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Theme: Intimate Partner Violence

Title: Dating violence: an exploratory characterization study in social education students in higher education

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Introduction:

Dating violence has stirred up debate in the academic community and society in general. These discussions have shown there is a need to conduct research to promote a better understanding of this phenomenon in higher education students. It is possible to note that there have been a small number of studies conducted on higher education students, both at the national (Machado, Caridade, & Martins, 2009; Machado, Matos, & Moreira, 2003; Paiva & Figueiredo, 2004) and international (Blázquez-Alonso, Moreno-Manso, & García-Baomonde Sánchez, 2011; Hernando-Gómez, García-Rojas, & Montilla-Coronado, 2012) level. They show that a significant percentage of students adopt violent behaviour in their intimate relationships. This form of violence affects both genders, and according to research, contributes to future victimization in early adulthood (Kaura & Lohman, 2009; Straus, 2004). This initial stage of research raises discussions about the importance of using conflict resolution strategies to deal with differences in dating relationships and that cannot be neglected in training social educators. This understanding supports the preparation of this work whose aim is to (i) characterize the prevalence of non-abusive (or positive) conflict resolution strategies and abuse in dating relationships, distinguishing the behaviour of self (commission) and partner's behaviour (victimization) in the last 12 months, and (ii) to compare the prevalence of dating violence in two Portuguese higher education institutions by gender, age and school year.

METHOD:

Participants:

A convenience sample was used in this study, with the following inclusion criteria: (i) being a student in the undergraduate program in social education at the Polytechnic Institutes of Bragança and Viseu; (ii) being or having been in a dating relationship in the past 12 months. 242 students in the social education degree program in two northern interior Portuguese institutions (Bragança and Viseu) participated. As shown in Table 1, the number of female students (89.70%) was considerably higher, while only 30.10% of the students were male. The age of the students included in this study is between 18 and 46 years ($M=21:26$, $SD=3.77$). Of these, 119 (49.20%) were 21 years old or less and 123 (50.80%) were over 21. As for school year, 90 students (37.20%) were attending the 1st year, 80 (33.10%) the 2nd year, and 72 (29.80%) the 3rd year. The duration of the dating relationship varied between 1 and 282 months with the mean being 29.18 and the standard deviation, 28.61. Most students (64.90%, $n=157$) reported currently being in a dating relationship and 35.10% ($n=85$) reported having been in a dating relationship in the past 12 months.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization about the dating relationship of the overall sample (n=242).

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Age (years)	18	46	21.26	3.77
		n		%
Gender				
Female		217		89.70
Male		25		10.30
Age categories				
≤ 21 years		119		49.20
> 21 years		123		50.80
Higher Education Institution				
School of Education of Bragança		124		51.20
School of Education of Viseu		118		48.80
Academic year				
1st		90		37.20
2nd		80		33.10
3rd		72		29.80
Dating Time (months)	1	282	29.18	28.61
		n		%
Relationship status				
In a current relationship		157		64.90
In a finished relationship		85		35.10

Instrument and procedure:

The demographic characteristics of the students were collected through a questionnaire. The information collected allowed us to analyse the following variables: gender, age, marital status, school year and educational institution attended, as well as some contextual data about their dating relationships, current or previous, such as time and experience of violence, if any. To assess non-abusive (or positive) conflict resolution strategies and abusive conflict resolution strategies, knowing one's own behaviour (commission) and their partner's (victimization) we used the Portuguese version of Conflict Relationship Inventory for Adolescents (CADRI) developed by Wolfe, Scott, Reitzel-Jaffe, Wekerle, Grasley, and Straatman (2001) and validated for the Portuguese population by Saavedra, Machado, Martins, and Vieira (2011).

The total inventory has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 and the dimensions corresponding to one's own behaviour, 0.82 and to their partner's behaviour, 0.81 (Saavedra, 2010). It also allows us to identify the presence of physical, sexual and emotional/verbal violence. This version consists of 70 items against which the students must score in terms of degree of agreement/disagreement through a Likert scale with four response options, ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (often). The instrument was applied through an online link, conducted in the classroom, between May and June 2017. Prior permission was obtained from the institutions as well as the consent of the participants, to whom one of the researchers explained the aims of the project, clarifying that their contributions were voluntary and ensuring strict confidentiality with respect to personally identifiable information. Application of the instrument time took 15 to 20 minutes.

