

Gender, sexuality and violence: perception of mobilized adolescents in an online game

Gênero, sexualidade e violência: percepção de adolescentes mobilizadas em um jogo online

Género, sexualidad y violencia: percepción de adolescentes movilizados en un juego online

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify and analyze the perception of high school students about violence in intimacy relations in adolescence, in the light of the category Gender. **Method:** A qualitative, descriptive and exploratory study, based on the comments of 27 adolescents participating in the online game, Papo Reto. The discourses were submitted to the analysis of thematic content and discussed in the light of the category Gender. **Results:** Adolescents naturalize violence in their relationships of intimacy, but when they recognize it, they react in several ways: with aggressions, dialoguing with the partner or seeking support from third parties. **Final considerations:** There were discordant perceptions regarding the phenomenon, most of which reiterated gender stereotypes. However, they reveal attitudes favorable to overcoming mainly related to the attainment of autonomy.

Descriptors: Gender and Health; Violence; Adolescent; Sexuality; Educational Technology.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Identificar e analisar a percepção de estudantes de ensino médio sobre a violência nas relações de intimidade no âmbito da adolescência, à luz da categoria Gênero. **Método:** Estudo qualitativo, descritivo e exploratório, realizado a partir de comentários de 27 adolescentes participantes do jogo *online* Papo Reto. Os discursos foram submetidos à análise de conteúdo temática e discutidos à luz da categoria Gênero. **Resultados:** Os adolescentes naturalizam a violência nas suas relações de intimidade, porém, quando a reconhecem, reagem de várias formas: com agressões, dialogando com o parceiro ou buscando apoio de terceiros. **Considerações finais:** Houve percepções discordantes em relação ao fenômeno, a maior parte reiterando os estereótipos de gênero. Contudo, revelam atitudes favoráveis à superação principalmente relacionadas à conquista de autonomia.

Descritores: Gênero e Saúde; Violência; Adolescente; Sexualidade; Tecnologia Educacional.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Identificar y analizar la percepción de estudiantes de Secundaria sobre la violencia en las relaciones de intimidad en el ámbito de la adolescencia, a la luz de la categoría Género. **Método:** Estudio cualitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio, realizado a partir de comentarios de 27 adolescentes participantes del juego *online* Papo Reto. Los discursos fueron sometidos al análisis de contenido temático y discutidos a la luz de la categoría Género. **Resultados:** Los adolescentes naturalizan la violencia en sus relaciones de intimidad, pero cuando la reconocen, reaccionan de varias formas: con agresiones, dialogando con el compañero o buscando apoyo de terceros. **Consideraciones finales:** Hubo percepciones discordantes en relación al fenómeno, la mayor parte reiterando los estereotipos de género. Sin embargo, revelan actitudes favorables a la superación principalmente relacionadas a la conquista de autonomía.

Descriptorios: Género y Salud; Violencia; Adolescente; Sexualidad; Tecnología Educativa.

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INTRODUCTION

In the health area, facing the challenge of training critical and reflexive professionals, games have been increasingly used in order to facilitate learning processes. In this study, the use of an online game to favor the approach to sexuality with adolescents in a playful and interactive way is emphasized. The game *Papo Reto* was conceived as a pedagogical device focused on the promotion of the protagonism of adolescents, critical-reflexive thinking and the construction of knowledge, subsidized by playfulness and interaction. It envisages the mobilization of critical reflexivity through an environment free of preconceived responses⁽¹⁾.

Grounded in the gender perspective, the game *Papo Reto* considers the social construction of sexuality, in articulation with the social constructs that make possible the different conceptions and expressions of masculinity and femininity. It is assumed that the approach to sexuality in adolescence is permeated and determined by gender. From this conception, gender inequality is a determinant element of violence that permeates the experience of sexuality in adolescence. Thus, the experience of intimacy relations in this social group is related to the significant vulnerability to the experience of victimization or perpetration of violence, which determines other vulnerabilities in the sexual and reproductive field⁽²⁾.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects a significant proportion of the world's population. Globally, 30% of girls aged 15 to 19 years old experience IPV in their relationships⁽³⁾. A study conducted in nine countries with 24,000 women suggests that IPV affects more adolescents and young women when compared to adults⁽⁴⁾. The largest study on violence in sexual-affective relationships among Brazilian adolescents covered 10 urban centers, distributed among the five geopolitical regions, with young people from public and private schools. The results indicated that 86.9% of the adolescents suffered and 86.8% committed some type of violence during an affective relationship⁽⁵⁾.

