








## Intimate Partner Violence: Perceptions and Attributions of Male Perpetrators

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### ABSTRACT



There are many reasons to perpetrate intimate partner violence (IPV). This study analyzes the attributions and perceptions of Portuguese men who perpetrate IPV to understand their justifications for violence against their female partners. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven male perpetrators. Through thematic analysis, three main categories emerged: self, partner, and situational factors. Perpetrators identified self attributes as justifications to abuse, such as individual characteristics, emotional disturbances, and jealousy; partner attributes, such as partners' characteristics and the use of violence against them; and situational factors, such as alcohol abuse and relational stressors. Perpetrators' narratives evidenced a tendency to conceive violence as an unintentional and unplanned action, attributing violence to uncontrollable factors, and an attitude of non-accountability for their behaviors/actions. A deeper understanding of perpetrators' perceptions and attributions for IPV will help to develop more effective intervention programs with offenders or to improve the existent ones, for example, in terms of dropout prevention, to reduce violence against women.

### KEYWORDS

Intimate partner violence; perpetrator; attributions; perceptions

## Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been defined as any behavior by a current or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including physical abuse, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). IPV remained in obscurity for a long time, being ignored socially and legally. Only in the 1960s, feminist movements in Europe and the US draw attention to violence against women, which began to be seen as a social problem (C. Machado & Matos, 2007). These movements enabled the emergence of political, social, and academic efforts that yearned for the growing recognition of marital violence as a social and political problem (C. Machado & Matos, 2007). Nowadays, IPV is a severe human rights violation and a global public health issue (Pereira et al., 2020).

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IPV is associated with physical, mental/psychological (e.g., Campbell, 2002), and social consequences (e.g., Ansara & Hindin, 2011). Estimates indicated that 1 in 3 (35%) women worldwide had experienced physical and/or sexual IPV lifetime, and intimate partners commit as many as 38% of all murders of women (WHO, 2021). In Europe, data revealed that one in five women has experienced physical and/or psychological violence episodes since they were 15 years old (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2017). Males are also victims of IPV (e.g., A. Machado et al., 2016). A study by Costa et al. (2015) in Europe revealed that men and women present similar prevalence rates of victimization and perpetration, except for sexual coercion, which males mainly perpetrate. Notwithstanding, in this study, we will focus on IPV perpetrated by men against women.

The literature indicates that eradicating IPV involves implementing campaigns and prevention strategies or intervention programs for victims (e.g., Santos et al., 2017) and offenders (e.g., O. Cunha & Gonçalves, 2015). However, to develop and implement successful and effective programs, it is crucial to understand the reasons for the abusive behaviors and the underlying causes of IPV (e.g., Neal & Edwards, 2017; Whitaker, 2014). Nevertheless, the process of identifying the causes of IPV is complex and not always consensual: first, IPV is a heterogeneous phenomenon that must be understood from an individual, public, and societal level (Petrosky et al., 2017); second, the determinants of human behavior, whatever they may be, are complex and multiple (Loseke, 2005); and third, most of the investigation focuses on a quantitative understanding of the risk factors and predictors of IPV (e.g., Capaldi et al., 2012; Gerino et al., 2018; Stith et al., 2004; Yakubovich et al., 2018). Although different studies have examined the perceptions, attributions, and motives of those involved in violent relationships (see Neal & Edwards, 2017 for a review), it is still crucial to address the “underlying psychological processes that impel people’s thinking, feeling, and behaving” (Fiske, 2004, p. 14). As individuals’ perceptions are central to their experiences, perpetrators’ and victims’ perceptions about their behavior in the relationship may provide essential insights into abusive relational dynamics (Flynn & Graham, 2010), allowing the development of more focused, effective, and valid ways to deal with IPV.

The research focused on motivations for violent acts is particularly useful because IPV perpetrators usually do not accept the responsibility for their violence (e.g., Henning et al., 2005). Besides, attributions characterized by a denial of personal responsibility, victim-blaming, and other external attributions of blame are common among IPV perpetrators (e.g., Martín-Fernández et al., 2018; Senkans et al., 2020).

Toxic masculinity has been identified as a factor that impacts the risk of IPV. Male gender identity as a breadwinner, which may be limited due to

economic stressors, may lead to IPV as a compensatory mechanism for men who cannot economically support the family (Clare et al., 2021). In a study by Taylor et al. (2013), using a meta-ethnography approach, it was found that some males believe in patriarchal views and are socialized into a culture that produces limited but influential views on the “normal” or “ideal” male. The authors reported that this norm is produced and reproduced through some males’ enactment of the masculine ideal, which is learned through social interaction and demonstrations in the media; accordingly, violence can be how some men reassert masculinity.

