Psychological Abuse of Women: A Review of the Literature
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A review of the research literature on the psychological abuse of women is presented including defining and measuring the construct. Implications for practice, research, and multiculturalism are explored.

Keywords: psychological abuse; women; emotional abuse

Psychological abuse may affect a woman’s overall psychological well-being to the same extent as physical abuse or battering (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, & Hause, 1990; Katz & Arias, 2000) and may actually be predictive of physical violence. In a longitudinal study of 393 engaged couples, Murphy and O’Leary (1989) found that participants who were not physically aggressive at a premartial assessment but were identified as psychologically aggressive were far more likely to have engaged in battering behavior within 30 months of the marriage. Follingstad et al. (1990) surveyed 234 victims of domestic violence between 19 and 64 years of age to investigate the relationship between emotional abuse and physical abuse in intimate relationships. A factor analysis identified six types of emotional abuse: threats of abuse, ridicule, jealousy, threats to change the marriage, restriction, and damage to property. All but 5 of the study participants reported having experienced at least one episode of psychological abuse prior to the onset of violence within the relationship. The majority (72%) reported experiencing at least 4 types of emotional abuse. In a more recent investigation, Henning and Klesges (2003) found that 80% of a large sample (N = 3,370) of victims of domestic violence reported experiencing psychological abuse prior to experiencing physical abuse. In this particular sample of battered adult women, only rarely did physical abuse occur in the absence of psychological abuse, and it was noted that psychological abuse, independent of physical abuse, was significantly related to victims’ perceived threat and plans to terminate the relationship.

Despite the evidence suggestive of the potential dangers and/or harm associated with psychological abuse, the research in this area remains scarce and somewhat inconsistent. However, the available literature supports the existence of psychological abuse and provides evidence of the harmful consequences of this type of victimization. What is presented here is a synthesis of the research on psychological abuse to date. This article will include a brief historical perspective as a context for viewing the construct of psychological abuse. Several definitions of psychological abuse will be explored, and the research regarding the measurement of this construct will be presented. The effects of psychological abuse as they are empirically reported throughout the literature will be summarized and reported. Finally, the implications for counseling and further research will be discussed.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In 1977, Lenore Walker first defined a syndrome and a cycle of violence that later became known as battered women syndrome. Initially identified through the stories of battered women, Walker identified a three-stage cycle that became one of the fundamental foundations for future research and practice within the field of domestic violence. The three original phases within the cycle of violence were reported as tension building, explosion of acute battering incidents, and calm, loving respite.

In a follow-up study, Walker (1983) supported her hypothesis that a psychological phenomenon unique to this population is consistent and does in fact occur within the context of an identifiable cycle. Surveys of a diverse sample of 403 15- to 59-year-old victims of domestic violence supported the expansion of battered women syndrome as a unique set of circumstances coupled with psychological symptomatology that occurs in the context of an abusive relationship. This particular study set the stage for a shift in the treatment of battered women. In addition to supporting her original hypothesis, analyses revealed that victims interviewed were not staying in abusive relationships because of a psychological need to be a victim. Instead, Walker found that the majority of
women surveyed described terror at the thought of leaving based solely on issues of safety. This advancement within the research influenced a shift in the conceptualization of abuse and the development of theory discouraging the practice of blaming the victim. Not only did this expand the notion of treatment for victims of domestic violence, it opened a door for future research and the identification of alternative forms of abuse.

**DEFINING/MEASURING PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE**

Although mental health practitioners agree that psychological abuse occurs and results in harmful psychological outcomes, a common definition of this construct remains illusive. This lack of clarity creates a difficulty for researchers, because there is not yet a consistent method for operationalizing the construct of psychological abuse. The profoundly personal nature of an individual’s experience of psychological abuse does not support the notion of a universally accepted definition of psychological abuse. However, several researchers have attempted to define and operationalize the construct of psychological abuse, primarily through the development of measures intended to identify and quantify the existence of various components of psychological abuse.

Tolman (1992) was among the first researchers to attempt to define psychological maltreatment in a book chapter that included a multifaceted view of the construct and addressed the complexity of issues affecting research efforts in this area. Tolman described the effects of psychological maltreatment, categories of maltreatment, issues in assessment, measurement approaches, and legal considerations.

The effects of psychological abuse for individual victims is dependent upon the abuse’s intensity, frequency, intent, and the level of victims’ fear of reciprocity of abuse. Tolman described specific categories of abuse as including creation of fear, monopolization, economic abuse, degradation, rigid sex role expectations, psychological destabilization, emotional or interpersonal withholdings of love, and contingent expressions of love. Assessment complexities and challenges were described as including issues of concurrent physical abuse, reliability of self-report, partner reports, and counterclaims of maltreatment. Tolman’s assessment of the research, as of 1992, suggested that measurement approaches had included checklists, monitoring measures, and observational measures.