An integrative literature review found that IPV is experienced by both genders, but there is a divergence between types of violence perpetrated. Most studies show that boys commit more physical aggression and girls more psychological violence. It should be noted that the studies on the subject, in general, did not analyze the results from the gender perspective. Although some define IPV as a social phenomenon, the perspective of approaching the problematic presents itself degenerate⁽²⁾.

It is important to emphasize that vulnerability to violence in intimate relationships is influenced and determined by socially constructed norms and gender roles. These aspects influence the recognition of the problem and can naturalize and characterize situations of violence as belonging to this generation⁽⁶⁾. This article presents a review of the issues related to gender inequality and violence in the intimacy relations of adolescents who were mobilized in the experience of using the Game *Papo Reto* by students of a public high school in São Paulo State.

The study of this theme is fundamental for the area of Collective Health, because understanding how adolescents perceive and experience situations that refer to gender inequity and violence in the experience of their intimate relationships will allow

us to envisage intervention strategies destined to this public, aiming to sexuality in a non-violent and equitable way.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study was to identify and analyze the perception of high school students about sex, sexuality and violence in intimacy relations, in the light of the gender category.

METHOD

Ethical aspects

The study followed the requirements of Resolution 466/12⁽⁷⁾ of the Ministry of Health and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee with Human Beings of the School of Nursing of the University of São Paulo. All adolescents under the age of 18 signed the Free and Clarified Consent Form, and parents, legal guardians and adolescents over 18 years old signed the Free and Informed Consent Form. It should be noted that, in order to preserve anonymity, the comments were identified by the sex of the participants, with the letter "M" representing the male sex and "F" the female, followed by randomly assigned Arabic numerals.

Theoretical-methodological reference

The study used as a theoretical-methodological reference the social category Gender, anchored in historical and dialectic materialism. This category is based on the difference between the genders. It is a component of social relations, representing a primordial element for the elaboration of meanings on the relations of power. As a basic component of social relations, gender is associated with four elements present in society: to culturally available symbols, to normative concepts, to social institutions and organizations, and to the construction of subjective identities, which comprise the complex relationships built in the process of interaction human⁽⁸⁾.

Type of study

This is a descriptive and exploratory study of a qualitative approach, developed from the discursive commentaries of teenagers registered on the online platform, the game *Papo Reto*. The game corresponds to a pedagogical device developed to approach the subject sexuality among adolescents. It is anchored in the problematization of reality, in the protagonism of the social subjects, in the free expression and in the interaction between the players, with a view to motivate the creativity and the construction of the knowledge in the field of sexuality, from the perspective of gender⁽⁹⁾.

The game simulates real situations experienced by adolescents, taking as scenery the map of a city, in which the spaces Home, School, Internet, Nightclub and Street are progressively accessed. In these territories, adolescents are faced with different situations-problems structured to promote the problematization of sexuality issues, such as: discussions about the body, dialogue with peers and parents, initiation and sexual orientation. As the player responds to the problem situations and completes the missions defined for each of them, accumulates points and thus gains ranking positions for all players.

With regard to sexuality, the elaboration of the game sought to stimulate questions about the problem of gender inequalities among peers, allowing an interface with the IPV problem. This approach was adopted considering adolescents' own patterns of relationship as determined by the construction of gender that, in turn, permeate the construction of sexuality.

Study scenario

The study was developed in a municipal high school located in the city of São Paulo. The invitation to adolescents to participate in the study was formally made by the researchers to 308 students, personally, in the classrooms. Among the guests, 62 showed an interest in participating in the game and the research, having received authorization from the mother, father or legal guardian. The participation of adolescents over 18 years of age has not been authorized.