Individuals may also believe that, in a relationship, they have the right to use violence to express love and as a legitimate way of obtaining power and control. A meta-analysis on the relationship between power (defined as control and dominance) and IPV against women, perpetrated by males, concluded that IPV is a matter of control, rooted in patriarchal traditions of male dominance in heterosexual relationships (Ubillos-Landa et al., 2020). This mind-set leads to a rejection of the perpetrator’s responsibility because culture legitimizes violence, and men can transfer the responsibility of the violence to the victim (Ubillos-Landa et al., 2020). Kropp and Hart (2015) stated that the most severe and repetitive offenders distinguish themselves from non-offenders on many levels: they minimize the severity of IPV, deflect responsibility, deny, or endorse certain specific attitudes (e.g., sociopolitical, religious, subcultural, and personal attitudes) that are conducive to IPV. The feminist literature focuses on the latter, more specifically, misogynistic, and patriarchal belief systems. A belief system that validates men’s sense of having the right to certain privileges in their relationship with women allows the offender to deflect responsibility and justifies the continued use of control and dominance (Ubillos-Landa et al., 2020).

Previous research has shown that men who tend to see their partners as dangerous and cruel are more likely to accept lower levels of IPV and minimize its consequences and are more likely to blame their partners for problems and conflicts (e.g., Scott & Straus, 2007). Wood (2004) found that the most cited motives used by men to justify their abusive acts were their partners disrespecting their authority as a man and their right to discipline their partners. Literature and anecdotal evidence strongly suggest that how male perpetrators think about their gender plays a significant role in IPV (Senkans et al., 2020). In a recent prospective study, Willie et al. (2018) found that young men’s adherence to traditional male gender norms predicted physical IPV six months later.

Men who perpetrate IPV may possess more proactively aggressive self-schemas and scripts (Dunne et al., 2019), often pointing out their wives as responsible for their violence (Wood, 2004). Narratives of abusive men and women about themselves, the others, their relationship, and violence seem to include ambiguous and contradictory constructions of the victim and the

offender: constructions of violent relationships as cyclical, constructions of women's abuse as an individual problem, and the narrative of violence as a reciprocal process involving narratives of power and control. Other studies examining the causes of IPV from perpetrators' perspective concluded that individuals identified the interference of others outside the marital relationship, the presence of inappropriate actions and behaviors on the part of the partner, the dominance of the woman over her partner, the response to the partner's physical, verbal, or psychological aggression, alcohol consumptions, infidelity, and economic condition (e.g., Neal & Edwards, 2017; Radcliffe et al., 2021; Stairmand et al., 2020).

Although the attributions literature has mainly been atheoretical, some researchers have attempted to formulate some theoretical basis to understand the attributions endorsed for IPV perpetration (Neal & Edwards, 2017). Flynn and Graham (2010) conceptualized the perceived motives for IPV at three distinct levels based on their proximity to violence. Level I (the most distal) includes individual attributes such as an aggressive personality, attitudes or beliefs that legitimize violence, or childhood experiences that make the individual more likely to be violent. Level II involves daily life circumstances such as stress, depression, poor physical health, alcohol or drug use, and other life circumstances that can make a person more likely to respond aggressively to intimate conflicts due to stress or other effects associated with those life situations. Level III refers to immediate precursors or precipitants that can lead to physical violence, including actions taken by the partner seen as provocative or violent, the perpetrator's mental state (including the state of intoxication), and other situational factors. More recently, Stairmand et al. (2020) proposed a conceptual framework for IPV motives emphasizing the influential role of situational, such as emotional regulation difficulties, violence-supportive cognitions, perceived costs and benefits, and intrapersonal factors, such as alcohol intoxication, relationship conflicts, environmental stressors, mental health difficulties, in contributing to acts of IPV.

