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Emotional abuse in intimate relationships: The role of gender and age

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the moderating roles of gender and age on emotional abuse within intimate relationships. This study included 250 participants with an average age of 27 years. Participants completed the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ; Jacobson and Gottman, 1998), whose four subscales are isolation, degradation, sexual abuse, and property damage. Multigroup analysis with two groups, female ($n = 141$) and male ($n = 109$), was used to test the moderation effect. Younger men reported experiencing higher levels of emotional abuse, which declined with age. Older females reported experiencing less emotional abuse than older males. Overall, emotional abuse was more common in younger participants. Younger women experienced higher rates of isolation, and women's overall experience of property damage was higher than that of men and increased with age. Results are interpreted through the Social Exchange and Conflict frameworks.

Keywords

Emotional abuse; intimate partner violence; Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ); isolation; property damage; age; gender

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is considered a human rights violation and public health issue throughout the world (Campbell, 2002; Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). As currently indexed, violent crimes against intimate partners—current or former spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends—are committed more frequently against women; these include lethal (homicide) and non-lethal (rape, assault) forms (Catalano, 2000). However, abusive behavior does not always involve tangible violence. Distinctions must be made between physical violence/abuse—traditionally, the most researched and detectable form—and emotional, or psychological, abuse. Emotional abuse is any nonphysical behavior or attitude that is designed to control, subdue, punish, or isolate another person through the use of humiliation or fear (Engel, 2002). The present paper focuses on this form of abuse while examining its relationships to age and gender.

Emotional abuse can include verbal assault, dominance, control, isolation, ridicule, or the use of intimate knowledge for degradation (Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005). It targets the emotional and psychological well-being of the victim, and it is often a precursor to physical abuse. There is a high correlation between physical abuse and emotional abuse in

batterer populations (Gondolf, Heckert, & Kimmel, 2002), and verbal abuse early in a relationship predicts subsequent physical spousal abuse (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005).

Thus, there is an emerging emphasis on understanding emotional abuse as a construct separate from physical abuse, worthy of its own theories and prevention strategies (O'Leary & Maiuro, 2001). Gender and age are pertinent to the burgeoning study of emotional abuse. The focus of research on relationship violence has traditionally been on youth and women of childbearing age as the prototypical victims, but there is now evidence thwarting this conventional view. For instance, men can be victims of IPV (e.g. Mills et al., 2003), and older women can be victims of relationship violence (e.g. Zink, Jacobson, Regan & Pabst, 2004).

Therefore, the current paper aims not only to investigate emotional abuse, but also to examine how it relates to the gender and age of the victim. Some types of physical behavior can be considered emotional abuse in that they represent physical violence (Marshall, 1996). Examples include: throwing objects, kicking a wall, shaking a finger or fist at the victim, driving recklessly while the victim is in the car, or threatening to destroy objects the victim values. Property damage is a form of emotional abuse considered "symbolic violence" (Engel, 2002) that results in serious psychological, social, and economic costs. Harm inflicted on victim's pets can be emotionally abusive, causing suffering in both humans and animals (Faver & Strand, 2007).

Much evidence has accumulated chronicling the deleterious effects specific to emotional abuse. Emotionally abused women can be more lonely and despairing than physically abused women (Loring, 1994). Van Houdenhove et al. (2001) postulate that emotional abuse and neglect may be contributing factors to the development and/or severity of illnesses such as chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia. For the termination of an abusive marriage, a better indicator than frequency of physical violence may instead be the severity of emotional abuse, and over time, emotional abuse can be as powerful a control tactic as physical abuse (Jacobson et al., 1996). Further, Sackett and Saunders (1999) investigated the impact of different forms of abuse on women receiving services from a domestic violence agency and found that both emotional abuse and physical abuse contributed to depression and low self-esteem.

Due to the complexity of operationalizing emotional abuse, researchers have had difficulty consistently measuring emotional abuse. The development of a valid measurement is hindered by the relative dearth of research on emotional abuse in comparison with research on physical or sexual violence. Some studies use behavioral checklists to measure emotional abuse (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006) but cannot report an aggregate prevalence measure. Other studies have used variations of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996) or the Abuse Behavior Inventory (ABI; Shepard & Campbell, 1992); both define emotional abuse through specific behaviors. Less often used are the Psychological Maltreatment Inventory (Tolman, 1989) and the Women's Experience with Battering (WEB) Scale (Smith, Earp, & DeVellis, 1995).

Partially as a result of difficulties in measurement, calculating accurate prevalence estimates for emotional abuse has been challenging. A recent meta-analytic review by Carney and Barner (2012) examined three aspects of IPV: emotional abuse, sexual coercion, and stalking/obsessive behavior. For emotional abuse, prevalence rates were high, averaging around 80%; 40% of women and 32% of men reported expressive aggression, and 41% of women and 43% of men reported coercive control. Furthermore, new findings from the National Intimate Partner & Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) by Black et al. (2011) found that approximately half of Americans reported experiencing lifetime emotional abuse by a

partner. Psychological aggression was measured by combining questions based on both expressive aggression (e.g. name calling) and coercive control (e.g. isolation tactics or threats of harm). Psychological aggression by an intimate partner was reported by 48.4% of women and 48.8% of men. Consequently, emotional abuse appears to be the most common form of IPV.

