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Unperceived dating violence among Mexican students

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Abstract The aim of this ex post facto study was to determine the level of self-perceived abuse and the feelings of fear and entrapment that exist among Mexican students in a dating relationship. We intended to explore possible differences in the prevalence of the various types of violence or victimization between individuals who perceive themselves as being abused and those who do not, combining such perceptions with the feelings of fear and entrapment. The sample was composed of 3,495 Mexican students, of which 1,927 were pre-university students ($M= 20.16$; $SD= 2.13$) and 1,568 were university students ($M= 15.99$; $SD= 1.64$). We applied a questionnaire on socio-demographic data and the Cuestionario de Violencia entre Novios (CUVINO, Dating Violence Questionnaire). Results showed that 88% of participants did not feel abused by their boyfriend or girlfriend; yet, 15.2% reported having been afraid and 27% reported having felt trapped in the relationship at some point. The data revealed that a considerable majority of youth in the sample had been victims of unperceived abuse. More specifically, they presented evidence of having experienced abuse in their dating relationship even when they described themselves as not being abused.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Maltrato técnico;
Estudiantes
mexicanos;
Noviazgo;
Estudio ex post facto

Resumen El presente estudio, ex post facto de tipo prospectivo, tiene como objetivo establecer la autopercepción de maltrato, así como los sentimientos de miedo y atrapado que existen entre los miembros de una relación de pareja, y determinar si hay diferencias en la prevalencia de los diferentes tipos de violencia o victimización entre los que se perciben maltratados y los que no, teniendo en cuenta las combinaciones con la sensación de miedo y atrapamiento. Participaron 3.495 estudiantes mexicanos de los cuales 1.927 son preuniversitarios (edad media = 20,16; $DT = 2,13$) y 1.568 universitarios (edad media = 15,99; $DT = 1,64$). Se aplicaron un cues-

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cionario de datos sociodemográficos y el Questionario de Violencia de Novios (CUVINO). El 88% de los participantes no se percibe como maltratado por su pareja, pero el 15,2% ha sentido miedo y el 27% asevera haberse sentido en algún momento atrapado en la relación. Los datos ponen de manifiesto que una importante mayoría de jóvenes del estudio presenta maltrato técnico, ya que aun cuando se autoperceben como no maltratados presentan la evidencia de haber vivido abuso en su relación de noviazgo.

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Recent studies on dating violence (i.e., violence perpetrated within dating relationships of adolescents) have revealed that it has a high prevalence. Dating violence has been found to be influenced by many variables such as country, culture, sex and type of violence. The prevalence of dating violence has been found to range from 9% to 65% (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Foshee & Reyes, 2011; Menesini, Nocentini, Ortega-Rivera, Sánchez, & Ortega, 2011; Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, & González, 2009; Rodríguez-Franco, López-Cepero et al., 2012; Sebastián et al., 2010). According to various studies, dating violence is bidirectional, that is, both sexes can be perpetrators or victims in a violent dating relationship. For example, up to 50% of youth report having used psychological violence against their girlfriend or boyfriend (González & Santana, 2001; Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, & González, 2007; O'Leary, Smith-Step, Avery-Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008); more specifically, 37% of boys and 24% of girls report having perpetrated sexual assault (Agoff, Rajsbaum, & Herrera, 2006; Castro & Casique, 2007; Hines & Saudino, 2003; Méndez & Sánchez, 2009; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2009; O'Leary et al., 2008; Rey-Anacona, 2013; Vázquez & Castro, 2008). In fact, Rivera-Rivera, Allen, Rodríguez, Chávez, and Lazcano (2007) reported a prevalence of sexual, psychological and physical abuse of 9.37%, 9.88% and 8.63% respectively, among girls, and 8.57%, 22.71% and 15.15% respectively, among boys.

The large number of studies conducted on the prevalence of dating violence and its associated risks underlines the importance of exploring this phenomenon (Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012; Rivera-Rivera et al., 2007; Rodríguez-Franco, López-Cepero, & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2009; Rodríguez-Franco et al., 2010; Stark & Ager, 2011). In Mexico, data from nationwide studies (Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud, 2008; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2008) are consistent with international figures. They indicate that, among youth aged from 15 to 24 years in a dating relationship, between 43% and 76% have been subjected to emotional abuse (i.e., insults, humiliations, threats), particularly single girls (23.1%), 15% have experienced physical abuse and 16.5% have experienced sexual abuse.

