




“If not Mine, She Won’t Belong to Another”: Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in a Femicide Perpetrator from Brazil

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Abstract

Case files can show how aggressors use different explanations to reduce the seriousness of their crime. We aimed to identify and categorize a 2016 Brazilian case file from a perpetrator of femicide, based on moral disengagement theory. Content analysis yielded 47 verbalized excerpts, with 70 disengagement occurrences. The most frequently used mechanisms throughout the aggressor’s speeches consisted of moral justification and blaming the victim herself. Results indicated that he reduced the seriousness of the femicide and sought reduction of the consequences. We discuss how speeches in criminal cases can serve as a secondary source for producing data on violence.

Keywords

content analysis, femicide, social cognitive theory, violence against women

Jealousy and fear of abandonment stand out as the main reasons for homicide perpetration between couples (Serran & Firestone, 2004; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019), whether intimate partners or ex-partners. On one hand,

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even though both men and women attack and kill in intimate relationships, physical or psychological violence is usually a more masculine control strategy (Campbell, 1992; Dobash & Dobash, 2017). Obsessive passion and possessiveness, which fuel escalation that can result in homicide, are highly correlated, and women have commonly been the main victims (DeWall et al., 2007). Violence against women is associated with possessiveness, domination, and a belief system that allows men, the perpetrators of violence, sometimes to minimize the violence committed (Hearn, 1998), and, at other times, to attribute responsibility for the aggressions to the victim (Beiras et al., 2020). Explanatory narratives of femicide aggressors are rarely studied. However, these are of unique importance to the scientific field, as well as the life history of these aggressors, allowing a better understanding of violent behavior, the characteristics of the victims, and relevant contextual variables (Di Marco, 2018). Male aggressors' narratives often bring distorted explanations to subtly try to attenuate violent acts, as well as argue that the violence was an isolated situation, an unusual incident, and a convenient reduction (Hearn, 1998).

In fact, cases in which victims of femicide had once been victims of abuse by their partners are typical (Hayes et al., 2017); nevertheless, for various reasons, there is under-reporting to the authorities. One of the ways to reduce this type of violence is to make precautionary measures more effective and to provide individual-level interventions (Krahé, 2018). Another preventive approach involving the reeducation of male perpetrators of violence, for example, in reflective groups, in which they are made aware of their responsibility for their behavior and are made mindful of their mistakes, has been a strategy with positive results (Beiras et al., 2019). The provision of specific police services and reception services on days and times with the highest incidence of violence can also contribute to interrupting the cycle of aggression, which normally ends with lethality (Dobash & Dobash, 2011). The intersectionality of social representations, cultural constructs, and historical contexts, such as the sense of control and the deconstruction of norms that endorse and legitimize violence based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status, must be at the core of studies on violence against women (Daly et al., 1982; DeWall et al., 2017; Ferreira & Bonfá-Araujo, 2021). Hence, it seems essential that the characteristics of crimes also be investigated using case files themselves.

The purpose of the present article is to analyze the speeches of an individual perpetrator convicted of the crime of femicide; we analyze the case file from a jury court, having Bandura's (2002) moral disengagement theory as a reference. It is an approach that enables us to investigate mainly the psychological mechanisms used by the perpetrator to try to justify to himself and to others an action that is clearly immoral. The model allows the elaboration of categories of a priori analysis in which the conceptual definitions of disengagement mechanisms guide the framing of the statements. A considerable number of studies in psychology and related fields have revealed how offenders systematically seek ways of explaining their behavior that not only remove feelings of guilt, but also mitigate the negative consequences (Shalvi et al., 2015). Femicide today has a specific legal provision and strong public opinion in

the Brazilian context; identifying the arguments of criminals themselves is strategic for research and crime prevention.

