



The European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context

www.elsevier.es/ejpal



Group psychological abuse: Taxonomy and severity of its components

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Manuscript received: 30/05/2014

Revision received: 03/10/2014

Accepted: 14/11/2014

Keywords:

Psychological abuse
Interpersonal control
Groups
Severity
Taxonomy

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to delimit group psychological abuse through a psychosocial approach. An operational definition of the phenomenon and a taxonomy of group psychological abuse strategies were proposed based on a review of the scientific literature. A panel of 31 experts in the area evaluated the content of the taxonomy and judged the severity of the strategies through a Delphi study. Group psychological abuse was defined by the application of abusive strategies, their continued duration, and their ultimate aim, i.e., subjugation of the individual. The taxonomy showed adequate content validity. Experts' judgments allowed for hierarchically organizing the strategies based on their severity, being the most severe those directed to the emotional area. Operationalizing, classifying, and organizing the strategies hierarchically contributes to a better delimitation of the phenomenon, which is useful for both the academic and applied fields.

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Abuso psicológico en grupos: taxonomía y severidad de sus componentes

RESUMEN

Se diseñó un estudio con el propósito de delimitar el abuso psicológico en grupos desde una aproximación psicosocial. A partir de una revisión de la literatura científica, se propuso una definición del fenómeno y una taxonomía de las estrategias de abuso psicológico en grupos. Un panel de 31 expertos evaluó el contenido de la taxonomía y juzgó la severidad de las estrategias a través de un estudio Delphi. El abuso psicológico en grupos es definido por la aplicación de estrategias abusivas, su duración continuada y su objetivo último, el sometimiento del individuo. La taxonomía mostró una adecuada validez de contenido. El juicio de expertos permitió jerarquizar las estrategias en función de su severidad, siendo las más severas aquellas que inciden en el ámbito emocional. Operativizar, clasificar y jerarquizar las estrategias contribuye a una mejor delimitación del fenómeno, útil tanto en el campo académico como en el aplicado.

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Palabras clave:

Abuso psicológico
Control interpersonal
Grupos
Severidad
Taxonomía

Group Psychological Abuse (hereafter GPA) refers to a process that can occur in group settings with an intense, continued interaction associated with recruiting and maintaining followers (Langone & Chambers, 1991). This process involves a set of behaviors or strategies that combine forms relevant to the field of aggression, ranging from undue influence to interpersonal control, coercion, and abuse (Taylor, 2004).

These behaviors have been studied on the basis of the interpersonal relations that take place in different group settings, in particular those that have been called manipulative groups (Almendros, Gámez-Guadix, Carrobbles, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011). Some authors have studied these behaviors in elite sports teams (Stirling & Kerr, 2014), in youth gangs (Ulloa, Dyson, & Wynes, 2012), or in terrorist groups (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2009; Trujillo, Ramírez, & Alonso, 2009).

Psychological abuse applied in group settings has mainly been studied in manipulative groups, perhaps due to the unexpected nature of some destructive behaviors that can occur in them (Bohm & Alison, 2001). Some extreme evidence of these behaviors can be seen in the so-called collective suicides of People's Temple members in Guyana in 1978, Heaven's Gate members in San Diego (US) in 1997,

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or Ordre du Temple Solaire members in various locations (Switzerland, France, and Canada) in 1994 and 1995 (Dein & Littlewood, 2000). Multiple testimonies from former members of these types of groups report having suffered persistent forms of psychological abuse (e.g., Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Other studies have found clinically significant psychological symptoms and/or adjustment problems attributable to these abusive behaviors in this population (Aronoff, Linn, & Malinosky, 2000).

Despite the social relevance of GPA, the scientific community has not reached a strong consensus about the elements defining the phenomenon or the abusive behaviors found in group settings, even less than the degree of agreement about psychological abuse against the partner (Kelly, 2004). In addition, the severity of these behaviors, which is essential in predicting the damage suffered by their victims, has not been adequately evaluated. In order to contribute to improving the delimitation of GPA, this study aims to answer the following three questions:

What are the basic elements of GPA?

How can GPA behaviors be classified?

Do these abusive behaviors differ in terms of their severity?

Group Psychological Abuse

The study of the social influence processes in group settings has focused on mechanisms such as conformity, obedience, compliance, the power of group dynamics, or the factors explaining group influence, such as the strength, number, and immediacy of the sources of influence (Latané, 1981). However, most studies, which usually analyze legitimate and non-continuous episodes of social interaction, are not sufficient to explain some forms of influence that, exerted continuously over time in groups and due to their intensity, can include abusive components.

