



SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

Conflict in adolescent dating relationships: a study of factors involved

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KEYWORDS

Dating violence;
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Abstract

Background: Dating violence is a relevant current social and public health problem, not only due to adolescents exposure to risk of physical and mental injury, but also because it's at this age that romantic relationships begin with the possibility of these patterns of interaction to be perpetuated throughout life. The aim of this study is to characterize behaviours of violence and to identify the factors of conflict in adolescent dating relationships.

Material and methods: Transversal and correlational study, with a non-probabilistic sample of 243 mostly Portuguese adolescents, 56.0% female (mean age = 16.29 years; SD = 1.02), 71.2% living in rural areas and who attended between the 10th and 12th year at school. A socio-demographic questionnaire and on the contextual characteristics of dating was applied as well as a validated and adapted version for the Portuguese population of the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory.

Results: Of the adolescents, 91.7% live with their parents and the vast majority is dating or has dated. The victimization conflict behaviours superseded those of perpetration and the boys showed more conflict strategies (of the self and the other) compared to girls, while girls and older boys had demonstrated more non-abusive strategies of the self. The conflict behaviours were significant in adolescents who initiated their sexual activity earlier and non-abusive strategies when dating couples or friends talk about sex.

Conclusions: The results justify the need to integrate the topic of dating violence in adolescent education, using active methods with effective participation of everyone involved in the process.

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Background

Research has revealed disturbing levels of violence within intimate relationships between adult couples, but only recently has it focused on violent behaviour in dating relationships among adolescents.

Such violence, in addition to being a human rights violation, profoundly affects physical, psychological, sexual, reproductive and social development, with consequences on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, not only in the short run, but also in the medium and long run, possibly resulting in death.¹ There are, however, forms of violence that go unnoticed and are even socially accepted, with frequent trivialization and even romanticizing of some violent acts.²

Dating violence can be defined as an act of violence, a singular occurrence or continuous, committed by one partner or both, in order to control, dominate and have more power than the other in the relationship. According to the evidence, this type of relationship is an act that does not discriminate gender with male and female victims and offenders.³

Violent behaviour in dating adolescent couples is a significant problem, not only because they generate damage to physical and mental health,⁴ but also because they occur at a stage in life where romantic relationships begin and patterns of interaction with others are learned, leading to the risk of lasting into and throughout adulthood.⁵ Moreover, adolescents have difficulty in recognizing physical and sexual abuse as such, interpreting these behaviours as jealousy and signs of love.⁴

When understood as such, dating violence is normally a personal experience characterized by feelings of shame, hindering calls for help for most adolescents. The fear of being blamed, that the secret will not be kept, that adults will pressure them to end the relationship or the fear of parental punishment keeps adolescents from disclosing the experience they are living. Their main confidants are usually friends, but in most cases, they do not have the conditions to provide due support, because they are also involved in abusive relationships or because they legitimize a set of beliefs that perpetuate the phenomenon.⁶ For this reason, violence in intimate relationships is a phenomenon surrounded by silence and pain, thus causing an under-estimation of the real extent of the problem.¹

Acts of violence in teens romantic relationships are a social and important public health problem because, apart from the abusive acts, they can expose young people to other health risks such as sexual risk behaviours, increasing the likelihood of unplanned adolescent pregnancy⁷ or sexually transmitted diseases.⁷ According to some studies,^{3,8} episodes can go from insults, slander, threats, humiliation and slaps to more aggressive behaviour, which, although less frequent, may endanger the partner's life.⁹

Although it is commonly assumed that in these situations the man is the perpetrator and the woman is the victim, multiple investigations conducted in this area reveal that violence, especially non-sexual violence among dating adolescent couples, is often characterized by mutual exchanges of aggression.^{3,9-11} Furthermore, studies corroborate the idea that girls are more often the target of sexual victimization, having nevertheless greater self-defence

strategies with regards to violence, when compared to boys.¹² Justifications that are cultural and gender-specific in nature will form the basis of differences in conflict management among dating couples.

In 2000, the Center for Disease Control¹³ (CDC) reported that about 12% of dating adolescent couples was living in conflict situations. A Portuguese study, released in 2008^{14,15} conducted on a sample of 4667 young people between 13 and 29 years reported that between 25% and 30% of Portuguese young people already had been victims of violence in their intimate relationships. In several investigations, the most commonly received/perpetrated behaviours were "lesser forms" of violence, such as insults, slander or making serious claims to humiliate or hurt, yelling or threatening with intent to frighten, intentionally breaking or damaging objects and slapping,^{16,17} without significant gender differences.

