

Indicators of psychological abuse associated with the length of relationships between couples

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Título: Indicadores de maltrato psicológico asociados a la antigüedad en las relaciones de pareja.

Resumen: La investigación analiza la variable antigüedad de la relación de pareja y la existencia de manifestaciones de maltrato psicológico en estudiantes universitarios/as. Aporta un mayor conocimiento en lo relativo a la relación entre la antigüedad de pareja y la posibilidad de que aparezcan manifestaciones de maltrato psicológico en el seno de la misma; y analiza la presencia de los diferentes componentes que configuran la interacción coactiva (desvalorización, hostilidad, indiferencia, intimidación, imposición de conductas, culpabilización y bondad aparente) en el sistema conyugal. El estudio pone de manifiesto que conforme las relaciones de noviazgo avanzan en el tiempo, existe una mayor propensión al ejercicio de conductas de violencia psicológica reproduciéndose en mayor medida indicadores como trivializaciones, reproches, indiferencia, intimidación, juzgar, criticar, corregir, conductas destructivas, insistencia abusiva y acusaciones. Asimismo, los resultados indican que los jóvenes presentan en función de la antigüedad de la relación conyugal una mayor frecuencia en "conductas destructivas" y "reproches". La investigación se desarrolla en el contexto de la Universidad de Extremadura (España). La muestra se compone de 1.080 estudiantes universitarios/as de entre 17 y 23 años ó más. Los hallazgos ponen de manifiesto la necesidad de documentar y concienciar sobre esta gran desconocida forma de maltrato.

Palabras clave: Maltrato psicológico; relaciones de pareja; noviazgo, universitarios/as.

Abstract: This research analyzes the variable 'length of relationship between couples' and the evidence for psychological abuse in university students, providing further knowledge concerning the possible connection between the length of a relationship and evidence of psychological abuse appearing within it. The presence of the different components that make up coercive interaction in couples (disparagement, hostility, indifference, intimidation, imposition of behavior patterns, blaming and apparent kindness) is also analyzed. The study shows that relationships, as they get longer, have a greater chance of violent psychological conduct becoming evident through such indicators as trivialization, reproaches, indifference, intimidation, judging, criticizing, correcting, destructive behavior, abusive insistence and accusations. Similarly, the results indicate that there is a greater frequency of "destructive behavior" and "reproaches" the longer the relationship of the young people lasts. The research has been carried out in the context of the University of Extremadura (Spain), the sample being made up of 1.080 university students aged between 17 and 23 years or more. The findings show the need to document and raise awareness of this largely unknown form of abuse.

Key words: Psychological abuse; relationships of couples; premarital couples, university students.

Introduction

Violence within couples is today the most alarming form of interpersonal violence and it is present in many different forms of intimate relationships: married couples, couples who are not married but live together, couples who do not yet live together and ex-couples (Dutton, 2006). Some studies estimate that such violence in Spain affects 20-25% of women (Fontanil, Ezama, Fernández, Gil, Herrero & Paz, 2005; Labrador, Rincón, De Luis & Fernández, 2004), while others point to percentages of between 3.6-9.6% of women aged over 18 (Echeburúa, Fernández-Montalvo, Corral & López-Goñi, 2009). It is not surprising then, that some qualify this reality as a public health problem (Caetano, Vaeth & Ramisetty-Milker, 2008; Sharps & Campbell, 1999) whose magnitude is as great as the repercussions of the aggression itself. Such aggression, often repeated, can imply physical and sexual violence that can even end in murder, or the most serious and chronic forms of psychological violence (Echeburúa, Fernández-Montalvo & Corral, 2009; Patró, Corbalán & Limiñana, 2007).

Apart from such exceptional cases as when serious injury or death occurs, the psychological consequences of violence within the couple are considered to be more frequent and

severe than physical aggression (Labrador, Fernández-Velasco & Rincón, 2010). Nevertheless, in spite of this evidence, the importance of such psychologically violent behavior within the couple's relationship is still highly underestimated. This phenomenon is easily contrastable when the manifest absence of this form of abuse in both the media and the scientific sphere of research is considered (Sims, 2008).

