

Psychological Abuse in Chinese Women: A Qualitative Study

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***Editor's Note:** Common in relationships where there is also physical violence, psychological abuse has always been very difficult to define. Culture further complicates things, as what might seem psychologically abusive in one culture may not seem so in another. This article describes the results of a qualitative study in China comparing the stories of psychological abuse between women who are in physically abusive relationships and women who are not being abused. The results of this study further strengthen the notion that context is important to understand the effects of psychological abuse within abusive relationships.*

INTRODUCTION

In the past two to three decades, increasing interest in the phenomenon of non-physical aggression in intimate relationships has brought about scales designed to measure (e.g., Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Rodenburg & Fantuzzo, 1993; Shepherd & Campbell, 1992; Tolman, 1989) and interventions (e.g., Evans, 1992; Loring, 1994) purported to treat the effects of what is now generally termed “psychological abuse.” However, despite the growth of clinical and research literature related to psychological abuse, there is still no consensus about its meaning and identification (O’Leary, 2001; Follingstad, 2007). Further, whether such a complex phenomenon can be approximately captured using quantitative measurement methods

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without taking into account the context of the reported behaviors has been questioned (Follingstad, 2007).

The issue of context is a salient one. Previously, Murphy and Cascardi (1993) have cautioned that psychologically aggressive behaviors may be “experienced very differently in the context of a mutually satisfactory nonviolent relationship, a distressed nonviolent relationship, or a violent relationship” (p. 91). Tolman has also suggested the need to consider the context and motive of the act in order to decide if negative behaviors in intimate relationships constitute a pattern of psychological maltreatment (R.M. Tolman, personal communication, September 11, 2008). In addition, a psychological action may be considered abusive in the context of one culture but may not be so in another. For example, “gave you angry stares or looks”; “ended a discussion abruptly and made the decision himself”; and “got upset over dinner or housework” are considered as abusive in Neufeld, McNamara, and Ertl’s (1999) list of psychological abuse behaviors in Western literature. However, the same behaviors may not be viewed as abusive when presented to women brought up in traditional Chinese culture, which emphasizes the need for a woman to be submissive to her husband (Tang & Lai, 2008) and condones the husband’s right to use punishment to bring his wayward wife into line (Chan, 2009). Indeed, the relatively low prevalence rates of psychological abuse detected in many of the Chinese studies may be due to the use of measurement scales that have not considered the context of the intimate relationship in question (Tiwari et al., 2009).

Interestingly, in earlier studies (Chan, 2005; Leung et al., 1999; Tiwari et al., 2005; Tiwari et al., 2007) some Chinese women found ridicule to be the most negative form of abuse among their partners’ psychological behaviors, similar to that reported in Western literature (Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Street & Arias, 2001). Many of them have also indicated that their partners’ psychologically abusive behaviors have caused them fear and/or distress (Tiwari et al., 2007). Although the women did not go into detail about the context of their intimate relationship when completing the pen and paper measure, a number of factors (such as the intention and outcome of the act, the particular history of the behavior in question, and the broader relationship history) appeared to influence the women’s decision as to whether their partners’ behaviors were psychologically abusive or not. These women have confirmed what has been known for some time that psychological abuse rarely occurs in a vacuum and that measurement of particular psychological behaviors should include an understanding of the psychological meanings that are placed upon such behaviors by the recipients (Follingstad, 2007).

In this study what constituted psychological abuse in intimate relationships was explored in depth from Chinese women’s perspectives. Also, the reality within which the abuse took place was elicited from the women in order to gain a better understanding of this complex phenomenon and

hopefully pave the way for more sophisticated strategies to identify and measure psychological abuse.

METHODS

A descriptive qualitative approach was used to explore in depth Chinese women's experiences of psychological abuse in intimate relationships. A purposive sample of 14 abused women and 10 non-abused women was selected for the study. Non-abused women were included in the sample so as to provide normative data of psychological tactics that may be used during conflicts in non-abusive relationships. The normative data were used to compare and contrast with those found in abusive relationships. Knowing what is normative when couples have conflict may also reduce the tendency to label any form of psychological aggression as abusive (Follingstad, 2007).

