



“But I love you”: The use of language in changing the realities of victims during abusive relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Victims of psychopaths have been a largely ignored area of research, even though up to 30% of domestic abusers meet the criteria for psychopathy (Huss & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000). Emotional abuse is reported to be more long-term, terrorizing, and result in greater health impairments than physical abuse (Arden, 2005). Emotional abuse often precedes violence, but it is difficult for victims to define the abuse and its ongoing severity. Due to the deceitful and manipulative tactics of psychopaths, it follows that their victims may be a prime candidate of a specifically debilitating form of emotional abuse: gaslighting, which is *the presentation of false information under to disorient the victim and cause them to doubt their own reality (i.e., memory, perception, and even sanity)*. Gaslighting conditions the victim to survive in an environment that they become dependant on and cannot readily escape. Qualitative analysis will investigate the question: *How can someone else can convince you that your experience is wrong?* The answer will focus on language.

METHODS

Participants

♦ Seven female participants (86% Caucasian; $M_{age}= 36$) were selected from data collected from a larger study on psychopath victims. Selection was based on completion of 12 open-ended questions that detailed the context surrounding an abusive relationship.

♦ Information was also gathered from a modified self-report psychopathy scale (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press) that assessed the extent the abuser exhibited psychopathic traits, and a survey of demographics and victimization characteristics (i.e., relationship length, frequency and type of abuse).

Data Analysis

♦ Coding procedures were carried out using thematic analysis to identify themes associated with language in survivors’ written responses as related to the abusers’ process of altering their reality.

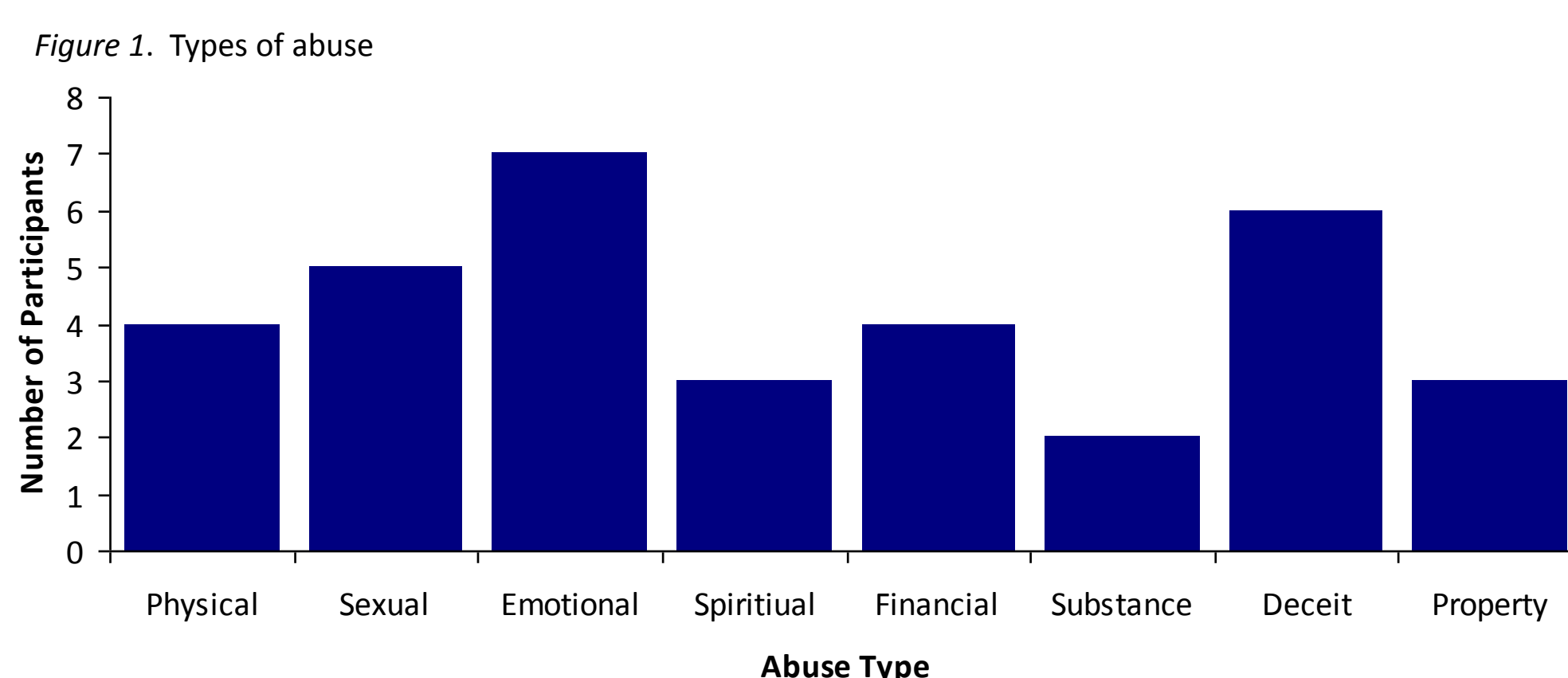
Results

♦ Abuse was very frequent in the relationships, which have an average length of 10 years ($SD= 8.6$). Three survivors stated to be current contact with their abuser.