Yet, these figures are likely to conceal an even more serious reality that is related to the recognition or labeling of abusive behaviors. Within a dating relationship, both boys and girls who experience physical violence tend to minimize such episodes of violence. In addition, most girls who experience sexual violence (46%) do not seek help because they consider that "it has no importance" or that "it is normal in a dating relationship". That is, in some cases they

do not perceive coercive sexual tactics as being problematic. Dating abuse or violence tends to go unnoticed among youth themselves, which influences its future probability of occurrence in intimate relationships (Connolly, Friedlander, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, 2010; Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud, 2008; McDonell, Ott, & Mitchell, 2010; Moral, López, Díaz-Loving, & Cienfuegos, 2011; Oswald & Russell, 2006).

Along these lines, some studies have highlighted the existence of a mismatch between individuals' labeling of their own experiences (i.e., holistic assessment) and behavioral measures of dating violence (i.e., behavioral assessment) (López-Cepero, Rodríguez-Franco, Rodríguez-Díaz, Bringas, & Paíno, 2013). Studies show that individuals' ability to label or recognize experiences of violence as abuse are influenced by several factors such as general attitudes toward violence (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011), childhood abuse experiences (Lichter & McCloskey, 2004), feelings of guilt (Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003), victims' perceived fear (Rodríguez-Franco, Antuña, López-Cepero, Rodríguez-Díaz, & Bringas, 2012), and defenses that minimize and justify abusive or violent behaviors to protect the positive aspects of the relationship (Harned, 2005).

Stereotypes play an important role, since there is a widespread belief that abuse and sexual coercion are acts perpetrated by a stranger and not by a romantic partner (Kahn et al., 2003; Littleton, Axsom, & Grills-Tauechel, 2009). The concept of technical abuse (i.e., abuse invisible to the victim herself or himself) is a highly interesting indicator. It reflects low awareness of the problem (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and refers to situations in which the victim endures some type of violence without labeling it as abuse (López-Cepero et al., 2013). Thus, in order to avoid victimization it is important for individuals to be able to identify (i.e., label) a dating behavior as violent or abusive. Research has consistently shown the existence of a relationship between previous sexual or physical victimization with events not labeled as abuse (i.e., technical abuse) and later experiences of victimization, which are very frequent among adolescents and youth (Anderson & Kobek-Pezzarossi, 2011; Hammond & Calhoun, 2007; Siegel & Williams, 2003). In a study with Spanish women, for example, Rodríguez-Franco, Antuña et al. (2012) found that, although participants pointed out nine or more indicators of abusive behaviors, they had low scores in self-perceived abuse. In another study with female Spanish students, these authors reported percentages of non-labeled victims ranging from 34% to 71%. In fact, studies have shown

that adolescents have serious difficulties perceiving situations of violence in their dating relationships as such, since the information they receive about dating violence is inaccurate, incomplete and highly stereotypical (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbean, Coles, & Jordan, 2009).

Considering this, it is important to explore the prevalence of perceived abuse and unperceived abuse (i.e., technical abuse) using holistic indicators that allow early detection of such situations. It is also key to design intervention programs aimed at individuals in victimization situations regardless of whether they label themselves as victims of abuse in their relationship or not (Rodríguez-Franco, Antuña et al., 2012). For these reasons, the present study had the following objectives: a) determine the self-perception of abuse and the feelings of fear and entrapment that exist among youth in dating relationships; and b) explore possible differences in the prevalence of the various types of violence or victimization among individuals who perceive themselves as being abused and those who do not, combining such perceptions with the feelings of fear and entrapment.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 3,495 Mexican students. The only inclusion criterion for the study was currently having or having had a dating relationship for at least one month. As regards participants' level of education, 1,927 were pre-university students (850 males and 1,077 females) and 1,568 were university students (687 males and 881 females). The age range was 13 to 24 years in pre-university students ($M=15.99$; $SD=1.64$) and 17 to 40 years in university students ($M=20.16$; $SD=2.13$).

