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## ADOLESCENT WITNESSES IN CASES OF TEEN DATING VIOLENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF PEER RESPONSES

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### Abstract

Gender violence is a serious problem that also affects the adolescent population (González & Santana, 2001). The victims of such violence in adolescence, should they seek help, rely primarily on their peers and rarely report it to adults (Weisz et al., 2007). The responses or reactions of avoidance, minimization or protection that their peers may have contribute to the victim maintaining or breaking the "unhealthy" relationship. An experimental study was designed to examine the reactions of adolescents in the event that they are witness to an episode of violence (verbal and physical aggression) towards a friend. The main objective was to analyze the differences in their reactions according to sex of the witness, familiarity with the perpetrator (stranger vs. a friend) and the relationship between aggressor and victim (a date, romantic partner.) An exploratory analysis of the influence of the witnesses' sexist beliefs (hostile and benevolent) on these reactions was also performed. Thus, more negative reactions were found (greater passivity and less empathy) among men in the case where the victim maintained a relationship with the offender than in the case of a date, especially if the perpetrator was a stranger. Also, in the girls more avoidance responses were found when the violent episode occurred between members of a couple on a date. Finally, the practical implications of the findings are discussed, highlighting the need to include guidelines in programs against gender violence among adolescents on how to behave if in relation to the victim when they are witnesses of gender violence.

**Keywords:** witnesses, gender violence, sexist beliefs, ambivalent sexism, male female relations.

### Resumen

La violencia de género constituye un serio problema que afecta también a la población adolescente (González & Santana, 2001). Las víctimas de este tipo de violencia en edad adolescente, en caso de buscar ayuda, recurren principalmente a sus iguales, y pocas veces informan de ello a los adultos (Weisz y cols., 2007). Las respuestas o reacciones que los iguales puedan tener, de evitación, protectoras o de minimización, contribuyen a que la víctima se mantenga o rompa con la relación "no saludable". En un estudio experimental se examinaron las reacciones de los adolescentes en el caso de que fuesen testigos de un episodio de violencia de género (agresión verbal y física) hacia una amiga. El principal objetivo del estudio consistió en analizar las diferencias en sus reacciones en función del sexo del testigo, familiaridad con el agresor (extraño vs. un amigo) y del tipo de relación entre agresor y víctima (una cita, pareja). También se planteó un análisis exploratorio de la influencia de las creencias sexistas (hostiles y benevolentes) del testigo/a en dichas reacciones. Se encontraron reacciones más negativas (mayor pasividad y menor empatía) en los hombres en el caso en que la víctima mantenía una relación con el agresor que cuando se trataba de una cita, especialmente si el agresor era una persona desconocida. También en las chicas se hallaron mayores respuestas de evitación cuando el episodio de violencia se daba entre miembros de una pareja que en una cita. Finalmente, se discuten las implicaciones prácticas de los hallazgos obtenidos destacando la necesidad de incluir en los programas de prevención de la violencia de género entre adolescentes, orientaciones sobre cómo comportarse con la víctima en caso de ser testigo de un caso de violencia de este tipo.

**Palabras clave:** testigos, violencia de género, creencias sexistas, sexismo ambivalente, relaciones hombre mujer.

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## Introduction

Research on the phenomenon of gender violence today shows that it is not only a serious problem that affects adults, but also that such events occur with a significant minority of adolescents: in the U.S., the figures range from 9% (Roscoe & Callahan, 1985) and 57% (Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 1994). The limited data available in Spain suggests the same pattern. González and Santana (2001) found that 7.5% of boys and 7.1% of girls admitted to having pushed or hit their partner on one or more occasions. Moreover, according to results of another recent survey, 42% of girls in the analysed sample aged 18 to 20 years had suffered a sexually coercive situation inflicted on them by a male acquaintance at least once in their life (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2005). This issue is addressed in the literature under the name of teen dating violence (TDV), and includes studies that seek to analyse adolescent abuse, either physical, psychological, emotional and/or sexual between partners in a relationship that is not necessarily stable, and may be a single date (O'Keefe, 2005).

