

psychological Applications and Trends

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRAINING IN SOCIAL EDUCATION: SOLVING CONFLICTS IN DATING AND EMPATHY

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Abstract

The Social Educator works with very diverse populations for the promotion of well-being and autonomy. In this sense, it is important to understand to what extent higher education students in this area present perceptions regarding the use of conflict resolution strategies (abusive and not abusive in dating) and empathy that can be mobilized in the future exercise of the profession. Hence, the study aims to know the relation between the perceptions of conflict resolution and empathy strategies; and to what extent the influence of sociodemographic variables (gender and age) and degree year. In this way, we seek to foresee how training can contribute to enhance the use of positive strategies for conflict resolution and the improvement of empathic perceptions. A total of 242 students from two Polytechnic Higher Education Institutions participated. This is a non-experimental and cross-sectional study. The instruments used were the *Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory – CADRI* - developed by Wolfe, Scott, Reitzel-Jaffe, Wekerle, Grasley e Straatman (2001), validated for the Portuguese population by Saavedra, Machado, Martins, e Vieira (2011) and the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (IRI, Davis, 1980, 1983), in the Portuguese version (Limpo, Alves, & Castro, 2010). In the results, we highlight in the CADRI, statistically significant differences; *i*) by gender, in the *abusive strategies of conflict resolution* (own behavior - perceptions of sexual violence and behavior of the other - perceptions of physical violence), and non-abusive conflict resolution strategies (behavior of the other); *ii*) by age (age group) in *abusive conflict resolution strategies*, behavior of the other-perceptions of physical violence. In IRI, there were statistically significant differences in the subscale of the *empathic perspective*; in the *global scale of empathy* (according to gender and degree year), as well as in the *empathic concern subscale* (according to the degree year). Positive and significant correlations are also found in some of the conflict resolution strategies identified from the CADRI and one of the IRI subscales and dimension, as well as in the global scale. Based on the results, strategies that could be developed in the context of training were thought, with a view to enhancing improvements with impact on the personal and social development of trainees.

Keywords: Social education, empathy, dating violence, conflict behaviors, higher education quality.

1. Introduction

The work of the Social Educator is conceived from an educative, transformative and emancipatory perspective and is based on the capacity for development (Azevedo & Correia, 2013). In this sense, the professional needs to have relational skills, be available to understand the other and have an empathetic attitude and active listening, to respond to the demands and challenges placed on the profession today. It is important, from the point of view of their training, to invest in the promotion of technical and scientific competences (which support the processes of intervention in different contexts), but also in the promotion of personal and relational skills, central to the development of socio-educational work (AEIJI, 2006). Analyzing conflict resolution strategies in the affective relationships and the way they are related to the perceptions of empathy in students of the Social Education course allows to reflect on the personal and social development of the same, drawing lessons for training.

2. Purpose of the study

The research proposes to know the relation between the perceptions of conflict resolution strategies (in the dating situation) and perceptions of empathy of undergraduate students in Social Education and to what extent they are influenced by sociodemographic variables (gender and age) and year of course.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and investigation procedures

This is a non-experimental and cross-sectional study involving students from two Portuguese Higher Education Institutions of the three years of the degree in Social Education that took place during one academic year. Statistical analyzes were developed using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 24. The investigation followed confidentiality procedures and ethical rules.

3.2. Participants

The sample is of convenience and included 242 students of the Public Higher Education degree courses in Social Education, of which 124 (51.2%) are students of an Institution of the north of Portugal and 118 (48.8%) of a Congener Institution of the central region. It consists of 25 (10.3%) young males and 213 (89.7%) females. Regarding the age groups, 119 (49.2%) were 21 years old or less and 123 (50.8%) were over 22 years old. The mean age is 21.6 (\pm 3.77 SD) years. In total, the two institutions participated respectively with students of the first, second and third year of the course: 90 (37.2%), 80 (33.1%) and 72 (29.8%).

