

Intimate partner violence and depressive symptoms in women: Cognitive schemas as moderators and mediators

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Abstract

In this study the role of cognitive schemas as moderators and mediators between intimate partner violence and depressive symptoms was examined. The sample consisted of 312 women who had suffered an abusive relationship. Participants completed measures of physical, psychological and sexual abuse, maladaptive cognitive schemas (disconnection and rejection, autonomy, and other-directedness), and depression. The evidence for a moderation effect was low and mainly restricted to schemas of the impaired autonomy domain. In contrast, the results supported mediational models in which violence was associated to the cognitive schemas, and these in turn were associated to depressive symptoms. Mediation was partial, with the schemas of the disconnection and rejection domain explaining most of the association between violence and depression. Finally, several explanations for these findings are examined, and their implications for the concept and measure of the cognitive schemas are discussed.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, several studies have revealed the link between intimate partner violence and depressive problems in women (e.g., Barnett, 2001; Follingstad, Brennan, Hause, Polek, & Rutledge, 1991). However, women differ in the severity and magnitude of their emotional responses to the abuse and some women are able to be resilient despite exposure to such extreme stress (O'Neill & Kerig, 2000). The present study is focused on the role that cognitive schemas play in the relationship between intimate partner violence and depression.

Cognitive diathesis-stress models of depression propose that depression is more likely to result from an interaction between adverse circumstances and intrinsic cognitive characteristics that increase the risk for depressive mood (Abramson, Alloy, & Metalsky, 1989; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Although most of the research in the area has focused on attributional style as a cognitive diathesis (Abramson et al., 1989), other cognitive variables, such as perceived self-competence, self-complexity, and problem solving orientation,

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have also been proposed to buffer the impact of negative events (e.g., Steinberg, Pineles, Gardner, & Mineka, 2003; Tram & Cole, 2000).

A number of studies have examined cognitive factors that could moderate the effects of violence on women's psychological adjustment. O'Neill and Kerig (2000) investigated the role of cognitive attributions about the experience of battering as a potential source of resilience. In their study, high attributions of self-blame and low perceived self-control increased the relationship between physical violence and psychological maladjustment. Parker-Corell and Markus (2004) found that the attributional style was an independent factor that, along with battering, predicted trauma symptoms and depression. However, they did not examine the effect of the interaction between violence and attributional style. Last, variables related to self-worth and self-concept have also been proposed as potential buffers between abuse and psychological adjustment with mixed results. For instance, in a study with female patients of primary care centers self-esteem moderated the effect of abuse on mental health (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002). Arias, Lyons, and Street (1997) found that relationship efficacy was protective for women who were not in psychologically abusive relationships against depression but not for women in violent relationships. And Steinberg et al. (2003) failed to confirm a buffering effect of high self-complexity for depression among abused women.

Cognitive schemas represent another cognitive variable that could moderate the consequences of intimate partner violence on women's depressive symptoms. Cognitive schemas consist of organized elements of past behaviors and experiences that form a relatively cohesive and persistent body of knowledge and guide subsequent appraisals (Segal, 1988). Young (1999) proposed the existence of 16 maladaptive schemas, which are hypothetically developed during childhood and elaborated throughout one's lifetime. According to Young's schema theory, these schemas often form the core of the individual's self-concept and define his/her vision of the world.

Young (1999) grouped these schemas within five domains or broad categories. Three of these domains could play a significant role when a woman copes with an abusive relation, because they refer to cognitive contents that have often been identified as relevant in intervention with victims (e.g., Dutton, 1992). The domain of *Disconnection and Rejection* includes schemas (e.g., abuse and defectiveness) that involve the expectation that one's needs for security, acceptance, and respect will not be fulfilled in a predictable way. The schemas within the domain of *Impaired Autonomy and Performance* (e.g., dependence and failure) consist of expectations about oneself and the environment that interfere with one's perceived capacity to separate, survive, function independently, or perform successfully. Last, the schemas within the domain of *Other-directedness* (self-sacrifice and subjugation) consist of an extreme focus on the desires of others, at the expense of one's own needs.

According to cognitive diathesis-stress models, when schemas are dysfunctional, women become vulnerable to negative psychological outcomes (Dutton, Burghart, Perrin, Chrestman, & Halle, 1994; Ponce, Williams, & Allen, 2004). Thus, those women who endorse the above maladaptive schemas could appraise more negatively the meaning of intimate partner violence experiences than women who do not think in such dysfunctional way. For instance, schemas into the disconnection and rejection domain could lead victims to appraisal that they are the cause of the maltreatment and that abuse is unavoidable, whereas victims who endorse schemas into the impaired autonomy domain would experience a high dependence of their abusive partner and would think that they lack the necessary personal resources to solve the situation or to live independently. Thinking in this way could in turn increase the risk of depression development.

On the other hand, Young (1999) stated that the schemas usually remain latent until they are activated by events in the environment relevant to the particular schema. Thus, an alternative possibility is that the link between abuse and depression is accounted for by the activation of maladaptive schemas, with these schemas mediating the link between abuse and depressive symptoms. In support of this hypothesis several studies have revealed that the experiences of abuse and violence may affect the victims' cognitions, particularly when the victims experience trauma as a result of violence (e.g., Arias & Pape, 1999; Dutton, 1992; Lerner & Kennedy, 2000).

The experience of abuse could be particularly harmful for schemas related to self-worth and self-efficacy, due to the role that the interactions with others play in the development of self-representations (McCann, Sakheim, & Abrahamson, 1988). Thus, when a woman suffers prolonged experiences of physical abuse and critical comments from her intimate partner, her self-schemas could become negative (Lynch & Graham-

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