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VIOLENCE PERPETRATED AND SUFFERED IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH COUPLES

Dra. Nadia Yazmín Ocampo Álvarez (a)*, Dr. Mario Alberto Morales Martínez (b), Mtra. María Lorena Barba González (c), Mtra. Miriam Yolanda Arriaga Tapia (d), Dr. Juan Alberto Hernández Padilla (e)

*Corresponding author

- (a) Departamento de Bienestar y Desarrollo Sustentable, Centro Universitario del Norte. Universidad de Guadalajara, Km. 191, México 45D No. 23, 46200 Jal. México, Jalisco, nadiaocampo@cunorte.udg.mx
- (b) Departamento de Bienestar y Desarrollo Sustentable, Centro Universitario del Norte. Universidad de Guadalajara, Km. 191, México 45D No. 23, C.P. 46200 Jal., México, mario.mora@cunorte.udg.mx
- (c) CIMAT, Centro de Investigación en Matemáticas A.C., Parque Quantum, Ciudad del Conocimiento, Av. Lasec, Andador Galileo Galilei, Manzana 3 Lote 7 C.P. 98160, México, Zacatecas, maria.barba@cimat.mx
- (d) Departamento de Bienestar y Desarrollo Sustentable, Centro Universitario del Norte. Universidad de Guadalajara, Km. 191, México 45D No. 23, C.P. 46200 Jal., México, Zacatecas, m.arriaga@cunorte.udg.mx
- (e) Departamento de Bienestar y Desarrollo Sustentable, Centro Universitario del Norte. Universidad de Guadalajara, Km. 191, México 45D No. 23, C.P. 46200 Jal., México, Zacatecas, juanalberto@cunorte.udg.mx

Abstract

Dating relationships during adolescence and youth contribute to the acquisition of interpersonal skills and identity consolidation, they also influence how people build their future relationships. Nevertheless, there are few studies that analyze the phenomenon with a sample of actual couples. This research aims to compare the levels of perception of victimization and perpetration of violence, as well as the perception of victimization regarding psychological violence, in a sample of teenage and young Mexican couples. The participants in the research are 267 couples, comprised of 534 individuals aged between 13 and 29, with an average age of 19 years and a standard deviation of 3.1 years; 49.44% are men (264) and 50.56% are women (270). All participants referred being in an actual relationship of at least one month while the study was taking place. The results suggest directionality in psychological violence, and show that perception of perpetration levels is slightly higher than the perception of victimization. In other words, bidirectional violent behaviors and attitudes are recognized.

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Keywords: Violence in dating relationships, bidirectional violence, couples, teenagers and young people.



1. Introduction

We refer to dating as the first moments of the relationship. Campo and Linares (2002) have identified dating as the first stage of a relationship in which they elaborate fantasies of a future together, that may or may not consolidate after this period of mutual exploration, where, regardless of duration, months or years, there is the possibility of establishing an emotional bond that will impact the development of the person and the establishment of future relationships, especially during adolescence and early adulthood. During this period of life, we are more susceptible to the impact of our first loves, because in them we find a possibility of reconfirmation or rejection of our identity, by perceiving ourselves as beings worthy of affection and respect (Brooks, Foshee, & Ennett, 2013; Laso, 2018; van de Bongardt, Yu, Dekovic, & Meeus, 2015).

Violence in relationships is a major social problem. Its high prevalence has aroused the interest of the national and international scientific community. Thanks to this, progress in research on the subject allow the development of research variables associated with the phenomenon and improve the methodological design. Despite that statistically the efforts to address this problem among youth have increased in recent years, the expected results are not yet reflected. Various systematic revisions have been published referring to the subject accounting the reality of the phenomenon. Among of the studies we would like to highlight there is the conducted by Gonzalez (2009) who reviewed studies of prevalence of psychological violence in dating relationships in 21 research studies addressing the phenomenon in various countries with perpetration levels ranging from 82% to 94%, while the prevalence according to the type of study went from 9.4 to 90%. Rubio-Garay, López-González, Carrasco, and Amor (2017), analyzed 113 studies finding prevalences of psychological violence suffered by males of 49.2 % among Asians and up to 79.9% among latin americans. The prevalence among women ranges between 46.7% and up to 69.2%. The values of exercised violence were greater among women 73.1%, while among men it was 67%.