In August 2014, the process of registering the participants in the online platform was carried out, through the creation of login and individual passwords. In September and October 2014, the game was made available to teenagers. At the end of this period, 27 adolescents accessed and played regularly, constituting the final participants of the research. In general, adolescents accessed the game for a mean period of one month and an average time of 40 minutes of connection, even though access became available throughout the implementation period of this study.

Collection and data analysis

In July 2015, the data were collected from a database composed of the answers to the situations-problems in a discursive question format and the comments of the adolescents, in front of the responses of the peers. The empirical material was exported from the online game environment to a database in the Microsoft Excel Program. The discourses were submitted to the thematic content analysis proposed by Bardin⁽¹⁰⁾ and the discussion was based on the analytical category Gender.

RESULTS

The analysis of the comments made possible the emergence of three empirical categories: "Naturalization of violence in gender relations", "Recognition of sexual rights as a potential for strengthening" and "Coping with violence by adolescents".

Naturalization of violence in gender relations

The naturalization of violence, especially in the discourse of adolescents, was evidenced in situations that refer to behaviors understood as acceptable in a given relationship. Such behaviors were not identified as violence, but as natural members of the relationship.

The discourses revealed that intimacy relationships between adolescents may be marked by power disputes that influence the determination of situations of violence. In this sense, the sexual practice can represent an instrument of domination - usually masculine - since in some comments issued by male adolescents, the intercourse was considered a form of aggression to the woman, through the use of the masculine sexual organ.

It's good for you to have a crooked penis [because] it's better to hurt women! (M1)

It does not matter if the sword [penis] is crooked, but rather if it strikes the opponent. (M4)

Another aspect evidenced in the responses of the adolescents to the situations of the game was the subalternity of gender, as participants' argument to justify violence in their relationships. The use of terms that stereotyped and inferiorized the female condition in the relationship was highlighted, as can be evidenced below:

Banged the young chicks. (M2)

The speeches of some female participants revealed an unequal power relation with respect to the rights and preferences of each of the pairs. It was observed that the fact of being in a relationship allows acceptance of dominant behaviors, especially of sexual character, understood as belonging to an affective relationship, in order to please the other.

I do not think there's a need to [take his hand off her breasts], after all, I'm dating him. (F1)

[...] if he [boyfriend] likes you, he will not want one thing, he will want you completely. (F3)

In some cases, the participants referred to female behavior as the trigger for violent situations in affective-sexual relationships. Alleged seductive and provocative characteristics of adolescent women often justify intimate partner violence. In this way, the girls are blamed for the situations of violence, taken as caused by them. In the next speech, it is verified the disqualification of the behavior of the victim and the valorization of the posture of the aggressor.

She is naughty because she is playing [making out] with her boyfriend. She should have known that her boyfriend would do that [STUPID GIRL]. (F2)

The reports also expressed the blame of teenagers for the violence experienced in the virtual environment, such as the disclosure of intimate photos without the permission of the partner.

For starters, the girlfriend should not even have sent photos of this type [intimate ones] to those who do not have 100% confidence. (M3)

Although the adolescents have been blamed for the situations of violence present in the affective-sexual relationships, it is important to highlight the fact that some discourses have made a reading of the female behavior based on the autonomy of the women on their bodies, which refers to a conception about the experience of sexual rights, as revealed in the following category.

Recognition of sexual rights as a potential for strengthening

In this category the valorization of the female sex was identified through the expression of the wills of the girls in relation

to the experience of sexuality. The autonomy of the adolescent in deciding when and how to initiate the sexual life proved important for the participants, especially the female.

If you think it's still not the right time [to have the first intercourse] do absolutely nothing! [...] Analyze all the conditions and do not let the boy force you to anything. Go your own way. (F3)

She must be sure that this is what she wants, so she will not regret it later. After all, it is a very important step to start a sex life and it should not only do for doing but for wanting. (F4)

Although these statements reveal the value of autonomy in decision making on sexuality and the body, some adolescents presented a romantic and idealized view of intimacy relations, especially regarding the first intercourse. Among the aspects mentioned as relevant for the adolescents to reflect and decide to initiate the sexual life, it stands out the moment considered by them as opportune the choice of a partner of their confidence.

Few were the male participants who mentioned a more liberated position on the part of the adolescents in deciding on sexual initiation. However, when they positioned themselves, they emphasized the need to respect each other's right to choose.

