

Physical and psychological aggression in dating relationships in Spanish university students

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The presence of violent behaviors of a psychological and physical nature in dating relations was analyzed in a sample of Spanish university students between 18 and 27 years of age. The results indicate a high prevalence of both kinds of aggression in interpersonal relationships, revealing important typology differences between the sexes. Violent psychological behaviors (characterized by the presence of verbal aggression and coercive and jealous behaviors) and physical aggression were significantly higher in women, though the consequences of physical aggression were worse for the women's health. The implications of the results and their possible relation with more severe violent acts in more stable, emotional relationships are discussed.

Agresión física y psicológica en las relaciones de noviazgo en universitarios españoles. En el presente trabajo se analiza la presencia de comportamientos violentos de carácter psicológico y físico en las relaciones de noviazgo en una muestra de jóvenes universitarios españoles con edades comprendidas entre los 18 y los 27 años. Los resultados indican la alta prevalencia de ambos tipos de agresión en las relaciones interpersonales, encontrando diferencias importantes en cuanto a su tipología entre sexos. Así, la violencia de carácter psicológico (analizadas por la presencia de agresiones verbales y comportamientos coercitivos y celosos) y la agresión física resultaron ser significativamente superiores en el caso de las mujeres, aunque las consecuencias para la salud derivadas de la misma son más negativas para ellas. Se comentan, asimismo, las implicaciones de los resultados obtenidos y su posible relación con actos de violencia más graves en posteriores relaciones emocionales más estables.

In the last few years, domestic violence has become one of the most important problems faced by contemporary society, not only because of the enormous magnitude of the phenomenon, but also because of the severity of the personal and social consequences that derive from it. It has therefore been recognized as a public health problem.

The statistics conducted recently by public and private organizations of various countries show that abuse in couple relationships is a frequent and habitual phenomenon (Archer, 2000). In Spain, data provided by the Ministry of Home Affairs [Ministerio del Interior] in the years 2003 and 2005 about victims of violence by the spouse or intimate partners show that 5,129 crimes or offenses are reported, both by women and men, between ages 21 and 30 years. These early ages of partner aggression have revealed that violence does not usually emerge spontaneously during the marriage or the couple's life together but that it frequently begins during the dating relationship.

In 1998, The World Health Organization (WHO) informed that 30% of the female university students had reported some kind of violence in their dating relationships, and over time, verbal

aggressions, which were more frequent at the start of the relationship, turned into physical aggressions. In Spain, the Family Violence Service of Bilbao (Echeburúa & Corral, 1998) reported that in 22% of the cases registered, the problems of violence began when the couple was dating. In other study carried out in Asturias (Fontanil et al., 2005), 20,2% of the population have suffered or are suffering abuse by their partner. Data from other countries show that in 71% of the cases attended in the last few years, it was detected that violence began also during this developmental stage (Coffey, Leitenberg, Henning, Bennett, & Jankowski, 1996).

Makepeace (1981) was the pioneer in carrying out an investigation about the nature and prevalence of dating violence, obtaining the result that one out of five university students had experienced physical abuse by their partner. In addition, 61% of the sample also knew someone who had suffered abuse. After two decades of similar studies, subsequent research still offers comparable estimations in the university population (Fiebert & González, 1997; González & Santana 2001; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Katz, Carino, & Hilton, 2002).

Besides the importance of the above data about the habitual presence of these aggressive acts in young people's relations, it is also important to note that the studies carried out show that aggression between partners is usually engaged in by both individuals (e.g., in marriage Straus & Gelles (1990) and dating relations (O'Leary & Slep, 2003). And, physical aggression is often considered a «normal» practice within the couple (Avery-

Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997; Díaz-Aguado, 2003; Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, & Bangdiwala, 2001; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2000). Moreover, there is a strong correlation between the levels of aggression between male and female partners (O'Leary & Slep, 2003).

Concerning the typology of the more frequently performed physical aggressions in young couples, the data indicate that they are usually of the most «*minor*» form (e.g., throwing objects, hitting or kicking something, grabbing or pushing) and the consequences are not severe, although the fact in itself is alarming. However, with dating couples, the severe forms of violence (e.g., the use of weapons, choking, beating) are very infrequent (Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992; Dye & Eckhardt, 2000; Katz et al., 2002; Katz, Street, & Alias, 1997; Magnol et al. 1998).