Thus, although there is some research work in Spain that has tried to deal with the psychological problems pertaining to the victims of domestic violence (mainly women) (Alonso & Labrador, 2008; Rincón, Labrador, Arinero & Crespo, 2004; Sarasúa, Zubizarreta, Echeburúa & Corral, 2007), there is still an important void where work aimed at the study of psychological abuse as a form of violence in itself is concerned (Domínguez, García & Cuberos 2008; Ellsberg, Jansen, Heise, Watts & García-Moreno, 2008; Pico, García, Celda, Blasco, Echeburúa & Martínez, 2006; Plazaola & Pérez, 2004; Ruiz & Plazaola, 2005). It is a form of violence that has such serious consequences as to be comparable with those of a physical nature, or even worse, even though they are more difficult to predict (Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Schumacher, Smith & Heyman, 2001; Street & Arias, 2001).

Thus, the conceptual immaturity of research into this phenomenon invites a reflection on such questions as: How can we intervene in something when we do not know exactly what it is due to the invisibility of its effects? This is, without doubt, a dilemma that is not considered when study-

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ing physical aggression, where the use of force appears as an instrumental mechanism of verifiable consequences and, very often, part of an unbalanced marital relationship with permanent or circumstantial power (Corsi & Dohmen, 1995; Patró & Limiñana, 2005).

This is why it is necessary to focus on those works that contribute to finding the limits of the impact of psychological violence with respect to its physical manifestations. The Andalusian Institute for Women (2006) defines psychological abuse as "any act or conduct which harms the dignity and could lead to devaluation, humiliation, suffering or mental illness (insults, harassment, mental cruelty), and acts or conduct resulting in a climate of anxiety (spyware, ignore, control over economic resources, threats and coercion). To this end, various findings reveal data claiming that 80% of women who are victims of physical aggression have rarely been victims of abuse without psychological abuse as well. The aggressor's threat of abandoning the relationship is identified as the principal agent of psychological suffering (Henning & Klesges, 2003). Other research has concluded that, for both men and women, psychological aggression is moderately connected to light physical aggression as a pattern of habitual interaction (Zarza & Froján, 2005); while the latter is in turn moderately connected to serious physical aggression (Pan, Neidig & O'Leary, 1994). One explanation, which describes the relationship between both physical and psychological violence in minute detail, establishes a continuity with those findings that show psychological aggression as the only variable capable of predicting the recurrence of physical violence within the couple in any consistent and meaningful way (Murphy, Morrel, Elliott & Neavins, 2003).

On the other hand, in the same way that these works do not state precisely which behavior patterns of psychological aggression more frequently cause direct physical violence; it can be stated that there is very little general consensus about the particular types of behavior that make up psychological abuse.

Follingstad & Dehart (2000) carried out a study that throws light on this question. An analysis was made of the evaluation of a sample of males concerning their sentimental partner on the former's behavior that was considered by the latter to be evidence of psychological violence. Such behavior as threats to physical health, control over physical liberty in the social sphere and destabilization through intimidation, were perceived as having the greatest probability of being manifestations of psychological abuse, as opposed to such manifestations as monopolizing and controlling behavior, which were conceived as inherent to the relationship of a couple.

It is necessary, however, to look at this aspect in greater detail if we hope to enumerate the existence of the many indicators of psychological abuse that appear in the relationships between couples. The most evident are insults, criticisms, humiliations, disqualifications or ridiculing, both in public and in private, social and economic isolation, repeated threats of leaving, divorce, abuse of the victim, loved ones

and those related with the destruction or damage to properties closely linked to the victim, whether they be objects or animals, the result of which could suppose a psychological trauma or severe attack on the victim's mental health (Faver & Strand, 2007). The research carried out by Faver & Strand (2003) stated that 41 pet-owning women who were victims of abuse mentioned threats or harmful acts against their pets by their partners. One in four of the victims admitted that worrying about their pets had affected their decision to leave or to stay with their partner.