3.3. Instruments for data collection

Among the instruments used is the *Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory* (CADRI), of 70 items, developed by Wolfe, Scott, Reitzel-Jaffe, Wekerle, Grasley and Straatman (2001), adapted to the Portuguese population by Saavedra, Machado, Martins and Vieira (2011) which includes two subscales that evaluate respectively; strategies (abusive and non-abusive), conflict resolution in courtship, one's own and the other. And yet, the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (IRI, Davis, 1980, 1983), of 24 items, in the Portuguese version of Limpo, Alves e Castro (2010) that is constituted by a cognitive dimension (subscale *perspective taking*) and an affective dimension (subscale *empathic concern, personal discomfort and fantasy*). A questionnaire was also used to identify sociodemographic data.

4. Results

In the case of results related to conflict resolution strategies in the courtship of one's own and the other (CADRI), significant differences were found in the use of physical violence, and it was found that more men report violent partner behavior ($p = .003$). However, there were no differences when each of them (men and women) referred to their behavior. Regarding sexual violence, men assume that they have more abusive behavior towards women ($p = .000$), the same does not happen in their perceptions of their partner. In physical violence, older students (over 21 years of age) report that they are subject to more abusive behaviors by the partner ($p = .021$), and there are no differences, according to age, regarding the behavior of the partner. Regarding non-abusive strategies, women report a greater number of this type of action by the partners ($p = .008$). In abusive and non-abusive conflict resolution strategies there are no significant differences between the younger and older students. Also for the academic year no significant differences were found among the students of the three years of degree.

Regarding the results of empathy perceptions (IRI - subscales) by gender, there were significant differences in *empathic concern* ($p=0.000$), *affective dimension* ($p=0.001$) and *overall result* IRI ($p=0.000$), where the girls obtained higher values. Regarding the age categories (≤ 21 years and ≥ 22), there were no significant differences in the *overall result* IRI or in the partial values of empathy - subscales. If we look at the academic year, we found that there were significant differences in the subscale of *empathic concern* ($p = 0.38$), with differences occurring between the 2nd and 3rd grades. year, with higher values in the 3rd year.

Finally, with respect to the results of the two Scales (CADRI and IRI), there were positive and significant correlations between non-abusive / positive conflict resolution strategies, from the self and the other, and the affective dimension (respectively, $\rho = .255$, $p = .000$ and $\rho = .234$, $p = .000$), as well as the full scale of empathy (respectively, $\rho = .269$, $p = .000$ and $\rho = .234$, $p = .000$). It was also observed the existence of negative correlations, of low intensity, but significant, between the cognitive dimension of empathy (subscale *perspective taking*) and abusive strategies related to the behavior of sexual violence itself ($\rho = -.139$, $p = .031$), emotional violence ($\rho = -.227$, $p = .000$) and total abusive behaviors of himself ($\rho = -.271$, $p = .000$) and of the other ($\rho = -.129$, $p = .045$).

5. Conclusion

The positive and significant correlations between the non-abusive conflict resolution strategies and the empathy perception are highlighted in the results, insofar as they point to the importance of promoting, from the point of view of formation, the activation of essential skills of relational and sociocognitive nature, essential to the future exercise of the profession. The accomplishment of this objective must be based on the valuation of collaborative methodologies, in the production of knowledge, that call and involve the students, in a critical-reflective perspective, for the resolution of practical problems.

This line of research is part of a strategic axis of higher education and methodologies for education and human development (Ribeiro, Amante, Martins, Felizardo, Fernandes & Xavier, 2016). The results presented here constitute a set of evidences with significance for the purpose of proposing strategies to allow for improvement, both in the curriculum of the degree, specifically in the content of some curricular units, and also to the perspective of the strategies, with impact on the learning, personal and social development of trainees, which is in accordance with the scientific literature in this field (Astin, 2003; Chickering, 2010; Pascarella, 2006).

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