social sciences

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Dating Conflict-Resolution Tactics and Exposure to Family Violence: University Students' Experiences

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Abstract: An increasing prevalence of abusive dynamics in intimate relationships among young people has been reported in recent data. The purposes of this study are to outline the conflict-resolution strategies used in dating relationships, to describe the exposure to violent dynamics in the family of origin, and to analyse the correlation between conflict-resolution tactics in dating and exposure to family violence. This quantitative/cross-sectional study, using self-report instruments (sociodemographic questionnaire; revised conflict tactics scales; children's natural family environment signalling scale), involved 247 university students (mean age = 21.07; SD = 2.07). The results revealed a high prevalence in the use of abusive conflict-resolution tactics and exposure to family violence. Positive and significant correlations between these two variables were also found. These results raise the possibility of the transgenerational transmission of abusive dynamics and multiple victimisation and signal the need for action (prevention and intervention) on beliefs and expectations that young people have about marital relationships.

Keywords: abusive dynamics; conflict-resolution tactics; exposure to family violence; dating; university students; multiple victimisation

Citation: Portugal, Alda, Sónia Caridade, Ana Sofia Santos, Joana Spínola, and Ana Sani. 2023. Dating Conflict-Resolution Tactics and Exposure to Family Violence: University Students' Experiences. *Social Sciences* 12: 209. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12040209

Academic Editor: Nigel Parton

Received: 17 January 2023
Revised: 2 March 2023
Accepted: 30 March 2023
Published: 4 April 2023

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1. Introduction

According to Hattery and Smith (2019, p. 11), "intimate partner violence refers to the physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse that takes place between intimate partners." The abuse causes harm and involves diverse forms of control over the victim (there can be acts of physical aggression, psychological and sexual violence, and other forms), sometimes leading to homicide (Hattery and Smith 2019). Violence between intimate partners is a global public health problem (Dahlberg and Krug 2002) that cuts across different countries, socioeconomic classes, and cultures (Hattery and Smith 2019).

Among the various intimate contexts in which violent or abusive interactions can occur, dating in early adulthood stands out. This lifetime period is described by some authors as an early and initial stage of family development (Ségrin and Flora 2011). During the dating phase, partners engage in an emotional and affective relationship to experience and rehearse the first interpersonal relationship of intimacy (Palumbo 2017; Ségrin and Flora 2011). Statistical (Neves et al. 2020; UMAR 2021) and empirical (Courtain and Glowacz 2021; Kütük et al. 2018; Oliveira and Sani 2016; Oliveira et al. 2012; Santos et al. 2019) data indicate an increasing and alarming prevalence of this phenomenon among young people. A recent study conducted by UMAR (2021) found that 67% of young adults tend to legitimise some forms of intimate partner violence, and 58% of them reported having already suffered some kind of violent behaviour (psychological violence is the most-often reported). At the legal level, intimate partner violence in dating relationships is a type of domestic violence,

described by the perpetration of acts of physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual violence between two individuals who maintain, or have maintained, a dating relationship, regardless of age, gender, and cohabitation (Decree-Law nº 16/2018 2018).

Gender differences in intimate partner violence arise in several studies. For example, the study conducted by Erdem and Sahin (2017) with university students revealed that men tend to demonstrate a more legitimising attitude to physical and psychological violence when it is perpetrated by men and to physical violence when it is exerted by women, compared with the group of female participants. Other studies (Baker and Carreño 2016; Carlo et al. 1999; Dardis et al. 2017; Oliveira et al. 2012) also found that women tend to be less physically aggressive compared to men. However, some studies (McAuslan et al. 2018; Straus and Gozjolko 2014) suggest that gender is an insufficient explanation for intimate partner violence by itself. Straus and Gozjolko (2014) found that the "intimate terrorism" (that is, a pattern of violence aimed at total control over the other (Johnson 2006)) exists in a similar percentage in both men and women, reinforcing a dyadic dimension regarding violence. When one of the partners is classified as an "intimate terrorist," there is a statistically significant tendency for the other person to adopt this relational style (Straus and Gozjolko 2014). Carlo et al. (1999) considers that parental practices used by the participants' parents are a key variable to understand this result. Indeed, higher levels of perceived parental involvement are associated with lower levels of physical aggression, where women score higher than men on parental involvement (Carlo et al. 1999).

