



Contributions of a Reflective Practice Group of Male Perpetrators of Violence Against Women

Taciane Aparecida Siqueira Pastre¹ 

Adriano Valério dos Santos Azevêdo¹ 

João Paulo Araújo Lessa¹ 

Abstract: In Brazil, reflective practice groups and groups for the liability of men who commit violence against women represent a public policy with good results in reducing violence between intimate partners. This study aimed to assess the contributions of a reflective practice group on feelings such as empathy, aggressiveness and anger in men who commit violent crimes against women. Using the Empathy Scale - ACME, the Aggression Tendency Assessment Scale - EATA, the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory 2 - STAXI 2 and a sociodemographic questionnaire, a quantitative study was carried out with 80 men divided into a reflective practice group and a control group. It was found that the members of the reflective group showed a decrease in mean aggressiveness and an increase in mean empathy compared with the control group. It is suggested that empathy, aggressiveness and anger be integrated into interventions using active methodologies.

Keywords: violence against women, aggressiveness, empathy, anger

Contribuições de um Grupo Reflexivo em Homens Autores de Violência Contra Mulheres

Resumo: No Brasil, os grupos reflexivos e de responsabilização para homens autores de violência contra a mulher representam uma política pública com bons resultados na redução da violência entre parceiros íntimos. Este estudo objetivou avaliar as contribuições de um grupo reflexivo na empatia, agressividade e raiva em homens autores de violência contra a mulher. Utilizando a Escala de empatia - ACME, a Escala para Avaliação de Tendência à Agressividade - EATA, O Inventário de Expressão de Raiva como Estado de Traço - STAXI 2 e um Questionário sociodemográfico foi realizado um estudo quantitativo com 80 homens, divididos em grupo reflexivo e grupo controle. Verificou-se que os integrantes do grupo reflexivo apresentaram diminuição nas médias de agressividade e aumento nas médias de empatia quando comparados com o grupo controle. Sugere-se integrar empatia, agressividade e raiva nas intervenções do grupo reflexivo por meio de metodologias ativas.

Palavras-chave: violência contra mulher, agressividade, empatia, raiva

Contribuciones de un Grupo de Reflexión a Hombres Perpetradores De Violencia Contra Mujeres

Resumen: En Brasil, los grupos de reflexión y responsabilización para hombres perpetradores de violencia contra la mujer son una política pública con buenos resultados en la reducción de la violencia entre parejas. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo evaluar las contribuciones de un grupo de reflexión sobre la empatía, la agresividad y la ira a hombres perpetradores de violencia contra la mujer. Utilizando la Escala de Empatía - ACME -, la Escala de Evaluación de Tendencias Agresivas - EATA -, el Inventario de Expresión de Ira como Estado Rasgo - STAXI 2 - y un cuestionario sociodemográfico, se realizó un estudio cuantitativo con 80 hombres, divididos en grupo de reflexión y de control. Se encontró que los integrantes del grupo tuvieron reducción en los promedios de agresividad y aumento en los promedios de empatía en comparación con el grupo de control. Se sugiere integrar empatía, agresión e ira en las intervenciones mediante metodologías ativas.

Palabras clave: violencia contra la mujer, agresividad, empatia, rabia

¹Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná, Curitiba-PR, Brazil

Support: Article derived from the master's thesis of the first author under the supervision of the second author, defended in 2022, in the Graduate Program in Forensic Psychology at the Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná.

Correspondence address: Taciane Aparecida Siqueira Pastre. Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná. Rua Sydnei Antonio Rangel Santos, 238, Curitiba-PR, Brazil. CEP 82.010-330. Email: tacisiqueira27@gmail.com

The media reports daily on violent acts committed against women in the domestic environment. In Brazil, in 2022, 1,437 women were killed because of their gender, an increase of 6.1% compared with 2021 and the highest figure recorded in the country since the enactment of the femicide law in 2015. Furthermore, there were 899,485 reported cases of domestic violence, 522,145 protective

measures granted by the Courts and 56,098 rapes recorded, meaning that a mean of 153 women were abused every day in the country (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública [FBSP], 2022). The statistics show that although there have been legislative progress, women are still a major target of violence in Brazil, which makes it clear that the problem goes beyond state protection and requires reflection on the role of women and the behavior of society in this regard.

