

Dating Violence among Adolescents: A Bioecological Perspective on Human Development

Violência no Namoro entre Adolescentes: Uma Perspectiva Bioecológica do Desenvolvimento Humano

Violencia en el Noviazgo entre Adolescentes: Una Perspectiva Bioecológica del Desarrollo Humano

La Violence dans les Relations Amoureuses chez les Adolescents : Une Perspective Bioécologique du Développement Humain

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Thaís Afonso Andrade  

PhD and MSc in Clinical Psychology from the Unicap. Trained in Systemic Therapy for Individuals, Couples, and Families at the Hospital das Clínicas/ Federal University of Pernambuco. Psychologist, Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais.

Marisa Amorim Sampaio  

PhD and MSc in Maternal and Child Health from the Prof. Fernando Figueira Institute of Integral Medicine, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil, with a Sandwich PhD Program at the Tavistock Clinic, London, England, United Kingdom; postdoctoral training in Clinical Psychology at the Unicap, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil; full-time faculty member at Unicap (undergraduate and graduate programs in Clinical Psychology), Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil.

Véronique Donard  

PhD in Clinical Psychopathology from Université Paris Diderot–Paris 7, Paris, France; postdoctoral training in Clinical Psychology at the Unicap, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil. MSc in Musicology from Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), Paris, France. Coordinator of the Graduate Program in Clinical Psychology at Unicap and Coordinator of the Research Line in Cyberpsychology and Digital Humanities in the same program, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil.

Priscilla Machado Moraes  

PhD and MSc in Clinical Psychology from the Unicap, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil. Specialist in Mental Health from Pio Décimo College, Aracaju, Sergipe, Brazil. Clinical Psychologist from Tiradentes University, Aracaju, SE, Brazil. Family Therapist, Family Therapy Association of Goiás. Coordinator and faculty member of the Graduate Program in Clinical and Health Psychology at UniEVANGÉLICA University Center, Anápolis, Goiás, Brazil.

Abstract

Dating violence among adolescents is highly prevalent and has lasting consequences for physical and mental health across development. This study aimed to understand adolescents' experiences of dating violence from a bioecological perspective of human development. We conducted a qualitative study using ecological insertion at a non-governmental organization in the city of Recife, state of Pernambuco, Brazil. Eight adolescents aged 16–19 years participated in semi-structured interviews, each completed individually over two meetings. Impressions and informal conversations with nongovernmental organization staff were recorded in a field diary. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis grounded in the Bioecological Theory of Human Development. The results indicate that adolescents were direct and/or indirect victims of violence within developmental microsystems (family, school, and neighborhood). Psychological, digital, and physical forms of violence were frequent. Although participants spoke spontaneously about the types of violence most common in dating relationships, they did not always label these experiences as “violence,” suggesting a process of normalization and legitimization that may hinder the construction of healthier relationship boundaries. The pandemic was linked to increased cell-phone–based internet use for school activities. Jealousy, immaturity, and impulsivity were cited both as justifications for aggression and as strategies used in attempts to resolve conflicts in dating relationships. We recommend public policies that promote preventive and interventional actions addressing the multiple expressions of dating violence.

Keywords: adolescence, violence, dating, Bioecological Theory of Human Development.

Resumo

A violência no namoro entre adolescentes é um fenómeno com alta prevalência e repercussões à saúde física e mental ao longo do desenvolvimento. Este estudo objetivou compreender as experiências de violência no namoro entre adolescentes, a partir da perspectiva bioecológica do desenvolvimento humano. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, por meio da inserção ecológica, realizada numa organização não governamental (ONG) na cidade do Recife/PE. Oito adolescentes entre 16 e 19 anos participaram de entrevistas semiestruturadas, concretizadas individualmente em dois encontros. As impressões e conversas informais com trabalhadores da ONG foram registradas no diário de campo. Os dados foram analisados segundo a técnica de análise de conteúdo temática, sob a Teoria Bioecológica do Desenvolvimento Humano. Os resultados indicam que: os adolescentes foram vítimas diretas e/ou indiretas de violência em microsistemas de desenvolvimento (familiar, escolar e bairro); a violência, em suas expressões psicológica, digital e física, foi frequente; apesar da espontaneidade ao verbalizar sobre as tipologias que mais ocorrem no namoro, os adolescentes nem sempre nomearam esse fenómeno como “violência”, o que parece reforçar a ideia de naturalização e legitimação desta, sugerindo uma dificuldade na construção de contornos mais saudáveis nas relações; a pandemia esteve ligada ao aumento do uso da internet via celular para atividades escolares; o ciúme, a imaturidade e a impulsividade foram marcadores que justificaram e, ao mesmo tempo, foram usados na tentativa de resolução de conflitos no namoro. Recomenda-se o desenvolvimento de políticas públicas via ações preventivas e interventivas que considerem as várias expressões de violência no namoro.

