Moral Development in Adolescents as a Key Indicator for the Prevention of Violent Behavior in Their Couples' Relationships

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Abstract

Dating violence is a multidimensional and cross-cultural problem that in the last decade has extended worryingly to teenage age. The consequences are so serious and lasting over time that they cause serious psychological, educational, family and social implications. Knowledge of predictive indicators and the consequences that these aggression and victimization processes cause, can offer an important guide for the design of prevention and intervention protocols that contribute to decrease the prevalence of cases, to facilitate their identification, to give an answer faster and more efficient. This study emphasizes the moral development of adolescents as a key indicator and, specifically, in the level of moral disengagement they present. The aims are: a) Analyze the level of moral disengagement of adolescents, as well as the mechanisms they use to accept and normalize violent behaviors; b) Know what mechanisms of moral disengagement predict certain forms of aggression in dating relationships. The sample consists of 2029 adolescents (55.4% girls) with ages between 14 and 18 years (M = 16.2; SD = 1.2). The results indicate that adolescents have a moderate level of moral disengagement (M = 2.562; SD = 0.4362) and the most commonly used disengagement mechanisms coincide with the diffusion and displacement of responsibility for the damage caused. As the level of disengagement increases, the mechanisms that adolescents use to validate and approve aggressive behaviors committed and suffered are diversified. Finally, it is found that the use of mechanisms such as dehumanization and euphemistic language are strong predictors of certain forms of victimization.

Keywords: dating violence, moral disengagement, diffusion of responsibility, predictive factors, secondary education
1. Introduction

Violence in adolescent dating is a poorly recognized social health problem that affects millions of young people around the world every year. This phenomenon implies a series of violent and abusive behaviors directed towards the couple whose ultimate purpose is to establish and maintain control over it. One of the biggest problems generated by dating violence is the difficulty in detecting such situations, even from within the relationship itself. On many occasions, victimized adolescents are unable to describe their relationship as abusive because the behaviors suffered (control, jealousy, insults, abuse, etc.) are seen as normal, and even desired, way of relating. The acceptance of violence by the two members of the couple increases the chances of developing an abusive relationship between them (Smith et al., 2005). Likewise, this acceptance is considered an element of risk related to the chronification of the phenomenon throughout life, to the point that it is common to find that victimized adolescents end up becoming victimized adults (Spriggs et al., 2009).

1.1 Dating violence and moral disengagement

Dating violence is an important health problem among adolescents and young adults for its implications on physical and mental health and its consequences for individual and social development. During early and middle adolescence, the romantic relationships are a normative developmental task and the quality of these relationships is a key element for adolescents’ psychological adjustment and well-being (Bonache, Gonzalez-Mendez, & Krahé, 2017). The dynamics of later relationships will depend on the experiences, interactions and attitudes that develop in these relationships. Healthy romantic relationships during adolescence are linked to positive outcomes including higher self-esteem, sense of social competence and skill building for long-term partnership (Fisher, 2016). However, a considerable proportion of teenagers are likely to sustain victimization in the context of their first romantic relationships and experience significant distress.

From a cognitive point of view, there are factors that may be related to teenagers' perception of dating violence. Specifically, the morality that these people have, and the mechanisms of moral disconnection they employ could affect this perception.

Research studies directed at analysing the explanatory causes of aggressive processes (Luduc et al., 2018; Simao et al., 2018), have, among other variables, emphasized the moral ones. For decades, it has been known that moral disengagement is strongly related to bullying, and can even be a predictor of it (Ortega-Ruiz et al., 2002; Gasser and Keller, 2009; Wang et al., 2017). The term moral disengagement was coined by Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli (1996) to refer to the process or processes used to legitimate behaviour that goes against the beliefs, values, and norms of the victims. Moral disengagement consists of a series of cognitive defence mechanisms that deactivate moral censorship and self-regulation with the aim of protecting self-esteem and self-concept. There are 8 defence mechanisms used in the process of moral disengagement:
- Moral justification, used to justify a questionable action as its having been carried out with appropriate motives.
- Euphemistic labeling, consisting in using indirect or ambiguous language to verbally minimize the severity of the objectionable actions carried out.

- Advantageous comparison, where the morally questionable action is compared with other worse actions performed before by other people.

- Displacement of responsibility, transferring the responsibility for the action carried out onto other people who have the necessary authority to order such actions, thereby legitimizing the act.

- Diffusion of responsibility, used to share the burden of the action over a group, and thus minimize the guilt that a single person would feel.

- Distortion of the consequences, consisting in diminishing the harm caused.

- Blaming the victim, in order to justify the action performed as a reaction to a previous reprehensible action by the victim.

- Dehumanization, reducing the human condition of the victim, and therefore their rights, thus making the behaviour carried out to not be so serious.