In the domestic and family sphere, where conflicts arise from the imposition and attempt of male domination over female resistance, violence manifests itself as an act or omission that harms or intimidates an individual, resulting from physical force, psychological means or negligence; in addition to clashes due to these interests and domination, violence can be seen as a gender issue (Pastre & Azevêdo, 2023). Violence against women stems from a historical and cultural construction in which the accepted standards promote female subjugation in favor of men, who dominate, humiliate and arrogantly express power and dominance over women (Iennaco, 2017).

In order to legitimize public policies aimed at changing discourses and preventing violence, Law No. 11,340 (2006), known as the Maria da Penha Law, innovatively introduced the possibility of referring male perpetrators of domestic violence to recovery and re-education programs (article 45) and the creation of education and rehabilitation centers (article 35, item V). The publication of Law No. 13,984 (2020) enforced the attendance of perpetrators of violence to recovery and re-education programs, considering it to be an urgent protective measure (article 22, item VI).

Notably, after splitting up with the women against whom they practiced violence, these men will continue to establish social and affective relationships throughout their lives, meaning that they may repeat aggressive/abusive practices in new cycles of violence. Therefore, the Maria da Penha Law introduced a new strategy: recovery and re-education programs, also known as reflective practice and accountability groups. These groups are aimed at assisting male perpetrators of domestic violence and have the political-criminal function of preventing violence against women, but they also represent spaces for disconnecting masculinity from violence, seeking a connection with the male identity, tracing the biography of these perpetrators of violence in the social context in which they live and, based on this, aiming to disarm these lifestyles, demystifying them, breaking down discourses and thereby creating new bonds (Beiras et al., 2021).

In this sense, when these offenders are included in programs of this nature and interact with other participants, they gain new conceptions and perspectives on violence and relationships, which allows them to rethink and redefine their behavior.

In summary, reflective practice groups are meetings with a critical/reflective approach for male perpetrators of domestic violence, acting as a space for debate on a variety of topics, in which the perpetrators are held accountable for their violent actions, but can also reflect on the violence

they have committed. The facilitators of these interventions come from bodies linked to or partners with the judicial branch. Therefore, these groups comprise a psychosocial intervention that seeks to promote critical reflection in order to hold perpetrators of violence accountable for their actions, aiming to transform their views on gender and relationships.

In Brazil, these interventions have been conducted in a variety of ways, both in terms of referrals to programs and the development of activities. In the mapping carried out from June to October 2020, 312 operationalized initiatives were identified in different Brazilian states, making it possible to verify that there are differences in the way the meetings are conducted and in aspects related to the number of sessions, participants, topics to be discussed and ways of evaluating the intervention (Beiras et al., 2021). In a way, this indicates that there is a need to continue training the professionals who act as facilitators. In addition, it is important to share the scientific status of reflective practice groups with managers in the legal sphere, otherwise the proposition of discursive spaces could be interpreted as a simplistic approach with easy application and quick results, which is a misconception.

On the other hand, there are scientific studies by leading authors in the field with recommendations on the theoretical and methodological aspects that should be used (Barragán & Márquez, 2013; Beiras et al., 2021, 2022; *Intervenciones con Hombres*, 2022; Martins & Beiras, 2023), which represents a positive aspect for guiding the practices to be developed. Initially, it is necessary to understand that reflective groups fall within the scope of restorative justice and therefore represent a measure of protection. In terms of theory/methodology, it is recommended that intervention facilitators acquire knowledge about gender, feminist theories, masculinity, and public policies to combat violence. The meetings should primarily use active methodologies, with pairs of facilitators (mixed-gender), averaging 10 to 15 meetings, a maximum of 20 participants and one and a half to two hour-long weekly meetings (Beiras et al., 2021). These proposals have been reinforced among scholars and represent a national trend for the future. There is still a way to go to effectively structure these recommendations, but in this trajectory, research represents an important resource for the operationalization of theoretical and methodological aspects.

