



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

# IJDR

International Journal of Development Research

Vol. 11, Issue, 04, pp. 46041-46045, April, 2021

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.21296.04.2021>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

## VIOLENCE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS ACCORDING TO YOUNG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2021

Received in revised form

01<sup>st</sup> February, 2021

Accepted 08<sup>th</sup> March, 2021

Published online 22<sup>th</sup> April, 2021

#### Key Words:

Relationship; Violence; Young Adults.

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### ABSTRACT

Dating violence is a phenomenon present in the relationships of adolescents and young adults, being considered a public health problem. The research aimed to know the perception of young university students about violence in dating relationships. Descriptive and quantitative study, conducted with young university students from health courses aged between 19 and 24 years. Data collection was performed by a self-administered questionnaire and data analysis was through descriptive statistics with frequency distribution and measures of central tendency and dispersion. Most of the participants were female, and practically all of them understand that jealousy is the major cause of affective violence; however, they demonstrated to know and protect themselves from situations that are configured as violence within relationships. Thus, socioeconomic and demographic data are related to the occurrence of violence and young people can identify situations of dating violence.

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**Citation:** Fernanda Gabriel Torres, Rosana Alves de Melo, Fernanda Maria Araújo Ribeiro, Jobson Maurilio Alves dos Santos, Cristiane Souza Bezerra and Flávia Emília Cavalcante Valença Fernandes. 2021. "An incidental finding of paraesophageal hernia in an adult with recurrent chest discomfort: a case report", *International Journal of Development Research*, 11, (04), 46041-46045.

## INTRODUÇÃO

Intimate partner violence is a public health issue, with negative implications for the physical and mental health of the men and women involved and is present in the dating phase, as well as between cohabiting partners or in the marital relationship. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), dating violence is a behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological damage, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors, generating damage to health and development (Beserra, Leitão, Fernandes, Scatena, Vidinha, Silva & Ferriane, 2015). Authors point out that violence perpetrated within a relationship can determine a

pattern of relationship throughout the life cycle, besides being a precursor to more serious aggressions after the transition to cohabitation or marriage (Flake, Barros, Schraiber & Menezes, 2013; Beserra et al., 2015). It is noteworthy that affective violence can occur in both short (such as "staying" relationships) and long-term (such as engagement) and is a precursor of intra-family violence, besides being associated with other mental health damage, for partners of both sexes, such as drug abuse, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (Nascimento & Cordeiro, 2011). According to Murta, et al. (2013), the perpetration of dating violence and victimization share, in part, the same risk factors, such as witnessing violence between parents, being a direct victim of parental violence, suffering sexual abuse, living with friends who are violent with their intimate partners, having sexist beliefs, accepting violence

as a natural means of conflict resolution and having deficits in assertive social skills, anger management and emotional self-control. According to Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence and Price (2014), a considerable portion of young people who have reported some kind of emotional violence reported experiences of violence and interpersonal abuse using technologies, such as the sharing of intimate images without authorization, with girls as the most frequent victims. Some studies approach it as an occurrence at school, pointing out that 15 to 43% of young people who have experienced some type of dating violence refer to it in the school space, either as personal statements or as others' statements. Despite the high rates already revealed, the high risk of intimate partner violence in the dating phase is not recognized in its entirety. In Brazil, studies are still incipient (Flake et al., 2013; Oliveira, Assis, Njaine & Pires, 2014). In addition to these data, it is worth mentioning that our reality shows us that there is a high incidence of physical violence among young university students, which draws our attention. Some studies indicate the incidence of 20% to 40% in the rates of violence among young people. The university population has a significant representation in many countries, considering that nowadays there are more young people attending university courses, given the personal needs of each one and the easier admission to a higher education course (Martinez Gómez & Rey Anacona, 2014; Pimentel, Moura & Cavalcante, 2017). It is worth mentioning that, in addition to the university population being representative in our society, investigating this population is being able to break with one of the greatest stereotypes, that violence only takes place in the subaltern social classes and endorsed with impoverished cultural resources. If we consider that dating is the stage in which intimate partnerships are built and can lead to future conjugal relations, knowing how this phenomenon can be present at this stage of human relations is extremely important (Oliveira et al., 2014). The violence between adolescent and young boyfriends is considered a public health problem, since they can be a form of conflict resolution that spread in intimate relationships in adulthood and over time. Thus, actions to prevent violence between intimate partners need to focus on the earliest age group, when the first experiences of affective-sexual relationships are happening, reproducing, but also transforming gender norms that justify violence against the partner (Nascimento, 2009; Oliveira, Assis, Nijaine & Pires, 2016). According to this information, this research sought to answer the following question: How do young university students perceive the situations experienced within relationships, which can be configured as violence? The objective was to describe the perception of young university students of the situations that are configured as violence in dating relationships, considering the relational and social context.