Dating is really a test tube for the development of mature and romantic relationships in the future (Manning et al. 2011). For that reason, the type of strategies that young couples use to manage their conflicts may underlie abusive dynamics, particularly when these strategies are violent, i.e., have the intention of causing harm (physical, emotional, or sexual) to the other (Straus and Gelles 1990). Some evidence suggests that the use of violent strategies of conflict resolution are linked to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Navarro et al. 2022). ACEs refers to one's exposure to frequent and prolonged adversities during childhood, such as physical and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, and having family members who have substance use problems, among others (Felitti et al. 1998). ACEs seem to be a common pathway for risky behaviour, violence, or revictimisation and, thus, may be associated with the victimisation and perpetration of intimate partner violence in dating relationships not only in adolescence but also in adulthood (Navarro et al. 2022).

The family of origin plays a crucial role in shaping young people's perceptions of intimate relationships. The family context may also act as a driving force for the use of abusive strategies in intimate relationships (Calvete et al. 2018; Faias et al. 2016; Oliveira and Sani 2016; Tussey et al. 2018). Faias et al. (2016) found that there was a positive and significant correlation between the use of abusive conflict-resolution strategies in dating relationships and exposure to violence in the family context in a sample of university students. More specifically, the authors found that about 81% of the sample claimed to have witnessed or been a victim of some form of violence in the family context. The use of abusive strategies of a psychological nature in intimate relationships seems to be statistically related to the perception of being a (direct or indirect) victim of emotional abuse and control in the family context. Authors have also found that the use of physical assault without injury in dating relationship seems to be statistically related to the perception that there is emotional violence, coercion, and control in the family environment. In addition, on the level of victimisation, young people who perceive themselves to be victims of physical abuse without injury in their dating relationships tend to perceive the existence of emotional abuse, coercion, and control in their family of origin; victimisation by sexual coercion is associated with coercion and control in the family context; and being a victim of physical abuse with injury is associated, in a statistically significant way, with physical abuse and control within the family. Being a victim in a family context seems to predispose that victim to multiple victimisations throughout life (Sani et al. 2021; Sani et al. 2020; Sani and Lopes 2019). Tussey et al. (2018) suggested that the perpetration of violence

tends to be associated with other factors, such as physical abuse experienced in the family context during childhood. Likewise, having been exposed to child maltreatment and family violence and being in a psychologically abusive relationship are strongly linked with later alcohol use (Grest et al. 2022). These findings make evident the continuance of conflict tactics, from the family of origin, in first relationships and/or committed relationships. It additionally sheds light on the emergence and maintenance of the violent strategies of conflict resolution during dating (Calvete et al. 2018; Oliveira et al. 2012).

Given all these clues, the present study proposes to describe abusive dynamics in dating relationships and the perception of current exposure to family violence among university students from the Autonomous Region of Madeira (a Portuguese island). It is crucial to trace the numbers associated with violence in intimate relationships, and although there are data on the prevalence of violence that occurs specifically in the context of dating in Portugal (UMAR 2021), there is a lack of information on the occurrence of this phenomenon in the intimate relationships of the young people of the Autonomous Region of Madeira. This research becomes even more relevant if one considers that Madeira is one of the regions of the country with the highest incidence of domestic violence. According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs Office (SGMAI 2022), Madeira recorded an incidence rate of domestic violence of 3.2 per thousand inhabitants. Because the literature shows that domestic violence in the family of origin is a risk factor for intimate partner violence in dating relationships, it is vital to understand this association in a context with a critical index of domestic violence. In addition to this, a great contribution of this study is to highlight the severity of the strategies used in conflict resolution.

The purposes of the present study are (a) to outline the conflict-resolution strategies used in dating relationships, (b) to describe the exposure to violent dynamics in the family of origin, and (c) to analyse the correlation between the conflict-resolution strategies in dating and exposure to family violence.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Procedure

The sample was collected under a cooperation protocol established between the University of Madeira (UMa) and the Social Security Services of Madeira (ISSM, IP-RAM), in order to raise awareness among university students of the problem of violence in dating. More specifically, the sample collection involved the following steps: the collaboration protocol was established within the partnership between UMa and ISSM, IP-RAM; several UMa course directors were contacted to obtain authorisation for the survey to be applied at a time during class and then to give a brief explanation and reflection on the issue of dating violence; the sessions were scheduled (students of nursing, psychology, physical education, communication, culture and organisations, education sciences, basic education, and computer engineering took part in the study); within the context of the classroom, students were asked to collaborate in filling out the survey before the awareness-raising action in order to reduce any effect that the information on the subject could have on participants' attitudes; after obtaining informed consent, that is, after clarifying the aims of the investigation and ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the data (in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments), participants completed the survey within an approximate timeframe of 25 min. Thus, data collection was performed through a convenience-sampling process using the snowball technique (Coutinho 2013).