Palavras-chave: adolescência, violência, namoro, Teoria Bioecológica do Desenvolvimento Humano.

Resumen

La violencia en el noviazgo entre adolescentes es un fenómeno con alta prevalencia y repercusiones en la salud física y mental a lo largo del desarrollo. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo comprender las experiencias de violencia en el noviazgo entre adolescentes, desde la perspectiva bioecológica del desarrollo humano. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, mediante la Inserción Ecológica, realizada en una organización no gubernamental (ONG) en la ciudad de Recife, Pernambuco (Brasil). Ocho adolescentes, con edades entre 16 y 19 años, participaron en entrevistas semiestructuradas, realizadas individualmente en dos encuentros. Las impresiones y conversaciones informales con los trabajadores de la ONG fueron registradas en un diario de campo. Los datos se analizaron según la técnica de análisis de contenido temático, bajo la Teoría Bioecológica del Desarrollo Humano. Los resultados indican que: los adolescentes fueron víctimas directas y/o indirectas de violencia en microsistemas de desarrollo (familiar, escolar y comunitario); la violencia, en sus manifestaciones psicológica, digital y física, fue frecuente; a pesar de la espontaneidad al verbalizar sobre las tipologías más comunes en el noviazgo, los adolescentes no siempre nombraron este fenómeno como “violencia”, lo que parece reforzar la idea de su naturalización y legitimación, sugiriendo una dificultad en la construcción de relaciones más saludables; la pandemia estuvo asociada al aumento del uso del teléfono móvil con fines escolares; los celos, la inmadurez y la impulsividad fueron marcadores que justificaron y, al mismo tiempo, fueron utilizados en los intentos de resolución de conflictos en el noviazgo. Se recomienda el desarrollo de políticas públicas a través de acciones preventivas y de intervención que consideren las diversas manifestaciones de la violencia en el noviazgo.

Palabras clave: adolescencia, violencia, noviazgo, Teoría Bioecológica del Desarrollo Humano.

Résumé

La violence dans les relations amoureuses chez les adolescents est un phénomène de prévalence élevée, entraînant des répercussions sur la santé physique et mentale tout au long de leur développement. Cette étude visait à comprendre les expériences de violence dans les relations amoureuses chez les adolescents, selon la perspective bioécologique du développement humain. Il s'agit d'une recherche qualitative, parmi l'approche écologique, réalisée dans une organisation non gouvernementale (ONG) à Recife (PE). Huit adolescents âgés de 16 à 19 ans ont participé à des entretiens semi-structurés, réalisés individuellement lors de deux rencontres. Les impressions et les conversations informelles avec les travailleurs de l'ONG ont été enregistrées dans le journal de terrain. Les données ont été analysées selon la technique d'analyse de contenu thématique, dans le cadre de la Théorie Bioécologique du Développement Humain. Les résultats indiquent que : les adolescents ont été victimes directes et/ou indirectes de violence dans les microsystèmes de développement (familial, scolaire et communautaire) ; la violence, sous ses formes psychologique, numérique et physique, était fréquente ; malgré la spontanéité à verbaliser sur les typologies qui surviennent le plus souvent dans les relations amoureuses, les adolescents n'ont pas toujours nommé ce phénomène comme de la « violence », ce qui semble renforcer l'idée de naturalisation et de légitimation de celle-ci, suggérant une difficulté à établir des relations plus saines ; la pandémie a été associée à une augmentation de l'utilisation d'Internet sur téléphone portable pour les activités scolaires ; la jalousie, l'imaturité et l'impulsivité étaient des marqueurs invoqués pour justifier et tenter de résoudre les conflits dans les relations amoureuses adolescentes. Il est recommandé de développer des politiques publiques à travers des actions préventives et intervenantes qui prennent en compte les diverses expressions de la violence dans les relations amoureuses.

Mots-clés : adolescence, violence, relation de couple, Théorie Bioécologique du Développement Humain.

Dating is a mutually agreed romantic relationship between two people and, in many cultures, is viewed as an exploratory stage of love (Sánchez et al., 2011). The intensity of physical-affective expressions — such as kissing, hugging, and touching hands and body — creates opportunities for adolescents to experience new situations at a vital stage of the life cycle, one that occupies a privileged place. However, some couples experience episodes of violence in their early romantic relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Among these experiences is dating carried out on social networks, which offers both opportunities for flirting and risks related to controlling and monitoring behaviors (Andrade et al., 2020).

Dating violence can be understood as a pattern of abusive behavior used to exert power and control over the partner — a gender-neutral term used here in place of “girlfriend” or “boyfriend” in the context of romantic relationships (Love is Respect, 2019). Violent behaviors enacted in different ways enable the gain and maintenance of one person’s power and control over another. Any adolescent may become involved in a serious or casual violent relationship, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic position, race, religion, or culture (Love is Respect, 2019).

