

ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTION OF DATING VIOLENCE FROM A PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This research was carried out with adolescents from the coastal zone of Ecuador, characterized by having a miscegenation between the Afro-Ecuadorian population, indigenous peoples and Europeans. The objective was to explore the experiences and perception of adolescents about dating violence from a Public Health perspective. A qualitative methodology of phenomenological design was applied, using as techniques the focus group and non-participant observation with a question guide to guide the discussion in the focus group, structured based on gender theory and previous studies of dating violence. As a result, the perception of violence was found as an element that is built over time, observing how these adolescents see it as normal to give their phone codes to their boyfriends as part of trust, a situation that ends up invading the private space by complete; adolescents grant a significant part of their privacy to maintain their partner, observing control and domination as a category that is also associated with the manifestation of various behaviors in which the level of violence increases. Conclusion: Violence is observed in a bidirectional way where control strategies are used, in many cases referring to a cultural factor that favors violence as something normal among them. And it is described as worrisome and negative, both for physical and psychological health “seriousness of the problem”.

Keywords: Violence, Adolescent, Public Health, Dating.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is characterized by being a period in which the emotional development of the person has not yet been reached, therefore, exposure to violence in dating relationships implies a negative impact on the mental health of adolescents in the short or long term.

Some theoretical perspectives that address the origin of this behavior base their explanations on: normalization of abuse in the couple relationship (acceptance and social tolerance), intergenerational transmission of violent patterns (repeated exposure or testimony of children and young people to intimate violence of partner or spouse). Therefore, dating violence is defined “as the physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional abuse of a partner, including threats” (WHO, 2010). Added to these unhealthy behaviors is “stalking that can occur in person or by electronic means” (Vagi, O’Malley, Basile, Vivolo, 2015).

Violence in dating relationships is a subject that is followed closely and continuously in several countries around the world. An example that serves as a reference is the research carried out by Leen, Sorbring, Mawer, Holdsworth, Helsing and Bowen (2013), where the result was that: “violence is normalized, minimized or confused with gambling. The main causes that trigger violence are: family history of violence, early age at the onset of sexual life, and the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances” (p.4).

In Latin America, it is reported that the most common behaviors consist of maintaining control and using nicknames to humiliate, both sexes agree that both men and women are aggressors and recipients of this type of violence (Flores, Juárez, Vidaña, 2015). In Ecuador, specifically, the Esmeraldas canton ranks as the second province where more acts of violence occur and with adolescents in vulnerable conditions, as it is one of the provinces with the greatest educational, economic and health inequalities according to the PUCE Esmeralda Human Rights Observatory (2019).

According to the analysis of the results obtained in the National Survey on Family

Relations and Gender Violence against Women (ENVIGMU) carried out by Camacho (2014), the incidence of violence against women by the couple varies according to the region. geographic, with the Sierra being one of the regions with the highest percentages. In the same study it is maintained that “Family history constitutes a predictor of the exercise or not of violence towards the couple; since it is verified that the incidence is greater among women who were mistreated during childhood at home” (p.100). The precedent obtained in the results of the National Survey leads to a propensity in the reproduction of unhealthy couple relationships, since they could be derived from the patterns learned at home.

For this reason, the objective of this research was to explore the experiences and perception of adolescents about dating violence from a public health perspective.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study of phenomenological design that took into account the gender perspective to understand the way in which dating relationships are perceived among adolescents from the coastal zone of Ecuador, which is characterized by having a miscegenation between the Afro-Ecuadorian population, indigenous peoples and Europeans. The scenario where the study was carried out was a trust-based educational institution in Esmeraldas and in total the data was extracted from a focus group made up of 7 participants using the non-probabilistic method at convenience. Considering all the ethical aspects of the research.

The data collection techniques used: focus group and non-participant observation with a question guide to guide the discussion in the focus group, this was structured based on gender theory and previous studies on dating violence (Rubin 1975; Lagarte 1996.)

To achieve theoretical saturation in the focus group, the exhaustion of the topic discussed was validated with the participants and the same technique was used for the interview.

The information was stored in voice files, transcribed with the NVIVO program, reviewed and edited by the researchers. Regarding the analysis of the information, the Mayring (2014) approach was used, for the processes of deductive categorization (predetermined categories) and the analysis of the researchers opened the way to inductive categories (they come from the data), later a structure was created. of interrelation of the categories to give a broader explanation of the phenomenon and facilitate theorization, all this with the use of the Atlas software. ti version 7. The interpretation processes arose from the triangulation between researchers, observations made in the field and the categorization as a whole.