According to a study by Coker et al. (2002), 29% of women ($n = 6,790$) and 23% of men ($n = 7,122$) experienced physical, sexual, or psychological IPV during their lifetime. Psychological abuse was measured by two subscales, verbal abuse and abuse of power and control, created from the Power and Control Scale (Johnson, 1996). Women were significantly more likely to experience physical or sexual IPV and abuse of power and control alone; the prevalence of physical IPV alone was 13.3% for women and 5.8% for men, while sexual IPV alone was 4.3% for women and 0.2% for men. Women were less likely to report verbal abuse alone, and the prevalence of psychological IPV alone was 12.1% for women and 17.3% for men, respectively. In both males and females, physical and psychological IPV were associated with physical and mental health sequelae (Coker et al., 2002). Another study by Coker et al. (2000) examining IPV prevalence rates for men ($n = 243$) and women ($n = 313$) found men were as likely as women to report perceived emotional abuse (7.4% of women vs. 8.3% of men). Overall, emotional abuse within intimate relationships is common in the United States (US) and is likely the most pervasive form of relationship maltreatment.

The present study seeks to elucidate the relationships between emotional abuse, gender, and age. In the next two subsections, we discuss the literature on the effects of gender and age on emotional abuse. However, there is limited literature on the interplay between these two fundamental constructs in their relationship to emotional abuse. Therefore, in this study, we investigate the interaction between gender and age in the path to emotional abuse.

Gender and Violence

Feminist perspectives have traditionally viewed relationship violence as an expression of patriarchal oppression against women that is socially sanctioned (Lammers, Ritchie & Robertson, 2005). According to Johnson (1995), there are two main forms of violence. Some relationships suffer from conflict-related outbursts of violence: Situational or common couple violence. In this form, either partner may 'lose control' and act violently, but this rarely escalates into more injurious or life-threatening behaviors (Johnson, 1995; Waltz et al., 2000). Alternatively, some relationships suffer from systemic male violence, which is rooted in the patriarchal tradition of men controlling 'their' women (Johnson, 1995). This form of violence is rarer but frequently devastating and often involves economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics; it is referred to as intimate terrorism or patriarchal terrorism. With time, the severity of violent behaviors tends to intensify (Johnson, 1995).

However, the relationship of gender to IPV is not as unambiguous and unilateral as was once assumed, i.e. violence is only committed against women by male perpetrators. Recent research suggests some women actively perpetrate violence against their partners, and debates over the gender symmetry of IPV have generated sizeable controversy. A meta-analytic review by Archer (2000) found women were slightly more likely to use physical aggression in a relationship; however, men were more likely to inflict an injury. The majority of the studies included were conducted in the US in the late twentieth century, and roughly half of the sample was students, thus limiting generalizability. Archer (2000) also concluded that measures based on acts of violence (e.g. slap) versus consequences of violence (e.g. injury ensuing a hospital visit) yield different results. When measures were based on specific acts, more women than men used physical aggression; when measures

were based on consequences of aggression, men were more likely than women to injure their partners. It is also vital to consider the sample, as there is likely to be more mutual aggression in community samples, but more male violence in severely victimized samples such as women's shelters.

IPV among university students appears to occur at excessive rates. A meta-analytic review by Straus (2004) of students at thirty-one universities in sixteen countries ($n = 8,666$) found that 29% of the students had physically assaulted a dating partner in the previous year, and 7% had physically injured a partner, with similar rates between women and men. Harmed (2001) investigated IPV among university students in the US and found relative similarity between the genders: women and men ($n = 874$) reported comparable amounts of overall aggression from dating partners but differed in the manner of violence experienced. Women described increased sexual victimization (39% for women vs. 30% for men), whereas men recounted increased psychological aggression (87% for men vs. 82% for women). Psychological abuse was measured by the ABI (Shepard & Campbell, 1992). Rates of physical violence for men and women were comparable, at 21% and 22%, respectively and men reported perpetrating more emotional abuse than women ($d = 0.16$).

A meta-analysis of female perpetration of IPV within heterosexual relationships by Williams, Ghandour, and Kub (2008) looked at different forms of abuse within three populations: adolescents, college students, and adults. The specific types of violence that comprised the categories—physical, sexual, and emotional—were defined by research team and therefore varied in definition, specificity, and severity. Only 11 of the 62 articles included in the review examined some form of emotional abuse; studies looking at both verbal and psychological abuse were included. Due to methodological and sampling differences across studies, prevalence estimates varied widely and it was not possible to ascertain a developmental trajectory, but within all groups, emotional abuse was the most prevalent form of IPV. Rates of emotional abuse perpetration by college females were particularly high, ranging from 40%–89%, and were measured using various scales and questionnaires (Williams, Ghandour & Kub, 2008); one study used a “global experience measure” and the others utilized either the CTS or the ABI.

Hines and Saudino (2003) sought to utilize the CTS2 (Straus et al., 1996) in a sample of college students ($n = 481$). Females reported perpetrating slightly more psychological aggression than males (86% vs. 82%), and in terms of reported physical aggression, 29% of males and 35% of females admitted to perpetration. In terms of both psychological and physical abuse, there were no statistically significant gender differences. Physical aggression tended to co-exist with psychological aggression. In contrast to previous research, no gender differences emerged regarding injuries. However, in line with earlier studies, males reported perpetrating much more sexual coercion than females; the prevalence rates were 29% for men and 13.5% for women.

