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### **Psychologically Abusive Relationships and Self-Disclosure Orientations**

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**Abstract**

This study examines gender differences with respect to the relationships between perceived psychological abuse experienced in dating relationships and several dimensions of self-disclosure. One hundred sixty-six (62 male, 104 female) undergraduate students completed the Revised Self Disclosure Scale (RSDS) and the Psychological Abuse Scale (PAS) referring to their most recent former unpleasant dating partner. Openness, control of depth, positiveness, and honesty/accuracy dimensions of self-disclosure were negatively related to the level of psychological abuse experienced during dating. Moreover, the correlation between the level of psychological abuse and the amount of self disclosure differed for male and female respondents. Implications for future research in the area of psychological abuse and communication are presented.

## **Psychologically Abusive Relationships and Self-Disclosure Orientations**

Relational abuse frequently involves inherently communicative acts, such as verbal and physical expressions of dominance, that result in feelings of guilt, fear and powerlessness among the victims of abusers (Tolman, 1992). Likewise, social humiliation, hostile interaction, and issuing orders are other communication actions considered to represent relationally abusive activity (Hoffman, 1984; Kasper, 1982; Walker, 1979). Described as the “most powerful coercive technique experienced in a battering relationship” (Walker, 1979, p.172; see also Okun, 1986; Tolman & Bhosley, 1991; Walker, 1984), verbal battering and threats of humiliation or violence can only occur through acts of communication (O’Leary, 1999). Thus, it is clear that the psychological dimension of abusive relationships is communicative in its very nature.

Although many researchers agree that effective communication is essential for healthy intimate relationships (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993, Noller 1981; Sabourin, 1991), the lack thereof may permit abusiveness in dating relationships. Consequently, understanding the association between communicative orientations and perceived relational abuse would have extensive heuristic significance relative to the initiation and evolution of abuse in interpersonal relationships. The specific purpose of this study is to examine gender differences relative to the relationship between perceptions of psychological abuse in relationships and self-disclosure orientations.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

#### **Psychological Abuse**

Recently, a substantial number of studies have examined the communication implications of psychological abuse (Marcus and Swett, 2002; Harned, 2002; Follingstad and Dehart, 2000; Katz, Arias and Beach, 2000; O’Leary, 1999). While numerous definitions have been offered for this construct, psychological abuse is often described as a form of mind control that employs threats to the physical and social well being of the victim (Hoffman, 1984). For example, Follingstad and Dehart (2000) report that the psychological abuse displayed by males to their female spouses tend to cluster into five categories: threats to physical health, control over physical freedoms, general destabilization (intimidation, degradation, isolation/restriction/monopolizing, destabilizing perceptions), dominating-controlling (jealousy/suspicion, isolation/restriction/monopolization, control of personal behavior, emotional withholding/blackmail, verbal abuse, treatment as inferior), and ineptitude (rigid gender roles, role failure). Clearly, while there are numerous manifestations of psychological abuse most reflect “direct infliction of mental harm” or “limits to the victim’s well-being” (Gondolf, 1987, p. 97). Specifically, Loring (1994) indicates that psychological abuse occurs when the essential ideas, feelings, perceptions, and personality characteristics of the victim are constantly belittled.

Psychological abuse research has focused on a range of relationship levels: high school/courtship relationships (Foshee, 1996; Bergman, 1992), college-level dating partners (Pipes and LeBov-Keeler, 1997; Kasian and Painter, 1992; White and Koss, 1991), pre-marital couples (McLaughlin, Lenord, Senchak, 1992; Makepeace, 1989), and married couples (O’Leary and Jouriles, 1994; Marshall, 1994). White and Koss (1991) report 80% to 90% of women experience some type of psychological abuse. Harned (2002) further reports that 82% of women and 87% of men reported experiencing psychological aggression from a dating partner. For 18-24 year olds, 20% of the dating population reported the presence of violent behaviors (Stets and Straus, 1990). Further, prevalence of abuse is noted more in relationships where couples are more committed and have dated longer (Sugarman and Hotaling, 1989; Sharp and Taylor, 1999).

Psychologically abusive relationships are said to have a direct negative impact on women's emotional health (e.g., Molidor, 1995; Raymond and Bruschi, 1989). Women in abusive relationships often report that the psychological impact of belittling and threatening verbal behaviors have a continuing negative impact on their emotional well-being (Greenfield et al., 1998; McFarlane, Wilson, Malecha, & Lemmey, 2000; Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause and Polek, 1990; Foster, Veale, and Fogel, 1989). In addition, many victims report that the level of psychological abuse they experienced in these relationships was more damaging than the physical abuse they endured. Tolman and Bhosley (1991) found that psychological abuse was a powerful predictor of women's psychosocial problems. Reports from battered women suggest that the harmful effects of psychological abuse on self-esteem and recovery are more prolonged and emotionally devastating (Dobash and Dobash, 1981; Okun, 1986; Walker, 1984). Straus, Sweet and Vissing (1989) report the more verbal aggression a woman experiences from her spouse, the greater the probability that she will be depressed. In essence, victims of psychological abuse have lower self-esteem and negative self-views (Katz, Street and Arias, 1997).