More specifically, the studies to date have shown that, in dating populations, psychological violence is considered a «*normalized*» practice by youths, taking on the form of: a) hostile attitudes (e.g., refusing to discuss a problem); b) dominating or intimidating the partner (e.g., threatening to harm the partner's friends); c) degrading (e.g., insulting); and d) restrictive control (e.g., asking the partner insistently where he/she has been) (Harned, 2001; Hird, 2000; Jackson et al., 2000; Murphy & Hoover, 2001).

Considering the above, the aim of this work was to determine the typology of aggression carried out within dating relationships and the differences as a function of sex in a representative sample of young Spanish university students from the Community of Madrid.

Method

Participants

Taking into consideration the goals of the study, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were proposed:

- Inclusion criteria: a) being over 18 years of age and b) being currently, or having been in the past, in a dating relationship.
- Exclusion criteria: being married.

Hence, the sample was made up of a total of 1,886 university students of both sexes (72.1% women and 27.9% men) of ages between 18 and 27 years old, mean age 20.97 years ($SD=1.95$). The most representative group was made up of youths between ages 20-21 years, who made up 38% of the total sample.

All the participants were studying either in public universities (62% of the sample) or in private universities (38%) of the Autonomous Community of Madrid.

With regard to the university course, 96.1% of the students were in the first University Cycle, 1.6% were in the second Cycle, and 2.3% in the third Cycle. Specifically, 12% studied careers in the areas of Engineering/Technology and Health Sciences, respectively, 26% were studying careers in the field of Humanities, 31% studied careers in the area of Social and Juridical Sciences, and 19% studied careers in the area of Experimental Sciences.

Instruments and variables

A specific assessment instrument with three different formats was elaborated:

1. A series of questions with various response possibilities which collected all the relevant information about:
 - Descriptive aspects of the sample (age, sex, nationality, university and sexual orientation).
 - Facts about the dating relationship (e.g., age of first relation, number of partners, number of previous break-ups, duration of relations, dating frequency and foresight of the current relationship's future).
 - The typology of injuries derived from physical violence experienced in the dating relationship (slight cuts or bruises, severe cuts or bruises, broken nose, black eye or broken bones and medical attention or hospitalization).
- a) The Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (mCTS; Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, O'Leary, & Slep, (1999), Neidig, 1986). This is a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979). Made up of 18 items, with bidirectional questions (victim/aggressor), with a likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently*). This scale evaluates the way individuals resolve conflicts in the course of a disagreement with their partner. Specifically, it measures physical and verbal violence (e.g., «*Did you say or do something to upset or annoy your partner? // Has your partner said or done something to upset or annoy you? Have you threatened to hit or throw something at your partner? // Has your partner threatened to hit or throw something at you?*»).
- b) The Dominating and Jealous Tactics Scale (Kasian & Painter, 1992). This scale is made up of 11 five-point Likert-type items, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently*). It is structured in two subscales that measure jealous behavior (e.g., *I have been jealous of my partner. I have suspected my partner's friends,*) and dominant tactics (e.g., *I have tried to prevent my partner from talking to or seeing his/her family*). The variables analyzed in this study are defined as follows:
 1. Psychological aggression/ violence. In this study, psychological violence carried out within dating relationships was appraised by evaluating the presence of various forms of aggression as defined below:
 - a) Verbal aggression. Operatively defined as the use of words (e.g., threats, insults) or intentional silences (e.g., refusal to talk about some topic. Verbal aggression or violence was evaluated considering the following behaviors: a) insulting or cursing; b) upsetting the partner by talking or refusing to talk about some topic; c) leaving angrily; d) saying something to upset or annoy the partner; and e) threats of physical aggression.
 - b) Dominant behavior. Defined operatively as a series of behaviors aimed at controlling the victim's activities in the area of relations, family, and emotional well-being.
 - c) Jealous behavior. Defined by a series of behaviors and feelings that involve the wish to possess and control the other member of the couple.
 2. Physical aggression /Violence. Defined operatively as any kind of aggressive behavior that includes actions such as hitting or throwing an object, physically restraining the partner, slapping, pushing/ grabbing, trying to choke and/or beating.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

The mean age at which the participants had their first relation was around 14.6 years and the youths, both women and men, reported having had three dating relationships in their lives. The mean duration of these relationships was about 25.9 months ($SD=20.75$), with significant differences between sexes, with the

women maintaining their relationships for longer periods of time [26.72 vs. 24.12, $\chi^2(1)=2.44, p<.001$].