Straus (2005) contends that although violence perpetrated by women may result in fewer fatalities than male-perpetrated IPV, it is a substantial proportion of all injuries and needs to be addressed within the broader framework of ending IPV. Further, violence perpetrated by women, though frequently minor, makes them vulnerable to severe retaliation by men. Despite high perpetration rates across genders, a review has concluded that women are still disproportionately victimized by IPV and more frequently sustain serious injuries (Hamberger, 2005). Overall, a better understanding of gender effects on IPV is needed as it pertains to emotional abuse.

Age and Violence

A few studies have addressed the role of age on IPV, with the focus primarily on physical violence. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have estimated that between 12% and 20% of middle and high school students experience physical or emotional abuse in dating relationships (2006). According to the NISVS survey conducted by Black et al. (2011), approximately 1 in 5 women and nearly 1 in 7 men who reported rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner first experienced some form of IPV between 11 and 17 years of age. In a stratified cluster sample of 5,414 high school students from a study conducted by Coker et al. (2000), 12% of adolescents self-reported severe dating violence (SDV) as a victim (7.6%) or a perpetrator (7.7%), and SDV rates (victimization/perpetration combined) were higher in girls (14.4%) than boys (9.1%). SDV and forced sex were associated with poorer health-related quality of life, lower life-satisfaction, and more adverse health behaviors both in female victims and male perpetrators (Coker et al., 2000).

In an examination of IPV among adolescents, Molidor and Tolman (1998) surveyed high school students ($n = 635$) on their experiences with IPV, with a discernment toward contextual factors. The authors collected data by modifying the CTS. Boys and girls reported similar frequencies of overall violence, but girls reported experiencing more moderate and severe forms of violence along with more acute physical consequences. In terms of reactions, over half of boys reported “laughing” in response to physical IPV, and a third of boys ignored it. A third of the girls reported defending themselves against IPV, and 40% cried. Girls were much more likely to perceive assaults against them as serious with damaging physical and psychological effects. Boys perceived less negative impact on themselves and the relationship. The data suggest much of girls’ violence against boys may be to defend against sexual aggression.

Rivara et al. (2009) wanted to understand if the diminishing rates of IPV among American women over the past four decades were a result of age, period, and/or cohort effects. IPV was measured using questions from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS; CDC, 2001). Psychological abuse questions were centered on fear due to a partner’s anger, threats, name-calling, put-downs, or controlling behavior. After randomly selecting and interviewing women ($n = 3,568$), they found that regardless of birth cohort, IPV was most common among women in their mid-20s to early 30s. IPV was reported in 42% of the sample. Rivara et al. (2009) also found that women aged 26 to 30 had the highest risk of IPV, and the risk decreased with age, with substantial drop-offs after age 50. Interestingly, age-related decline in prevalence of physical and/or sexual IPV began at a younger age than that of nonphysical IPV. Younger birth cohorts were at a reduced risk for IPV, after correcting for age and period effects.

However, in a study by Mezey, Post, and Maxwell (2002) examining different forms of IPV against women throughout the lifespan ($n = 1,249$), physical abuse was negatively related to age, but nonphysical abuse, such as emotionally abusive and controlling behavior, was not. Non-physical abuse was measured as follows: ten questions were taken from Smith, Smith, and Earp (1995), and Smith, Tessaro, and Earp (1999) from their WEB scale to measure psychological vulnerability, and the five-question scale developed by Wilson, Johnson, and Daly (1995) was used to measure autonomy-limiting behavior. Rates of physical violence rose from age 22 until peaking at age 32 and decreased substantially after age 52. Having a younger partner was significant in predicting a woman’s risk of physical violence. But age was not a significant predictor of psychological vulnerability or autonomy-limiting behavior, two non-physical forms of abuse, and a partner’s age did not predict a woman’s risk of psychological abuse. Thus, rates of non-physical abuse were similar between younger and older women: Women appear vulnerable to emotional abuse across the lifespan. Further investigation is warranted to understand these age effects.

Moreover, as can be seen from previous research focusing on relationship violence, age and gender are highly interwoven. However, there is limited research that can unfold the complex interaction between gender and age and their relationship to emotional abuse. Therefore, this study aims to explore the answer to the question: what is the role of gender and age on emotional abuse in intimate relationships?

Methods

Participants

This study included 250 participants who were in a relationship for more than a year. Participants were 141 females (56%) and 109 males (44%). The average age of the participants in the sample was 27 years ($SD=9.05$), ranging from 18 to 61. Nine percent ($n=22$) of the participants were under the age of 20, and the majority of the participants (58%, $n=146$) were between the ages of 20 and 30. Approximately one sixth ($n=41$) were between 30 and 40, 7% ($n=18$) were between 40 and 50, and 4% ($n=9$) were older than 50 years of age. The mean duration of the relationship was 33 months, ranging from 13 months to 30 years. Most of the participants were dating (52%, $n=129$), approximately one third ($n=78$) of the participants were married, 4% ($n=10$) were engaged, 2% ($n=10$) were cohabiting, one percent ($n=3$) were single, and 10% did not report their relationship status.