In the last few years, some literature reviews have analyzed both men's and women's attributions of IPV (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Neal & Edwards, 2017). Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012), in a literature review on men's and women's motivations for IPV, found that power/control and self-defense, using violence as an expression of negative emotion, communication difficulties, retaliation, and jealousy were common motives for IPV. Very few gender-specific motives for IPV perpetration were found. Neal and Edwards (2017) conducted a critical review of the literature about perpetrators and victims' attributions for IPV, concluding that IPV perpetrators' commonly endorsed attributions for physical and psychological IPV consisted of control, anger, retaliation, self-defense, attention seeking, alcohol intoxication, and an inability to express oneself verbally. Sexual IPV was mainly attributed to dominance or hedonism. Themes

regarding victims' attributions were similar to those of the perpetrators (Neal & Edwards, 2017). A literature review focusing on male and female attributions for IPV found that women's physical violence is more likely than men's to be motivated by self-defense, fear, and retaliation for emotional hurt. In contrast, men's violence is more likely than women's to be driven by control and instrumental motives (Flynn & Graham, 2010).

### ***Intimate partner violence in Portugal***

Portugal has been a dictatorship from 1933 to 1974; hereupon, gender equality, domestic violence, and IPV research are still in their infancy compared to other countries. Although current policies against domestic violence, Portugal has a high prevalence of victimization against women, with 19% reporting having experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or another person (FRA, 2017). Recent data figures showed that domestic violence is the most reported crime against persons in Portugal, corresponding to 7.5% of all national crimes (Internal Security System, 2022). In 2021, around 23,600 cases of violence against a partner or ex-partner were reported to the authorities in Portugal (Internal Security System, 2022), and there were 13 femicides and 40 attempted femicides in the context of intimate relationships (Observatory of Murdered Women [OMA], 2022). Notwithstanding, and despite the COVID-19 pandemic, in the last years, we are assisting to a decrease in the number of criminal participations for IPV (Internal Security System, 2022).

Following international trends, in Portugal, research on IPV primarily focused on female victims (e.g., C. Machado et al., 2007; Santos et al., 2017) and only more recently on male victims (e.g., A. Machado et al., 2016, 2018). Research regarding IPV perpetrators has been neglected in the Portuguese context. Only in the last few years the scientific community has been interested in the study of IPV perpetrators (e.g., O. Cunha et al., 2018; O. S. Cunha & Goncalves, 2016). However, studies were mostly quantitative and focused on the risk factors for IPV perpetration (Abrunhosa et al., 2020; O. Cunha et al., 2018; O. S. Cunha & Goncalves, 2016), or in the intervention with abusive men (e.g., O. Cunha & Goncalves, 2015; O. Cunha et al., 2022). National research regarding perceptions and attributions mainly focused on female domestic violence victims (e.g., Alves et al., 2019), and, as far as we know, no studies are focusing on IPV perpetrators' perceptions and attributions regarding intimate violence.

### **Current study**

The research on the motivations and attribution styles of IPV perpetrators is particularly relevant from the intervention standpoint with these individuals. First, to develop and implement successful intervention programs aimed at changing violent behaviors is crucial to understand the reasons behind these

behaviors (Neal & Edwards, 2017), and the perpetrators' attributions and belief systems. Second, perpetrator intervention programs (PIPs) should address perpetrators' attributions and beliefs about IPV to challenge and change them, increasing their awareness about their violence and leading them to accept and become responsible for the abusive behavior. IPV perpetrators who fail to accept their responsibility for abusive behavior are more likely to drop out and to continue abusing their partners (either former or current; e.g., McGinn et al., 2020; Santirso et al., 2020). For this reason, the main objectives of PIPs are to end abusive behavior by raising awareness of gender equality and holding the offender accountable for their abusive behavior, as well as modifying beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about gender roles and the use of violence (e.g., Arce et al., 2020; Butters et al., 2021). As Flynn and Graham (2010) advocated, IPV prevention and treatment programs should focus on an attributional bias to promote the perpetrators' accountability about how their perceptions of the reasons and motives for aggression affect their behavior. Thus, increasing our understanding of why IPV occurs in a relationship from the standpoint of perpetrators is essential in ascertaining effective treatment. This is even more important since results regarding PIPs effectiveness remain controversial (Arce et al., 2020; Butters et al., 2021); being necessary to find ways to improve PIPs effectiveness. Furthermore, and as previously mentioned, as far as we know, in Portugal, no studies are focusing on perpetrators' attributions and perceptions about their abusive behavior.

