

Socially-determined psychological distress and expressive abuse in men

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SUMMARY

The meanings of abuses carried out by men to express distress were explored. A logic was described of accumulation of distress with social origin expressed in an act of abuse and mediated by a reason or conflict that justified the physical and/or verbal attack. Sometimes, the expression of distress was accompanied by feelings of guilt after violent events. Expressive elements that allow abuses of partners and other family members are the beliefs about the superiority of men, the physical and general inferiority of women and children, the notion that wives are property, the perception that relationships should last a lifetime, and beliefs about the use of violence in relationships. In terms of the intervention with this population, the study highlights the importance of considering the role of social determinants of distress from the macro level to social programs and community interventions.

Key words: Social determination, psychological distress, men, family violence, abuse.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es conocer y describir la experiencia subjetiva de hombres que asisten a un programa reeducativo para detener su violencia familiar, en torno al malestar psicológico determinado socialmente y su expresión por medio de actos violentos. El acercamiento metodológico de esta investigación es de tipo cualitativo y se trata de un estudio crítico con enfoque interpretativo. Participaron cinco hombres que se reúnen en un centro gubernamental especializado para la atención de la violencia familiar ubicado en una Delegación política del sur en el Distrito Federal. El malestar psicológico de la vida cotidiana se abordó a partir de instrumentos clínicos y del análisis de entrevistas grupales que exploran variables sociales. Además, se presentan los significados de los abusos realizados por los hombres con el fin de expresar el malestar. Se describió una lógica de acumulación de malestar con origen social expresado en un acto de abuso, y mediado por una razón o conflicto que justifica el ataque físico y/o verbal. La expresión de malestar, en ocasiones, se acompaña por sentimientos de culpa posteriores a los eventos violentos. Los elementos que permiten los abusos expresivos contra la pareja y otros familiares son las creencias sobre la superioridad del hombre, la inferioridad física de las mujeres e hijos, la propiedad de la persona por ser esposa, la obligación de la duración de una relación "para toda la vida" y las creencias sobre el uso de la violencia en las relaciones. En términos de intervención con esta población, se destaca la importancia de considerar el papel que juegan las determinantes sociales del malestar psicológico provenientes del nivel macro para los programas sociales e intervenciones comunitarias.

Palabras clave: Determinación social, malestar psicológico, hombres, violencia familiar, abuso.

INTRODUCTION

Within the interpretations that can be made about violence used by men towards their partners and other family members, what stand out in particular are the primary elements that give rise to mental patterns, which correspond to a greater or lesser extent with stereotyped ideas around gender, generation, families, and beliefs about the validity of using violence. These gender beliefs are present in both so-called instrumental violence as well as in expressive vio-

lence; they can be the primary variable in the origin of the distress and in the motivations for the act,^{1,2} or could even allow for the expression of distress towards partners and other family members. Both possibilities are not exclusive.

In cases where rigid gender beliefs are not the primary determinant of psychological distress in males, distress directed towards partners is usually identified as deriving from environmental frustrations and social stress.³ This can be as the product of factors present within the closest social contexts, without considering the presence of variables from

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the structural dimension. In this sense, the social responses to tackle these distresses or health problems do not usually indicate the conditions operating on broader levels to produce psychic distresses which are expressed through violence towards partners and/or family members.

Some proposals of Bronfenbrenner's⁴ explicative model of human development are very useful in approaching the possible structural variables that determine individual psychological distress. The ecological model sets out the interaction of an active subject in permanent development with distinct environments, understood as systems that have to be studied in order to understand the development of people. It characterizes development as a progressive mutual accommodation that is also affected by relationships established between the various environments in which the person participates and the broader contexts in which these environments are included.

This model envisions a set of structures that are serialized and set out on different levels, where each one contains the other. The innermost level of these structures is formed of the immediate environments containing the person in development, called *microsystems* (family, school or work, neighborhood). Into the next level are placed relationships between two or more of the developing person's immediate environments, and in which they actively participate, known as the *mesosystem*. The third level is made up of environments where the person is not actively present, but is influenced: the *exosystem*. The fourth level holds the broader cultural and socioeconomic factors in which the person and all individuals in their society develop, constituting the *macrosystem*.

