

Gender and Adolescent-to-Parent Violence: A Systematic Analysis of Typical and Atypical Cases

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Introduction

The gender composition of adolescent-to-parent violence is so often presumed that researchers may use de-gendered terms such as *youth*, *child*, and *parent* when they are referring to a son assaulting his mother. Indeed, the growing body of research on adolescent-to-parent violence shows that the most frequent dyad is *males* (sons) assaulting *females* (their mothers or stepmothers). By comparison, male parents (fathers or stepfathers)¹ are less likely to be targets of abuse: in part, this is because their children may view them as more intimidating and in part, because adolescent-to-parent violence is more frequent in single-parent households, where adult females are more likely to be sole heads of families (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). Although girls may assault their parents for different reasons than boys, the target of their violence is more often mothers than fathers.

The gender composition of the typical dyad in adolescent-to-parent violence recapitulates that in adult partner violence; furthermore, mothers who are assaulted by their sons may also be assaulted by their partners (or ex-partners). Researchers have identified similar dynamics in both victimization contexts, including the ‘tactics of control’ used (Pence & Paymar, 1986), male attitudes of superiority over females, and the ongoing (not ‘incident-based’) qualities of violence and conflict. However, as Daly & Nancarrow (2010: 10) suggest, ‘theories of male violence against women alone do not tell the whole story’ of adolescent-to-parent (son-to-mother) violence. This is because adolescent violence in families is recursive: male youth may offend against their mothers, but also be victimized by their fathers, stepfathers, or their mother’s boyfriends. Mothers may blame their sons’ violence on these other men; at the same time, their sons and significant male adults may join together in minimizing their violence toward mothers.

What, then, of the atypical dyads in adolescent-to-parent violence? Of girls assaulting their mothers or fathers, or youth assaulting their fathers? In what ways are the dynamics of these cases similar and different from the more typical dyad? This paper compares three typical and three atypical cases to systematically assess the following: (i) familial contexts, (ii) types of violence, (iii) parents’ and youths’ explanations of violence, and (iv) disclosing violence to friends or family members and reporting it to legal authorities. Following this analysis, implications are drawn for police and justice responses to adolescent-to-parent violence.

¹ Throughout the paper, ‘mother’ includes stepmother; and ‘father’, stepfather.

Offending and Victimization

Cottrell & Monk (2004) suggest that 9 to 14 percent of parents are ‘at some point physically assaulted by their adolescent children’ (p. 1072). Drawing from Australian, Canadian, and British data, Howard (2011: 3) estimates ‘one in ten parents are assaulted by their children’. Boys (sons) are offenders in two-thirds of cases, and adult women (mothers) are three-quarters of parent-victims. Condry & Miles’s (2014) analysis of reported offences to the London Metropolitan Police finds that son-to-mother violence comprised 67 per cent of cases; son-to-father, 20 per cent; daughter-to-mother, 11 per cent; and daughter-to-father, 2 per cent. However, caution needs to be exercised because reporting patterns may themselves vary by the gender composition of the dyad (Condry & Miles, 2014: 168). In addition, Gallagher (2004) notes that clinical samples have a higher share of male offenders than sample surveys of self-reported offending. Although males predominate as offenders in both, a higher share of females in sample surveys likely stems from the inclusion of lower level or less serious types of offending.

To frame our analysis of offending and victimization in typical and atypical cases, we turn to key themes in the literature: familial contexts, types of violence, parental and youth explanations for violence, and disclosing and reporting violence.²

Familial Contexts

Youth (typically sons) who are violent towards their parents (typically mothers) are likely to have experienced sexual or physical abuse by their father and have witnessed partner violence towards their mother (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Holt, 2009; Howard & Rottem, 2008). In addition, some fathers, even when separated from a boy’s mother, may attempt to undermine her parenting or verbally abuse her in front of their son. In cases when sons had contact with their father, parental conflict remained strong (Howard & Rottem, 2008). Thus, adolescent-to-parent violence occurs within a broader familial context of violence and disharmony. It is often the tip of a more systemic family violence pattern, which includes partner abuse, child abuse, and parental abuse toward children which, as Downey suggests, ‘may be co-occurring or occurring over time’ (1997: 76). For this reason, she argues, violence in families is ‘recursive’ – that is, ‘mutually shaping’ rather than a linear or ‘cause-effect relationship’.

Types of Violence

Gallagher (2004, citing Campbell, 1993) suggests that violence by a youth (typically a son) toward a parent (typically a mother) can be ‘instrumental’ or ‘expressive’. Instrumental violence is used to control another, whereas expressive violence is depicted as a youth ‘letting off steam’ in inappropriate and violent ways (p. 96).³ A similar distinction is made in

² Key themes in the literature are sourced from Howard & Rottem (2008), who examine son-mother violence exclusively; and Cottrell & Monk (2004), Gallagher (2004), Holt (2013), and Routt & Anderson (2015), who sometimes distinguish among the dyads, but not always. We use the authors’ language (that is, ‘youth’, ‘child’, ‘parent’), but identify the dyad’s gender composition whenever possible.

