

## ABSTRACT:

### **The clinical and legal implications of psychological violence in group contexts**

Carmen Almendros, Ph.D., Associate Professor in Clinical Psychology, Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain).

Whereas physical and sexual abuses have statutory definitions (Auburn, 2003), there is no consensus about which behaviors constitute psychological abuse (PA). It has been asserted, in the different settings where it was studied, that psychological abuse is an elusive concept, of difficult operationalization (e.g., Almendros, Gámez-Guadix, Carrobes, Rodríguez-Carballeira and Porrúa, 2009). If this is the case in the family (e.g., psychological abuse against the partner, children or the elderly), school or work settings, it is even further in the case of psychologically manipulative groups, a field markedly less investigated than the others. As a result, we found in the available literature a conceptual ambiguity and lack of consensus concerning how to assess psychological abuse in ways that would assist researchers and practitioners in mental health and legal settings. Only recently have researchers become aware of the importance of studying psychological abuse as an independent dimension of physical violence and of conceptually defining psychological abuse in specific contexts.

This presentation has a focus on measurement – what has been done, what have we learned, where do we go. It has been stated that the ability to reliably measure is a key indicator of a developing field's health and maturity (Hill, 2005). Concern for measurement in the cultic studies field is still recent. We reviewed the psychometric properties and conceptual dimensions of a variety of instruments measuring PA both in the intimate partner violence (IPV) (Almendros *et al.*, 2009) and abusive groups (AG) (Almendros, Gámez-Guadix, Carrobes & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011) contexts. In respect to the measurement of PA in the IPV field we found a wider number and variety of instruments developed. We found up to 30 instruments including at least a subscale related to PA. Research in this field (e.g., Marshall, 1999) suggests that psychological abuse may not only have a deleterious impact on subjects, but sometimes have a greater and more enduring impact than physical abuse. PA in IPV settings has been found to precede most cases of subsequent physical violence, which doesn't mean that PA will necessarily escalate to that extent. Also, while physical abuse tends to decrease in its frequency in the long term, as people grow older, the PA is more resistant to change. Some argued that, in

contrast with physical and sexual abuses, PA may lead to the woman's maintaining the relationship

In contrast, in the cultic studies field we found only three instruments designed for the measurement of dimensions related to more or less extent to Psychological Abuse: *Group Psychological Abuse Scale* (GPA; Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Spanish version: Almendros, Carrobles, Rodríguez-Carballeira, & Jansà, 2004); *Individual Cult Experience Index* (ICE; Winocur, Whitney, Sorensen, Vaughn, & Foy, 1997); and *Across Groups Psychological Abuse and Control Scale* (AGPAC; Wolfson, 2002). The GPA has been the most widely used instrument, revealing adequate internal and test-retest reliability. The GPA scale has shown consistently its ability to distinguish between different samples of former members: those who identify themselves as former members of abusive groups and of non-abusive groups (Almendros, Carrobles et al., 2009; Langone, 1996; Mascareñas, 2002). No evidence has been found to relate the information provided by the victims with negative attitudes (Lewis, 1986; Solomon, 1981) resulting from their status as former members of these groups or them having been counseled—upon leaving the group or at any time after it—by expert professionals or associations educating/alerting about cults (Almendros, Carrobles et al., 2009). In general, very similar response patterns and very few differences have been found between the GPA scores of former members of AG from various cultural environments—US, Spanish, Mexican & Japanese (Almendros et al., 2004; Almendros, Carrobles & Gámez-Guadix, 2009; Almendros, Carrobles & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2009; Mascareñas, 2002).

Two parallel studies are being carried out investigating abusive behaviors both in partner and group violence contexts. Several authors noted the similarity between controlling systems and the experience of people who have been taken hostage, prisoners of war and concentration camps, people who are members of cults, and victims of domestic violence (e.g. Andersen, Boulette y Schwartz, 1991), but there is little empirical precedence in the available literature (Wolfson, 2002). Two groups of self-identified former members of abusive groups participated in our study. One was composed of 128 people from originally English-speaking countries (71.1% women) and the second included 118 Japanese (55.4% women). Beside these, a group of 72 Spanish women victim of intimate partner violence participated so far in a study that included parallel forms, adapted to the language and to the intimate context, of the instruments used with the AG former members. Several instruments for the measurement of psychological abuse, influence and involvement in the abusive relationship were used. Overall, the IPV group reported suffering more physical abuse

than the FMG groups, whereas the last showed more degree of involvement, and a higher level of psychological abuse and influence strategies. Results should be taken with caution regarding the developmental stage of the measures employed for the present work.