Subsequent to providing this overview of the construct of psychological abuse, Tolman (1999) developed the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI). The PMWI represented the first comprehensive measure of psychological abuse to include a continuous measure of the construct. Tolman devised a 40-item instrument of statements that participants rated on a scale of never, rarely, occasionally, frequently, or very frequently (e.g., “my partner screams and shouts at me,” “my partner interferes with my relationships with my family”). A factor analysis of an administration of the instrument to 100 women identified two distinct types of psychological abuse: dominance/isolation and emotional/verbal. In this initial testing of the PMWI, these subscales successfully discriminated between three groups. Physically abused women scored significantly higher than both relationship distressed/nonabused and relationship satisfied/nonabused women. In addition, both subscales of the PMWI were highly correlated with the Nonphysical Abuse subscale of the Index of Spouse Abuse (ISA; Hudson & McIntosh, 1981). Finally, a 14-item short version of the PMWI also successfully discriminated between the physically abused and relationship-distressed groups. Ultimately, this study provided evidence for the validity of the PMWI and the shorter subscales derived from it. In addition, the use of factor analysis as a tool for instrument development expanded research efforts in identifying specific constructs associated with psychological abuse.

For example, Sackett and Saunders (2001) sampled a group of 60 women receiving services from a domestic violence agency (30 sheltered women and 30 nonsheltered women). In a factor analysis on derived survey items, four types of psychological abuse were identified: ridiculing of traits, criticizing behavior, ignoring, and jealous control. Follow-up analysis of variance tests indicated that sheltered women experienced more ridicule and jealous/control than nonsheltered women. In addition, for the entire sample, ridiculing of traits was rated as the most severe form of psychological abuse.

Murphy and Hoover (1999) hypothesized that psychological abuse is a complex, multidimensional construct. Utilizing a sample of 157 never-married female undergraduate students who self-described as currently involved in a dating relationship, Murphy and Hoover investigated the level of emotional abuse, physical aggression, social responsibility response bias, interpersonal problems, and attachment.

The level of emotional abuse was measured using a 54-item instrument previously derived by Murphy and Hoover (1999) in a study of 160 undergraduate students. Item-scale correlations of .25 or less were reported for this sample, and internal consistency ratings ranged from .84 to .92. The four derived scales were defined as Restrictive Engagement, Hostile Withdrawal, Denigration, and Domination/Intimidation.

Physical aggression was assessed using the 8-item Conflicts Tactic Scale (Strauss, 1979), and social desirability response bias was assessed using the 40-item Balanced Inventory of Desirability Responding: Version 6 (Paulhus, 1991). The Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 1990; Horowitz, Rosenberg, Baer, Ureno, & Villasenor, 1988) was also utilized as well as the Reciprocal Attachment Questionnaire (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). These measures were combined into a single survey that was distributed to the student participants.
The results of a principle components analysis on the Emotional Abuse Scale suggested a four-factor solution that corresponded to the previously derived scales of Restrictive Engulfment, Hostile Withdrawal, Denigration, and Domination/Intimidation. In terms of the relationship between physical aggression and emotional abuse, correlational analyses suggested that the relationship between physical aggression and both Denigration and Domination/Intimidation were higher than those reported for physical aggression and Restrictive Engulfment and for physical aggression and Hostile Withdrawal. Social desirability was negatively correlated with emotional abuse, and it appears that, although all four Emotional Abuse Scales were linked to interpersonal problems, Hostile Withdrawal and Restrictive Engulfment were strongly indicative of interpersonal problems related to dominance, coercion, and aggression. Finally, correlational analyses of the relationship between emotional abuse and attachment indicated that anxious preoccupation with attachment concerns was most strongly related to Restrictive Engulfment.

In conclusion, Murphy and Hoover (1999) suggested that there are, in fact, four discernible types of emotional abuse and that relationships exist between emotional abuse and other variables. Specifically, they suggested a relationship between both Dominance/Intimidation and Denigration and physical aggression. Their results further indicate a relationship between Hostile Withdrawal and Restrictive Engulfment and specific interpersonal problems. It was also suggested that Restrictive Engulfment was related to self-reported attachment insecurities.

More recently, Wolfson (2003) explored the constructs of psychological abuse and control, which culminated in the development of the Across Groups Psychological Abuse and Control Scale (AGPAC). Factor analysis revealed verbal abuse, isolation and activity control, and emotional abuse as distinct components of psychological abuse. In addition, analyses of variance indicated a significant relationship between anxiety and the incidence of domestic violence. This study explored the factors of psychological abuse and control as they were displayed in different types of abusive relationships. Specifically, this investigation focused on the presence of these factors of abuse and control across two groups: victims of domestic violence and cultic systems.

