Problems during a romantic relationship: Conflict identification and resolution styles in heterosexual youth

(Problemas en el noviazgo: identificación de conflictos y estilos para la resolución en jóvenes heterosexuales)

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Abstract

A dating or romantic relationship is supposed to be the appropriate process for the parties involved in it to develop or increase their coexistence communication and problem-solving skills. The aim of this work was to describe the main problems that occur during a dating/romantic relationship as reported by young heterosexual couples, as well as to describe the different strategies used to solve such problems. Eighty young Mexican college students who were going through a heterosexual dating relationship participated in this study. A questionnaire was conducted accordingly which included 21 questions to be answered Yes and No, Likert type of questions and open questions. The results revealed that the main problems came directly from a lack of communication and problem-solving skills. The style to solve such conflicts in a current relationship is heavily avoidant (10.29% in men and 14.70% in women of a total of 68 students who chose to answer). It has been concluded that it is necessary to implement interventions based on evidence in these type of conflicts and with this population.

Key words: Dating relationship, Problem-solving, Communication, Social networks, Youth.

Resumen

El noviazgo supone un proceso idóneo para que los integrantes que lo conforman desarrollen o incrementen sus habilidades de convivencia, comunicación y solución de conflictos. El objetivo de este trabajo fue describir los principales problemas en el noviazgo reportados en parejas de jóvenes heterosexuales, así como, dar cuenta de los distintos estilos empleados para su resolución. Participaron 80 jóvenes mexicanos universitarios los cuales se encontraban en una relación de noviazgo heterosexual. Se aplicó un cuestionario elaborado ad hoc de 21 preguntas con modalidad de respuesta dicotómica, Likert y abiertas. Los resultados revelan que los principales problemas se relacionan con déficits en la comunicación y solución de problemas. El estilo para la resolución de conflictos en la relación actual que más se utiliza es el evitativo (10.29% de los hombres, 14.70% de las mujeres de un total de 68 alumnos que respondieron). Se concluye que es necesaria la implementación de intervenciones basadas en evidencia en este tipo de problemáticas y en esta población.

Palabras clave: Noviazgo, Solución de problemas, Comunicación, Redes sociales, Jóvenes.

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Introduction

Couple relationships are fundamental and contribute to the human biopsychological well-being (Guzmán & Araujo, 2015). For Rodríguez (2011) these relationships are a very important stage in the shaping of a life shared together by a couple because it is supposed to be a learning stage in order to relate to and connect with each other in a romantic, intímate and personal environment which also prepares people for future relationships, including in some cases, marriage. Likewise, Bonache, Ramírez-Santana and Gonzalez-Mendez (2016) point out that romantic relationships during adolescence and youth have repercussions in the individual development and well-being, as well as contributing to acquiring social skills. However, some problems are likely to appear in these romantic relationships, such as jealousy (Kennedy, 2018; Massar, Winters, Lenz & Jonason, 2016; Renata & Sánchez, 2008), bad communication (Williamson, Hanna, Lavner, Bradbury & Karney, 2013), infidelity (Emir, 2012; Frederick & Fales, 2016; Pérez, Ruíz & Parra, 2014) and in some cases, much more serious problems could happen such as violence in any of its different manifestations (Francis & Pearson, 2019; Méndez & García, 2015; Rubio-Garay, López-González, Carrasco & Amor, 2017; Zamora-Damián, Alvídrez, Aizpitarte & Rojas-Solís, 2018). Speaking specifically about couples communication, authors such as Nguyen, Karney and Bradbuy (2020) stay that this type of conflicts commonly underlie the communication skills of the parties involved in the relationship which at the same are added to factors such as poorly identifying the problem and the topic being discussed.

Other elements which contribute to problems appear in a dating/romantic relationship are the previous psychological issues in people who take part in such relationship and their previous experiences (Bonache et al., 2016; Whisman, Uebelacker & Weinstock, 2004). The individual factors that usually influence a couple's interaction are: disadaptive thoughts, feelings of confusión and distrust in the other part, frustration and insecurity, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, antisocial behavior and risky sexual practices (Villanueva, Aragón, Díaz & Reyes, 2012). Also, drastic changes in the diet (anorexia nervosa and bullimia) substance abuse (alcohol, marihuana, tobacco and others) and the appearance of violent behavior (Águila, Hernández & Hernández, 2016).