In the international literature — especially in the United States — studies on this phenomenon are frequent and well established (Bonell et al., 2023; DeGue et al., 2020). Data from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Basile et al., 2020), conducted annually with U.S. adolescents, indicate that about 1 in 11 female high-school students and about 1 in 14 male students reported experiencing physical dating violence in the year prior to the survey (Basile et al., 2020). In Brazil, violence in adolescent romantic relationships — dating and “seeing someone” — has received increasing academic attention. Visibility grew with a study conducted from 2007 to 2009 with 3,600 adolescents aged 15–19 years in 10 Brazilian capitals, which revealed alarming data: most girls and boys (76.6%) simultaneously perpetrated and suffered multiple types of violence in their relationships — physical (64%), psychological (96.9%), and sexual (83%) (Oliveira et al., 2011).

The theoretical framework adopted in this article is the Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD). This framework is well suited to a broader understanding of dating violence because it promotes a contextualized and multifactorial perspective. It posits that human development arises from interdependence and reciprocal interactions between the person and the environment across generations. Bronfenbrenner (2011) argues that human psychological processes are not merely properties of the individual but the product of interdependent systems in which the person is embedded. Over 40 years, the theory evolved to its most mature form, the process–person–context–time (PPCT) model.

Proximal processes are the reciprocal, enduring, bidirectional interactions that occur between the person and the context, from the most immediate to the more distant. Depending on their characteristics, these processes may lead to competence effects — acquisition of knowledge and social skills — or to dysfunction effects, reflected in difficulties maintaining and integrating behavior (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Paludo et al., 2021; Rosa & Tudge, 2017).

The person component encompasses individual biological, psychological, and social (biopsychosocial) characteristics that influence engagement in proximal processes. Three attributes shape developmental trajectories. The first involves dispositions/forces that may be generative — those that foster the development of proximal processes — or disruptive, which hinder their maintenance. The second attribute, resources, includes biopsychological characteristics that affect the capacity to engage effectively in proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 2011; Paludo et al., 2021). Resources may be active — expanding constructive possibilities across the life course — or passive — conditions that limit the organism’s functional integrity (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2017). Demand is the third attribute and has the potential to invite or discourage reactions from others in the social context, thereby fostering or interrupting proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 2011; Lordello & Costa, 2015).

The context component refers to interconnections within and between the four systems of the ecological environment: the microsystem (the most immediate setting in which the developing person participates, with a complex of interrelations); the mesosystem (relations among microsystems); the exosystem (settings in which the person does not participate but that influence development); and the macrosystem (the subculture or culture, social organization, and belief systems of a given society) (Bronfenbrenner, 2011; Nunes & Morais, 2018).

Time, or the chronosystem, concerns the influence of the historical moment in which the other systems are situated, as well as changes within the individual’s own life history. It is divided into a) microtime — continuity and discontinuity of frequent episodes of proximal processes; b) mesotime — the periodicity of these episodes over broader intervals such as days and weeks; and c) macrotime — societal events that change across and within generations, along with life-course history (Bronfenbrenner, 2011).

Dating violence is recognized as a public health issue that warrants investigation to deepen knowledge for prevention and intervention in this social problem, which affects the romantic relationships of thousands of adolescents (Basile et al., 2020). The World Health Organization recommends public-health studies grounded in this approach to capture the complex, multifactorial nature of violence (Dahlberg & Krug, 2006). Prevention and intervention strategies based on the ecological model are also recommended because they highlight the interplay of personal, relational, contextual, and historical-time factors that may be associated with the phenomenon, reinforcing the idea of multiple causalities (DeGue et al., 2020; Borges et al., 2020; Rey-Anacona & Martínez-Gómez, 2021; Sanhueza et al., 2022). Accordingly, this article aims to understand adolescents’ experiences of dating violence from a bioecological perspective of human development.

Method

This qualitative study, conducted as part of a doctoral thesis, used Ecological Insertion (EI) (Koller et al., 2020) to systematize the four aspects of the BTHD — the PPCT framework. This ethnomethodological approach (Souza et al., 2022) entails the researcher's insertion into the research setting, which in this case was a developmental microsystem: a nongovernmental organization (NGO). EI was carried out with attention to five essential aspects (Koller et al., 2020): i) engagement of participants and researcher in a shared activity; ii) the researcher's systematic presence over an extended period; iii) implementation of progressively more complex activities; iv) reciprocity in relationships; and v) focus on a topic that stimulates the interest of participants and researchers, such as attention, exploration, and imagination.

The host NGO is a private civil society organization in the social assistance sector, established in 2006. It is located in the city of Recife, state of Pernambuco, Brazil, and serves children and adolescents aged 0–18 years. Adolescents attend the institution opposite their school shift and receive two daily meals to ensure food security. Activities include socio-professional training through non-degree and technical courses that introduce adolescents from age 16 as well as youth in their first work experience to the labor market. The NGO, which did not address dating violence in its routine activities, was selected for convenience (ease of access).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, activities with adolescents at the NGO were suspended; only administrative work and the distribution of food and hygiene products continued. The NGO authorized EI to be conducted in October 2020, with the researcher visiting daily under strict health protocols.