The empirical evidence seems to point to differences between the type of gender-based violence exercised toward teenage victims and adult victims: in adolescents there are more emotional and psychological abuses (threats, insults, humiliation, impairment, blame, demand for obedience, emotional blackmail) than physical attacks (punching, kicking, slapping, pushing, biting, fractures) and/or sexual (Jezi, Molidor, & Wright, 1996). Furthermore, according to the literature reviewed, a feature of the dynamic established in this phenomenon in adolescents is the reciprocal use of non-sexual violence by both partners (Archer, 2002). Some studies have even found that girls physically assault their partners more than boys (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997; Roscoe & Callahan, 1985). Nevertheless, the physical damage inflicted by the girls on boys is less so that it is girls who require medical attention when assaulted (Makepeace, 1987). Furthermore, it is mostly girls who suffer in the case of sexual abuse (Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

Different studies list numerous negative effects on victims of TDV: increased drug abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behaviours or suicide (i.e., Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001).

**TDV victim support**

With regard to the search for help by victims of TDV, the research shows that adolescents do not usually look for it. According to some studies, the possible barriers to this lie in the stigma attached to being a victim of such abuse, fear of loss of privacy, sense of self-sufficiency, scarce information on existing resources or an external locus of control, among others (Boldero & Fallon, 1995). When looking for help, adolescent victims, like 'battered' women as adults (Rose, Campbell, & Kub, 2000), rely mostly on informal sources, mainly peers, and rarely report it to adults (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Boldero et al., 1995; Jackson, 2002; Watson, Cascardi, Avery Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001). The fear of being blamed and that confidentiality will not be maintained could be the reasons that explain the reluctance to seek formal help (Saunders, Resnick, Hoberman, & Blum, 1994).

In recent years an analysis of the reactions of others, of society to the phenomenon of gender violence has begun. The study of Gracia, Lila, Herrero and Fuentes (2009) suggests that the characteristics of residential areas such as disorder and deprivation contribute to an impoverished social environment that can foster attitudes that condone domestic violence against women. Thus, the literature on domestic violence in adults highlights the fact that inadequate responses from informal support providers contribute to the perpetuation of violence (Klein, 2004, Rose et al., 2000), because these sources may blame the victim or encourage them to maintain their relationship. Other authors have shown that sometimes the fact that informal sources of support may not provide effective assistance affects the way the victim describes their situation, often minimizing the experience of violence. For example, Dunham and Senn (2000) showed that of 182 girls who suffered TDV, 67% had disclosed their problem mainly to friends and family. However, 36% of them indicated that at first they tended to minimize their experience of abuse when telling peers. There is little research on the responses given by peers when a victim of TDV decides to disclose their status, nor of their effects on the victim.

Jackson, Cram, and Seymour (2000) found that both boys and girls expressed that having talked to someone about the subject had been a positive experience because it made them feel supported. However, the responses of people who listened to the victims of TDV did not always contribute to the break up of the relationship. Thus,

Jackson (2002) found that the likelihood of adolescent girls maintaining their relationship with the perpetrator was greater when they revealed the abuses (emotional, physical or sexual) they were subjected to, especially when the confidant was another teenager (Sugarman & Hotaling, 1998). Salazar, Wingood, DiClemente, Lang, and Harrington (2004) showed that social support for girls who suffered TDV did not moderate the negative effects that such violence could have on the psychological wellbeing of the adolescent girls. The researchers attribute this to the fact that the main provider of social support are peers and that they do not know how to help and advice victims of such violence.