RESULTS

Figure 1.

The figure presented shows the structuring of knowledge based on the discussions of adolescents. The results were systematized considering the categorization processes linked to the citations of each participant. The letters GF- which stands for focus group are shown. Followed by the letter P that means participant and a number that shows the number given to the person who participates in the focus group.

We start from the category “Control and domination” because its manifestation gives rise to certain abuses in the dating relationship, it refers to the controlling demonstrations that can occur from one member of the couple to another. Here is a sample of the expressions generated during the exchange:

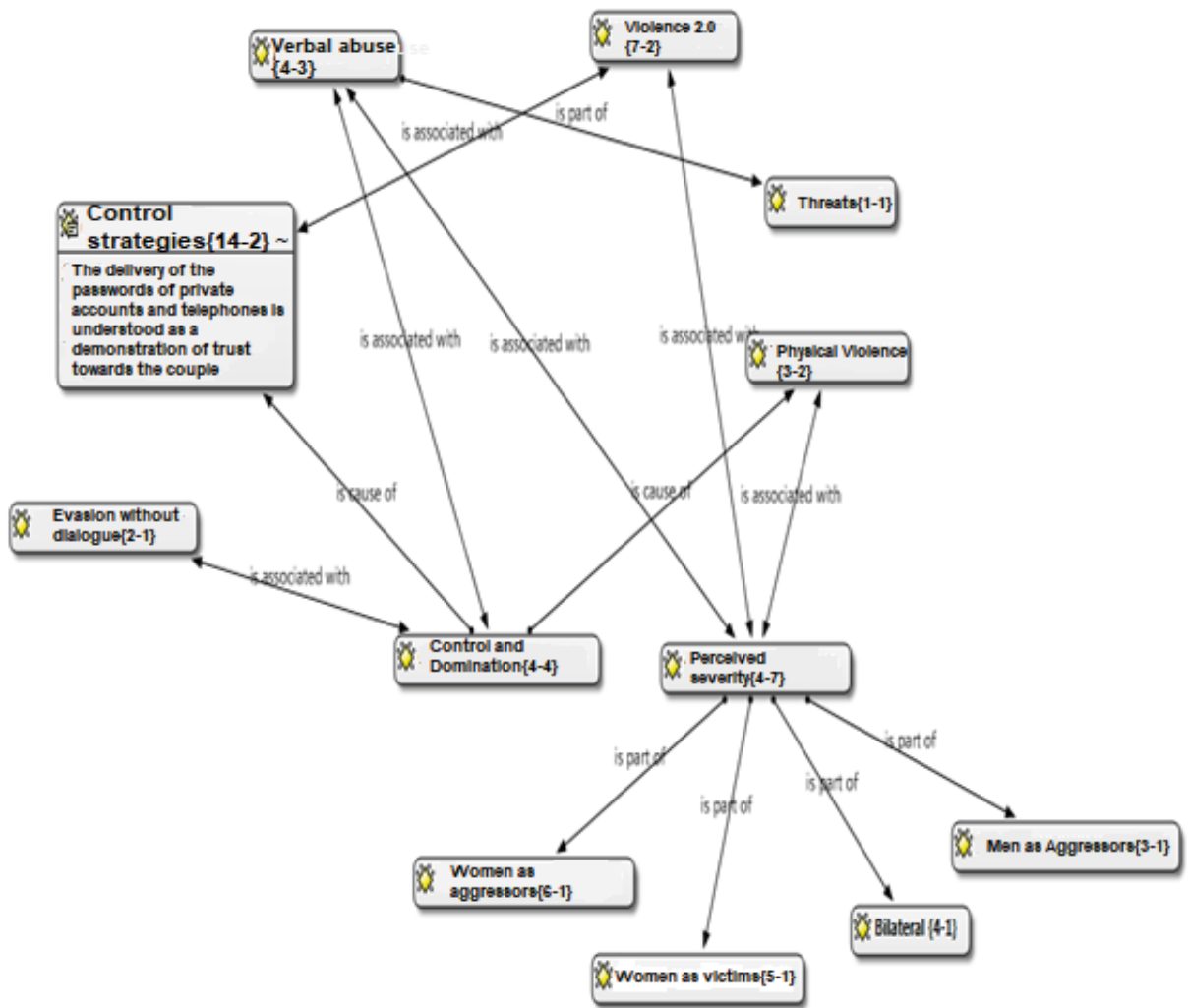


Figure 1. Structural network perception of dating violence.