### **Self-Disclosure**

Self-disclosure occurs when one person reveals thoughts, feelings and ideas to another (Rosenfeld, 1979; Cozby, 1973; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976). The tendency to engage in these behaviors is predicated on the notion that the target of disclosure is a person of good will (Jourard, 1971), as typically found in successful dating relationships. Self-disclosure tends to build trust and increases the likelihood of intimacy in relationships (Rosenfeld, 1979). Trust in one's dating partner is clearly antecedent to a willingness to disclose personal information (e.g. Jourard, 1971; Wheelless and Grotz, 1977; and Wheelless, 1978). Intimacy involves revealing positive or negative feelings in relationships (Prager, 1995). Intimate relationships are based on high degrees of depth and intent of self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure is associated with many benefits that are essential to the development and maintenance of good interpersonal relationships (Rosenfeld, 1979). Self-disclosure has been associated with need fulfillment and maintaining harmony in close relationships (Prager, 1995). Additionally, self-disclosure promotes mental health by decreasing self-alienation (Gergen, 1971). Other benefits of self-disclosure include increased attraction, liking, loving (Egan, 1970).

Self-disclosure also involves risks and may result in avoidance. Perceived harmful consequences form a basis for avoiding self-disclosure. Rosenfeld (1979) found that women avoid self-disclosure when they wish to avoid personal hurt and problems with the relationship; and men may avoid self-disclosure to maintain control that would be hampered by self-disclosure. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identified four risks associated with self-disclosure: rejection, reduction of personal autonomy and integrity, loss of control or self-efficacy and hurting or embarrassing the listener.

Thus, it would be reasonable to assert that generally self-disclosure in dating relationships is precipitated by positive perceptions of one's dating partners and expectations of positive outcomes from self disclosure. Moreover, this can be further delineated by the five factors associated with the self-disclosure concept by Wheelless and Grotz (1977): intention (or openness), amount, control of depth, positive/negative, and honesty/accuracy. The authors go on to conclude that higher individualized trust in targets of disclosure (as opposed to lesser trust) is related to more consciously intended disclosure and greater amounts of disclosure. Wheelless (1978) found that the amount, depth, and honesty factors were positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the partner. Varying degrees of disclosure are clearly related to varying

degrees of perceptions of trustworthiness. Reasoning that as psychological abuse escalates, the self-disclosure pattern will be appropriately adjusted as a function of decreased trust, the following hypotheses covering the five factors of self-disclosure were generated:

- H1: Perceived psychological abuse and openness of self-disclosure will be negatively correlated.
- H2: Perceived psychological abuse and amount of self-disclosure will be negatively correlated.
- H3: Perceived psychological abuse and depth of self-disclosure will be negatively correlated.
- H4: Perceived psychological abuse and positiveness of self-disclosure will be negatively correlated.
- H5: Perceived psychological abuse and honesty/accuracy of self-disclosure will be negatively correlated.

### **Sex Differences**

Historically, psychological abuse literature has focused on women's experiences of abuse. Foshee (1996) indicates that females report more victimization than males. No gender differences in the amount of victimization from threatening behaviors were found. For males and females, the most common type of psychological abuse received was emotional manipulation followed by monitoring (Foshee, 1996). Additionally, females reported more perpetration than males of emotional manipulation. Reports of psychological abuse may be minimized by women as a mechanism to reduce stress and anxiety or in fear of retaliation from her partner (Tolman, 1992). Also, non-traditional women perceived more abuse than traditional women (DeGregoria, 1987). Men also claim to be victims of abuse, when confronted with their abusive behavior towards their partner (Foshee, 1996). Tolman (1989); Straus et al. (1989) report that men are more likely than women to minimize reports of psychological maltreatment at intake, as compared with their partner's reports.

Rubin, Hill, Peplau, and Dunkel-Schetter (1980) generally support the notion that women self-disclose more than men. Additionally, men were found to reveal their strengths while women are more likely to reveal their fears. Clearly, women are more frequently negatively impacted by experienced psychological abuse than men.