2. Problem Statement

When we think of dating violence, at first, it may come to mind the idea of behaviors corresponding to physical or sexual violence, that are usually clear and deliberate, producing harm on that who suffers them; and secondly, we consider as violent, actions that are subtle and sometimes are initially almost imperceptible for those who suffer them as well as for those who exercise them, deriving in slow deterioration of the relationship and in suffering (van de Bongardt et al., 2015).

The intention of producing harm is evident in physical and sexual violence, however, in psychological or emotional violence, as in some expressions of economic and structural violence, this intention is not always recognized. Harming without intention also produces suffering. Consistent with this, in this research we adopt the definition of violence in dating relationships developed by López-Cepero (2011): “Dating violence consists in acts through which one member of the couple violates the freedoms of the other, putting him at risk of suffering some kind of harm. These acts may be presented in a discontinuous or continuous manner, by action or omission, and with or without explicit intent to produce harm” (p.56) as we consider it offers an integral view about the violence experienced in dating relationships of adolescents and young persons.

Previous research indicates the difficulty of measuring violence in dating relationships, so it is considered that the estimations are lower than the actual prevalence in the evaluated environments. The differences in prevalence are not only shown between countries, but also between different regions of each country (Brown & Hegarty, 2018; Herrero, Torres, Rodríguez, & Juarros-Basterretxea, 2017; Zapata-Calvente, Megías, Moya, & Schoebi, 2019). The characterization of this problem among adolescents and young people for the Mexican population was carried out by the Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud (Mexican Youth Institute, IMJUVE, 2008). In the National Survey of Intimate Partner Violence. The sample was made up of 7,278,236 adolescents and youths between the ages of 15 and 24, showing that in the dating relationships they maintained during 2007 a high prevalence of psychological violence was present, 76% (IMJUVE 2008). The psychological violence includes behaviours like: emotional blackmail, verbal mistreatment, constant humiliation, indifference, disregard, coercion y various actions of control to limit the freedoms of the other. In the same study, physical and sexual violence was present in equal percentages of the relationships, reaching 16% of them (IMJUVE, 2008). Being a representative sample with such high levels of violence, the survey raised alerts about the prevalence of the problem. At the same time, it suggests that youths have limited information about what is dating violence. Thus, limiting the possibility of opting for a relationship without violence.

When maltreatment is normalized and minimized in relationships, avoiding it require integral actions of prevention and intervention that consider the interaction of personal and macro-social variables that incide in the phenomenon (Juarros-Basterretxea, Overall, Herrero, & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2019; Ocampo-Álvarez, Estrada-Pineda, & Chan-Gamboa, 2018; López-Cepero, 2011). Most of the dating relationships violence prevention programs have been targeted to the female population, emphasizing in gender violence.

The conclusions from various studies point out the need of studying the phenomenon by including both members of a couple, while warning about the methodological difficulties of having access to them (IMJUVE, 2008; Rodríguez, 2015; Rojas-Solis, 2013; Rubio-Garay, Carrasco, Amor, & López-González, 2015; Updegraff et al., 2014; van de Bongardt et al., 2015). According to an analysis by Rojas-Solis (2013), in Mexico only one broad sample was found regarding couples in marriage or cohabitation in Mexico City.

3. Research Questions

Based on the review of the available literature, and considering the differences between studies on the problem that consider only one member of the couple versus the few studies conducted with both members of the relationship, we consider the following questions: Do men and women differ in their average levels of exercise of violence and victimization? Are perpetration of violence and victimization distributed in the same proportion in dating relationships among adolescents and young people?

4. Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to examine the differences between the distributions and averages, as reported by the participants of the study, regarding perpetration of violence and victimization experiences in their current relationship.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Sample

This research used of a single, non-probabilistic and intentional sample that was formed as a convenience sample, taking that population that agreed to participate at the time of data collection in rural and urban populations of the state of Jalisco, Mexico. The participation of the subjects was voluntary.

The total sample was of 534 individuals, Mexicans of both sexes. 264 men (49.44%) and 270 women (50.56%). The group has an average age of 19 years, with a minimum of 14 years and a maximum of 25 years. All participants reported having a dating relationship with a minimum duration of one month at the time of data collection for the study. The sexual orientation of the participants corresponds to (90.1%) n= 481 heterosexuals and (9.6%) n= 53 correspond to various LGBT orientations.

5.2. Procedure

The procedure of the present study was based on the non-probabilistic selection of rural and urban centers. Minors among the participants were contacted in educational institutions with the prior authorization of their parents and the directors of the institutions. The data provided by adults was collected in meeting places such as public squares, and shopping centers, explaining the objectives of the study and the guarantee of confidentiality. At the first contact, an information letter was read and the survey's privacy notice was provided. The survey was anonymous even when it collects sensitive personal data. The participants were invited to ask all relevant questions in case of doubt, both, before starting the test and during the test. At least one of the authors of this work and a group of three trained research assistants were present in all rural and urban settlements to carry out the data collection. The inclusion criteria for participating in the study were: accepting to respond voluntarily to the survey and having maintained a current relationship for at least one month of uninterrupted duration. The exclusion criteria were defined in relation to age, that is, those who were under 14 and over 25 years old were excluded.

5.3. The instrument

In the present study, we used an ad hoc socio-demographic questionnaire to obtain data that allows the adequate characterisation of the sample. These data include information on age, schooling, work activity, family income, perception of social class, as well as information related to the current couple relationship and about their previous relationships. Then we used the violence scale in the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationship Inventory (CADRI) Wolfe, Scott, Reitzel-Jaffe, Wekerle, Grasley, and Pittman (2001), in its adapted version by Fernández-Fuertes, Fuertes, and Pulido (2006). This instrument was designed specifically for detecting violent behaviours in adolescents couples, it consists of 34 items, evaluates 17 violent behaviors against the partner and 17 experiences of victimization through three subscales of the Spanish versión that are grouped into six factors, namely: relational violence, verbal-emotional violence, physical violence, relational victimization, verbal-emotional victimization, and physical victimization. The scale offers a range of responses of four options ranging from "never" (this has not happened in our relationship), a category that is assigned a value of zero, up to "frequently" (this has occurred on six or more occasions), with an assigned value of three. The internal consistency of the original

scale is 0.83 (Wolfe et al., 2001) and in studies with Spanish adolescents were observed adequate psychometric properties of this scale (Fernández-Fuertes et al., 2006; Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010). In the analyses carried out in our sample, the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient (Elosua & Zumbo, 2008) was 0.92. The subscale of violent behavior towards the couple was 0.82 and for the victimization subscale of 0.89.

6. Findings

The descriptive analysis of the data shows that 90.23% of the participants have exercised some form of intimate partner violence, 52.2% are women and 47.80% are men (Pearson's Chi Square test indicates that the frequency distributions are equal in both sexes [$\chi^2 = 3.118$, $p = 0.077$]). Similarly, the data analysis indicates that 83.08% of the participants have been victims of intimate partner violence, 49.9% are women and 50.1% are men (the frequency distributions of victimization are the same in both sexes [$\chi^2 = 0.253$, $p = 0.615$]).