At the time of the study, 65.1% of the women and 63.2% of the men were in a dating relationship. Out of the total sample, between 40-43% of the youths of both sexes described their current relationship as stable and/or serious, 47% had weekly contact with their partner, with a frequency of several times a week, and almost 60% foresaw continuing the relationship in the near future (table 1).

Prevalence of Psychological Violence

The analysis of the prevalence of the above-mentioned psychologically aggressive and violent behaviors occurring within the dating relationships of the youths under study revealed interesting results. The three kinds of psychological aggression considered the most prevalent in the sample were verbal aggression and jealous behaviors.

We analyzed the responses of the youths who reported having psychologically abused their partners as a way to resolve their interpersonal conflicts (table 2).

With regard to verbal violence, we observed that the most habitual types are saying something to upset or annoy the partner, and insulting or cursing the other member of the couple, both significantly more frequent in women.

Likewise, being jealous of other people (who can either be from the partner's close circle or strangers) is also a habitual behavior in this section of the population, especially in women (72.3%) as compared to men (63.7%).

In comparison to the aforementioned two groups of aggressive behaviors, the presence of dominant behaviors aimed at controlling one's partner seems to be less frequent, although it should be taken into consideration that practically 45% of the women and 38.5% of the men admitted to threatening to break up if the other member did not comply with their wishes.

Table 1
Type of current relation, frequency and contact between couple members and prediction of relation's future

| | Women | Men | χ^2 |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| Type of current relation | | | |
| New | 10.1% | 9.8% | 1.37 |
| Casual | 5.2% | 4.5% | |
| Stable | 39.2% | 42.3% | |
| Serious | 43.8% | 41.4% | |
| Formal engagement | 1.7% | 2.1% | |
| Contact frequency | | | |
| Less than once a month | 1.7% | 2.1% | 9.97 |
| Once a month | 2.7% | 1.5% | |
| Once every two weeks | 3.3% | 1.2% | |
| Once a week | 4.9% | 3.3% | |
| Several times a week | 49.3% | 47.9% | |
| Every day | 31.5% | 37.6% | |
| More than once a day | 6.7% | 6.5% | |
| Future of the current relation | | | |
| We will get married | 33.4% | 31.8% | 7.48 |
| We will stay together | 57.9% | 59.8% | |
| I will break off | 6.2% | 3.9% | |
| My partner will break off | 2.5% | 4.2% | |

Table 2
Psychological aggression in dating relationships in university students: aggressors' report

| | Sex | | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| | Women | Men | |
| Verbal aggression | | | |
| Insulting/cursing your partner | 58.3% | 42.7% | 37.30** |
| Upsetting your partner by talking/ refusing to talk | 73.3% | 75 % | 0.62 |
| Going off angrily | 73.3% | 70.4% | 1.68 |
| Saying something to upset or annoy your partner | 83.4% | 77.3% | 9.66** |
| Threatening to assault your partner physically | 11.7% | 10.2% | 0.85 |
| Dominant behaviors | | | |
| Trying to prevent your partner from talking to or seeing his/her family | 3.7% | 5.6% | 3.57* |
| Stirring up your family and friends against your partner | 3.1% | 4.1% | 1.24 |
| Threatening to go off with someone else if your partner does not do what you wish | 15.1% | 14.2% | 0.24 |
| Blaming your partner for your own violent behavior | 19.5% | 18.7% | 0.16 |
| Blaming your partner for the couple's problems | 26.7% | 23.7% | 1.79 |
| Threatening to break off if your partner does not do what you wish | 44.5% | 38.5% | 5.61** |
| Jealous behaviors | | | |
| Being jealous/suspicious of friends | 53.6% | 50.4% | 1.60 |
| Being jealous of another boy/girl | 72.3% | 63.7% | 13.44 * |
| Checking or demanding explanations about what your partner does | 37.6% | 33.4% | 2.95 |
| Accusing your partner of maintaining parallel relations | 9.9% | 10.1% | 0.01 |

* $p<.01$. ** $p<.001$

Focusing on the analysis of the frequency with which the youths of the sample reported suffering or having suffered some kind of psychological aggression by their partners, the data are quite coherent with previously obtained data. Again, verbal abuse and jealous behaviors are the two kinds of aggression that both men and women have suffered most frequently (table 3).

When analyzing conjointly the three kinds of aggression and the sex differences, it is important to underscore that the percentages of victims were significantly different as a function of sex only in six specific aggressive behaviors (two verbal, two dominant, and two jealousy-related).