“The most frequent are the toxic ones, that is, an example I know what I know that someone already pretends that they do not like that the couple is dating or something like that, they let them stay at home while they go out to do their things, while the couple is locked up, they just stay there doing nothing” GF-P2.

“I am going to give an example as a toxic agent: That is, when the woman or man looks at a person or a family member, they prevent him from looking at him, and ask him to simply look at his partner and also when he is going to greet someone, if he simply grabs or hits him so that he only communicates with his partner” GF-P5.

“Control and domination” is associated with the subcategory “evasion without dialogue” which consisted of agreement with the story of an adolescent in manipulative behaviors, where the opportunity to dialogue or negotiate peacefully in the face of a conflict in the relationship is denied.

In the structural network, it is observed how control and domination is the cause of the category “control strategies” referring to a cultural factor that favors violence. In the specific case of adolescents, the delivery of usernames and passwords of social networks is used. as a wrong demonstration of affection

and trust. The “control strategies” category is part of the appearance of types of violence and one of them is directly “violence 2.0” where the experiences narrated in the era of social isolation during the time of the pandemic and the increase in digital interaction between couples. Here are some expressions:

“It is better to know about the networks, because it allows you to see things about infidelity or private messages or intimate photos that she had sent to another person” FG-P.

“Usually it is not done (delivery of users and passwords), only when you come to have extreme trust with the person who is your partner. Only when you have great confidence” FG-P.

“I would give her the password because we are starting and when we have been a year, so there is no longer any infidelity or something like that, I give her my password so that she sees everything in me, except that she can see if I am being a unfaithful” FG-P.

Control and domination is a category that is also associated with the manifestation of various behaviors in which the level of violence increases, such is the case of “verbal abuse” certain offenses are observed in the relationship:

“It’s a matter of strong discussions, strong because there were cases, of course it doesn’t happen to me, but there are couples who find things they don’t like or mustn’t find and based on that a very strong discussion can start” FG-P.

The next category refers to “threats” and they are part of “verbal abuse” in the focus group it was possible to observe the expressions with these circumstances, where the adolescent comments on the experience of other adolescents:

“As if he wanted to hit her, he raised his voice, said very bad things to him, as well as insults and all those things” FG-P.

Additionally, in the structural network it is observed how the category “control and domination” is the cause of “physical violence” this type of violence

“It would be like physical contact, it is that they want to hit or throw things” FG-P.

During the interaction with the adolescents, it was possible to verify that the group described violence in dating relationships as a worrisome and negative situation, which gave rise to the category “seriousness of the problem” in the focus group.

“Yes, it is worrying because (...) psychologically or physically it can hurt you” FG-P.

However, in the discussion generated, it is noteworthy that one person expresses that this situation can be worrisome if it is very frequent. In this sense, there is a certain tolerance or normalization of these behaviors in the couple relationship.

“I say that it is worrying, when these discussions or fights are very frequent” FG-P.

According to our structural network, the subcategories: “women as aggressors”; “women as victims”, “bilateral” and “men as aggressors” are part of the perceived seriousness and respond to the modality of violence, that is, they describe those people who exercise or receive abusive behaviors in the dating relationship according to the perception of the adolescents.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The data shows a type of control and domination through electronic media, a practice that occurs among adolescents, as Thulin et al. (2023) for a similar age range. In our case, it is observed how adolescents give a significant part of their privacy to maintain their relationship. The lack of elements of the subject’s privacy can lead to problems in

Women as aggressors	Women as victims	Bilateral	Men as aggressors
<p><i>"I treat badly, very badly, that is, I don't treat everyone badly, I treat them how I want them to treat me, but not if they treat me badly"</i> FG-P.</p> <p><i>"If the one that causes the most problems or fights in the relationship"</i> FG-P.</p>	<p><i>"It's always the girls"</i> FG-P.</p> <p>Observations: <i>The group as a whole identifies women more as victims.</i></p>	<p><i>"I treat the person, how he treats me. If she treats me violently, I can treat her violently, but no, not that much. It is not reaching violence, violence"</i> FG-P.</p>	<p><i>"The boyfriend, how he fights many times online or face to face, then the family worries and looks at his son's messages, and if the son cannot speak, then there are times when he becomes violent, sometimes he leaves home, fight with the others"</i> FG-P.</p>

Table 1. Modality of violence.