On the basis of the preceding literature review reflecting the potential impact of sex differences in the context of psychological abuse, the following generalized research question was generated:

- RQ: To what extent do males and females differ with respect to the relationship between perceived psychological abuse and self-disclosure factors?

### **Method**

#### **Procedures**

As part of a larger study, participants were asked to write down the initials of their most recent former, unpleasant dating partner. Responses to questions about their self-disclosure patterns and the perceived psychological abusive behaviors displayed by their former dating partner were then answered relative to that specific relationship. Participation was voluntary and

took place during regular class time. Credit toward a departmental research requirement in the aforementioned course was awarded for participation in this study.

### Participants

Participants (N=166) were recruited from an undergraduate communication studies class at a southwestern university. There were 104 females and 62 males volunteered for the study. The mean age for these survey respondents was 19.2 years. The average time since terminating the negative relationship described above was 12.9 months. The distribution of study participants by class was; Freshman = 95, Sophomore = 50, Junior = 15 and Senior = 6.

### Measures

**Psychological Abuse Scale (PAS).** The PAS is a 15-item instrument constructed by Pipes and LeBov-Keeler (1997) reflecting one partner's perception of the amount of psychologically abusive activity by their partner. This scale contains items from Straus' (1979) Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS) and those published by Hoffman (1984) and Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1986). The PAS allows for the participants to endorse, on a seven-point Likert-type scale (0 = never; 1 = once; 2 = twice; 3 = three to five times; 4 = six to ten times; 5 = eleven to twenty times; more than twenty times) how many times their recent, unpleasant former dating partner behaved in psychologically abusive manners. Pipes and LeBov-Keeler (1997) reported acceptable reliability for the PAS ( $\alpha = .89$ ). In the current study, internal consistency was also acceptable ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Revised Self-Disclosure Scale (RSDS).** The RSDS measured each respondent's report of their self-disclosure to a targeted former dating partner during/following psychological abusive activity. RSDS is a five-factor self-disclosure instrument with a 7-step Likert-type response pattern where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree (Wheeless, 1978). In the Wheeless (1978) study, internal consistency for the five dimensions ranged from .84 to .91. In the present study,  $\alpha$  coefficients for each scale were as follows: Openness of Self-Disclosure = .71, Amount of Self-Disclosure = .78, Positive/Negative Self-Disclosure = .82, Control of Depth of Self-Disclosure = .76, Honesty/Accuracy of Self-Disclosure = .81, and Psychological Abuse = .87.

### Results

Openness of self-disclosure (see table 1) was significantly, negatively correlated with perceived psychological abuse for the entire sample ( $r = -.31$ ,  $df = 165$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and for males ( $r = -.28$ ,  $df = 65$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and females ( $r = -.35$ ,  $df = 103$ ,  $p < .05$ ). No significant difference was indicated between male and female correlations ( $Z = .85$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The analysis provided substantial support for H1.

**Table 1: Openness of Self-Disclosure**

| <u>Abusive Actions</u>    | <u>Open-All</u> | <u>Open-Males</u> | <u>Open-Females</u> |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Insulting                 | -.16*           | -.07              | -.21*               |
| Spiteful                  | -.18*           | -.22*             | -.17*               |
| Critical                  | -.18*           | -.02              | -.29                |
| Sulked                    | -.04            | -.02              | -.05                |
| Stomped Out               | -.06            | -.16              | -.02                |
| Your Guilt                | -.21*           | -.31*             | -.17*               |
| Restrict Yr Interactions  | -.30*           | -.38*             | -.27*               |
| Disregarded Yr Feelings   | -.27*           | -.13              | -.24*               |
| Denied Your Perceptions   | -.23*           | -.15              | -.26*               |
| No tenderness             | -.08            | -.04              | -.11                |
| Accused You of Cheating   | -.12            | -.34*             | .00                 |
| Issued Orders             | -.29*           | -.33*             | -.30*               |
| Degraded You              | -.27*           | -.23*             | -.30*               |
| Took No Responsibility    | -.18*           | -.20              | -.16*               |
| Unreliable                | -.25*           | -.17              | -.29*               |
| Total Psychological Abuse | -.31*           | -.28*             | -.35*               |

