The Psychological Abuse of Women

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Abstract
What is emotional abuse? What are the alternative names for it and closely related phenomena?

Emotional abuse can be conceptualized as any set of activities designed to humiliate or otherwise reduce the standing of another person. While research has typically focused on examining the activities in intimate relationships (such as between a partner, friend, or family member), these activities can also occur in between people who are not intimately connected, such as in professional settings (commonly referred to as harassment). Garfinkel (1956) called such activities *status degradation ceremonies*, and described them as interactions that remove people from a place of value and restrict their freedom within a community. As a result these activities, behaviors (and in extreme cases, thoughts and feelings) a person could previously perform are now restricted or forbidden. Ossorio (1976/2013) has described how such activities look in dyadic interactions -- in which one person denounces and degrades another – as well as how these processes can be internalized and carried out against oneself (commonly referred to as negative self-talk in the clinical literature).

Despite decades of research, the term *emotional abuse*, is not one that has been used consistently in the literature (Maiuro, 2001). Some authors have referred to “emotional abuse” while others have used “controlling abuse,” “psychological abuse,” “psychological maltreatment,” “psychological torture,” “verbal aggression,” “verbal abuse,” or “verbal battering.” (for review, see Follingstad, 2007). The range of terms in use to describe this phenomena, reflects both a lack of consensus regarding the definition and application of these terms.

For example, Maiuro (2001, p. x) noted that these terms have been used to describe “the action or intent of the perpetrator, the emotional impact upon the victim, or the area of life functioning that is affected.” In a study of practicing psychologists (2000) and a follow-up study of lay persons (2004), Follingstad and colleagues found wide variability in the types of behaviors that were deemed “emotionally abusive” betwixt and between psychologists and lay persons. A
growing consensus has developed among scholars who look at the issue at the national (US) level and international level among the 28 EU nations.

As noted by Schumacher, Slep, and Heyman (2001), “Despite the Measures of emotional abuse and related concepts (psychological abuse and psychological maltreatment of partners) the better measures have focused not merely on specific behavioral acts but on their perceived implications for recipients. For example, these items were used to measure “Expressive psychological aggression” by the 2010 National Intimate Partner & Sexual Violence Survey (Black, et.al., 2011): “Acted very angry in a way that seemed dangerous;” “Told me that I was a loser, a failure or not good enough;” “Called me names like ugly, fat, crazy, or stupid;” “Insulted, humiliated, or made fun of me;” and “Told me that no one else would want me”. Four out of the five items used to measure such psychological aggression represent the victims’ perception of being subjected to a form of degradation.

This national survey treated coercive control as the second aspect of psychological abuse and measure it by 13 items. The five most highly endorsed items by victims are these: (1) “Tried to keep you from seeing or talking to family and friends;” (2) “Made decisions that should have been yours to make;” (3) “Kept track by demanding to know where you were and what you were doing;” (4) “Made threats to physical harm;” and (5) “Destroyed something that was important to you.” Several of these behaviors reflect attempts to keep the woman is the new, lower place in the relationship—as a lesser person who is not eligible to manage her own life. The combination of the various forms of degradation is kept in place by two kinds of threats—of physical harm and actually destroying something of value. Research suggests that these two components—degradation and credible threat—constitute the core of emotional abuse.

**Measures of emotional abuse**

The overwhelming majority of studies into these phenomena have relied on self-reported survey data from women who were asked about their experiences of emotional abuse victimization. Even if using our earlier conceptualization— “any set of activities design to humiliate or otherwise reduce the standing of another person” — such an approach clearly has limits.

First, does the researcher measure abuse by counting the type and frequency of “emotionally abusive“ behavior, or does he or she try to get at the severity of the abusive behaviors. The studies giving the clearest evidence about
the consequences of emotional abuse have all attempted to get at the severity of the abuse and consequently, we will emphasize those studies in this review.

Current measurement tools often do little to capture the context of in which emotional abuse occurs. As we see with Garfinkel’s (1956) description of emotional abuse as an interaction, the behavioral context simply cannot be ignored. For example, saying “I’m going to kill you,” to someone means something very different when said during a heated argument than when said while playing video games. Whether or not such an utterance constitutes emotional abuse is a question of its impact. As noted by Follingstad and Rogers (2014), a “true” emotionally abusive behavior will have an emotional and/or behavioral impact on its target.

The Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory developed by Tolman (1989) is a widely used measure, that improved upon earlier assessment measures by distinguishing types of abusive behavior (verbal and dominance/isolation). In order to address some of the conceptual and measurement limitations mentioned above, Follingstad (2011) recently developed the Measure of Psychologically Abusive Behaviors and subsequently expanded the measure (Follingstad & Rogers, 2014) to assess behavioral and emotional impact of behaviors across 14 categories.

**Prevalence rates for women, men, and LBG populations.**

Follingstad & Rogers (2014) report no gender differences in the rates of severe psychology abuse among respondents describing their “worst relationship.” Black, et al., (2011) reported that slightly more than 40% of women in their national sample had experienced both expressive aggression and coercive control. In the case of men, 32% reported expressive aggression and 42.5% coercive control. There was no difference between men and women on coercive control, but fewer men reported being the targets of expressive aggression.

