

Consequences of intimacy and violence in the couple relationships of Romanian youth on the future life plans

Youth ages 19 to 22 are transitioning from adolescence into young adulthood, a time when individuals begin to make their own decisions about the path they will take in adulthood (Nagaoka et al., 2015). In search for independence, young adults approach the vocational, educational, and personal issues as major decisions. One of the primary social development in young adulthood is the entry into romantic and longer-term sexual relationships (Gutgesell and Payne, 2004). Recent studies pointed that, despite the spreading of selfish individualism, there exist a continued high value of commitment within intimate relationships (Carter, 2012).

On the other side, recent studies reflected that intimate partner violence is the most prevalent form of violence. Antecedents of violence in couple is multifaceted and the negative outcomes are huge at a socio-psychological level (Plazaola-Castano and Ruiz Perez 2004; Roberts, Auinger and Klein 2005; Vives-Cases et al., 2010).

Taking into account all these issues, we decided to investigate the interlink between the levels of intimacy, respectively of violence within the current couple relationship, and the plans related to personal development in the near future among Romanian youth. We assume that a strong intimacy encourages the plans for personal achievement, while elements of violence in couple discourages the partners to assume adult roles in the personal life.

We used data from the second wave of the online self-administered Outcome of Adolescence Questionnaire (OAQ). From the total sample of 1509 Romanian young people, who completed the OAQ during October 2014 and February 2015, we selected only respondents having a current romantic partner at the moment of inquiry; consequently, analysis were applied to 836 young people. The age range is 19 to 23 years, mean age is 20, and 66% are female. About 90% of participants having a romantic partner were sexually active, and 60% were in partnership for more than a year. Preliminary descriptive and inferential analysis are implemented to document the consequences of intimacy and violence in youth couple on their future personal plans.

In the same extent, young females and males declare they can talk everything with their lover and that they understand each other how they feel. However, when more profound levels of intimacy are involved, females report in a greater extent than males that some things they can

confess only to their partner (88% vs. 81%, $p=0.008$) and that they feel very close to their lover most of the time (95% vs. 90%, $p=0.038$).

Around 5% of young people reported they had sexual experiences against their will or were forced to have sex. Almost 80% of the respondents or their partners manifested jealousy in couple and over 40% declared that in their couple, they addressed insulting or degrading words or names, or humiliating each other. The most serious form of violence in a partnership – being injured or harmed by the partner – was reported by 8% of respondents. From all young people who had a lover, 82% experienced at least one type of violence in couple.

As we mentioned before, for 60% of the respondents who had a current romantic partner, the relationship was longer than a year. Comparing couples older than one year with those having a shorter duration, we found significant differences regarding the intensity of intimacy and violence among the romantic partners. Thus, a longer relationship accentuates the perception of intimacy, but paradoxically, intensify behaviours from the sphere of violence.

Also, we noticed significant gender differences regarding the perception of intimacy and violence in couple, in the way that females reported higher levels of intimacy, while males declared in a greater extend the presence of violent behaviours in the romantic couple.

Regarding the violence in the romantic couple, addressing insulting words or humiliating each other and adopting some gestures of extreme jealousy are the most spread forms of violence, reported in the same extent by both young females and males. However, paradoxically, when some more severe forms of violence are involved, like forcing the partner to have sex or being injured or harmed by your partner, males seem more likely to report to be the victim. Thus, 8% of males declared they felt forced to have sexual contacts compared to 2% of females ($p=0.001$), and 10% reported they have been harmed by their female partner, compared with 4% of females ($p=0.001$). In spite of these results, we need to interpret cautiously these declarations, taking into account that the scientific literature constantly prove the over-representation of the feminine gender among the victims of couple and domestic violence.

Interestingly, there was no significant association of such factors as gender, age, place of residence, and the perceived financial situation in the family of origin with any type of violence within the intimate relationship. Instead, a significant association was demonstrated between the manifestation of any type of violence in couple and adverse events in the family of origin during

the last 12 months, like having problems with parents, substance abuse of a family member, and witnessing scenes of serious violence in family.

Independent-Samples T-Test was used to compare the differences between partners' positive or negative intentions related to moving together or separating with the partner, getting married and giving birth to a child, according to the mean scores on intimacy and violence in the current partnership.

Intimacy and violence in couple produce the strongest significant differences regarding separation: young people with lower levels of intimacy and higher levels of violence in their couple intend to withdrawn from the partnership in the next 2-3 years. It seems that intimacy and violence do not have impact on the intention to move together with the partner. Instead, higher levels of intimacy predict the intentions to get married and to have a child. Levels of violence in couple make no difference in such plans. The results showed that women perceived higher levels of intimacy, whereas men felt higher levels of potentially violent behaviours in their couple. Also there are more significant influences for future personal issues among women than among men.

Starting from these findings, some implications for policies in the public health and educational system can be depicted. We showed that the damage of violence in couple can be transmitted across generations. To break the chain of the vicious circle, prevention of the phenomenon is essential. Therefore, the public health and educational system should collaborate in order to build an educational strategy based on recent evidence in the field. In the same time, cultivating commitment and intimacy in the partnership is a resource to foster a positive youth development. Educators and counsellors should encourage young adults to develop their autonomy, to be aware of new roles and responsibilities, requiring choices and decisions. The individually response of the professionals working with young people depend on his/her assessment of a range of factors, some of which we have discussed here. Planning a response and supporting young people to manage their behaviour is a key-role for educators and counsellors.

References

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