Abused women in this study were those residing in a shelter for battered women. The shelter was one of four in Hong Kong. All the shelters were similar in terms of residents' characteristics and abusive histories. Invitations to participate in the study were announced at the shelter's weekly house meetings. The principal investigator (PI) contacted those who had expressed an interest in participating and provided a full explanation of the study and their rights as research subjects to ensure informed consent. Those who agreed to participate were asked to sign a written consent form.

Non-abused women in this study were employees or users of a large charitable organization in Hong Kong. The women responded to notices inviting their participation in a research project. Informed written consent was obtained from those who voluntarily agreed to participate in the same way that was used for recruiting abused women. In addition, at entry to study, the Chinese Abuse Assessment Screen (Tiwari et al., 2007) was administered to ensure that none of the informants in the non-abused group had a current or past history of intimate partner violence. Two of them were screened positive and excluded from the study after receiving counseling and/or referral with their agreement.

Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreeable time and location. For the abused group, the interviews were conducted in the shelter. For the non-abused group, the interviews were conducted in a room provided by the charitable organization. A focus group format was used to enhance the breadth and depth of the interview data. The choice of focus group was deliberate as the PI had found, through earlier contacts with women in the shelter, that they were often inhibited when attempting to express their feelings or personal experience during an individual interview. However, they were more open and talkative in the company of other women in a group setting. In all, five focus group interviews were conducted with three for the abused group and two for the non-abused group. Abused and non-abused women were interviewed separately in their own group. The average duration of the interviews was about two hours (ranging from 1.5 to 2.5 hours). The interviews were conducted in

Cantonese, a dialect spoken by all the informants, and audio-recorded with their permission.

A warm-up question, "Can you tell me what it has been like for you living with your partner?", was used to encourage the women to start talking about their relationships. This was followed by, "When you and your partner have conflicts, what would your partner say or do to you and what would you say or do to your partner?" Additional questions were used to elicit more details about the nature, frequency, trigger, and impact of the behavior reported, as well as their interpretation of the partner's behavior and their response to it. They were also invited to describe their feeling towards their partner in light of the latter's behavior and what, if anything, they would like to happen in order to address their relationship. Where appropriate, they were encouraged to provide anecdotal examples for a more vivid description of their intimate relationship.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim into spoken Cantonese in order to maximize retention of the original meanings and nuances of the utterances. The PI and the co-investigator (KHY) conducted the data analysis independently before examining critically the analytic categories and interpretations. Modifications were made to the interpretations and conclusions after several rounds of critical discussion. A reflexive journal was kept to document data analysis procedures, insights, and analytic decision-making.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Informants

All 24 informants (14 abused and 10 non-abused) were Chinese and their age ranged from 23 to 44 years (33.5 ± 10.3). Ten of the abused women were in the process of divorcing their partners while four were undecided as to whether they would stay in the relationship. All 10 non-abused women were married and living with their partners. Immigrants from China made up 11 (79%) of those in the abused group and three (30%) in the non-abused group. Nine (82%) of the abused women and two (67%) of the non-abused women were immigrants from Mainland China and had come to Hong Kong in the past two years. The remaining of the informants were born and bred in Hong Kong. Only one (7%) of the abused women was employed while nine (90%) of the non-abused women were in paid jobs. Psychological abuse was reported by all in the abused group and physical and/or sexual abuse was reported by all but one of the abused women.

Psychological Aggression Reported

In response to the question, "When you and your partner have conflicts, what would your partner say or do to you?", some forms of psychological aggression were only reported by those in the abused group. The common ones were "restricting the amount of her activities outside the relationship," "constantly checking on her whereabouts," "making it difficult for her to work,"

“controlling how much she can spend,” “threatening to hurt her and/or the children,” and “threatening to report her to the authorities.”

Other forms of psychological aggression were reported by women in both groups. The common ones were “yelling or screaming at her,” “criticizing her for not doing the ‘right’ thing,” “saying derogatory things about her and/or her family,” “embarrassing her in public and/or in front of friends or family members,” “sulking,” and “ignoring her and/or her feelings.” Although both groups of women appeared to be reporting the same forms of behaviors, a more critical and in-depth examination has revealed that there were subtle differences between those reported by abused and non-abused women in terms of (i) frequency, (ii) what triggers the behavior, (iii) her interpretation of the partner’s behavior, (iv) her response to it, and (v) the impact of the behavior on her.

