



DATING VIOLENCE IN STUDENTS ATTENDING HIGHER EDUCATION: PREDISPOSING FACTORS

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Background: Dating violence can be defined as the perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried couple on the other member (in same-sex or opposite-sex couples), an increasing phenomenon among college students. **Objectives:** to identify socio-demographic variables that interfere with dating violence in students attending higher education institutions; to identify conjugal/domestic violence contextual variables in the family that may come to influence dating violence among higher education students. **Method:** A quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive and analytical study involving a sample of 121 higher education students, mostly female (78.5%), with a minimum age of 18 years and a maximum age of 43 years, which corresponds to a mean age of 21.65 years ($\pm 4,065$ years). Data collection instruments include a socio-demographic data questionnaire, a questionnaire aiming at assessing the conjugal violence contextual variables, and the Attitudes Toward Dating Violence Scale (EAVN) adapted to the Portuguese population By Saavedra, Machado and Martins (2008). **Results:** Most participants report that there's no sign of conjugal violence in their family (81.0%) and 95.9% of them state that they had not suffered any type of family violence. Despite the socio-demographic and contextual variables of marital violence witnessed in the family, it was evident that male students who were 22 or over, who were not living with family members during school time, who had already witnessed any kind of conjugal violence in their family and who had already suffered violence perpetrated by a relative are more likely to exhibit abusive behaviours in their affective relationships. **Conclusion:** The results suggest the need for a greater investment in nurses so they can carry out a closer and more efficient monitoring of higher education students' dating behaviours and thus reduce the incidence of dating violence, by promoting the training of young adults in order to provide them with information about the kind of behaviours they have to assume in their love relationships.

Keywords: Dating violence; Higher education students.

Introduction

Dating violence is a phenomenon that started to be regarded as a specific social problem in the 60s. Since then, dating violence has received an increasing social and scientific attention at an international level. In Portugal, people really became aware of this problem in the 90s (Ventura, 2014). However, and according to the same author, "Most accepted positions are still reductionist and stereotyped, based on traditional models within a framework set for heterosexual couples, usually married or living together, in which the

standards of conduct that reflect a certain kind of abuse of power, normally associated with harassment or abuse, are assigned to the male partner due to his socially accepted superiority (Ventura, 2014, p. 16).

Dating violence can be defined as the perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of a couple (composed by two people of the same or different genders) on the other member. This kind of violence spreads gradually between the couple, includes different types of abuse (psychological, physical or sexual) and can take on the form of small and stand-alone mistreatment episodes or lead to more extreme situations like murder (González-Ortega, Echeburúa & Corral, 2008; Ventura, 2014).

Even though there are different types of violence, the meaning that each person assigns to the concept of “violence” or “abuse” will affect the way people look at their relationship and will prevent them to understand that they are being victims of violence (in the victim’s case) or that they are adopting abusive behaviours (in the aggressor’s case). The problem is even worse when violence take on the form of emotional abuse (one of the partners threatens to end the relationship, blackmails the other emotionally, insults him/her, controls his/her partner’s behaviours and/or is excessively jealous). The fact that there is no physical violence involved makes young people attach less importance to the abusive behaviour of their partner. This situation can lead them to ignore the signs, allow the perpetuation of this abusive treatment which is affecting the relationship and prevent the victim from seeking the support he/she needs to leave that abusive relationship (González-Ortega, Echeburúa & Corral, 2008).

Verissimo, Catarino et al. (2013), based on the research they conducted using a sample of students composed mostly of girls (55.7%) who had a mean age of 16.2 years, who were attending, for the most part, the 10th grade (43.7%), observed that 68.3% of the students claimed they had already been involved in a romantic relationship, although not all of them were dating at the moment of the data collection. Evidence showed that only 15.5% of students had never dated before. Those relationships lasted, on average, 8.9 months and their duration ranged between 1 and 100 months. They realised that 138 (4.0%) of the students claimed to have been victims of dating violence: 5.2% of the female students and 2.5% of the male students reported they had been victims of violence perpetrated by their boyfriend/girlfriend. The differences between genders have statistical significance. Victims of violence are, on average, older students who have been involved in a longer relationship. These considerations will lead to statistically significant differences. Verissimo, Catarino Fábão et al. (2013) have also confirmed that, in the analysis carried out according to the participants’ gender, the victims of dating violence are older and have been involved in a longer relationship and that is the case for both boys and girls. The results for that factor are statistically significant, except for boys when we take into account the age dimension.