Contacts with adolescents took place individually in the NGO garden to ensure physical distancing and confidentiality. Three adolescents were interviewed per day, in sessions of approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, held in one or two rounds depending on each participant's engagement with the study activities.

Participants

Eight adolescents aged 16–19 participated — four female and four male — according to the following criteria: age 15–19; female and male; currently dating or previously dated. Exclusion criteria were current or past cohabitation with a dating partner. Recruitment ended upon reaching saturation, defined by recurrence and complementarity across interviews (Minayo, 2014; Turato, 2008). Table 1 presents sociodemographic data and a brief contextualization of the study participants.

Table 1.

Sociodemographic characteristics and romantic relationships

Name/Age	Schooling	Family configuration	Who works	Current romantic relationship	Previous romantic relationship
Adélia Prado 18 years	3rd year of high school	Mother and sister	Adélia (youth apprentice) and mother (older person caregiver)	Luís, 28 years / 3 months	Moisés, 19 years / 2 years and 5 months
Carolina de Jesus 17 years	1st year of high school, EREM	Mother and sister	Mother (domestic worker)	“Seeing someone”	Antônio, 21 years / 17 days; Jonas, 19 years / 2 years
Conceição Evaristo 18 years	2nd year of high school	Mother, uncle, and two brothers	Conceição (youth apprentice) and brother (informal work)	—	Lucas, 18 years / 2 years; João, 16 years / 3 months
Fernando Sabino 17 years	2nd year of high school, EREM	Adoptive father, adoptive grandfather, and two cousins	Father (social educator) and grandfather (retired)	“Seeing someone”	Cecília, 16 years / 4 months
Guimarães Rosa 19 years	High school complete – EJA	Mother, stepfather, three brothers, two sisters, and a nephew	Mother (domestic worker) and brother (refrigeration sector)	—	Grazi, 18 years / 2 years
João Cabral 18 years	2nd year of high school, EREM	Mother, stepfather, and one sister	Mother (self-employed)	Francis, 15 years / 4 months	Valentina, 17 years / 1 year and 7 months
Lenine 16 years	2nd year of high school, EREM	Mother, father, sister, two nieces, and a nephew	Mother (bus fare collector); sister and father (informal work)	“Seeing someone”	Yolanda, 14 years / 2 years

Lia de Itamaracá 18 years	High school complete, EREM	Grandmother and two brothers	Brother receives BPC**	Roberto, 21 years / more than 2 years	—
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BPC = Continuous Cash Benefit (non-contributory social benefit for older adults or people with disabilities); EJA = Youth and Adult Education (adult/continuing high-school program); EREM = State Reference High School (full-time program).

Most adolescents were dating, casually seeing someone, or had done so for more than 3 months. Five lived in single-mother households — three with their biological mother, one with a grandmother, and one with an adoptive father — while two lived in stepfamilies and one in a nuclear family. These families commonly faced unemployment, poverty, precarious housing, early deaths of close relatives, and significant family figures with alcohol dependence or drug abuse, including cocaine. The adolescents lived in a neighborhood with more than 10,000 residents, marked by intense drug-trafficking activity and frequent gunfights between police and traffickers.

Instruments

- *Biosociodemographic questionnaire*: developed by the authors to collect personal data (age, sex, schooling, religion, family configuration, household composition, dating duration, partner's name and age, and employment).
- *Field diary*: records of proximal processes between participants and the researcher, along with notes from informal conversations with staff to contextualize and support understanding of the research setting. It also included informal field notes (feelings, questions, difficulties, positive moments) and records of research actions (descriptions, reports, decisions, brief analyses).
- *Individual semi-structured interview*: designed to deepen the topic of dating violence (DV) among adolescents, covering: how they date; conceptions of violence and of DV; possible experiences of DV in current or past relationships; strategies adopted when violence occurred; and contextual influences (neighborhood, work, school, NGO, family, and romantic partners).
- *“Getting to Know Dating Relationships” questionnaire*: yes/no responses to 24 behaviors assessing four types of violence—physical, digital, psychological, and sexual—six items per type. Participants were invited to elaborate on their answers with examples of situations that had occurred or were ongoing. Developed based on articles included in Andrade et al. (2020) and on the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CADRI) (Minayo et al., 2011).
- *Word Search*: adolescents selected, from a list of 24 words, those that must be present in a healthy relationship. This instrument — based on guidance about healthy relationships from Love is Respect (2019) and the One Love Foundation (2020) — sought to understand adolescents' views of healthy dating relationships.

Procedures

The study comprised 16 visits, held Monday through Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Each individual meeting with adolescents lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. Observations and informal conversations — recorded in the field diary — with social educators, kitchen staff, a general services assistant, the pedagogical coordinator, and the director were conducted to contextualize and support understanding of the interview content, to learn about families' relationships with the institution, and to gather other information about the community.