The classification by type of violence perpetrated shows that 36% of the sample studied has exercised relational violence (36.10% of the women and 35.90% of the men, these frequency distributions do not differ significantly in both sexes [$\chi^2 = 0.003$, $p = 0.959$]); Similarly, 35.54% have exercised physical violence (42.90% of the women and 28.00% of the men. We found a statistically significant difference between women and men in this area [$\chi^2 = 12.885$, $p = 0.000$]). Finally, 89.37% of participants have exercised verbal-emotional violence (known in other referential frameworks as psychological violence), 91.40% of the women and 87.30% of the men; there was no statistically significant difference between these percentages [$p=0.121$]).

In regard to the categorization of victimization experiences, the results show that 8.14% of participants have been victims of relational violence (7.50% of the women and 8.80% of the men; we did not find significant statistical difference among these percentages [$\chi^2 = 0.280$, $p = 0.597$]); have been victims of physical violence (18.90% of the women and 35.10% of the men found a statistically significant difference between these percentages [$\chi^2 = 17.666$, $p = 0.000$]); finally, 82.13% have been victims of verbal-emotional violence, (81.10% of the women and 83.10% of the men; statistically these percentages are equal [$\chi^2 = 0.362$, $p = 0.547$]).

On the other hand, taking as a cutting point the average scores of the different types of violence and victimization experiences, which CADRI measures (Fernández-Fuertes et al., 2006), it is observed that these values are closer to the cumulative minimum scores for the different categories. In a range from 3 to 12 points, the average in which study participants have exercised relational violence is 3.56. In a range from 4 to 16 the average in which they have exercised physical violence is 4.89. In a range from 10 to 40, the average in which they have exercised emotional violence is 15.28. Similarly, participants have rarely experienced relational victimization ($x = 3.16$), physical ($x = 4.79$) and emotional victimization ($x = 14.92$); in short, participants record low average values in perpetration of violence and experience of victimization. However, when grouping these categories we found that the accumulated average of perpetration of violence is 23.73 and the accumulated average of victimization is 22.87. The numbers are alarming, considering the characteristics of the sample and the type of relationship we study.

Complementing the analysis above, U Mann-Whitney test summary allows us to accept the null hypothesis of equal mean ranks between women and men in relation to the exercise of relational violence, which means that both sexes record similar levels of violence in this area. On the contrary, this test allows the rejection of the equal mean ranks between women and men in terms of physical violence and emotional violence; women accumulate higher mean ranks in perpetration of physical and emotional violence.

Regarding the experience of victimization, the statistical significance of U Mann-Whitney test allows us to accept the equal mean ranks in terms of the experiences of relational and emotional victimization of women and men; on the contrary, this test allows for the rejection of equal mean ranks in the experience of physical victimization of women and men; according to table 1, men accumulate higher mean ranks in all areas.

In regard to the experience of victimization, the statistical significance of the U Mann-Whitney test allows to accept the equality of mean ranks between men and women relational and emotional victimization; on the contrary, this test allows to reject the equality of mean ranks between men and women in regard to physical victimization. According to table 1, men accumulate the higher mean ranks in all categories.

Table 01. U Mann-Whitney hypothesis test for violence and victimization types by sex

Test	Relational Violence	Physical Violence	Verbal-Emotional Violence	Relational Victimization	Physical Victimization	Verbal-Emotional Victimization
U of Mann-Whitney	34577,500	30026,000	29563,500	34399,000	28817,000	31958,000
W of Wilcoxon	69030,500	64217,000	63233,500	69910,000	64328,000	67203,000
Z	-0,180	-3,297	-2,953	-0,538	-4,411	-1,514
Bilaterasl Asymptotic Significance	0,857	0,001	0,003	0,591	0,000	0,130

A: Grouping variable sex

In the other hand, the global analysis of the CADRI dimensions with the Wilcoxon sign rank test allows to reject the null hypothesis of equal medians in the three categories of violence and victimization. According to the significance level registered in the Wilcoxon test for our sample, the average of relational violence exercised is greater than the average of relational violence victimization ($Z=-9.615$, $p=0.000$); similarly, we observe that the average of the physical violence exercised is greater than the average of the physical violence victimization ($Z=-2.920$, $p=0.003$), and that the average of the emotional violence exercised is greater than the average of the emotional violence victimization ($Z=-2.912$, $p=0.004$). This is, it is observed a higher prevalence of violence perpetration than victimization, particularly in regard to emotional violence (table 2). This means that as the majority of the participants on the study believe they are both, perpetrators and victims of violence, they consider that the frequency at which they exercise violence is higher.