³ Some also refer to adolescent-to-parent violence as ‘proactive’ and ‘reactive’. Routt & Anderson (2015: 77) suggest that youth tend to use both types of violence against their parents at different times.

research on intimate partner violence. For example, Johnson (2008) distinguishes between ‘intimate terrorism’ and ‘situational couple violence’.⁴ In the former, an abuser (typically male) uses violence or other ‘control tactics’ (such as threats and isolation) against a partner (typically female) ‘to exercise general, coercive control’ (p. 26). In the latter, ‘conflict between the partners leads to an argument, the argument escalates and becomes verbally aggressive, and the verbal abuse leads to violence ..., [but the violence] is not driven by a general motive to control ...’ (pp. 60-61). However, Routt & Anderson (2015) distinguish control used in adult partner violence and that used by youth toward their parents. They suggest that ‘... the [adult] abuser uses a variety of tactics to exert control over his partner’s life, ... [but] teens coerce parents to get something they want rather than to restrict their parent’s freedom and independence’ (pp. 26-27). With varied binaries used to describe types of violence, we chose ‘controlling’ and ‘reactive’ as the most descriptive.

For research on girls’ violence toward parents, Routt & Anderson (2015: 70) say that it is ‘almost exclusively against their mothers’. Cottrell & Monk (2004: 1081) suggest that daughter-to-mother violence is ‘a paradoxical response, [...] used to create distance from the “feminine ideals” that [are] often ascribed to [girls]’ (p. 1081). Specifically, girls may view ‘their mothers as weak and powerless and use abusive behaviour against them ... to distance themselves from [an] image of female vulnerability’ (p. 1082). For son-to-father violence, Cottrell & Monk (2004: 1081) suggest that boys’ abusive behaviour is ‘influenced by the role modelling of masculine stereotypes that promote the use of power and control in relationships’, offering one example of a boy who said, ‘You kind of look up to your dad. If he’s rough, you are too’. The authors also suggest that although it is less frequent, sons may ‘use aggression against an abusive adult man in an effort to protect [his] mother’. Another reason cited, which is relevant to both girls and boys, is conflicting childrearing styles, whereby parents ‘contradict each other’. In these circumstances, youth violence may reflect ‘underlying problems in the parental relationship’ (Cottrell & Monk, 2004: 1085).

Although violence toward a parent can be ‘defensive or retaliatory’ (Gallagher, 2004: 3), little is said about a potential mutuality of aggression, that is, when both parties agree that violence is ‘one way to settle the score’ (Daly, 1994: 130). To be clear, by mutuality of aggression, we mean that parents and adolescents may choose to escalate an argument by fighting each other. We do not mean a temporal ordering of violence in the home that begins with parental aggression toward children, which may subsequently lead to adolescent abuse of parents, dynamics that have been studied by Brezina (1999) and Margolin and Baucom (2014).

Parental and Youth Explanations for Violence

As Holt (2013: 73) suggests, parental explanations for their child’s violence toward them is a ‘tricky terrain’ because the ‘dominant explanation in scientific and common-sense discourse’ is that abusive behaviour is rooted in a person’s childhood, for example, by ‘witnessing violence between parents’ (see also Holt, 2011). When sons assault mothers, women may blame themselves, citing poor parenting or other personal deficits. Ex-partners may also blame the women, and women (mothers) are more likely than men (fathers) to say

⁴ Johnson (2008) identifies a third category, ‘violent resistance’ (pp. 48-59), but this category may have less relevance to adolescent-to-parent violence.

that professionals blame them (Howard & Rottem, 2008, citing Furlong, Young, Perlesz, McLachlan, & Reiss, 1991). Mothers may minimize their sons' abuse: they may excuse the behaviour as outside of their sons' control because of 'inherent traits' or 'learnt behaviour' (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Routt & Anderson, 2015). Specifically, mothers attributed their son's violence to their having learned such behaviour from their fathers, with some also blaming their sons' alcohol or drug use. Women's views of their sons' abilities to control (or not control) their abusive behaviour oscillated, but most thought it was 'entrenched' and 'out of control' (Howard & Rottem, 2008: 50). Stewart, Burns, & Leonard (2007) interviewed 60 Sydney women in 1996/7 and 2001, asking about their children's violence towards them (both as adolescents and adults). The main explanation offered was the 'bad influence of a father [or] stepfather ...' (p. 187), although some mothers believed they had contributed to the violence because they were 'too weak'. Some cited a child's personality ('always very self-centred' or has a 'short fuse') or mental illness, or simply claimed that the abuse was 'typical male behaviour' (pp. 187-8).

For young people's explanations of their own violence, less is known. However, Holt (2013) suggests that their explanations often mirror those of their parents by referring, for example, to a history of violence in the home. In Howard & Rottem's (2008) study, all the sons blamed people other than themselves for their abusive behaviour toward their mothers. Most blamed their victim-mothers, but some also blamed siblings and school officials.

Disclosing and Reporting Violence

Parent-victims may deny their child's abuse, hide it from family and friends, or not initiate police contact. This occurs for many reasons, among them: self-blame for the abuse or shame (Holt, 2009) and fear of it being revealed. One consequence of denial is a parent's isolation from family and friends in order to maintain the family secret (Bobic, 2004). A parent's reasons for not reporting to officials are fear of the ways an abusive child may react when learning the abuse was reported, and not wanting a child to go through a criminal justice process (Cottrell & Monk, 2004). It is noteworthy that these circumstances— isolation, denial, and fear about what will happen if the behaviour is disclosed to authorities—are similar to those that inhibit adult females from reporting male partner violence. According to Routt & Anderson (2015: 29-30), some parents will attempt to protect themselves from an abusive child by leaving the household at certain times of the day. Calling the police is often the last resort for victimized parents and contemplated only after abuse has been occurring for some time.