♦ Moderate levels of psychopathic traits in abusers ($M=90.3$; $SD=27$).

♦ All survivors sought help for a mental illness after the relationship.

♦ Figure 1. displays the types of abuse experienced across survivors.



♦ Language reportedly used by abusers reflect the tactic of gaslighting:

“Look at me- I’m trying to be calm and rational and you’re acting crazy. You have problems, maybe you should get help”

♦ Survivors’ reactions indicate the severity of gaslighting:

“I cried and cried. I felt absolutely insane. I felt crazy. I felt like I should be hauled off and locked up. I prayed and prayed, asking God please don’t let me be crazy.”

♦ The following themes outline the process in which language is used as a primary tool by abusers to convince victims that their reality is false.

Establishment of Power

♦ To alter the reality of their victims, abusers must *initiate* the relationship with the establishment of power. Abusers with higher levels of psychopathic traits accomplished this through the following:

Persistent Communication

♦ Excessive phone calls and emails cause the abuser (and what they say they want from the victim) to remain salient in the victim’s mind.

“Something made me cringe. Too forward? He kept calling after the first night. He kind of grew on me but I didn’t want to commit. I kept trying to find excuses...Nothing worked.”

Love Bombing

♦ Verbal reassurance, excessive flattery, expressions of love, and extreme overtures reflect the need for the abuser to quickly secure the victim’s attachment and trust in the new relationship.

“He started love bombing me right away. I was 18, with no vision and I figured I’d attach my wagon to him, because he sure seem to know what he was doing.”

“He proposed three weeks after I left my husband and pressured me to move in with him.”

“They Know the Words But Not the Music”

♦ The above quote from Blair and colleagues (2006) reflects psychopaths’ ability to ‘lexically apply the meaning of emotional words but not experience the affective value attached to them’ (p.114).

Frequency of Trigger Words

♦ Frequent use of words that distress the victim drains them of their energy, while simultaneously updating their reality that they are powerless. The abuser exerts further control, as they are not also emotionally drained from either: 1) the victim’s distress to their abuse, or 2) what the victim says to defend themselves.

“His insult was calling me a child and oh my god that was the most hurtful thing I could ever hear. It was so traumatizing. He would call me it out of spite.”

“If I fought back he’d fight back even harder and that was just draining and I got to the point where I didn’t even care.”

Presupposition Accommodation

♦ Victim’s reality is subtly adjusted when the abuser utters a sentence, which imposes a particular requirement on the context (Fintel, 2008). Without establishing an argument, the abuser makes a conclusion about the victim, which elicits distress.

“I forgive you for going to get a massage and I won’t bring it up again. It’s in the past and the relationship is more important than holding a grudge. And here’s some cash for groceries.”

Erosion of Identity

♦ The abuser remains salient in the victim’s mind through excessive communication and frequent but episodic verbal abuse. The victim becomes socially isolated. The victim lacks reminders of ‘who they were’ prior to the relationship and feel confused. They begin to doubt themselves and are unable to recognize themselves.

Playing the Victim Card

♦ Increased pronoun use of “I” is reflective of psychopaths’ self absorption and is evident when the abuser reverses roles by playing the victim. They project their behaviors onto the actual victim through repeated pronoun use of “You”.

“He kept portraying himself as a victim: he was doing everything he could, everyone was against him. All he does is talk about himself.”

“Don’t tell me I’m stupid! Don’t lie to me. You are such a liar! You are so selfish! How could you do this to me? I love you so much...”

Need for Validation

♦ The victim becomes confused and questions themselves. Their sense of self is eroded and they cannot validate their own feelings.

“Does this make sense? Did I say the wrong thing? Was I too harsh? Should I have said something else? I don’t know.”

Altered Standard of Truth

♦ Identity is shaped by how we, along with how those in our social life view us (Hilde, 2001). The abuser projection of reality is accepted by the victim as their new standard of truth.

“I heard tapes of his criticism and put-downs when he was not around. I could hear his lectures in my head at all times. I began to believe what he said about me, such as I was crazy, that I had my own issues but he was fine.”

Summary of Findings

Psychopaths appear skilled in using language to persuade victims that their reality is false. They are deceptive, charming yet detached, egocentric, and non-responsive to distress. They force themselves to be salient in the victim’s mind. They take advantage of the victim’s commitment to them by draining them with subtle accusations that quietly begin to shift their reality. Saliency continues as the victim becomes more isolated. The victim is exhausted and loses a sense of who they were before the relationship. They question themselves as they experience conflict between what they feel and what the abuser tells them. The abuser’s projected reality becomes accepted as the new standard of truth to validate the victim’s experiences. The victim is unable to recognize themselves, often feeling like they are going insane they are left with little sense of self worth. Even after the relationship ended, survivors expressed that these feelings continued.