Given the pandemic context, initial contact to schedule the first interview round was made by a social educator, who provided interested adolescents with basic information about the study — topic, objectives, and its two-stage format. The second meeting was scheduled directly by the researcher. Participants chose the time that best fit their online school activities and other commitments, including informal work.

The adaptations required by the pandemic did not prevent the expression of emotions that emerged when sensitive topics were verbalized — teary eyes, spontaneous laughter. Eye contact proved to be a genuine and respectful form of connection with another person's story. EI was indispensable for aligning interpretations of the narratives with the adolescents' perspectives, thereby contributing to the study's ecological validity (Souza et al., 2022).

Ethical Considerations

All procedures followed National Research Ethics Commission Resolution 466/12 (CAAE: 24624619.7.0000.5206). To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned fictitious names. The TCLE (parent/guardian consent and consent for individuals aged ≥ 18 years) and the TALE (assent for individuals aged < 18 years) were carefully drafted to guarantee participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.

Data Analysis

Construction of the corpus considered familiarity with the phenomenon and deeper engagement with the topic based on the interview material. Field-diary notes (elements from informal conversations) were analyzed — individually and collectively — through discussions among the research team. These discussions sought representativeness of meanings and broader, deeper interpretations through the exchange of impressions and information.

Using analytical categories, we triangulated research instruments and researchers to identify empirical categories interpreted according to the BTHD (Bronfenbrenner, 2011). In this process, the interviews—including the “Getting to Know Dating Relationships” questionnaire and the “Word Search” activity — were triangulated with the biosociodemographic questionnaire and the field diary and examined from multiple perspectives (the field researcher and three supervising researchers). Triangulation aimed to analyze data obtained from these different sources and to reach conclusions based on the whole, adding auditability and credibility to the core phenomena under analysis and helping to validate or expand interpretations. Finally, thematic content analysis was applied, privileging the interrelations among PPCT (Bronfenbrenner, 2011), and proceeded through pre-analysis, organization of materials, analysis, and interpretation of data (Minayo, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Adolescents reported that their first romantic relationships formed within the school and neighborhood microsystems, on social networks—Facebook and Instagram—and among friends. Because many met their boyfriend/girlfriend, or the person they are casually seeing, in their own neighborhood or at school, this geographic proximity supported in-person contact during the COVID-19 pandemic, with visits to each other’s homes. In this context, there was no increase in the use of messaging apps such as WhatsApp to maintain contact with partners during the 2020 period of social isolation.

All adolescents had been directly or indirectly exposed to violence in family, school, or neighborhood microsystems — contextual factors identified in the literature as risk factors for dating violence (Rey-Anacona & Martínez-Gómez, 2021). Despite adverse contexts, they expressed optimism about the future — marriage, children, employment — and confidence in their capacity to face life’s challenges. We also noted a positive mobilization among participants and staff around the topic, which they viewed as new, timely, and necessary, especially for institutions serving this age group.

Participants described satisfaction with being beneficiaries of the NGO and with the NGO as a space that promotes well-being, safety, and positive relationships among adolescents, social educators, the coordinator, management, and families. The mesosystemic NGO–family relationship appears to function as a protective factor for adolescents.

Five categories are presented and discussed below: what dating means to adolescents; conceptions of dating violence; episodes of dating violence; understandings of healthy dating; and learning and positive influences of romantic relationships.

Dating for Adolescents

Participants’ narratives suggest that dating is a stage of a romantic relationship marked by exclusivity, preceding marriage and the start of one’s own family — meanings shaped by macrosystemic elements. Literature describes dating as embedded in sociocultural norms such as fidelity, monogamy, and especially frequent in-person meetings between partners. Addressing dating thus involves grasping the meanings adolescents assign to their romantic relationships within their social context (Sánchez et al., 2011). For some, one should first casually see someone to get to know the person and only then assume a more serious relationship; dating is a step toward marriage: “For me, dating is the foundation; you date, then you marry and have your family (...) you see someone first, then you date” (João Cabral, 18). “For me, there are three stages: dating, engagement, and marriage. So to get to marriage you have to go through the first two” (Conceição Evaristo, 18).

For two adolescents, relationship duration (chronosystem), regularity of encounters, and exclusivity did not determine whether they labeled the relationship as dating. For some couples, the shift from “seeing someone” to dating is not explicitly marked but occurs naturally until both confirm they are dating. The literature also points to ongoing “seeing someone” as a distinct form of adolescent romantic relationship (Barth et al., 2017).

One adolescent recounted discovering infidelity in her first relationship, which made it hard to “trust men,” suggesting possible avoidance of new relationships (insecurity) reinforced by the betrayal. Even while noting disorganizing characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 2011; Paludo et al., 2021; Rosa & Tudge, 2017) — such as insecurity and difficulty establishing trust — that could hinder engagement in proximal processes, we identified a disposition toward new romantic relationships. As Nunes and Morais (2018, p. 290) note, “a person’s characteristics are not static and can be transformed, even under adverse conditions.”