The present article approaches variables that may be operating in the various systems, particularly those of a cultural and structural origin, to generate emotional distress in actual men which is expressed in the abuse of partners and/or other family members.

From a gender perspective, men who abuse family relations have been called *men exercising male violence in the home*.⁵ This gives the connotation of the violent act (of men) and its link, with the social dimension of the same (male violence). As such, it is considered that each man has a personal experience with respect to the violence they carry out, and at the same time, reproduces the structures of power and subordination within society.

Male violence is defined as an act that is simultaneously instrumental and expressive. Its instrumentality lies in the fact that it is a means of social control, and in that sense, an intimidation strategy which serves domination. This is a strategy that the man consciously chooses from his social position.⁶ In the patriarchal system, men are enrolled in social power systems that give them privileges for the mere fact of being male; an internalized capital that is both symbolic and real, and which they use in subjective crises related with conflicts and differences which occur in their family relationships. In other words, violence has an important relationship with the

crises that threaten generic identity or "authority", in the face of which, abusive practices are exercised which maintain the dominant order of gender. As such, a violent act is an instrument that serves certain logic and social orders.

In its expressive sense, violence can be understood as a regressive experience related with life history and experienced as a feeling of "losing oneself", produced in parallel with the instrumental sense. The expression of psychological distress made in the violent act, present before or during partner and family conflicts, is directed at *being expelled from the subject themselves*.^{6,7} This expressive violence (emotional, reactive, or hostile) is characterized by violent behaviors, carried out impulsively, and motivated by feelings of anger and rage. It is usually directed at those with less power; that is, towards those who are believed to be inferior for reasons of *gender* or *age*.^{8,9} This places the subjectivity related with gender as directing its expression towards the domestic space. As such, violent acts in family relationships can be considered a *symptomatic manifestation* that synthesizes two tensions related with the distress: one which is cultural-social and another which is personal-psychological.

Although gender is a determinant in the development of family violence committed by men, men present differences between themselves. From a psychological focus, some authors have created typologies around them based on said differences. For example, Dutton proposes three basic types:¹⁰ those who are characterized as psychopaths and who are not candidates for achieving important changes in intervention programs; and those who are cyclic or emotionally unstable who, together with those who are overcontrolled, can achieve changes in psychotherapeutic or reflexive processes of re-education. Considering this typology has been essential for reflection about the instrumental and expressive character of the violent acts of the latter two types, given that in acts of violence, the instrumental nature (domination for reasons of gender) could prevail over the expressive nature (expression of personal distress) to a certain extent, or vice versa, although the two are always present.

In the case of the so-called *overcontrolled* group, *instrumental* type violence is that which is most frequently present, and it is motivated by psychological distress associated with meeting rigid beliefs, among them gender stereotypes. In the case of the *emotionally unstable* group, the pattern of abuse responds most to the *expression* of distress; in other words, it is related with perceptions, emotions, and circumstances that occur with the partner or family members. As such, the expressive nature of violence as a regressive experience can be associated with experiences of abuse at an early age, as well as conflict and violence in socialization and adult partner relationships. This case would refer to a psychological approach centered on variables at the *microsocial* level of their reality.

However, if it is considered that the experience of any subject and their primary group is contained in various lev-

els of social reality, the question arises whether it is only psychological distress associated with the events occurring in childhood which manifest themselves in expressive violent acts. In this respect, some studies that have explored the expressive nature of violence and relate it to early experiences of abuse by parents or caregivers in men who exercise family violence, emphasize that only around a third report experiences of abuse in childhood.^{3,11,12} In other words, approximately 70% of those men expressed distress that did not come from experiences of abuse in childhood, but rather was generated for other reasons, for example, crises that are a product of not meeting rigid beliefs about gender roles, traumatic experiences as a product of masculine socialization, or other events during the course of their life. But it is also necessary to consider other social determinants¹³ of psychological distress that can be expressed in violent acts and which come from levels of reality other than the *micro*, *meso*, and *exo* levels; in other words, from the social context, including the *macro level of reality*.