Femicide in Brazil and Sociocultural Conditions

Brazil was ranked fifth when considering 83 countries' femicide rates, with 4.8 femicides per 100,000 women in 2013; three other Latin American countries (El Salvador [8.9], Colombia [6.3] and Guatemala [6.2]) as well as Russia (5.3) had higher rates (Waiselfisz, 2015). Although femicide is a term coined in 1976 (Corradi et al., 2016), the crime of femicide was incorporated into the Brazilian law almost 40 years later, with the advent of Law Number 13.104/2015 (Law n° 13.104, 2015), which amended an article in the Brazilian Penal Code. It represented the inclusion of a paragraph according to which homicide is aggravated when it is committed with contempt or discrimination to the condition of being a woman. In the year following the amendment, 4,645 femicides were registered in Brazil (Institute of Applied Economic Research [IPEA] & Brazilian Forum on Public Security [FBSP], 2018). Even though the data are already high, they are still considered to be underestimates, given that the registration is usually less reliable in several smaller municipalities or municipalities located further away from large urban centers (Meneghel et al., 2017).

Men who commit femicides, as well as those victimized by their partners, usually have a criminal record for domestic violence (Belknap et al., 2012). The first three months after the end of an intimate relationship are pointed out by studies as the period of greatest risk for lethal aggression (Brownridge et al., 2008; Wilson & Daly, 1993). It is also noteworthy that there is no evidence that points to the occurrence of specific psychiatric pathologies in men who commit femicide (UNODC, 2019). This suggests the strategic importance of knowing more about circumstantial factors than about dispositional ones in the escalation that leads to femicide. Thus, analyses of this phenomenon must consider variables on the macro, meso, and micro levels, from culture to intraindividual elements. In this study, we focus on the micro level (i.e., statements made by a perpetrator and his lawyers during trial), analyzing possible individual-level explanations and patterns.

Society's value systems are reflected in the degree of tolerance and acceptance of violence against women, creating contexts favorable or unfavorable for aggressive behaviors (Krahé, 2018). Many men act in an aggressive manner more automatically in the face of an intimate relationship rejection, with indications that the male belief in the defense of honor (or reputation) is linked to harmful behaviors (Saucier & McManus, 2014; Stratmoen et al., 2018). The internalization of beliefs about male honor generates attitudes that facilitate violent behavioral responses, reinforcing the feeling of insult and offense in response to rejection or infidelity (even if only assumed) (Rodriguez-Mosquera et al., 2002). Vandello and Cohen (2008) also showed that violence contributes to the stereotype that a good woman is faithful and submissive to the man, wholly loyal to the family, and, above all, morally and sexually pure. The ideas that violence can help restore a man's honor, and perhaps prevent infidelity in the relationship follow from this stereotype (Vandello & Cohen, 2003).

In Brazil, violence related to jealousy is still socially accepted as a defense of male honor and as maintenance of female submission (Costa et al., 2016). In a study with Brazilian and Honduran samples, the authors found that controlling the partner's behaviors, such as monitoring the telephone and social networks, choosing clothes, and restricting friendships were common (Taylor et al., 2017). Furthermore, jealousy and fear of infidelity are among the main risk factors in intimate relationships between young people, supported by nonprescribed norms that naturalize and consolidate inequitable gender roles, as well as forced sex (Taylor et al., 2017).

Law Number 11.340 (Law n° 11.340, 2006), known as the "Maria da Penha Law," created mechanisms aimed at preventing and ameliorating domestic and family violence against women and, apparently, sought to equalize this cultural endorsement by legal coercion. Nonetheless, Nothhaft and Beiras (2019) showed, through a national literature review, that there is a distorted common sense about this Law as if it were a form of female privilege. This also creates a risk of violence naturalization in intimate relationships, minimizing the consequences of aggression and imputing bad faith to the victims (self-victimization).