\* p< .05

Amount of self-disclosure (see table 2) was not

**Table 2: Amount of Self-Disclosure**

| <u>Abusive Actions</u>     | <u>Amt.-All</u> | <u>Amt.-Males</u> | <u>Amt.-Females</u> |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Insulting                  | .02             | .20               | -.09                |
| Spiteful                   | .01             | .13               | .07                 |
| Critical                   | -.04            | .19               | -.20*               |
| Sulked                     | .10             | .20               | .04                 |
| Stomped Out                | .01             | .08               | -.04                |
| Your Guilt                 | -.00            | .18               | -.10                |
| Restricted Yr Interactions | .06             | .12               | .03                 |
| Disregarded Yr Feelings    | .06             | .29*              | -.09                |
| Denied Your Perceptions    | .05             | .18               | -.02                |
| No tenderness              | -.02            | .18               | -.15                |
| Accused You of Cheating    | -.01            | .13               | -.09                |
| Issued Orders              | -.01            | .03               | -.05                |
| Degraded You               | .03             | .28*              | -.15                |
| Took No Responsibility     | .14*            | .25*              | .08                 |
| Unreliable                 | .10             | .29*              | -.01                |
| Total Psychological Abuse  | .06             | .28*              | -.10                |

- p< .05
-

significantly, negatively correlated with perceived psychological abuse for the entire sample ( $r = .06$ ,  $df = 165$ ,  $p > .05$ ) nor for females ( $r = -.10$ ,  $df = 103$ ,  $p > .05$ ). However, a significant positive correlation was indicated for males ( $r = .28$ ,  $df = 65$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A significant difference was indicated between male and female correlations ( $Z = -2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus H2 was not supported.

Control of Depth of self-disclosures (see table 3) was

**Table 3: Control of the Depth of Self-Disclosure**

| <u>Abusive Actions</u>       | <u>Cont-All</u> | <u>Cont-Males</u> | <u>Cont-Females</u> |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Insulting                    |                 | -.09              | -.10                |
| Spiteful                     |                 | -.10              | -.09                |
| Critical                     | -.10            | -.13              | -.08                |
| Sulked                       | -.24*           |                   | -.30*               |
| Stomped Out                  | -.11            | -.11              | -.12                |
| Your Guilt                   | -.03            | -.04              | -.02                |
| Restricted Your Interactions | -.08            | .04               | -.15                |
| Disregarded Your Feelings    | -.06            | -.22*             | .05                 |
| Denied Your Perceptions      | -.07            | -.16              | -.02                |
| No tenderness                | -.05            | -.23*             | .07                 |
| Accused You of Cheating      | -.04            | -.11              | .01                 |
| Issued Orders                | -.01            | .04               | -.05                |
| Degraded You                 | .01             | -.08              | .09                 |
| Took No Responsibility       | -.17*           |                   | -.18                |
| Unreliable                   | -.15*           |                   | -.18                |
| Total Psychological Abuse    | -.15*           | -.19              | -.12                |

\*  $p < .05$

significantly, negatively correlated with perceived psychological abuse for the entire sample ( $r = -.15$ ,  $df = 165$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and for males ( $r = -.19$ ,  $df = 65$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The female correlation ( $r = -.12$ ) was directionally supportive but did not approach significance ( $df = 103$ ,  $p > .05$ ). No significant differences were indicated between male and female correlations ( $Z = .42$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The analysis provided support for H3.

Positive self-disclosure (see table 4) was significantly, negatively correlated with perceived psychological abuse for the entire sample ( $r = -.22$ ,  $df = 165$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and for females ( $r = -.26$ ,  $df = 103$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The correlation for males ( $r = -.18$ ,  $df = 65$ , NS) was not significant. No significant differences were detected between male and female correlations ( $Z = .85$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The analysis provided support for H4.

**Table 4: Positive/Negative Self-Disclosure**

| <u>Abusive Actions</u>     | <u>Pos-All</u> | <u>Pos-Males</u> | <u>Pos-Females</u> |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Insulting                  |                | -.13*            | -.10               |
| Spiteful                   |                | -.10             | -.14               |
| Critical                   | -.19*          | .00              | -.31*              |
| Sulked                     | -.12           | -.04             | -.15               |
| Stomped Out                | -.20*          | -.15             | -.25*              |
| Your Guilt                 | -.18*          | -.07             | -.23*              |
| Restricted Yr Interactions | -.16*          | -.05             | -.22*              |
| Disregarded Yr Feelings    | -.11           | -.12             | -.09               |
| Denied Your Perceptions    | -.09           | -.13             | -.05               |
| No tenderness              | .03            | -.13             | .10                |
| Accused You of Cheating    | -.11           | -.25*            | -.04               |
| Issued Orders              | -.16*          | -.21*            | -.16*              |
| Degraded You               | -.24*          | -.22*            | -.27*              |
| Took No Responsibility     | -.07           | .00              | -.08               |
| Unreliable                 | -.20*          | -.21*            | -.19*              |
| Total Psychological Abuse  | -.22*          | -.18             | -.26*              |