Approximately three quarters of the participants ($n=183$) were Caucasian, 7% ($n=18$) were Hispanic, 6% ($n=15$) were Asian, 3% ($n=9$) were African American, 1% ($n=3$) were Native American, 3% ($n=9$) reported other ethnicities, and 5% ($n=13$) did not report their race/ethnicity. One fifth ($n=54$) of the participants reported having children, ranging from one child to seven children. One sixth ($n=43$) of the participants reported having lower income, and 11% ($n=27$) of the participants reported having higher income, while 68% ($n=171$) reported being middle class.

Procedures

Participants were either non-student community members or college students recruited through announcements around a large Midwestern and a large Southwestern university. The email address of the investigator was provided in the flyers that were distributed in classrooms, around the campuses, and throughout the community. Participants contacted the investigator for answers to their questions and to arrange a time for participation. Before data collection, participants signed consent forms. Participants then completed questionnaires on demographic information and emotional abuse. Following completion of the questionnaires, participants were debriefed about the study objectives, and they received extra course credit or \$20 compensation.

Measures

Demographic information—A demographic questionnaire included questions about basic characteristics of the participants, including age, gender, race, education level, and socioeconomic status. The remaining questions were related to relationship characteristics of the participants, including the duration of the relationship.

Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ)—The EAQ was developed by Jacobson and Gottman (1998). In their original study of battered married women, Jacobson and Gottman (1998) found severe emotional abuse was more likely to drive women out of a relationship than severe physical abuse. They identified four distinct categories of emotional abuse: destruction of pets and property, sexual coercion, isolation attempts, and degradation. Destruction of property was often used as an intimidation tactic, and sadistic behavior toward pets indicated a disregard toward the pain of living beings. Sexual coercion and

marital rape can occur without physical force, and sexual coercion fell under the purview of emotional abuse when the victim was made to feel ashamed, guilty, or afraid to refuse her/his partner. Isolation attempts restricted a woman's freedom and often led to loneliness and feelings of claustrophobia. Degradation was the most common type of severe emotional abuse, including both public and private insults.

The EAQ was based off of this original study. It has 66 items assessing emotional abuse, each rated on a 4-point frequency scale (Never to Very Often). The EAQ has four subscales: isolation, degradation, sexual abuse, and property damage. Internal consistency for the subscales is .92, .94, .72, and .82, respectively. The isolation subscale has 24 items including "my partner keeps me from spending time with the people I choose," and "my partner prevents me from leaving the house when I want to." The degradation subscale has 28 items, including "my partner humiliates me in front of others," and "my partner ridicules me." The sexual abuse subscale has 7 items, including "my partner makes me engage in sexual practices I consider perverse," and "my partner pressures me to have sex after an argument." The property damage subscale has 7 items, including "my partner intentionally damages things that I care about," and "my partner threatens to break things that are valuable to me." In order to reach a comprehensive definition of emotional abuse, all subscales were used in this study. The EAQ has been widely used in previous research, indicating its external validity (Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman, & Yerington, 2000). The EAQ was chosen for the current study due to its wide range of different patterns of emotional abuse and its strong psychometric values. Scale scores were obtained by averaging the items. Higher scores indicated higher levels of experiencing emotional abuse.

Results

Data for this study was collected using non-experimental, correlational design. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 20 for Windows software package. Descriptive statistics for major variables in the study are presented in Table 1. In order to ensure that the data were normally distributed, univariate analysis was conducted. The skewness and kurtosis estimates and histograms were examined. Additionally, a Shapiro-Wilk test for normality was performed. Examining the distribution of the variables on emotion regulation and age indicated a slightly right skewed distribution with unsatisfactory normality. Therefore, these variables were transformed in order to avoid violating the normality assumptions. The necessary transformation was carried out by taking the natural logarithm of the variables. After transformation, the emotion regulation and age variables satisfied normality assumptions.

Correlations among the major variables, as well as their means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 1. As seen in Table 1, almost all correlations among various measures were in the expected direction. For example, degradation was positively correlated with isolation ($r=.52, p<.001$), sexual abuse ($r=.40, p<.001$), and property damage ($r=.56, p<.001$). Table 2 presents the gendered correlations between major variables. As can be seen in Table 2, while there is a significant correlation among women between property damage and degradation ($r=.72, p<.001$), and property damage and sexual abuse ($r=.86, p<.001$), we do not see this correlation among men.

In order to test the moderation effect, multigroup analysis was used. The multigroup model consisted of two groups: female ($n = 141$) and male ($n = 109$). Two models, namely the unconstrained and fully-constrained models, were examined for the multigroup analysis (for females and males). The fully-constrained model is the one where all estimated parameters are required to be equal across groups, while the unconstrained model is the one where estimated parameters are allowed to differ (Byrne, 2010). The unconstrained model fit the

data well [$\chi^2(1) = 2.935, p > 0.05$]. The results of model comparison tests using delta chi-square difference indicated that as compared to the fully constrained model, the unconstrained model fit the data better [$\Delta\chi^2 = 2.935; \Delta df = 1; p(d) = 0.001$], which indicated that the two models were different; i.e., gender moderates the path from age to general emotional abuse for at least one of the gender groups. Motivated by these results, we examined the structural path parameters to further understand the relationship between age and emotional abuse for each gender.