Bandura's Moral Disengagement Model

According to Bandura (1999), people, in general, are morally engaged and, in most situations, follow social norms and standards, which is obviously a more advantageous behavior. It is also possible to assimilate and naturalize inappropriate conduct, so that there are no feelings of guilt. In other words, when committing transgressions, people do not lose their moral standards, nor are they necessarily immoral; they just conveniently disengage from their moral standards (Bandura, 2002). In his cognitive social theory, Bandura predicts that autonomy and intentionality guide individuals' moral agency, which can function as a force that inhibits antisocial behaviors or stimulate prosocial behaviors. Hence, there are structures that are self-organizing, self-reflective, and self-regulating, from which attitudes can be scrutinized and from which behaviors can be delimited and restricted to maintain coherence with moral standards. These structures serve mainly to maintain a positive self-image and to manage a positive evaluation by others (Alexandra, 2019). The sociological theory of techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) posits that five types of justifications are used to neutralize the negativity of deviant behavior: denial of responsibility; denial of injury; denial of the victim; condemnation of the condemners; and appeal to higher loyalties. Despite their overlapping descriptions, however, Bandura's disengagement model is usually applied to a broader context of life than the theory of techniques of neutralization, which is more specifically focused on deviant behavior, motive, and motivation.

The moral disengagement model stands out for not presenting classifications or psychological types, because it focuses more on situational processes, rather than on dispositional characteristics. Although personality traits can be predictors of disengagement (see Moore, 2015 for a review), self-regulatory behavior occurs through mechanisms that can be selectively deactivated or conveniently adapted. It has already been found, for

instance, that they are influenced by variables such as empathy, locus of control, cynicism (Detert et al., 2008), “forgetting” rules (Shu et al., 2011), anxiety (Chugh et al., 2014), and recognition/defensiveness (Wenzel et al., 2020).

From the theoretical matrix more formally systematized by Bandura (1986), the disengagement model presents eight mechanisms that are characterized by reinterpreting reprehensible conduct or by minimizing its effects, by blaming victims, or even by distorting responsibilities: (1) moral justification—reconstruction of meanings of harmful/antisocial conduct, making it intimately acceptable and excusable; (2) palliative comparison—reduction of harmful results from damaging/antisocial conduct by comparing them with more serious ones; (3) euphemistic labeling—use of alternative words and linguistic resources to mitigate harmful conduct and consequences; (4) minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences—the claim that a harmful act or its harmful consequences can be ignored because they are intended for the good; (5) dehumanization—adoption of disqualifying attitudes towards people, attributing to them characteristics of objects or animals, unworthy of deference or equal treatment; (6) attribution of blame—self-pity with respect to one’s harmful/antisocial acts, whether by exempting oneself or by blaming a person (the victim) for the suffered misfortune; (7) displacement of responsibility—resorting to the idea that the blame or responsibility for one’s own actions is due to other people or to situational circumstances; and (8) diffusion of responsibility—the argument that other individuals, through action or pressure, also participated (or, at least would do the same in a similar situation) (Bandura et al., 1996).

Although there is a profusion of research on moral disengagement that examines various themes involving transgression (Bandura, 2016), the literature does not seem to have focused more specifically on cases of femicide. The mechanisms have already been investigated, for instance, on similarly complex issues involving death, such as the execution of prisoners (Osofsky et al., 2005) and terrorists (Bandura, 2004). However, regarding aggressions against women, studies have focused more on the crime of rape (D’Urso et al., 2019) and sexual harassment at work (Page & Pina, 2018), but not the more extreme violence of murder by a partner. In Brazil, studies of moral disengagement are still scarce and those that have examined moral disengagement have been limited to traffic violations (Neto et al., 2012), corporate crimes (Medeiros et al., 2018), and bullying (Silva et al., 2020).

Analysis of Case Files as a Research Technique

In a systematic review of the Brazilian production of empirical studies on violence against women in the field of psychology between the years 2013 and 2017, Curia et al. (2020) reported that 13 of them adopted a more qualitative approach, 11 a more quantitative approach, and five a mixed-methods approach. They also showed that there is a myriad of techniques, such as interviews, psychometric instruments, document analysis, and experience reports. In this review and others, case files are not often used as direct sources for obtaining and analyzing offenders’ speeches, arguments, and narratives. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Bender (2017), analysis of case

files is a very promising approach in the area of aggression and violence between intimate partners. In theory, the inputs from case files contain elements capable of allowing the understanding of events, such as femicide, from the victim's perspective as well as from the perpetrator's perspective. The use of case files as a research data source, in fact, is consolidated in criminology, since careful reading of case files allows the researcher to reveal the logic and the inferred coding of words (Oliveira & Silva, 2005)—something that should be used more in criminal psychology.