As far as victimization behaviours and dating violence perpetration are concerned, Verissimo, Catarino Fábão et al. (2013) noted that girls reported a greater number of aggressions or abuses than boys, with statistically significant differences. In this context, the authors found out that boys have a higher scoring that girls in 5 of the victimization behaviours like: stalking the partner during school time, pulling his/her hair hard, slapping him/her, strangling him/her and kicking him/her.

The results of a study conducted on dating violence in higher education students show a prevalence of violence with significant variations and offer results ranging from 9% to 46% of young people who claimed they had already been involved in dating abuse situations either as victims or aggressors. These differences in the prevalence of victimization and of dating violence perpetration can be attributed to different factors: the lack of a uniform definition to identify what dating violence really means for each one of us, the diversity of the assessment instruments used, the absence of longitudinal data and the different samples and ages considered (Ventura, 2014). Miller (2011), based on his study of dating violence in higher education students aged between 18 and 25 years, found out that one in four students surveyed had already experienced a physically abusive relationship that had involved at least two acts of violent behaviour. Students with abusive affective relationships presented, in general, longer-lasting relationships, previous relationships that were equally tainted by violence and a higher acceptance of the physical abuse he/she had to endure as a form to overcome the existing conflict (Miller, 2011).

Caridade (2011) has reviewed international studies on the prevalence of dating violence among young people that show that the most frequent forms of violence are physical, psychological or sexual

abuse. Evidence also showed that the “abuse young people consider the less serious” is the one which reaches the highest expression among young people. The same studies reveal the existence of prevalence rates of dating violence that range between 12.1% and 72.4% (Caridade, 2011). The same author states that, at a national level, this phenomenon is quite recent and that it has been growing lately. The author also states that dating violence among youngsters has never gotten the attention it deserves until the 90s.

The consequences of dating violence will have an impact on the physical, psychological and professional well-being of the victims. When they suffer this type of violent relationship, young people may experience the following consequences: low self-esteem, depression, anger, anxiety, school failure, suicidal tendencies, eating disorders, engaging in high-risk sexual behaviours, drug abuse and associated risk behaviours (Caridade, Saavedra & Machado, 2012).

In a relationship where violence is present, people are very likely to suffer physical injuries. Problems like general malaise, headaches, neurological symptoms, hypoacusis, bruises, head injuries, lacerations or broken bones are quite common (Freitas, 2012). At a psychological level, victims may experience emotional problems that they will express through bursts of anger, fear, anxiety, irrational guilt or depression that will increase the victims struggle with their poor self-esteem and self-confidence (Freitas, 2012).

The consequences of dating violence also have repercussions on the aggressor, on the couple’s family and on the victim’s closest friends. Since dating violence is currently considered a crime, the offender will have to face legal, social and professional consequences. The victim’s family and closest friends with experience feelings of helplessness, frustration, anger, anguish and anxiety fuelled by the act of violence perpetrated against the person they love.

According to Caridade and Machado (2006), many higher education students in a dating relationship have already experienced several different forms of abuse or violence during these relationships. Physical, psychological, verbal and sexual abuses are the most common forms of dating violence. These forms of violence are directly associated with these young people physical, emotional, cognitive and social maturity, aspects that will have a direct influence on the way each student behaves in a dating relationship (Ayers & Davies, 2011). In their perspective, the interaction between these factors can determine how and when a socialization routine will become a dating situation or when a relationship between two young people ceases to be a seemingly normal situation and becomes a violent or abusive situation.