Three inclusion criteria were defined: (a) participants should be between 18 and 30 years old, (b) participants have been in at least one dating relationship (participants should respond to the survey by referring to their current relationship, or if they did not currently have a partner, they should refer to a past relationship), and (c) participants must not be married.

2.2. Measures

The research survey was composed of three questionnaires: a sociodemographic data sheet, with the purpose of collecting information on age, gender, educational background, and relational status, among others; the revised conflict tactics scales (CTS2; Straus et al. 1996; Portuguese version: Paiva and Figueiredo 2006); and escala de sinalização do ambiente familiar infantil (children's natural family environment signalling scale) (Sani 2007).

The CTS2 contains 39 items grouped into pairs of questions addressed to the participant as a victim (victimisation perspective; e.g., "My boyfriend screamed at me") and as a perpetrator (perpetration perspective; e.g., "I screamed at my boyfriend"), amounting to 78 questions. It evaluates the existence of four abusive strategies of conflict resolution: psychological aggression (verbal and nonverbal acts likely to hurt the other; e.g., "I insulted my girlfriend"), physical assault without injury (use of physical force against another person without resulting in physical harm; e.g., "I pushed or squeezed my boyfriend"), physical assault with injury (differs from the previous dimension by the physical consequences that result from the inflicted abuse and usually signalled by the presence of continuous pain for more than one day, bone or tissue injury that requires or has been the subject of medical care; e.g., "I went to see a doctor because of a fight with my girlfriend"), and sexual coercion (forcing the partner to engage in unwanted sexual activity; e.g., "I forced my girlfriend to have sex without using a condom"). The CTS2 also assesses the existence of negotiation as a conflict-resolution strategy (i.e., an attempt to resolve a dispute supported by rational and respectful arguments from the other's point of view; e.g., "I showed respect for the feelings of my boyfriend"). This instrument makes it possible to identify the number of occurrences of each of the conflict tactics in the previous year, including eight categories of response, the first six of which were designed to determine the prevalence and chronicity over the past year ([1] 1 time in the previous year, [2] 2 times in the previous year, [3] 3–5 times in the previous year, [4] 6–10 times in the previous year, [5] 11–20 times in the previous year, and [6] more than 20 times in the previous year), and the remaining categories were designed to determine the overall prevalence ([7] not in the previous year but occurred previously) and the absence of this type of abuse ([8] never happened). The CTS2 also provides information about the severity of intimate partner violence: abusive strategies of a slight nature (e.g., "I insisted on having sex when my partner didn't want to [but I didn't use force]") and abusive strategies of a severe nature (e.g., "I used threats to get my partner to have sex with me").

In the original study of the CTS2 adapted to the Portuguese population, the internal consistency of the scale obtained a $\alpha = 0.80$ for the total victimisation scale and of $\alpha = 0.79$ for the total perpetration scale. In the present study, the values of α were, respectively, 0.74 and 0.73.

The SANI scale aims to determine the existence of situations of victimisation and/or exposure to violence in the family context from the respondent's point of view. It consists of 30 items distributed along four dimensions: physical violence (actions that may result in physical harm to the victim; e.g., "punching or kicking someone"), emotional violence (a set of emotional acts intended to cause psychological harm to the other, affecting them mainly at the emotional level; e.g., "telling scary things to someone"), coercion (behaviours aimed at controlling the other through repressive actions; e.g., "chasing out of the house"), and control (a set of behaviours aimed at exerting influence over the other person, though with a lesser degree of coercion than the behaviours assessed by the dimension previously described; e.g., "not giving money for household costs"). It is a 5-point Likert scale ([0] never/not once, [1] 2 or 3 times in that year, [2] sometimes or more than 2 or 3 times in that year, [3] often or about once a month, and [4] almost always or more than once a month). In the original version of the SANI scale, the scale achieved good consistency, obtaining an α for the total scale of 0.92. In the present study, the value of α was 0.89.

