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Development and validation of the Psychological Abuse Experienced in Groups Scale

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is the development and analysis of the psychometric properties of a new instrument to assess the possible psychological abuse experienced in a group setting. The Psychological Abuse Experienced in Groups Scale was administered to 138 people who self-identified as former members of abusive groups. An exploratory factor analysis revealed a common factor, which showed appropriate reliability. The scale scores were correlated with a prior measure aimed to assess group abusiveness, providing evidence of external validity. Participants reported a higher degree of psychological distress than normative samples, and those who requested psychological counseling after leaving the group had suffered group psychological abuse to a greater extent. The scale covers a wide range of subtle and explicit abusive behaviors and overcomes the limitations of previous instruments, being useful in both research and applied settings.

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Desarrollo y validación de la Escala de Abuso Psicológico Experimentado en Grupos

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es el desarrollo y análisis de las propiedades psicométricas de un nuevo instrumento para evaluar el posible abuso psicológico experimentado por una persona en el seno de un grupo. La Escala de Abuso Psicológico Experimentado en Grupos se administró a 138 personas auto-identificadas como exmiembros de grupos abusivos. Mediante un análisis factorial exploratorio se extrajo un factor común que mostró una adecuada fiabilidad. Las puntuaciones de la escala correlacionaron con una medida previa que evalúa el grado de abuso que caracteriza a un grupo, aportando evidencias de validez externa. Los participantes reportaron un mayor grado de malestar psicológico que en muestras normativas y aquellos que buscaron atención psicológica tras abandonar el grupo reportaron haber sufrido abuso psicológico en mayor grado. La escala cubre un amplio rango de conductas abusivas tanto explícitas como sutiles y permite superar las limitaciones de instrumentos previos, resultando útil tanto en el campo académico como en el aplicado.

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This study describes a scale designed to assess psychological abuse behaviors that can be experienced in groups. Psychological abuse in group settings has mainly been studied in the so-called

cult or abusive groups, where abusive strategies are applied by a group leader or some of the members to recruit and retain other members (Langone & Chambers, 1991). Some sources suggest that there are over 5,000 abusive groups operating within the United States and Canada (Singer, 2003), with a combined membership of over 2,500,000 people (McCabe, Goldberg, Langone, & DeVoe, 2007). Former members of these types of groups report having suffered persistent forms of psychological abuse (e.g., Chambers,

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Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Matthews & Salazar, 2014), and several studies report negative post-involvement consequences (for a review, see Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinoski, 2000).

The concept *group psychological abuse* has been proposed to refer to the abusive practices of these types of groups (Langone & Chambers, 1991); it has been defined as a process of systematic and continuous application of pressure, control, manipulation, and coercion strategies for the purpose of dominating other people in order to achieve their submission to the group (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). Over the years, researchers have extensively documented psychologically abusive behaviors that may take place in group settings (e.g., Baron, 2000; Coates, 2012; Hassan, 2013; Langone, 1992; Singer, 2003). Examples of these behaviors include isolation from the family, control of sexual life, humiliation, denigration of critical thinking, and imposition of an absolute authority.

Prior studies have classified these behaviors according to the possible effects they can have on group members. In this regard, Langone (1992) classified psychologically abusive behaviors that can occur within groups according to whether they mainly disrespect individuals' minds, autonomy, identity, or dignity. Hassan (2013) classified them according to whether they are directed toward behaviors, information, thoughts, or emotions. These classifications have limitations because an abusive behavior may influence more than one psychological process. Moreover, some authors have stressed that the definition and assessment of group psychological abuse should focus on the abusive actions rather than on their possible psychological and social effects, which can have a different nature or seriousness and should be evaluated separately (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015).

Recently, a comprehensive taxonomy of group psychological abuse that focused on the delimitation of psychologically abusive behaviors was developed and validated by a panel of experts through a Delphi study (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). It is composed of 26 strategies classified into 6 components: (a) isolation, (b) control and manipulation of information, (c) control over personal life, (d) emotional abuse, (e) indoctrination within an absolute and Manichean belief system, and (f) imposition of a single and extraordinary authority. An operational definition for each component of the taxonomy is also provided.