Instruments

- Ad-hoc questionnaire on socio-demographic data. This questionnaire collected data on participants' age, sex, school and school year as well as the financial status of participants and their boyfriend or girlfriend. Participants also had to respond to three questions that allowed us to identify technical abuse and its relationship with the seriousness of victimization: *¿Sientes o has sentido miedo alguna vez de tu pareja?* (Are you afraid or have you ever been afraid of your boyfriend/ girlfriend?), *¿Te sientes o te has sentido atrapado/a en tu relación?* (Do you feel trapped or have you ever felt trapped in your relationship?) and *¿Te has sentido maltratado/a?* (Have you ever felt abused?). The questions had a yes/ no response format.
- *Cuestionario de Violencia de Novios-CUVINO* (Dating Violence Questionnaire, Rodríguez-Franco et al., 2010). This instrument was developed to assess the victimization of adolescents and youth in their dating relationships. The CUVINO is composed of 42 behavioral items (i.e., molecular indicators) describing situations of abuse that may occur in dating relationships. It is responded on a Likert scale from 0 to 4 according to the frequency with which each item has been experienced (0=never, 1=sometimes, 2=often, 3=usually, 4=almost always). Total values range between 0 and 168 points; a score of 0 means no abuse by participants'

Table 1 Frequency and percentage of "yes" and "no" answers to the questions on feeling abused, afraid and trapped in the relationship.

	Yes	No
	n (%)	n (%)
Abused?	423 (12.10)	3072 (87.89)
Afraid?	699 (20)	2796 (80)
Trapped?	1192 (34.1)	2303 (65.9)

boyfriend or girlfriend and scores ranging from 1 to 168 indicate the presence and the seriousness of victimization. The 42 items are clustered into eight factors that represent eight forms of abuse in dating relationships: Detachment, Humiliation, Sexual Abuse, Coercion, Physical Abuse, Gender-based Violence, Emotional Punishment and Instrumental Violence. In our study, alpha values ranged between .52 –in the *Instrumental Violence factor* –and .80 –in the *Humiliation factor*. The remaining factors had the following reliability: *Detachment* (.77), *Sexual Abuse* (.72), *Coercion* (.71), *Physical Abuse* (.70), *Gender-based Violence* (.69) and *Emotional Punishment* (.63). In the validation of the instrument with young Spanish-speaking youth, Rodríguez-Franco et al. (2010) reported reliability values ranging between .58 and .80 for the individual factors (seven factors with alpha values $\geq .67$) and a reliability greater than .90 for the entire instrument.

Procedure

The schools (i.e., secondary schools, pre-university schools and universities) were selected through non-probabilistic sampling. After contacting the schools in writing, we selected those who responded to the invitation and authorized the research. The instruments were administered during class hours by the research team in the classrooms, in the presence of the teachers. Instructions were read before the assessment and participants' anonymity was guaranteed. The article was written following the recommendations made by Hartley (2012).

Results

First, to respond to the objective of determining the percentage of individuals in the sample who perceived themselves as being abused or not, we obtained the frequencies of responses to items *¿Sientes o has sentido miedo alguna vez de tu pareja?* (Are you afraid or have you ever been afraid of your boyfriend/ girlfriend?), *¿Te sientes o te has sentido atrapado/a en tu relación?* (Do you feel trapped or have you ever felt trapped in your relationship?) and *¿Te has sentido maltratado/a?* (Have you ever felt abused?). Responses to each question are provided in Table 1, which shows that most responses were negative.

Next, we conducted an analysis by segmenting the responses according to perceived abuse and combining them with the feelings of fear and entrapment. According

Table 2 Subject count according to the perception of being abused, afraid and trapped.

Abused?							
Yes		No					
423		3072					
12.1%		87.9%					
Afraid?							
Yes		No		No		No	
233		190		466		2606	
55.1%		44.9%		15.2%		84.8%	
Trapped?							
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
175	58	99	91	215	251	703	1903
75.1%	24.9%	52.1%	47.9%	46.1%	53.9%	27%	73%

Table 3 Prevalence and descriptive statistics of the types of abuse as a function of perceived abuse.