The conflicts during a dating or romantic relationship could very well be the result of the different ways to interpret the surroundings by each party involved, since they have learned to behave differently, according to multiple cultural, geographic factors, previous experiences and upbringing styles (Morales, 2016; Soto, 2015). In addition, rarely do young people receive any kind of "training" or professional counseling in order to cope with the conflicts in their relationships during their younger years. In some cases, learning is based on observation of the parents or tutors, that is, on the observation or identification of the stereotypes in their families or on the advice they are given within that context (Rodriguez 2011). The specialized support given in order to solve conflicts in a couple does not usually occur prior to marriage, but until later, once the couple have lived together for a while and, unfortunately, in some occasions, the type of therapy is not necessarily based on empirical evidence but merely on counseling (Ramirez, 2019).

On the other hand, the coping mechanism or attitude by the parties involved in the relationship turns out to be an interesting variable when it comes to solving conflicts. This variable is added to other aspects such as the topic in which the discussions are rooted and the previous and unsuccessful attempts at solving conflicts which in the end tend to make matters worse (Williamson et al., 2013). Along the same lines, and following up on the proposals made by Nezu, Nezu y D' Zurilla (2013) it is said that there are two fundamental factors which take part in a problem-solving process which could work successfully; the orientation of the problem (beliefs and attitudes towards everyday life conflicts) and the type of solution (the activities carried out in order to solve it, which could be rational. Impulsive or, in other cases, avoidant). Hence, the study of the conditions which cause the conflict during a dating or romantic relationship and the assessment of the individual capability to solve such conflict, becomes fundamental for creating intervention strategies (Labrador, 2015; Ramírez & Núñez, 2010).

The relevance of this topic is outstanding among young people since it's in this stage of their lives when the first romantic experiences take place. For example, The Center for Pyschological Attention from the University of Costa Rica found, from 2004 to 2013, that the conflicts in couples or families ranked first (Maroto, Molina & Prado, 2017). Colombia and its Center for Psychological Attention (CAP in Spanish) which belongs to the University of Manizales, reported that within their demographic, the conflicts of couples account for 23.7% of the cases among people of legal age and 7.3% in underage people (De la Portilla, Montoya, Dussán & López, 2016). In Chile, The Center for Psychological Attention from the University of Santiago reported that from 2002 to 2004 (last year registered) the conflicts of couples were the most notorious and dealt with (Loubat & Magaña, 2005). In Canada, the Counselling & Clinical Services web page (2020) from The University of Alberta mentions the conflicts of couples as one of the most common problems among their students. The USA is no exception, according to the Counselling & Psychological Services web page (2019) from The University of New Haven, conflicts in couples are reported as being one of the main reasons people seek counseling and one of the main reasons students seek urgent psychological attention.

In Mexico and according to the Psychological Attention Services webpage from the Facultad de Estudios Superiores Iztacala (FESI, 2019) the conflicts of couples are one of the main reasons people seek professional help at the

Clínica Universitaria de la Salud Integral (CUSI), as well as the psychological support phone line from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México reported that 40% of the calls were made by people who said they were experiencing conflict in their relationships (Alcocer, 2019).

This illustrates the frequency in which the university student demographic face this type of conflicts which could eventually have an impact on other areas of their lives. Therefore, it would be necessary to widen the studies concerning dating/romantic relationships and identify the main conflicts arising from these relationships, in order to make brief, successful intervention proposals adjusted to the needs of young, heterosexual couples (Williamson, Hammett, Ross, Karney, & Bradbury, 2018).

Based on the above-mentioned statements and information, the aim of the present article was to describe the main conflicts in dating/romantic relationships reported by young, heterosexual couples, as well as outlining the different conflict resolution styles used in this type of interpersonal relationships.

Method

This research was conducted based on a non-experimental, cross-section design with a descriptive scope (Ker-linger & Lee, 2002).

