leads perpetrator parents to devalue children's mental processes, beliefs, and feelings (Mohaupt & Duckert, 2016) due to the difficulty they feel in understanding their emotions and those of others (Fonagy & Bateman, 2006). In general, reflective functioning is an aptitude that is acquired through a healthy bond between parent and child and consists of the ability to perceive the actions of others as a consequence of their emotional states and psychological motivations, essential for the establishment of healthy relationships and interpersonal functioning (Narciso et al., 2018).

It is plausible that these fathers and mothers may have been exposed to interparental violence during their upbringing, thus potentially becoming recipients of the intergenerational transmission of violence. This could explain their inclination towards engaging in violent behavior towards their intimate partners and children (Gardner et al., 2014). Such behaviors could stem from the development of detrimental schemas and self-perceptions, leading them to

perceive themselves as inadequate (Pellerone et al., 2017), and exhibiting limited empathetic behaviors (Pellerone et al., 2017). Attachment theory underscores that caregiving patterns are intricately linked with one's interactions with their parents (Shaver et al., 2010). These experiences influence the activation of thoughts and emotions when caring for a child, shaping parental behaviors and responsiveness (Morris et al., 2017).

Regarding the parental relationship, parents living in BV situations report more difficulties communicating with their children. According to the literature, this dimension seems to be the most affected due to the feelings of shame and guilt that both perpetrator parents feel for their behavior (Kamody et al., 2020), the possible lack of communication in the relationship that extends to the parent-child relationship (Insetta et al., 2015), or the parents' refusal to talk to their children about the family situation as a way of protecting them (Kamody et al., 2020). However, children perceive hostility in the environment (Brown et al., 2007), and the lack of communication about conflicts can extend to other family and personal matters (Kamody et al., 2020). Communication problems arise more in adolescents, associated with the fear of being judged by parents and a decrease in open communication between parents and children as a result of the distancing of young people from parents (Kamody et al., 2020); typical of this developmental phase (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). Additionally, authoritarian and aversive communication styles contribute to an increased risk of maladjustment and the practice of violent behavior in the future (Bastien et al., 2011).

Finally, the relationship between IPV and adopting hostile parenting styles are not linear. There are parents who, despite family conflicts, maintain an affective relationship with their children (Perel & Peled, 2008), playing a significant role in their lives (Salisbury et al., 2009). For example, a study by Esbjørn et al. (2013), focused on unidirectional violence, found that there are fathers and mothers endowed with reflective functioning, making them more prone to reflect on the emotional states of their children, ensure the establishment of an attachment relationship, and have open communication (Slade, 2005), emotional regulation capacity (Fonagy & Bateman, 2006; Slade, 2005), sensitivity and competence to respond to children's developmental needs and challenges (Slade, 2005; Suchman et al., 2010). Moreover, the compartmentalization theory states that there are couples in conflict situations capable of distinguishing their role as intimate partners from their role as parents, establishing limits between different family relationships, i.e., able to compartmentalize their marriage and parenting roles (Heinrichs et al., 2010; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). According to this perspective, parents are capable of maintaining the negative feelings related to their conflicted

intimate relationship within the boundaries of their relationship, not transposing the negativity into their role as a parent, and continuing to be adequate parents even under challenging circumstances (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Parents remain able to provide affection and support to children, mitigating the impact of exposure to marital conflict (Letourneau et al., 2007) and protecting them from violence (Peled & Gil, 2011).

## Present Study

This study aims to understand and expand the literature on parenting among individuals involved in BV. The need for more research on BV and its impact on parenting makes it impossible to understand the communication process between situations of unidirectional and BV (Kamody et al., 2020). First, there is still little investment in the study of BV, especially in the Portuguese context (Capinha et al., 2022). Second, the research on the impact of BV on parenting and, more precisely, on the parent-child relationship is scarce, both nationally and internationally, which limits our knowledge of the phenomenon and makes it challenging to improve and develop targeted responses to the problem.