Factor	Abused				Not abused			p	df
	Yes	n (%)	M	SD	n (%)	M	SD		
Detachment	Yes	401 (94.8)	.948	.222	2454 (79.9)	.798	.400	.000	1
	No	22 (5.2)			618 (20.1)				
Humiliation	Yes	356 (84.2)	.841	.365	1328 (43.2)	.432	.495	.000	1
	No	67 (15.8)			1744 (56.8)				
Sexual abuse	Yes	302 (71.4)	.713	.452	1213 (39.5)	.394	.488	.000	1
	No	121 (28.6)			1859 (60.5)				
Coercion	Yes	399 (94.3)	.943	.231	2368 (77.1)	.770	.420	.000	1
	No	24 (5.7)			704 (22.9)				
Physical abuse	Yes	258 (61.5)	.609	.488	884 (28.8)	.287	.452	.000	1
	No	165 (39)			2188 (71.2)				
Gender-based violence	Yes	343 (81.1)	.810	.392	1715 (55.8)	.558	.496	.000	1
	No	80 (18.9)			1357 (44.2)				
Emotional punishment	Yes	307 (72.6)	.725	.446	1256 (40.9)	.408	.491	.000	1
	No	116 (27.4)			1816 (59.1)				
Instrumental violence	Yes	110 (26)	.260	.439	409 (13.3)	.133	.339	.000	1
	No	313 (74)			2663 (86.7)				

Note. SD, standard deviation.

to the results, 3,000 participants (i.e. almost 88% of the sample) did not feel abused by their partner; yet, a considerable percentage of participants reported having been afraid (15.2%). Among those who reported not feeling abused or being afraid, 27% reported having felt trapped in the relationship at some point. Results are shown on Table 2.

Next, we obtained the descriptive statistics for each of the factors of the CUVINO and the prevalence of the various

types of abuse among participants who felt abused and participants who did not. This was done by coding the scores of each of the factors of the CUVINO, assigning a score of 1 when the answer was "yes" (1-168) and 0 when the answer was "no". Data are shown on Table 3. Participants who felt abused obtained higher means and reported a significantly higher prevalence of violence than those who did not feel abused in the eight forms of victimization. The most frequent forms of abuse reported by participants who felt

Table 4 Prevalence of the types of abuse as a function of perceived abuse and fear.

Factor		Abused		<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>	Not abused		<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>
		Fear	No fear			Fear	No fear		
		<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)			<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)		
Detachment	Yes	221 (94.8)	180 (94.7)	1.000	1	432 (92.7)	2022 (77.6)	.000	1
	No	12 (5.2)	10 (5.3)			34 (7.3)	584 (22.4)		
Humiliation	Yes	204 (87.6)	152 (80)	.047	1	300 (64.4)	1028 (39.4)	.000	1
	No	29 (12.4)	38 (20)			166 (35.6)	1578 (60.6)		
Sexual Abuse	Yes	173 (74.2)	129 (67.9)	.183	1	255 (54.7)	958 (36.8)	.000	1
	No	60 (25.8)	61 (32.1)			211 (45.3)	1648 (63.2)		
Coercion	Yes	226 (97)	173 (91.1)	.016	1	425 (91.2)	1943 (74.6)	.000	1
	No	7 (3)	17 (8.9)			41 (8.8)	663 (25.4)		
Physical abuse	Yes	164 (70.4)	94 (49.5)	.000	1	178 (38.2)	706 (27.1)	.000	1
	No	69 (29.6)	96 (50.5)			288 (61.8)	1900 (72.9)		
Gender-based violence	Yes	189 (81.1)	154 (81.1)	1.000	1	326 (70)	1389 (53.3)	.000	1
	No	44 (18.9)	36 (18.9)			140 (30)	1217 (46.7)		
Emotional punishment	Yes	168 (72.1)	139 (73.2)	.895	1	256 (54.9)	1000 (38.4)	.000	1
	No	65 (27.9)	51 (26.8)			210 (45.1)	1606 (61.6)		
Instrumental violence	Yes	64 (27.5)	46 (24.2)	.517	1	72 (15.5)	337 (12.9)	.161	1
	No	169 (72.5)	144 (75.8)			394 (84.5)	2269 (87.1)		

abused were detachment, coercion and humiliation, and the least frequent form was instrumental violence. Participants who did not feel abused reported detachment, coercion and gender-based violence as being most frequent and instrumental violence and physical abuse as being least frequent. Analyses of differences of means revealed that participants who felt abused had higher scores in all forms of violence than participants who did not feel abused, with statistically significant differences (Table 3).