3. Results

3.1. Description of the Conflict-Resolution Strategies Used in Dating Relationships

The sample consisted of 246 university students living in Madeira Island, 70.3% (*n* = 173) were female and 29.7% (*n* = 73) were male, aged between 18 and 27 years (M = 21.07, SD = 2.07). All participants attended higher education; more specifically, 85% (*n* = 209) were working towards an undergraduate degree and 15% (*n* = 37) were working towards a master's degree. In terms of relational situations, most participants (i.e., 65.4% [*n* = 161]) reported being currently in a dating relationship, as opposed to 34.6% (*n* = 85) who were single (but have already had in a relationship). The length of the relationship ranged from 1 month to 11 years (in months: M = 36.16, SD = 28.53), with the most frequent length of the relationship in the sample being 2 years of dating.

In order to describe the prevalence of the intimate abuse of the participants in terms of perpetration and victimisation, all participants who reported to currently be in a relationship or to have been in one in the past (*n* = 246) were included (all participants who answered "I've never been in a dating relationship" were excluded from the sample). Thus, 79.7% of the participants reported having experienced some kind of intimate abuse, and a similar percentage (79.3%) admitted to having perpetrated some kind of abuse towards their intimate partner. Additionally, it was found that 79.7% stated that their partner had already tried to negotiate the conflicts at least once in the previous year, while 20.3% stated that their partner had never used strategies based on negotiation. Regarding the participant's own perspective on the use of negotiation strategies, it was found that 81.3% reported having used negotiation at least once in the previous year, and 18.7% reported never having used this conflict-resolution tactic.

According to an analysis of the different types of intimate violence, obtained from the CTS2, and with regard to the perpetration of violence, the majority of the participants reported having perpetrated psychological aggression (74%) in their dating relationships. Thereafter, sexual coercion (30.1%) and physical assault without injury (26.4%) were identified as the most commonly reported abusive typologies by participants in the context of their intimate relationships. Physical assault with injury (4.9%) emerged as the least admitted typology by the participants. This differentiation was also found in the victimisation indicator, where the participants admitted to experiencing psychological aggression in a more predominant way (71.1%), followed by sexual coercion (33.7%) and also physical assault without injury (25.6%). The type of intimate abuse least experienced by the participants was physical assault with injury (4.9%).

Regarding the level of severity of the negative tactics of conflict resolution, there was an increased use of strategies considered slight (51.2% reported having used at least one abusive strategy of a slight nature and all participants reported having already been the victim of at least one of these strategies) compared with the severe ones (perpetration: 4.9%; victimisation: 26.4%). With the exception of two dimensions (physical abuse with injury—perpetration; sexual coercion—victimisation), the percentage differences in favour of using slight strategies were statistically significant (cf. Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies and statistical differences between slight and severe conflict-resolution tactics (CTS-2-R).

	Typology of Abusive Conflict-Resolution Tactics	Level of Severity		χ^2	p-Value
		Slight (%)	Severe (%)		
Perpetration	Psychological Aggression	67.5	26.8	14.658 *	0.000
	Sexual Coercion	29.7	2.8	10.842 *	0.001
	Physical Assault without Injury	23.6	6.5	10.139 *	0.001
	Physical Assault with Injury	4.1	0.8	0.085	0.770
Victimisation	Psychological Aggression	71.5	30.1	21.523 *	0.000
	Sexual Coercion	30.9	5.3	1.497	0.221
	Physical Assault without Injury	22	7.7	11.313 *	0.01
	Physical Assault with Injury	3.3	2	4.550 *	0.033

Note: * $p < 0.050$.

The relationship between the prevalence of intimate abuse and the gender of the participants was then verified (cf Table 2). Only in the psychological aggression indicator were statistically significant differences observed in terms of gender ($\chi^2 = 6.177$, $p = 0.013$); men have reported to be more often victims of psychological aggression (82.2%) than women (66.5%). For the remaining typologies of perpetrated and suffered intimate abuse, no statistically relevant differences were detected.

Table 2. Association between typology of abusive conflict-resolution tactics (CTS-2-R) and Participant Sex.