Studies focused on identifying and analysing specific moral disengagement mechanisms warn that aggressors accuse the victims of being mainly responsible for the situation they have lived through (Boulton & Underwood, 1992). In this sense, Camodeca and Gossens (2005) indicate that aggressors claim to feel anger when they commit an aggressive act, and that this anger is greater the more hostility they previously attribute to the victims' intentions. These results were confirmed and extended by Hymel et al. (2005), who observed that the mechanisms most commonly used by teenagers of ages from 12 to 16 are cognitive restructuring and blaming the victim.

The aggressors' behaviour is explained by the activation of mechanisms designed to release the tension caused by the contradictions that arise between their moral principles and their actions (Hymel & Bonano, 2014; Allison & Bussey, 2017). These mechanisms, that deactivate moral censorship and self-regulation with the aim of protecting self-esteem and self-concept, are grouped into four loci that allow an individual to control their behaviour: locus of the behaviour, the agent of the action, the outcomes that flow from the behaviour, and the recipient of the actions (Bandura et al., 1996). The aggressors' use of these mechanisms means that they have the possibility of legitimizing their violence as being standardized behaviour.

Despite the numerous studies that have addressed this topic, there has been very little work on whether these moral imbalances are also present in the figure of the victim, and whether they contribute to perpetuating the victim's role (Hood & Duffy, 2018; Thornberg, et al., 2018). Unlike the studies focused on the figure of the aggressor whose results tend to be mutually coincident, those that also include the victims report very different results and conclusions.

Some of the research addressing the processes of moral disengagement in victims explain this disengagement as consisting of the victims separating their inaction from their excusing others' immoral conduct, thus minimizing their need to confront or stop these aggressions. In
this way, victims may disengage themselves morally to justify their inaction, and even to justify the aggressions they suffer (Allison & Bussey, 2017; Luo & Bussey, 2019). In the same sense, Perren et al. (2012) note that victims also resort to a search for moral justifications, and develop a special empathy towards other victims so as to mitigate their self-attacks on their own self-esteem.

Some studies have even found that witnesses tend to blame victims in the same way as aggressors do (DeSmet et al., 2012), denying that they themselves have any responsibility to intervene (Van Cleemput et al., 2014), and arguing either that mediation in these situations is a task that should be carried out by friends of the victim (DeSmet et al., 2012) or that the actions perpetrated are unimportant (Huang & Chou, 2010). Recent research suggests that perhaps the key is related to collective moral disengagement which would have a mediating effect on individual morality, increasing or reducing the likelihood that witnesses will intervene.

This study emphasizes the moral development of adolescents as a key indicator and, specifically, in the level of moral disengagement they present. The aims are: a) Analyze the level of moral disengagement of adolescents, as well as the mechanisms they use to accept and normalize violent behaviors; b) Know what mechanisms of moral disengagement predict certain forms of aggression in dating relationships.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample consists of 2029 adolescents (55.4% girls) with ages between 14 and 18 years (M = 16.2; SD = 1.2). The sample selection followed an approximately proportional stratified procedure that included 21 lower and upper secondary schools in both urban and rural populations located throughout the Region of Extremadura (Spain).

2.2 Instrument

For the development of this research, two different questionnaires were used.

The first instrument was Dating Violence Questionnaire, CUVINO (Rodríguez et al., 2010). This instrument was developed to assess the victimization of adolescents and youth in their dating relationships. This questionnaire consists of 61 items, grouped into three thematic blocks. The first of them explores the incidence of violence. It is composed of 42 behavioral items (i.e., molecular indicators) describing situations of abuse that may occur in dating relationships. It is responded on a Likert scale from 0 to 4 according to the frequency with which each item has been experienced (0=never - 4=almost always). Total values range between 0 and 168 points; a score of 0 means no abuse by participants’ boyfriend or girlfriend and scores ranging from 1 to 168 indicate the presence and the seriousness of victimization. The 42 items are clustered into eight factors that represent eight forms of abuse in dating relationships: Detachment, Humiliation, Sexual Abuse, Coercion, Physical Abuse, Gender-based Violence, Emotional Punishment and Instrumental Violence.
The second group focuses on the self-perception that adolescents have as victims of abuse; and, the third one deepens the relationship of abuse related to other aspects such as the duration of the relationship, the number of attempts to break, etc.

The second instrument was the questionnaire published by Bandura et al. (1996). This reveals the moral disengagement mechanisms that the participants apply to themselves. They are grouped into eight categories: moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization. The presence of one or a combination of these categories provides information about the processes of moral control and the selective location of moral disengagement as a function of the focus of the behaviour, the agent of the action, the outcomes that flow from the behaviour, and the recipient of the actions.