The initial portion of this research involved the development of the AGPAC to measure issues of psychological abuse and control for victims of domestic violence and members of cultic systems. The previously defined factors (verbal abuse, isolation and activity control, and emotional abuse) were derived for each group, and all factors displayed high levels of internal consistency.

The second part of this study involved administering the AGPAC to 98 ex-cult and 100 domestic violence participants to determine how each of these groups related to the identified factors of psychological abuse and control. In addition, participants in the study were given an anxiety questionnaire. Both groups experienced all of the identified factors of psychological abuse and control while in their respective relationships. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated that domestic violence participants were found to be severely anxious with ex-cult participants only mildly anxious.

Clearly, the empirical evidence to date suggests that psychological abuse represents a complex array of factors that combine to create this overriding construct. In every case, attempts to operationalize the construct of psychological abuse have resulted in the identification of subscales (i.e., factors) thus supporting the notion that psychological abuse must be viewed broadly. Studies related to identifying and measuring the existence of psychological abuse provide evidence that defining such a construct remains a highly complicated endeavor. To date, the defining of this construct has been confined to the use of factor analysis.

EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Despite the challenges faced in operationally defining the construct of psychological abuse, substantial evidence exists in support of its negative impact on psychological well-being. Researchers have reported that psychological abuse is related to increased vulnerability to a number of clinical issues (Baldry, 2003; Harmon, 1996; Katz & Arias, 2000; McKibbin, 1998; Ovara, McLeod, & Sharpe, 1996; Sackett & Saunders, 2001).

Ovara et al. (1996) found that abused women had lower self-efficacy scores, higher depression scores, and lower self-esteem scores than nonabused women. A series of ANOVAs were conducted on a sample of 21 victims of abuse and 18 controls. Victims of abuse were consistently shown to be at a significantly higher risk for depression than women who had not been victimized. Utilizing a measure of conflict tactics as well as a measure of personal power, researchers estimated the severity of abuse among the sample of victims. It was noted that the severity of the abuse experienced, either psychological or physical, was significantly positively correlated with depression scores.

Harmon (1996) conducted a qualitative study of the psychological abuse of women. In this study, Harmon explored women’s experiences with ongoing psychological abuse from male partners with whom they were in short-term, cohabiting relationships. It was the intention of this study to determine the types of psychological abuse tactics women report being exposed to early in their cohabiting relationships. In addition, Harmon was interested in investigating the psychosocial factors that appear to affect women’s experiences with and responses to ongoing psychological abuse. Harmon interviewed 8 women representing a diverse population of women younger than 35. During interviews, women responded to questions on psychological abuse from five cat-
categories: humiliation/degradation, intimidation, deprivation, objectification, and distortion of subjective reality. Results of cluster analyses revealed that all of the women experienced the psychological abuse tactics of emotional deprivation, objectification, and distortion of subjective reality. Although the women did experience both overt and subtle tactics of psychological abuse, there was considerable variability in the type and intensity of psychological tactics the women experienced. In addition, cluster analyses revealed three interrelated factors that appeared to affect women’s experiences with ongoing psychological abuse: relationship structure and women’s experiences with tactics of psychological abuse, personal characteristics of the women interviewed, and family of origin issues.

McKibbin (1998) reported a relationship between sustained, overt psychological abuse and women’s self-concept and psychological distress. In this study, 93 women identified as having sustained, severe psychological abuse from a partner with either no, moderate, or serious violence completed questionnaires measuring self-concept (i.e., self-esteem, interpersonal competence, problem-solving confidence, and depression proneness) and psychological symptoms from the Symptom Checklist 90—Revised. Results of regression analyses indicated that subtle psychological abuse was an effective predictor of women’s problem-solving confidence, depression, anxiety, and somatization regardless of the presence of overt psychological abuse or violence.

Sackett and Saunders (2001), in their study of 60 victims of domestic violence, found that low self-esteem was significantly related to the occurrence of psychological abuse. Although factor analyses derived four types of psychological abuse (ridiculing of traits, criticizing behavior, ignoring, and jealous control), regression analyses revealed that ignoring was the strongest predictor of low self-esteem. In the same study, both psychological abuse and physical abuse were found to contribute independently to the level of depression. However, fear of being abused was uniquely predicted by psychological abuse.