Hereupon, given the relevance to addressing domestic violence, its distinct contexts, and the need to adapt intervention programs to the specific needs, risk factors, and responsivity of perpetrators, the present work sought to analyze the motivations and attributions for IPV, as well as the perceptions about the use of violence, from the perspective of the male perpetrator of IPV. This study is even more relevant as most studies designed to examine motives for IPV were based on self-report measures that presented methodological limitations. These measures often employ a multiple-choice approach that asks participants to select from a decontextualized list of motives and to recall motives across multiple IPV acts rather than from specific IPV acts (Stairmand et al., 2020). A qualitative approach, based on in-depth interviews, allows us to overcome some of these limitations, providing rich information on participants narratives about their violence about their female partners.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The selection of the participants was based on a convenience sample, consisting of seven male individuals referred for forensic psychological assessment by the court, as part of the Inquiry proceedings for Domestic Violence (art. ° 152°, Portuguese Penal Code), for the Psychology Service of the University of Minho.

All participants were indicted for one or more domestic violence crimes against their current female partner or ex-partner. Only two were still cohabiting with the victim, and the remaining five were already separated and/or in divorce proceedings. Participants were between 25 and 46 years, with a mean age of 38.7 years ( $SD = 7.4$ ). Four of them completed four years of education, one completed six years, one completed nine years, and one completed 12 years.

### ***Instrument***

Assuming that the main objective of this study was discovering and understanding the meanings, perceptions, and attributions for IPV, it was necessary to choose a sufficiently flexible and comprehensive data collection instrument. Thus, a semi-structured in-depth qualitative interview was used (Hugh-Jones, 2010; Smith, 1995). This technique is essential when the researcher wants to understand the complexity of a phenomenon and the underlying processes (e.g., Smith, 1995). In addition, the semi-structured format allows for greater flexibility in questioning and a natural response to the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Hugh-Jones, 2010), as it allows to adapt to the idiosyncratic characteristics of each participant.

The interview guide aimed to understand the subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants about the violence they perpetrated in their intimate relationship and the respective causes and motivations. The interview was based on previous literature (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Neal & Edwards, 2017; Stairmand et al., 2020) and consisted of 25 open questions that facilitated the participants' narrative styles and the researcher's detailed exploration of the contents to better clarify the individuals' attributions and motives for IPV perpetration. The interview guide involved a set of questions centered on the following dimensions to explore the relationship history, and the main causes and motives for violence following previous literature (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Stairmand et al., 2020): dating relationship (e.g., "How do you define your relationship?"); marriage or cohabitation (e.g., "What causes conflicts in your relationship?"); relationship changes (e.g., "Do you identify changes in your relationship?"); decision-making process (e.g., "How do you manage issues related to children?"); dominant styles of marital communication (e.g., "Tell me about an episode that caused tension/conflict between you"; "How do your partner react in these moments?"; "How do you react in these moments?"); and conflict resolution (e.g., "How do you deal with divergences?"; "How do you solve conflicts/problems?").

### ***Procedures and data analysis***

Participants were invited to participate in the study, providing their written informed consent after explaining the objectives and the voluntary and

anonymous nature of the study. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time, and no identifying information was collected. No incentives or remuneration were granted to the participants. Ethics procedures concerning privacy and data protection established by the Portuguese legislation and by the Ethics Committee of the University of Minho were followed.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and individually with each participant in 2016, ranging between 50 and 120 minutes ( $M = 87.43$ ). All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed *verbatim* to preserve the reports' integrity. No personal information was included in the interviews' transcriptions, and all the material was stored in a safe place and protected by a password.

A thematic analysis was used to understand the perceptions, attributions, and motivations for IPV. This technique allows a detailed and complex data description through pattern analysis. QSR NVivo10 software was used to organize, code, and analyze data. The analysis was guided by inductive coding, based on the assumption that the themes are related to the data and do not necessarily have a specific relationship with the questions asked (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis and coding involved the following steps: a) familiarization with the data by transcribing the interviews and reading the data, taking note of some general ideas for coding; b) systematic encoding of data, generating the initial codes; c) after encoding and compiling the data, the data encoded in each code was re-read, in order to analyze them and identify how different codes could be combined to form a general theme and sub-themes; d) finally after the thematic map was formulated, the initial themes were refined, generating clear classifications for each one. To ensure the reliability and credibility of the results different validation strategies were adopted: intentionality in the sampling process; constant comparative analysis; dense description of the meanings identified (i.e., detailed presentation and illustration of each category with examples of participants' speech); and reflexivity (i.e., constant self-analysis and self-criticism of the process; O. Cunha & Gonçalves, 2014). A co-encoder analyzed all the material. Disagreements were solved by consensus.

