

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS & VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN HOSPITALS: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Ideally, all individuals should be involved in the sustainable development goals attainment. Even though frequently ignored, Psychology can have a considerable impact in this context. Psychology students can also make an important contribution as such. Additionally, an area in desperate need of attention, even before the hardships related to the COVID-19 pandemic, is violence prevention in healthcare settings. Consequently, the aim of this study is to present the rationale, process and results of a project on violence prevention in hospitals undertaken by Psychology undergraduates. The 61 students enrolled in a 3rd-year compulsory course enthusiastically accepted the challenge to develop a brief training session for violence prevention in a hospital setting as part of their grading system. The theme and the possibility to develop a training session were proposed and not imposed. A total of 22 work groups were formed: 4 decided to focus on patients, 4 on nurses, 3 on mental health professionals/psychiatrists, 2 on psychologists, 2 on obstetrics/gynecology; almost all of the remaining groups chose health professionals in general. Only 4 groups decided to take the challenge one step further and direct their training for outside of the class, via Zoom. The sessions were scheduled to begin on the 7th December 2021. Among the sub-themes chosen by the groups (with no constraints from the teacher), there is: burnout (3 groups), psychological well-being, depression, communication, resilience, and optimism. Globally, the groups were keen on complementing the psycho educational component with a skills training approach. Consequently, during undergraduates' skills training, students can become more aware of the sustainable development goals and experience simple ways they can contribute to them (e.g., Goals 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, and 17).

Keywords: Sustainable development goals, psychology, undergraduates, violence prevention, hospital settings.

1. Introduction

Since “the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the world’s best plan to build a better world for people and our planet by 2030” and “they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability” (United Nations – United Nations in Western Europe, n.d.), ideally, all individuals should be involved in the SDGs attainment. Even though frequently ignored, Psychology can have a considerable impact in this context (e.g., Eloff, 2020; Jaipal, 2014; Meneses, in press, 2019a,b). For instance, “psychology can ... be relevant to sustainable development by helping to shape social policies that foster mental health and well-being in both developed and developing countries” (Jaipal, 2014). Psychology students can also make an important contribution as such (Meneses, 2019a,b).

Certainly the goal more easily associated with Psychology is Goal 3 – “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”, especially “promote mental health and well-being” (3.4) and “strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol” (3.5) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.a). But Psychology can have an important role regarding most other components of Goal 3 too, since they relate to behaviour change (regarding health risks, from those related to road traffic accidents to sexual and reproductive health, including pollution).

Psychology can also be connected to many other goals, namely Goals 1 – No poverty, 2 – Zero hunger, and 11 – Sustainable cities and communities (Eloff, 2020). Regarding Goal 4 – “Quality Education”, Psychology can promote “effective learning outcomes” (4.1) and “relevant skills, including

technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship” (4.4), literacy and numeracy (4.6), “the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (4.7), “safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all” (4.a), and contribute to “the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training” (4.c) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.b).

Goal 5 – “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” encompasses several aspects where Psychology can be relevant, namely “eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres” (5.2) and “all harmful practices” (5.3), “the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family” (5.4), “access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights” (5.6), “enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women” (5.b) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.c).

Even if less obviously, the same holds true for Goal 10 – “Reduce inequality within and among countries”, with relevant examples being “empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all” (10.2) and “ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard” (10.3) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.e).

Concerning Goal 17 – “Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”, psychologists can, for instance, provide their knowledge to enhance “cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing” (17.6), “enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology” (17.8), and “to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product” (17.19) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.g).

Similarly, the practice of Psychology can have a significant impact when one aims to reduce/end “all forms of violence” (16.1 and 16.2), improve decision-making (16.7) and “public access to information” (16.10), i.e., achieve Goal 16 – “Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies” (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.f).

A certain context is particularly relevant in this regard, even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic: the occupational context. It is also the core of Goal 8 – “Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all” (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.d). Psychology can give a helping hand when it comes to promoting “development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation” (8.3), achieving “full and productive employment and decent work for all” (8.5), and protecting labor rights and promoting “safe and secure working environments for all workers” (8.8). In fact, “the psychology of sustainability and sustainable development ... calls for managerial styles and leadership that recognize and respect the importance of relationships in organizational contexts for the well-being of workers” (Di Fabio, 2017).

Additionally, an area in desperate need of attention, even before the hardships related to the COVID-19 pandemic, is violence prevention in health care settings. For the purposes of the Convention No.190 of the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019, p. 5), “the term “violence and harassment” in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment”.

In Portugal, where (a) enjoying decent work and a healthy and safe working environment is a fundamental right according to the Constitution, (b) the notifications’ trend of situations of violence against health care professionals has been increasing, and (c) violence is considered a crime in the Penal Code, a Action Plan to Prevent Violence in the Health Sector was developed (Direção-Geral da Saúde DGS, 2020). Unfortunately, violence against health care workers is not limited to Portugal: it is a worldwide phenomenon (DGS, 2020; Ma et al., 2022; Vento, Cainelli, & Vallone, 2020).