Turato (2011) uses the term clinical-qualitative research method to describe and understand the relationship between senses and meanings of human phenomena. Hence, the content analysis method was chosen because it allows the apprehension of explicit and implicit contents from text excerpts related to the perpetrator's speech and that of his attorney. This method allows inferences that make it possible to fit the meanings in the analysis categories according to the theoretical assumptions guiding the present study.

Method

Sample Case

We performed the analysis using the transcription of speeches made during a trial of an offender who was eventually convicted of the crime of femicide, registered in the case file from a jury court. The material contained 957 pages divided into four volumes, organized into four files with complete transcription of the oral media.

The femicide was perpetrated by a 19-year-old Brazilian man against his 20-year-old ex-girlfriend in 2016. The perpetrator lured her into a room at the university where they were both studying, with the subterfuge that he was going to commit suicide that day, but first he had to say goodbye to her. In the court records, he reports that days before, he planned and prepared the space, reserving it for an alleged photosensitive scientific experiment, which, according to witnesses, allowed him to obstruct all the windowpanes without raising suspicion. He reported using a cloth with chloroform causing the victim to faint (introducing chloroform into the victim's mouth, which, according to a legal report, caused asphyxia and death), undressing her soon after. He stated that he had an erection, even putting on a condom, but did not sexually abuse her. He tied the victim's arms and legs to a chair (sitting) and spent a few hours with her in the room. Afterward, he walked around town and came back to hide her body. He covered her body with an inflatable mattress and used a university cart to move it to the parking lot, where, without arousing suspicion from other students, he placed the body in the backseat of a car. Minutes later, he dumped the body in an area of greenery near the university campus, returning to his house normally. The body was found on campus the next morning by military police.

Instruments and Procedures

A formal request to access the case file was registered at the Gender Center of a State Public Ministry. After approval and referral to the Jury Court, researchers' access was granted through a restricted link and a commitment to maintaining confidentiality of personal information of those involved. We then performed free readings individually for full knowledge of file contents, general contextualization of facts, and apprehension of implicit/explicit speech contents. We followed the three standard steps of a content analysis (i.e., [1] preexploration phase; [2] selection of unities phase; [3] categorization phase), where (1) refers to the nonstructural reading and getting to know the material; (2) involves selection of specific information to be analyzed; and (3) involves categorization according to the specific plan, in our case Bandura's theory. Impressions were discussed and the content was systematized for analysis (Campos, 2004; Campos & Turato, 2009). The thematic categories were defined, a priori, according to recommendations by Bandura (2015) to codify moral disengagement mechanisms, based also on the concepts and descriptions adapted to the Brazilian context by Iglesias (2008).

Recurrent readings allowed us to select, categorize, and justify the excerpts from the case file, considering the explicit message and the unapparent meanings. The units of analysis comprised one or more sequential sentences that presented arguments and meanings consistent with the defined categories. All excerpts extracted from the case file were transcribed in full to a spreadsheet, within the thematic categories, with respective identification of the speaker and extraction location (case file part, volume, and page).

First, data provided by the perpetrator and his lawyers were separated. However, since the speeches were intertwined to construct an argumentative articulation and reflect a united technical–legal defense, we opted to analyze their information as an aggregate. The selected excerpts were also transferred to an online form, whose link was made available to three volunteer experts invited to read, evaluate, and classify each semantic content of the sentences in one or more moral disengagement mechanisms. Comparing the initial categorization with experts' responses showed unanimity regarding at least one mechanism. Another four excerpts were categorized differently, and in their final categorization, those indicated by the experts were adopted.