In scientific production, empirical studies on reflective practice groups have been carried out using the qualitative method with intervention facilitators (Pê et al., 2022; Scott & Oliveira, 2021) or with male perpetrators of violence (Einhardt & Sampaio, 2020; Gedrat et al., 2020; J. Oliveira & Scorsolini-Comin, 2021). Therefore, there is a lack of studies on evaluative intervention processes. In this area, only one study was found, which analyzed recidivism rates after men participated in a reflective group (Vasconcelos & Cavalcante, 2019). However, it is necessary to integrate other variables in order to verify the effectiveness of the intervention proposal, for example, by investigating men's opinions on the topics that were discussed, conceptions of gender, violence, and accountability for violent acts.

An example of an unprecedented intervention evaluation — different from the aforementioned studies — is the assessment of empathy, aggressiveness and anger in men who are perpetrators of violence against women. This is because empathy can be defined as the ability and sensitivity to understand another person's needs and put yourself in their shoes, to understand what they are feeling, to see the world from their perspective and thus develop the sensitivity to perceive their joys and discomforts (Sampaio et al., 2009).

Aggressiveness refers to violent acts against another person, which can occur physically, verbally or indirectly, for example by manipulation (Björkqvist et al., 2000). Anger, in turn, is an emotion which, according to Spielberger (1992), can be defined as experience and expression. Experience includes the state anger and the trait anger. The state anger is an emotional condition in which feelings fluctuate in intensity, accompanied in most cases by muscle tension and excitement; while the trait anger corresponds to a predisposition to perceive unpleasant and frustrating situations and to react to such events. Anger can be externalized through attitudes or internalized with the possibility of control (Spielberger, 1992). It is possible to infer that the development of empathy is the element that can promote self-regulation of anger and aggressiveness, thereby preventing situations of violence against women. Considering that gender-based violence is a social construction, reflective and accountability groups are important for promoting relationships based on dialog and solidarity. In this sense, measuring empathy, aggressiveness and anger before and after interventions with male perpetrators of violence against women provides an opportunity to verify the contributions of reflective practice groups, which aim to reframe roles and masculinity.

This study is justified primarily by the relevance of the topic, given that it involves a major social problem: domestic violence against women. And given the growing number of reflection and accountability group programs, there is a need for studies into the effectiveness of these interventions. By analyzing empathy, aggressiveness and anger, it is possible to verify possibilities to be developed, for example, to encourage improvements in the functioning and structuring of intervention proposals with active methodologies. This study aimed to evaluate the contributions of a reflective group on empathy, aggressiveness, and anger in male perpetrators of violence against women.

Method

Participants

This study included 80 men who were facing criminal charges in a district in the southern region of Paraná/Brazil for committing crimes involving domestic violence. These participants were selected randomly and by convenience. Participation in the study was voluntary, which means that

all subjects agreed to take part. Before determining who would be in the control group and who would be in the reflective practice group, all participants were informed about the reflective practice group. Once consent had been granted, the participants were randomly divided into two groups of 40 men each: the Reflective Practice Group, which received the five interventions, and the Control Group, which received no intervention.

The mean age of the Reflective Practice Group participants ($n = 40$) was 40.62 years ($SD = 10.58$). Of these participants, 13 were married, 14 had completed high school, 15 had two children, nine one child, eight had three children, 20 earned one to three minimum wages and 13 earned less than one minimum wage. As for their relationships with the women who were victims of violence, 14 participants were ex-partners or ex-husbands of the woman they had harmed, but some were living with the assaulted woman (their wife) and with children ($n = 17$) or only with the assaulted woman (their wife) ($n = 5$). Four participants had a criminal record, including two cases of domestic violence.

The Control Group had the following characteristics: the mean age of the participants was 39.23 years ($SD = 10.27$), 14 participants were married, 14 were single, 16 had completed high school, 14 had three children, 26 earned one to three minimum wages and 11 earned less than one minimum wage. For this group, in the majority of cases, the woman who was the victim of violence was the ex-partner ($n = 11$), but some participants were single ($n = 10$) or living with their wife and children ($n = 10$). Six participants had a criminal record, two of whom were accused of domestic violence.