Source: Information provided by the adolescents participating in the focus group.

self-concept, an element in which problems are observed when dating violence occurs, as indicated by Guerrero et al. (2022).

This is related to jealousy, the possibility that someone approaches my partner to seduce her. In this sense, Ramos et al. (2022), in a study with medical students from Cuba, points out how the most suffered violence is the control violence of jealousy. Just as the data reflects violence by men and women, Ramos et al. (2022) points out that women and men exercised violence related to jealousy and humiliation. This supposes a two-way violence, as our data shows. An investigation in five cities in Colombia, Rey-Anacona et al. (2022) show how women exercise verbal violence and men physical violence, which is related to what was observed in our research, where men usually exercise physical violence.

The results agree with Thulin et al. (2023) where control and domination lead us to physical violence. Violence is an element that is built over time. In our case, it is observed how the couple first trusts each other to give each other the keys to then invade the private space completely, which corresponds to the study by Robles et al. (2021) where higher levels of violence are observed as students get older.

The violence is justified by the treatment received or if the couples find information on the mobile. This is related to the contribution of Orozco-Vargas et al. (2021) where violence was justified in the case of infidelity, sexual abstention with the partner or behaviors that justify violence. We can also observe a justification of violence in relation to the way in which people must be treated; if a woman is treated with violence, she must respond to her aggressor, observing a pattern of affirmation of her dignity as a woman, which corresponds with the results of Pérez-Sánchez et al. (2020). Violence is exercised physically or through digital means. Both one and the other influence people, as highlighted by Gomes et al. (2022).

Families influence the formation of behavior towards violence (Rodrigues et al., 2022). In our case, it is observed how the family plays a role in defending the possible victim in line with what was observed by Reina-Barreto (2021), where the family is the main support of the victim. Culture also influences how intimate partner violence is portrayed. In line with the contribution of Costa et al (2021), adolescents represent violence with the vocabulary that they use in their cultural environments. The medium,

low socioeconomic and cultural level of the participants make us speculate, as did Rocha et al. (2020), that the data on violence can be related to the sociocultural level, being frequent practices the giving of passwords, which can be common to a group, community or social stratum.

Violence is observed in a bidirectional way, something that shows the importance of focusing on men as victims of this violence in relationships, as highlighted by Sánchez-Villegas et al. (2023) and Pérez-Sánchez et al. (2020). Although, as in the research by Rodrigues et al. (2022) and Reina-Barreto (2021), a higher prevalence is observed among women. As Rey-Ancona and Martínez-Gómez (2021) point out, men suffer dating violence, but the effects of violence are more negative in women, from the deterioration of physical and psychological health to social, family and social networks. support. In our research, women are identified as victims, something that is related to what was observed by Pérez-Sánchez et al. (2020), the violence exerted on them being evident.

The students point out the importance of violence in relation to their physical and mental health, which is corroborated by the contribution of Javier-Juárez et al. (2022), with Mexican adolescents where physical violence exercised in the presence or digitally decreases the quality of life associated with health. Rey-Anaconda and Martínez-Gómez (2021), observe that suffering violence in the dating relationship negatively influences the development of women, as the results indicate. Women are more victimized (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013), and they also tend to justify the violence exerted against them (You and Kwon, 2023). One of the keys to courtship is in the idealization of couple relationships where certain actions by the couple are consented to in order to continue

with the relationship as shown by Hernández, Castro and Barrios (2021).

The main conclusion is that violence is exercised in a bidirectional manner, as observed in Ramos et al. (2022), and it seems that, at a critical point, violence of any kind is exerted in both directions. As Francisco-Pérez et al. (2022), it seems that courtship is a stage where in risk contexts, as is the case of Esmeraldas, the factors of violence occur in a usual way among the young population. Paraphrasing Rodrigues et al. (2022), it seems that dating violence is becoming naturalized in risky contexts.

Future research must measure the level of appearance of violent behaviors and the causes that produce this escalation of violence in the couple. This information will allow us to establish prevention projects that avoid the first signs of violence. In line with Thulin et al. (2023), and in view of the available data, we advise intervention before the age of 13.

Coronel (2019) must always be kept in mind, where they describe that these are situations that can be overcome if help is sought and offered in time for an interdisciplinary approach. Without forgetting that adolescents are the future of any country.

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