Mitchell and Hodson (1983) established 2 types of possible responses from the informal network towards female victims of gender violence: responses of empathy and denial (avoidance and minimization). The responses of avoidance and minimization are associated with lower self-esteem and a lower perception of the competence of the victims. Weisz, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, and Black (2007) examined these responses in adolescents. They analyzed the influence that the seriousness of the abuse could have on the peers' potential responses towards the victim of TDV. The protective response was the most characteristic, regardless of the level of severity. Furthermore, they found that the minimization response was more common than avoidance in cases of moderate severity, and the opposite happened when the severity of the abuse was high, in which case avoidance responses were predominant. The authors interpret this result by arguing that avoidance could be a product of fear that the peers may have of the abuser or the lack of ideas or knowledge of how to provide help in such situations. Rayburn, Jaycox, McCaffrey, Ulloa, Zander-Cotugno, Marshall, and Shelley (2007) analyzed the influence of familiarity with the aggressor on immediate aid responses of the adolescents if they were witnesses to an episode of gender violence among adolescents. They found that when the aggressor was a stranger, the most frequent responses were to seek assistance from the police or help the victim escape. However, when the perpetrator was a friend, the adolescent's loyalty towards the abuser interfered with the intention to stop the violence, especially in the case of girls, as they were more likely to justify the friend's abusive behaviour than the stranger's.

**Ambivalent Sexism and attitudes toward violence**

According to ambivalent sexism theory (AST) of Glick and Fiske (1996), sexism consists of two clearly distinct but related components: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism (HS) coincides basically with sexism understood as a negative and derogatory attitude toward women. Benevolent sexism (BS) is defined as: "a set of interrelated attitudes towards women that are sexist in as much as they consider women stereotyped and restricted to certain roles, but have a positive affective tone (for the perceiver) and they tend to elicit behaviours typically categorized as pro-social (e.g. help) or search for intimacy (e.g. self-disclosure)"(Glick & Fiske, 1996). Within the framework of AST, Glick and Hilt (2000) argue that sexism evolves from a form of clearly hostile prejudice towards people of the opposite sex in childhood, to a series of ambivalent attitudes in adulthood. They believe that the key moment for change is adolescence, as it is from this age that the sexual interdependence the adolescents begin to experience in this period promotes the appearance of the more benevolent form of sexism.

These researchers believe that ambivalent sexism may moderate the reactions and responses of support that adolescent peers show the victims of TDV. Although research analyzing this relationship has not been found in the literature review, research can be highlighted showing the important role of ambivalent sexism on the perceptions and judgments about the culpability of rape victims. For example, Abrams, Viki, Masser, and Bohner (2003) found that benevolent sexism predicted the blaming of a rape victim. Yamawaki (2007) also found that benevolent sexism predicted blaming the victim but when the rape occurred on a date, while hostile sexism was a better predictor when the violence was perpetrated by a stranger.

This study is an exploratory examination of whether hostile or ambivalent sexism are related or whether they can be predictive of peer reactions and their support responses with a victim of teenage gender violence.

This study's central goal is to analyze the potential adolescent reactions to the phenomenon of gender violence but in teenage victims. Both the immediate reactions, in the case of witnessing an episode of TDV, and the support responses (empathy, protection, avoidance or minimization), in the case where the victim reveals their abusive situation have been studied. The study also aims to examine a number of



determinants of such responses such as: sex of the witness, familiarity with the offender (friend vs. stranger) and the degree of the relationship between perpetrator and victim (date or romantic relationship). The hypotheses in this regard are:

Hypothesis 1: With respect to gender, more reactions aimed at halting the violence in boys than in girls and, on the other hand, more positive subsequent responses of support (empathy and protection) in girls than in boys are expected.

Hypothesis 2: With respect to familiarity with the aggressor, it is predicted that the reactions aimed at stopping the violence and the subsequent responses of support (empathy, protection) become more frequent when the offender is a stranger than when he is a friend.

Hypothesis 3: Regarding the relationship between victim and aggressor, it is predicted that the reactions to stop the violence and subsequent responses of support (empathy, protection) will be more frequent when the situation is a date rather than a relationship. No study examining the influence of this variable in the reactions of peers to TDV has been found.

Hypothesis 4: Nonetheless, it is believed that the justification or legitimacy of using violence in interpersonal relationships will be less in the event that it is a date than when a relationship exists between the victim and offender. The sexist beliefs would be the basis of this justification.