As can be seen in Table 3, in five of these items, the percentage of men who reported having been victims of psychological aggression by their female partner was significantly higher than the percentage of women. Specifically, the men reported that their girlfriends upset them by talking or refusing to talk about certain topics (81.2% vs. 77.2%, for men and women, respectively), threatened to assault them physically (14.1% vs. 7.8%, for men and women, respectively), threatened to go off with other partners (16.8% vs. 11.8%, for men and women, respectively) or to break up if they did not comply with their wishes (38.3% vs. 33.0%, for men and women, respectively), and, lastly, they were accused of having parallel relationships (16.1% vs. 12.5%, for men and women, respectively).

Only when asked if their partners are or have been jealous of other boys/girls during their relationship, the percentage of female victims was significantly higher than that of the males, as practically 74% of the women responded affirmatively, in contrast to 70% of the surveyed men.

Prevalence of Physical Violence

In view of the results obtained, physical aggression, as compared with psychological aggression, was much less present in the relationships of the population under study.

As can be observed, slight physical aggression is more common, whereas severe physical aggression, such as beating or using weapons, was practically inexistent (it did not exceed 0.5% of the sample). Of all the forms of slight physical aggression analyzed, about 15% of the university youths surveyed admitted having restrained, hit or kicked and/or shoved their partner during the current or past relationships.

In the opposite direction from what we obtained in the analysis of psychological violence, in this case and in general, a significantly higher percentage of men than women admitted to assaulting or having assaulted their partners, especially in the case of physically restraining [24.2% vs. 17.0%, $\chi^2(1)= 13.12, p<.001$]. Contrariwise, 6% of the female university students admitted having slapped their boy-friends [6.0% vs. 2.3%, $\chi^2(1)= 11.30, p<.001$] as a way to solve couple conflicts.

When observing the data in table 5, which displays the percentages of youths who admit being victims of physical aggression by their partners, it is important to note that, in general, more men than women reported that their partners have thrown objects at them in order to harm them [8.1 vs. 4.1, $\chi^2(1)= 12.54, p<.001$] and more men also report having been slapped by women [9.0 vs. 1.5, $\chi^2(1)= 62.59, p<.001$].

Lastly, the data obtained from the analysis of the consequences of violent acts in the couple provide important contextual information related to the overall results. As displayed in the previous tables, despite the fact that both men and women reported having committed aggressive acts in their relations, the consequences for health derived from such acts are very different depending on gender (see table 6).

As can be observed, 12% of the women said they suffered slight cuts or bruises from their partners' aggressions, a percentage 3 times higher than that of the men who also suffered such injuries. Upon analyzing the more severe consequences, the percentage decreased, but still a higher percentage of women than men have

Table 3
Psychological aggression in dating relationships in university students: victims' report

| | Sex | | χ^2 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| | Women | Men | |
| Verbal aggression | | | |
| Your partner has insulted/cursed you | 47.7% | 46.5% | 0.20 |
| Your partner has upset you by talking/refusing to talk | 77.2% | 81.2% | 3.54** |
| Your partner has gone off angrily | 67.3% | 68.5% | 0.26 |
| Your partner has said something to upset or annoy you | 79.3% | 79.5% | 0.01 |
| Your partner has threatened to assault you physically | 7.8% | 14.1% | 17.27*** |
| Dominants behaviors | | | |
| Your partner has tried to prevent you from talking to or seeing your family | 4.7% | 6.3%* | 2.15 |
| Your partner has stirred up the family and friends against you | 4.9% | 7.1% | 3.50 |
| Your partner has threatened to go off with someone else if you don't do what he/she wants you to | 11.8% | 16.8% | 8.38*** |
| Your partner has blamed you for his/her own violent behavior | 16.0% | 17.4% | 0.25 ns |
| Your partner has blamed you for the couple's problems | 20.7% | 24.4% | 3.23 ns |
| Your partner has threatened to break up if you don't do what he/she wants you to | 33.0% | 38.3% | 4.64 * |
| Jealous behaviors | | | |
| Your partner has been jealous/suspicious of your friends | 60.6% | 60.5% | 0.01 |
| Your partner has been jealous of another boy/girl | 77.3% | 70.5% | 4.58* |
| Your partner has checked or demanded explanations about what you do | 38.2% | 42.8% | 3.34 |
| Your partner has accused you of maintaining other parallel relations | 12.5% | 16.1% | 5.10* |

* $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$. *** $p<.001$

suffered severe bruises or broken bones, the percentage of the latter injuries being practically twice that of the severe bruises (it is noteworthy that no men in our sample suffered either of these injuries).