Participants

The sample for this study was made up by a total of 80 participants, out of which 40 were men and 40 were women. The participants came from the different on campus and online careers delivered as part of the FESI (psychology, nursing, biology, medicine, dentistry and optometry). The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 34 years of age (M= 18.71, DE= 3.54). In order to select the participants, the option was to conduct a per quota, non-probabilistic sampling due to the fact that the sample was chosen according to the characteristics of the research and the decisions made by the researchers, in addition to reaching a certain quota required to comply with such study (80 surveys). As for the criteria used to select the participants, some inclusion criteria were considered, such as being a student and being signed up on any of the careers offered in the FESI in any modality, and having an active, current heterosexual relationship. As for exclusion criteria, the following were considered: Being married or having been married or living or having lived as a couple, having children, being single (no boyfriend or girlfriend). As for elimination criteria, the following were considered: incomplete questionnaire answers and not giving serious answers (jokes, senseless words, sarcasm, etc.).

Instruments

A tailored-made questionnaire consisting of 21 open-ended and Yes / No questions, divided into seven areas:

Education prior to a dating or romantic relationship, only one question. In this category, the aim was to gather as much information as possible concerning the kind of education young people received from their parents or le-gal guardians related to dating or romantic relationships.

Dating/romantic relationships history, three questions. In this category, the aim was to gather as much information as possible concerning their dating/romantic relationships prior to beginning the current one (as well as the reasons behind the break-up).

Current relationship, five questions. In this category, the aim was to gather as much information as possible related to general details of their current relationships, exis-ting conflicts and how often these conflicts occur.

Attempts at solving conflicts in the current relationship, six questions. In this category, the aim was to gather infor-mation concerning individual criteria in order to conclude that a conflict had been solved, as well as the frequency with which they solved such conflicts, their support networ-ks and the type of help they requested when conflict arose. Likewise, information was gathered as to which life areas were affected due to such conflicts during their relations-hips.

Attempts at solving conflicts in relationships prior to the current one, five questions. In this category, the aim was to gather information regarding solution criteria they had when faced with conflicts during their past relationships, how often they were able to solve such conflicts and the support networks they had. Perception of individual responsibility towards dating/romantic relationships one question. In this category, the aim was to gather information concerning the existence of personal factors/issues which might have kept them from solving conflicts in their relationships.

Procedure

Once the paticipants agreed to answer the questions, it was made sure that all questions were actually answered; in case no answers were missing, the questionnaire was concluded and the participants were thanked for their par-ticipation. If there were answers missing, the participants were told to complete them. At the end of the question-naire, the data gathered were entered in Microsoft Excel based on standardization of categories and themes, some tables and charts were designed along with the statistical data and later the results were analyzed.

Results

Next is a description of the results in the Education prior to a dating/romantic relationship section in which it was noted that 82% of the people surveyed (men and women) received some kind of information prior to

beginning a relationship by their parents or legal guardians. The to-pics covered, according to this sample, were: violence, se-xuality and how to solve conflicts. As for the usefulness of such information, this sample indicated 60% for each of those topics.

In the Dating/Romantic relationship history, it was found that 32 male and 36 female participants reported ha-ving previous relationships, which accounts for 85% of the total sample. The reasons behind the break-up which were most mentioned were: jealousy (91%), infidelity (72.5%) and problems related to a lack of communication (57%)

It was interesting to find out that social networks and the communication through them stand as a dispositional factor when it comes to conflicts in a relationship, since participants answered things such as *"People would comment on her/his photographs with hearts and pickup phrases"*, or *"all her/his friends would react with hearts in her/his potos"*, *"she/he would post sexy pictures"*, *"she/he would tell me she/he was busy and would appear online all the time"*, *"every time we went out, he/she would always be on his/her phone chatting with friends"*, he would send *"nudes"* to another woman."

In the Conflicts in the current relationships the most common and frequent conflicts in the relationships were defined, as well as the frequency with which they occur in the current relationships. The results obtained can be seen in table 1.