Considering the high prevalence rates of BV and its potential impact on the parent-child relationship, the main goals of this study were to: (i) identify the rates of bidirectional intimate partner violence and unidirectional intimate partner violence (perpetration or victimization) in the sample; (ii) analyze differences in perceptions about the quality of the parent-child relationship between parents

involved in intimate relationships characterized by unidirectional violence (victimization or perpetration), parents involved in intimate relationships characterized by BV and parents without violence and identify which dimensions of the parent-child relationship are most affected in situations of unidirectional violence (victimization or perpetration) and BV; (iii) analyze differences in the perceptions about the quality of the parent-child relationship between fathers and mothers involved in intimate relationships characterized by BV; (iv) and analyze how the length of the marital relationships and the age of the parents involved in intimate relationships characterized by BV are related with how they perceive the relationship with their children. In this sense, we formulate the following hypotheses: (i) BV is the more common pattern of IPV in the sample; (ii) fathers and mothers involved in intimate relationships characterized by BV present perceptions of lower quality in the relationship with their children than fathers without violence or in a situation of unidirectional violence (victimization or perpetration); (iii) the communication dimension will be the most affected; that is, fathers involved in intimate relationships characterized by BV present perceptions of lower quality of the relationship with their children than mothers; (iv) older parents with longer intimate relationships with BV present perceptions of lower quality in the relationship with their children.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from the community through a convenience sampling process. The sample was selected according to the following inclusion criteria: (i) being 18 years of age or older; (ii) having children aged between four and 17 years of age; (iii) being in a current intimate relationship or having been in an intimate relationship in the last year (even if they were not at the time of the study).

The sample was composed of 138 participants, 115 (83.3%) females and 23 (16.7%) males, with a mean age of 38.98 ( $SD=7.34$ , range 21–54). Most of the participants were in a current intimate relationship ( $n=121$ ; 87.7%), with an average of 27.84 months ( $SD=20.20$ ), and were married or lived in a civil union ( $n=105$ ; 76.1%). Most participants assumed a heterosexual orientation ( $n=127$ ; 92%). A high percentage of participants reported having only one child ( $n=69$ ; 50%), followed by two children ( $n=47$ ; 34.1%). Most participants had a degree ( $n=43$ ; 31.2%) and were employed; ( $n=124$ ; 89.9%). Detailed sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Sociodemographic characterization ( $n=138$ )

| Variables           | <i>n</i> | %    |
|---------------------|----------|------|
| Sex                 |          |      |
| Female              | 115      | 83.3 |
| Male                | 23       | 16.7 |
| Marital status      |          |      |
| Single              | 17       | 12.3 |
| Married/civil union | 105      | 76.1 |
| Divorced/separated  | 14       | 10.1 |
| Widower             | 1        | 0.7  |
| Number of children  |          |      |
| 1                   | 69       | 50   |
| 2                   | 48       | 34.1 |
| 3 or more           | 15       | 10.9 |
| Education           |          |      |
| Until 9 years       | 32       | 23.2 |
| Until 12 years      | 29       | 21   |
| Graduation          | 43       | 31.2 |
| Master or PhD       | 34       | 24.6 |
| Professional status |          |      |
| Employed            | 124      | 89.9 |
| Student             | 2        | 1.4  |
| Student worker      | 4        | 2.9  |
| Unemployed          | 8        | 5.8  |

## Instruments

The sociodemographic questionnaire was used to collect data regarding the characterization of the participants, such as sex, age, educational level, marital status, intimate relationship length, and the number of children.

Perceptions about the parent-child relationship quality were assessed using the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI; Gerard, 1994; Portuguese version Leite et al., 2018). PCRI is a 78-item self-report rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Items are distributed in seven scales: Parental Support, Satisfaction with Parenting, Involvement, Communication, Setting Limits, Autonomy, and Role Orientation. Higher scores in the different scales indicate more positive parenting characteristics and better parenting skills. The original (Gerard, 1994) and the Portuguese versions (Leite et al., 2018) revealed good psychometric properties. In the current sample, the PCRI revealed the following internal consistency values: Satisfaction with parenting=0.77; Involvement=0.81; Communication=0.71; Definition of Limits=0.81; Parental support=0.75; Autonomy=0.65; and Functional orientation=0.70.