Similarly, as the most hidden expression of psychological abuse within the couple, we can find such conduct as the manipulation of information, affective neglect, denial of the violence and putting all the responsibility for episodes of abuse onto the victim (Marshall, 1999), among other types of behavior and attitudes in which any form of psychological aggression occurs.

The many contributions in this respect increases the difficulty of finding works that deal with situations of psychological violence in couples once the couple has become consolidated, as opposed to at the beginning of the relationship or during the period before marriage. However, there is evidence that shows the existence of behavior patterns in couples which are characterized by a progressive and gradual increase over time in psychological aggression, up to a point where it explodes into physical aggression (Peterson, 1982).

This paper, therefore, analyzes the appearance of manifestations of psychological violence, as the relationship progresses, within couples of university students. When analyzing psychological violence within couples, its multifactorial nature cannot be ignored, given that each component is an enriching source of information for reaching a greater understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, taking into account the important lagoons that exist in the study of psychological abuse, a double objective is presented here: on the one hand, to analyze how close a connection there is between the psychological abuse and the length of the couple's relationship; and secondly to provide greater knowledge about the manifestations of psychological abuse in the couple that make up the coercive interaction between the couple (disparaging remarks, hostility, indifference, intimidation, imposition of certain types of behavior, blaming and apparent kindness).

Method

Participants

The research was carried out in the context of the University of Extremadura. The variable 'length of relationship between couples' and the existence of manifestations of psychological abuse in a total of 1,080 university students was analyzed. The subjects were 332 men and 748 women aged in four categories covering the range from 17 to 23 years or more.

Below, we show the distribution of the university students according to age and sex.

Table 1. Distribution of the university students according to age and sex.

Sex	Age range				Total
	17-18 yrs	19-20 yrs	21-22 yrs	+23yrs	
Male	60	135	110	27	332
Female	147	279	238	84	748
N	207	414	348	111	1080

Instruments

Even with some validated instruments for the diagnosis of psychological violence in the couple (Pueyo, Lopez, Alvarez, 2008; Rodríguez-Calalleria, Almendros, Escartín, Porrúa, Martín-Pena, Javaloy, Carrobes, 2005) we proceeded to design a Questionnaire Psychological Abuse (QPA), aimed at the university population. The design of this QPA took place in two stages. First, the research began by examining various scales and national and international questionnaires extensively used as instruments for sifting and diagnosis in hospitals as an aid to healthcare personnel in detecting and treating cases of domestic violence, such as, for example, the US National Family Violence Survey, Straus & Gelles (1985) or the International Violence Against Women Survey (IWAWS) (1993).

The design of the QPA was based on the following instruments: Abuse Disability Questionnaire (ADQ), McNamara & Brooker (2000); Conflict Tactics Scale Revised (CTS2), Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman (1996); Index of Spouse Abuse, Hudson & McIntosh (1981); Evaluation Inventory of Abuse Against Women by their Partner (APCM), Matud, Caballeira & Marrero (2001); Non-Physical Abuse of Partner Scale (NPASNP), Garner & Hudson (1992); Norvold Abuse Questionnaire (NOR-AQ) Nordic Research Network of Norvold, Swahnberg & Wijma (2003); Partner Abuse Scale: Non-physical (PASNP), Hudson (1990); Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI), Tolman (1989); Psychological Violence Inventory, Sonkin (2001).

Two hundred elements, obtained from a wide variety of instruments, were then selected. These elements were then set out as simple declarative propositions. The elements from all these sources were classified into a small number of relatively homogeneous categories. Excess elements were eliminated and the rest were once more set out as phrases that could be answered on a Likert type scale of 5 points according to the degree of agreement or disagreement. The decision to make categories wider or more specific always fell on the side of the latter, with the idea that they could always be made wider if the psychometric characteristics made this advisable. Since the favorable and unfavorable elements were initially assigned to different categories, many scales contained positive and negative overgeneralizations. The next step was to eliminate the categories that included fewer than three elements, incorporating them into wider categories.