A distribution analysis of responses was conducted to estimate the prevalence of the various forms of abuse, combining perceived abuse with the feeling of fear (Table 4). Results showed that the most frequent forms of abuse in both groups were detachment, coercion and gender-based violence. As regards differences, the analyses revealed that participants who felt abused and afraid reported a significantly higher prevalence of humiliation and physical abuse than participants who reported feeling abused and not afraid (Table 5).

As regards the perception of participants who did not feel abused, those who reported feeling afraid reported a significantly higher prevalence of all forms of abuse except instrumental violence (i.e., the prevalence was also higher but the difference was not significant). The forms of abuse with the highest prevalence were the same in both groups: detachment, coercion and gender-based violence (Table 4).

At that stage, we analyzed the prevalence of the factors of abuse in the two groups resulting from combining participants' perceived abuse with fear and entrapment (Table 5). The forms of abuse with the highest incidence in the group of participants who felt abused and afraid and either trapped or not were coercion, detachment,

humiliation and gender-based violence. The analysis of differences revealed that participants who felt abused, afraid and trapped reported a higher prevalence of sexual abuse and physical abuse than those who felt abused and afraid but not trapped.

The group of participants who felt abused, not afraid and trapped reported a significantly higher prevalence of detachment, humiliation and sexual abuse than the group of participants who felt abused, not afraid and not trapped.

Finally, the same procedure was used to analyze the prevalence of abuse in the group of participants who did not feel abused. Participants who did not feel abused and felt afraid and trapped had a significantly higher prevalence in humiliation, sexual abuse, coercion, physical abuse and gender-based violence than those who did not feel abused and felt afraid but not trapped (Table 6). Yet, when we considered the absence of fear in the same group of participants who did not feel abused, we found significant differences in all the factors when we considered the feeling of being trapped in the relationship or not. Participants who felt trapped reported a higher prevalence of all forms of abuse. The forms of abuse with the highest prevalence among participants who did not feel abused or afraid and felt either trapped or not trapped were the same as those reported by participants who felt afraid: coercion and detachment.

Discussion

According to the objectives of the study, our focus was 1) to determine the prevalence of the different forms of abuse or violence among participants who felt abused and not abused

Table 5 Prevalence of the types of abuse as a function of perceived fear and entrapment among participants who felt abused.

<i>Factor</i>		Abused							
		Fear				No fear			
		Entrapment		No entrapment		Entrapment		No entrapment	
		<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>
Detachment	Yes	168 (96)	53 (91.4)	.300	1	98 (99)	82 (90.1)	.016	1
	No	7 (4)	5 (8.6)			1 (1)	9 (9.9)		
Humiliation	Yes	155 (88.6)	49 (84.5)	.557	1	88 (88.9)	64 (70.3)	.003	1
	No	20 (11.4)	9 (15.5)			11 (11.1)	27 (29.7)		
Sexual abuse	Yes	137 (78.3)	36 (62.1)	.023	1	78 (78.8)	51 (56)	.001	1
	No	38 (21.7)	22 (37.9)			21 (21.2)	40 (44)		
Coercion	Yes	170 (97.1)	56 (96.6)	1.00	1	94 (94.9)	79 (86.8)	.088	1
	No	5 (2.9)	2 (3.4)			5 (5.1)	12 (13.2)		
Physical abuse	Yes	130 (74.3)	34 (58.6)	.036	1	52 (52.5)	42 (46.2)	.464	1
	No	45 (25.7)	24 (41.4)			47 (47.5)	49 (53.8)		
Gender-based violence	Yes	147 (84)	42 (72.4)	.078	1	86 (86.9)	68 (74.7)	.051	1
	No	28 (16)	16 (27.6)			13 (13.1)	23 (25.3)		
Emotional punishment	Yes	129 (73.7)	39 (67.2)	.433	1	74 (74.7)	65 (71.4)	.725	1
	No	46 (26.3)	19 (32.8)			25 (25.3)	26 (28.6)		
Instrumental violence	Yes	50 (28.6)	14 (24.1)	.627	1	29 (29.3)	17 (18.7)	.124	1
	No	125 (71.4)	44 (75.9)			70 (70.7)	74 (81.3)		

Table 6 Prevalence of the types of abuse as a function of perceived fear and entrapment among participants who did not feel abused.