Katz and Arias (2000) investigated the effects of abusive feedback from dating partners, relative to women’s self-esteem levels, on relationship intimacy and stability with 82 women in heterosexual relationships. The participants were undergraduate students and ranged in age from 17 to 22. Results of both correlational analyses and analyses of variance indicated that partner abuse was related to lesser relationship stability and intimacy and also supported the hypothesis that women with lower self-esteem were more likely to attribute the abuse to personal characteristics than to a lack of relationship stability or intimacy. Repeated-measures analyses revealed that these results remained stable during a 6-week period for a subgroup of participants who participated in follow-up analyses.

Most recently, Baldry (2003) investigated the relative contribution of psychological and physical abuse to the development of psychological symptoms for a sample of 145 abused women receiving treatment for issues related to domestic violence. Participants completed a survey combining measures of depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and intrusion/avoidance tendencies. Regression analyses revealed that psychological abuse was predictive of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and intrusion/avoidance symptoms.

In another recent study, Straight, Harper, and Arias (2003) investigated the impact of psychological abuse on physical health. Independent regression analyses were conducted on the impact of both physical and psychological abuse on various aspects of physical health (i.e., illegal drug use, health perceptions, and cognitive impairment). Results indicated that psychological abuse was predictive of illegal drug use, negative health perceptions, and cognitive impairment even after controlling for physical violence.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Implications of this research for practice are numerous. On the surface, empirical studies of psychological abuse confirm that victims of such abuse appear to be at greater risk for psychological symptomatology. Certainly, there is strong evidence to support a claim that victims of psychological abuse are likely to exhibit increased levels of both anxiety and depression. In addition, lower levels of self-esteem are likely to be associated with psychological abuse. From a clinical standpoint, these findings suggest that the practitioner maintain an awareness of these risks and assess for potential exposure to psychological abuse. Self-report of psychological abuse has not been investigated. It is not clear whether victims of psychological abuse will self-identify in therapy. It is therefore imperative that clinicians assess the status of intimate relationships. Where psychological abuse is present, practitioners should assess for the presence of depression and/or anxiety. In addition, issues of self-esteem should be explored.

Until more research becomes available, clinicians are faced with choosing models and definitions that meet the needs of their clients and style of counseling. The research to date supplies practitioners with a variety of methods and/or models for explaining and defining the existence of psychological abuse among their clients. The various instruments developed to date define a variety of types of psychological abuse. There is not a universally accepted set of behaviors and/or traits that currently make up the construct of psychological abuse thus creating a situation where practitioners must choose among the various models provided in determining the level and/or type of psychological abuse their clients might be enduring.
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although some generalizations can be made, the research does not support a universal definition of psychological abuse or the components of it. In terms of empirically defining psychological abuse, the research to date has relied almost exclusively on the use of factor analytic and principle components methods. Although this methodology makes sense in terms of creating tools that might be used to measure the construct, the derivation of items for these analyses has been based upon the orientation of individual researchers. Once a more consistent pool of items is derived, factor analytic methods applied to determine specific factors may result in measurement tools that are more consistent and accurate than those currently available to researchers. The application of qualitative methods on interviews of diverse samples of women might yield more consistent information relevant to the development of common themes grounded in the experience and voice of the women who have experienced psychological abuse.

Thus, implications for future research remain vast. Investigations focusing on the specific components of psychological abuse would certainly increase our understanding of the victim’s experience. In addition, further study of the effects of psychological abuse can only enhance counselors’ ability to more accurately understand the experience of victims.

CULTURAL VARIABLES

The construct of psychological abuse in intimate relationships is extraordinarily complex. It is also intimately woven into the cultural context of both the client and the clinician. The cultural experience of any individual is bound to be intricately connected to their view of psychological abuse. Certainly, cultural context is instrumental in forming our worldview. As such, views related to the defining of psychological abuse must be considered within all cultural contexts (i.e., racial, religious, family, community, etc.). Currently, the literature on psychological abuse does not include specific attention to this particular issue. Studies to date have focused on samples and populations of victims of domestic violence and psychological abuse as it is defined within specific studies. Although samples might include members of various groups, there are no studies to date that have examined cultural context as a specific variable under study. This certainly remains a gap in this body of literature and implies that further study is warranted.

SUMMARY

The psychological abuse of women remains a construct of tremendous complexity. The multitude of variables that enter into the study of such a construct provides a wide array of both possibilities and challenges for researchers and practitioners. From every perspective—defining the construct, identifying victims, treating the effects—the complexities are numerous. However, throughout the literature, threads of information have proven consistent. Psychological abuse takes many forms. The effects of psychological abuse are well documented and varied. Confounding events and variables remain numerous. Although more exploration is warranted, much information is available and can be utilized by both clinicians and researchers. Consideration of this body of research can both enhance the effectiveness of clinical work and inform the direction and focus of future research efforts.

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