## METHODS

This is an analytical and descriptive research, with a quantitative approach. The quantitative approach uses mathematical language to describe the causes of a phenomenon, the relationships between variables, among others. The main objective of analytical and descriptive research is to describe characteristics of a given social reality. (Minayo, 2012). The research was developed at the University of Pernambuco-UPE, Petrolina Campus and Federal University of Vale do São Francisco-UNIVASF main campus, both located in the municipality of Petrolina-PE. The research population consisted of students from undergraduate health courses from the chosen institutions: nursing, physiotherapy, nutrition, medicine, pharmacy, physical education and psychology. The number of students who participated in the research was 506 young people, a number established from sample calculation, through the Sample Size Calculation for X-Sectional Surveys Program, using the 1.5 design; considering the need to correct the inaccuracy by the sampling process that was by conglomerates. The calculation had a confidence level of 95% and sampling error of 5%. The inclusion criteria established were: being students of health courses; aged between 19 and 24 years, regardless of the course period, who agreed to participate in the research by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

Quantitative data were collected through the application of a questionnaire, elaborated with sociodemographic and economic data, and closed questions related to the objectives of the study. The sociodemographic variables that were collected in the research were: age; sex; dating relationship; family income; marital status of the parents; residing with whom (father, mother, both parents, friends, other relatives); number of people living in the house; residing in a neighborhood considered violent; parental violence; father-to-mother violence; witnessed or witnesses violence between parents. The collected data were initially analyzed based on descriptive statistics (frequency distribution and measures of central tendency and dispersion). Inferential statistics were applied by means of hypothesis tests appropriate for each type of variable. The evaluation of the sociodemographic conditions of the young people was performed according to the classification of the variables. For the qualitative variables, Pearson's chi-square and Fisher's exact nonparametric tests were performed, establishing a 95% confidence level and 5% significance. For the quantitative variables, the association verification was performed by parametric tests such as student's t-tests; or the nonparametric equivalent Mann-Whitney and/or Wilcoxon, after the evaluation of the normality test of numerical variables. The research followed all ethical precepts of research with human beings, meeting Resolution no.466 of December 12, 2012, of the National Health Council, which presents the guidelines and regulatory norms of research involving human beings (Brazil, 2012). Data collection was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Federal University of Vale do São Francisco, under number 2.276.495 and CAAE 74849417.9.0000.5196.

## RESULTS

The participants were 506 students, being 336 (70.4%) women and 170 (37.8%) men. Of them, 391 (80.7%) had a family income over one minimum wage, 181 (40.1%) reported living with both parents, 101 (23.7%) with the mother, 89 (21.2%) with other family members, 59 (14.8%) reported living with friends, 54 (13.7%) lived alone, 17 (5.3%) living with their spouse/partner (a) and only 5 (2.4%) reported living only with their father (a-Table 1).