Frequency

Compared to those in the non-abused group, abused women generally reported that their partners used psychological aggression more frequently. For some, it can be as often as every day and throughout the day, as this woman recounted:

He starts drinking when he wakes up and he takes it out on me . . . I stay out of his way as far as I can but we live in a very small apartment . . . when I come home with the food, he gets mad with me for taking such a long time . . . but the walk to the market takes at least 20 minutes and I can’t be there and back within one hour as he insists . . . this goes on every day. . . .

—Informant A1, a mother with two young children, whose unemployed husband would not allow her to seek paid work, and whose whole family has been living on comprehensive social security assistance

What Triggers the Behavior

The common triggers reported by the non-abused group were disagreement over parenting, conflict between the woman and her mother-in-law, and her concern about his addiction to gambling. Women in the abused group were generally less clear about the triggers for their partners’ use of psychological aggression, as said by these women:

I never know when he will lose his temper on me . . . it’s like living with a time bomb . . . I don’t know when it will blow. . . .

—Informant A2, a young woman from a rural part of China, who came to Hong Kong about two years ago to be united with her husband who was about 30 years her senior and had been unemployed for a long time

He comes home about once a month . . . when he's home, he does not talk to me or the children . . . when he feels like it, he leaves us some money . . . but if he gets angry . . . and I don't know what makes him angry . . . he just storms out of the house and leaves us with no money. . . .

—Informant A3, a young mother with three children, whose husband, a business executive, has left her for another woman, his secretary

Interpretation of Partner's Behavior

Abused and non-abused women also differed in the way they interpreted their partners' behaviors. Informants in the non-abused group tended to interpret their partners' behaviors in relation to what triggered such behaviors:

Whenever we argue, it's always about our son . . . he does not like my way of bringing up our son but he does not do anything about it . . . it's not easy to be a parent and his constant criticism of my way only makes things worse . . . I hope our relationship will improve when our son grows up and leaves home. . . .

—Informant N1, an office worker with a teenage son, who described her 18-year marriage as having been marked by intermittent arguments and disagreements but never physical violence

He does not like my mother and calls her all sorts of awful names . . . he is always like that before and after family gatherings . . . I try to avoid having such gatherings as much as I can. . . .

—Informant N2, a co-worker of Informant N1 and a mother of two grown-up sons

Abused women's interpretations of their partners' behaviors appeared to be different from those of the non-abused group, as shown here:

One minute he's yelling at me . . . telling me how useless I am . . . and he will go back to her [his ex-wife] . . . then, all of a sudden, he is so kind to me . . . apologizing for what he's done to me and giving me money to buy a new dress . . . why do I keep on disappointing him . . . I wish I know how to make him proud of me. . . .

—Informant A4, came to Hong Kong nine months ago to join her twice-wed husband in Hong Kong, having given up her job as a receptionist in a hotel in China

I don't know anything . . . I only went to school for a few years because I had to work in my family's farm . . . Here (in Hong Kong) I get lost because I can't read . . . my husband shouts at me all the time because he has to do everything for me . . . finding a school for our daughter . . . taking her to the clinic . . . and I sit at home and do nothing . . . he thinks I am like the rest of them . . . that I will leave him once I get my HKID [permanent residence]. . . .

—Informant A5, a young woman with a three-year-old daughter and a 65-year-old husband who had just come to live in Hong Kong four months ago

Like many of the women in the abused group, these two informants blamed themselves for their partners' behaviors. Partly, it was due to their lack of confidence in themselves as they were in a new environment and without the support of their families or friends. Their partner's use of belittling behaviors may have further intensified their sense of worthlessness and tendency to blame themselves. Such self-blame was not observed in the non-abused group, probably because the women were financially independent, more confident, and resourceful.