Results

Content analysis resulted in the identification of 46 relevant excerpts in the case file, which represented seven moral disengagement mechanisms, in six different parts of the case file. Some excerpts were classified in more than one category, registering a total of 70 representations of moral disengagement mechanisms. The data are shown in Table 1. We verified that moral justification ($n = 30$) and attribution of blame ($n = 27$) were the most recurrent mechanisms in the excerpts, sometimes in an overlapping way (e.g., “the defendant acted impelled by the emotion triggered by the victim's unjust provocation,” Defense, Appeal Opening Brief, vol. 4, p. 98).

Table 1. Excerpts and Moral Disengagement (MD) Mechanisms by Case File Parts.

Case file part	Number of excerpts	Number of MD mechanisms
Reinterrogation term	5	7
Defendant's interrogation term	1	1
Interrogation term	18	23
Appeal final brief	6	11
Appeal opening brief	11	20
Appeal second brief	4	7
Unnamed part	1	1
Total	46	70

Minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences ($n = 3$) was used only in excerpts attributed to defense attorneys, which fits a line of legal defense to reduce the verdict. Through this moral disengagement mechanism, there was an attempt to attribute suffering to the perpetrator (e.g., "I would say that the defendant, as well as the victim, had his life devastated and exposed, the defendant's life is also ended, he has no prospect for the future. He is still in a hurricane"; "The greatest penalty he could suffer, he has already been paying since the day [date he was arrested], seeing his family destroyed as well as his future, from a promising boy to a detainee," Defense, Appeal Second Brief, vol. 4, p. 122).

The euphemistic labeling mechanism ($n = 5$) has a subtler expression; it is a resource frequently used in the Brazilian context. One of the examples was registered in the interrogation term of the instruction and trial hearing, when the perpetrator was asked to explicitly report his conduct before the jurors, his relatives, and the victim's relatives. This situation may have generated a certain embarrassment that needed, in some way, to be circumvented by milder ways of mentioning the act of killing: "At the end, we ended up ... she acted with much indifference, ignoring what I was saying, acting with disdain, I ended up losing my mind and oh, I did it, I ended up doing" (Defendant, Interrogation Term, vol. 3, pp. 278–279).

Diffusion of responsibility ($n = 3$) and displacement of responsibility ($n = 1$), although distinct mechanisms, occurred in an overlapping way. In an excerpt, it is possible to explicitly identify the manifestation of the two mechanisms: "(...), therefore, it is perfectly reasonable for the family to have a feeling of helplessness and fear, a fact that should not be attributed exclusively to the Defendant. The fact is that the homicide committed by the Defendant is an isolated fact in his life, a tragedy of epic proportions not only for the victim and her family, but also for the Defendant and his family" (Defense, Appeal Second Brief, vol. 4, p. 121).

With respect to dehumanization ($n = 2$), it essentially concerns the attribution of characteristics of things or animals to a person. Therefore, one facet of this mechanism is the suppression of the victim's name or the use of generic pronouns to refer to the victim. In the excerpts, the perpetrator referred to the victim in ways that ignored her condition as a person: "(...) then I stopped, looked at all that, tried to dress her

Table 2. Moral Disengagement, Representative Excerpts, and Frequency in the Case File.