Table 02. Comparison of the distributions of frequencies of violence and victimization

Variable	Categories	Prevalence of victimization		
		Is not victim of violence	Is victim of violence	Total
Prevalence of violence perpetration	Does not exercise violence	40	11	51
	Exercises violence	48	416	464
Total		88	427	515

7. Conclusion

The goal of this article is to perform an initial analysis that allows to examine the differences in the distributions and averages reported by the participants of a study conducted in the state of Jalisco, México, regarding perpetration of violence and experiences of victimization. This, based on a cross-sectional field research and by applying the CADRI scale of violence to a sample of adolescents and young people in emerging adulthood.

According to the descriptive statistics, the calculated averages for each category of perpetration of violence and victimization may be considered low, which indicates that the participants rarely exercise the types of violence that CADRI evaluates, and few times have been victims of violence from their partner. However, 90.23% of the participants have exercised violence in their current relationship, even when according to the calculated averages for each category of exercise of violence and victimization are relatively low. The accumulated average of violence perpetration is established in 23.73%, while the accumulated average of victimization is established in 22.87%, which indicates values close to the obtained by other studies (Brooks, Foshee, & Ennett, 2013; Ocampo-Álvarez et al., 2018; Rubio-Garay et al., 2015; Updegraff et al., 2014; Valdivia-Peralta, Fonseca-Pedrero, González Bravo, & Paino, 2019). These studies point out the presence of violence in 20 to 30 % of dating relationships. These results suggest difficulties to keep a relational bond without exercising violence. This is worrying, given the impact that these first partner relationships have in the consolidation of personality, and as a risk factor for establishing future relationships.

According to the U Mann-Whitney test, men and women show equal average levels of relational violence, and differ in physical and verbal-emotional violence. In comparison, men and women show equal average levels of relational and verbal-emotional victimization. Average levels differ in physical victimization. Women register the higher averages in every category of violence perpetration, while men registered higher averages in every category of victimization.

Regarding psychological violence we found that the most frequent violent behaviors are verbal-emotional followed by relational. These types of violence are frequently normalized as every day actions “all couples argue”. However, not everybody blames their partner for what happened without taking some responsibility in the conflict. This turns into detachment attitudes, showing indifference and not considering the partners feelings. This lack of consideration to the partner is what makes the difference. When we normalize these behaviors we reduce the possibility of detecting and labeling the maltreatment, thus, limiting intervention (García et al., 2015; López-Cepero, Rodríguez, & Rodríguez, 2015). An interpretation we make from the high levels of perpetration of violence and victimization is that we are normalizing the violent expressions, detachment in relationships is becoming the norm rather than the exception. As pointed

out by Bauman (2005), current bonds are characterized by immediacy and relationships are considered disposable, where the other gets diluted and self-interests are the primacy. When bonds get tighter or life gets complicated the relationship is discarded passing to a new relationship. We live detachment in its different manifestations with attitudes of lack of interest that are experienced as lack of respect and affection (Laso, 2018), and we normalize this in myths of romantic love such as “Love hurts”, thus, complicating its identification, labeling and, therefore, the possibilities for young people to act in the face of conflict.

Regarding the frequency distributions, the type of violence that participants perpetrate more frequently is the verbal-emotional (87.3% in men and 91.4% in women), followed by physical and relational violence. By sex, we observe that women present the higher percentage of violence perpetration in all categories, as men present the higher percentages as victims of violence in all categories.