## Results

From the interview's analysis, three main categories emerged in perpetrators' discourse, attributing the abusive behaviors to three factors: (1) self; (2) partner; and (3) situational factors (cf., Table 1).

The category self was mentioned by all the participants ( $n = 7$ ) and emerged when the perpetrator justified the use of violence based on individuals' characteristics or claimed factors beyond their control, such as psychological problems or jealousy. This category was composed of the

**Table 1.** Distribution of categories and subcategories.

Categories	Subcategories
Self ( $n = 7$ )	Individuals' characteristics ( $n = 7$ ) Emotional disturbance ( $n = 4$ ) Jealousy ( $n = 5$ )
Partner ( $n = 7$ )	Partner's characteristics ( $n = 7$ ) Partner violence ( $n = 5$ )
Situational factors ( $n = 6$ )	Alcohol abuse ( $n = 5$ ) Relational stressors ( $n = 3$ )

subcategories: (a) individuals' characteristics, (b) emotional disturbance, and (c) jealousy.

The category partner was also mentioned by all participants ( $n = 7$ ) and was related to partners' attitudes and behaviors, which in association with their personal attributes and characteristics, impel them to perpetrate abusive acts toward their partners. This category was derived from two subcategories: (a) partner characteristics and (b) use of violence by the partner.

The category situational factors was referred to by almost all the participants ( $n = 6$ ) and related to the environment or external circumstances of the individual. This category included two subcategories: (a) alcohol abuse and (b) relational stressors.

## **Self**

### ***Individuals' characteristics***

Individuals focused on their personal characteristics as causes of IPV ( $n = 7$ ). This subcategory mentioned characteristics such as impulsiveness, irritability, bad temper, and stubbornness as precipitants of violence.

It's not that I have a bad temper ... I don't ... I think that in other times I had a bad temper, even at home ... always in a bad mood.

I'm not a perfect person, I also have my faults, sometimes I also have my tantrums and I'm very stubborn

My heart is very close to my mouth. (...) She knew I was not easy to bend.

Individuals tended to attribute the causes of their violence to poor self-control or emotional control, or other factors, which, although individual, are understood as beyond their control.

If I'm upset about something, I react badly

(...) the nervous system already worked at that time

I'm a bit sudden

Individuals' narratives reflected intimate violence as an uncontrollable and unintentional behavior, i.e., influenced by factors behind their control. This conceptualization of violence is largely related to an attitude of an absence of responsibility for the violence.

But it came out [...] without planning . . .

I never planned the aggressions

### ***Emotional disturbance***

Psychopathology was often used to explain IPV ( $n = 4$ ). This strategy is commonly used to “pathologize” the problem of IPV, which socially removes perpetrators' responsibility for their actions, attributing violence to uncontrollable factors.

I had a problem for many years, I went to doctors . . . I was hospitalized . . . I couldn't go out, I can't hear anyone . . . It was almost a burnout . . . I didn't sleep, I didn't eat and then I'm very ruminative

Not being normal . . . I'm not saying I'm crazy. I feel normal . . . but there are things that make me mad.

### ***Jealousy***

The theme of jealousy was also present in the individuals' verbalizations ( $n = 5$ ), associated with the behaviors of their wives that triggered such feelings.

I'm jealous of [my] wife . . . She went out and didn't say where she was going and that day everything came out. But I never suspected anything

(. . .) but I think at the time I was more because I was jealous. I was suspicious of everyone at the time . . . or because she looked at someone and I was pissed . . .

There were arguments because of jealousy, I distrusted her.

### ***Partner***

#### ***Partner characteristics***

Explicitly or implicitly, the participants focused on the partner's characteristics as motivators for aggression ( $n = 7$ ), revealing evident beliefs on their partner's responsibility for the aggression and the consequent non-accountability for their use of violence. In this way, they justified that their partners' characteristics led them to use violence.

[. . .] she blinded me with rage. She had always to be right. There were things I didn't understand

She's a bit rude when she gets nervous, which leads me to exhaustion and getting to the point of . . . how many times . . . so many times I asked her not to do that, because I then did things and took me to the point that took . . . .

[. . .] she pissed me off, and I got out of my nerves

Specifically, perpetrators referred to their wife's temper and aggressive way of acting, especially in verbal terms, conceptualizing IPV as a reciprocal phenomenon.

