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Perception of Non-physical Abuse in Intimate Partner Relationships

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Introduction

Non-physical Abuse

• Non-physical abuse is believed to be comprised of a range of behaviors that qualify as extreme violations of relationship behavior that surpass non-physical aggression (Follingstad, 2011).
• Researchers believe that rates of non-physical abuse may be similar or greater than rates of physical abuse because non-physical abuse almost always occurs in the presence of physical abuse (e.g., Hennings & Klesges, 2003).
• Non-physical abuse is difficult to isolate and its effects are difficult to study for several reasons.
- definition/conceptual disagreement
- measurement difficulty
- high concordance rates with physical abuse
- inability of individuals to recognize this behavior as abusive.

The Tip of the Iceberg Theory

First Degree: Verbal Abuse

• proposed as words, tone, or body language that communicate hostility and may be short in duration
• least severe form of non-physical abuse
• includes behaviors such as name-calling, swearing at, and insulting an individual.

Second Degree: Emotional Abuse

• proposed to occur over a longer period of time
• may negatively affect the target’s emotional health or gain compliance from the target.
• behaviors may include threats of abandonment, outbursts of anger, and withholding affection/love, etc.

Third Degree: Psychological Abuse

• proposed to be the most severe form of non-physical abuse
• behaviors are meant to control and/or destroy certain aspects of the receiver.
• examples include deception, manipulation, and threats/intimidation that were intended to erode the target’s self-worth and perception of self. (James and Mackinnon, 2010)

Current Study

• Although the Tip of the Iceberg Theory conceptualizes how different forms of non-physical abuse may vary and effect recipients of non-physical abuse differently, this hypothesis has not yet been tested.
• The goal of this study is to test a theoretical model of non-physical abuse that may be helpful in clarifying the definition of different forms of non-physical abuse for researchers, clinicians, and lay people.
• Based on the theory outlined in the introduction, we predict that participants’ perceptions of severity of non-physical abuse will vary according to the degree of non-physical abuse that they read about in couples’ interactions vignettes.
• Specifically, as the degree of the non-physical abuse increases in the relationship scenarios (i.e., verbal, emotional, and psychological), participants’ ratings of abusiveness or perceptions of abusiveness will also increase.

Participants

• Participants will be approximately 100 undergraduate students from the University of Dayton, between the ages of 18 and 25 years old.

Measures

Vignettes. Fifteen vignettes will be developed for the study. Each vignette will discuss a situation about a couple, in which one partner engages in non-physically abusive behavior(s) towards the other partner. These vignettes will differ in behaviors and intent that the authors believe is associated with each type of non-physical abuse. Participants will rate each vignette on a 9-point rating scale (1= not abusive (non-physically) at all to 9= extremely abusive (non-physically)).

Demographic/background information questionnaire. Each participant will complete a questionnaire evaluating demographic information. Items will relate to sex, age, ethnicity/race, relationship status, length of relationship, etc.

Anticipated Results

Preliminary Analyses

• Descriptive statistics of demographic variables, and ratings of non-physical abusiveness from the vignettes.

Primary Analyses

• An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be used to determine whether significant differences exist between verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse vignettes.
• We predict that significant differences will be found in severity ratings of verbal, emotional, and psychological abusiveness vignettes.

References