Six Cases of Violence

The data for six cases of violence were gathered in 2001 as part of the *In-Depth Study of Sexual and Family Violence* (see Daly, Bouhours, & Curtis-Fawley, 2007; Daly and Wade, 2012). The study examined youth justice conferences for sexual and family violence in the state of South Australia. Conferences have been used there since 1994 as a diversion from court for admitted offenders, aged 10 to 17 years.⁵ During a 6-month period (July to

⁵ In a conference, the victim, an admitted offender, their supporters and any other relevant parties meet to discuss the offence, its impact and how to address the offending and victimization. The conference is organized

December 2001), all youth justice conferences for sexual and family violence were identified; eight sexual violence and six family violence cases were completed during the time period. For each case, the police report of the incident and the youth's criminal history were obtained; in addition, interviews were carried out with the victim⁶ and with the Youth Justice Coordinator (YJC), who organized and facilitated the conference. The interviews canvassed the offence dynamics, and what occurred before, during, and after the conference. Detailed cases studies were assembled from a rich set of case materials, and here we can only sketch the highlights. An earlier paper (Daly & Nancarrow, 2010) examined three typical cases of adolescent-to-parent violence, which are re-analyzed here, along with three atypical cases. Appendix 1 provides more information on the family contexts in each case.

Typical Cases

Case #1: Carolyn and Des. Des (16 years old) came home one afternoon drunk. He went to change his clothes, but after having trouble putting his belt on, he became aggravated and started to punch the walls. After smashing a hole in the wall, he went to the kitchen and started to yell and name-call his mother, Carolyn, before pushing her in the chest with both hands. Carolyn attempted to call the police, but Des ripped the phone from the wall. As she tried to leave the house, Des grabbed her and pushed her against the wall, yelling 'you're not leaving the house. I'll fucking kill you'. He picked up a knife from the kitchen drawer and slammed it into the breakfast bar, just missing Carolyn's hand. She ran from the house and called the police.

Case #2: Anna and Tom. Anna heard her daughter, Tina (10 years old), yelling from another room in their home. Anna rushed to see what was happening and saw Tom (14 years old) pushing Tina into the couch. Anna intervened and argued with Tom, and he struck her with a broom handle. Anna left the house with her daughter and contacted the police. The police report says she was fearful of going back to her house on her own. A few hours later Tom was arrested.

Case #3: Shelia and Mitch. Shelia arrived home from work and ordered a pizza for dinner, which she had with her son, Mitch (15 years old). When they finished, she told Mitch that she was going to take the leftovers to her boyfriend, Bevan. Mitch got 'very mad' about this and as Shelia was about to leave the house, he said, 'You're not going'. Sheila said, 'I am going', but Mitch then grabbed her around the throat and punched her in the head. He strangled her and held her against the wall. He then released her and told her, 'Get the fuck out and don't fucking come back'. Shelia fled to Bevan's house and from there rang the police.

and facilitated by a Youth Justice Coordinator (YJC), with a police officer present. If a young person admits to an offence and completes the agreement, no criminal conviction is recorded.

⁶ As part of the agreement with the South Australian Family Conference Team, the research team interviewed only those victims in cases referred to a conference on or after 1 October 2001 (see Daly et al. 2007; and Daly & Wade, 2012 for research methods, interview instruments and preliminary findings). Of the six family violence cases, we were able to interview just one victim; two declined or were not available to be interviewed, and three were referred to a conference before 1 October 2001.

Atypical Cases

Case #4: Ruth and Sally. Sally (13 years old) and her mother Ruth were arguing about Sally making long distance calls to her friends, who lived in New South Wales.⁷ During the argument, the phone was pulled out of the wall (the police report does not say who pulled the phone, but the YJC thinks it was Sally), and Sally began to hit her mother in the head and upper body. Ruth said she was going to leave, but Sally prevented her from doing so by ‘cornering her’ in the room. Sally then grabbed two knives and raised them to shoulder height. She faced her mother and said, ‘I could kill you if I wanted to. I could do a murder suicide’. Ruth left the house and went to the police station to report what happened. Sally was arrested for this offence and for previous property damage to Ruth’s car.

Case #5: Graham and Matt. Graham, who is Matt’s stepfather, came home from his job as a cleaner just after midnight. He started to argue with Matt (16 years old) about a missing \$5 note and some expensive telephone calls. The argument moved throughout the house and ended in Matt’s bedroom. When Graham followed Matt into his bedroom, Matt became aggressive and abusive. Graham said he attempted to restrain Matt. They began to ‘wrestle’ on the bed and Matt kicked him in the leg. Matt then grabbed a fillet knife and threatened twice to kill his stepfather. Matt’s mother came into the room and told Matt to let go of the knife. Matt threw it into the air, and she picked it up. She then called the police.

