



SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

Teens and dating: study of factors that influence attitudes of violence

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KEYWORDS

Adolescents;
Dating;
Dating violence

Abstract

Framework: Dating violence is a relevant social problem in adolescent and young adult romantic relationships. Particular attention has begun to be paid to it by the scientific community in the last two decades. It may involve a sexual, physical and psychological dimension, requiring different prevention and intervention strategies.

Objective: To analyse the effect of socio-demographic and contextual variables on attitudes to dating violence.

Material and method: This is a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional descriptive and correlational study. Questionnaires to characterise socio-demographics and dating context and the Scale of Attitudes about Dating Violence (SADV), were applied to 243 adolescents attending the 10th, 11th and 12th years of schooling in a Portuguese secondary school.

Results: The adolescents are over 17 years in age (40.7%), with a predominance of girls (56.0%). They reside mainly in rural areas with most attending the 10th year. More than half live with their parents (91.7%). The vast majority are Catholic. Nearly all of the participants are dating or have dated. We found statistically significant differences in all types of violence with regards to gender, the religion they practice and adolescents who have had sexual relations. The type of violence exerted was mainly psychological.

Conclusion: The results point to the need to integrate the topic of dating violence in adolescent education using active methods with the effective participation of everyone involved in the process (adolescents, parents, teachers and health professionals). Only in this way will it be possible to develop healthy emotional relationship skills.

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Introduction

Intimate violence is not limited to marital relationships; it is also present in both dating relationships and occasional adolescent relationships. Research has revealed disturbing levels of violence in intimate adolescent relationships. In these situations and in the case of relationships which extend over time, violence tends to increase in frequency and severity, often leading to marital violence.¹

Violence in intimate relationships interferes with adolescent physical, psychological, sexual, reproductive and social development with consequences for their physical and social health, not only in the short run, but also in the medium and long run. Dating violence can be occasional or continuous, committed by one partner or both in order to control, dominate and have more power than the other in the relationship.² Trivialization is common and even romanticising some violent acts.¹ However, consequences may range from personal injury, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, gynaecological complications, sexually transmitted infections, among others.

There are different forms of dating violence (psychological, physical and sexual) and different forms of violence in the same dating relationship may occur. For example, verbal attacks may come before a physical assault. All forms of dating violence have a common goal: to hurt, humiliate, control and frighten.³ It is a personal experience characterized by feelings of shame, which keeps the vast majority of adolescents from seeking help. The reasons are fear of being blamed, that the secret will not be kept, that adults will pressure them to terminate the relationship, believing they will not be helped, fear of parental punishment. Their main confidants are friends. However, the vast majority of these friends do not have the conditions to give due support, either because they are also involved in abusive relationships or because they legitimize a set of beliefs that perpetuate the phenomenon.⁴

This study sets out to identify factors that influence attitudes of adolescent dating violence.

Material and method

This is a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional descriptive and correlational study. Data was collected through a questionnaire to characterise socio-demographics and dating context and the Scale of Attitudes about Dating Violence. A non-probabilistic, convenience sample comprised of 243 adolescents attending the 10th, 11th and 12th years of schooling in a Portuguese public school during the 2012/2013 academic year. Firstly, the protocol of measuring instruments was submitted to the Portuguese government's General Directorate for Curricular Innovation and Development. Later, permission from the school's administrative body was requested and informed consent from parents and the students themselves was obtained. Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences® (SPSS - version 20.0), allowing descriptive and inferential statistics to be prepared.

Results

The study sample consists of 243 adolescents who have a minimum age of 15 years and a maximum of 21 with a mean age of 16.29 years and a standard deviation of 1.02. The most prevalent age group is over the age of 17. There is a greater percentage of girls (56.0%) than boys. The adolescents live mainly in rural areas (71.2%) and are mostly Portuguese in nationality (95.9%). Regarding their year of schooling, most are in the 10th year (48.6%). More than half of the adolescents live with parents (91.7%). The vast majority of respondents are Catholic (93.0%). More than half (58.0%) of the adolescents considered that there is no right age to initiate sexual activity. 66.7% of respondents have never had sexual relations; and the minimum age at which the adolescents initiated sexual relations was 10 years for males and 12 years for females; 4.9% of the adolescents felt pressured to initiate sexual activity; 71.6% said they were in love with the person they had had sex with for the first time; 99.4% of teens are dating or have dated.

As for violence, the highest means, for either boys or girls, were for psychological violence (33.57 and 53.00 respectively). It was found that there are statistically significant differences for all types of male and female violence ($P = .000$).