<i>Factor</i>		Not Abused							
		Fear				No fear			
		Entrapment		No entrapment		Entrapment		No entrapment	
		<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>
Detachment	Yes	199 (92.6)	233 (92.8)	1.000	1	621 (88.3)	1401 (73.6)	.000	1
	No	16 (7.4)	18 (7.2)			82 (11.7)	502 (26.4)		
Humiliation	Yes	151 (70.2)	149 (59.4)	.019	1	401 (57)	627 (32.9)	.000	1
	No	64 (29.8)	102 (40.6)			302 (43)	1276 (67.1)		
Sexual abuse	Yes	135 (62.8)	120 (47.8)	.002	1	371 (52.8)	587 (30.8)	.000	1
	No	80 (37.2)	131 (52.2)			332 (47.2)	1316 (69.2)		
Coercion	Yes	206 (95.8)	219 (87.3)	.002	1	623 (88.6)	1320 (69.4)	.000	1
	No	9 (4.2)	32 (12.7)			80 (11.4)	583 (30.6)		
Physical abuse	Yes	93 (43.3)	85 (33.9)	.047	1	254 (36.1)	452 (23.8)	.000	1
	No	122 (56.7)	166 (66.1)			449 (63.9)	1451 (76.2)		
Gender-based violence	Yes	166 (77.2)	160 (63.7)	.002	1	462 (65.7)	927 (48.7)	.000	1
	No	49 (22.8)	91 (36.3)			241 (34.3)	976 (51.3)		
Emotional punishment	Yes	129 (60)	127 (50.6)	.052	1	365 (51.9)	635 (33.4)	.000	1
	No	86 (40)	124 (49.4)			338 (48.1)	1268 (66.6)		
Instrumental violence	Yes	39 (18.1)	33 (13.1)	.175	1	134 (19.1)	203 (10.7)	.000	1
	No	176 (81.9)	218 (86.9)			569 (80.9)	1700 (89.3)		

in their dating relationships; and 2) to explore the profile of the various forms of abuse in the different combinations of responses to the questions *¿Sentas o has sentido miedo*

alguna vez de tu pareja? (Are you afraid or have you ever been afraid of your boyfriend/ girlfriend)?, *¿Te sientas o te has sentido atrapado/a en tu relación?* (Do you feel trapped

or have you ever felt trapped in your relationship?) and *¿Te has sentido maltratado/a?* (Have you ever felt abused?). Results show that about one eighth of participants had felt abused by their boyfriend or girlfriend whereas most participants (i.e., seven times more) responded “no” when asked whether they had experienced abuse in their relationship. Youth who felt abused reported a higher frequency of the various forms of abuse than those who did not. This suggests that the former have a greater ability to label or recognize psychological, sexual and physical abuse, as pointed out by several studies that have obtained similar results (Anderson & Kobek-Pezzarossi, 2011; Harned, 2005; Rodríguez-Franco, Antuña et al., 2012). Importantly, participants who reported not being abused were seven times more numerous, which means that youth also experience a very high prevalence of various forms of victimization without labeling them as such (i.e., technical abuse). The prevalence of the eight forms of abuse among participants who did not feel abused clearly evidences the presence of technical abuse. More specifically, the abuse profile of this group was very similar to that of participants who felt abused. Participants who did not feel abused reported the same forms of violence as being most frequent, although with a lower incidence: detachment, coercion, gender-based violence and humiliation. Based on our findings, we agree with the studies that argue that the prevalence of violence and its lack of recognition may be due to various factors such as the lack of adequate information on violence and its different forms; according to such studies, youth are likely to confuse violent or abusive behaviors with signs of affection (Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud, 2008). Individuals’ inability to recognize and label a situation as abuse or violence is also explained by the “normalization” of abusive behaviors, which sometimes even leads them to be expected as signs of love (Agoff et al., 2006; Castro & Casique, 2007; Méndez & Sánchez, 2009; Vázquez & Castro, 2008). In turn, this may increase individuals’ need to justify the occurrence of abusive behaviors in a romantic relationship (Harned, 2005).