(. . .) she doesn't admit being called to reason, even if she's wrong

But my wife had a bad temper and she always wanted to scream louder . . .

She doesn't understand that many my behaviors are based on her behaviours

Individuals also identified their wife's mood oscillations as justifications for using less effective and abusive problem-solving strategies due to their unpredictability.

It's not easy to deal with my wife; sometimes she's fine and other times she isn't

She is fine and sometimes just gets upset about anything and just starts screaming.

Some individuals related the episodes of violence to their wife's reactions to their alcohol consumption.

On that date, we started to discuss, I don't know why, she called me drunk, and I got angry.

I also attacked her due to her behavior. Sometimes she would come home and say I had been drinking, without me having even drunk. She started calling me a drunk, starting to mistreat me.

Beliefs and attitudes about gender roles also appeared as reasons men used to justify their violence, primarily when women did not fulfill their "duties."

There were sporadically these problems because I pointed out that I didn't have clothes, that I didn't have meals ready, and I wasn't used to that

I came home and my wife was never home and my mother had to make my meals.

### **Partner violence**

Men also pointed out violence, whether physical or psychological, perpetrated by the intimate partner as a reason for using violence ( $n = 5$ ). This category includes explanations that imply a violent response by the perpetrator to the partner's aggressive behavior.

She has always been very aggressive!

She is a cold person, she starts screaming . . .

In this context, they tend to justify their violent behavior as a self-defense strategy against their partner's abusive behavior toward themselves.

I always defended myself, I never had an attitude of violence, I was always defending myself

I slapped her, but I never hit her with any object. She attacked me, and I would push her so I wouldn't hit her anymore

In addition, in individuals' discourses, resorting to violence also appeared as a retaliatory response to the aggressiveness of the partner.

(...) she threw everything at me, everything that came to hand she threw at me! I would go out and she would call me coward, cuckold!

It was from [throwing me] chairs, closing the doors of my home, calling me names

### ***Situational factors***

#### ***Alcohol abuse***

Individuals resorted to alcohol abuse ( $n = 5$ ) to justify their violence, suggesting alcohol consumption as a trigger for conflicts and/or violence. The motivation to drink is centered on problems (family, economic, professional), and alcohol is seen as a strategy to escape from problems.

I started drinking to forget about other things. (...) Sometimes I drank at work and at meals, a person, sometimes screwed with life, and then drinks too much and then ...

I am a person who from time to time abuse a bit of alcohol and do something stupid and say what I shouldn't.

Thus, individuals tended to assume alcohol as the main reason for the violent behavior and associated the end of consumption with the cessation of violence toward the partner.

But it wasn't me who hit ... it was the alcohol (...) Now I don't hit her, that's over ... because now I don't drink ... it wasn't me who hit, it was the alcohol

A doctor already told me that drinking just half a glass of wine would turn my head

The perpetrator, again, disclaimed responsibility for the violence, locating its causes on factors beyond their control. This attribution of violence to factors beyond their control, declining their responsibility for the violence, was also common in the presence of softening expressions about their consumption, thus reducing the guilt associated with the means (violence) used.

I used to drink, but it wasn't to exaggerate

I've always been a person who drank during meals ... I sometimes abused a bit ... on weekends with a friend or another ...

If I abused it, it was once or twice . . . besides, I always controlled myself.

### **Relational stressors**

Individuals' verbalizations appealed to some stressors that appear in the relationship and daily routine ( $n = 3$ ), such as financial issues and children's education, as the root of conflicts between partners.

It was at a specific time, there was a lack of work and money

One of our disagreements was the education of the children

### **Discussion**

In the present study, we analyzed male perpetrators' perspectives on the causes and attributions for IPV against women and the perceptions about the use of violence in intimate relationships. From the analysis of data, it resulted that the perpetrators of IPV tend to attribute their violence to three types of factors: themselves, where their characteristics, the existence of emotional disturbance, and jealousy stand out; their partner, among which the characteristics of the partner and the violence exerted by her stand out; and situational factors, such as alcohol consumption, and relational stressors. This study extends previous research on IPV attributions and motives for violence, focusing on a sample of male individuals, and using a qualitative approach. Besides, as far as we know, it is the first study in the Portuguese context addressing IPV perpetrators' attributions.