In coherence with this result, the Chi-squared test shows that the percentage distributions of men and women are equal in relational violence and verbal-emotional violence, they only present statistically significant difference in physical violence. About the victimization experience, men and women have equal percentage distributions in relational violence and verbal-emotional violence; they only present statistically significant difference in physical victimization. About the experience of victimization, men and women have equal distributions in relational violence and verbal-emotional violence (83.1% and 81.1%); they only have statistically significant differences in physical victimization. The percentages found in this study coincide with those with wider samples at national and international levels with similar methodology (Ocampo-Álvarez et al., 2018; Redondo, Luzardo, García, & Inglés, 2017; Rodríguez, 2015; Rubio-Garay, López-González, Carrasco, & Amor, 2017).

In regards to the assessment of the differences between the categories of violence perpetration and victimization, the Wilcoxon test presents statistically significant evidence that the average perception of relational violence is higher than the average perception of relational victimization among the participants of the study. Equally, we found that their average perception of physical violence perpetration is higher than the average perception of physical victimization and that the average perception of verbal-emotional violence perpetration is higher than the average perception of verbal-emotional victimization. In short, the data shows that as the majority consider themselves both, perpetrators and victims, they perceive themselves as perpetrators of violence more frequently.

The analysis with the McNemar test of the four general distributions that CADRI measures: exercises violence, does not exercise violence, is a victim of violence, is not a victim of violence; found that the probability of self-reporting as victim of violence increases with the probability of perceiving himself (herself) as perpetrator of violence. The difficulty to label the suffered violent behaviors, but a higher recognition of violent behaviors perpetrated, coincides with the description by Rodríguez, Antuña, López, Rodríguez, and Bringas (2012). This result, together with the other that have been reported, constitute a pertinent proof in favor of the theoretical hypothesis of bidirectionality of violence in dating relationships.

In this sense, the findings indicate that the bidirectional maltreatment in dating relationships among adolescents and young people is a phenomenon occurring with important and alarming frequency because of the emotional, physical and social implications it entails (Foshee et al., 2004). Although the importance of the problem has been pointed out internationally by the W.H.O (2014), in Mexico as in other countries

of America, it has not yet materialized in public policy that facilitates prevention and intervention (Valdivia-Peralta et al., 2019).

Considering relational violence as a bidirectional phenomenon does not relieve from responsibility of exercising violent behaviors, this is why in this kind of studies it is convenient to analyze the frequencies of perpetration and victimization in both members of the couple. The explanation of bidirectionality of violence is complex, it has been associated with culture and the relational ideals as the romantic love myths as to the function of falling in love (Laso, 2018). We consider it convenient to point out to the importance of designing and implementing gender-sensitive prevention strategies that include men and women (Herrero, Torres, Rodríguez, & Juarros-Basterretxea, 2017; Kiss, Schraiber, Hossain, Watts, & Zimmerman; 2015). Many of the preventive actions are elaborated with women in mind, leaving males unattended, so are their need for emotional education and relational contention.

7.1. Limitations and Future Directions

The first limitation for this work is the data gathering method. While it's true that the sample was extracted from urban and rural areas of the west of Mexico with the intention of reflecting diverse socio-demographic contexts, it was not a probabilistic sampling, thus producing difficulties to reach conclusions that can be generalized, so it is convenient to widen the sample. The results obtained with this sample are a practical guide to be considered in the design of prevention strategies based on the need that adolescents, regardless of their sex, of establishing dating relationships that are more satisfactory and learn to engage with other forms of interactions that allow them to live without violence. Finally, it is essential that future studies examine the role that other variables may play as conflict resolution in relationships, beliefs in myths on romantic love, personality traits and emotional nutrition in other relationships as family and peers, which will allow to identify new problems to guide the study of this phenomenon in the immediate future.

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