To examine the prevalence of unidirectional and BV, the Inventory of Marital Violence (IVC; Machado et al., 2007) was used. IVC is a 21-item scale, rated on a three points scale (0=never, 1=once, 2=more than once), measuring two dimensions (physical and psychological violence) and a total score of the frequency of violence (the higher the score, the higher the frequency of violence). IVC assesses the prevalence of acts perpetrated and suffered by intimate partners. Thus, it makes it possible to characterize the dynamics of violence in a couple as unidirectional or bidirectional. Although the original authors did not assess the internal consistency values, other studies indicate Cronbach’s alpha values from 0.81 to 0.85 for physical violence, 0.51 to 0.72 for psychological violence, and 0.80 to 0.84 for the total scale (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2015, 2016; Cunha et al., 2021). For the present study, the Cronbach values were 0.84 for the perpetration scale and 0.90 for the victimization scale.

To assess social desirability, the Socially Desirable Response Set-5 scale was used (Hays et al., 1989; Portuguese version of Pechorro et al., 2019). SDRS-5 is a 5-item self-report measure rated on a 5-point scale from “Totally True” to “Totally False”. Higher scores indicate higher levels of social desirability. The original (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960, as cited in Pechorro et al., 2019) and the Portuguese versions (Pechorro et al., 2019) revealed good psychometric properties. In the present sample, the internal consistency was 0.55.

## Procedures

The project was approved by the Ethics and Deontology Committee for Scientific Research (EDCSR) of the Lusófona University.

Data was collected through an online survey using the Qualtrics software. The link was disseminated through personal and institutional emails and social networks of the institution and the research team (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp). In addition, the snowball sampling strategy was used, which consists of passing the word between people with knowledge of participants who fit the study’s selection criteria.

Informed Consent was collected online before filling out the questionnaires. The study’s objectives were presented to the participants and guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of the information, ensuring the anonymity of the participants. There was no reward for participating in the study, as participation was voluntary. Completing the questionnaire took between 15 and 20 min.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for sociodemographic characterization of the sample and the main variables, i.e., perceptions about the quality of the parent-child relationship, violence in intimate relationships, and social desirability. Inferential statistics were performed to test the previously formulated hypotheses. Before testing the hypotheses, an exploratory analysis was conducted to assess whether the assumptions underlying the use of parametric tests were met. Since the assumptions of normality were not met, parametric and non-parametric equivalent tests were performed for all the analyses. As advocated by Fife-Schaw (2000), when both procedures produced similar conclusions, the results of the parametric tests were presented; when the conclusions were different, to maintain statistical rigor, the non-parametric test results were chosen. Since the parametric and non-parametric tests’ results were identical, we decided only to report the parametric tests. To analyze differences between the groups (i.e., without violence, unidirectional perpetration, unidirectional victimization, bidirectional violence) in social desirability a one-way ANOVA was performed. To examine differences between the groups (i.e., parents in situations of unidirectional violence (victimization or perpetration), parents involved in BV, and parents without violence) and sexes (i.e., mothers and fathers) in the perception of the quality of the parent-child relationship, after controlling for social desirability, ANCOVA tests were performed. Pearson correlation tests were conducted to examine the correlations between parent-child relationship dimensions and age and relationship length. The statistical program IBM® SPSS®



Statistics (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, 28.0) was used to perform the analyses.

## Results

### Descriptive Analysis

Results regarding IPV victimization and perpetration, parent-child relationship, and social desirability are presented in Table 2.