The structural path parameters showed that gender moderates the path from age to emotional abuse ($\beta = -.28, p < .05$) for males. However, this path was not significant for females. Chi-square threshold tests indicated a confidence interval of 90%. These results are shown in Figure 1. As can be seen in the figure, the differences in age affect the experience of emotional abuse differently for males and females. For example, older males tended to report experiencing lower rates of emotional abuse as compared to younger males. Moreover, they tended to report similarly with older females. On the other hand, younger males reported the highest overall rates of emotional abuse, while younger females reported higher rates of emotional abuse that tended to decrease as they aged. Older females reported the lowest overall rates of emotional abuse.

Detailed analyses were conducted to further understand the moderation effect for each specific domain of emotional abuse. The results of these analyses are shown in Figure 2. As seen in the figure, the unconstrained model fit well to the data [$\chi^2(1) = 2.935, p > 0.05$]. Models testing the moderation among age and specific domains of emotional abuse (isolation, degradation, sexual abuse, and property damage) provided a better fit for the unconstrained model [$\Delta\chi^2 = 10.37; \Delta df = 3; p(d) = 0.016$], which indicated that the model for each specific domain was different in terms of gender. For males, the structural path parameters showed that gender moderates the path from age to isolation ($\beta = -.29, p < .05$), property damage ($\beta = -.33, p < .05$), and sexual abuse ($\beta = -.44, p < .05$). For females, the structural path parameters showed that gender moderates the path from age to sexual abuse ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$) and property damage ($\beta = .27, p < .05$), but not the other domains of emotional abuse.

Further, path to path analysis to validate the results indicated that this moderation effect lies in the isolation [$\Delta\chi^2 = 2.75; \Delta df = 1; p(d) = 0.09$] and property damage [$\Delta\chi^2 = 2.75; \Delta df = 1; p(d) = 0.006$] domains. These results are shown in Figures 3 and 4. As can be seen in Figure 3, the differences in age affect the experience of emotional abuse, particularly isolation and property damage, differently for males and females. In general, females reported experiencing more isolation as compared to males. Younger females reported having the highest rates of isolation, while older males reported having the lowest rates of isolation. Older males tended to report experiencing lower rates of isolation as compared to younger males.

Similarly, Figure 4 showed that the difference in age affects the experience of property damage differently for males and females. The baseline for experiencing property damage was quite different for males and females: females reported experiencing much more property damage. While the rate of experiencing property damage did not differ much between younger and older males, older females tended to report experiencing higher rates of property damage.

Discussion

The current study primarily aimed to investigate the role of gender on emotional abuse. There have been various studies investigating emotional and physical abuse against women,

while research on emotional abuse against men is quite limited. We also examined how other individual characteristics, such as age, were associated with gender in influencing emotional abuse above and beyond its main effects. Results of the study indicated significant interaction effects between age and gender.

Gender moderated the path from age to emotional abuse for males. Younger men reported experiencing the most emotional abuse, and this declined with age. Older females experienced the least amount of emotional abuse—comparable to older males. Overall, emotional abuse was more common in younger participants, which is in line with previous research showing youth report the highest rates of IPV. Young women experienced the highest rates of isolation, and women's overall experience of property damage was substantially higher than men's experience. In fact, women's experience of property damage increased with age.

The findings do not fully validate all previous research, where following the risk of relationship aggression toward women throughout the lifespan found that physical violence decreased over time while emotional abuse did not change (Mezey, Post & Maxwell, 2002). Yet, Mezey et al.'s study looked at psychological vulnerability and controlling behavior, while the current study looked at isolation, degradation, sexual abuse, and property damage as forms of emotional abuse. Thus, methodological differences may be responsible for the conflicting results, and further exploration is warranted regarding longitudinal risk of emotional abuse.

Emotional Abuse & Men

The findings of the present study suggest that men's overall risk of emotional abuse may be increasing while women's risk may be decreasing. Due to factors such as increased provision of resources for female victims and the role of law enforcement, along with women's empowerment through feminism, rates of both fatal and non-fatal IPV against women have declined in the past two decades (Rivara et al., 2002). Archer (2000) now reports similar rates of IPV between the genders, and although there is a paucity of research examining emotional abuse of men, there is some evidence that men are now experiencing increased rates of emotional abuse (Harned, 2001). Overall, the current study speaks to men's escalating experience of emotional abuse, and the results can be interpreted through multiple theoretical paradigms.