## Method

### Participants

The responses of 98 students in the 3rd and 4th ESO (secondary/high school) were analysed, of which 51 were boys (52% of the sample) and 47 girls (48% of the sample). The average age of the participants was 15 years ( $SD= 1$ ). The data relating to their relationship history were: 68% of participants had had a relationship, the average number of partners was 3, the average maximum duration of a relationship was 7 months, while 32 % had a partner at the time of answering the questionnaire, the average duration (in months) of the relationship with the current partner was 6 months.

### Design and procedure

An experimental design was employed. This was a factorial design 2 (familiarity: aggressor friend vs. stranger) x 2 (type of relationship between offender-victim (date vs. relationship) x 2 (sex of the witness: boy vs. girl), all variables manipulated between groups. The number of subjects per experimental condition ranged from 12 to 14 people. Since the booklet, consisting of a scenario and other measures that are described later, is self-administered, data collection was carried out by means of a collective application during school hours. To this end, the voluntary participation of students was requested ensuring their anonymity in advance. The subjects were told that the overall objective of the research was to identify aspects of social relationships among adolescents. The scenarios found in the booklet recount episodes of gender violence among adolescents (TDV). The scenarios are short stories that describe hypothetical situations to which the participants must give their answers regarding their reactions. In the vignettes used in this study the following are manipulated: participants' familiarity with the aggressor (friend or stranger) and the duration as a couple, that is, if it is a date or if they have been together 2 months. In turn, the design allows the examination of the gender differences among participants. In all cases, the story refers to an act of physical abuse of the boy towards the girl (slap in the face). The example vignette presents a situation in which the participant has no familiarity with the perpetrator who has, however, been the girl's partner for two months:

*Imagine you are at the birthday party of a friend, who is turning 16. After a few hours at the party you go outside for a breath of fresh air. Suddenly, you hear voices of two people arguing. You look around and see a boy and a girl shouting. They have not realized that they are being observed. Imagine the girl you see is a friend of yours. It's Rachel, she has been part of your group of friends for a long time. You do not know the boy, he came to the party with your friend.*

*It must be the boy Rachel told you she has been going out with for the last 2 months.*

*The boy is furious and is insulting Rachel. Both maintain a confrontational manner, and their voices are getting louder. You would say the two are very angry. The boy pushes your friend Rachel and she insults him. You see how your*

*friend wants to get away from there but the boy grabs her by the arm and does not let go. Suddenly, the boy gives your friend a slap in the face and she screams in pain. Finally, the boy turns around and walks away.*

In order to check whether participants correctly understood the episode or story presented a series of screening questions were included: 4 items in a Likert-type response scale from 1 (not serious at all) to 5 (very severe) and 6 items whose response format was true or false. These questions measure the variables manipulated in the story: familiarity with the perpetrator ("You do not know the boy, he came to the party with your friend") and duration of the relationship ("It must be the boy Rachel told you she has been going out with for the last 2 months).

The dependent variables included measures of the inferences on the following issues that the participants made from the reading of the episode presented:

- a) Immediate assistance response: This was measured by 16 items in a Likert -type response scale response of 1 to 5 (very low probability, low, moderate, high and very high). The items are based on responses that adolescents produced in response to listening to an episode of TDV in the study of Rayburt et al. (2006) and includes responses that denote passivity either because the violence is justified ("I would not do anything because I think if he reacts like that it is because she has earned it") or because of fear ("I would not do anything for fear of getting hurt") and finally other reactions involving active attempts to restrain the perpetrator or the help the victim, such as the item ("I would have done something to calm the situation from the first moment he insulted her"). The reliability of the alpha coefficient of the full scale was 0.82.
- b) Subsequent assistance response: the adaptation of the scale of Mitchell et al. (1983) conducted by Weisz et al. (2006) was used. In turn, it has been modified to fit the needs of this study. It consists of 10 items with a response in a Likert-type response scale of 1 to 5 (very low probability, low, moderate, high and very high). The scale consists of 4 factors that make reference to the reaction of the subject: one regarding empathy (items 2,3 and 4) as an example, the item "I would insist she talk to me about how she feels," another regarding avoidance (item 1 "I would be uncomfortable talking about it" and item 9), another regarding protection (items 5, 6 and 10), for example the item "I would insist she

discuss it with her parents," and finally, one referring to the minimization of the situation (items 7 and 8, "I would diminish the importance of what happened"). The alpha coefficient for the total scale was 0.65.