[...] if she does not want to be with him, she will not. You do not have to insist. (M5)

Some participants reported pressures exerted socially by the group of friends in the sense of achieving the beginning of intercourse. However, they corroborated women's autonomy in deciding when it should occur, stressing the need for trust and emotional preparation to avoid regrets.

I think she should only have her first time when she feels comfortable and not by pressure from a group of girlfriends or her boyfriend. She has to have sex when she wants, and when she feels good! (F5)

Do not make your choices based on what others will think; what matters is that you feel good. (F6)

Although autonomy is evident in the discourses as a necessity related to the beginning of sexual relations, it was also perceived as an aspect that can influence the confrontation of gender violence in the relationships of intimacy established among adolescents.

Coping with violence in gender relations among adolescents

The adolescents in the research reported different ways of coping with gender violence in intimacy relationships. In the face of a problem situation presented in the game and commented by the participants, in which the discomfort of one of the partners was approached with an unwanted sexual caress, two reactions were listed: the first is related to the dialogue with the partner and the second is associated response through verbal and physical aggression.

I would tell me to calm down, because he was very horny, and he was hurting me. (M6)

I would say "stop" and if he did not stop I would go for aggression. (F9)

I would slap his face, because he should be responsible before acting. (M7)

In game problem situations that dealt with the issue of violence in virtual environments, adolescents' responses and comments expressed the perpetration of psychological violence in these environments as a common experience of this social group, such as access to messages and the profile of the partner in social networks without authorization, with consequent invasion of privacy. In this context, some participants indicated as a way of coping with these violations, the search for police support.

Go on e-crime police unit. (M8)

Report the boyfriend to the police and make him pay for this. (M5)

Participants also highlighted how to fight violence to seek the help of professionals, such as psychologists and their support network, usually made up of parents and friends. The reports emphasize that interventions need to be targeted to both adolescents in situations of violence and to perpetrators of aggression.

So that he [a perpetrator] seeks a professional to learn to control himself and to act like a normal person. Not everything is solved fighting. (F7)

[...] Talk to someone close to your family or even a more sensible friend! (F8)

The discourses of the adolescents recognize the situations of violence that can be experienced in the intimacy relations, in the same way that they point out possibilities of coping to overcome these conflicts present in adolescence.

DISCUSSION

The results reveal an interface between the problems of IPV and sexuality in the adolescent population. In the Papo Reto game, phenomena that need to be problematized, interpreted and understood in the light of the gender category have been evidenced, since they are permeated by social constructs that reproduce an ideology of the naturalization of violence and the conservation of socially established norms for women and men.

The standards in force in each social context and the construction of gender generally determine the affective and sexual relationships that begin during adolescence, also determining vulnerabilities, with repercussions in the short, medium and long term⁽¹¹⁾. These same social standards that influence the relations of power established between adult men and women have also been identified in the affective and sexual relationships in adolescence. In the discourses of the adolescents, it was verified that the male sexual organ and the sexual act appear as symbols that represent instruments of domination of the girls.

It was also observed the strengthening of the position of female subalternity and the blame of adolescents for situations of violence. The social role attributed to women is hegemonically stigmatized and is responsible for determining the control and condemnation of sexuality⁽¹²⁾. In this way, women are often blamed when they do not present behavior considered socially appropriate⁽¹³⁾.

In the same way, it is recognized that men-specific behaviors are also attributed socially. Among the several characteristics of these, strength and virility stand out, the latter being linked to an understanding of the sexual relation as a biological necessity inherent to the masculine. This conception constitutes a fertile ground for sexual violence, since it justifies and naturalizes this type of violence, associating it with a supposed sexual instinct of the men⁽¹⁴⁾.

In addition to the fact that male and female social roles are determinant for IPV among adolescents, in some cases, different forms of violence are naturalized and romanticized, since violent attitudes and behaviors can be interpreted as an expression of romance and passion⁽¹⁵⁾. By basing their intimacy on the ideals of romantic love, adolescents tend to consider violent attitudes as a demonstration of affection and love, leading to non-perception of violence, which becomes naturalized in their relationships⁽¹⁴⁾.