Conceptions of Dating Violence

Adolescents described dating violence primarily in terms of physical violence — intentional use of force to instill fear and cause possible injury — and psychological violence—threats, insults, and undermining a partner’s self-esteem. In their view, psychological violence is the most common form, consistent with international (Peralta et al., 2019) and national (Borges et al., 2020) findings, and includes behaviors such as controlling clothing and friendships, name-calling, and disparagement.

Psychological violence was also portrayed as a conflict-resolution strategy within romantic relationships that can undermine partners’ well-being and crystallize into relational patterns for managing conflict over time. Lapierre et al. (2019) suggest that early prevention or intensive intervention programs that promote skills — communicating needs, fears, and vulnerabilities and sharing intimacy — are particularly beneficial in adolescence because such skills can be learned and developed: “Not only physical violence, but also when the person acts like they own you. They want to control everything you do and everything you wear. What happens most is control and this name-calling thing” (Carolina de Jesus, 17). “It’s forcing something a woman doesn’t want. There’s physical and psychological violence, like a man putting a woman down, saying she’s worthless” (Guimarães Rosa, 19).

Despite speaking freely about the types of violence most common in dating, knowledge alone does not seem sufficient to prevent their occurrence. This may represent a disorganizing force that does not foster competencies for handling an abusive relationship (Souza et al., 2022). Another salient point is that normalization and legitimization of such behaviors make them harder to recognize.

Girls are more frequently victims of this type of violence, which includes control over their clothing and bodies (Martínez-Gómez et al., 2021; Souza et al., 2022). This pattern reinforces traditional gender-role behaviors that produce unequal perceptions of socially assigned conduct for men and women and are significantly associated with violence perpetrated and suffered. As Flach and Deslandes (2021) argue, these arrangements remain embedded in everyday social relations, though they are continually contested by more emancipatory convictions.

Certain behaviors related to concern with self-image appeared in narratives of both girls and boys. Hair care stood out as a way to increase attractiveness, illustrating personal behavioral characteristics that seem to foster proximal processes. Demand is an individual attribute referring to salient features capable of eliciting reactions from the social context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Episodes of Dating Violence

For some participants, their first dating relationship was not a positive experience; it was marked by infidelity and episodes of violence. “Thank God I’m not dating” (Conceição Evaristo, 18); “I thought it was one thing, but it wasn’t the way I imagined” (Fernando Sabino, 17). Early dating relationships bring new challenges that, combined with idealized expectations, can generate conflict and stress, leading adolescents to adopt various behaviors to keep the relationship going (Lapierre et al., 2019). Even so, they expressed willingness to meet new people, preferably through more short-lived relationships, such as casually see someone.

Digital violence — intentional acts of controlling, threatening, humiliating, or insulting a partner’s image, and provoking embarrassment or stalking through internet-connected devices such as cell phones and tablets (Andrade et al., 2020) — was present in these romantic relationships even when participants did not use that term. Such behaviors appeared to be normalized, resulting in conflict, stress, and invasion of digital privacy. In many cases, these actions were viewed as signs of trust and as ways to control fidelity, driven by insecurity in managing the relationship.

Perhaps because it is a contemporary form of violence that has only recently received attention in academia and society (Andrade et al., 2020; Flach & Deslandes, 2021), adolescents still struggle to distinguish it from other forms. They reported that checking a partner’s phone — openly or secretly — can reveal a “secret” related to real or imagined infidelity by inspecting contacts, incoming and outgoing calls, and messages. Other behaviors included repeatedly calling to track a partner’s location; policing how quickly a partner replies to successive messages, causing discomfort; and “liking” a photo of someone of the opposite gender, even if known.

All these behaviors can be understood as ways of exerting power and control over a partner and are documented in the literature on digital violence as control and monitoring of online activities (Andrade et al., 2020). Being in a romantic relationship is sometimes treated as a supposed right to invade individuality, intimacy, and privacy — aspects essential to building healthy relationships that may go unnoticed. This controlling dynamic — monitoring, policing, surveilling — can produce a constant sense of unease and restlessness for many people in dating relationships (Lucio-López & Pietro-Quezada, 2014).

I kept calling to find out where she was. And she asked to see my WhatsApp contacts (...) I was very jealous, so I would just look at contact names to see if there was any affectionate nickname saved. (Guimarães Rosa, 19 years)

Once I caught him chatting with a girl on his phone. We imagine a thousand things, but sometimes it’s so simple. I fought with him; I almost killed him. I investigate; when he’s entering the password, I watch one number and suddenly I already know the whole password. (Lia de Itamaracá, 18 years)

Development of preventive actions to promote responsible and more positive use of digital technologies — within the context of adolescents' romantic relationships — may help address this phenomenon (Andrade et al., 2020). At the exosystem level, Safernet Brasil, a private civil-society association with nationwide reach, has run campaigns specifically aimed at adolescents to encourage conscious, ethical, responsible, and safe internet use through its website (www.safernet.org.br) and Instagram (@safernetbr).