To designate the forms of undue influence, control, coercion, and abuse occurring on a continued basis in group settings, the term Group Psychological Abuse has been proposed (Langone & Chambers, 1991). In addition, other terms have been used in recent literature, such as emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2014) or intense indoctrination (Baron, 2000). The focus on psychological abuse involves the analysis of the abusive behaviors taking place in group settings, without prejudging the dynamics characterizing the entire group in which they occur (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). However, the first approaches to the study of the phenomenon came from investigations analyzing the practices of certain groups labeled as cults or manipulative groups.

Most definitions of psychological abuse in this type of groups mention the use of influence and abuse strategies. These strategies have been described as systematic and intentional (Langone, 1992), planned, coordinated, and hidden (Singer & Lalich, 1995), or manipulative and exploitative (Almendros et al., 2011). Some definitions have focused on the intended purposes of the abuse, such as controlling the group members (Singer & Lalich, 1995) or subordinating their well-being to the benefit of the leader (Almendros et al., 2011).

Other definitions of GPA highlight its adverse consequences for the people affected. Thus, it has been defined as a set of techniques that influence how people think, feel, and act, altering their identity (Hassan, 2013). Likewise, Langone (1992) stated that psychological abuse involves: (a) controlling information in order to manipulate thinking and judgment, (b) coercing choice, (c) fragmenting and altering personal identity, and (d) undermining feelings of self-worth.

The differences in the proposed definitions seem to confirm that psychological abuse, both in groups and in other settings where it has been studied, is an elusive phenomenon with dim limits (Almendros et al., 2011; Follingstad, 2007). Probably for this reason, the proposed definitions involve limitations such as being excessively broad and imprecise,

including elements that are hardly operational, or trying to delimit the abusive action by combining it with its possible consequences.

Classifications of the Group Psychological Abuse Strategies

As long as the different abusive behaviors and strategies are one of the key elements in defining GPA, it seems appropriate to delimit them as accurately as possible, so that they can be identified, evaluated, and prevented. Most studies attempting to delimit these strategies have proposed lists of abusive behaviors that can be applied in a group (e.g., Langone, 1982; West & Singer, 1980). Other investigations have focused on specifying the conditions that should be met in the group to enhance the implementation of these behaviors (Ofshe & Singer, 1986; Singer & Lalich, 1995).

The proposed classifications of psychological abuse strategies have mainly been based on four viewpoints according to: (a) the integration stage of the subject in the group where these strategies are usually applied (Baron, 2000; Clark, Langone, Schecter, & Daly, 1981; Zerlin, 1983); (b) the specific type of strategy (Andersen, 1985); (c) the degree of coercion characterizing them (Langone, as cited in Rodríguez-Carballeira, 1992); and (d) personal or situational components to which the action of each strategy is directed (Coates, 2012; Hassan, 2013; Rodríguez-Carballeira, 1992).

Other approaches to the classification of GPA strategies come from the measurement instruments proposed for the assessment of the phenomenon. The Group Psychological Abuse Scale (GPA-S; Almendros et al., 2012; Chambers et al., 1994) is divided into four subscales: Compliance, Exploitation, Anxious Dependency, and Mind Control; while the Across Groups Psychological Abuse and Control Scale (AGPAC; Wolfson, as cited in Almendros et al., 2011) is divided into three subscales: Emotional Abuse, Isolation-Control of Activity, and Verbal Abuse. In the development of the Individual Cult Experience Index (ICE; Winocur, Whitney, Sorensen, Vaughn, & Foy, 1997), questions related to controlling group members, emotional manipulation, and experiences of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse were considered. However, these authors suggested interpreting the overall instrument score as the "extent of exposure to cult experiences".

Some of the limitations identified in previous studies designed to delimit or evaluate GPA are: (a) including strategies labeled as abusive without defining them operationally; (b) covering only some abusive strategies that can occur in groups; (c) formulating some strategies by combining different types of abusive behaviors; and (d) highlighting the adverse consequences for people's health and well-being, either by mixing them with abusive strategies or considering them as strategies themselves. Based on these limitations, there is a clear need to develop more precise, comprehensive, and operational classifications of GPA strategies.

Severity of the Group Psychological Abuse Strategies

GPA usually produces substantial costs for the affected people, either in terms of money, time, missed opportunities, self-harm, or harm to their loved ones (Baron, 2000). Most studies evaluating former members of groups in which abusive behaviors were applied have found that a significant part of this population experienced psychological and social difficulties after leaving the group (Aronoff et al., 2000). Some of the difficulties involve establishing social relationships, cognitive deficits, feelings of loss, anger, blame and shame, depression, anxiety, dissociation, self-destructive tendencies, or post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Coates, 2010; Malinoski, Langone, & Lynn, 1999; Matthews & Salazar, 2014).

A person can experience a variety of abusive behaviors in a group that can lead to different costs or damages. Therefore, the severity, defined here as the degree of damage that can potentially be caused by each abusive behavior, is likely to differ among them (Follingstad, 2007). A priori, some behaviors characteristic of emotional abuse,

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