The results concerning IPV victimization and perpetration revealed the following values: the victimization scale presented an average of 1.52 ( $SD=3.58$ ), and the perpetration scale was an average of 0.22 ( $SD=0.62$ ) (see Table 2). Victimization and perpetration scores were then converted in a dichotomous scale (Yes/No), and then the sample was divided into different groups according to the presence or absence of victimization and perpetration in four groups: the group without violence (individuals who did not report either victimization or perpetration), the group with unidirectional violence perpetration (individuals who reported perpetrating at least one act of violence against their intimate partner and no act of victimization), the group with unidirectional violence victimization (individuals who reported suffering at least one act of violence perpetrated by their intimate partner and did not report perpetrating any act of violence against their intimate partner), and the group with BV (individuals who reported both perpetrating and suffering at least one act of intimate violence). Therefore, most participants reported living in a context without violence ( $n=67$ ; 57.3%), 35.9% ( $n=42$ ) reported BV, 15.2% ( $n=21$ ) reported suffering unidirectional violence, and a lower percentage ( $n=8$ ; 6.8%) admitted to perpetrating unidirectional violence.

Regarding PCRI (see Table 2), the dimensions with the highest means were involvement ( $M=48.76$ ,  $SD=4.22$ ), the definition of limits ( $M=35.59$ ,  $SD=4.17$ ), and satisfaction with parenting ( $M=34.63$ ,  $SD=3.71$ ).

**Table 2** Description of the main instruments

| Variables        | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Minimum | Maximum |
|------------------|----------|-----------|---------|---------|
| IVC              |          |           |         |         |
| Victimization    | 1.52     | 3.58      | 0.00    | 18.00   |
| Perpetration     | 0.22     | 0.62      | 0.00    | 3.00    |
| PCRI             |          |           |         |         |
| Parental Support | 23.86    | 3.36      | 12.00   | 34.00   |
| Satisfaction     | 34.63    | 3.71      | 21.00   | 40.00   |
| Involvement      | 48.76    | 4.22      | 39.00   | 56.00   |
| Communication    | 29.82    | 2.49      | 24.00   | 36.00   |
| Limits           | 35.59    | 4.17      | 20.00   | 45.00   |
| Autonomy         | 26.82    | 3.04      | 19.00   | 36.00   |
| Guidance         | 30.12    | 2.88      | 22.00   | 36.00   |
| SDRS-5           | 17.71    | 2.75      | 10.00   | 25.00   |

Note. IVC - Marital Violence Inventory, PCRI- Parent-Child Relationship Inventory, SDRS-5- Socially Desirable Response Scale-5

Concerning the Socially Desirable Response Scale-5, the average mean was 17.73 ( $SD=2.70$ ), ranging from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 25 (see Table 2). Although the high scores on SDRS-5, no differences were found between the four groups (i.e., without violence, unidirectional victimization, unidirectional perpetration, and bidirectional violence) on what concerns social desirability scores,  $F(3)=0.414$ ,  $p=.743$ ,  $\eta^2=0.041$ .

### Comparative Analyzes

Regarding the different dimensions of the parent-child relationship (see Table 3), after controlling for social desirability, the results only revealed statistically significant differences between the groups in communication,  $F(3)=3.691$ ,  $p=.014$ , with a medium effect size of 0.08. The post hoc test of Gabriel revealed statistically significant differences between the BV group and the unidirectional perpetration group ( $p=.030$ ). Thus, the group characterized by BV had lower scores in communication than the group characterized by unidirectional violence perpetration.

Separate analyzes were performed to analyze the differences between sexes, controlling for social desirability (see Tables 4 and 5). Analyzes were not carried out for the group

**Table 3** Comparison analyses between groups

|                  | Without Violence<br>( $n=67$ ) |           | Unidirectional Violence Perpetration<br>( $n=8$ ) |           | Unidirectional Violence Victimization<br>( $n=21$ ) |           | Bidirectional Violence<br>( $n=42$ ) |           | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ |
|------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|---|-----------|---|-----------|--------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                  | <i>M</i>                       | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>  | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>  | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>                             | <i>SD</i> |          |          |          |
| Parental Support | 24.17                          | 2.93      | 26.12   | 3.95      | 24.67   | 4.79      | 22.93                                | 3.68      | 2.242    | 0.086    | 0.048    |
| Satisfaction     | 34.38                          | 4.15      | 36.36   | 2.06      | 35.16   | 2.99      | 34.71                                | 3.13      | 0.629    | 0.598    | 0.014    |
| Involvement      | 49.04                          | 4.20      | 50.14   | 4.27      | 48.87   | 3.58      | 48.06                                | 4.22      | 0.694    | 0.558    | 0.015    |
| Communication    | 30.15                          | 2.41      | 31.47   | 2.64      | 30.62   | 2.67      | 29.00                                | 2.34      | 3.691    | 0.014    | 0.077    |
| Limits           | 35.67                          | 3.50      | 38.43   | 4.02      | 36.38   | 4.55      | 34.93                                | 4.95      | 1.463    | 0.228    | 0.032    |
| Autonomy         | 26.70                          | 2.85      | 27.14   | 1.74      | 26.80   | 3.48      | 26.95                                | 3.55      | 0.079    | 0.971    | 0.002    |
| Guidance         | 30.18                          | 2.98      | 28.94   | 2.67      | 30.53   | 3.38      | 30.26                                | 2.76      | 0.610    | 0.610    | 0.015    |