In experiencing these situations, known risk and protection factors include psychological, biological and sociocultural factors including gender (in)equalities.¹

Adolescence has been regarded as a period of great vulnerability to intimate violence, given the emotional immaturity, inexperience with relationships and initiation into sexuality which characterise this stage. This is especially the case in younger adolescents as a result of poor communication and inappropriate perceptions and expectations about the partner's behaviour.¹ In this context, the integration of sex education in schools, as recommended in Portugal since 1990, can constitute an added value in recognising the behaviours of abuse and violence in dating relationships by its positive effect on knowledge and awareness of healthy values and attitudes that facilitate communication with partners and parents, thus promoting healthier relationships.¹⁸

It was in this context that the objectives of this study were defined: to characterise the behaviours of violence and to identify the factors of conflict in dating relationships between adolescent couples.

Material and methods

This was a cross-sectional, descriptive and correlational study conducted with a non-probabilistic sample of 243 mostly Portuguese adolescents; 56.0% were female, aged between 15 and 21, years old, mean 16.29 years (SD = 1.02), 71.2% living in rural areas and who attended between the 10th and 12th year of schooling. A questionnaire on socio-demographic and contextual characteristics of dating as well as the Inventory of Conflict in Dating Relationships among Adolescents, adapted from the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory,¹⁹ developed and validated by Wolfe, Scott, Reitzel-Jaffe, Wekerle, Grasley & Straatman (2001) and validated for the Portuguese population by Saavedra, Machado, Martins & Vieira in 2008.²⁰ This inventory allows us to evaluate the use of positive (or non-abusive) and abusive conflict resolution strategies in adolescent dating relationships, distinguishing behaviour of the self (perpetration – 35 items) and behaviour of partner(s) (victimization – 35 items). It assesses the occurrence of specific forms of abuse: threatening behaviour, relationship abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional or verbal abuse. It is completed individually by dating adolescents or those who have been in

a relationship. Before completing the questionnaire, they should be informed that the two similar questions in each item wish to obtain information on the behaviour of the self and the behaviour of a boyfriend/girlfriend or an ex-boyfriend/girlfriend. The items are scored from 0 to 3 according to their frequency ("never" is scored "0", "rarely" "1", "sometimes" "2" and "often" is scored "3").

Ethical procedures were safeguarded by obtaining prior permission from the General Directorate of Innovation and Curricular Development to carry out the study in educational establishments and free and informed consent was obtained from parents and the adolescents.

The data was analysed with SPSS® – Statistical Package for Social Sciences (Version 20.0 for Windows).

Results

Socio-demographic characterisation

The adolescents had a mean age of 16.29 years ($SD = 1.02$); 48.6% attended the 10th year at school and 35.4% and 22.2% the 11th and 12th years respectively. It was found that 95.9% were Portuguese, 71.2% lived in rural areas, and 91.7% lived with their parents. The parents mostly had the first cycle of basic education [up to the 4th year of schooling] (73.3% fathers and 65.4% mothers), while 12.9% of mothers and 7.1% of parents held honours degrees.

Context of dating

Of the group of adolescents, 95.1% admitted to dating or having dated, ranging in age from starting dating at between 10 and 17 years of age, with a mean of 13.16 years ($SD = 1.54$). Of the sample, 66.7% had never had sexual relations and of those who had initiated sexual activity, 48.6% were male, ranging in age of initiation between 10 and 17 years (mean = 14.62 years, $SD = 1.78$). Overall, 58.0% believe there is no right age for initiating sexual activity and 71.6% said they were in love with the person they had had sex with for the first time, while 4.9% said that they felt pressured to do so; pressured by the boyfriend 75.0% and 25% by the peer group.

With regards to sources of information about sexuality, 74.9% of the adolescents said it was their teachers, 67.9% parents, 50.6% their health care team, 47.3% friends and 30.0% the media. More than half of the adolescents (55.1%) considered themselves as having good knowledge about sexuality.

Strategies for resolving conflict in dating for the self and the other

With regards to different conflict strategies used by the sample overall, the mean values ranged between 9.48 ($SD = 8.16$) in self-strategies and 9.74 ($SD = 8.31$) in strategies of the other and between 14.99 ($SD = 5.67$) in non-abusive self-strategies versus 14.28 ($SD = 5.68$) in strategies of the other. The t-test showed that the conflict strategies of the other (victimization) override those of the self, with an explained variance of 88.3% for the conflict strategies of self vs the other ($t = -1.50$; $P = .135$) and 85% in non-abusive self-strategies vs the other,

with statistically significant differences ($t = 4.99$; $P = .000$). Boys had a higher and statistically significant mean in conflict strategies (of the self and the other) ($P = .000$) while girls and the older teens revealed more non-abusive strategies (of the self and the other), with statistical significance only for older adolescents ($P = .000$).