In this section, once again social networks were men-tioned multiple times which suggests that the new techno-logies represent very intense means of interaction and are widely used, where conflicts of couples (jealousy, commu-nication, infidelity, etc.) are constantly expressed. Some of the examples mentioned above, such as *"He/She gets jealous because people like my pictures too much"*, *"we tease each other with messages, comments and friend re-*

Table 1
Main conflicts arising in a relationship, according to the participants

Conflicts in the current relationship (women)	*f*	N	LF	F	A	Conflicts in the current relationship (men)	*f*	N	LF	F	A
Jealousy	31	9	23	7	1	Jealousy	29	11	13	15	1
Communication	22	18	7	13	1	Social networks	18	22	6	9	3
Social networks	17	23	15	1	1	Distrust	16	24	10	5	1
My friends	11	29	8	3	-	Communication	15	25	10	5	-
His friends	11	29	8	2	1	Her Friends	14	26	10	4	-
Distrust	11	29	4	3	4	My Friends	12	28	6	6	-
False expectations	11	29	7	2	2	False expectations	8	32	6	2	-
My family	10	30	6	3	1	[a]Drug use by her	7	33	4	3	-
Violence	9	31	7	2	-	[a]My drug use	6	34	2	2	2
[a]Drug use by him	6	34	3	2	1	Infidelity	6	34	5	1	-
[a]My drug use	5	35	4	1	-	Her family	5	35	4	-	1
His family	4	36	3	-	1	Violence	4	36	3	1	-
Infidelity	3	37	3	-	-	My family	4	36	4	-	-
Others	1	39	-	1	-	Others	3	37	3	-	-

Note: Letter f stands for the frequency, letter "N" for Never happens, letters "LF" for Little frequent, letter "F" for Frequently and letter "A" for Always. The sub index[a] refers to consumption of addictive substances or harmful. The symbol – refers to the absence of data.

quests from certain people", *"He/she thinks I hit on someo-ne on Facebook and viceversa"*, *"sometimes he/she thinks I answer his/her messages on whatsapp angrily, but the truth is that he/she interprets that as if I were angry"*, *"we misinterpret comments or conversations on social networ-ks"*, *"he/she still keeps pictures with his/her ex."*

In the Attempts at solving the conflicts in the relations-hip the frequency with which the participants are able to solve their conflicts as a couple was identified, 43.75% of

the participants mentioned being able to solve them all the time, whereas 41.75% said they frequently could and finally 13.75% said they were able to solve conflicts a lot less frequently.

Likewise, the ideal expectation for the participants to solve their conflicts could be known, thus allowing to group their answers in categories, where the dominating category is the one related to Talk/Come to agreements (83.5%), others such as letting the situation go and spending time alone just got percentages no greater than 5%

Lastly, the personal criteria to realize that a conflict had not been or could not be solved were known and they included answers such as "we don't ever talk about the situation" (27.5%), "ignoring each other" /23.5%) and "we never come to any agreement" (15%), other answers such as "let's break up" (1.25%) or "there's always a solution" (7.5%) give way to knowing the type of strategy or style that young people use or implement to solve their problems.

When analyzing the textual reports from the participants related to the question What do you usually do when conflicts occur with your girlfriend/boyfriend? And What did you use to do when conflicts occurred in your previous relationships?, we could then identify the solution styles used based on reports and with the support of the answer standardization process, according to the categories proposed by Nezu y D, Zurilla (2013) as observed in table 2

Data related to the type of support and type of support source participants requested in order to solve their conflicts were identified, as can be observed in table 3.

As for the repercussions that conflicts have in other contexts, it was found that 59.18% of 49 participants who answered this question reported going through a rough patch at school (problems to concentrate and low academic performance), as observed in table 4.

In the final section of the questionnaire, there was an area called Perception of individual responsibility in the

Table 2
Problem-solving styles in the current relationship versus previous relationships according to Nezu and D'Zurilla (2013)

		f		Textual comments from the participants	
	Problem-solving style	M	F	Woman	Man
[a]Previous dating / romantic relationships	Avoidant	12	15	*"Talk to other people but not him."*	*"Let whatever had to happen, happen."*
	Impulsive	8	15	*"Cry, drink and smoke and partying."*	*"I'd take it on other people."*
	Rational	12	6	*"Talk about the situation and apologize if I made a mistake."*	*"Talk about things that bother us and talk it over."*
[a]Current dating / romantic relationships	Avoidant	7	10	*"I don't talk to or reply to him for some days."*	*"I generally avoid conflicts."*
	Impulsive	4	7	*"I'm impulsive and react the way I feel in that moment."*	*"I speak my mind regardless of who's present or where we are."*
	Rational	21	19	*"When we're upset, we wait for a while so as to not let ourselves get carried away, and then we talk."*	*"Talk things over, propose what we want from each other and come to agreements by negotiating."*

Note: Letters M and F refer to Female and Male, letter f refers to the frequency from participants. [a] The frequency of this table came from the 68 participants who mentioned having had dating/romantic relationships prior to the current one.