From a *micro* view of reality, it is proposed that expressive violence reflects difficulties in controlling impulses and an emotional state of unpleasant physiological activation induced by environmental frustration, or a biased interpretation of others' behavior.¹⁴ In these episodes of the intermittent-explosive disorder, the level of aggression used is disproportionate to the intensity of the psychosocial aggressor that stimulates it, such as academic failure, loss of work, accidents, etc. Before violent behavior, the man may feel great internal tension that is then followed by a feeling of release, and later, guilt and remorse. They usually act "normally" between one explosive episode and the next, which leads to thinking that these attacks express a distress which is the product of a psycho-physiological condition induced by a stressor of social origin.

As they are not specified or placed uniquely within the *meso* or *micro* level of reality, these social stressors do not identify with other social determinants of the *exo* and *macro* levels of reality that contribute to the generation of said affectation. The above raises the question, *What can be understood by "environmental frustration" or "psychosocial stressor"?* Taking into account factors from the educational and work spheres as well as other social variables, the reflection is oriented towards the material living conditions of the subjects as generators of psychological distress and their relationship with expressive violence in the family environment.

From here on, this violence shall be called "*expressive abuse*", in that it refers to acts of expressive violence that occur in a relationship of trust, meaning they are specifically abuses, as they do not occur in other relationships. They are the symptom of a series of social variables that are filtered, negotiated, and reworked by the subject's personal experiences, and which are manifested in their health and social practices. In other words, these are variables that generate distress which are shown as part of a process of determin-

ing health and illness¹⁵ that goes beyond the *micro*, *meso*, and *exo* levels of social reality, and includes the *macro* social level (Figure 1).

Based on the above, the aim of this article is to know and describe the subjective experience of men who attend a re-education program to stop family violence, in the sphere of socially-determined psychological distress and its expression through violent acts. It is about describing the process of a personal and subjective symptom, which is also a social and structural condition.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The methodological approach for this research was qualitative, and it was a critical study with an interpretive focus.¹⁶ The social determination of health and illness is a theoretical approach that cuts through the methodological proposal, which also incorporates a focus of placing determinants into a hierarchy. It has a non-experimental design, there is no randomization; rather, it is about a previously existing situation outside the direct control of the researcher and where the subjects, by self-selection, already belong to a certain group or level. It is cross-cutting in that it centers on analyzing data gathered at one point in time.¹⁶ The instruments were piloted in a group with similar characteristics who attended another institution, to detect possible difficulties in design or application and adjust accordingly.

Five men participated who met at a government center specializing in treating family violence, located in a politi-

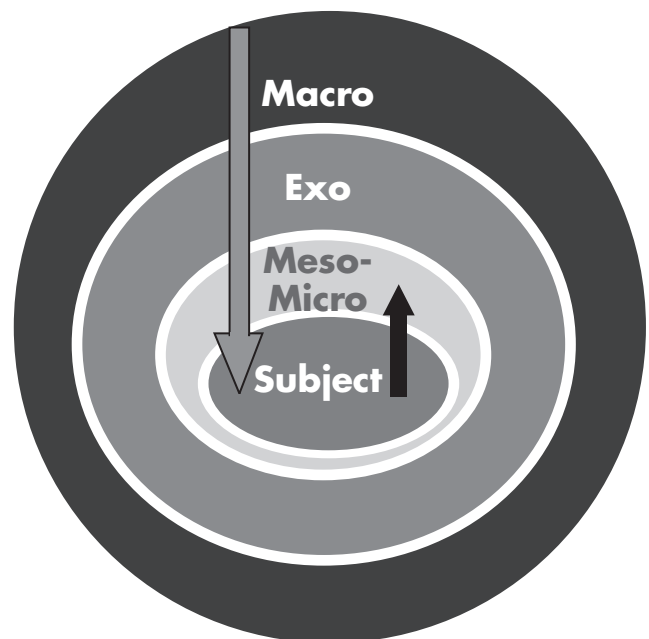


Figure 1. Multidimensional social determination of psychological distress and expressive abuse

cal Delegation in the south of the Federal District of Mexico City bordering Morelos State. This group could therefore be characterized as semi-rural. Their primary characteristics are described in Table 1.