The prevalence of violence as a function of perceived and unperceived abuse considered along with the presence or absence of fear shows the following: participants who felt abused and afraid were very similar to those who felt abused but not afraid, as they both reported high rates of abuse, particularly detachment, gender-based violence and emotional punishment. Participants who reported feeling afraid perceived greater humiliation, coercion and physical abuse from their boyfriend or girlfriend. This may be because the information they receive on violence in dating relationships is inaccurate, incomplete and highly stereotypical (Bleakley et al., 2009). In fact, forms of violence characterized as “psychological” can be misinterpreted as expressions of love. By contrast, physical expressions of abuse are more easily recognizable as violence and are likely to generate more fear than more “subtle” forms (i.e., detachment, emotional punishment).

In the group of participants who did not feel abused, those who felt afraid reported more expressions of all forms of violence than those who did not. It seems that the feeling of fear could be an indicator of abuse or victimization in dating

relationships. Yet, the absence of fear does not indicate that violence is absent from the relationship, as evidenced by studies in Spanish samples (Rodríguez-Franco, Antuña et al., 2012).

Finally, a comparison of the prevalence of abuse combining the three situations (i.e., abuse, fear and entrapment) showed that the group that reported feeling abused, afraid and trapped in the relationship experienced a significantly higher prevalence of sexual and physical abuse than the group of participants who felt abused, afraid and not trapped in the relationship. However, both groups had a very high incidence of victimization, particularly related to coercion, detachment and humiliation. This suggests that feeling trapped or not leads to differences in these psychological forms of abuse.

Among participants who reported feeling abused (and either afraid or not), feeling trapped was an indicator of higher victimization. Participants who felt abused, not afraid and trapped experienced significantly higher rates of detachment, humiliation and sexual abuse than those that felt abused, not afraid and not trapped. Yet, the higher victimization of participants who felt abused and afraid was only found among participants who felt trapped in the sexual and physical abuse factors.

As regards the group that reported not feeling abused but feeling afraid, both participants who felt trapped and those who did not feel trapped had something in common: a high level of detachment-related abuse; yet, those who reported not feeling abused but feeling afraid and trapped they experienced much higher rates of humiliation, sexual abuse, coercion, physical abuse and gender-based violence. A comparison between participants who did not feel abused or afraid but felt trapped and those who did not feel abused, afraid or trapped revealed that those who felt trapped experienced greater abuse in all the dimensions studied.

Overall, results show that a considerable majority of youth in our study had experienced technical abuse, since they presented evidence of having suffered abuse in their dating relationship even when they perceived themselves as not being abused. The predominant forms of abuse in the different combinations analyzed were detachment and coercion, followed by humiliation, sexual abuse, gender-based violence and emotional punishment (with slight changes in the order depending on the combinations). Physical abuse and instrumental violence had the lowest frequency of victimization. Studies on this topic have shown that psychological abuse occurs before physical abuse and even predicts it (Loinaz, Ortiz-Tallo, & Ferragut, 2012; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2009; Novo, Fariña, Seijo, & Arce, 2012; O’Leary & Smit-Slep, 2003; Sears, Byers, & Price, 2007). In our study, a considerable majority of participants reported having experienced situations of abuse, particularly psychological abuse. The most disturbing finding is that they had difficulties recognizing such behaviors as abusive. Unless the situation changes, such youth have few chances of reducing the risks of abuse in future situations and avoid future victimization (Anderson & Kobek-Pezzarossi, 2011; Hammond & Calhoun, 2007). Our results agree with those of various studies that have highlighted the existence of a mismatch between individuals’ labeling of their own experiences (i.e., holistic assessment) and behavioral measures of violence in dating relationships (i.e., behavioral

assessment) (López-Cepero et al., 2013). They also agree with results of studies that have pointed out the need to adjust prevention efforts accordingly.

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