The alpha reliability coefficients ($KMO = .94$; $p = .00$) were calculated and those elements that reduced the scales' internal consistency reliability were eliminated, adding instead others that increased it. Using this procedure, 7 factors and 23 subfactors were built which gave satisfactory indices of internal consistency.

The reliability coefficients of the 92 elements that make up our questionnaire ($KMO = .85$; $p = .00$) were obtained from a sample of 357 university students, 158 men and 199 women aged between 17 to 23 years or more. The said coefficients are satisfactory, although, in the case of the subfactors, they are somewhat low, which is only to be expected, as the number of elements it is made up of is notably smaller. Thus, the scores in the least reliable variables should be interpreted with caution, particularly when the differences are small. They are, however, suitable for detecting relatively large differences.

Finally, as can be seen in Table 2, the QPA is made up of 92 items aimed at detecting evidence of psychological abuse in 7 factors and 23 subfactors.

Table 2. Factors and subfactors of the Questionnaire on Psychological Abuse (QPA).

Factors	Subfactors
1. Disparagement	1. Ridicule 2. Disqualification 3. Trivialization 4. Opposition 5. Disdain
2. Hostility	1. Reproaches 2. Insults 3. Threats
3. Indifference	1. No empathy or support 2. Monopolization
4. Intimidation	1. Judging, criticizing, correcting 2. Threatening postures & gestures 3. Destructive behavior
5. Imposition of behavior patterns	1. Social isolation 2. Orders 3. Deviations 4. Abusive insistence 5. Invasion of privacy 6. Sabotage
6. Blaming	1. Accusations 2. Gaslighting 3. Negation/denial
7. Apparent kindness	1. Manipulation of reality

Procedure

The research was carried out with students from the University of Extremadura. The sample selection was random so as to be sufficiently representative. Once the faculties had been selected, the deans, center directors and academic secretaries were informed of the research aims and permission was gained to implement the instruments and guarantee the collaboration of the lecturers of the different university degree courses selected. From this starting point,

a calendar was jointly decided upon to carry out the questionnaire, which was done mornings and afternoons during the academic courses of 2007/2008 and 2008/2009. The test was administered collectively in a single session; the copies with instructions were handed out and the students were instructed to fill in personal data; the instructions were read out loud, stressing the importance of answering all the questions; and finally, doubts were solved while trying not to influence the subjects' responses.

The confidentiality of the students' responses was assured by coding each questionnaire with a numerical identification. The time taken to do the test varied from 15 to 20 minutes and there were no serious problems of comprehension. After the tests were handed in, the students' responses to each the protocols were revised, looking for strange responses and items unanswered. Only two badly completed protocols were eliminated. No strange responses or unanswered questions were found.

Results

The data analysis was carried out using the statistical package SPSS 15.0. First, a descriptive analysis was done for each of the factors/subfactors of psychological abuse included in the study (disparagement, hostility, indifference, intimidation, imposition of behavior patterns, blaming and apparent kindness). The descriptive analysis was used to evaluate the specific incidence of each of these factors and subfactors of psychological abuse in the university students under consideration.

An inferential analysis was then carried out to establish significant correlations between the various factors and subfactors of psychological abuse under study and the variable 'length of relationship'. To do so, the variables were first checked for compliance with the requirements for carrying out parametric tests, using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to show whether our distribution within the population was normal, the Rachas test to indicate whether the sample was random and the Levene test to show whether the variations were homogeneous. Having checked that the parametric tests were correct, we then proceeded to use the ANOVA of a factor to estimate the effect of the categoric variable *length of relationship* on the variable *psychological abuse in couples* for each of the factors and subfactors. Finally, a correlational analysis (correlation by Pearson) was carried out on the variables being studied. We shall now show the results concerning the application of the tests.