Type of disengagement	N
Moral justification “[...] he felt an absurd rage, a rage that he thinks was accumulating and ‘broke out’; he felt abandoned and despised, and that was ‘hammering, hammering’” (Interrogation Term, vol. 1, p. 59)	29
Attribution of blame “[...] she acted with much indifference, ignoring what I was saying, acting with disdain, I ended up losing my mind and oh, I did it, I ended up doing (Interrogation Term, vol. 3, pp. 278–279)	27
Dehumanization “[...] I need to get rid of this” (Interrogation Term, vol. 4, p. 13)	2
Minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences “The fact is that the homicide committed [...] is an isolated fact in his life, a tragedy of epic proportions not only for the victim and her family, but also for [him] and his family” (Appeal Second Brief, vol. 4, p. 121)	3
Euphemistic labeling “[...] I ended up externalizing everything” (Interrogation Term, vol. 4, p. 31)	5
Diffusion of responsibility “She was always making decisions concerning the relationship [...], at the moment of the homicide, there was a feeling of control, which was very good, but it hurts remembering that (Reinterrogation Term, vol. 1, p. 59)	2
Displacement of responsibility “[until we broke up the relationship] I was already starting to look for jobs, for studying, it was getting tougher, I was starting to take civil service exams and everything, so everything was, everything was very closed [...]” (Interrogation Term, vol. 4, p. 29)	1
Palliative comparison	0

again, I put on just the underwear, which was hard to be put on, then I said no, I’ll leave it like this” (Defendant, Interrogation Term, vol. 4, p. 13). Table 2 describes the number of times that each moral disengagement mechanism was identified in the case file, with representative examples. In addition to statements presented in this article, we provide supplemental material containing all the phrases identified in the analyses, keeping the original language and its English translation.

The distinction between the mechanisms of attribution of blame and displacement of responsibility was possible, based on the focus given by the perpetrator. When he referred to the victim’s agency, it was categorized as attribution of blame. When he referred to circumstances or external pressures, it was categorized as displacement of responsibility: “In the first days, we maintained normal contact, but she was a little more distant, her personality was slightly altered, until we broke up the relationship” (Defendant, Interrogation Term, vol. 3, p. 272); “(...) as well as the fact that I was already starting to look for jobs, for studying, it was getting tougher, I was starting to take civil service exams and everything, so everything was, everything was very closed like that” (Defendant, Interrogation Term, vol. 4, p. 29).

The criterion used to distinguish the mechanism of attribution of blame and the mechanism of moral justification was that, for the former, the perpetrator considers that the circumstances are caused by the victim's actions and omissions and, for the latter, the perpetrator resorts to his own emotions and feelings to justify his actions: "When I returned, I tried to contact her, she was always avoiding me, until once I went to her building to try to meet her and ask what, what was happening, she ended up acting, I believe, in a very impulsive way, she even mistreated me (...)" (Defendant, Interrogation Term, vol. 3, p. 273); "He did not premeditate the murder, but, during the conversation, he felt an absurd rage, a rage that he thinks was accumulating and 'broke out'; he felt abandoned and despised, and that was 'hammering, hammering,' (...) during the relationship, he got disappointed several times with her, having internalized the disappointments and rage (...) she was always making decisions concerning the relationship, which was allowed (...) in order not to hurt her; at the moment of the homicide, there was a feeling of control, which was very good at the moment (...)" (Defendant, Reinterrogation Term, vol. 1, pp. 59–60).

To categorize excerpts whether as moral justification or as displacement of responsibility, one aspect that mobilized the first discussions regarding morality parameters was the understanding of what would be classified within each of the two units of this topic. The phrase "(...) he killed because he was in a moment of rage" (Defendant, Defendant's Interrogation Term, vol. 2, p. 86) can be categorized within several mechanisms. Depending on the parameter adopted, it can be understood as displacement of responsibility and, in this sense, the cause is attributed to momentary rage. Nevertheless, rage is resulting from the perpetrator's interpretation according to which, by not dealing with the fact that his "love" was not being reciprocated as he wished, he is dominated by rage and acts with lethal violence against the victim, which makes his subsequent explanation consistent with the category of moral justification:

She acted with indifference, just ok, cool, live your life, I will live mine, then she said: "oh, let me at least say goodbye to you," and the moment that she hugged me, I felt the cold, angry with her at that moment, because she was simply despising me, she despised me the entire time, every time I would meet her, she would ignore me (...)
(Defendant, Interrogation Term, vol. 3, p. 280)