Case #6: Scott and Dan. Scott usually drives his son Dan (15 years old) to his job at a fruit and vegetable shop with a start time of 6am. However, Scott had told Dan some days before that if he continued to misbehave (attributed by his parents to taking an anti-depressant), Scott would not drive him to work. The day before, Dan behaved in a threatening manner toward his mother and had ‘pushed’ her; for this reason, Scott said he would not drive him to work. Dan asked his mother for a lift to work, but she too said she would not take him. After contacting his employer, Dan became agitated that he would lose his job. This resulted in a fight between Dan and Scott in the front yard of their house. Dan approached his father and punched him in the face and head approximately 12 times. Scott put his son into a headlock to restrain him until the police arrived. When in the headlock, Dan tried to kick his father in the face, but he could not make contact. His mother called the police.

Relating the Cases to Key Themes in the Literature

How, then, do our cases relate to key themes identified in the literature? The variables tapping into each theme are listed in Table 1. Drawing from the case materials (the police report, interviews with the YJC, and in one case (#3), an interview with the victim), we show evidence of the presence (‘yes’ in Table 1) or absence (‘no’) of the variable descriptor in each of the six cases.

 insert Table 1 here

⁷ Sally’s father lives in the state of New South Wales, and she travels there to visit him and her friends. Apart from this, no other information exists on the file about the nature of the father’s relationship to Sally or Ruth.

Familial Contexts

Variables (a) and (b) show major differences in familial contexts for the typical and atypical cases: all the typical cases were associated with a *history of abuse* of both the victim and the offender by another adult (i.e., the victim's ex-partner, and in one case, also a current boyfriend).⁸ Such violence was evident in just one atypical case (#5), in which the offender had been abused by his biological father (and perhaps also by his stepfather, but information was sketchy for the latter). In addition, in case #2, Anna believed that her ex-husband had been sexually abusing his daughter.

Common to both the typical and atypical cases were variables (c) and (d), which tapped into *the on-going nature of the violence*: in all cases, there was a history of abuse of the victim by the offender, which ranged from about 4 months (case #6) to 18 months (cases #1 and #5) or many years (inferred in cases #2, #3, and #4).

For variables (e) and (f), which tap into *family instability and conflict*, in all but one case (#6), the youth's parents had separated. All four female victims (mothers) lived in sole-parent households. In one case (#5), the boy's mother had re-partnered and his stepfather (the victim) lived in the family home. In just one of six cases (#6) did the young person live with both biological parents. In all the typical cases, *ongoing conflict between the youth's biological parents* was evident. In one atypical case (#4), there was insufficient information to know about parental conflict. In another (#5), there appeared to be no current parental conflict; but the YJC said that although 'dad hadn't been around for a long time', the youth's mother spoke negatively about the father to her son. In case #6, the youth's biological parents have continued their relationship, with no evidence of conflict between them.

Types of Violence

With all cases having a history of adolescent-to-parent violence, it is uncertain what inferences we may draw about the type of violence used in any particular episode. Nor do we have sufficient information on the developmental or escalating pattern of violence over time. Thus, we infer the degree of 'controlling' or 'reactive' violence based on cues from the police offence report and histories of violence in the home that the YJCs had gleaned in their conversations with participants when preparing the conference.

In three cases, we determined that *controlling violence* was used by the youth in the immediate incident (cases #1, #3, and #4). Des (case #1) was initially frustrated, but then escalated his violence and began threatening his mother to control her and to prevent her from contacting the police. Mitch (case #3) used violence (and threats) as a way to control his mother and to get his way (specifically, he did not want his mother to leave the house to see her boyfriend Bevan, a man Mitch disliked and who had assaulted him previously). Sally (case #4) used violence against her mother to gain more freedom: she felt entitled to have more phone time than her mother allowed. In addition, the YJC suspected that Sally's mother was 'a little fearful' of her daughter. Both Sally (case #4) and Des (case #1) used threats of murder (and in Sally's case, also suicide) to persuade their mothers to act in ways

⁸ For case #1, this was inferred from the interview with the YJC, who said, 'I think there was mention [of past violence]' by Des's father. The YJC also said that both Carolyn and Des did not want the ex-husband to be at the conference because 'it would just get bogged down in their warfare'.

they wanted. Although Matt (case #5) also used threats,⁹ he did so to end the fight with his stepfather, rather than to control his actions or prevent him from leaving the house (as occurred with Des and Sally). Indeed, in case #5, the YJC believed that Matt's stepfather was controlling in the home, just as he had been controlling during the conference.

We interpret the two cases of sons who assaulted their fathers as examples of *reactive violence*. Matt (case #5) acted violently towards his stepfather in response to accusations against him and to control the specific situation: to have his stepfather leave him alone and (perhaps) to stop being physically restrained and assaulted by his stepfather.¹⁰ Dan (case #6) acted violently towards his father after contacting his employer and learning that he may lose his job. In case #2, we interpret the immediate incident as 'reactive' in that Tom blamed his behaviour on his sister: he told the YJC that she did something that made him angry.¹¹ He spat on and pushed his younger sister; and when his mother Anna intervened, he struck her with a broom stick.¹² At the same time, the YJC referred to Tom as a 'very manipulative' and 'very dangerous' boy. Our inference is that Tom used controlling violence against his mother on other occasions.