According to micro-resource conflict theory (Sprey, 1999), the results of the current study can be partially understood in terms of conflict resulting from changing gender roles. Younger men are reporting experiencing higher rates of emotional abuse as gender roles—and the distribution of resources—are changing. Women are renegotiating roles and expectations because although they traditionally have been victims of patriarchal discrimination and inequality, in developed nations they increasingly have access to similar resources as men (Walker, 1999). For example, in the US, a historic male monopoly on higher education has dissipated, with more women than men currently holding baccalaureate degrees (US Census Bureau, 2011). Women's emotional abuse of men could be a way to "even the playing field" in a competitive struggle to gain control over scarce resources. Further, women may be utilizing emotional forms of abuse because, traditionally, relational aggression is more indirect and socially acceptable for women than physical violence (Archer, 2004; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Men's higher incidence of experiencing emotional abuse in the present study can also be explained through the Social Exchange and Choice Framework. In accordance with this theory, people rationally pursue their self-interests by calculating the ratio of costs to rewards in order to maximize profit, and people's actions can be understood and predicted

by understanding their interests or values (White & Klein, 2002). Emotional abuse is not traditionally considered a form of IPV, and abuse is generally stigmatized and/or unrecognized in men. For younger men experiencing emotional abuse in their relationships, they may not consider themselves to be victims, so the rewards of the relationship (e.g. companionship, access to sex) would outweigh the costs (conflict that is not considered abuse). Additionally, as young men do not commonly discuss their relationship problems with other men in the context of suffering abuse, a young man may see his relationship as normal and a better choice than his comparison level (what his peers experience) and his comparison level of alternatives (being alone). As males age, they may be better at identifying abusive relationships and more adept at identifying favorable alternatives, so they would be less likely to sustain relationships with emotionally abusive females.

Emotional Abuse & Women: Isolation

Although men's overall risk of emotional abuse may be increasing, in the current study, young women experienced the highest rates of isolation. Isolation tactics are forms of emotional abuse and include such behaviors as restricting a person's contact with family and friends or physically confining a person. Isolation aims to undermine the victim's life and identity outside the relationship and foster a sense of dependency. Although there are many reasons (such as easier control of partner and increasing power in the relationship) to believe that abusers try to socially isolate their partners, the evidence for isolation is mixed. For example, McCloskey, Treviso, Scionti, and daPozzo (2002) found that batterers used isolation tactics, and battered women received less social support than non-battered women (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002). Other researchers found no differences in network sizes of battered and non-battered women, indicating that both groups show about 10.7 social network members (Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995). However, detailed analysis demonstrated that perception of availability of instrumental and emotional support was associated with the severity of assault: the more severe the abuse, the more severe the isolation (Kocot & Goodman, 2003). Alternatively, often in an attempt to cease violence, women may self-isolate (Flitcraft, 1995). However, in many instances, self-isolation is due to coercion and fear of retaliation (Goetting, 1999).

Young women's increased risk of emotional abuse through isolation in the present study can be explained through the Social Exchange and Choice Framework. Younger women may be more vulnerable to isolation within their relationships because due to a complex amalgam of social, cultural, and economic factors, younger women may put a higher value on emotional connectivity than independence, and younger women may value a romantic partnership more than the benefits of life as a single person. Thus, for a young woman with this set of values and with a lack of awareness concerning the parameters of a healthy relationship, experiencing emotional abuse and isolating tactics by her male partner is not too big a cost to bear for the benefits of remaining in a romantic relationship. The lower rates of emotional abuse among older women can be interpreted as follows: with time and experience come a matured perspective, an increased analytic ability to maximize utility, and other characteristics that would decrease likelihood of victimization, such as a strong social support network, high self-esteem, knowledge of what constitutes abuse, and economic stability.

Emotional Abuse & Women: Property Damage

In the present study, women's overall experience of property damage was substantially higher than men's experience, and women's reported experience of property damage increased with age. Property damage is a form of emotional abuse considered "symbolic violence" (Engel, 2002). In their development of an economic abuse scale, Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, and Greeson identified multiple forms of economic abuse: the prevention of resource

acquisition, the prevention of resource use, and the exploitation of resources (2008). When abusive male partners engage in behaviors that generate costs—damaging and destroying possessions and household items, and damaging apartments or cars—women’s economic resources are depleted because “not only do they lose the property they once had, but they also incur the costs to reinstate the utilities, replace the items, and repair the damage” (Adams et al., 2008, pp. 567). Women’s economic stability is compromised, fostering increased economic dependency and the inability to leave (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). If a woman does manage to escape the abuser, she is much more likely to end up in poverty or homeless, which carries serious risks of poor physical and psychological health for both women and their children (Brown & Moran, 1997; Lynch, Kaplan & Shema, 1997). Finally, the harm inflicted on victim’s pets by abusers is a form of both property damage and emotional abuse that results in extreme distress (Faver & Strand, 2007).

The results of the current study speak to women’s increased risk of property damage and can be explained through the Conflict Framework. As explained previously, gender conflict has arisen in recent years due to changing roles and expectations, fueled by women’s acquisition of instrumental resources such as higher education and lucrative employment. Male violence against females, illustrated through property damage in this study, could be analogous to women’s increased emotional abuse of men in the current study: there is a competition for power and control, and this struggle manifests itself in relationship conflicts between the genders.

Limitations

Results of this study should be considered in light of its limitations. These include its focus on dating relationships of heterosexual participants. Same sex couples could have different emotional abuse dynamics with different age effects. Blosnich and Bossarte (2009) demonstrated that same-sex and opposite-sex victims of IPV experienced similar poor health outcomes (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2009). Thus, despite the restricted legal and social recognition of IPV within same-sex relationships, it is an area worthy of further analysis. Furthermore, the sample of the study was small and mostly composed of white and middle class university students and individuals from the community. The findings of this study may have limited generalizability to upper and lower socioeconomic classes and people of diverse backgrounds.