	Typology of Abusive Conflict-Resolution Tactics	Sex		χ^2	p-Value
		Female (%)	Male (%)		
Perpetration	Psychological Aggression	74.6	72.6	0.103	0.748
	Sexual Coercion	27.7	35.6	1.512	0.219
	Physical Assault without Injury	27.7	23.3	0.525	0.469
	Physical Assault with Injury	4	6.8	0.869	0.351
Victimisation	Psychological Aggression	66.5	82.2	6.177 *	0.013
	Sexual Coercion	22.4	15.8	0.632	0.427
	Physical Assault without Injury	26	24.7	0.049	0.824
	Physical Assault with Injury	4.6	5.5	0.081	0.776

Note: * $p < 0.050$.

3.2. Description of the Exposure to Violent Dynamics in the Family of Origin

Regarding the direct or indirect abusive experiences that occurred in the family context, it was found that a considerable percentage of the sample (80.1%) has already witnessed or been the victim of some kind of violence in the family context. Control (73.2%) was identified as the most present in the participants' family context, followed by emotional violence (68.3%), physical abuse (38.2%), and coercion (31.3%).

In terms of the possible association between the gender of the participants and the typologies of exposure to family violence, no statistically significant correlation was detected in the different abusive typologies that were measured (physical abuse: $\chi^2 = 0.366$, $p = 0.545$; emotional abuse: $\chi^2 = 1.336$, $p = 0.248$; coercion: $\chi^2 = 0.736$, $p = 0.391$; control: $\chi^2 = 0.034$, $p = 0.854$) and the total score of the instrument ($\chi^2 = 0.100$, $p = 0.752$).

3.3. Association between Conflict-Resolution Tactics in Dating and Exposure to Family Violence

Statistically significant associations were detected between the total result of the SANI instrument and the indicators of the victimisation ($\chi^2 = 6.832$, $p = 0.009$) and perpetration ($\chi^2 = 7.295$, $p = 0.007$) of intimate abuse provided by the CTS2, as well as other correlations with statistical significance between some of the typologies measured by the mentioned instruments (cf Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations between typology of abusive conflict-resolution tactics (CTS-2-R) and exposure/victimisation in family context (SANI).

	Victimisation				Perpetration			
	Physical Assault without Injury	**Physical Assault with Injury**	**Psych. Aggression**	**Sexual Coercion**	**Physical Assault without Injury**	**Physical Assault with Injury**	**Psych. Aggression**	**Sexual Coercion**
Physical Violence	1.394	0.743	5.543 *	0.039	0.298	0.127	2.662	0.006
Emotional Violence	0.000	0.015	2.754	1.565	0.250	1.949	7.395 **	1.778
Coercion	6.804 **	4.287 *	7.833 **	3.065	3.109	2.051	8.103 **	2.103
Control	0.916	2.198	8.081 **	0.001	3.151	0.664	8.387 **	2.319
Total SANI	0.632	1.025	8.239 **	6.098 *	1.681	0.069	12.018 **	5.189 *

Note: * $p < 0.050$; ** $p < 0.001$.

As a result, the coercion measured by the SANI instrument was the abusive typology that revealed more statistically significant associations with some victimisation indicators extracted from the CTS2, which more specifically proved to be correlated with the physical assault without injury ($\chi^2 = 6.804$, $p = 0.009$), the physical assault with injury ($\chi^2 = 4.287$, $p = 0.038$) and with psychological aggression ($\chi^2 = 7.833$, $p = 0.004$). Physical violence and control (SANI) also revealed a statistically significant association with the CTS2 victimisation by psychological aggression ($\chi^2 = 3.544$, $p = 0.059$; $\chi^2 = 8.081$, $p = 0.004$, respectively). The totality of the SANI instrument has also demonstrated a correlation between the victimisation indicator and the coercion indicator of the CTS2 ($\chi^2 = 6.098$, $p = 0.014$).

Regarding the CTS2 perpetration indicators, psychological aggression emerged as the typology of intimate abuse that revealed the most statistically significant associations with the types of abuse measured by the SANI, namely with emotional violence ($\chi^2 = 7.395$, $p = 0.007$), coercion ($\chi^2 = 8.103$, $p = 0.005$), control ($\chi^2 = 8.387$, $p = 0.004$), and total SANI ($\chi^2 = 12.018$, $p = 0.001$). The total of the instrument that assesses victimisation in a family context (SANI) presented another statistically significant correlation with sexual coercion ($\chi^2 = 5.189$, $p = 0.023$) (cf Table 3).