All the participants responded to the self-applied instruments, and participated in a thematically-guided group interview to approach the social factors that cause them distress, how this manifests itself, and the meanings behind the expressive abuses. The individual instruments were completed before the interview, with the aim of gathering information about possible problems that would represent social determinants of distress, as well as stress symptoms. Two inventories were used which were validated in Mexico. One was the *List of problems* by McKay, Davis, and Fanning,¹⁷ the aim of which is to identify problematic areas for the subjects. It consists of 80 situations or problems divided into nine areas (health, economy, work, home, social relationships, leisure, family, psychology, and others). The second was the *scale of stress symptoms* by Reynoso et al.¹⁸ The first part of this scale examines the presence or absence of 14 problems or illnesses that are a consequence of stress. The second part presents a list of 23 stress symptoms and asks the subject to respond to the presence or absence of the same.¹⁷ Each area of the *problems* list was scored from the frequency of positive answers and the level of irritation indicated; the stress scale was scored from the subjects' positive answers. Furthermore, based on the *group pre-admission form* prepared by Bolaños for the "Multidimensional and multicomponent program to stop gender violence by men toward their families",¹⁸ an adapted scale was applied to locate the aggressors within Dutton typology,¹⁰ with some questions about history of child abuse and others that explored the level of income and education in order to determine the general economic conditions of the participants. The instruments were manually scored and the information contained in each section was synthesized; the scale for aggressors was scored from pre-established criteria for the adaptation.

The group interviews were recorded with the group's consent, transcribed with a word processor with the ATLAS TI *software*, and analyzed with an interpretive focus. The group's accounts were laid out with respect to the relationship between social variables and the psychological distress experienced in the areas of work, health, governmental support, social networks, changes in gender relationships, and others identified by the participants themselves. The events

exercising of expressive abuse were then described, along with the elements that allow the participants to direct the expression of distress towards their partner and/or children.

RESULTS

The most problematic areas for these men, according to the list of problems, are: family, economics, psychology, and health. The primary symptoms of stress reported were: muscle pain, insomnia, nightmares, and change in habitual behaviors. The group's positive responses to the stress symptoms considered in the whole instrument represent 43% of the questions.

Regarding the personal histories of violence, it was noted that all participants reported having been witness to emotional and verbal violence against their mother by their father or their mother's partner, and four had witnessed physical violence. Three observed verbal violence by their mother towards their father or their mother's partner, and one identified the mother or the father's partner as the physical aggressor. Regarding direct violence, all participants reported having been the recipient of verbal and emotional violence from their family members and three reported physical violence; in both cases, the paternal figure stands out as the primary aggressor. In terms of mistreatment during childhood that had the greatest or most painful impact and who carried it out, the participants reported that which came from fathers, mothers, or parental figures, and they took the form of insults and shouts towards them, and blows between adults. Violence was reported in social spaces.

Three of the five were considered to be within the basic profile of the abuser, one was within the profile of an over-controlled aggressor, and one had psychopathic features. The latter is notable because it corresponds with the subject who scored the highest in various areas of the problem list and in the stress symptoms.

Group discussion about the social determinants of the distress

Paid work

It was indicated that stress occurs due to the current conditions of paid work and the level of family life that they have

Table 1.

Pseudonym	Age	Civil status	Children	Level of education	Occupation
T1	48	Divorced	Yes	High school	Official
T2	43	Married	Yes	Technical course	Businessman
T3	25	Single	No	High school	Unemployed
T4	20	Single	No	Incomplete high school	Student
T5	47	Separated	No	Incomplete high school	Businessman

in comparison with previous years; others mentioned only when they do not have paid work, and another due to the present and future of this condition but primarily associated with the fear of not meeting traditional expectations about the role of the man as father or provider. In terms of distress, it could be said that for some men there was a notable 'before and after' with the conditions in this sphere, as well as the possibility of absence in the present and certain future scenarios.

Health

The relationship between the participants' needs not being satisfied by the health system, and the anger, powerlessness, and stress that generates, presents a certain normalization considered impossible to change. The services are used regularly, except in the case of health situations considered relevant, in which case a private service is accessed. They consider that bad care received by those requesting it affects paid activities of the family members. This generates stress, given that they have to provide support or company to continue satisfying their health demands.