As for the **length of current relationship** (Table 3), 33.8% state that their relationship has lasted between 1 and 2 years; 27.1% between 6 months and 1 year; and 3.3% over 4 years. It can be seen that the majority lies within the 1 to 2 year interval.

With respect to the **indicators of psychological abuse** for the young university students in the sample, the following can be concluded:

The results of the QPA, as shown in Table 4, confirm the position of all the average scores obtained at intermediate levels, ranging between 1.5 and 2.49. Nevertheless, we should mention the factor of psychological abuse that most frequently occurs among these young people: (3) *Indifference*, as opposed to the least frequently occurring: (7) *Apparent kindness*. Here, we have to take into account the fact that the codification values used in the SPSS mean that the lower the average score obtained, the higher the incidence of the variable of psychological abuse in each case.

Table 3. Frequencies of the variable "length of current relationship".

LENGTH OF CURRENT RELATIONSHIP	N (%)
less than 1 month	5 (0.5)
1-3 months	77 (7.1)
3-6 months	94 (8.7)
6-12 months	293 (27.1)
1-2 years	365 (33.8)
2-4 years	205 (19.0)
over 4 years	36 (3.3)
TOTAL	1075

Table 4. ANOVA, means and typical deviations of the factors and subfactors of Psychological Abuse

	M	DT	F
Factor (1) Disparagement	2.09	.63	1.28
1. Ridicule	2.08	.68	1.01
2. Disqualification	1.93	.69	1.71
3. Trivialization	1.74	.70	5.22***
4. Opposition	1.78	.66	2.15*
5. Disdain	2.42	.77	1.37
Factor(2) Hostility	2.03	.59	1.42
1. Reproaches	1.64	.67	2.81*
2. Insults	2.27	.71	.95
3. Threats	2.06	.68	1.05
Factor(3)Indifference	1.92	.55	3.40**
1. No empathy or support	1.83	.59	5.55***
2. Monopolization	1.95	.67	1.69
Factor (4) Intimidation	2.05	.62	2.18*
1. Judging, criticizing, correcting	1.78	.67	3.62**
2. Threatening postures & gestures	2.05	.72	1.68
3. Destructive behavior	2.09	.72	2.09
Factor (5) Imposition of behavior patterns	1.99	.55	1.66
1. Social isolation	2.06	.72	1.03
2. Orders	1.69	.75	2.35*
3. Deviations	1.86	.73	5.23***
4. Abusive insistence	1.63	.72	2.09
5. Invasion of privacy	2.09	.65	2.29*
6. Sabotage	2.21	.75	1.59
Factor (6) Blaming	2.12	.65	.97
1. Accusations	1.74	.75	6.00***
2. Gaslighting	2.18	.68	2.50*
3. Negation/denial	2.32	.74	1.72
Factor (7) Apparent kindness	2.16	.68	2.41*
1. Manipulation of reality	2.17	.67	2.15*

Note: *p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001.

The data indicate that 158 of the subjects most frequently make use of *Disparagement* (14.6%) and *Blaming* (14.7%) in their relationships. The percentages are, however, well com-

compensated in both factors when it comes to analyzing the number of subjects in high or very high positions. Similarly, it can be seen that 14.4% of the young people (n=156) most frequently make use of *Hostility*, *Imposition of Behavior Patterns* and *Apparent Kindness*.

On the other hand, a detailed analysis of each factor reveals that, within the occurrence of *Disparagement*, *Trivialization* was the most frequently used, reaching high levels (35%) and very high levels (1.9%) in 399 of the subjects studied, as opposed to *Disdain*, which was the least frequently used, at 59.2% of the cases.

As for the occurrence of *Hostility*, it should be noted that *Reproaches* is the most common subfactor (42.6%) in their relationships for 480 subjects, while *Insults* (14%) is the least common (n=152).

With respect to psychological abuse in the couple expressed through *Indifference*, the most common behavior type among the subjects (n=278) is that of *No empathy or support*, although the difference between this subfactor (25.7%) and that of *Monopolization* (23.9%), used by 258 subjects, is not large.