2.3 Procedure
Prior to the distribution of the questionnaires to the adolescents, both the research objectives and the procedure, instruments and techniques used were supervised and approved by the Bioethics and Biosafety Committee of University of Extremadura (Spain). Also, approval was required from the parents (as the study was dealing with minors) and from the Regional Education Administration (from both the school inspectors and the schools' headteachers). In the case of the parents, they were sent a letter describing the nature of the investigation and the mechanisms used to guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of their children's responses. This letter was accompanied by a written informed parental consent that they were to send back to the school if they wanted their child to be part of the study sample. In the case of the Education Administration, obtaining approval consisted of two phases. In the first, a detailed report of the objectives and methods of the investigation was sent to the Inspection Service of the Regional Government, together with the ethical principles conforming it. Approval of this report allowed access to the Region's schools for distribution of the questionnaires. The second phase required acceptance on the part of the selected schools' directive teams to facilitate the choice of classrooms and access to them during school hours.

2.4 Data analysis
For the identification of the victims and the forms of abuse they suffer, descriptive analyzes have been used. The exploration of the relationship between the modalities and the frequency of abuse suffered by victims and the level of moral disengagement requires a correlation analysis. Finally, the prediction analysis will require a regression analysis.

3. Results
The results reveal that the number of victims varies depending on the frequency of aggression suffered. When the aggression is on the 'sometimes' scale in any of the modalities analyzed, the number of victims is 1447 (811 girls, 363 boys). In relation to the age ranges, from 14 to 16 years, 708 victims are registered, from 17-18 years 583 victims are calculated and from 19-20 years 157 victims are obtained. However, despite the fact that 1447
adolescents admit that they feel they are victims of one or more of the modalities of aggression analyzed, only 437 of them declare or perceive themselves as people mistreated by their partners, trapped in their relationship or fearful in their relationships as a couple. This data reflects that the interpretation made by victims of abuse is far from the conceptually accepted by researchers and that used at the judicial level. These results show that there are latent factors that are exerting an influence so as not to classify the repeated aggressions they suffer as situations of abuse.

The number of victims decreases significantly when considering the scale ‘very often’. In this way, people who have suffered some or several forms of aggression ‘very often’ are considered abused (Table 1). In this case, the number of victims drops to 390.

On the other hand, the results show that the victims suffer mostly from more than one form of abuse (Table 1).

Table 1: Prevalence of victims depending on the modality of abuse and the frequency suffered

| Modality of abuse | Frequency scale |
|-------------------|----------------|
|                   | Never | Sometimes | Very often | Habitually | Always |
| Detachment        | 1326  | 978       | 208        | 43         | 7      |
| Humiliation       | 1816  | 667       | 72         | 10         | 0      |
| Sexual            | 2001  | 490       | 53         | 14         | 6      |
| Coercion          | 1529  | 861       | 135        | 36         | 4      |
| Physical          | 2262  | 270       | 25         | 6          | 3      |
| Gender violence   | 1928  | 540       | 71         | 15         | 4      |
| Emotional         | 1873  | 508       | 146        | 35         | 7      |
| Instrumental      | 2423  | 100       | 36         | 5          | 1      |

One of the latent factors that may be influencing the difference between victim self-perception and being abused could be the level of moral disengagement. The results show a relationship between victimization and moral disengagement (Table 2). Specifically, the results reveal that all forms of abuse correlate with the variable moral disengagement. Therefore, as the frequency of abuse suffered increases, the level of moral disengagement also increases.

Table 2: Correlations between victims of forms of abuse and levels of moral disengagement

|          | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     | 7     | 8     | 9     |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Detachment       | -     |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 2. Humiliation      | .678**| -     |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 3. Sexual           | .530**| .565**| -     |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 4. Coercion         | .695**| .682**| .522**| -     |       |       |       |       |       |
| 5. Physical         | .442**| .585**| .518**| .466**| -     |       |       |       |       |
| 6. Gender violence  | .592**| .677**| .599**| .547**| .532**| -     |       |       |       |
| 7. Emotional        | .610**| .616**| .497**| .647**| .459**| .503**| -     |       |       |
| 8. Instrumental     | .292**| .381**| .424**| .317**| .583**| .370**| .300**| -     |       |
| 9. Moral disengagement | .067**| .071**| .112**| .102**| .073**| .062**| .096**| .091**| -     |

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01

Finally, it is analyzed whether the use of certain moral disengagement mechanisms predicts the victimization of specific forms of dating violence. For this, the disengagement
mechanisms have been grouped into four blocks. The first of them, behavior locus, contains the mechanisms of moral justification, euphemistic language and advantageous comparison. The second, outcome locus, represents the mechanism of distortion of consequences. The third, agency locus, includes the mechanisms for diffusion and displacement of responsibility. And the fourth, locus of the recipients, refers to the mechanisms of dehumanization and attribution of blame.