4. Discussion

Given the statistical and empirical data that reveal an increase in the prevalence of intimate partner violence in dating relationships among the youngest groups (Caridade and Barros 2018; Faias et al. 2016; Kütük et al. 2018; Neves et al. 2020; Santos et al. 2019; UMAR 2021), the present study aims at contributing to deepening knowledge about this subject, particularly in a geographical context in which the incidence of domestic violence is one of the highest in the country (SGMAI 2022). Given the role of family dynamics in intimate partner violence, this study also analysed the relationship between conflict-resolution tactics in dating relationships and exposure to family violence.

The characterisation of the prevalence of conflict-resolution tactics in dating relationships, as well as exposure to violence in the family of origin, revealed alarming results in the present study. Although the strategies focused on negotiation were experienced by all participants, they did not seem to be sufficient to prevent the use of abusive strategies. Thus, approximately 80% of the participants admitted having already been victims and also perpetrators of some of the abusive strategies evaluated by the CTS2 and having witnessed abusive behaviours in the family context. Because these results are in line with previous empirical evidence (Faias et al. 2016), it becomes urgent to identify the factors that promote and maintain abusive behaviour among young adults. One may identify two reasons to understand this high prevalence, namely young people's beliefs about conflict-resolution tactics and the influence of family on the option to use these strategies. This result highlights a connection between being a victim as a child in a family context and being a victim as a partner in future love relationships. The phenomenon of multiple victimisation is a real concern (Sani et al. 2020, 2021; Sani and Lopes 2019). The positive cor-

relation between the total on the SANI scale (exposure to family violence) and the subscales of psychological aggression and sexual coercion, both in victimisation and in perpetration, could also constitute evidence of multiple victimisation and the transgenerational cycle of violence (Mosena and Bossi 2022; Sani et al. 2021; Tussey et al. 2018). This means that the more one is exposed to family violence, the more one may incur or engage in abusive behaviours, as victim and/or as perpetrator.

The CTS2 instrument allows us to differentiate between the abusive conflict-resolution tactics of a slight nature (e.g., "I insisted on having sex when my partner didn't want to [but I didn't use force]") and those of a severe nature (e.g., "I used threats to get my partner to have sex with me") (Straus et al. 1996; Paiva and Figueiredo 2006). In the present study, it was found that slight severity strategies are used mainly to perpetrate abuse in intimate relationships, compared with more-severe strategies. In this regard, the study conducted by UMAR (2021) indicates that there is a very high percentage of young people who validate and normalise abusive behaviour in dating relationships (e.g., controlling the partner's mobile phones and having access to their email passwords). This trivialisation can be the basis for the promotion and maintenance of abusive behaviours among young adults. Thus, the more that abusive behaviours are normalised, the greater the belief that they are valid for resolving conflicts in intimate relationships (Willie et al. 2018). Dardis et al. (2017) revealed that men consider the CTS2 items to be less abusive compared to women, while the study by Erdem and Sahin (2017) suggested that women devalue psychological violence when it occurs, compared with men. These data point to the importance of cultural stereotypes about gender roles and the self-referential information and beliefs that come from those stereotypes.

On the other hand, the fact that about 80% of the participants in this sample have already witnessed, directly or indirectly, violence in their family context may also explain the high prevalence of abusive behaviour in dating relationships, primarily because the family is the first context of socialisation (Grusec 2011; Ségrin and Flora 2011). If the family resorts to a pattern of communication and problem-solving backed by violence, these strategies are more likely to be carried over into interpersonal relationships established outside the family (Tussey et al. 2018). In fact, in the present sample, there seem to be statistically significant relationships between the two analysed variables (CTS2 and SANI), similar to what had previously been verified in the study conducted by Faias et al. (2016). More recently, Calvete et al. (2018) more precisely verified that witnessing abuse in the family context predicts the increase in victimisation in dating relationships over time, where this relationship is mediated by maladaptive cognitive schemas only for the women. The same study also revealed that being a victim of violence in the family context tends to predict victimisation in dating, without mediation of cognitive schemas. The high percentage observed in the present study can also be understood if one considers the fact that the Autonomous Region of Madeira is the geographical region of the country with the second-highest incidence of domestic violence. Importantly, the subdimensions of the CTS2 and the SANI also reveal positive statistically significant associations: coercion (SANI) and physical assault without injury and psychological aggression (subscales of victimisation of the CT2). These associations prove, at a more specific level, that there is a strong relationship between exposure to family abuse and the use of abusive conflict-resolution tactics in dating relationships, and that is why we choose not to discuss it further.