Intimate relationship dynamics reported by participants included: controlling friendships (offline and online); physical aggression such as grabbing an arm; hitting the wall to express frustration and anger; name-calling; controlling clothing — especially for girls; arguments that led to breaking objects; and repeated threats to end the relationship to gain control over a partner's behavior.

Bidirectional, or mutual, violence (Martínez-Gómez et al., 2021) was identified in participants' intimate relationships, appearing in different forms and at different moments in the couple's dynamics. In some cases, unidirectional violence became bidirectional, forming a maladaptive pattern for resolving conflicts.

One boyfriend kept me from going out with my friends (...) another didn't like a friend of mine and asked me to distance myself because he 'was no good' (...) And I didn't like his ex-girlfriend, she didn't like me, and I didn't like her (...) I once broke a boyfriend's chain (laughs) because I was stressed with him. (Carolina de Jesus, 17 years)

My ex-girlfriend would punch the wall during fights; it scared me. I couldn't talk to her. She told me to "get lost" (...) it was shouting — if I said, "I'm going out with the guys," she'd say, "If you go, we're done right now." I did that to her too, like, equal rights. She did it; I did it. (João Cabral, 18 years)

Jealousy, immaturity, stress, impulsivity, and insecurity were highlighted by adolescents as triggers for violent episodes. The ideal of romantic love often frames jealousy as a sign of love, care, and attentiveness — widely shared in society and grounded in gender stereotypes that cut across women's and men's intimate relationships (Martínez-Gómez et al., 2021). However, this belief can legitimize and justify controlling behaviors toward a partner.

The behaviors described above suggest difficulty regulating emotions, a disorganizing personal characteristic that undermines the maintenance of a healthy relationship and even the interruption of violent cycles. Such disorganizing attributes were also observed at the couple level, especially in initial experiences of intimacy and in the transition from "see someone" to dating, often revealing skills still under development and low self-esteem for dealing with relational demands (Leme et al., 2016; Lordello & Costa, 2015).

At this developmental stage, interest in and formation of first romantic partnerships are marked by the discovery of pleasure through intimate touch and are commonly accompanied by emotions such as jealousy, anxiety, frustration, disappointment, and confusion about one's own feelings. Thus, active biopsychological resources — knowledge and skills needed for proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 2011) — may be insufficient, reducing the chances of a constructive relationship.

Conversely, organizing dispositions/forces and active biopsychological resources (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) — evident when some girls recognized abusive behaviors — underscore a person's capacity to transform and break the cycle of violence by taking an active stance in favor of healthier proximal relationships:

When he commented on my clothes and grabbed my arm, I already thought it was strange. He apologized: "I'm very afraid of losing someone." I said, "But acting like this you will lose her. No one wants to be in a relationship where you're always talking about her clothes and don't want her with friends." (Carolina de Jesus, 17 years)

I like tight clothes that accentuate this here (touches hips). He didn't like it, and I said, "Okay, if you want, we'll go out like this; if you don't, I'll stay home, because I'm not changing my clothes just because you want it." (Lia de Itamaracá, 18 years)

Proximal processes influence development in concert with the characteristics of the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 2011) and should not be seen as static, deterministic, universal, or unidirectional (Nunes & Morais, 2018; Rosa & Tudge, 2017). Viewed through the lens of the BTHD, these accounts showed more dysfunction effects than competence. A violent relationship is considered a dysfunction (Carvalho-Barreto et al., 2009; Paludo et al., 2021), given the difficulty partners have when one imposes power and control over the other, expressed across psychological, digital, and physical forms — all identified here.

Accordingly, dating can be understood as a proximal process for adolescents: it encompasses the complex, enduring, bidirectional interactions a person establishes over the course of development with other people (a partner), objects (technology via electronic devices such as smartphones), and symbols (personal beliefs about romantic love) in the immediate environment. These interactions can produce dysfunction effects, as described above, or competence effects, as presented in the next category.

Understanding Healthy Dating

We explored characteristics of healthy dating among the adolescents, recognizing the importance of highlighting violence and its implications for affective-sexual relationships while also fostering reflection on relationships that promote development. Such characteristics can be viewed as organizing dispositions/forces and proximal processes that generate

competence and knowledge acquisition. The traits most frequently cited were trust, privacy, fidelity, respect, honesty, boundaries, communication, and friendship.