\*  $p < .05$ 

The honesty/accuracy of self-disclosure (see table 5) was

**Table 5: Honesty/Accuracy of Self-Disclosure**

| <u>Abusive Actions</u>     | <u>Hon-All</u> | <u>Hon-Males</u> | <u>Hon-Females</u> |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Insulting                  | -.07           | -.12             | -.04               |
| Spiteful                   | .00            | -.13             | .07                |
| Critical                   | -.15*          | -.19             | -.13               |
| Sulked                     | -.01           | .02              | -.15               |
| Stomped Out                | -.15*          | -.09             | -.19*              |
| Your Guilt                 | -.12           | -.09             | -.13               |
| Restricted Yr Interactions | -.13*          | -.14             | -.14               |
| Disregarded Yr Feelings    | -.02           | .02              | -.03               |
| Denied Your Perceptions    | -.06           | -.04             | -.07               |
| No tenderness              | .01            | -.02             | .03                |
| Accused You of Cheating    | -.14*          | -.20             | -.11               |
| Issued Orders              | -.09           | -.01             | -.17               |
| Degraded You               | -.16*          | -.21*            | -.12               |
| Took No Responsibility     | -.09           | -.09             | -.08               |
| Unreliable                 | -.17*          | .07              | -.30*              |
| Total Psychological Abuse  | -.15*          | -.12             | -.17*              |

 $p < .05$

significantly, negatively correlated with perceived psychological abuse for the entire sample ( $r = -.15$ ,  $df = 165$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and for females ( $r = -.17$ ,  $df = 103$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The male correlation ( $r = -.12$ ,  $df = 65$ ,  $p > .05$ ) was not significant. No significant differences were indicated between male and female correlations ( $Z = -1.90$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The analysis provided support for H5. On four of the five correlations between self-disclosure factors and perceived psychological abuse no significant differences were detected in the correlations for males and females. However, males and females differed with respect to the amount of disclosure. For males the correlation between the amount of disclosure and perceived psychological abuse by a dating partner was positive ( $r = .28$ ) while the correlation for females was weak and negative ( $r = -.10$ ).

### Discussion

As predicted, there were significant negative relationships between the amount of perceived psychological abuse and the amount of openness of self disclosure, the degree that one controls the depth of disclosures, the nature of the positive-negative orientation of self-disclosures, and the extent of the honesty/accuracy in one's disclosures. Only the amount of self-disclosure was not correlated with the amount of abuse over the entire sample, likely the result of the differences in directionality for male and female correlations. It appears that some aspects of disclosure provide both an opportunity and rationale for abuse by a partner so inclined. Conversely, the abusiveness by a partner may produce a pattern of caution in self-disclosure by the abuse target. The relationship between self-disclosure patterns and psychological abuse deserves further investigation. The effect of abuse on related constructs, such as the impact of abuse on the self-esteem of the abused partner, and the role of coping styles such as repression-sensitization, merit further examination in this context.

Although four of the five self-disclosure factors were significantly and negatively correlated with the amount of psychological abuse, the degree of correlation was quite modest. To further explore this unexpected result, a more detailed examination of the different types of psychological abuse contained in the measure was conducted by examining each abuse item in the measure. Each of the four self-disclosure factors related to overall perceptions of abuse was significantly related to only some of the abusive behaviors—and rarely the same abusive behaviors. Table 6 displays the number of

**Table 6: Self-Disclosure and Psychologically Abusive Actions**

| Disclosure Factor | Number of Related Abusive Actions | Overall Factor Correlation |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Openness          | 10                                | -.31*                      |
| Amount            | 1                                 | .06                        |
| Control           | 3                                 | -.15*                      |
| Positive          | 8                                 | -.22*                      |
| Honesty           | 6                                 | -.15*                      |

\*  $P < .05$

individual abuse actions that maintained a significant negative correlation with each self-disclosure factor relative to the possible number of 15 abuse actions. A more detailed analysis is contained in Tables 1—5 in which individual scale items were correlated with the number of

times each abusive action occurred, indicate that some facets of self-disclosure orientation are associated with particular abuse actions than are others. Future research should attempt to examine the impact of psychological abuse on particular types of self disclosure behavior.

In addition, future researchers should shift from cross-sectional and descriptive research, such as the one employed in this study, to more elaborate and experimental designs. The focus of these studies would be to more fully explicate the causal relations between abuse and self-disclosure. Moreover, differences in male and female reactions to the abuse of a dating partner merits further detailed examination. Finally, the emergence of same-sex dating partners as well as opposite-sex dating partners requires further research to pursue the extent to which the sex combinations within a dating relationship may impact the evolution and response pattern associated with abuse and self-disclosure.

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