Instruments

The Affective and Cognitive Measure of Empathy – ACME (Vachon & Lynam, 2016). This scale has 36 items, representing three dimensions: cognitive empathy (12 items; $\alpha = 0.61$, $\Omega = 0.62$) and affective empathy (24 items), subdivided into affective resonance (12 items; $\alpha = 0.75$, $\Omega = 0.75$) and affective dissonance (12 items; $\alpha = 0.61$, $\Omega = 0.60$), with answers graded from 0 to 5 on a Likert-type scale ranging from “0 - strongly disagree” to “5 - strongly agree.” It consists of a self-report assessment of empathy that measures not only cognitive and affective empathy, but also affective dissonance, the feeling of an opposing emotion — pain in other people's pleasure and pleasure in other people's pain.

The Aggression Tendency Assessment Scale – EATA (Sisto, 2010). This scale assesses the tendency to manifest aggressive behavior, and the answers given to each item inform about a person's tendency and their increased or decreased likelihood of manifesting aggressiveness. It has 40 items and three independent subscales, namely subscale A ($\alpha = 0.81$), which focuses on behaviors common to men and women; subscale B ($\alpha = 0.86$), which focuses on behaviors more common among women; and subscale C ($\alpha = 0.90$),

which involves topics more common among men. It also has a fourth measure, which is the total score ($\alpha = 0.94$).

The *State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory 2 – STAXI 2* was created by Charles Donald Spielberger and consists of 57 items, which form scales and subscales and represent 11 measures distributed into three groups: State Anger, Trait Anger, and Anger Expression and Control. State Anger – *S-Ang* ($\alpha = 0.888$); Feeling Angry – *S-Ang/F* ($\alpha = 0.750$); Feel like expressing Anger Verbally – *S-Ang/V* ($\alpha = 0.834$); Feeling like Expressing Anger Physically – *S-Ang/P* ($\alpha = 0.820$); Trait Anger – *T-Ang* ($\alpha = 0.804$); Angry Temperament – *T-Ang/T* ($\alpha = 0.788$); Angry Reaction – *T-Ang/R* ($\alpha = 0.700$); Anger Expression-Out – *AX-O* ($\alpha = 0.685$); Anger Expression-In – *AX-I* ($\alpha = 0.767$); Anger Control-Out – *AC-O* ($\alpha = 0.865$); and Anger Control-In – *AC-I* ($\alpha = 0.868$). This inventory aims to assess personality, more specifically the expression of anger as a state and trait, and makes it possible to investigate the intensity and frequency of feelings of anger.

A sociodemographic questionnaire was also used, with information on age; marital status; schooling; number of children; who the participant currently lives with; religion; income; any chemical dependencies or addictions and their specific nature if applicable, which one; relationship with the woman who was a victim of domestic or family violence; and whether the participant has ever been the subject of criminal proceedings.

Procedures

Initially, authorization was requested from the Judge of the Criminal Court of the district to carry out the research, since throughout the years 2020 and 2022, men who had committed domestic violence were notified to attend the Community Council to participate in activities in accordance with the decisions and sentences. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group took part in the five intervention meetings (a maximum of 20 men in each group, in accordance with the recommendations of the National Council of Justice), while the control group received no intervention during this period.

Circles of dialog and dynamics were used in the methodology. Each cycle consisted of five consecutive meetings (1). Support, the Courts and the Maria da Penha Law; (2). Explanation about noncompliance with the protective measure and a dialog about masculinity; (3). Social Assistance Network and Initiation of the Reflective Process; (4). Negligence in Men's Health and its Relationship with Gender-Based Violence and Mental Health; (5). Self-assessment, reflecting on each subject's participation in the cycle. The reflective practice group meetings took place in the Jury Room of the Regional Forum. They were mediated by two people (a man and a woman) and lasted two hours and thirty minutes each, for a total of ten hours.

Data collection. The experimental group answered the instruments before and after the intervention. The control

group answered the instruments without taking part in the intervention. The interval between the first and second data collection was approximately three months.

Data analysis. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential analyses. Descriptive analysis was carried out to understand the distribution of the means, medians, standard deviation results, minimum and maximum values of the scores of the instruments used for each group and moments of application. In addition, descriptive analysis was performed to investigate the normality of the data distribution using the Shapiro-Wilk test. This test helped to determine which technique would be used for the inferential analyses (parametric or nonparametric). Descriptive analysis was also used to describe the participants based on their sociodemographic information. The descriptive results included the Shapiro-Wilk test, which was chosen for its greater robustness in investigating normality for small samples in intervention studies.