An awareness of different types of violence is important for conference preparation, as illustrated in case #3. The YJC did not realize until just before the conference how manipulative and controlling Mitch and his father were. The day before the conference, the pair arrived at the conference team's office and attempted to persuade the YJC to hold the conference that day without Shelia present. The YJC was disturbed by their behaviour and comments they made about Shelia, and he decided to implement a safety plan. He showed Mitch and his father the security set-up in the conference room, pointing out the duress alarm in the room and saying that a police officer would be on the scene immediately when it was activated. On the day of the conference, a sheriff was visible in the hallway of the conference venue, and the YJC arranged that Shelia and her support person would leave before the agreement was written up and finalized 'to allow them some space and [to] get away from the building' before Mitch and his father left.

All four female victims were subject to *controlling violence* (case #2 was a reactive incident in an overall pattern of controlling violence), but the two male victims were not. Sally's violence toward her mother (case #4) was used to assert her authority and get what she wanted; it did not fit Cottrell & Monk's (2004) image of a girl wishing to distance herself from her mother and 'feminine ideals'. Matt's violence toward his stepfather (case #5) arose, in part, because of an inconsistent application of house rules by his parents, an example of what Cottrell & Monk (2004) might view as conflicting parenting styles. Matt accepted what his mother told him to do, but not his stepfather. Mutuality of aggression

⁹ Graham told the police that Matt threatened to kill him twice; Matt denies this.

¹⁰ Matt attempted to walk away from his stepfather; but when his stepfather followed Matt into his bedroom, they 'wrestled' on Matt's bed. It is not clear how fearful Matt felt during the incident, but he thought his stepfather was trying to choke him.

¹¹ It is not clear from the file what provoked Tom's ire against his sister. The police report says he spat on her because of something she said.

¹² Tom said that he struck his mother after she broke his play station controller and hit him with the broom stick.

was apparent in case #5, when Matt and his stepfather ‘wrestled’ in Matt’s bedroom and Graham held Matt by the throat. In case #2, Tom said that he struck his mother with the broom stick only after she struck him with it (although it is unclear from the file what happened). These were the only cases in which there was a dispute by a youth and parent about what had occurred.

Parents’ and Youths’ Explanations for Violence

Two mothers (cases #2 and #3) *blamed themselves* for their son’s violence, and in both cases the women had been physically abused by an adult (an ex-partner, and in case #3, both an ex-partner and current boyfriend). With just one victim interviewed (Shelia in case #3), there was too little information to know with certainty whether parent-victims felt the professionals in their cases blamed them for the violence. In Shelia’s interview, she said she did not feel she was blamed by anyone, although she believed she contributed to the violence. However, the YJC recalled that Shelia said that she did not feel believed by her ex-husband and that this made the conference process difficult. Specifically, according to the YJC, Sheila said words to this effect when speaking to her ex-husband at the conference: ‘[It’s] hard to do this, and hear you talk about it as if you still don’t believe that it happened’. Drawing from the police report and the YJC interview material, we find evidence that the professionals blamed the victims in two cases (#1 and #5, discussed below).

Three victims blamed factors as being outside the young person’s control. Anna (case #2) thought that her son was treating her the same way her ex-husband did. She thought that she was partly to blame for her son’s violence because she did not defend herself against her ex-husband’s violence. Shelia (case #3) and her ex-husband believed that Mitch had a ‘chemical imbalance’ that contributed to his violence. The YJC had another view, saying that Mitch ‘saw dad’s behaviour, learnt from it, then when dad left, Mitch took over’. Scott and his wife (case #6) blamed their son’s violence on his taking anti-depressant medication, noting that his behaviour began to deteriorate when he began to take it.

In four of six cases, the young people *blamed their behaviour on the victim or another person*. Tom (case #2), Mitch (case #3), and Sally (case #4) blamed their mother-victims for the violence, and Matt (case #5) blamed his stepfather-victim. Tom also blamed his sister. Mitch accepted some responsibility for the violence, but only after his mother said that she was partly to blame because she should not spend so much time with her boyfriend Bevan. Mitch and his father also blamed Bevan. According to the YJC, at times during the conference, Sally (case #4) made ‘references to [her mum’s] actions which she said prompted her actions’. The YJC interpreted these comments to mean that Sally believed ‘her mother had some responsibility [for her offending] from the actions that she took’. Matt (case #5) blamed his stepfather for following him into his bedroom. He said that when he is at school, he is able to walk away from situations that make him angry, but at home he could not do that with his stepfather. Matt saw his stepfather as ‘the adult who could have made the decision to stop it’. In the two cases in which the victim and offender disputed the offence ‘facts’ (cases #2 and #5), each blamed the other.

Professionals at the conference may diffuse blame. This occurred in case #5, and perhaps appropriately so, when the YJC and the police officer blamed Matt’s offending on his

stepfather, Graham. During the conference, the police officer commented on Graham's potentially illegal actions towards Matt, telling him it is 'inappropriate to put pressure on someone's throat, even if you did feel at risk. You could have quite easily said "no" and got up'. The YJC believed that Graham 'wouldn't buy that, [thinking] ... "I'm in a fight, I'll finish it"'. The YJC also thought that Graham was 'dramatizing' the offence:

I think we made it very clear about the seriousness of the event, that this was an offence which we were surprised—given the nature of the knife—that it had come to a conference ... He was receiving all that ... but then instead of leaving it at that, he was basically destroying his credibility by then taking any positives that had been gained and turning them against Matt, who was by this stage beginning to become the victim in our heads ...