Future research

In future research, specifying the developmental course of romantic relationships and identifying the sequence of events and factors that lead to emotional abuse is important. The construct of self-esteem, its longitudinal course, and its variance between genders may also relate to people’s experiences with IPV, and emotional abuse specifically. In order to combat emotional abuse and address young men’s unique susceptibility, primary prevention programs should be developed to target vulnerable couples in order to protect both women and men, and in line with Straus and Ramirez (2007), these programs should be implemented in a gender- and culturally-sensitive way that will avoid deteriorating women’s subordinate social status.

Practice Implications

Combined with younger men’s overall higher incidence of emotional abuse as reported in this study, these results highlight the importance of educating youth on emotional abuse and the need for prevention campaigns for both males and females. Relationship counselors should recognize the seriousness of emotional abuse and that males have substantial rates of victimization. Emotional abuse must be addressed not only to end the distress it causes, but also to prevent the escalation to physical violence that is damaging to families and society.

Females reported an elevated experience of isolation within emotionally abusive relationships in the current study, with the highest occurrences among younger women. Therapists and counselors should pay special attention to controlling, isolating behaviors of partners as precursors to emotional abuse. An emphasis should be placed on couples' ability to maintain healthy, stable relationships with family, friends, and colleagues independent of the primary romantic attachment, as becoming "lost" within the relationship is a common reason women remain in abusive entanglements, along with the fear of being alone (Engel, 2002). Finally, women's higher reporting of property damage by their male partners is of concern, especially as it appears to increase over time. Emotional abuse within relationships may be difficult to detect by couples counselors, but destruction of personal property, even if unintentional, should be addressed (Engel, 2002) and taken as an admonition of abuse.

Conclusion

The effects of emotional abuse are just as detrimental as the effects of physical abuse. However, the law recognizes physical and sexual violence as crimes against the individual but not emotional abuse (Rivara et al., 2009), although it is a pervasive form of relationship abuse (Black et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to further our knowledge on emotional abuse and its effects on human psychology and health.

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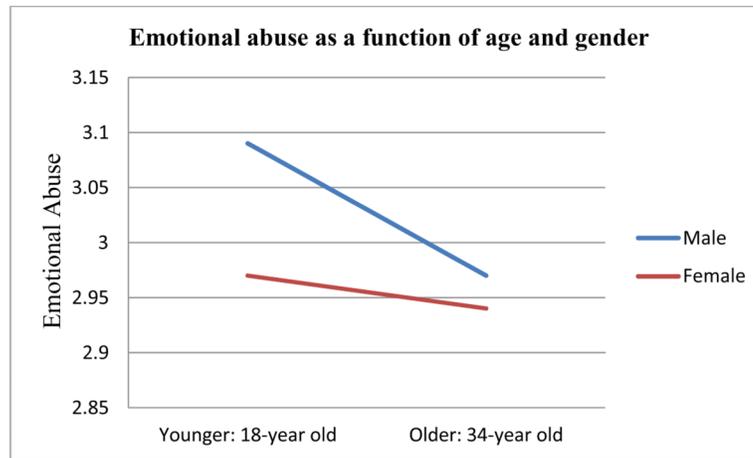


Figure 1.
Prototypical plots of emotional abuse as a function of age and gender

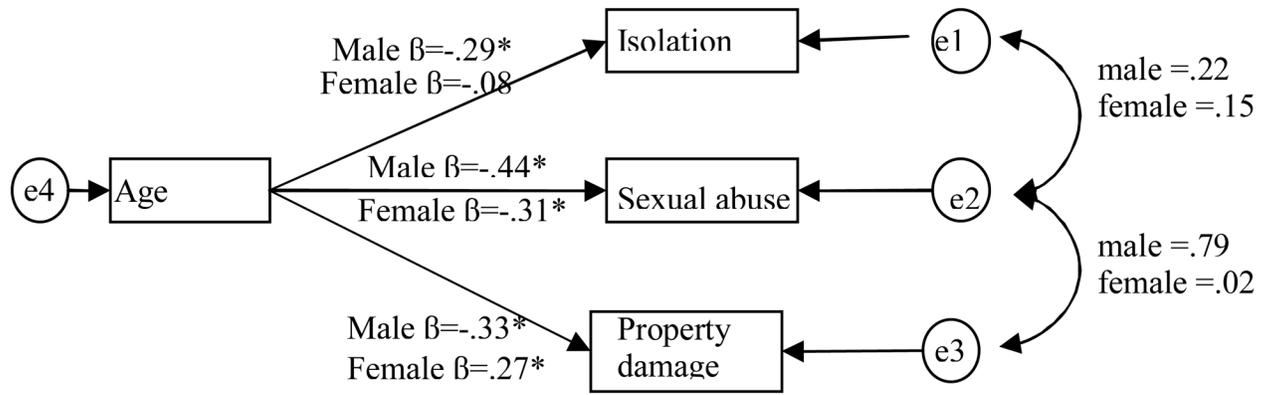


Figure 2. Final multigroup modeling results for subscales of emotional abuse as a function of age and gender * $p < .05$