Inferential analysis, on the other hand, was used to investigate whether there were intra-group differences at the two application times, using the paired t-test in both groups (control and experimental). Furthermore, inferential analysis sought to determine whether there were intragroup differences at different times, using the independent t-test. When the data showed normality, Student's t-test (parametric test) was used. Otherwise, the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon X tests were used.

The effect size was calculated using Cohen's *d* for the parametric Student's t-test and the Point-Biserial Correlation Coefficient (*rpb*) for the other nonparametric tests. All the analyses were carried out using Jamovi 1.8 computer software (The Jamovi Project, 2021). To interpret the effect size values, the recommendations of Lakens (2013) were followed, considering *d* values of up to 0.20 as low, *d* values from 0.21 to 0.50 as moderate and *d* values from 0.51 to 0.80 as high. As for the Point-Biserial Correlation (*rpb*) values, the interpretation can be considered similar to Pearson's correlation coefficient, as pointed out by Kerby (2014), with values closer to one (1) meaning a larger effect size.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná, under opinion n° 4.650.550 and CAAE n° 45047921.9.0000.8040.

Results

The results of the inferential tests comparing means and medians will be shown to investigate the contributions of the intervention. Student's t- and Wilcoxon tests were respectively used when the criteria of normality and nonnormality were met, along with Cohen's *d* effect size and Point-Biserial Correlation tests. Table 1 shows the results of the intragroup comparison for the experimental group.

Table 1

Intra-group comparison and effect size for the ACME, STAXI and EATA scales in the experimental group pre- and post-test

Factor	T-test	Statistic	DF	P	Difference	Effect size	
Cognitive Empathy	Student	-1.21	39	0.12	-1.80	D	-0.19
Resonant Affective Empathy	Wilcoxon	248.00		0.09	-1.50	rpb	-0.26
Dissonant Affective Empathy	Wilcoxon	42.00		<0.01	-1.50	rpb	-0.60
ACME General Score	Student	-1.85	39	<0.05	-6.10	d	-0.29
EATA Subscale 1	Wilcoxon	194.50		<0.01	-1.00	rpb	-0.42
EATA Subscale 2	Wilcoxon	135.50		0.48	-0.01	rpb	-0.02
EATA Subscale 3	Wilcoxon	54.00		<0.05	-1.50	rpb	-0.43
EATA General Score	Wilcoxon	203.50		<0.05	-1.50	rpb	-0.32
Feeling Angry	Wilcoxon	62.00		0.26	1.00	rpb	0.36
Feeling Like Expressing Anger Verbally	Wilcoxon	6.00		0.79	-1.00	rpb	-0.20
Feeling Like Expressing Anger Physically	Wilcoxon	0.00		0.17	-3.34	rpb	-1.00
Angry Temperament	Wilcoxon	128.00		0.97	0.00	rpb	0.01
Angry Reaction	Wilcoxon	154.00		0.83	-0.01	rpb	-0.05
Anger Expression-Out	Wilcoxon	231.00		0.11	-1.50	rpb	-0.31
Anger Expression-In	Wilcoxon	328.50		0.95	-0.01	rpb	-0.01
Anger Control-Out	Wilcoxon	177.50		0.79	-0.96	rpb	-0.06
Anger Control-In	Wilcoxon	239.50		0.65	-0.50	rpb	-0.09
STAXI General Score	Wilcoxon	398.50		0.91	0.25	rpb	0.02

Note. *d* = Cohen's *d*; rpb = Point-Biserial Correlation; ACME = Affective and Cognitive Measure of Empathy; EATA = Aggression Tendency Assessment Scale; STAXI = State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory; DF = degree of freedom.

Table 1 shows that there were statistically significant differences for the Dissonant Affective Empathy factor, in which the power of the Point-Biserial Correlation (rpb) effect was of moderate magnitude ($r = -0.60$). The negative rpb value indicates that the scores for this factor in the experimental group were higher at Time 2 than at Time 1. For the overall ACME score, the *p*-value was significant and the effect size calculated by Cohen's *d* ($d = -0.29$) was low.