Discussion

The intention to kill due to unwillingness to accept the end of an intimate relationship can lead perpetrators to concealment and premeditated femicide. In this article, the files of a femicide case were analyzed based on the moral disengagement mechanisms proposed by Bandura (1991), considering the perpetrator's statements and those of his defense attorneys. Content analysis allowed us to identify the arguments used by the perpetrator and by his attorneys when they sought exemption or reduction of responsibility for the consequences of an intentional lethal aggression. Initially, the perpetrator's speeches and those of his lawyers were considered separately, but they were soon found to reflect, together, an argumentative articulation to promote a technical–legal

defense; therefore, they were subsequently treated in aggregate. On several occasions, the perpetrator argued that he was the victim of unfair suffering and that his lethal aggression was due to his victim's violations and emotional neglect. The mechanisms of moral justification and attribution of blame were the most recurrent.

The results also indicated that the perpetrator was able to be guided by his own logic to act and to justify the lethal aggression. In the case file, the report shows that the crime took place exactly in the third month after the end of the relationship, which the literature points out is the period of the greatest risk for femicide (Campbell et al., 2003; UNODC, 2019). Feeling offended or humiliated by the victim and the need to reestablish one's honor are, in fact, among the main motivations, as verified by Borges and Alencar (2009). People who commit homicide, in general, judge it as wrong to kill someone when analyzing other people's conduct, but they tend to consider acceptable reasons when referring to their own homicides.

There are indications that the perpetrator exercised what Campbell and Muncer (1987) point out as the preservation or restoration of male honor. The alleged intransigence and reluctance of the victim not to meet the perpetrator's expectations of love, according to his perspective, hurt his self-esteem and needed to be repelled. Similar to the study of Taylor et al. (2017), we found evidence that men have dissonant attitudes when recognizing inappropriate intimidation and sexual coercion of others, but not their own behaviors. The perpetrator in this case analyzed somehow evoked this reasoning: "Violation of a principle is more serious than violating a norm" (Defense, Appeal Opening Brief Interrogation Term, vol. 4, p. 106). This sentence indicates that the perpetrator sought to justify his femicide by arguing that the victim's nonreciprocity for his feelings was more serious than the crime. This excerpt also reflects the view of the male I's described by Hearn (1998), in which men tend to produce narratives sometimes as the subject of action (i.e., in the first person or I and/or me), and other times as an observer of the subject (i.e., he), constituting a way to distance themselves from responsibility for the violence.

Our findings seem to corroborate the reports of Di Marco and Evans (2020), which analyzed narratives of femicide, reporting that speeches of perpetrators are shaped by sociocultural elements in which the idea that hegemonic masculinity (i.e., attitudes that support male dominance) endorses and naturalizes beliefs and attitudes, mostly prevails. Thus, the intimate partner is seen as a mere object that, if they cannot belong to the perpetrator, will not belong to anyone else. That is why most of the arguments have coalesced in the categories of moral justification and attribution of blame. These findings reflect, in part, the perpetrator's inability to deal with rejection and the understanding that the woman is responsible for his misfortune, that is, the one responsible for the partner's violent reaction. In Brazil and many other countries, the process of criminalizing this type of violence involves overcoming an old but still often supported view of "legitimate defense of honor" (Andrade & Matos Almeida, 2017).

The perpetrator systematically sought to claim that he acted violently because of the emotional suffering that the victim had caused him. In the categorization of excerpts, attribution of blame was considered when the perpetrator conferred responsibility for his actions on the victim. On the hand, we classified it as displacement of responsibility

when he referred to external pressures, that is, without mentioning the victim. On the other hand, we assume that the absence of any type of physical aggression, her life being taken by lethal violence, and the conditions in which the killing occurred may have served as inhibitors for the use of the mechanism palliative comparison. In this case, it seems almost impossible to find arguments that demonstrate a possible palliative comparison to reduce the seriousness of the femicide. Hearn (1998) previously reported very similar discursive variations when reporting the three artifices that men use to describe their violence: the subject/object relationship (the most common), exemplified by the phrase "I hit her"; the description of a reciprocal process, exemplified by "We were fighting each other"; and the abstraction of violence as something spontaneous (endowed with its own agency that affects men), exemplified by "It just happened," something similar to the various excerpts identified in the case under analysis: "She gave a hug, a fact that triggered a rage" (Response to Accusation, vol. 2, p. 218).