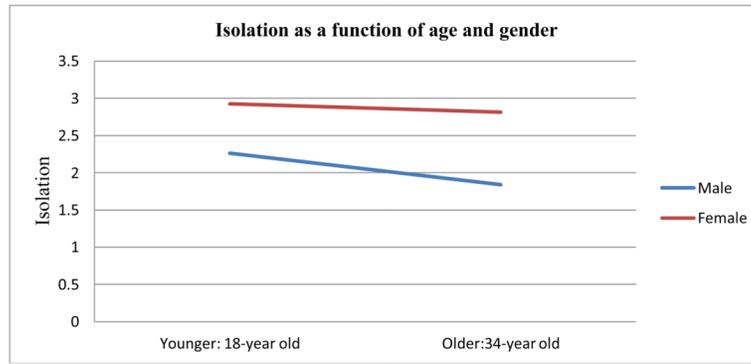


Figure 3.
Prototypical plots of isolation as a function of age and gender

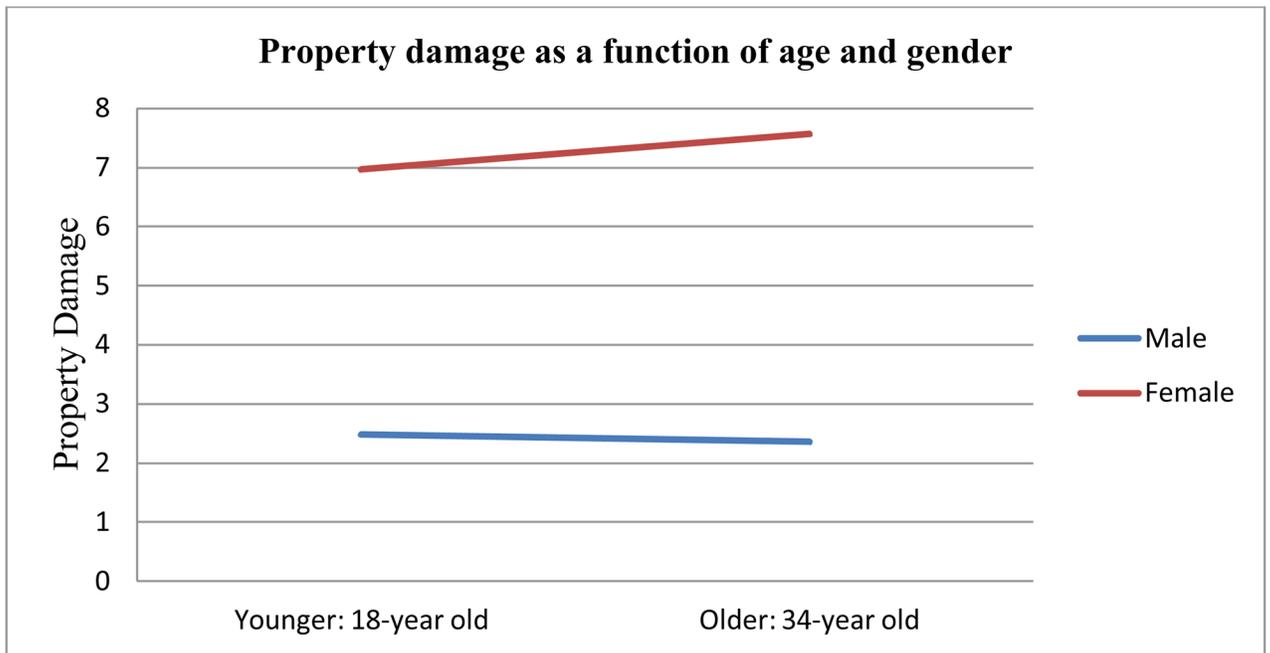


Figure 4.
Prototypical plots of property damage as a function of age and gender

Table 1

Correlations among major variables

| Variables | Age | Isolation | Degradation | Sexual abuse | Property damage | Emotional abuse |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-----------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Log Age (M=3.27, S.D.=.28) | 1 | | | | | |
| Isolation (M=1.50, S.D.=.11) | -.14* | 1 | | | | |
| Degradation (M=33.75, SD=8.13) | -.05 | .52* | 1 | | | |
| Sexual abuse (M=6.99, S.D. =2.45) | -.36* | .32* | .40* | 1 | | |
| Property damage (M= .85, S.D. =.03) | .04 | .29* | .56* | .63* | 1 | |
| Emotional abuse (M=2.98, S.D. =.19) | -.16* | .89* | .82* | .52* | .49* | 1 |

* p<.05

Table 2

Gendered correlations among major variables

| Variables | Age | Isolation | Degradation | Sexual abuse | Property Damage | Emotional abuse |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Age | 1 | -.23* | -.13 | .40* | .07 | -.25* |
| Isolation | -.07 | 1 | .56* | .44* | .34 | .87* |
| Degradation | .02 | .44* | 1 | .52* | .72* | .88* |
| Sexual abuse | -.28* | .15* | .20 | 1 | .86 | .65* |
| Property damage | .17 | .22* | .20 | .08 | 1 | .69* |
| Emotional abuse | -.08 | .89* | .77* | .35* | .26* | 1 |

* p<.05

Please note that correlations in bold represent males, while correlations in regular font represent females.