Discussion

The results obtained in this study clearly reveal the presence of aggressive acts within affective relations of Spanish university youths as a way to resolve conflicts arising within the couple. As in other similar studies, the importance of the data is more relevant if one takes into account that 42% of the current sample analyzed considered that their present dating relationship was stable/serious

despite reporting, at the same time, the presence of violent behaviors within the relationship (Follingstad, Bradley, Laughlin, & Burke, 2002; Harned, 2001).

Upon detailed analysis of the results obtained, it can be said that psychological aggression is more frequent than physical aggression among university youth, especially verbal aggression (more than one half of the sample admitted to insulting their partner or saying things that they knew would upset or annoy their partner), again confirming that verbal aggressions, jealous actions, and control tactics occur with more frequency and can be considered more «normative» than physical aggressions in dating relationships (Harned, 2001; Jezl, Molidor, & Wright, 1996). Moreover, this fact is especially relevant as it has been repeatedly demonstrated that psychological violence can cause as much or more harm to the victim's physical and mental health as physical maltreatment (Echeburúa & Corral, 1998; O'Leary, 1999; Soler, Barreto, & González, 2005) and that there is a stable relation between verbal and psychological abuse and episodes of violence in young couples (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary & Slep, 2003; Ryan, 1995; White, Merrill, & Koss, 2001).

Concerning the physical violence reported and despite the fact that the indexes are lower than those obtained when analyzing psychological violence, it is important to underscore that nearly 30% of the university youths admitted to having assaulted or assaulting current partner, with no significant sex differences. This is certainly alarming, and it is similar to results obtained in other studies with American samples (Dye & Eckhardt, 2000; Hettrich & O'Leary, in press; Katz et al., 2002; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Straus, 2004).

Finally, the scale of the results obtained shows the importance of considering them not only as isolated data concerning young adults, but instead along a continuum of violence strongly associated with beliefs and attitudes learned and generated in former developmental stages. Such beliefs and attitudes must be detected early and modified by preventive strategies that can become the true alternative solution (Díaz-Aguado, 2005).

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Table 4
Physical aggression in dating relationships in university students: aggressors' report

| | Sex | | χ^2 |
|----------------------------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| | Women | Men | |
| Slight physical aggression | | | |
| Restraining physically | 17 % | 24.2% | 13.12* |
| Throwing an object | 5.3% | 5.1% | 0.04 |
| Hitting/kicking | 11.9% | 14.6% | 2.50 |
| Shoving/grabbing | 14.7% | 12.8% | 1.13 |
| Slapping | 6 % | 2.3% | 11.30* |
| Severe physical aggression | | | |
| Trying to choke/ asphyxiate | 0.2% | 0.4% | 0.34 |
| Beating up | 0.1% | 0.1% | 0.78 |
| Threatening with a knife/weapon | 0.4% | 0.4% | 0.04 |
| Any kind of physical aggression | 30.4% | 32.2% | 0.48 |

* $p < .001$

Table 5
Physical aggression in dating relationships in university students: victims' report

| | Sex | | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| | Women | Men | |
| Slight physical aggression | | | |
| Your partner has restrained you physically | 18.0% | 19.1% | 0.31 |
| Your partner has thrown an object at you | 4.1% | 8.1% | 12.54* |
| Your partner has hit/kicked you | 13.6% | 13.9% | 0.03 |
| Your partner has shoved/grabbed you | 12.5% | 13.3% | 0.25 |
| Your partner has slapped you | 1.5% | 9.0% | 62.59* |
| Severe physical aggression | | | |
| Your partner has tried to choke/asphyxiate you | 0.1% | 0.2% | 0.03 |
| Your partner has beaten you up | 0.1% | 0.4% | 0.94 |
| Your partner has threatened you with a knife/weapon | 0.2% | 0.4% | 0.34 |
| Any kind of physical aggression | 29.5% | 32.3% | 0.19 |

* $p < .001$

Table 6
Consequences of physical aggression in the couple

| | Sex | | χ^2 |
|--------------------------------------------|--------|--------|----------|
| | Women | Men | |
| Slight cuts/bruises | 11.9%* | 4.1%* | 6.00* |
| Severe cuts/bruises | 1.2% | - | 1.48 |
| Broken nose, black eye, broken bone | 2.4% | - | 2.98 |
| Required medical treatment/hospitalization | 2.4% | 1.6% | 0.23 |
| None | 83.3%* | 92.8%* | 6.46* |

* $p < .01$

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