In national terms, and in recent years, some studies focusing on higher education students have been carried out in the field of dating violence (Caridade, Machado & Vaz, 2007). Paiva and Figueiredo (2004) refer that higher education students tend to adopt violent behaviours in their dating relationships. According to the same authors, psychological aggression is the most prevalent type of violence among higher education students and physical violence is the least frequent type. These results take into account the victims and aggressors’ opinions. As Saavedra (2010) was conducting a study on the prevention of this type of behaviour, he could confirm that male students are those who seem to justify and tolerate the most that kind of boy-on-girl violence. That perspective is the same among those who see themselves as victims and those who see themselves as perpetrators.

That way, dating violence can be characterized by the occurrence of some kind of abusive act perpetrated against the partner, always with the intention to gain or maintain a power and control position in the relationship (Caridade & Machado, 2013).

Objectives

The following research questions were designed to guide the empirical study: “Which socio-demographic variables might interfere with dating violence among higher education students?” and “Which contextual domestic violence variables experienced in one’s family may interfere with dating violence among higher education students?”.

Based on the previous questions the objectives of the study were also defined: to identify the socio-demographic variables that may interfere in dating violence situations affecting higher education students;

to identify contextual variables of domestic violence perpetrated in one's family and that interfere with dating violence behaviours detected among higher education students.

Method

The research design for this study is non-experimental, cross-sectional, descriptive and correlational and explanatory. With this kind of study, we aim to analyse how independent variables may interfere or may impact on dating violence behaviours happening among higher education students. In order to carry out this study, we used a sample composed of 121 students who were attending a higher school of health. It was a non-probability sampling for convenience.

The data collection instrument is composed of a socio-demographic questionnaire, that includes questions about the participants' gender, age, marital status, the place where students are currently living and who they are living with during school time; It also contains a questionnaire about the contextual determinants of domestic violence which allowed us to gather information about the existence of signs of domestic violence in the family and whether or not the participants have already suffered any kind of violence perpetrated by family members. It also includes the Portuguese version of the *Attitudes Toward Dating violence Scale (EAVN)*, adapted to the Portuguese population by Saavedra, Machado and Martins (2008) and which consists of a self-report scale questionnaire composed of 76 items that are divided into six subscales. The value assigned to each subscale will be calculated by adding up its items. Higher scores indicate greater legitimization/ acceptance of the use of abusive behaviours in affective relationships.

Results

As far as the participants' age is concerned, the results reveal, for the entire sample, a minimum age of 18 years and a maximum of 43 years, which corresponds to a mean age of 21.65 years (± 4.065 years). Female and male participants' minimum age is 18 years and their maximum age ranges between 37 and 43 years. Male students are, on average ($m = 23,96$ years ± 5.902 years), older than female students ($M = 21,02$ years $\pm 3,155$ years). The variation coefficients indicate a low dispersion taking into account the mean ages encountered. As for the gender, data reveal that, for the whole sample, students in the 20-21 years age group (39.7%) (30.8% of them being male and 42.1% female) are the most significant group. Right after comes the group formed by students who were 22 years old (32.2%). As far as the marital status is concerned, there is a clear predominance of students who were not dating at that moment (95.6%). Only 4.1% of them had a partner by the time they answered the questionnaire.

As we can see in table 1, most of the participants state that there is no history of domestic violence in their family (81.0%). 69.2% of the male students and 84.2% of the female participants are part of that respondent group. In contrast, 19.0% of students admit that there have been episodes of domestic violence in their family. That group of respondents was formed by 30.8% of the male participants and 15.8% of the female participants.

It is also evident that almost all the young people who formed the sample (95.9%) had never suffered any type of violent abuse perpetrated by family members. Among those respondents, 96.2% were male students and 95.8% were female students.

Table 1.-Statistics regarding contextual variables of domestic violence in the family

Gender Variables	Male		Female		Total		Residuals		X ²	P
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	1	2		
	(26)	(21,5)	(95)	(78,5)	(121)	(100.0)				
Domestic violence in the family									n.a	n.a.