Some victim-blaming by the YJC occurred in case #1. When asked if he anticipated that Carolyn, the victim, would be blamed during the conference, the YJC said 'I'm expecting there will be [by Des, her son] ... I suspect [that] mum's fairly flat tone, fairly negative tone, inside the house could be one that causes him to spark'. He thought that Carolyn's 'dynamics might be feeding the problem'. He also agreed with the arresting officer's observation that Carolyn 'did not want to help herself ... like a complainer rather than an activist'.

Disclosing and Reporting Violence

There was insufficient information to know whether any of the six parent-victims tried to hide or deny being abused by their child (or stepchild). In Table 1, variable (a) for this theme shows that in all but one case (#4), at least one other family member knew about the violence. In case #4, we have no information about Ruth's relationship with any family member except her daughter. For variable (b), two of the four female victims had told a friend about the violence (cases #2 and #3); however, we lack information on this variable for the other cases.

Victims may also hide or deny abuse by deciding not to take legal action. Although all six cases had a history of violence by the youth toward their parents, in just two had the police been called before to intervene (cases #2 and #6). First-time calls to the police by victims (or by other family members) occurred in four cases, two each in typical and atypical cases.

In all six cases, it was women who called the police. In the four cases of victim-mothers (cases #1, #2, #3, and #4), the victim left the house and contacted the police while they were away from their child. In the two victim-father cases (#5 and #6), the man's wife (and the offending youth's mother) called the police from the home.

The reasons for calling the police varied and were multiple. In two cases (#1 and #2), the mothers said they sought to change their sons' behaviour. Carolyn (case #1) believed her son 'needed some help from the authorities'. Anna (case #2) told the YJC '... she wanted him to change, and she wanted it to be miraculous'. In case #3, Shelia called the police to protect herself from her son's further abuse. She said, '[I wanted to] try and wake him up. I felt horrible doing it, but if I didn't do it, he probably would have carried on doing it, and I

couldn't handle that'. In case #4, Ruth wanted both to change her daughter's general behaviour and 'sexual precociousness' and to protect herself. In the two cases of violence against a stepfather and father (cases #5 and #6), their wives (mothers of the youths) called the police, fearing further injury. In addition, in case #5, the YJC said that although Sue did not want to see her son 'as a criminal, they had tried everything to get this kid to listen to them. When the knife was produced, that was the final straw'.

According to the YJC, in three cases, the victim wanted to see the youth punished. Anna (case #2) wanted her son 'to know the consequences: either he'd get locked up or his dad would have him. That was the punishment she wanted'. Shelia (case #3) 'wanted the conference to punish' her son. Graham (case #5) wanted his stepson to have 'the book thrown at him'. Thus, whatever the initial reasons were for calling the police, victims' desires for justice may change as the case progresses. Change was evident in Carolyn's case (#1): although she had called the police to 'get help' for her son, in time she wanted to know more about her legal rights when her son breached the conditions of his pre-conference bond. Then, about 5 weeks after the conference, her son arrived home at midnight, drunk and verbally abusive; he threw a dish and food around the house and told Carolyn to call the police, claiming that the house would be 'totally trashed' before they arrived. He had also broken into her house at least four times, taking food and clothing.¹³ Carolyn detailed these incidents in a letter to the YJC, which led to her son being breached by the police for failing to comply with the conference agreement. When a breach of the agreement is recorded, the police have discretion to refer the original charges back to court. They did so in this case, but a year later the charges were dismissed in court.

Subsequent Offending

Table 1 shows re-offending, as recorded by the South Australian police, during a 3-year period (up to December 2004) for all six cases.¹⁴ In two typical cases (#1 and #2), the young person committed another family violence offence: Des against his mother and Tom against his father. Tom committed other property damage and assault offences over the next few years (some of which may have been family-related, but the file is not clear); these resulted in a sentence of 8 months to serve in detention. In atypical case #4, Sally admitted to committing six larceny offences, but it is unknown if any of these were family-related. In atypical case #6, Dan had two cases finalized in the youth court in 2003: one for property damage and another for trespass and carrying a weapon, but it is unknown if any of these were family-related. Of all six youth, the pattern of offending for Tom (typical case #2) was the most developed and entrenched. For two (typical case #3 and atypical case #5), the police record showed no offending post-conference; and for three (typical case #1 and atypical cases #4 and #6), there was post-conference offending, but it ended in 2003.

¹³ After the conference, although Des intermittently stayed at his mother's house, he was under strict conditions not to enter the house drunk or without her permission. Based on information in the file, Des did not have a key to the house, and thus, could only enter when his mother was there. The YJC also said that Carolyn locked her bedroom door.

¹⁴ We do not have information on officially recorded offending outside the state.