A study conducted in the State of Curitiba, Brazil, among adolescents aged 15 to 19, revealed that they suffer and perpetrate violence, but do not recognize it as such. This lack of recognition is based on gender stereotypes that socially establish the roles of men and women in intimate relationships understood by adolescents as intrinsic to supposed female and male natures⁽²⁾.

Thus, the naturalization of violence is revealed in the discourses of adolescents to the extent that situations that refer to violent behavior are not problematized and are understood as acceptable in a relationship. This aspect was evidenced, above all, in the discourse of girls. We also emphasize the acceptance of unequal relations regarding the rights and preferences of each of the pairs. This may be evidenced in speeches that address a supposed authority granted to the male sex to touch the partner's body without permission. At the same time, these discourses deny girls the right to express or experience their desires and preferences in relationships.

The gender submission revealed in the adolescent speeches is reinforced in the discourses of the girls, being characterized by the greater appreciation of the girls the younger they are. The idea of the "young woman" is presented in the imaginary of men as a virgin, pure, untouchable and fragile, being the object of male desire to conquer it to value its masculinity and virility. This ideation reaffirms gender stereotypes and power relations and domination between women and men, with adolescents being given a subordinate position, which makes them more vulnerable to victimization in intimate relationships.

This increased female vulnerability may be evidenced as a result of a survey of 1377 adolescents in eight public schools in the United Kingdom. The study found that three quarters of the cases of sexual violence in intimate relationships suffered by girls were perpetrated by older partners⁽¹⁶⁾.

Although the comments of the participants reiterate gender issues - which naturalize violent relationships and subalternate

the teenagers - it was possible to see, in part of the speeches, a position aimed at the autonomy of women over their bodies, which refers to the experience of sexual rights. In the reports, the adolescents were identified as responsible for deciding about sexual initiation, however, needing to consider several aspects in making their choices, in order to avoid regrets. However, the valorization of the sexual rights of the adolescents was shown to be contradictory among the participants of the research, a fact associated with an idealized and little problematized view of intimacy relationships.

Sexual initiation is considered, by adolescents, as a milestone in their life histories, having different motivations according to sex. While for girls the sexual experience proves to be idealized, and must occur at the right time and age as a consequence of a lasting love bond, for boys it is linked to a sexual need that needs to be satiated⁽¹⁷⁾.

It should be noted that decision-making to initiate sexual life, in addition to being influenced by gender issues, is influenced and stimulated by peers, especially when the network of friends is formed by adolescents who already maintain active sexual life⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁾. Considering that "autonomy is the capacity and concrete conditions that allow women to freely make the decisions that affect their lives and the power to act according to such decisions"⁽¹⁹⁾, it is questioned whether, in fact, adolescents exercise autonomy in making decisions about sexual initiation and sexuality. Although women nowadays have more freedom to make their sexual and reproductive choices, they are still based on gendered, historically and socially constructed gender identity.

Although the perception of adolescents as protagonists in the experience of their sexuality was evidenced in the discourses, the analysis also showed the coexistence of femininity and masculinity patterns that reproduce the sexist stereotypes present in the intimacy relations. These patterns influence the adolescents' understanding of the different roles assumed by the female and male figures that they refer to and reproduce in their affective-sexual relationships. Thus, although this generation presents to some extent a surpassing discourse, centered on female autonomy and protagonism in the sexual field, it still reproduces the sexist patterns of behavior with which they coexist in the family and in society, an expected aspect, since in social historical transformations, there is a dialectic of progress and retreat.

Another aspect mentioned by the participants of the research shows potentialities for coping with IPV in adolescence, as well as for identifying permissive attitudes towards the perpetration of this phenomenon. The adolescents indicated different ways of coping with these violations, especially dialogue and aggression.

Corroborating this result, a survey carried out in the city of Brasília, Brazil, with first-year high school students from a public school, revealed that adolescents recognize the end of relationships as a way of coping with violence in affective-sexual relationships, violence and resignation⁽²⁰⁾. Regarding the response to violence through aggression, this fact was also evidenced in a study developed with economically disadvantaged African American adolescents, which revealed the presence of IPV reciprocity among adolescents⁽²¹⁾.