As for the occurrence of *Intimidation* in couples, it can be seen that the psychological abuse factor most commonly used by the subjects (n=328) is *Judging, criticizing and correcting* (30.4%), as opposed to *Destructive Behavior* (21%), which is the least used by the subjects (n=227) under study.

Focusing on the occurrence of *Imposition of behavior patterns* in the couple, it can be seen that, in spite of the fact that 477 subjects make moderate use of *Abusive Insistence* (44.2%), there is a higher number of individuals (n=484) who use this subfactor with an even higher frequency (44.8%) at both a high (n=449) and very high (n=35) level. This occurrence is, therefore, the type of psychological abuse of an impositive nature (44.8%) most used by the subjects in their relationships. Behavior based on *Sabotage* (19.1%), on the other hand, is the least used subfactor (n=206).

As for *Blaming*, the existence of 484 subjects situated in the mean, as far as *Accusations* is concerned, is of particular interest. This figure does not contrast in any relevant way with those that use such indicators the most (n=424), both at a high (n=393) and very high (n=31) level. Similarly, the use of *Accusations* (39.3%) is the subfactor of *Blaming* most used in their relationships by the subjects (n= 424); as opposed to the occurrence of *Negation/Denial* (15.7%), which is the least common (n=169) among the sample.

Finally, a greater participation (54%) of subjects (n=583) can be seen using *Apparent Kindness*, although the values are average.

As for the ANOVA of a factor, the results concerning the differences in the factors and subfactors of psychological abuse in the couple according to the length of the relationship indicate significant differences in *Trivialization* ($F(6, 1068) = 5.22, p = .000$), *Opposition* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.15, p = .045$), *Reproaches* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.81, p = .010$); the factor *Indifference* ($F(6, 1068) = 3.40, p = .003$), *No empathy or support* ($F(6, 1068) = 5.55, p = .000$); the factor *Intimidation* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.18, p = .042$), *Judging, criticizing,*

correcting ($F(6, 1068) = 3.62, p = .001$), *Orders* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.35, p = .029$), *Deviations* ($F(6, 1068) = 5.23, p = .000$), *Invasion of privacy* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.29, p = .033$), *Accusations* ($F(6, 1068) = 6.00, p = .000$), *Gaslighting* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.50, p = .021$); the factor *Apparent Kindness* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.41, p = .026$) and the subfactor *Manipulation of reality* ($F(6, 1068) = 2.15, p = .045$). The results indicate that as the relationship gets longer, there is a greater occurrence of psychological abuse.

With respect to the correlational analysis between the different factors and subfactors of psychological abuse considered and the variable 'length of relationship', the following can be concluded (see Table 5):

Table 5. Correlational analysis of the factors and subfactors of psychological abuse with respect to the length of the couple's relationship.

	<i>r</i>
Factor (1) Disparagement	-0.00
1. Ridicule	-.05
2. Disqualification	.01
3. Trivialization	-.07*
4. Opposition	.00
5. Disdain	-.02
Factor(2) Hostility	-.02
1. Reproaches	-.08*
2. Insults	.00
3. Threats	.05
Factor(3)Indifference	-.07*
1. No empathy or support	-.04
2. Monopolization	-.04
Factor (4) Intimidation	.07*
1. Judging, criticizing, correcting	-.08*
2. Threatening postures & gestures	.05
3. Destructive behavior	.09*
Factor (5) Imposition of behavior patterns	-.04
1. Social isolation	-.05
2. Orders	-.30
3. Deviations	.00
4. Abusive insistence	-.07*
5. Invasion of privacy	.01
6. Sabotage	.01
Factor (6) Blaming	-.02
1. Accusations	-.07*
2. Gaslighting	-.00
3. Negation/denial	-.01
Factor (7) Apparent kindness	-.02
1. Manipulation of reality	-.02

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The factor (1) *Disparagement* shows no significant correlation between the subfactors *ridicule*, *disqualification*, *opposition* and *disdain*, except for the subfactor *trivialization* ($p = -.07$). Similarly, within the factor (2) *Hostility*, a significant correlation can only be seen in the subfactor *reproaches* ($p = .01$).