Summary and Implications

Our analysis of typical and atypical cases of adolescent-to-parent violence reveals similarities and differences. The cases were similar in that a particular violent episode is part of a broader and longer-term pattern: the youth had abused the parent in the past, and conflicts and violence featured in the relationship for over a year (except one case, which was shorter). In case #2, Anna described the abuse as having gone on 'always'. In all but one case, the youths' parents had separated. In all cases where information was available, other family members knew of the violence. There was too little information to say if victims hid the violence from friends. In two cases, disclosure to friends was mentioned; both were typical cases.

The cases differed in these ways. All the victims (mothers) in the typical cases, but none of those in the atypical cases (a mother, stepfather, and father) had been abused by an ex-partner.¹⁵ Case #5 was somewhat unusual in that the Sue (the wife of the victim in the current incident) and her son had likely experienced abuse by her former husband. All the youths in the typical cases, but just one in the atypical cases (#5) had likely been abused by their fathers and witnessed violence against their mother in the home. In one typical case (#2), it was suspected that the boy's father had also sexually abused his daughter. For all the typical cases, there was current conflict between the biological parents, but this was not apparent (or not known) in the atypical cases (although there was some negativity expressed by a mother toward her ex-partner in case #5). Two victims in the typical cases (#2 and #3) blamed themselves (in part) for the violence, whereas none of those in the atypical cases did.

We found that female victims in the three typical cases and one atypical case (#4) had experienced controlling violence from their son or daughter, with two including threats of murder. None of the male victims experienced controlling violence. A recursive pattern of violence appeared more often in the typical than atypical cases, and with it, a 'recursive trap' (Daly & Nancarrow, 2010: 169), when mothers blame themselves for (or, in some cases, are immobilized by) their sons' violence. Although all six cases had a history of violence between the youth and parent, the typical cases had compounding influences of abuse by male ex-partners towards mothers and their sons.

No clear pattern of similarities or differences was evident for other variables. Mutual aggression was apparent in an atypical case (#5) and perhaps in typical case #2, although this is uncertain. For explanations of violence, parent-victims believed it was outside a youth's control in three cases (two typical and one atypical), and youths blamed the victim in four cases (two typical and two atypical cases); and in two typical cases, they also blamed others. Parent-victims (or their partners) had mixed reasons for calling the police: to help a youth, to 'wake up' a youth, to protect themselves, and to prevent further injury. A parent-victim's interest to see a youth punished was inferred by the YJC in three cases (two typical cases and an atypical one).

The implications for police and criminal justice responses to adolescent-to-parent violence are several. First, an incident of adolescent-to-parent violence may be reported to the police

¹⁵ There was no information on the file in case #4 to know if Ruth had been abused by her former husband.

for the 'first time', but the offending has been occurring for a long time. Second, justice responses (whether by conference or court actions) alone cannot repair or resolve longstanding conflicts and abuse in families, which require psychological counselling and related types of support and intervention. Third, the gender dynamics in these cases are consistent: mothers are more likely to be victims of controlling violence than fathers.

When a particular episode of violence is reported to the police and is referred to a conference or to court, it must be carefully considered. Is the current incident a type of controlling violence, or is it more situational or reactive? If the latter, is the offence embedded in a pattern of controlling violence? In general, controlling violence may require a greater degree of care, concern, and preparation in legal and therapeutic responses; and it may also require a greater degree of intervention or monitoring.

However, our analysis of post-conference offending finds no clear or consistent pattern that relates to controlling or reactive violence. Of the four cases of controlling violence against mothers, two had subsequent family violence offending; one had larceny offences, but we cannot say if any were family-related; and one had no offending at all. Of the two cases of reactive violence, one case had property damage, trespass, and weapons offences, but we cannot say if any were family-related; and one had no offending at all. With just six cases, our ability to generalize is constrained. More research on a larger set of typical and atypical cases is required to understand the complex and recursive dynamics of adolescent-to-parent violence, their implications for legal and therapeutic responses, and their relationship to subsequent re-offending.

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Table 1. Themes and variables in typical and atypical cases of adolescent-to-parent violence

Themes and variables	Typical			Atypical		
	#1 Vic: Carolyn Off: Des	#2 Vic: Anna Off: Tom	#3 Vic: Shelia Off: Mitch	#4 Vic: Ruth Off: Sally	#5 Vic: Graham Off: Matt	#6 Vic: Scott Off: Dan
(1) Familial Contexts						
a) History of abuse of victim by adult	yes (inferred)	yes	yes	no	no	no
b) History of abuse of offender by adult	yes (inferred)	yes	yes	no	yes	no
c) History of abuse of victim by offender	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
d) Length of abuse by offender is > 12 months	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
e) Youth's parents were separated	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
f) Current conflict between youth's biological mother and father	yes	yes	yes	unknown	no (but some negativity)	no
(2) Types of Violence						
a) Type of violence (this incident)	controlling	reactive (pattern of controlling)	controlling	controlling	reactive	reactive
b) Mutual physical aggression (this incident)	no	maybe	no	no	yes	no
c) Dispute between the victim and offender over the offence 'facts' (this incident)	no	yes	no	no	yes	no
(3) Parents' and youths' explanations for violence						
a) Victim blamed her/himself for violence	no	yes	yes	no	no	no
b) Victim believed violence was outside youth's control	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes
c) Youth blamed parent	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
d) Youth blamed another	no	yes	yes	no	no	no
e) Professional blamed victim	yes	no	no	no	yes	no