Individuals' attributes were used to explain an individual's greater propensity to resort to aggressive strategies or to identify their inability to avoid resorting to violence when faced with certain circumstances (Flynn & Graham, 2010; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Neal & Edwards, 2017; Stairmand et al., 2020; Whitaker, 2014). Thus, individuals sought to express their motives for aggression from intra-individual characteristics or some aspect of their personality (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Henning et al., 2005) considered as not being under their domain and control. Indeed, factors such as irritability, anger, and hostility (e.g., Neal & Edwards, 2017; Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005; Stairmand et al., 2020; Stith et al., 2004), aggressive personality style (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010), or difficulties in self-control (e.g., Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005; Stairmand et al., 2020; Whitaker, 2014) were identified as playing an essential role in triggering violence. It should be noted that, although IPV perpetrators tend to resort to self-centered justifications, their acts were attributed to factors they considered not to be under their domain and control (i.e., jealousy, emotional disturbance). Thus, individuals tend to show a posture of non-responsibility/non-accountability in the face of the violence exerted (e.g., Henning et al., 2005; Kropp & Hart, 2015).

Perpetrators also used the language of psychology or psychopathology to explain IPV. In the context of IPV, the “psychopathologization” of the problem seems to serve the function of ignoring the political and social context that supports violence against women, simultaneously locating the perpetrator in the position of “patient,” constructing violence as an individual problem (Hook, 2002). The perpetrators’ verbalizations point to individuals who transform themselves through forces beyond their control (Boonzaier, 2008). The language used (e.g., “without counting,” “without planning”) explicitly provides construction of violence as an expressive way of releasing tension (e.g., Langrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012) and an unintentional act. In the context of social learning, violence is conceptualized as self-reinforcing and functional for the individual, as it produces immediate emotional well-being associated with reducing tension in resolving a conflict (Stairmand et al., 2020). Thus, perpetrators perceived violence as something that does not correspond to the norm, using the volcano metaphor in their narratives to ease their responsibility, suggesting violence’s unpredictable and uncontrollable character (Boonzaier, 2008).

At the same time, IPV perpetrators mitigated the responsibility for their actions by resorting to alcohol consumption as being associated with the episodes of violence (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Radcliffe et al., 2021). Alcohol abuse has been identified in different studies as an important risk factor for IPV (e.g., Capaldi et al., 2012; Radcliffe et al., 2021; Stith et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2014), since alcohol can act as a “disinhibitor” or as a justification for violence. In this context, as Hydén (1994) advocates, men use the “victim change” as an excuse, assuming alcohol as the main responsible for violent behavior and even associating the end of drinking with IPV cessation. Thus, IPV perpetrators express themselves through a filter, rationalizing and justifying the means, that is, the violence used, taking no responsibility for their behavior (Kropp & Hart, 2015). This lack of responsibility was also common in expressions minimizing their alcohol consumption, thus reducing the guilt associated with the violence used.

Some individuals also attributed the episodes of violence to their wife’s reactions to their alcohol consumption. In this sense, alcohol consumption also seems to be a tension enhancer that can directly or indirectly lead to conflicts and violence (Flynn & Graham, 2010; Radcliffe et al., 2021). These narratives implicitly construct violence as a reciprocal phenomenon resulting from the provocation by the partner (Boonzaier, 2008). The co-construction of responsibility for violence is confirmed by representing the wife’s behaviors as provokers of jealousy, associated with the elaboration of the self as jealousy. Thus, men conceptualize violence as an expression of masculinity and authority, to respond to gender roles and social expectations, and to monitor women’s adherence to their role as women (Clare et al., 2021; Senkans et al., 2020; Willie et al., 2018).

Along with personal attributes, individuals also focused on the partner's characteristics, highlighting her responsibility for the aggression (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Henning et al., 2005; Martín-Fernández et al., 2018; Senkans et al., 2020) and the consequent self-non-responsibility for the use of violence (e.g., Kropp & Hart, 2015; Ubillos-Landa et al., 2020). Thus, perpetrators transfer the blame for the aggression to the partner, attributing responsibility for their violent behaviors to her personality and behavior (Henning et al., 2005; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Martín-Fernández et al., 2018; Neal & Edwards, 2017). In this way, the use of violence arises, in perpetrators' narratives, as a way of exercising their "right" (socially and patriarchally instituted) to control their women, reinforcing their masculinity and the characteristics associated with it: strength, power, control, and dominance (e.g., Wood, 2004). Thus, violence seems to be used to reestablish control in the relationship, especially when they feel their power is threatened (e.g., Clare et al., 2021). These narratives lead to the construction of IPV as a reciprocal phenomenon, in which the man responds to the behavior and characteristics of his wife, whom he conceptualizes as "provocative" (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Whitaker, 2014; Wood, 2004). Individuals' verbalizations appeal to interactional factors, patterns, and dynamics in the genesis and evolution of abusive behavior.