Yes	8	30,8	15	15,8	23	19,0	1,7	-1,7		
No	18	69,2	80	84,2	98	81,0	-1,7	1,7		
Victim of violence perpetrated by family members									n.a	n.a.
Yes	1	3,8	4	4,2	5	4,1	-0,1	0,1		
No	25	96,2	91	95,8	116	95,9	0,1	-0,1		
Total	26	100.0	95	100.0	121	100.0				

Based on the analysis of the results obtained, we can say that students who are 22 or over are those who exhibit higher mean ordination values in all dimensions. These values are even higher when they express their opinions about physical violence perpetrated against women. This position clearly shows that these are the participants who are more likely to adopt behaviours that will legitimate the use of abusive conducts in affective relationships. It also became evident that male students are those who support a greater acceptance of the use of abusive behaviour in affective relationships. This position reflects their attitudes towards male psychological and sexual violence, as well as their attitudes about female physical violence.

Female students share a greater acceptance for the use of abusive behaviours in relationships and in attitudes when they have to do with male physical violence and female psychological and sexual abuse. Students who have a history of domestic violence in their family are those who more easily legitimate the use of abusive behaviours in relationships. This position doesn't include attitudes about female physical violence; in this dimension, higher scores belong to students without any history of violence in the family.

Conclusion

Our conclusions are in accordance with those achieved by other studies, namely those conducted by Saavedra and Machado (2012) and Matos, Machado, Caridade and Silva (2006). According to all those studies, there are significant differences in the violence perpetrated by the male students when compared to their female counterpart. Veríssimo, Catarino Fabião et al. (2013, quoted by Costa, 2014) also establish that male students exhibit more frequent victimization and perpetration behaviours when compared to female students. However, it should be noted that, according to Costa (2014), there are more and more cases of young female students who reveal a greater acceptance of the use of abusive behaviour in relationships. Hines and Doulgas (2011) reveal that between 25% and 50% of the victims of dating violence are men. In Portugal, studies are even scarcer, however, taking into account the data provided by the Portuguese Victim Support Agency (*Associação de Apoio à Vítima- APAV*), we found out that, in 2010, 934 men have gotten in touch with that agency to look for support and in 2014 there were 1519 men seeking help against dating violence.

Students who do not live with family members reveal a greater acceptance of the use of abusive behaviours in relationships in aspects that have to do with the attitudes of male and female toward psychological violence and with attitudes that deal with physical violence against female partners. Students who normally live with family members during school time evidence a greater acceptance of the use of abusive behaviours in relationships in dimensions that are related to attitudes about male physical and sexual violence. These results may be due to the fact that students living with non-family members may be more likely to witness dating violence within their group of peers, a situation which in turn may make them prone to adopt acceptance behaviours regarding the use of abusive behaviours in relationships.

This study made it possible to characterize and understand a little better the factors that may influence dating violence in higher education students. Data suggest that we should continue to develop

preventive actions in this field, giving greater emphasis to primary prevention in younger age groups, and we should also focus on the training of the different educational agents, a group in which family plays a crucial part, so they may be able to achieve the right kind of knowledge that will allow them to act more wisely in the face of dating violence situations.

In this context, it is important, as future health professionals, to warn the public about the importance that this issue has in today's society, stressing that people should never minimize this problem nor the short-term or long-term consequences that may possibly result from this kind of behaviours.

This study presents some limitations that do not allow us to make inferences regarding the prevalence of dating violence in the entire population of higher education students. Nonetheless, it is still a contribution to the study of the attitudes that students may have in their dating relationships and that will represent predispositions toward future behaviours.

It is important to point out the need to develop further studies of this nature, research works which would include younger participants, since violent behaviours in dating relationships and the predisposition towards a greater acceptance of the use of abusive behaviour in affective relationships are more and more common at an ever younger age.

It would also be important to contemplate other geographical areas for the data collection and to include other socio-demographic characteristics of students and parents that were not contemplated in this investigation.

It would be interesting to carry out studies that would help understand and differentiate higher education students' behaviours according to the different types of dating violence. This study would allow us to develop a more integrated vision of the students' dynamics, notably their motivations, meanings, intentions and reactions that have an impact on dating violence.

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