**Table 4** Comparison analysis between males and females - bidirectional violence group

| Variable         | Males ( <i>n</i> = 7) |           | Females ( <i>n</i> = 35) |           | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ |
|------------------|-----------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                  | <i>M</i>              | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>                 | <i>SD</i> |          |          |          |
| Parental Support | 23.71                 | 3.20      | 22.77                    | 3.79      | 0.60     | 0.442    | 0.02     |
| Satisfaction     | 35.49                 | 2.96      | 34.56                    | 3.18      | 1.42     | 0.240    | 0.04     |
| Involvement      | 46.10                 | 3.96      | 48.45                    | 4.21      | 1.54     | 0.222    | 0.04     |
| Communication    | 27.76                 | 2.25      | 29.22                    | 2.31      | 2.03     | 0.163    | 0.05     |
| Limits           | 33.60                 | 3.67      | 35.20                    | 5.17      | 0.36     | 0.555    | 0.01     |
| Autonomy         | 26.90                 | 2.36      | 26.96                    | 3.77      | 0.01     | 0.937    | 0.00     |
| Guidance         | 29.77                 | 2.51      | 30.35                    | 2.84      | 0.15     | 0.706    | 0.00     |

**Table 5** Comparison analysis between males and females - without violence group

| Variable         | Males ( <i>n</i> = 12) |           | Females ( <i>n</i> = 55) |           | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ |
|------------------|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                  | <i>M</i>               | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>                 | <i>SD</i> |          |          |          |
| Parental Support | 24.75                  | 2.75      | 24.04                    | 2.98      | 0.72     | 0.400    | 0.01     |
| Satisfaction     | 34.59                  | 2.38      | 34.33                    | 4.46      | 0.06     | 0.811    | 0.00     |
| Involvement      | 47.03                  | 3.96      | 49.48                    | 4.16      | 3.43     | 0.069    | 0.05     |
| Communication    | 28.98                  | 1.95      | 30.40                    | 2.45      | 3.50     | 0.066    | 0.05     |
| Limits           | 35.84                  | 2.43      | 35.63                    | 3.71      | 0.06     | 0.810    | 0.00     |
| Autonomy         | 26.79                  | 2.25      | 26.68                    | 2.98      | 0.01     | 0.906    | 0.00     |
| Guidance         | 29.46                  | 2.33      | 30.34                    | 3.10      | 0.82     | 0.369    | 0.01     |

**Table 6** Pearson correlation analyses

|                  | Bidirectional Violence |        | Without Violence    |         |
|------------------|------------------------|--------|---------------------|---------|
|                  | Relationship length    | Age    | Relationship length | Age     |
| Parental Support | 0.078                  | -0.019 | -0.035              | 0.077   |
| Satisfaction     | -0.161                 | -0.047 | -0.218              | 0.009   |
| Involvement      | -0.002                 | -0.264 | -0.095              | -0.324* |
| Communication    | -0.089                 | -0.239 | -0.268*             | -0.225  |
| Limits           | 0.075                  | -0.207 | 0.009               | -0.044  |
| Autonomy         | -0.089                 | 0.082  | 0.080               | -0.001  |
| Guidance         | -0.258                 | 0.186  | 0.040               | -0.152  |

Note. \*  $p < .05$

that perpetrates unidirectional violence and for the group that reported unidirectional victimization, given the small number of male participants in each group (one and three male participants, respectively). In both groups, no differences between sexes in the perceptions of the parent-child relationship were found.