The perpetrators also pointed out the partners' physical or psychological violence as a reason for their violence use. This category includes explanations that imply a violent response by the perpetrator to a partner's aggressive behavior (e.g., Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Neal & Edwards, 2017; Stairmand et al., 2020; Whitaker, 2014). In this context, individuals tend to justify their violent behavior as a self-defense strategy or a retaliatory response to the aggressiveness of their partner (Flynn & Graham, 2010; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Neal & Edwards, 2017). The notion of retaliation implies that the violent act extends beyond the motive of self-defense and includes an element of retribution for something said or done by the partner (Flynn & Graham, 2010), and may include retaliation for physical aggression, psychological aggression, threats, or other partner's acts. Different studies have concluded that the use of violence by the wife is one of the main precipitants of the use of violence by men (e.g., Flynn & Graham, 2010; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Neal & Edwards, 2017; Whitaker, 2014). What seems to happen is that violent acts provoked by one of the elements trigger reactions from the other element, affecting the likelihood of future violence occurring. Thus, abusive behavior seems to be based on a system of interactions and occurs following an event perceived as threatening the perpetrator's power and control in the relationship (Clare et al., 2021; C. Machado & Dias, 2010). Therefore, violent behavior aims to maintain the *status quo*, exercising a position of control over women and obtaining their subordination (e.g., Clare et al., 2021; C. Machado & Dias, 2010).

Our results are of theoretical and practical relevance as attributions, and cognitive distortions considerably impact the perpetrators' motivation for intervention and the risk of re-offending and recidivism (e.g., McGinn et al., 2020). Besides, perpetrators who do not take responsibility for their abusive behavior are less motivated to change and at a greater risk of abandoning the intervention (Santirso et al., 2020), which is, in turn, a risk factor for IPV re-offending (Henning et al., 2005; Lila et al., 2019). Thus, violence minimization and denial and attributing violence to factors beyond their control are essential factors to address when working with IPV perpetrators (Morrison et al., 2021; Vlais & Campbell, 2019). PIPs should lead individuals to accept responsibility for their violence and the damage and impact they caused (e.g., O. Cunha & Gonçalves, 2015; Geffner & Mantooth, 2000; Morrison et al., 2021; Pallatino et al., 2019). The challenge is to guide perpetrators to understand their violence regarding the set of abusive behaviors they perpetrated. This non-blaming stance, but rather accountability for behavior, reduces resistance, promotes cooperation, and consequently favors the therapeutic process (Geffner & Mantooth, 2000).

Notwithstanding the contributions of this study, it should be noted that it also has some limitations. First, our study characteristics – qualitative, small sample and not representative of the entire population, male perpetrators, forensic sample – do not allow the generalization of the results. Thus, future investigations should include a broader and more diverse sample (i.e., female victims and perpetrators, male victims, and individuals from the community) to allow drawing more generalizable conclusions and to foster the creation of contrasting groups (e.g., male perpetrators vs. female perpetrators; female victims vs. male victims). A second limitation is the absence of a comparative group of female offenders or female and male victims to understand if different groups shared attributions and motives for IPV.

In sum, our results support previous studies concluding that processes of minimization and denial mark the narratives of IPV perpetrators and external attribution of blame (e.g., Henning et al., 2005; Kropp & Hart, 2015; Ubillos-Landa et al., 2020). A considerable percentage of perpetrators deny or reject responsibility for their conduct, leading them to project the responsibility for the abuse onto others (e.g., Henning et al., 2005; Kropp & Hart, 2015) and, in particular, on the partner. In this context, the reasons indicated by the perpetrators seem to reveal the social norms underlying marital relationships that favor the justification and rationalization of violence. Acknowledging the abusive dynamics of IPV has obvious implications for offenders' adherence to change in the context of intervention programs. A deeper understanding of perpetrators' perceptions and attributions for IPV is of extreme relevance, helping to develop more effective responses to IPV, matched with perpetrators' responsibility regarding their beliefs, ultimately reducing violence against women.

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