The European Union Agency for Human Rights conducted a survey entitled “Violence against women: an EU-wide survey” (2014) of 42,000 participants in 28 countries. Twenty-three items were used to assess psychological abuse, many of which overlapped the CDC study reported above (Black, et al., 2011), but new issues concerned economic violence (5 items) and blackmail/abuse of children (2 items). Forty-three per cent of women reported some form of abuse in a
previous or current relationship, with the most common forms being (emotionally) abusive behaviors (32%) and (coercively) controlling behaviors (35%). The specific items parallel those commonly occurring in the US.

Of importance that goes beyond our scope here were the dramatic national variations in psychological violence. Denmark and Latvia were at the high end with 60% of the women reporting psychological violence, and Greece (33%), Spain (33%), and Ireland (31%) at the low end. Prevalence rates appear somewhat higher in the major industrial counties in the EU—Germany (50%), France (47%), Italy (38%), Sweden (51%), and United Kingdom (46%)—than in the US. But the differences may largely be due to the additional of issues such as economic violence and blackmail that were not assed in the US.

What are the consequences?

This is an easy question to ask and a difficult one to answer with any certainty. There are at least two problems in getting to the facts. First, the ideal study would have measures of emotional abuse as distinct from physical and sexual abuse—and these often-but not always—occur together in the same relationships. Second, the ideal study would follow individuals/families over time to determine what consequences—negative or positive—that occur to those who have been emotionally abused vs. those who have not. Furthermore one needs to distinguish consequences to those who have been either physically or sexually abused (or both) vs. those merely emotionally abused. The “merely” is intended ironically, for from the very beginning of research into this topic, women victims were telling interviewers that the emotional abuse was worse than the physical abuse (Follingstad, Routledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). They could take the punches, slaps, kick, beatings, but being treating as a nobody, as a nothing whose feelings and views did not matter was harder to take than the battery. Demonstrating the greater negative consequences to the satisfaction of the scientific community has been harder to do. But recent work has provided a substantial amount of evidence toward this point. (Norman, R. E. et al (2012) concluded that the “evidence suggests a causal relationship between non-sexual child maltreatment and a range of mental disorders, drug use, suicide, sexually
transmitted infections, and risky sexual behavior” (p. e1001349). Keyes, K. M., et al., (2011) in a nationally representative study of 34,653 US adults found that five measures of aspects of childhood abuse and neglect could be related to two underlying dimensions of adult pathology—externalizing and internalizing. Externalization psychopathologies are antisocial personality disorder, heavy alcohol and drug use; internalizing disorders are major depression, the range of anxiety disorders, phobias, and PTSD. Emotional abuse was carefully distinguished from the other four aspects of childhood maltreatment and neglect. Emotional abuse was strongly related to internalizing disorders for both men and women but more strongly for women. For women, emotional abuse was correlated with externalizing disorders too—but not for men. One feature of this study was that any reported psychopathology occurring before age 18 was removed from the data to limit the spurious correlations between types of maltreatment and resulting psychiatric disorders. Although women have been studied as victim much more often than men, the emotional abuse of men is real and occurs more often than we might think. In a prospective longitudinal study of 971 urban males in Pittsburg (56% black), the authors (Lee, Courtnery, White, Mun, Stuthamer-Loeber, & Loeber, 2012) found that the prevalence of childhood maltreatment was higher for Black youth than for white, but there were no racial differences in timing, type, chronicity of maltreatment. With appropriate statistical controls, childhood maltreatment predicted depressive symptoms, heavy drinking (6 drinks in the same day), and getting into violence altercations (based both on self-report and on public records) as young adults. Assessments were completed between the ages of 12 and 17 and then again at age 24/25. General maltreatment and specifically emotional abuse were also associated in a longitudinal study with adverse consequences on health (Min, Minnes, Kim, & Singer, 2013). The negative health effects seem to be brought about by early development of obesity, substance abuse, and tobacco use. When the effects of more adverse life-events and greater psychological distress in adulthood are added, they strengthen the adverse health effects (accounting for 42% of the variance explained.)
An interesting study of 42,744 active duty US Air Force members (and 17,266 spouses) found that emotional abuse, measured by the CS-EA, was strongly correlated with alcohol problems, financial stress, relationship dissatisfaction, and poor self-efficacy. Emotional abuse has been most consistently related to depression, and more consistently related than either physical abuse or sexual abuse (Alloy, et al., 2006). One new finding is that the role of stressful life events changes over the course of depressive episodes. The original theory was that the first depressive episode sensitizes an individual to stressful life events and thus it takes less stress to induce the second depressive episode. This theory has been instrumental in explaining the high rates of reoccurrence of depression and the short intervals between episodes (Shapero, et al., 2014). Alloy and Abramson’s team (Shapero, et al., 2014) has shown that the intensity and severity of childhood emotional abuse is a major factor in sensitizing individuals to stressful events. [1,830 words to here]


Efforts at prevention.

SEE ALSO: (Cross-References)

Intimate Partner Violence, Physical Violence, Sexual Violence, Coercive Control, & psychological terrorism
References


Further Reading

The best single book about recognizing and avoiding abusive relationships is by Lynn Fairweather (2012). *Stop signs: Recognizing, avoiding, and escaping abusive relationships*. Berkeley, CA: The Seal Press (a publisher of groundbreaking books by women for women)
Victims of abuse need counseling and supportive relationships. Some of these can come from formal therapy but supportive, understanding friends, family and partners can play a major role in recovery.


In our experience, reading the autobiographical accounts of women who have broken free may be the best medicine of all. A few of our favorites are


Maiuro, R. D. (2001). *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will also hurt me: Psychological abuse in domestically violent relationships*. New York: Springer.