Evaluation of Group Psychological Abuse

Efforts to evaluate group psychological abuse strategies from a rigorous, quantitative and empirical perspective are still recent. The Group Psychological Abuse scale (GPA; Chambers et al., 1994) was the first instrument designed to assess the degree and varieties of psychological abuse practices perceived within a group, and it is the only instrument with repeated evidence of its reliability, validity and utility (Almendros, Gámez-Guadix, Carrobes, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011). Other relevant scales are the Individual Cult Experience index (ICE; Winocur, Whitney, Sorensen, Vaughn, & Foy, 1997), which is designed to assess the extent of exposure to negative cult experiences through 47 items, and the Across Groups Psychological Abuse and Control scale (AGPAC; Wolfson, 2002), which contains 22 items structured in three dimensions: Emotional Abuse, Isolation-Control of Activity, and Verbal Abuse.

In spite of the strengths of the existing instruments, there is still room for improvement. These prior instruments were based on a variety of theoretical formulations and clinicians' experiences (Chambers et al., 1994), a list of group practices hypothesized to be related to post-involvement distress (Winocur et al., 1997), or a model of intimate partner violence (Wolfson, 2002). The lack of a comprehensive semantic definition of group psychological abuse that clearly differentiates its operative components, and the lack of

a table of specifications, may have led to the misrepresentation of severe abusive strategies and the over-representation of aspects that are not abusive strategies in themselves (Carretero-Dios & Pérez, 2005). Therefore, a semantic definition of the construct, such as the operational definitions of group psychological abuse components provided by Rodríguez-Carballeira et al. (2015), is a necessary step in the development of any instrument, in order to obtain theoretical content validity and ensure that the design process is not ambiguous or imprecise (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994).

Another limitation detected in prior instruments is that the content and wording of some items may not meet the standards specified by several authors (e.g., Haladyna, 2004; Morales, Urosa, & Blanco, 2003). On the one hand, the content of some items does not seem to be congruent with the construct domains. They do not specifically describe psychological abusive behaviors that could be applied within a group, but rather other aspects related to the phenomenon, such as sexual and physical abuse practices, the group's generic characteristics, its purposes, or its relationship with outsiders (e.g., ICE's item 34 is "The leader or members physically injured you or your loved ones to the extent that you or they needed medical care"; GPA's item 6 is "Gaining political power is a major goal of the group"). On the other hand, some items can have a variety of interpretations because they contain unclear and undefined words such as "mind control" or "coercive persuasion" (e.g., GPA's item 24 is "Mind control is used without conscious consent of members").

In addition, another practical limitation related particularly to the GPA is that this scale was intended to assess perceived group abusiveness, asking about psychologically abusive practices, whether experienced personally or not (Chambers et al., 1994). Thus, the scores on this scale involve judgements about the group as a whole and, therefore, have limited use in research or applied contexts where the interest lies in the individual experience of psychological abuse.

Consequences of Group Psychological Abuse

Some studies have hypothesized that the intensity and frequency of the abusive strategies experienced within a group are related to post-involvement psychological distress (Winocur et al., 1997) or other substantial consequences for the affected people (Baron, 2000). Along these lines, several studies have reported psychopathological symptoms and adjustment problems in samples of former members of abusive groups (e.g., Coates, 2010; Malinoski, Langone, & Lynn, 1999; Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Some of the difficulties involve low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, somatization, dissociation, or self-destructive tendencies (Aronoff et al., 2000). However, to date, very few empirical studies have examined the relationship between psychological distress and the abusive behaviors experienced using standardized measures (Winocur et al., 1997). The aforementioned mental health and adjustment problems explain the fact that some former members of abusive groups seek psychological care after leaving the group. To facilitate their empowerment, some authors have proposed that it is necessary to accurately assess their past experiences of abuse (Matthews & Salazar, 2014).

Relationship between Group Psychological Abuse and Biographical Variables

Prior empirical studies with samples of former members of abusive groups have not found differences in the perception of group abusiveness based on gender, age of participation, or other sociodemographic variables (e.g., Almendros et al., 2012). However, former members' evaluations of their group experiences could

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