**a- Table 1: Sociodemographic data of young university students. Petrolina, 2018**

	Mean	SD	95%CI	
Age	20.8	1.6	20.7	21.0
	N	%	95%CI	
Sex				
Female	336	66.4	62.2%	70.4%
Male	170	33.6	29.6%	37.8%
Income				
No income	56	11.1	8.6%	14.1%
Below 1 minimum wage	59	11.7	9.1%	14.8%
Over 1 minimum wage	391	77.3	73.4%	80.7%
Resides with				
Father	5	1.0	0.4%	2.4%
Mother	101	20.0	16.7%	23.7%
Both parents	181	35.8	31.7%	40.1%
Friends	59	11.7	9.1%	14.8%
Other relatives	89	17.6	14.5%	21.2%
Alone	54	10.7	8.3%	13.7%
With a partner	17	3.4	2.1%	5.3%
Is the neighborhood violent?				
No	423	83.6	80.1%	86.6%
Yes	83	16.4	13.4%	19.9%
Parental violence?				
No	414	81.8	78.2%	85.0%
Yes	92	18.2	15.0%	21.8%
Parent-to-parent violence?				
No	406	80.2	76.5%	83.5%
Yes	100	19.8	16.5%	23.5%
Boy/girlfriend?				
No	273	54.0	49.6%	58.3%
Yes	233	46.1	41.7%	50.4%
Dating violence?				
No	404	79.8	76.1%	83.1%
Yes	102	20.2	16.9%	23.9%

Regarding insertion in a context of violence, 423 (86.6%) did not consider their neighborhood as violent; 414 (85%) reported not having suffered parental violence; 406 (83.5%) had never witnessed violence between parents; and 100 (23.5%) said they had already seen some kind of violence between parents (a-Table 1). Of the 506 surveyed, 273 (58.3%) reported not being in any affective relationship at the time of data collection; while 233 (50.4%) claimed to be experiencing a serious relationship. Of all of them, 404 (83.1%) reported having never suffered any kind of violence in their relationships, and 102 (23.9%) reported having already suffered (a-Table 1). Based on the context of situations of affective violence experienced, it was evidenced that jealousy is one of the main causes of violence experienced (96.3%); 323 (67.9%) do not agree that one has to please the other within a relationship; and 419 (85.9%) see a push as violent behavior within relationships. Regarding dating violence being a problem that only concerns the couple, 500 (99.5%) refuse this information (b-Table 2). Still considering the situations that can be configured as violence in relationships, 428 (87.5%) agree that exercising power over the boy/girlfriend is configured as violence; 408 (83.9%) do not agree that one can kiss the partner whenever he/she wants; 315 (66.4%) consider unwanted pregnancy as a possible consequence of affective violence; 473 (95.3%) considered that one should not wear any clothing only to please the other; 308 (65%) agree to be invasive to read the messages of the companion's cell phone without authorization; and 486 (97.4%) see forced sexual activity without the other's free will as violence (b-Table 2).

**b- Table 2: Context of situations of affective violence among young people. Petrolina, 2018**

	N	%	IC95%	
Is jealousy a major cause of dating violence?				
No	27	5.3	3.7%	7.7%
Yes	479	94.7	92.3%	96.3%
When we date, we must please the other				
No	323	63.8	59.5%	67.9%
Yes	183	36.2	32.1%	40.5%
A push is not violence				
No	419	82.8	79.3%	85.9%
Yes	87	17.2	14.1%	20.7%
Dating violence should only concern the couple				
No	500	98.8	97.4%	99.5%
Yes	6	1.2	0.5%	2.6%
Power over your boy/girlfriend is not violence				
No	428	84.6	81.2%	87.5%
Yes	78	15.4	12.5%	18.8%
I can kiss my boy/girlfriend whenever I want				
No	408	80.6	76.9%	83.9%
Yes	98	19.4	16.1%	23.1%
Unwanted pregnancy can be a consequence of dating violence				
No	191	37.8	33.6%	42.1%
Yes	315	62.3	57.9%	66.4%
Should boy/girlfriends dress to please each other?				
No	473	93.5	91.0%	95.3%
Yes	33	6.5	4.7%	9.0%
Can boy/girlfriends read each other's cell phone messages?				
No	308	60.9	56.5%	65.0%
Yes	198	39.1	35.0%	43.5%
Is forcing your boy/girlfriend to initiate sexual activity a form of sexual violence?				
No	20	4.0	2.6%	6.1%
Yes	486	96.1	93.9%	97.4%