Government support

Regarding the relationship between the function of federal or local government programs, or the lack thereof, this group of men showed an important distress. They also reported the presence of governmental information in the mass media as a social stressor which indicates improvement in living conditions but which is not perceived in their daily lives, as well as the effect of "deceiving people", as issue that is considered present since past administrations. The theme of organized crime and violence affecting the country as a phenomenon emerged, which also causes them distress in the form of fear and frustration. This distress is associated with a lack of investment in their capital to improve their own businesses or their material goods. Finally, local public officials were identified as other social variables which generated stress, naming extortion and corruption as affecting them as businessmen.

Social networks

In terms of social networks, the participants' accounts were around the absence of public support for basic needs, reporting distress on identifying the presence of this in the relatively recent past. Other environmental frustrations refer to the lack of support for agricultural production in these areas and to the corruption of public servants, as well as considering that the State does not perform its function of improving the living conditions of "the people".

Changes in gender relations and support for women

In terms of the stressors associated with changes in gender relationships and public support for women, only one man reported as a stressor a public program for women seeking

to study with the aim of improving their working mobility. This led the man's wife to perceive greater income and he, along with the partner relationship in general, entered into a crisis. The support for the woman was considered an unfair situation that influenced the man not meeting the traditional role of provider.

Other social variables

The social stressors considered by the interviewees not covered in the interview guide were: fear of being a victim of crime or organized crime; modification of life dynamics due to insecurity and its effect on limiting the generation of economic resources; the corruption of public servants that affects businesses; difficulties paying taxes; increased business competition and its association with generating less income; lack of work which impedes performing the role of provider; considering that work is the greatest frustration that must be overcome in life; poor use of alimony money for a minor by an ex-partner; paved roads being in a state of disrepair and considering that resources are used to benefit people who support a political party; and finally, payment of fees at public schools and kindergartens.

Expressive abuse in family violence

It was reported that the social stressors and environmental frustrations mentioned become a latent distress, which only needs a spark to detonate violence, citing as an example complaints from a partner or being told of bad behavior in the children: "you already have problems from work... you already have enough energy to unleash a war", given that "...it is easy to find a spark that sets off everything that's already in a *pressure cooker*", because "we turn a chat into an argument", "but because you are already fully loaded, you just say 'well there'"; and so, "...it's offloaded". Other abuses are sparked by the lack of arguments and discussion during conflicts, for example: "...as I don't have anything else to say to you, I'm going to release everything I've got". Finally, one man commented: "Yes, I do it, but then afterwards comes the remorse, the guilt of 'why did you do those things that way, when it didn't have to be like that'". Other men express this distress by "amusing it with something", and identify that as "the tension stays there", they exercise verbal violence.

Elements which allow expressive abuse towards family members

As well as beliefs about the use of violence, the variables which allow expressive abuse towards partners and other family members are the dominant beliefs about gender, generation, and partner relationships, as observed in the testimonies in Table 2.

These beliefs were identified within a general logic of power relationships in social, work, and family spaces. The

Table 2. Beliefs that allow expressive abuse

"It's that you're seeing **the difference in weakness**, really we do it because **they are... more fragile... you're not going to do it with someone who will give as good as they get**, right? Unfortunately, they are the ones who are exposed, because as a **woman, she is weaker than you, the children due to superiority, as they are small....** Unfortunately that's how we do it..."

"But **I didn't vent with him and the problem was with him** [the employer], instead I went home and **took it out** on other people, but because **we see them as weak**, we see it like, **'I am superior**, and so **you have to have respect me, and here you do what I tell you'**. So, what do you do? **'Well nothing, he is the dad** and you have to...' and bam! They fall..."

"Because I knew that **she was my wife and she would live with me until one of us died**, we lived with it... **she is mine and she'll never leave me**, right? So because of that I would say, 'I come here and offload', and **I come and do it here because she's mine anyway'**. But on the other hand, **at work I am going to lose, I can't offload there**, it's better if **I offload here, I can live with her until...** tomorrow, I'll ask her forgiveness and then the problem is over and **nothing will happen**. So **I would come back and offload**, and she would come back and take it all on".