Table 3
Support resources when conflicts arise in the relationship

Variable	Category	f F	M	%
Support resources when conflict occur	They go to someone/something	22	6	35
	They don't go to anyone	18	34	65
aWho the participants go to and request support from	Friends	10	6	57.14
	Family	5	2	25
	Professionals	1	2	10.71
	Information sources	1	1	7.14
aType of support they request	Advice to solve conflicts	8	5	46.42
	Opinion/points of view	2	3	17.85
	To be Heard	2	2	14.28
	Coaching	-	1	3.57
	Psychological help	-	1	3.57

Note: Letters F and M refer to Male and Female, letter *f* refers to the frequency from the participants. ªThe basis to obtain the percentages of this variable were the 28 participants who mentioned having gone to someone when conflicts arose. The symbol – refers to absence of data.

Table 4
Repercussions/Impact of conflicts in the different life areas of the participants

Variable	Category	f F	M	%
Repercussion of the conflict in the life of the participants	It does affect	22	27	61.25
	Does not affect	18	13	38.75
aLife areas of the participants affected by conflicts arising in the relationship	School	14	15	59.18
	Self-esteem	7	14	42.85
	Social	10	12	44.89
	Temper	9	12	42.85
	Family	9	4	26.53
	Personal care	3	7	20.40
	Health	6	5	22.44
	Work	5	4	18.36
	Others	1	1	4.08

Note: Letters F and M refer to Female and Male, letter *f* refers to the frequency from participants. ªThe basis to obtain percentages of this variable were the 49 participants who mentioned having been affected in at least one area of their personal lives.

conflicts of a dating/romantic relationship, which explored those participants who were able to recognize something in themselves that kept them from solving conflicts in their relationships. According to the results, it can easily be mentioned that 60% of the people surveyed recognize some factor, whereas the remaining 40% cannot identify any. The factors recognized were grouped in two categories: the ones belonging to a lack of communicative skills, such as difficulty to express what's wanted or requested, accept mistakes and not be able to say no; and the category where lack of problem-solving or negotiation skills, such as temper (type of impulsive problem-solving style); and avoiding the situation (type of avoidant problem-solving style) and insecurity or jealousy.

Discussion

Based on the purpose of the present article, which was to find out the main issues or conflicts arising in a dating/romantic relationship, as reported by young, heterosexual couples, as well as to identify the different problem-solving styles used in these relationships, we can then conclude that the main issues or conflicts identified are jealousy, lack of communication or communication breakdown, distrust and social networks (understood as the use of information exchanged through these networks and the individual interpretations as a result of such exchange).

On the other hand, most participants commented that they used an avoidant or impulsive problem-solving style in their previous relationships, however, they reported a seemingly rational problem-solving style in their current relationships, which comes to support what is described by Bonache et al. (2016) and Rodríguez (2011) who suggest that the first dating/romantic relationships may have repercussions in the beliefs and behaviors of future relationships, however, they do not determine the way they are experienced, since the results obtained, at least in this sample, may be determined different factors such as: the value given to those relationships for the participants, the duration of such relationship or the problem-solving style they used with their former romantic partners, as opposed to their current partner.

The results suggest that in terms of communication and problem-solving, they do not originate directly from exclusive interaction difficulties, but from the skills that each member of those relationships have and develop at the same time they are engaged in a romantic relationship. Concerning this, Nguyen et al. (2020), Williamson et al. (2013) and Labrador (2015) emphatically suggest that the individual skills and their lack thereof is what truly boosts stability in a relationship or could eventually hamper it. Among the participants, it becomes evident the lack of problem-solving and assertive communication skills by looking at phrases such as: I find it very hard to express my wishes, to say no, and accept my own mistakes.