In addition, prior to reading the vignettes and the dependent variables, participants had to answer a series of questions concerning: a) Socio-demographic data (age, sex); b) 'Relationship' history: the following questions were asked to the participants: "Have you ever been in a relationship, how many? Do you currently have a partner? How long (in months) have you been having a relationship with your current partner? What has been the maximum time (in months) you have maintained a relationship?"; c) The ambivalent sexism inventory (ASI) adapted for adolescents (De Lemus, Castillo, Moya, Padilla, and Ryan, 2008): consists of 20 items which are answered in a Likert-type response scale of 1 to 6 (1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree). It presents 2 subscales that assess hostile sexism (items 1 to 10) and benevolent sexism (items 11 to 20). The alpha coefficients were 0.85 for the total scale and 0.85 and 0.76 for the 2 subscales of hostile and benevolent sexism, respectively.

## Results

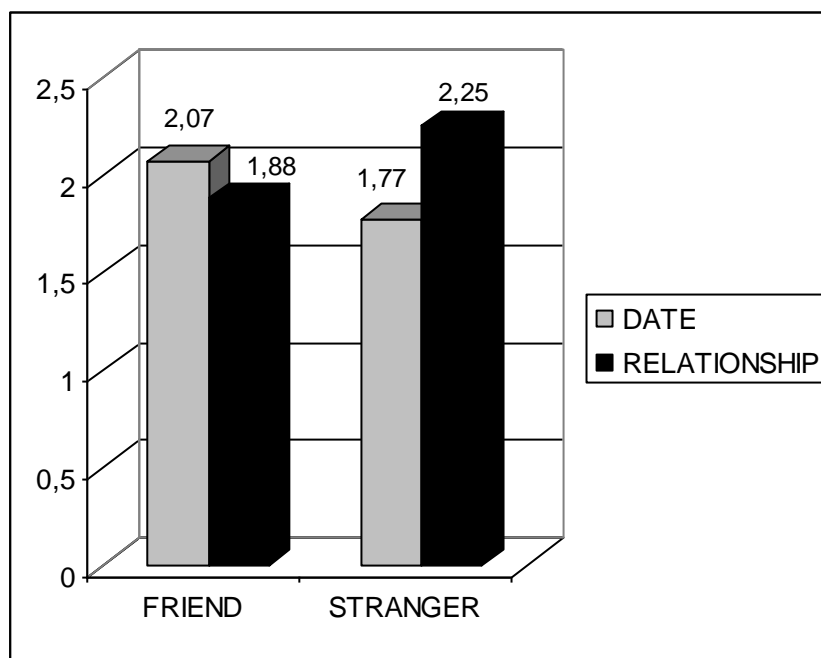
The hypotheses were tested by conducting several univariate ANOVAs for each of the proposed dependent variables: immediate assistance response and subsequent assistance response. In all ANOVAs there were two independent variables: the level of familiarity with the offender (friend vs. stranger) and the type of relationship they had with the victim (date vs. relationship), both manipulated between groups. Below are the results for each of the dependent variables separately.

### **Analysis of the immediate reactions of the witnesses to an episode of TDV**

The most frequent reactions demonstrated by the participants in the event of witnessing an episode of TDV were those that were aimed at stopping the fight ( $M= 3.9$ ;  $SD= 0.7$ ) compared to passive responses, where the passivity was the result of justification of the violence ( $M= 1.8$ ;  $SD= 0.6$ ) or of fear ( $M= 2$ ;  $SD= 0.6$ ).