Response to Partner's Behavior: Problem-Solving vs. Passive

Differences were also noted in the women's responses to their partners' behaviors. Non-abused women were more likely to employ a problem-solving approach than abused women:

My husband was getting more and more difficult to live with. He was sulking every morning before he went to work and was drinking quite a lot in the evening . . . If I asked him what's wrong, he would shout at me . . . I thought he might have problem at work . . . so I started to walk with him to the bus stop every morning . . . at first he ignored me and even told me to go away . . . but I persevered . . . after a while he started to tell me how much he dreaded going to work because of his boss and the work . . . I listened until he got on the bus . . . I kept doing this for several months . . . he's much happier now . . . and I still take the 20-minute walk to the bus stop with him every morning. . . .

—Informant N3, a housewife who described how she and her husband went through a very difficult time emotionally and what she did to save their marriage

When he lost everything he would come home and try to get more money from us . . . when I refused, he would get really mad at us . . . throwing things about and even threatening to hit me . . . my children and I have

been to classes for families of gamblers and we know what to do when he gets into a state like that. . . .

—Informant N4, a mother of three grown-up children, whose husband was a compulsive gambler

The abused women's accounts seemed to suggest that they were using a more passive approach to placate their partners:

I can tell from his footsteps and the way he opens the door that he is in a bad mood . . . I tell the children to go to their rooms and keep out of his way . . . we dare not make a sound or watch the television because the slightest bit of noise can upset him so much that he takes it out on me and the children. . . .

—Informant A6, who decided to leave her husband after enduring six years of partner violence

He comes to my workplace and accuses me of flirting with my boss or the customers . . . it's so embarrassing and humiliating . . . he calls me all the time on the phone when I am working . . . he locks me out if I am just five minutes late coming home . . . in the end, I have to give up my job . . . now I have to rely on his family to give us food and money and they don't understand why I gave up working. . . .

—Informant A7, a young woman who was a teacher in China before marrying her husband in Hong Kong 18 months ago

It is possible that the abused women adopted a passive approach in order to survive their partners' highly controlling behaviors as described by Informants A6 and A7. Also, the women might not be informed of their options in responding to partner violence. For example, informant A6 was misled by her husband that she could be sent back to China on his instigation as she had not been granted a permanent residency.

The Impact of the Behavior on the Women

For those in the abused group, their partners' behaviors had serious impact on them by inducing fear, as described by these two women:

It's not what he says . . . it's his look that frightens me . . . I know he is capable of hurting me and the kids

—Informant A8, a young mother of two children who sought refuge in the shelter after her husband threatened to throw her over the balcony from a high-rise block

I can't sleep properly at night even though I lock my bedroom door and he doesn't know where I am now . . . he has said that if he can't have me, no one can . . . I believe him. . . .

—Informant A9, who had been moving from one shelter to another as a victim of stalking by her estranged husband after many years of abuse

The fear reported by the abused women was likely to be due to the highly controlling behaviors used by their partners, including isolation, intimidation, and mental cruelty. While such behaviors were not reported by those in the non-abused group, and fear was not an expressed concern, distressed marital relationships still had a negative impact on non-abused women:

I am so depressed . . . my husband and I are hardly talking at all, the sulking and the cold war are taking a toll on me . . . and probably on him too . . . there seems to be no hope and no future. . . .

—Informant N5, who discovered that her husband was having an extramarital affair but she decided to stay with him for the sake of the children

CONCLUSIONS

What we have gleaned from the women's accounts has reiterated the importance of considering the context for interpersonal interaction when psychological aggression is reported in intimate relationships. Specifically, the use of controlling tactics is pivotal to the decision as to whether the behavior constitutes psychological abuse. Previously, psychological abuse in Chinese women was identified using measurement scales. The findings of this study have provided a strong case for going beyond measuring the frequency of a list of behaviors when dealing with a complex phenomenon such as psychological abuse. Recognizing that psychological abuse does not occur in a vacuum would help to advance its measurement. Acknowledging that a particular psychological behavior could be viewed differently from the recipient's, initiator's, and observer's perspectives would avoid an inaccurate understanding of this complex phenomenon. Research in the future might investigate the qualitative differences of the different psychologically abusive behaviors by using case-by-case analyses with extensive studies of the history, meaning, and context surrounding such behaviors. The intent of this study has been to gain a better understanding of psychological abuse experienced by Chinese women, and hopefully the women's stories have laid the foundation for a more sophisticated measurement of psychological abuse.

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