### Correlation Analysis

In the BV group, no significant correlations existed between the parent-child relationship dimensions and age and relationship length (see Table 6). In the group without violence, there was a statistically significant moderate and negative correlation between involvement and age,  $r = -.32$ ,  $p = .008$ , with older parents perceiving their involvement with their children less positively. There was also a moderate and negative statistically significant correlation between communication and relationship length,  $r = -.27$ ,  $p = .031$ , i.e., parents with longer relationships perceived communication with their children less positively.

### Discussion

The present study aims to determine the rate of BV in the present sample and comprehend how parents engaged in intimate relationships characterized by BV perceive their interactions with their children. These objectives introduce innovation to the study due to the dearth of literature and research on the impact of BV on parenting. BV remains a concept and reality that remains relatively obscure, even being excluded from violence statistics. By linking BV with the dimension of parenting, this study assumes even greater significance, given the limited focus on this aspect in the specific context of BV and the paramount importance of effective parenting. As previously mentioned, the quality of established relationships profoundly influences the entire family environment, and conflicts within the couple tend to detrimentally affect parenting. Addressing this crucial shortcoming is imperative, given the potential repercussions that can emanate from an environment rife with conflicts, especially in the context of children. The impact on children's development and emotional well-being is twofold,

primarily stemming from their exposure to parental discord, which is further exacerbated when violence is bidirectional (Chen & Johnston, 2012; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). This elevated risk of bidirectional violence (Stroud et al., 2015) heightens the probability of children becoming targets of neglectful and hostile parenting practices (Chiesa et al., 2018; Simmons et al., 2010), while also increasing the likelihood of children themselves resorting to violence against their parents (Holt & Lewis, 2021).

In the present study, in alignment with existing literature, BV stands out as the most common form of intimate violence among individuals (Capinha et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2019; Ridings et al., 2018). A recent systematic review focused on the prevalence of BV (Machado et al., 2023) across various samples (including community, forensic, and clinical) has revealed elevated BV rates on a global scale, with the European continent exhibiting the highest incidences. However, it is crucial to approach our findings cautiously due to the limited sample size, and a notable disparity in participant numbers exists between the unidirectional violence groups (victimization or perpetration) and the BV group.

The findings revealed that parents of both genders residing in environments marked by BV perceived a diminished quality in their interactions with their children. Although the available research is insufficient, leading to limited validation of this phenomenon, existing studies suggest a tendency for couples to extend the dynamics established within their marital relationships to their interactions with their children (Cox & Paley, 1997; Hosokawa & Katsura, 2019). This pattern may impede the establishment of an open channel of communication between parents themselves and their children (Insetta et al., 2015).

The results also align with prior literature, specifically highlighting that the dimension of parent-child communication is profoundly impacted within relational contexts characterized by BV (e.g., Jeong et al., 2020; Kamody et al., 2020). Given that family violence detrimentally affects individuals' communication skills and communication dynamics within the family unit (e.g., Mianaie et al., 2023), this outcome was anticipated to some extent. The communication between parents and children is prone to disruption in scenarios dominated by violence (Jeong et al., 2020), and this disruption appears to be even more accentuated within families experiencing BV (Kamody et al., 2020). The challenges in parent-child communication could be attributed to several factors, such as the parents' difficulty in engaging with their children due to the shame arising from their behavior (Kamody et al., 2020). This predicament is further compounded by the fact that this communication dimension is also impacted within marital relationships and consequently extends to the parent-child relationship (Insetta

et al., 2015). Additionally, parents might believe that by avoiding discussions about the family's situation, they are safeguarding their children from potential exposure to conflicts (Brown et al., 2007). However, it is important to note that effective family communication fosters emotional connections between family members and facilitates adaptive resolution of family transitions. Thus, communication difficulties have a negative impact on family development and serve as a risk factor for children's behavioral issues, including instances of child-to-parent violence (Jiménez et al., 2019).