## DISCUSSION

Dating violence occurs today, often due to the inability of those involved to recognize violent behaviors and control over the other. When talking about this type of relationship, it is important to emphasize the social issues involved, since violence itself is determined by a set of biopsychosocial actions, which occurs from

the development of life in society, in which the type of violence committed or suffered within an affective relationship varies according to the level of socioeconomic condition (Guerrero, 2016; Larsen, 2016). This study showed higher participation of the female public, and in the contemporary world, they are the ones who experience situations of violence in general, due to inequalities and violations of rights, thus presenting a higher risk of death from physical aggression, motivated by gender issues within an affective relationship (Bertolin, Andrade, Machado, 2017). This is because of their subordination and oppression in the hierarchy of social roles. Moreover, although they are the most affected, they often fail to denounce violent situations, even when they occur in less serious relationships, such as dating or flirting, for fear of their partner or shame (Larsen, 2016; Barufaldi et al., 2017). A significant part of the surveyed had a family income over one minimum wage, which can be considered as a protective factor, since living with less purchasing power is a risk factor for situations of violence. Social inequalities, poverty, social exclusion and vulnerabilities intersect with violence, and being related to young people, have increasingly become a topic of interest to national and international studies, aiming at the implementation of protective factors for this public (Maia, Nunes, Silva & Silva, 2017).

Another important data found was living with both parents and having never experienced and/or visualized violence between them. According to Murta et al. (2013), the perpetration of dating violence and victimization share, in part, the same risk factors, such as witnessing violence between parents, being a direct victim of parental violence, suffering sexual abuse, living with friends who are violent with their intimate partners, having sexist beliefs, accepting violence as a natural means of conflict resolution and having deficits in assertive social skills, anger management and emotional self-control. Another aspect found in this study was that most young adults were not in a serious relationship at the time of the research, which does not exclude the possibility that they are experiencing some relationship without lasting affective bond, which is a form of relationship without greater commitment. Thus, dating violence can happen in any affective relationship experienced, where young people can both be victims and perpetrators of violence in those relationships. (Minayo, Assis & Njaine, 2011). In this context, it is important to emphasize that, regardless of the type of relationship experienced, the violence that happens with couples is seen as a strong predictor for violence in long-term relationships and adulthood, besides producing serious damage to physical and mental health, as well as affecting the quality of life of those who experience it, leading to low self-esteem, chronic pain, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Oliveira et al., 2016). The research identified that young people are aware of the occurrence of violence within relationships, although an expressive number answered that people should always please the other within a relationship, showing that there are situations not yet seen or recognized as affective violence. In this context, it corroborates the literature concerning 'symbolic violence', which is characterized by subtle attitudes of violence within the relationship that end up being naturalized and reproduced over time. Thus, these findings may be related to the difficulty of young people in identifying subtle situations as violence within a relationship, as well as through the observation of subtle attitudes visualized in third-party relationships and perpetuated within their own affective relationships, as suggested by the theory of social learning, in which the spread of violence between generations occurs learned by imitation. (Barrier, Lima, Bigras, Njaine & Assis, 2014; Oliveira et al., 2016).

Jealousy was seen as a possible consequence of dating violence, as well as the fact of pushing the other was understood as violent behavior. According to the literature, adolescents and young people see jealousy as a feeling of protection and care, being overvalued by them, contradicting the findings of these studies, in which young people identify jealousy as a predictor of violence. However, the literature shows that this feeling is one of the main causes of conflict between adolescent and adult-young couples, constituting as a psychological violence (Oliveira et al., 2016). On the other hand,

some authors who address affective violence, for the most part, focus only on physical violence and its consequences, being important to point out that, in addition to this type of violence that causes physical harm, there are also those that can cause irreparable psychological harm to these victims, since physical harm usually reveals that psychological violence has been prevailing for a time (Beserra et al., 2015). Considering the findings of this study, that the conflicts existing in relationships only concern the couple, dating violence does not concern only those involved, since it is a public health problem, and has the potential to reach the lives of all those directly or indirectly involved in this cycle, showing the need for violence prevention in its various scenarios. (Murta et al., 2013). For young people, the behaviors considered associated with violence in the relationship are: exercising power over the boy/girlfriend and having the right to kiss the other whenever they want. This type of behavior is configured as an attempt to control or dominate the other person, which, according to the literature, can be physically, sexually or psychologically (Barreira et al., 2014). Other authors state that in abusive relationships, many women are the target of their partner's power, under psychological pressure, exerted from humiliations, insults, controlling behavior and threats (Oliveira et al., 2014).