Psychological aggression is highlighted in this study, both as a conflict-resolution tactic mostly used by young people, as the most prevalent form of abuse in their family context. Oliveira and Sani (2016) and Sabina et al. (2016) found that, in fact, psychological aggression tends to be one of the most frequent forms of abuse in dating relationships. According to Straus and Gelles (1990), this form of abuse involves the use of verbal (threats) and nonverbal (symbolic) acts that may harm the other. Krishnakumar et al. (2018) reveal that psychological violence is transversal to all other forms of abuse, being at the base of the escalation of violence. It is, thereby, suggested that the high percentage of psychological abuse in the present sample could have a cumulative effect in relation to other forms of

aggression. That is, participants who perceive themselves to be victims or perpetrators of sexual coercion and physical aggression, with and without injury, will also identify themselves as victims or perpetrators of psychological aggression. Although these tactics are mainly of slight gravity, this result constitutes a potential risk factor because dating relationships are considered to represent the first attempts at intimate adult interpersonal relationships (Palumbo 2017).

In relation to gender differences, a statistically significant difference was found in psychological aggression in favour of the victimisation of men; that is, young men tend to perceive themselves as being more victims of psychological aggression than women do. These data, although surprising, are convergent with the idea that the manifestation of abuse in intimate relationships tends to be bidirectional; therefore, it is not an issue of gender (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012; Straus and Gozjolko 2014). According to Ségrin and Flora (2011), this bidirectionality is explained by the fact that relational violence is a form of expressing maladaptive communication patterns that naturally involve both elements of the relationship in the escalation of abuse. Furthermore, the fact that men stand out as victims on this dimension, compared with women, may be related to the nature of the abusive strategy itself. Some studies (e.g., Straus and Gozjolko 2014) suggest that men tend to be more physically violent (something that also occurs in the present sample, in the dimension "physical abuse with injury," although without statistical relevance) compared with women; on the other hand, women tend to resort mainly to coercive and controlling behaviours, which are forms of psychological abuse. Another relevant aspect to understand this result is that several studies (e.g., Erdem and Sahin 2017) demonstrate that young men legitimise to a greater extent the behaviours associated with psychological aggression. This standardisation could make them more likely to become victims of such behaviours because they do not recognise them as typically abusive conducts. Nevertheless, the results of studies on gender differences appear to be inconsistent. Sabina et al. (2016) conducted a characterisation of violence in dating with Latin American adolescents at two time periods. The results indicate a high percentage of men who, at first, perceive themselves as being more victims in their dating relationships than women; however, this incidence is no longer reported at the second time period of the study. Therefore, the lack of consistency over time about young people's perception of their potential victimisation in a dating relationship requires that this result in the present study be taken with caution.

Despite the contribution of this study to the literature, it is important to consider some methodological limitations. One of them is related to the context in which the questionnaires were filled in. The fact that participants fill in the survey in a classroom and together may have influenced their responses towards social desirability, registering higher values with regard to physical abuse with and without injury and a high prevalence in terms of negotiation strategies. As Dardis et al. (2017) avers, studies involving sensitive variables, such as interpersonal abusive dynamics, tend to be highly susceptible to social desirability, which is why the context in which the instruments were applied may have amplified this effect. We may hypothesise that some young adults prefer not to reveal everything about their intimate relationships (with relatives and lovers), especially in assuming behaviours related to the perpetration of physical assault with and without injuries. In this regard, a replication of the present study may consider this aspect and include a measure of social desirability. Another aspect to consider is the characteristics of the sample under study. Research has been conducted only with young people attending higher education, and it is essential to promote studies with nonuniversity populations, including an analysis of variables such as beliefs or mental schemas about abuse in intimate relationships. Additionally, future studies should aim for a more-balanced sample in terms of the gender variable by including more young men. We did not ask participants about the typology of their relationship (e.g., homosexual, heterosexual, open consensual relationship), and this might be a limitation because it does not contribute to clarify the nature of the intimate partner relationships explored in the present study. Future research must describe intimate partner violence in different intimate arrangements. In addition