Parents within the unidirectional violence-perpetrating group tend to perceive a higher level of communication quality with their children compared to parents engaged in relationships marked by BV. Overall, it becomes apparent that parents entangled in BV scenarios generally harbor lower perceptions of relationship quality with their children. This discrepancy is particularly evident concerning communication when contrasted with parents from the unidirectional violence-perpetrating group (even when adjusting for the influence of social desirability bias). This observation could be attributed to the BV-involved parents being frequently immersed in conflicts, which can result in them overlooking their connection with their children. The prevalence of conflicts might often lead to challenges in parental-child relationships, manifesting in deficits across various dimensions, notably communication (Brown et al., 2007; Insetta et al., 2015; Kamody et al., 2020). The positive perceptions of diverse aspects of the parent-child relationship held by parents within the unidirectional violence-perpetrating group can potentially be elucidated by their reflective engagement in functioning as parents.

As evidenced in the literature, some fathers and mothers possess a reflective capacity that enables them to comprehend their children's sentiments and emotions, as well as the potential repercussions of their exposure to violence (Slade, 2005). This ability empowers them to distinguish their roles as intimate partners from their roles as parents (Heinrichs et al., 2010; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), allowing them to navigate through intimate partner violence (IPV) while sustaining a constructive and intimate bond with their children. Through this approach, they can fulfill their children's needs and thereby shield them from the adverse effects of a conflicted environment (Slade, 2005; Suchman et al., 2010). However, it's imperative to acknowledge the prospect that participants might have responded in a socially desirable manner. Notably, our sample exhibited levels of social desirability surpassing the average threshold, implying that the parental perspectives conveyed may not fully align with reality. Consequently, it is plausible that their responses aim to convey a positive parent-child relationship



that perseveres despite the presence of violence, potentially downplaying the impact of violence on this dynamic.

When examining gender differences, no disparities were observed between males and females in their assessments of the parent-child relationship, even following adjustments for social desirability bias. Consequently, it is the presence of BV rather than the parents' gender that appears to impact their perceptions of the parent-child relationship. In the context of parents' gender, the existing literature does not offer a consensus. While there is evidence (Esbjørn et al., 2013) indicating that fathers exhibit lower reflective functioning compared to mothers, other studies (Cannon et al., 2018, 2019) suggest that certain mothers may be at a higher risk for their children.

Finally, advanced age among parents is often associated with a less favorable perception of their involvement in their relationship with their children. Similarly, parents who have maintained longer intimate relationships tend to view their communication with their children in a less positive light. Existing literature highlights an array of stressors inherent in marriages, encompassing both internal factors (such as parenthood, cohabitation dynamics, conflict resolution challenges, and health issues) and external factors (like work-related demands, external relationship tensions, financial constraints, and interactions with individuals outside the relationship). These stressors notably impact diverse facets of individuals' lives, including the dynamics of marital and parental relationships (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

This study holds significant practical and theoretical implications. To begin, it introduces a fresh perspective on IPV and its repercussions by delving into the relationship between BV and the parent-child dynamic. In particular, it scrutinizes the viewpoints of fathers and mothers concerning the quality of their connections with their children. Prevailing literature on this subject predominantly revolves around unidirectional IPV, a trend partly influenced by the feminization of the phenomenon, which has inadvertently overshadowed the victimization experienced by men as well as the intricacies of BV (Machado et al., 2019; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). This lack of research has also impacted public and private policies and the development of prevention and intervention strategies, both nationally and internationally, as they mainly address unidirectional violence.

This research gap also extends its influence into the domain of public and private policies, along with the crafting of preventive and intervention approaches, spanning both national and global contexts. Current policies and interventions predominantly concentrate on unidirectional violence, underscoring the imperative for a more holistic grasp of the intricate dynamics associated with BV.