Another form of management reported by the participants of the present study was to activate their support network - represented by parents and friends -, police, as well as psychologists to help in coping with situations of violence in their relationships. These same mechanisms of support were also pointed out by other authors, and the friends were the ones most activated by adolescents⁽²²⁻²⁴⁾. It is worth noting that the search for friends is justified, above all, by the characteristics of empathy, warmth, secrecy and posture of non-judgment⁽²⁵⁾.

Regarding the search for specialized professionals, such as psychologists, the participants pointed out the importance of this support, both for the victim and for the perpetrator of violence. A study of 518 adolescents from different ethnic groups living in South Carolina, United States of America, found that 50% of the participants reported high intention to seek informal and service support in the face of situation of dating violence, with adolescents being more prone to seeking help⁽²⁶⁾.

In the case of psychological assistance to the perpetrator, in the reports, this support was intended to make him aware of himself and thereby learn to control feelings and impulses capable of triggering violent attitudes. This data is relevant and may be associated with the idea of seeking to address the determinants and not only of the consequences of IPV.

Analysis of the data together revealed that some players took on the game a violent and oppressive stance across the interaction, receiving many negative ratings by the peer. This aspect, while revealing a potential for the reconstruction of knowledge and attitudes through interaction, raises the hypothesis that this could also be a "game strategy" adopted by these participants, in which they assume a character and simulate their opinions with the aim of generating controversy and provoking peers.

On the other hand, the analysis revealed that some responses brought explicit violent content - such as:

It's good for you to have a crooked penis [because] it's better to hurt women! (M1)

I would bang the young chicks. (M4)

These were not commented or evaluated by other players until the end date of the analysis of this phase of the research. This aspect raises the question whether this "silence" of the players in relation to such attitudes would be the naturalization and acceptance of the violence or would not reflect a high degree of discomfort and refusal to these opinions or positions.

Study limitations

The limitations of this study are that the results allow for a short period of time, only in a school. In addition, adolescents accessed the game at a time when there were few subjects registered using the device, which may have compromised the interaction between players and their evolution in the game. Another limiting factor was that, although the game allowed the interpretation of the questions from homosexual relations, in this group of players, this result was not detected, making it impossible to

analyze IPV in relationships between adolescents of the same sex. In future game application studies, it is estimated the interaction between heterogeneous groups, coming from different scenarios and over a longer period of time.

Contributions to the health area

From the analysis presented, it was found that the game Papo Reto - as a playful device - brings as a possibility the capture of themes that can translate needs, vulnerabilities and also potential of attrition and strengthening of adolescents' reality, above all, in intimacy relations. Positioning against violence and the recognition of sexual rights have appeared as potentialities in the discourses of adolescents and can mean the possibility of transformation, since these discourses are shared in the game by interaction with the peers, mobilizing the construction of knowledge in this theme.

The vulnerabilities that emerge from the analysis of the discourses reveal the needs of interventions in this field, mainly related to the knowledge regarding the determination of the violence. These interventions should allow for the overcoming of ideological understandings that naturalize violence or blame the victims, as well as the recognition of violence and its different forms of manifestation and possibilities of confrontation.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The discursive content produced by comments from teens who used the online game Papo Reto revealed positions on VPI. They evidenced contradictory perceptions regarding the phenomenon, since they corroborated gender stereotypes, at the same time that they manifested attitudes and behaviors that can allow the overcoming of the problem and the right to autonomy.

Although the discourses point to possibilities of overcoming, the results show the need to problematize the theme from the perspective of gender, in order to promote reflection on the historical and social determination of the phenomena that determine IPV among adolescents. Despite the potential of using the game to allow the construction of knowledge and transformation of attitudes, it is understood that the diversity of perceptions of the adolescents on the subject of IPV and the perpetuation of characteristics that demonstrate their naturalization point to the need to interventions that, together with the use of the game, can promote the experience of sexuality in a non-violent way.

The understanding of the IPV of adolescents demands the articulation of the alchemized social categories. In order to address this problem, the social insertion of this group and the power relations established by the gender inequalities that are transmitted, experienced and naturalized by this generation, should be privileged, which determine different potentialities and vulnerabilities in the experience of healthy and violence-free relationships.

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