to the sample limitations, the results of the present study should be carefully analysed because of the measure used to explore intimate partner violence, the CTS2 (Straus et al. 1996; Portuguese version: Paiva and Figueiredo 2006). Despite the fact that the CTS2 resulted from a revision of the CTS (Straus 1979), some authors have highlighted some limitations of this measure: (a) difficulties in comparing the CTS2 scores across samples, cultures, and countries and (b) its limited use in clinical settings (Jones et al. 2017). In future studies, the use of the CTS2 to explore intimate partner violence should be combined with other sources of information (e.g., interviews, psychometric measures) (Jones et al. 2017). Finally, one of the major components of the current study was the exposure to violent dynamics in the family of origin; however, it was not possible to detail some characteristics of the participants' parents. Future studies should consider the collection of family of origin sociodemographic data to obtain a better understanding of the findings.

5. Conclusions

The present study reveals a high prevalence of the use of abusive tactics in conflict resolution in the intimate relationships of university students, corroborating the results of national and international research on this age group. Abusive strategies of slight severity are often used in conflict resolution, showing a tendency to perpetuate these practices in intimate contexts. Psychological aggression, widely standardised by young people, is associated with the most-abusive practices, which indicates the negative and cumulative effects on the overall adjustment of these individuals. The bidirectionality of violence is identified as a pattern present in young people's dating relationships, despite the differences found in victimisation, particularly psychological violence, which is more often pointed out by men. It also emerges from the family of origin and the experience of violence (as a victim or perpetrator) in dating relationships of young people, alerting us to the dangers of the intergenerational reproduction of violence in interpersonal relationships.

This study points out the necessity of preventive and multidimensional interventions. In fact, the abusive behaviours could happen just between two people, in a dyadic relationship, but this does not mean that it is not a community problem (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Wiehe 1998). It is therefore essential that agents, educators, and social and educational professionals (e.g., early childhood educators, teachers, psychologists, social assistants) help children and adolescents to think about concepts such as respect and freedom and how to distinguish valid behaviours from nonvalid behaviours in interpersonal relationships. In addition to this, it is fundamental to promote a general thought about the myths of intimate and dating relationships and to promote a change in dysfunctional beliefs about gender roles. Additionally, as the present study shows, children and adolescents need support to find alternatives and more-adjusted ways to resolve conflict. The development of psychoeducational programmes to be implemented in primary intervention contexts (e.g., schools, primary healthcare units) would be a relevant strategy to accomplish this need. Furthermore, working directly with families would be crucial because family is the first socialisation and learning context for children, thus conditioning the way children and youths socially relate to others. One of the clues that this study shows us is that dating violence is not just a matter of gender (given the percentage of men who reported having been victims of abusive conflict-resolution tactics). If we assume that abusive dynamics in intimate relationships can reflect multiple victimisation (exposure to family violence), as well as beliefs about couples' interactions, then future studies should seek to identify young adults' beliefs about and attitudes towards intimate relationships. Furthermore, is important to identify the protective factors of a healthy relationship, in addition to risk factors (such as exposure to family violence).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.P., S.C. and A.S..; methodology, A.P., J.S. and A.S.S.; formal analysis, A.P. and S.C.; investigation, A.P., J.S. and A.S.S..; writing—original draft preparation, A.P., S.C. and A.S.; writing—review and editing, A.P., S.C. and A.S.; supervision, A.P.; funding acquisition, S.C. and A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This study was partially conducted at the Psychology Research Centre (PSI/01662), School of Psychology, University of Minho, supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the Portuguese State Budget (Ref.: UIDB/PSI/01662/2020) and by Portuguese national funds through the FCT (Foundation for Science and Technology) within the framework of the CIEC (Research Center for Child Studies of the University of Minho) projects under the references UIDB/00317/2020 and UIDP/00317/2020.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Rector of the University of Madeira (Portugal). At the time we started this study, University of Madeira didn't have an ethical committee.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the nature of the data.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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