The results indicate that high levels of behavior locus predict victimization of abuses related to detachment ($\beta = .39, t=10.53, p<.01$), humiliation ($\beta = .32, t=10.04, p<.01$) and emotional punishment ($\beta = .26, t=9.11, p<.05$). Likewise, the detection of high levels of outcome locus can be considered predictors of victimization of sexual abuse ($\beta = .28, t=9.54, p<.05$), coercion ($\beta = .33, t=10.21, p<.01$) and physical abuse ($\beta = .21, t=7.94, p<.05$). Finally, the results show a predictive relationship between agency locus and gender based violence ($\beta = .36, t=10.32, p<.01$).

4. Discussion

Results show that a considerable majority of youth in our study had experienced technical abuse, since they presented evidence of having suffered abuse in their dating relationship even when they perceived themselves as not being abused. The predominant forms of abuse in the different combinations analyzed were detachment and coercion, followed by humiliation, gender based violence and emotional punishment. Physical abuse and instrumental violence had the lowest frequency of victimization. Studies on this topic have shown that psychological abuse occurs before physical abuse and even predicts it (Loinaz, et al., 2012). In our study, a considerable majority of participants reported having experienced situations of abuse, particularly psychological abuse. The most disturbing finding is that they had difficulties recognizing such behaviors as abusive. Unless the situation changes, such youth have few chances of reducing the risks of abuse in future situations and avoid future victimization (Anderson & Kobek-Pezzarossi, 2011).

The immaturity and lack of cognitive, emotional, and instrumental resources of these populations make it difficult for them to successfully confront the abusive and violent situations that they may experience. Instead, they tend to activate moral disengagement mechanisms that free them from the social and personal pressure they suffer when they feel attacked. The fear of exclusion, possible reprisals, or ridicule, as well as the avoidance of feelings related to helplessness, cowardice, and inability, inter alia, can lead them to conceal the aggressions they are suffering by self-justifying them as facts that lack seriousness and intentionality and that do not cause them any irreparable damage. This situation in turn means that there will be no action from support networks since they will be unaware of the aggressions the victims are suffering and the damage being caused. This places the victims in a situation of even greater defencelessness that makes their conversion from victims to polyvictims more likely. Undoubtedly, exposure to abuse that is continuous, of different types, and coming from different contexts has enormous repercussions for the mental health of those involved. But it must also be perceived as a public health problem given the lack of effective tools to combat the situations of helplessness that the victims experience.
Individuals’ inability to recognize and label a situation as abuse or violence is also explained by the “normalization” of abusive behaviors, which sometimes even leads them to be expected as signs of love (Vázquez & Castro, 2008). In turn, this may increase individuals’ need to justify the occurrence of abusive behaviors in a romantic relationship (Harned, 2005).

Likewise, the findings from this study are consistent with an increasing body of research showing that moral disengagement proneness is associated with aggression. Specifically, results show the mediating power exerted by moral disengagement in the relationship between the perception of dating violence and victimization. Specifically, one can conclude that the type of perception that victims have can facilitate the activation of certain mechanisms of moral disengagement. According to the social cognitive theory of Bandura (2002), selective recourse to these mechanisms allows victims to reduce the tension experienced when others do not respect their moral standards and they either feel unable to put a stop to the situation or do not dare to because they fear feeling excluded or making matters worse. In this way, the victims try to play down, camouflage, or distort the intentions behind the abuses they suffer, or the motivations that led the aggressors to disseminate these abuses.

In particular, the results of this study reveal a series of indicators that facilitate the orientation of prevention and intervention programs for violence in general, and for violence in the couple in particular. These indicators show the relationship between forms of victimization and activation of certain mechanisms of moral disengagement. The aggressions related to the emotional sphere are linked to the use of mechanisms oriented to the justification of aggressive behavior. This justification can be carried out through arguments that seek as a pretext exceptional circumstances or situations that have not occurred, through the use of euphemistic terms that do not show the cruelty of aggression, or through comparisons with more serious situations to show that one’s own is less and therefore bearable.

On the other hand, aggressions related to physical aspects, among which sexual abuse could also be considered, are associated with mechanisms of moral disengagement that try to distort the consequences suffered, to diminish them. This way of acting aims to protect their self-esteem and seek an impossible explanation for events that they fail to understand and that are not consistent with their moral standards (Bussey et al., 2015).

5. Conclusion

Studies of moral disengagement have traditionally been linked to knowledge of the possible causes that motivate aggressors to abuse their peers. In recent years, the study of moral variables has also extended to the figure of witness and defender of the victim with the aim of suitably adjusting violence prevention programs for children and teenagers. However, there have been very few studies addressing the link between moral disengagement and victimization. Sometimes this link is even treated as a secondary topic, thus hindering the establishment of comparative studies or the consideration of complementary variables. One of the most notable contributions of the present work is that of its thorough analysis of the processes of moral disengagement in victims, and the influence these have on the durability of their role as victims.
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