According to Bandura's theory (2015), moral disengagement mechanisms act individually or even in aggregate. In this sense, many excerpts of speeches were categorized into more than one mechanism. Although this may seem to represent a lack of conceptual clarity and weak operationalization of the constructs, it is a natural result of a methodological and analytical choice. It is different, for instance, from the detailed specification of mechanisms in attitude scales or inventories, when there is total control over the items that are presented to respondents. In the case of analysis of real narratives, the contents are obviously used in a much more overlapping and imprecise way, which, again, justifies the relevance of using content analysis of case files, as we did in the present study. One of the emerging conclusions refers to the objectification of the victim, as if she were a thing, in line with research that investigates gender aggression and violence (Hochdorn et al., 2016).

Our study provides a glimpse into the content analysis of criminal case files, indicating the possibility of using Bandura's mechanisms to further investigate the "whys" and "hows" of femicide through analysis of narratives thereby suggesting the theory's efficacy in *provi* a more neutral method of analysis (through expert evaluation) and its inclusion in the judicial system. This type of analysis could help us understand patterns of mechanisms used and the offender's type of crime, background, and possible cultural differences. It is also essential to further explore and describe the interrelated relationship between moral disengagement mechanisms and neutralization theory, avoiding a duplication of effort for both psychology and sociology.

Our study may fit into the list of techniques from grounded theory, considering the definitions presented by Bryant (2014). The purpose of our study was based on insights into the use of Bandura's concepts of moral disengagement mechanisms from which we intertwined the coding (established *a priori*) and the collection and analysis of data extracted from a criminal femicide process. Although we have quantified the number of times Bandura's mechanisms were represented in the narrative excerpts, we started from inductive hypotheses that the content of these excerpts could fit into these conceptual categories. We acknowledge that our analysis, endorsed by expert judges who analyzed our data, are always provisional results, constantly susceptible to revision, "an ongoing dialogue," in the words of Bryant (2014, p. 134).

Summary and Conclusions

The analysis of pieces from case files offers a range of qualitative data that should not be ignored by the various fields of scientific knowledge. Identifying justifications, according to assumptions of the moral disengagement model, offers researchers from different areas and legal science operators a wide range of elements to understand the phenomenon of lethal aggression. The strategy used here is promising in the composition of qualitative databases on violence and lethal aggression comprised of the content of legal processes, especially femicides. Thus, our findings reaffirm the importance of understanding cognition, beliefs, and orientations men use to justify their violent acts against their partners.

Some limitations must be considered. A considerable part of the arguments contained in a lawsuit can be technically elaborated to obtain legal results that mitigate the verdict or even vindicate the defendant. Truth distortions or omissions may be used to achieve favorable results. That is, by analogy to the concept of social desirability in psychology, there is what can be called a legal desirability involved. In Brazil, intentional crimes against life are decided by the sentencing council, which responds to questions formulated by a law judge based on personal convictions.

One direction for future studies is the improvement of content analysis techniques based on case files of crimes against life, comparing narratives and appeals used. Since psychologists' analysis must comprise the defendant's biopsychosocial trajectory, studies that address possible factors for crimes against life can be used as support for verdicts. Thus, it is imperative that, for effective interventions, the social phenomenon be understood not only in terms of the individual (Weil, 2016). Finally, similar to preventive programs aimed at dating violence (e.g., "Safe Dates", for more information see Foshee et al., 2005), we emphasize that public policies should be developed based on data from psychology. More effective prevention strategies for this type of crime need an understanding of the phenomenon from the perpetrators' perspective of the characteristics of verbal and nonverbal interaction with their victims, as well as of other situational elements of the crime.

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Supplemental Material

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