Despite the various strategies not presenting a significant relationship with whether or not they have initiated sexual activity, conflict behaviours of the self and the other showed significance in adolescents who did so earlier ($P = .000$).

Significant relationships between the conflict and non-abusive strategies of the self and the other and the adolescents' nationality and place of residence ($P > .05$) were not found.

Analysing the influence of sexual information sources on conflict behaviours, there is more victimization behaviour (conflict of the other) when there is no information given by teachers ($P = .014$) and non-abusive strategies of the self ($P = .009$) and of the other ($P = .0041$) when sexuality is discussed among dating couples or friends ($P = .003$ and $.024$, respectively).

Discussion

The prevalence of violence among dating adolescent couples has proved worrisome, so our aim was to characterise the behaviours of violence and identify the factors involved in conflict between dating adolescent couples.

In comparing the results of this study with those of other authors, the inferences produced were safeguarded, given the diversity of the measuring instruments used, the different sample amplitudes and methodological strategies, besides subjectivity or choice of more socially acceptable answers given the intimate nature of the issue. Another limitation is the non-random nature of the sample of adolescents selected.

The results indicated lower conflict behaviours of perpetration than victimization, especially in boys, while non-abusive self-strategies had a higher mean when compared with non-abusive strategies of the other, especially in girls and older teens.

This difference in perception of conflict behaviours and non-abusive strategies between boys and girls reflects cultural issues of gender which form the basis of differences in managing conflicts between dating couples. However, the attempt by boys to minimize aggressive behaviours, not valuing or assuming them, seems to indicate the choice of socially acceptable answers. In addition, the experience of male victimization in this study is in line with multiple investigations conducted in this area, showing that non-sexual violence especially among adolescent couples, is often characterized by mutual exchanges of aggression.^{3,9-11}

In other studies^{14,15,19} boys assumed their behaviours and considered themselves to have more power than their partners, acting in accordance with the dominant cultural models, thus demonstrating an attitude of greater competitiveness and control, hoping to find in their relationships a perpetuation of the traditional gender roles in which they were raised. Similarly, the increased use of positive or non-abusive strategies, especially for girls and older teens may be associated, on the one hand with a predominantly less aggressive socialization of girls, in which nonviolent

alternatives are encouraged and reinforced, as argued in some studies²⁰ and on the other hand a reflection of age maturity. Research indicates that girls have higher self-defence strategies against violence, compared to boys.¹²

Of the intervening factors found in the study we emphasised the relationship between conflict strategies of the self and the other and the early initiation of sexual activity. This can be justified by adolescents' greater vulnerability given their emotional immaturity and inexperience with relationships regarding initiation into sexuality, especially in younger adolescents, which is a result of poor communication and perceptions and expectations about the partner's sexual behaviour.¹

The relationship between greater perception of victimization among adolescents who said they did not speak about sexuality with teachers, and non-abusive strategies when the issue of relationships are the topic of conversation among peers, legitimizes the importance of sex education in school as an intentional and systematic intervention, and a measure that enhances the protective factors. Evidence¹⁸ shows that the integration of sex education in schools can be an asset in recognising the behaviours of abuse and violence in dating relationships, by its positive effect on knowledge and awareness of healthy attitudes and values.

We may conclude that, despite adolescent dating being accepted as ephemeral and transitory and based on existing knowledge about the phenomenon of conflict in these relationships, it is urgent to outline plans of conflict prevention and effective educational activities at this age. These should include everyone involved in the process and the definition of (in)formation plans and assertive strategies, able to help identify and overcome the interrelated conflicts in young people through individual and community empowerment, encouraging the protective factors of violence and emotional health in romantic relationships into adulthood.

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What we known about the theme

Violent behaviour in dating adolescent couples is a significant problem because they generate damage to physical and mental health and is a phenomenon surrounded by silence and pain. Preventing dating violence at this developmental stage may reap significant positive outcomes later in life.

What we get out the study

The study revealed a greater sense of victimization by teens who do not address the issue of sexuality with their teachers and greater use of non-abusive strategies by those who speak of the subject with their peers, emphasizing the importance of sexual education in school, while intentional and systematic intervention and a measure that enhances the protective factors.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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