Given the high internal consistency of the scale (alpha coefficient = 0.82) the general computation of the reactions to a single indicator was carried out. For this, the

scores of items that reflected an active role in stopping the violent event were inverted. Thus, a higher score would be indicative of passive reactions not aimed at stopping the violent episode. Regarding the influence on said reactions of factors such as familiarity with the perpetrator (friend vs. stranger), type of victim-perpetrator relationship (date vs. relationship) and sex of the witness, in contrary to that hypothesized, no significant effect of any of the three factors was found. However, the analysis of responses revealed a significant effect of the interactions between familiarity, type of victim-offender relationship and sex of the witness,  $F(1,96)= 3.8, p < .05]$ . In male witnesses there is a significant interaction between familiarity variables and type of victim-offender relationship,  $F(1,49)= 4.6, p < .05]$  but not in women. Detailed analysis of the effect of the interaction between boys (figure 1) revealed that: when the attacker was unknown, passive reactions were more frequent in cases where the victim had a relationship with the aggressor ( $M= 2.2; SD= 0.1$ ) than in the case of a date ( $M= 1.7; SD= 0.1$ ) the difference being significant,  $F(1,22)= 5.3, p < .05]$ . In the case of an aggressor friend the differences did not reach statistical significance.



**Figure 1.** Effect of the interaction between the level of familiarity between aggressor-witness and the type of relationship between aggressor-victim (date vs. relationship) on the immediate reactions of male witnesses to an episode of TDV.

Moreover, when conducting the ANCOVA, in order to explore the effect of ambivalent sexism on reactions, a significant effect of hostile sexism on DV was found,  $F(1,96)= 6.8, p < .01$ . Although this analysis shows how hostile sexism increases negative reactions, after controlling this effect, it was noted that, as in the ANCOVA, the interaction effect found in the ANOVA between familiarity, type of victim-offender relationship and sex of the witness is maintained,  $F(1,96)= 5.5, p < .05$ .

### **Analysis of responses of support towards the victim of an episode of TDV**

The descriptive analysis of subsequent supportive responses (see Table 1) revealed that the most common response among participants was that of empathy ( $M= 3.8; SD= 0.8$ ), this response being higher in girls than boys,  $t(1,94) = -2.6, p < .01$ . This result was in line with what was expected.

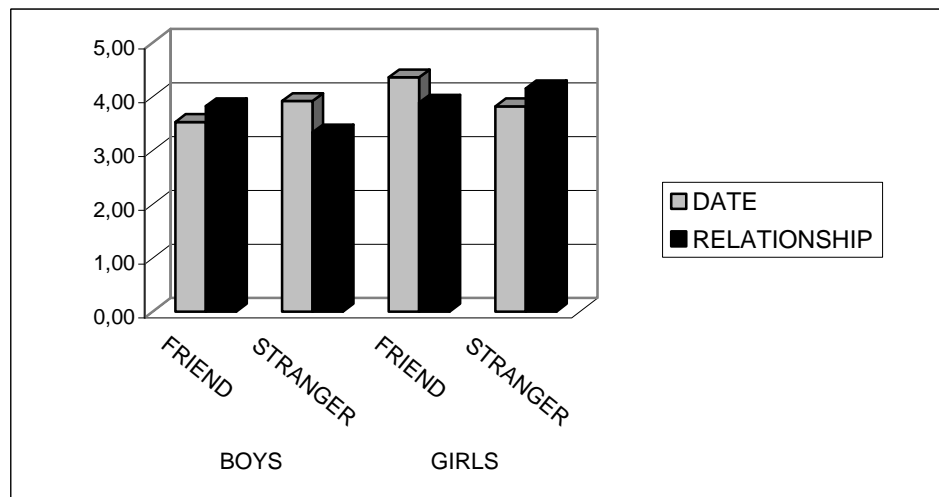
**Table 1.** Descriptive analysis of the supportive responses towards the victim of an episode of TDV.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>
Empathy	3.8 (0.8)	3.6 (0.7)	4.1 (0.7)
Protection	2.9 (0.9)	2.9 (1)	3 (0.9)
Avoidance	1.8 (0.9)	1.9 (0.8)	1.8 (1)
<u>Minimization</u>	<u>2.2 (0.9)</u>	<u>2 (0.9)</u>	<u>2.3 (1)</u>

*Note:* Figures in brackets are the standard deviations.