(4) Disclosing and Reporting Violence						
a) Other family members knew about the violence	yes	yes	yes	unknown	yes	yes
b) A friend knew about the violence	unknown	yes	yes	unknown	unknown	unknown
c) The police been called previously for the youth's behaviour	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
d) Primary reason police were called (this incident)	change youth's behaviour	change youth's behaviour	protect self and 'wake up' youth	change youth's behaviour and protect self	prevent injury and 'wake up' youth	prevent injury
e) The victim wanted to see the youth punished (according to the YJC)	no	yes	yes	no	yes	no
(5) Reoffending¹⁶						
(a) Youth committed another family violence offence after the conference, during a 3-year follow-up period, based on official police records in South Australia	yes (considerable to same victim, within 5 weeks)	yes (father and other family member within 18 months)	no	no	no	no
(b) Youth committed other offences (not directed to family members) after the conference, during a 3-year follow-up period, based on official police records in South Australia	no	yes (considerable offending to non-family and perhaps family members, including property damage and assaults; sentenced to serve 8 months)	no	yes (larceny offences within 15 months; not known if family-related)	no	yes (property damage a year later, then trespass and carrying weapon 7 months later; not known if family-related)

¹⁶ Criminal history data were provided by the South Australian police up to 3 December 2004, which gave a 3-year window of time post-conference to assess re-offending known to the police. The data were a complete record of official youth (or adult) offending in South Australia, but did not include offending known to police outside the state.

Appendix 1: Case Background

Case #1: Carolyn and Des

Carolyn is the sole parent of Des, having separated from Des's father some years ago. Des was meant to stay at his father's house the night of the offence because Carolyn did not want him in her home. Although his father agreed to this, Des refused to go. Des's relationship with his father has 'broken down': he does not want to live at his father's house, and his father has 'younger children from a new relationship'.

Case #2: Anna and Tom

At the time of the offence, Anna and her husband had been separated for 18 months. They have been engaged in a bitter and complicated property settlement with significant assets. Anna's ex-husband is physically violent towards Tom. Anna thought that if Tom lived with his father, he would appreciate her more. Her primary concern is her daughter Tina, whom she sees as the 'real' victim. Anna believes her ex-husband has sexually abused Tina and is trying to take her away from Anna. Anna has contacted the police before about Tom's behaviour, but never wished to make a formal complaint. On this occasion, she reported the offence to the police, but again did not wish to make a formal complaint. Rather, she asked the police to escort her home. When they arrived, a family friend was there who said there was 'family friction in the household'. Tom was arrested soon after.

Case #3: Shelia and Mitch

Up until the day after the conference, Shelia spent time with her boyfriend Bevan, who was physically abusive towards her. However, during her interview she said she had separated from Bevan the day after the conference because he had hit her 'for the first time'. According to the YJC, Shelia's son Mitch 'hates Bevan ... [When] everything goes wrong for Mitch, Bevan's behind it'. Mitch told the police that he was trying to frighten his mother into staying at home because she was always going to Bevan's house and did not spend enough time with him. At first, Shelia did not want the police to refer the case to a conference. However, she was grateful later that Mitch did not have to go to court and potentially incur a criminal conviction.

Case #4: Ruth and Sally

Ruth has been concerned about her daughter Sally's behaviour for some time, particularly her 'sexual precociousness', 'mixing with' older men, and disappearing (sometimes for a week) with men and having sex with them. During the conference, the YJC recalled that Sally told her mother to 'answer the question' when she 'would go off on a tangent', and that when Sally was asked what she wanted to do in the future, she said, not to be 'a criminal' like her mother (there is no information on the file on her mother's offending, if this occurred). Sally could be 'eloquent and prepared to engage in discussion', but according to the YJC, she tried to 'prove her place as an adult ... as a much older person than she actually

chronologically is'. Sally does not seem to respect her mother; she wants greater liberty and autonomy.

Case #5: Graham and Matt

Graham has been living with Sue and her son Matt for over 3 years, since Matt was 13. Matt's behaviour towards Graham has, in the words of the YJC, been 'outrageous' for about 18 months. Matt has a brother, 4 years younger. The YJC thinks there is 'favouritism because the younger brother does everything he's told, when he's told. He's the glowing light ...' Further, the YJC believed it was 'pretty evident that there was this dynamic between Graham and Matt, which meant that they only had to look at each other or smell each other and the buttons were being pushed ...' The YJC thought that Matt had a lot of expectations placed on him about how he should behave, but 'no one had actually told him what those expectations were'. When there were inconsistency in the rules and expectations, Matt would do what his mother said and tell Graham that he did not have to listen to him because he was not his father.

Case 6: Scott and Dan

Dan lives with his mother (Leah) and father (Scott, the victim). Dan was close to his grandmother (Scott's mother), but she was 'fairly well ostracized by Leah', in the words of the YJC. Leah was the foster child of Scott's mother (that is, Leah's mother-in-law is also her foster mother), although the file does not say when she became part of Scott's family. Leah and Scott had 'put [Dan's bad behaviour] down to his medication', according to the YJC. About 4 months before the offence, Dan started taking anti-depressants. His behaviour had become difficult around this time, and the incident in this case was the last in a string of offences that occurred during a 4-week period.