The factor (3) *Indifference* ($p = .02$) shows evidence of significant correlations, but not in the subfactors *no empathy or support* and *monopolization*. The factor (4) *Intimidation* does not show significant correlations, and neither does the subfactor *threatening postures and gestures*, unlike the other subfactors in this category, where the significant nature of such correla-

tions can be seen: *intimidation* ($p = .03$), *judging*, *criticizing*, *correcting* ($p = .00$) and *destructive behavior* ($p = .00$).

Factor (5) *Imposition of behavior patterns* only shows significant correlations in the subfactor *abusive insistence* ($p = .02$); while for Factor (6) *Blaming*, correlations are only detected in the subfactor *accusations* ($p = .02$).

On the other hand, no significant correlations can be established according to the length of the relationship with Factor (7) *Apparent Kindness* and the subfactor *manipulation of reality*.

In conclusion, the results indicate that, as the relationship gets longer, there is a greater possibility of the occurrence of the previously mentioned aspects of psychological abuse, which can be summarized as: *trivialization*, *reproaches*, *indifference*, *intimidation*, *judging*, *criticizing*, *correcting*, *destructive behavior*, *abusive insistence* and *accusations*.

Discussion and conclusions

Research shows that psychological abuse indicators appear in dating relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). To be precise, the results obtained confirm the occurrence of such manifestations as: *trivializations*, *reproaches*, *lack of empathy and support*, *criticisms*, *corrections*, *accusations* and *abusive insistence*.

All the evidence suggests that the young people in the sample do not show any significantly marked tendency towards the exercise of a particular type of psychological violence. They exhibit a heterogeneous behavioral repertory made up of such behavior types as undervaluing, confrontation, lack of interest or affection, coercion, psychological and social restriction, and blaming the victim for their own violent responses.

However, to be more precise, we should point out as specifically observed manifestations, the aggressor's interest in undervaluing any behavior or attitude adopted by their partner, showing serious resistance towards listening to and sharing the partner's point of view, unless it be to tell them off. Equally, attitudes through which the aggressor rigidly and implacably censures the partner for their behavior, which is far from the aggressor's own expectations, can be seen, forcing the situation until the aggressor can release their anger or personal tensions and make the victim comply with their wishes.

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that *indifference* was the most common form of psychological violence among young people. This demonstrates a lack of affective involvement which makes empathy, support and respect towards the victim's individuality impossible, giving rise to monopolizing behavior patterns on the aggressor's part, at the same time as it hinders the establishing of effective communicative ties and destroys the principals of mutuality and equality in the couple's relationship (Gottman & Silver, 2001).

Along the same lines, the study by Gottman (1999) should be mentioned. This author, after studying the behavior patterns in the relationships of over 130 couples, identi-

fied a series of dynamics that distinguished the healthy couple from the dysfunctional couple. These were four key behavioral factors, designated by the author himself as "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse". These factors acted as highly probable predictors of the failure of the marital relationship and which would, in the best of cases, inevitably lead the couple to a separation and in the worst case, to the spiralling relational dynamics of violence. We are, of course, referring to *criticism*, *defensiveness*, *disdain* and *indifference* or *stonewalling*. Taking into account Tapia (2001), who stresses the last two as being those that describe the worst forecast for the relational pattern, it would seem qualitatively noteworthy that the commonest manifestation of psychological abuse among the young people that make up our investigation should be indifference, as it is one of the indicators that would seem to pose a special risk of conflict in the couple's interaction.

There are currently works that relate the absence of any signs of affection towards the partner in the university population with a high probability of the occurrence of psychological abuse, as a consequence of the high levels of emotional stress that such aggression causes between the couple (Gormley & López, 2010).