It is imperative to translate these concepts into professional practice by developing effective and suitable prevention and intervention programs to address this phenomenon. Such initiatives should be rooted in enhancing parenting skills, specifically reflective functioning and communication, alongside cultivating an awareness of the repercussions of violent behaviors between parents on their children. Thus, the cultivation of positive parenting practices becomes pivotal in ensuring children's holistic development and emotional well-being, guarding against both short-term and long-term effects stemming from intergenerational violence transmission, parental disengagement, and lack of responsiveness (Morris et al., 2017). This becomes particularly vital due to the potential compromising of communication within the family unit caused by living in a violent environment, which serves as a risk factor for both parent-to-child violence (Chiesa et al., 2018) and child-to-parent violence (Holt & Lewis, 2021; Jiménez et al., 2019). In the context of prevention, the significance of collaborating with victim support institutions and service providers is equally justifiable, focusing on equipping them with comprehensive skills to address gender-inclusive approaches. This encompasses countering stereotypes and biases, particularly regarding men as victims. Additionally, interventions must target parents as individuals who may experience and perpetrate violence. Given that violence within an intimate partnership may permeate into parent-child relationships, personalized interventions are crucial. A holistic methodology should be employed, involving a deep understanding of motivations, behaviors, and cognitions, to address underlying causes.

Furthermore, investing in a more theoretical exploration of this phenomenon is essential. This endeavor is anticipated to augment comprehension and awareness surrounding BV, fostering gender equality by shedding light on victim and perpetrator profiles, and the necessity of reporting and support, thereby driving the development of gender-inclusive initiatives.

Despite the valuable insights offered by the present study, it is imperative to acknowledge the presence of certain limitations. Foremost, the modest sample size warrants attention, posing a hindrance to generalizing the findings to the broader population. Furthermore, the restricted number of participants curtails our ability to attain the requisite statistical power. This limitation emanates from both the initial number of participants and the necessity to exclude those who did not meet the eligibility criteria, such as individuals without children or those who did not complete the questionnaires. Another notable limitation pertains to the gender distribution, wherein a notable disproportion exists with a larger number of female participants compared to a smaller cohort of males. This imbalance hampers the prospect of conducting equitable comparisons between the

sexes. Consequently, caution is advised while interpreting the results, given this sampling disparity. A weakness also arises from the relatively low alpha value of the SDSR-5, which undermines the instrument's internal consistency. Furthermore, during the analysis of the social desirability instrument, it emerged that participants recorded values surpassing the midpoint. This raises the possibility that their responses might have been influenced by socially desirable norms, potentially undermining the authenticity of their perceptions and thereby posing a challenge in obtaining transparent information and data. However, it is noteworthy that statistical disparities were still evident between groups even after accounting for the impact of social desirability. Conducting an online study introduces its own set of complexities and constraints, encompassing challenges such as a lack of control over respondent identities, circumstances, and the potential for multiple responses from the same individual. Additional difficulties include concerns about fraudulent access, limitations in reaching certain demographic groups with limited internet access, absence of direct rapport with participants, and the potential for questionnaire fatigue (Andrade, 2020). Moreover, online surveys primarily captured minor, situational, and bidirectional violence (Cunha et al., 2023).

The heterogeneity in the ages of the children and the omission of this variable as a potential covariate represent additional limitations. Given that existing literature suggests greater communication challenges with adolescent children (Kamody et al., 2020), future research should consider the children's ages and explore how they might influence the quality of the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, extending this study to encompass other participant demographics, including sexual orientation or educational level (due to the correlations of such variables with IPV), could offer valuable insights. Additionally, future investigations should endeavor to glean the perspectives of children regarding their relationships with parents in the context of BV.

In conclusion, this study presents a groundbreaking approach by addressing underexplored subjects. Despite the considerable attention and study devoted to violence, the realm of bidirectional typologies remains relatively underexplored, particularly when intertwined with parenting dynamics. The study's findings highlight BV as the most prevalent form of intimate violence, correlating with a diminished perception of the parent-child relationship's quality among both males and females, particularly in the realm of communication. This underscores the potential transference of conflict-related consequences to the parent-child relationship.

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**Data Availability** The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality of the data but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional ethics committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. The current study is part of a research project approved by the Lusófona University Ethics Committee.

**Informed Consent** Online informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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