The One-Way ANOVA test was used with the aim of studying the relationship between age and the type of violence perpetrated by the students. The analysis shows that male psychological violence presents a higher average than the others for all ages. Students aged 15 have a higher mean (33.73) in relation to this type of violence, while students aged 17 or over have a lower mean (24.35) with regards to male sexual violence. We emphasize that female sexual violence, especially in participants aged 15 and 16, has high mean values (31.00 and 31.22, respectively). There are no statistically significant differences ($P > .05$).

The Mann-Whitney U Test was used to try to verify if there is a relationship between religion and violence perpetrated by the participants. The results showed that non-Catholic students had higher means in every type of violence, especially male sexual violence ($M = 158.26$). Female sexual violence also had a considerable mean (139.09), followed by male psychological violence ($M = 151.21$). In the group of Catholic students, the highest mean was found for female physical violence ($M = 121.81$), followed by female psychological violence ($M = 121.73$). Statistically significant differences were found ($P = .027$) with regards to male sexual violence, suggesting that religion may influence the tendency for male sexual violence.

The Mann-Whitney U Test was also used to try to check for a relationship between students who have already had sexual relations and the type of violence. Thus, students who have had sexual intercourse were found to have higher means in every type of violence, especially male sexual violence ($M = 142.72$). This was followed by male and female psychological violence ($M = 140.79$ and $M = 139.35$, respectively), which leads us to state that this variable influences the existence of violent behaviour in dating.

Discussion

Violence in intimate relationships occurs from adolescence and throughout adulthood, often in the context of marriage or cohabitation—starting during dating—and includes physical, psychological and sexual violence. A significant number of adolescents experience violence in dating relationships, often perceiving it as an act without relevance. From the social point of view, the phenomenon of violence in romantic relationships is not isolated, being recognized as something complex that needs an effective intervention.⁵ Intervening means lowering rates of aggression and the changing attitudes of its justifiability.⁶

Based on empirical study, it was found that gender was a variable that interfered with dating violence. Male participants presented higher means in every type of violence, with the highest mean value for psychological violence. Statistically significant differences were found for any type of male and female violence. These results confirm the evidence found in other studies, such as.⁷⁻⁹ According to these authors, there are significant differences in the violence perpetrated by male students compared to females. Moreover, the same authors report that male and female psychological violence is the most obvious, which is in line with data obtained in our study. Also found that sexual violence is mostly perpetrated by adolescent males.⁷ The authors maintain that the boys had significantly higher levels of tolerance for various forms of violence, whether these were perpetrated by boys or girls. This superior legitimacy has been found in different studies and by different authors,⁸⁻¹⁰ and has been explained in particular by the fact that boys are socialized towards more aggressiveness in their interpersonal relationships.

Another result was that the religion variable influenced the tendency for male sexual violence. Non-Catholic students had higher means in all types of violence, especially male sexual violence. Female sexual violence also had a considerable mean, followed by male psychological violence. In the group of Catholic students, the highest mean value is for physical violence and female psychological violence.

As for the adolescents' age, younger ones (aged 15 and 16) have higher rates of violence. In this context, we emphasize the study developed by¹¹ which shows that the legitimization of violence appears to be higher among younger adolescents with lower education and boys who are educated to be stronger, emotionally inexpressive, competitive and domineering with regards to their partners.

Continuing with the results obtained in this study, we noted the existence of statistically significant differences in all types of violence in adolescents who had already had sex, especially male sexual violence, followed by male and female psychological violence. These results corroborate those of² in that the authors also concluded that adolescents, especially males, in secondary school who have started their sexual activity are more prone to violent behaviour in romantic relationships. Violence prevention within intimate relationships presupposes the development of communication skills during adolescents' educational process. The debates on violence in general, violence in

intimate relationships and gender equality using active methods should be part of the curricula and trans-disciplinary. Only with coherent and consistent educational policies in these matters will adolescents' empowerment be achieved, enabling them to say no to all types of violence.

What we know about the theme

Violence in intimate relationships in adolescence includes acts of physical, emotional, and sexual aggression, abuse and other controlling behaviors during a dating relationship. It happens all around the world, being so transversal to all cultures, demanding answers by both citizens, political and judicial power.

What we get out the study

The study reveals that the attitudes of teenagers towards violence in dating relationships is strongly influenced by gender (predominantly males), by the religion they practice and the fact that they have already initiated sexual intercourse. The type of violence mainly exerted was psychological. This set of variables must be considered in the educational process of the adolescent.

Funding

The Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the project PEst-OE/CED/UI4016/2014, and the Center for Studies in Education, Technologies and Health (CI&DETS).

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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