As for the results of the Aggression Tendency Assessment Scale (EATA), only Subscale 2 did not obtain

statistically significant results. It should be noted that, as shown in Table 2, the effect sizes for Subscales 1, 3 and the General Score were in the range of $r = -0.40$, which indicates a moderate correlation. The negative direction indicates that this group obtained a higher score at Time 2. Lastly, the results of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI) were not statistically significant. In order to investigate whether the control group also had any result differences between application times, the same paired t-test was carried out (Table 2).

Table 2

Intra-group comparison and effect size for the ACME, STAXI and EATA scales in the control group pre- and post-test

Factor	T-test	Statistic	DF	P	Difference	Effect size	
Cognitive Empathy	Student	0.12	39	0.90	0.13	d	0.02
Resonant Affective Empathy	Student	-0.41	39	0.68	-0.38	d	-0.06
Dissonant Affective Empathy	Wilcoxon	36		0.82	0.00	rpb	0.09
ACME General Score	Student	-0.03	39	0.97	-0.05	d	-0.01
EATA Subscale 1	Wilcoxon	173		0.49	-0.50	rpb	-0.15
EATA Subscale 2	Wilcoxon	111		0.89	-0.01	rpb	-0.04
EATA Subscale 3	Wilcoxon	67		0.71	0.00	rpb	0.12
EATA General Score	Wilcoxon	215.5		0.97	-0.01	rpb	-0.01
Feeling Angry	Wilcoxon	65		0.44	0.50	rpb	0.24
Feeling Like Expressing Anger Verbally	Wilcoxon	12.5		0.20	1.00	rpb	0.67
Feeling Like Expressing Anger Physically	Wilcoxon	3		1.00	-0.24	rpb	0.00
Angry Temperament	Wilcoxon	155		0.17	1.00	rpb	0.34
Angry Reaction	Wilcoxon	0		NaN	NaN	rpb	NaN
Anger Expression-Out	Wilcoxon	239		0.23	0.78	rpb	0.26
Anger Expression-In	Wilcoxon	287		0.91	0.00	rpb	0.02
Anger Control-Out	Wilcoxon	318.5		0.73	0.50	rpb	0.07
Anger Control-In	Wilcoxon	284		0.82	-0.01	rpb	-0.05
STAXI General Score	Wilcoxon	421		0.30	3.00	rpb	0.20

Note. *d* = Cohen's *d*; rpb = Point-Biserial Correlation; ACME = Affective and Cognitive Measure of Empathy; EATA = Aggression Tendency Assessment Scale; STAXI = State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory; DF = degree of freedom; NaN = inability to calculate intra-group differences due to lack of variance.

Table 2 does not indicate that the application time had any statistically significant effect on the control group, since no factor or overall score showed a p -value of less than 0.05. The only effect size result that stands out is that of the Feeling like Expressing Anger Verbally factor of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory, which showed a r value of $r = 0.60$, considered moderate, even though the difference in scores between Time 1 and Time 2 was not statistically significant. This result showed a higher score at Time 1.

Discussion

The results of this study make it possible to develop some reflections, considering that the participants in both groups showed statistically significant differences for the Dissonant Affective Empathy Factor, a subdivision of the affective empathy component marked by affective dissonance and contradictory emotional responses, for example, obtaining pleasure from the suffering of others or anger from the happiness of others (Vachon & Lynam, 2016). In this sense, there are difficulties in developing empathy, and the control group showed greater indicators of Dissonant Affective Empathy than the experimental group.

This difficulty is understandable and to be expected, given that it comes from men accused of committing violent acts, i.e., people who, at some point in their lives, have made threats, caused bodily harm and failed to comply with protective measures. Their violent actions, considering the context and the relationship with the victims, already demonstrate a low repertoire of empathy.

Regarding the behavior of male perpetrators of violence, research shows a lack of recognition of violent acts, as these men justify their attitudes by attributing responsibility to other factors and people, including alcohol dependency, jealousy, impulsivity and/or the woman in a situation of domestic violence herself (Einhardt & Sampaio, 2020; J. Oliveira & Scorsolini-Comin, 2021). These statements are directly related to dissonant affective empathy, as they show that there is a gap in these men's ability to identify and manage emotions. This study shows that the outcome of dissonant affective empathy is associated with emotional difficulties.