While strong evidence of the efficacy of preventive interventions is still lacking, several measures have been advocated, including quality courses for healthcare professionals (covering communication, identification of early signs that someone may become violent, dangerous situations’ management, and self-protection), well-being promotion and psycho social risks (including stress and burnout) prevention, and education of the general population (DGS, 2020; Ma et al., 2022; Vento et al., 2020).

Consequently, the aim of this study is to present the rationale, process and results of a project on violence prevention in hospitals undertaken by Psychology undergraduates.

2. Method

When, as part of the grading system of a 3rd-year compulsory course, the possibility to develop a brief training session for violence prevention in a hospital setting was presented (and not imposed), the students enrolled enthusiastically accepted the challenge. It was decided bilaterally that the training session (role-play) would represent 50% of the grade in the course.

Students were allowed to focus more on the causes/risk factors, protection factors and/or consequences of violence in hospitals. In order for students to invest their time mostly on literature review and oral communication skills development, the report they had to present was the PowerPoint presentation they would use for their session. Complementing psycho-education with skills training and developing additional materials for the training session (e.g., printed or digital hand-outs, posters) were stimulated since the beginning.

Among the 61 students enrolled, a total of 22 work groups were formed. Consequently, each student was given 10 minutes for his/her training session. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as a preventive measure, students were allowed from the beginning to do their presentation through video recording or in person.

3. Results

Only 21 work groups (composed by a total of 55 students) ended up implementing their role-play training session. Of those, 4 focused on patients, 4 on nurses, 4 on health professionals in general, 3 on mental health professionals/psychiatrists, 2 on psychologists, 2 on obstetrics/gynecology professionals, 1 on operational assistants and 1 on geriatrics professionals.

Just 4 work groups decided to take the challenge one step further and direct their training for outside of the class, via Zoom.

The sessions began on the 7th of December 2021 and ended on the 4th of January. The sub-themes chosen by the groups (with no constraints from the teacher - RFM) were: bullying (4 groups), burnout (3 groups), obstetric violence (3 groups), violence, violence against patients, violence between patients, psychological determinants of the professionals' violence, identification of violence against older individuals & mindfulness, mental health, depression, psychological well-being, communication, resilience, and optimism.

Some students/work groups opted, *a priori*, for the video recording even though they were not facing health restrictions. Consequently, there were 8 role-plays using video, although the students were in the classroom. One group did a hybrid presentation, using the recording of one of its three members, and another one decided to use Zoom when confronted with a positive test for COVID-19 the day before the day scheduled for the presentation.

Twelve work groups developed additional materials, mostly posters and hand-outs. Globally, the work groups were keen on complementing the psycho educational component with a skills training approach. The grades obtained reflect the generally high investment from students, since they ranged from 12 to 19, with a mean of 16.

4. Discussion

One might easily agree that, if successful, challenging students to develop a brief role-play training session for violence prevention in a hospital setting could be related to SDGs 3 (skills training in the context of (good) health promotion and well-being) and 4 (a way to improve the learning process) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.a,b).

Considering specifically the sub-themes and targets chosen by students, and the contents/skills they explored in class, it becomes clear this experience had some potentialities in terms of SDGs 5 (raising awareness regarding gender equality, considering some statistics on violence they presented), 10 (raising awareness leading to reduced inequalities), and 17 (underscoring the importance of partnerships for the goals) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.c,e,g).

The training students planned and implemented focused intensely on SDGs 16 (making them more sensitive to the key place peace, justice and strong institutions have) and 8 (more clearly realizing the role psychologists can have in promoting decent work and economic growth) (Global Compact Network Portugal, n.d.d,f).

In sum, students became (more) conscious of a worldwide phenomenon (DGS, 2020; ILO, 2019; Ma et al., 2022; Vento et al., 2020) and familiar with some of the contributes Psychology can give in the context of SDGs and particularly in violence prevention in healthcare settings like hospitals (Di Fabio, 2017; Eloff, 2020; Jaipal, 2014; Meneses, in press, 2019a,b).

5. Conclusions

This experience indicates that, during undergraduates' skills training, Psychology students can become more aware of the SDGs and experience simple ways they can contribute to them (e.g., Goals 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, and 17). It is the first author's conviction this can lead to a stronger participation in the future, as citizens and Psychology professionals, bearing in mind (inter)national data and suggestions, and in line with the national Action Plan to Prevent Violence in the Health Sector (DGS, 2020; Ma et al., 2022; Vento et al., 2020). In time, they can play an important role in increasing the evidence of preventive interventions' efficacy (Vento et al., 2020).

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