It becomes clear that this lack of skills leads to consequences and repercussions in the lives of the participants,

which pretty much confirms what Bonache et al (2016) say, since it is believed that dating/romantic relationships during adolescence and younger years have serious consequences in the academic area, personal (self-esteem) and the social category (friends, etc.). Bearing in mind that the sample of the present study was comprised by mainly a college demographic, the academic area, the social and personal categories could also end up being affected. Therefore, attention given to this kind of issues and this particular demographic es quite important to create intervention programs.

Retaking the proposal made by Ramírez y Núñez (2010) who consider that the study of variables which eventually lead to altercations or conflicts in these relationships, and the creation of strategies to intervene, based on first-hand evidence, would very well yield benefits for the individual and his/her future dating or romantic relationships. It could easily be said that the development of training programs for this type of relationships where marriage could or could not be the ultimate goal, prepares couples with the ability to identify early on the issues or conflicts that they could be facing in the near future, and as direct product of their interaction. Besides this, this type of programs could increase the chances of improving communication and help couples to feel less threatened by the very prospect of having to attend therapy sessions in the future. This study leaves the possibility open for future research to elaborate intervention or training proposals for acquiring skills which would allow couples to have a much better, more effective and functional interaction. It shouldn't be overlooked that there is a significant gap between the conflicts that occur during a romantic relationship and the ones that arise in other types of more formal relationships, such as marriage, however, training for these general situations would surely be quite useful for the younger demographic.

As for the search for support in order to solve conflicts in these relationships, it was very interesting to observe that women were the ones who requested it or the ones who have more support resources, since only 6 out of 40 men who took part in this study reported having requested support from third parties. It was also observed that most participants go to friends and family much more often and that the types of help they report having requested are mainly advice and opinions. For this reason, it would be advisable to know if this type of help received is efficient or not to solve conflicts.

As for the specialized support request, it was found that only two participants requested professional advice (the psychologist or coaching); this result may be hinting at two elements: 1) the importance not given to professional psychological support and the cultural preference for requesting advice from family and friends and 2) the type of therapies offered to the general public and which could not necessarily be about regulated practices based on empirical evidence of their efficiency. Just like Ramirez (2019) mentioned, requesting this type of therapies generate false

expectations in the patients and may end up being iatrogenic, but what is worse, they discredit the role of mental health professionals.

As for social networks, it is paramount to point out that for the authors of this research, the means are not harmful but the possible effects of interpretations, in the light of this interaction, and the possible cognitions or learnings derived from exchanging messages. Let us not forget that youth is the stage in life in which identity and personality solidify and experiences such as romantic relationships, breakups and emotional sequels are much more frequent and likely to occur. It would become relevant to study this stage much more deeply and to know the impact of the Information and Communication Technologies (TIC in Spanish) on romantic relationships, according to the characteristics and traits of each social network, apart from making innovative intervention proposals which involve the use of such technologies.

Some of the limitations of the present study have to do with the mechanisms for data recollection, for example, the use of Yes and No answers for some indicators, which resulted in the loss of valuable details from the same answer. For example: it was found that most parents provide such education, however, it was never known whether the information received was relevant, enough or even if the participants have ever faced such situation or not, in order to judge its usefulness. Another limiting factor was not interviewing both parties in a relationship; it would be interesting to conduct a study which digs deeply into matters concerning romantic relationships, taking into consideration the participation of both people involved in a relationship.

Even though authors such as Bonache et al. (2016); Águila et al. (2016); Villanueva et al. (2012); and Whisman et al. (2004) stress the fact that the psychological background of each member of a romantic relationship plays a crucial role in the success of this type of interactions, it was never asked due to the fact that the participants could probably refuse to answer such question and the use of personal information which is always difficult to share with a stranger (the interviewer). Accepting that there is a problem or issue is not always easy for some young people, and in that sense, it would be necessary to look for this kind of information in future studies.

Likewise, it would also be very important to include analysis of the following variables which were not considered, such as: the quality of their sexual life, satisfaction in the relationship, influence of religion, the socioeconomic status and its influence on the couples, age or academic level differences, as well as the variables of communication and problem-solving types in much more stressful situations (such as unplanned pregnancy, getting infected by a sexually transmitted disease, etc.). It would also be valuable to explore how these variables are configured during homosexual romantic relationships or in those where a member of the couple suffers from a chronic disease.

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