To overcome this situation, Beiras et al. (2022) suggested developing a vocabulary for emotions, introducing a set of possible emotional responses and practicing self-awareness and emotional empathy. A viable alternative is to apply these steps following an intervention proposal, which would allow emotions and empathy to be explored in order to promote self-regulation.

Beiras et al. (2021) proposed that reflective practice groups discuss empathy, self-empathy and responsibility for empathetic and honest negotiation about the division of tasks in the domestic and family care environment, deconstructing ideas of cruelty as a pedagogical modality of control over women and allowing mutual care and tension management to be fostered. Discussing empathy and the

deconstruction of so many other pertinent issues in gender studies, feminism and masculinity will allow individuals to reflect and promote the process of subjectivation (Beiras et al., 2021). In order to carry out this proposal, which aims to promote change and a balanced and empathetic attitude, the authors also suggested working on emotional and anger control via role-playing activities or physical dynamics.

In this study, the anger indicators of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI) did not show significant values. On the other hand, there is a need to explore emotions, including anger, because, according to Moura et al. (2020), in violence between intimate partners, higher levels of anger cause more severe violent acts. As for the aspect of aggressiveness, the results obtained in this study demonstrate the relevance of an intervention addressing this construct. When the instrument for assessing the tendency to aggressiveness, EATA, was applied to the experimental group, higher scores were found in Subscales 1 (intimidation, dissimulation, taking advantage of other people's weaknesses, antisocial behavior) and 3 (illegal behavior, physical intimidation, irritating, punishing, and being disorderly) at Time 2. Although these rates were moderate, this fact shows that, over time, the behavior of these individuals may worsen. Therefore, it is recommended to directly explore the management of aggressiveness and anger in reflective practice groups, in order to prevent the emergence of violent actions.

In this sample, there is an important point to consider when it comes to the negative result of the experimental group: even after the intervention, this group showed a higher score in the Dissonant Affective Empathy and Aggressiveness factors, which possibly represents data manipulation when filling in the scale, with a view to social desirability. Although participation in this study was voluntary, it should be noted that the instruments were applied before the participants entered the reflective practice group, and the group meetings were ordered by the Judiciary, which caused them significant discomfort.

In this study, specifically for dissonant affective empathy, the control group had a higher score at Time 2 (second application) than the experimental group; on the other hand, the results of the Cognitive Empathy variable were more positive in the experimental group. The results show that the control group had greater difficulties in recognizing their emotions, as well as in practicing empathy in general. As a result, this group is more likely to engage in violent behavior and even reoffend.

For the experimental group, at Time 2, there was a worsening in the indicators of Dissonant Affective Empathy and Aggressiveness (Subscales 1 and 3). It is therefore suggested to reformulate the strategies proposed in this reflective practice group, considering that empathy and aggressiveness represent variables to be discussed directly. The development of empathy in perpetrators of violence may therefore represent a promising intervention target (Mayer et al., 2018), which shows the need to develop and evaluate the proposals to be implemented.

In this sense, there are challenges to be overcome, especially when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of reflective practice groups over time. In this study, the instruments were reapplied after three months, with negative indicators of Dissonant Affective Empathy. It should be emphasized that, in Brazil, there is an urgent need to implement and evaluate interventions focusing on empathy, aggressiveness and anger, which represents innovative, promising and necessary work. Studies have shown the lack of work on the effectiveness of interventions with male perpetrators of violence and the fragility of structuring these policies (Curia et al., 2020; Goulart et al., 2020). Reflective practice groups therefore represent a strategy for tackling domestic violence, as they help to deconstruct masculinity by uncoupling violence from the process of male subjectivation (Martins & Beiras, 2023).