What also draws attention in this work is the fact that a considerable number of young people do not agree that unwanted pregnancy can be a consequence of dating violence. Vagi, Rothman, Latzman, Tharp, Hall and Breiding (2013) point out that some protective and risk factors for the occurrence of violence involve risky sexual behavior, and men, in relationships, commonly refuses to wear a condom during sexual intercourse and women tend to concede partners' wishes for fear that they will lose confidence and distrust their faithfulness, or even may break with the relationship (Sampaio, Santos, Callou & Souza, 2011). This type of behavior, according to the literature, occurs due to what is configured as gender violence, that is, unequal relationships, in which the feminine is characterized as oppressed within the relationship. Therefore, this type of attitude can be an aggravating factor for the occurrence of unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections, especially in the female population, due to the difficulty in negotiating condom use with their partner. Moreover, other authors also cite the emotional blackmails and pressures that some young people suffer to perform certain acts or adopt behaviors configured as some common type of psychological violence (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). This type of behavior can occur due to the thought of control over the other still being very strong in young people's mind, being also a risk factor for the occurrence of violence, because, although most participants in the research have mentioned that exercising power over the other, and that dressing to please the other is characterized as violence within a relationship, a very significant portion of them report that one should read the messages on the boy/girlfriend's cell phone whenever they want, even without authorization. This result corroborates a study conducted with high school students from public and private schools in 10 Brazilian capitals, which showed that some behaviors related to the use of mobile phones, clothes are accepted mainly by those who practice or have suffered violence within a relationship (Oliveira et al., 2016). According to the results obtained from the present study, most of the young people agreed that forcing the partner to start sexual activity is a form of violence. According to some authors, this type of violence is configured when one of the partners force some attitudes against the other's will, also involving threat in the attempt to have forced sexual intercourse. This type of abusive behavior is one of the causes for suicidal ideation among young people and adolescents, of both sexes (Beserra et al., 2015; Barter & Stanley, 2016).

According to the literature, a problem faced, regarding sexual violence, is that many young people feel obliged to have sexual intercourse with their boy/girlfriend, even when they do not want to, in order not to disappoint or annoy the partner. This domination in gender relations can come from both men and women, since they are also victims of machismo when they do not accept having a sexual relationship and their masculinity is tested by the partner, through verbal aggressions humiliations/swearing. This happens, according to

the literature, because girls are raised with more freedom to express their discontent verbally, while boys do so only by using violence (Oliveira et al., 2016; Bittar & Nakano, 2017). This type of behavior, in the context of sexual violence, and allied to other types of violence, develops and is transmitted throughout the relationships that are being experienced in adulthood. Therefore, it is important to identify, analyze and seek to avoid risk scenarios for the occurrence of any form of affective violence, since the vulnerability of young people to various risk situations has the potential to result in sexually transmitted infections, drug use, depression, and even suicide (Barreira et al., 2014; Bittar & Nakano, 2017).

### Final thoughts

The results of this study allowed identifying that the young people surveyed present more protective factors than risks for the occurrence of dating violence. Moreover, they can identify situations of dating violence, in their various aspects, such as psychological, sexual and physical violence. The fact that they understand and identify situations of affective violence is important for both personal life and future health professionals that these young people will be. However, even with positive results in relation to the questions, the percentage difference was small in the questions related to domination and controlling behaviors within a relationship, being observed that the power and gender relations within a relationship are still very expressive. This work aimed to address violence in affective relationships, serving as the basis for other studies that will be carried out, in addition to assisting in the elaboration of public policies aimed at prevention and recovery. Despite the positive results in the research, it is important to address the prevention of dating violence not only at schools, but also at universities where the deconstruction of gender stereotypes occurs. Among the limitations found for this study is the small amount of studies on this theme aimed at young adults and the very significant difference in participation between men and women, hindering the comparison between genders and the perception of violence within the study.

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