Being honest with each other creates more trust, respect, and fidelity. Understanding each other and being each other's best friend (...) Self-control too, for example, because there will be some arguments, but you need control not to explode, not to shout. (João Cabral, 18 years)

Privacy is part of healthy dating. There are things women talk about that belong only to women. And privacy leads to what? It leads to trust, which leads to what? Respect. (Lia de Itamaracá, 18 years)

Similar findings were reported by Flach and Deslandes (2021) — trust, individuality, and intimacy/privacy as core values of dating. Dialogue was envisioned as the preferred way to handle doubts and disagreements. Love is Respect (2019) and the One Love Foundation (2020) likewise emphasize these elements as essential to building healthy romantic relationships. We found no issues related to sexual violence in this study; on the contrary, youths described respecting each other's timing and negotiating unwanted intimate touch.

Drawing on Santos (2019), we observed that engagement, reciprocity, increasing complexity, and regularity over time play a significant role in sustaining proximal processes in interpersonal relationships. We also noted ongoing potential for improvement, which can generate competence effects and signal growth from each intimate experience. Overall, adolescents showed that readiness for dialogue within the couple is vital to avoiding conflict, although for some this had not yet become a practiced skill. In one narrative, a “overflowing glass” metaphor illustrated the possibility of preventing conflict by communicating feelings on both sides.

Learning and Positive Influences of Romantic Relationships

From a time/chronosystem perspective, we observed that over the years dating also fostered the discovery of positive feelings and learning experiences, in line with Bronfenbrenner (2011). An adolescent emphasized the significance of learning to say “I love you” from a girlfriend in a relationship that lasted more than 2 years — an experience tied to his family and life history. For some adolescents, their first longer relationship — dating or extended “see someone” — made it possible to recognize behaviors reflecting the couple's “immaturity,” stemming from not knowing how to handle relationship issues: “I've dated, and if I made mistakes there, now I'll get it right, as if with my ex it was just a test and with my current girlfriend it's for real. If I was wrong by being too suspicious with her, I want to be better” (João Cabral, 18). “In my current relationship, we created a strategy so neither of us gets upset when we can't answer the phone: just send a message first saying ‘urgent’ before calling.” (Adélia Prado, 18)

The time component encompasses changes within the person's own life course (Bronfenbrenner, 2011). Some accounts reflected recognition of behaviors such as insecurity tied to suspected infidelity in a past relationship. In the current relationship, we observed attempts to do things differently over time (Nunes & Morais, 2018) from one relationship to the next, which is important for the emergence of new meanings and for establishing new proximal processes.

Final Considerations

This study sought to understand adolescents' experiences of dating violence from the BTHD. As a complex human phenomenon, violence — in its various forms — cut across the dating relationships of the adolescents who participated. Although they spoke readily about the types most common in dating, they did not always label these experiences as “violence.” This appears to reinforce their normalization and legitimation and suggests difficulty in establishing healthier boundaries in relationships.

Dating was viewed as a stage of a romantic relationship marked by exclusivity, preceding marriage and the start of one's own family — meanings shaped by the adolescents' social context. For some, a longer period of dating or extended “seeing someone” made it possible to recognize behaviors reflecting the couple's “immaturity,” due to not knowing how to handle relationship issues; even so, these were significant experiences carried into later relationships. Participants recognized physical and psychological forms of violence. Digital violence was not explicitly named, despite reports of controlling and monitoring behaviors tied to cell phone use, messaging apps (WhatsApp), and social media (Instagram and Facebook). Such behaviors were often seen as signs of trust and fidelity control, driven by insecurity in managing the relationship. Sharing passwords, monitoring posts and likes, repeated calls and messages to track a partner's location and activities — all were common and normalized, resulting in conflict, stress, and invasions of digital privacy.

Because the study was conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptations to EI were required: a) participant selection by the institution's social educators, based on individual availability and willingness to take part in in-person research during the pandemic — introducing potential selection bias; and b) suspension of NGO activities such as discussion circles and workshops. Even so, these adjustments did not prevent the development of EI.

Despite pandemic-driven adaptations, the researcher was met with receptivity, and no participant withdrew. This points to a positive mesosystemic relationship among families, adolescents, and the institution and underscores the value of providing a listening space for participants, especially during the pandemic. Moreover, adolescents' engagement — proximal processes — with the researcher emerged through rich narratives about their life histories.

Future research should examine dating dynamics and violence among LGBTQIA+ adolescents and probe more deeply into the bidirectionality of violence in adolescent intimate relationships. Recognizing dating violence as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, there is an urgent need to develop national public policies that operate at multiple levels: individual, family, school, vocational training settings, community, and beyond. Actions to confront the issue can include workshops and discussion circles focused on violence and healthy relationships, making visible the “silent power” of violence normalized as part of adolescent romantic relationships.

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Correspondence address:

Thaís Afonso Andrade
E-mail: t.afonsoandrade@yahoo.com

Marisa Amorim Sampaio
E-mail: marisa.sampaio@unicap.br

Véronique Donard
E-mail: veronique.donard@unicap.br

Priscilla Machado Moraes
E-mail: priscillamoraes.contato@gmail.com



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