Similarly, manifestations of *apparent kindness*, where the aggressors simulate love, interest and concern for their victims in an attempt to manipulate reality as they like, are the least frequent among young couples who are studying.

The moderate nature of our findings, although they confirm that such coercive interaction exists, are in stark contrast with the size of the problem of violence in premarital couples in the National Survey on Violence in Premarital Relationships (2007), where 75.8% of the subjects interviewed, aged between 15 and 24, stated that they had suffered psychological aggression.

Similarly, in the U.S.A., there are prevalence studies (Wolitzky-Taylor *et al.*, 2008) which reveal a reality whose contrast is even starker. Violence in premarital relationships reaches percentages of 1.6% (2.7% of the females and 0.6% of the males), which is equivalent to about 400,000 young people in the population and recognition of the problem as one of public health.

As for the relation between the length of the couple's relationship and the probability of manifestations of psychological abuse appearing, our study shows a connection with the following manifestations: *trivialization*, *reproaches*, *indifference*, *intimidation*, *judging*, *criticizing*, *correcting*, *destructive behavior*, *abusive insistence* and *accusations*.

Thus, our sample shows that, as premarital relationships advance in time, there is a greater propensity to the exercise of such behavior patterns as contempt for the perceptions and experiences of the partner, attitudes of recrimination and judgement and unjustified criticisms or reprimands.

In spite of the existence of such behavior patterns as a lack of interest and empathy, the study also shows the presence of destructive behavior patterns within the couple, where the subject who exercises such behavior patterns puts

the blame for them on the victim through accusations. Once again, abusive insistence appears among the young couples evaluated as a mechanism to force the partner into submission and to comply with the personal desires of the aggressor.

In our research, the most frequent indicators of psychological abuse with respect to the length of the couple's relationship are the *destructive behavior patterns* aimed at expensive objects or objects with a high sentimental value (including the abuse of pets) and *reproaches*. The latter indicator is an accusatory, rigid, repetitive and stereotypical mechanism. Through this, the aggressor implicitly rejects the other person as he/she is and imposes how the other "ought to be" in accordance with the desired model, ignoring the other's will or capacities to perform the demanded behavior patterns ("my partner often told me what he/she didn't like about me", "my partner often talked about the past in order to hurt me", etc.).

Rivera, Díaz & Flores (1986) point out that there is a series of factors in the relationship between a couple that affect the way the relationship works, its form, direction and magnitude, either facilitating the dynamics of the relationship or deteriorating it. The length of the relationship and the commitment acquired over time are two factors that affect the stability and level of satisfaction of both partners (Hicks & Platt, 1970). Studies, such as that of Miller (1976), claim that the length of the relationship and the frequency and duration of cohabitation are two of the seven key factors of marital satisfaction (precedents of socialization, roles

of transition in the family, number of children, socio-economic level and space for the offspring). According to Berger & Kellner (1970), the couple's satisfaction is built up by the married couple and when the variable 'power' is distributed unevenly and is perceived to be so, then high levels of dissatisfaction appear which facilitate the appearance of the dynamics of violence (O'Keefe, 1997).

There are currently works that back up the conclusions obtained in our study. Such is the case of the study by Giordano, Soto, Manning & Longmore (2010), whose results indicate that violent relationships are characterized by a longer duration than those that are not.

Thus, and taking into account the fact that recent research has clearly shown that violence is both predictable and avoidable, we believe it is pertinent to take on board the need to deal with premarital violence through approaches designed from the standpoint of early detection, prevention and intervention focused on emotional education (Blázquez, Moreno & García-Baamonde, 2009). Obviously, the fact that primary prevention of abusive and violent behavior will not happen without changes in personal, interpersonal and social spheres (Ryan, 2005) must be taken into account.

Using this research as the springboard, we hope to contribute to the task of encouraging more profound studies concerning psychological abuse in premarital relationships, given the interest that knowledge of such a phenomenon has for the establishment of full, healthy and adaptable relationships.

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