In a systematic review with a meta-analysis of the efficacy of interventions to prevent recidivism among male perpetrators of violence against women, it was found that the risk/need/responsiveness treatment is promising in the short and medium term, while treatments that use a follow-up strategy lasting one to two years show variations, with the long-term effects — of two years — showing no significant difference (Travers et al., 2021). Interestingly, in the international context, the discussion on the long-term effects of interventions with male perpetrators of violence has been the subject of scientific research with challenges to be overcome. This shows that it is essential to develop proposals for evaluating interventions in order to identify the points to be explored — and in this case, the specific demand is the reduction of violent acts.

In scientific production, Beiras et al. found that the monitoring and evaluation of these actions still needs improvement, suggesting the creation of quantitative and qualitative measures. To assess the indicators of change and/or effectiveness of reflective practice groups, these recommended using a variety of strategies, for example, applying questionnaires in the pre- and post-intervention phases, following up on male perpetrators of violence by seeking information from people in their social circle and cross-referencing data from different institutions. This would make it possible to extend the idea of analyzing the effectiveness of reflective practice groups by examining the recurrence of violence, which needs to be overcome. In this way, the integration of different variables is the first step in evaluating the results of reflective practice groups.

Another point refers to the need to understand that psychosocial care for male perpetrators of violence against women is a public policy (Martins & Beiras, 2023), legitimized by Law No. 13,984 (2020); thus, there is still a long way to go in the construction, application and evaluation of interventions. This study opens up possibilities for further research, considering that the variables (empathy, aggressiveness and anger) could be included in some future evaluation tool to check the effectiveness of reflective practice groups.

In short, giving these interventions a scientific status will make it possible to make progress in reducing the

rates of violence against women. There is also an urgent need to encourage men to break away from the hegemonic masculinity responsible for perpetuating violence over the years (Magrin & Oliveira, 2023), which is a crucial task for their transformation into individuals engaged in supporting gender equality.

In this study, in the intragroup comparison, the reflective practice group showed a decrease in the mean scores for aggressiveness and an increase in the mean scores for empathy compared with the control group. In this way, reflective practice groups focused on empathy are useful for emotional development, seeking to encourage reflection and awareness of the violence practiced, which can promote a change in behavior and a reduction in aggression and violence.

There is a need to develop manuals or protocols for interventions in order to promote empathy in reflective practice groups. Working on empathy in a direct way is a necessary strategy, which can be carried out via dramatization or discussion of documentaries and movie scenes. In this way, discussions about anger and aggressiveness can be introduced gradually. This is the great challenge that requires proper operationalization with a theoretical foundation and professional qualification for the facilitators of reflective practice groups.

This study has some limitations. A small sample was used, and it is possible that the results could be better evaluated in larger samples. In addition, other factors, such as the place where the activities were carried out — a legal environment —, the circumstances in which they took place — the participants were complying with a court order to take part in the reflective practice group, which made them tense — and the fact that the application of the instruments was monitored by a facilitator of the reflective practice group, may have influenced the results.

In this study, the reflective practice group engaged in five meetings a week, averaging two hours each. On the other hand, the National Council of Justice has issued guidelines (2022) to structure the number of sessions at eight (Recommendation No. 124, dated January 7, 2022), thus, the results of this study may foster a new format for structuring the aforementioned reflective practice groups. Future research could build and evaluate a specific instrument that integrates empathy, aggressiveness and anger, considering a possible tendency towards social desirability.

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- Taciane Aparecida Siqueira Pastre* holds a Master's degree of the Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná, Curitiba-PR, Brazil.
- Adriano Valério dos Santos Azevêdo* is a Professor of the Postgraduate Program in Forensic Psychology at the Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná, Curitiba-PR, Brazil.
- João Paulo Araújo Lessa* is a Professor of the Postgraduate Program in Forensic Psychology at the Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná, Curitiba-PR, Brazil.
- Authors' Contribution:*
All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of this study, to data analysis and interpretation, and to the manuscript revision and approval of the final version. All the authors assume public responsibility for the content of the manuscript.
- Associate editor:*
Wanderlei Abadio de Oliveira
- Received:* Aug. 08, 2023
1st Revision: Dec. 23, 2023
Approved: Mar. 05, 2024
- How to cite this article:*
Pastre, T. A. S., Azevêdo, A. V. S., & Lessa, J. P. A. (2024). Contributions of a reflective practice group of male perpetrators of violence against women. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto), 34*, e3411. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4327e3411>