"And I know that maybe you say... **'but my woman is going to leave me', and if we saw it that way, we wouldn't even hurt her**, right? I never thought about it like that, but **if I knew** that that was the problem, or **if there was going to be a problem of separation from my partner, I would take care of her'**."

participants showed there is a "defensive" attitude present, and when there is abuse on the part of someone with more power, distress is expressed through the same dynamic: "maybe I can't take you because you're huge, but later on I find a little guy and give him a kicking..." In this sense, the expression of distress is directed towards someone "inferior", not forcibly because of size; rather, the type of power relationship, for example "...[regarding a violent event with an employer], but you'll lose your job, right? I know that if I fight with my boss he's going to say 'your job ends right here and I'll pay you for what you've done'".

DISCUSSION

These men's primary problems are related to family and the economy (which mainly come from the *macro* and *exo* levels), as well as areas that affect mental and physical health, the latter having an overall presence of almost half of the stress symptoms explored. The primary spheres generating distress come from all levels of reality, with only family problems parting from the specific profile of this population.

The social stressors or environmental frustrations which stood out in the interviews due to their density in the responses were: government performance in terms of lack

of employment options or decent jobs, the disappearance of social programs, and criminal violence throughout the country. Poor performance by local government also stood out in terms of the functioning of social programs, corruption, its relationship with personal and family economy, and crime.

Due to the high presence of violent experiences in their families of origin, it can be considered that these men are reproducing abuses experienced in childhood, but the expression of socially-determined emotional distress was also observed in their violent acts. Coupled with this, the majority were considered emotionally unstable aggressors, and to a lesser extent, as overcontrolled, or with psychopathic features.

When exploring the relationship between emotional distress with a social origin and acts of abuse, as well as to identify the beliefs that allow expressive abuses and the experience of these acts, it was necessary to reiterate the question on more than two occasions. The social and personal meanings of these relationships were considered elements that need to be constructed for the subjects, given that they are made invisible, or naturalized, in their mental schemes.

A logic was described of socially-originated distress accumulating and expressed in an act of abuse, mediated by a reason or conflict that justified a physical and/or verbal attack. The expression or "release" of distress is occasionally accompanied by feelings of guilt after the violent events. The elements which allow expressive abuse against a partner and other family members are beliefs about the superiority of men, the physical inferiority of women and/or children or beliefs of the same, the notion of a wife being 'property', the obligation for a relationship to "last a lifetime", and beliefs about the use of violence in relationships. All of the above form part of a social logic of power relationships, where these acts are reproduced in the face of people's actual or symbolic inferiority.

When considering that social stressors and environmental frustrations are socially determined by variables that come from all levels of reality including the *macrosocial*, we can identify the role that social structure can play in the origin of distress that expresses itself through abuse. Furthermore, these expressive acts of distress are directed towards women and children who form part of families due to cultural elements that also come from the *macro* level, but which cut through the subjects' whole environment.

As such, a description is given of an active subject in permanent development with their multidimensional environment; in this case, in terms of socially-determined psychological distress and the practices of expressive abuse towards family members.

In terms of intervention in this population, the importance of the role played by social determinants of psychological distress coming from the *macro* level is notable for social programs and community interventions. It should be

emphasized that gender re-education of male aggressors alone, although very important, only modifies the direction of expression of this type of distress, and does not reduce the causes originating it. This results in actions that only manage a health problem without seeking a solution. In the same way, it should be considered that while there is greater stress and frustration in the subjects' living conditions, it will be more difficult to create successful primary, secondary, or tertiary preventative actions on themes that imply gender re-education in health or other relevant subjects. This is because these problems would have to be considered as priorities for the subjects themselves, as opposed to their basic needs not being met.

In terms of research, the question should be raised of what are the social determinants of psychological distress in different groups of men who are not violent against their families, given that for this population, it is an important characteristic of their own profile. Approaching this problem in representative populations and with qualitative studies will allow for the social determinants of health and illness in men to be identified, as well as associated problems, and the experiences of men themselves in a wider context. This would contribute to a knowledge that gives potential to public actions providing care to men at different levels.

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