The normal distribution of the data was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The data collected were analysed using SPSS version 24. The non-parametric tests were used because the data did not meet the criteria of normality and homogeneity.

Results:

Given the experience or not of an abusive relationship in dating, it was found that the majority (n=220, 90.90%) claimed not to have committed or to have suffered any kind of violence. Only 22 (9.09%) students acknowledged that they were or had been involved in some form of abuse. Of these 18 (7.40%) recognized themselves as victims and 4 (1.70%) as aggressors. However, it should be noted that, in relation to conflict resolution strategies assessed by CADRI, 228 (94.21%) reported at least one indicator of abusive behaviour perpetrated by themselves and 227 (93.80%) perpetrated by their partners. It should also be noted that there were no statistically significant differences between the male and female students with regard to the use of abusive conflict resolution strategies, either by themselves or by their partners. The same was true with respect to age, regarding the use of abusive conflict resolution strategies, by either themselves or their partners. Likewise, no statistically significant differences were found regarding the use of strategies for resolving abusive conflicts by themselves or their partner with respect to school year.

A predominance of emotional/verbal violence indicators was evident in the overall sample given the perpetration typologies of violence and victimization reported in CADRI. This was followed by sexual violence and physical violence, both in relation to perpetration and victimization of abusive behaviours as you shown in Table 2

Table 2. Prevalence of violent behaviours of the overall sample on the CADRI.

		Overall Sample n (%)
Perpetration	Emotional/ Verbal Abuse	211 (87.19%)
	Physical Abuse	55 (22.73%)
	Sexual Abuse	72 (29.75%)
Victimization	Emotional/ Verbal Abuse	206 (85.23%)
	Physical Abuse	50 (20.66%)
	Sexual Abuse	87 (35.95 %)

The analysis of the types of violence reported in the CADRI showed no statistically significant differences in abusive behaviour (emotional/verbal, physical and sexual) on the part of the participant and their partner relative to their year at school. The data also revealed no significant differences in perpetration and victimization of emotional/verbal violence relative to gender. This was also the case for emotional/verbal and sexual violence perpetrated by the participant and their partner relative to the participants' age. However, the male students reported more physical victimization indicators committed by their partner ($U=2008.000$, $p=0.003$) and more indicators of sexual violence perpetrated by the student himself against his partner ($U=1701.000$, $p=0.000$). It was also found that students aged over 21 had more indicators physical violence committed by their partner ($U=6429.000$, $p=0.021$).

Conclusion:

The results of this study for students enrolled in the degree in Social Education at two Portuguese public institutions in northern Portugal show that while most students do not perceive themselves as being in an abusive dating relationship, there was a high percentage of indicators abusive conflict solving strategies both in terms of perpetration and victimization. It should be emphasized that the use of these strategies does not differ according to age, gender and school year. There is no doubt that dating violence is a reality. On the other hand, there seems to be a legitimization and normalization of violence in intimate relationships of the students who participated in this study, which previous research had already confirmed (Dixe et al., 2010; González & Santana, 2001; Harned, 2001; Munoz-Rivas, Grana Gomez, O'Leary, & Gonzalez Lozano, 2007; Murphy & O'Leary, 2001; Sebastián et al., 2010; Trujano & Mata, 2002).

A higher prevalence of indicators of emotional/verbal violence was also found, followed by sexual and physical violence, confirming data from other research (Costa & Sani, 2007; Paiva & Figueiredo, 2004). In this regard, it is also important to stress the presence of a higher number of indicators of sexual violence in relationships for male students. Moreover, males and students over 21 years undergo more victimization of a physical nature. These data therefore reinforce the need to pursue further research with regard to this population, and to develop preventive strategies to mitigate this form of violence that significantly undermines the formative quality of being and becoming a social educator.

Finally, it is noted that these results should be treated with caution and recognize the limitations of this study. Future research should use a more diverse sample and include not only the perspective of the subject, but also the partner's point of view to better understand the phenomenon of dating violence.

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