In this case, to analyse the influence of factors of interest, the different ANOVAs were carried out separately for each of the responses of support: empathy, protection, avoidance and minimization. Focusing on the positive responses of empathy as the dependent variable, as already mentioned, a significant principal effect of gender was found,  $F(1,95)= 6.8, p < .01$ , the more characteristic response of girls ( $M= 4.1; SD= 0.7$ ) than boys ( $M= 3.6; SD= 0.7$ ). Moreover, an interaction effect (figure 2) between gender of the participant, the familiarity and the kind of relationship was found,  $F(1,5)= 7.3, p < .01$ . Thus, it was found that in boys there was a significant interaction between familiarity and the kind of relationship,  $F(1,49)= 4.34, p < .05$ , such that empathy toward the victim was lower ( $M= 3.3; SD= 0.2$ ) when the abuser was unknown, and also maintained a relationship with the victim than if it was a date ( $M= 3.9; SD= 0.2$ ),

whereas in girls the influence of the type of relationship (date / relationship) has the same effect on empathy but when the abuser is a friend and not a stranger. Thus, in girls, empathy toward the victim was lower ( $M = 3.9$ ;  $SD = 0.2$ ) when the abuser was a friend and also maintained a relationship with the victim than if it was a date ( $M = 4.36$ ;  $SD = 0.2$ ).



**Figure 2.** Effect of the interaction between the level of familiarity between aggressor-witness and the type of relationship between aggressor-victim (date vs. relationship) in terms of sex of participant on the empathy reactions of the participants.

Regarding the negative responses of avoidance, a significant interaction effect was found between the sex of the participant and the type of relationship that the victim had with the perpetrator so that in the case of girls these responses were greater when the episode occurred between people who had a relationship ( $M = 2.3$ ;  $SD = 0.2$ ) than when it was a date ( $M = 1.6$ ;  $SD = 0.18$ ), in boys no significant differences were found. Moreover, when performing the ANCOVA, in order to explore the effect of ambivalent sexism on reactions, a significant effect of ambivalent sexism on DV was found,  $F(1,96) = 5.1$ ,  $p < .05$ . As was the case with immediate negative reactions, ambivalent sexism shows a linear positive relationship with the reactions of avoidance, in addition, after controlling this effect, it is noted that in the ANCOVA the interaction effect found in the ANOVA between type of victim-aggressor relationship and the sex of the witness is maintained,  $F(1,96) = 4.51$   $p < .05$ .

## **Discussion**

From these initial findings (as it has been decided to extend the study sample in future research) relevant implications for interventions and program development for the prevention of gender violence in adolescents may be inferred:

- a) It would be important to include content and tasks designed to educate and empower adolescents with skills and resources to provide effective support for victims of TDV if it were the case, since the friend is often the main resource for victims seeking help (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Watson et al., 2001; Weisz et al., 2006).
- b) There is a need to take into account the complexity of peer relationships in adolescent age and to analyze the role of familiarity of the witness with the aggressor (when the abuser is also a friend). Loyalty to friends is a central element in adolescence (Clark & Bittle, 1992; González, Moreno, & Schneider, 2004) and this may be an obstacle to victims of TDV receiving help from their peers.
- c) The importance of the type of victim-offender relationship: highlighting the role of ambivalent sexist beliefs and being aware of how they influence the perception of the episode of violence according to whether it is a date between victim and offender or if there is already a relationship between them. Thus, more negative reactions were found (greater passivity and less empathy) among men in the case where the victim maintained a relationship with the offender than in the case of a date, especially if the perpetrator was a stranger. Also, in the girls more avoidance responses were found when the violent episode occurred between members of a couple on a date.

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