It is much what we have learnt and know about cults over the past years. However, scientific publications are yet few and our knowledge is little spread among professionals (Psychology and Law practitioners). Reliable and valid assessment tools are a first step that should inform prevention and intervention efforts.

Finally, specific conclusions are drawn, some research gaps are identified, and guidelines are suggested on future investigation lines that would be interesting to study more in depth. Clinical and legal implications will be discussed underlying that the difficulties at assessing psychological abuse are similar in other fields apart from cultic studies.

Almendros, C., Carrobes, J. A., Rodríguez-Carballeira, A., & Jansà, J. M. (2004). Propiedades psicométricas de la versión española de la Group Psychological Abuse Scale para la medida de abuso psicológico en contextos grupales. *Psicothema*, *16*, 132–138.

Almendros, C., Carrobes, J. A., & Gámez-Guadix, M. (2009, July). *Psychological abuse reported by former members of manipulative groups across different cultural groups*. Poster presented at the International Conference of The Norwegian Psychological Association. European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA): XI European Congress of Psychology, Oslo, Norway.

Almendros, C., Carrobes, J. A., & Rodríguez-Carballeira, A. (2009, July). *Development and validation of measures of group psychological abuse*. Paper presented at ICSA's International Conference: Psychological Manipulation, Cultic Groups and Harm, Geneva, Switzerland.

Almendros, C., Carrobes, J.A., Rodríguez-Carballeira, A., & Gámez-Guadix, M. (2009). Abandono y malestar psicológico en ex-miembros de grupos sectarios. *Behavioral Psychology/Psicología Conductual*, *17*, 181–201.

Almendros, C., Gámez-Guadix, M., Carrobes, J. A., Rodríguez-Carballeira, A., & Porrúa, C. (2009). Abuso psicológico en la pareja: aportaciones recientes, concepto y medición. *Behavioral Psychology/Psicología Conductual*, *17*, 433–451.

Auburn, P.R. (2003). Towards an operational definition of psychological maltreatment of children. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *64* (6-A), 1967.

Chambers, W. V., Langone, M. D., Dole, A. A., & Grice, J. W. (1994). The Group Psychological Abuse scale: A measure of the varieties of cultic abuse. *Cultic Studies Journal*, *11*, 88–117.

Hill, P. C. (2005). Measurement in the psychology of religion and spirituality: Current status and evaluation. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (pp. 43–61). New York, NY: Guildford.

Langone, M. D. (1996). *An investigation of a reputedly psychologically abusive group that targets college students*. Tech. Rep. Prepared for the Danielsen Institute, Boston University. Retrieved from [http://www.culticstudies.org/infoserv\\_articles/langone\\_michael\\_bu\\_bcc\\_study.htm](http://www.culticstudies.org/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_bu_bcc_study.htm)

Lewis, J. R. (1986). Reconstructing the cult experience: post-involvement attitudes as a function of mode of exit and post-involvement socialization. *Sociological Analysis*, *46*, 151-159.

Marshall, L. L. (1999). Effects of men's subtle and overt psychological abuse on low-income women. *Violence & Victims*, *14*, 69-88.

Mascareñas, C. (2002, June). *Application of the Group Psychological Abuse scale translated to Spanish in former members of two religious groups in Mexico*. Paper presented at AFF's International Conference: Understanding Cults and New Religious Movements, Orlando, FL.

Solomon, T. (1981). Integrating the 'Moonie' experience: A survey of ex-members of the Unification Church. In T. Robbins y D. Anthony (dirs.), *In Gods we trust* (pp. 275-295). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Winocur, N., Whitney, J., Sorensen, C., Vaughn, P., & Foy, D. (1997). The Individual Cult Experience Index: The assessment of cult involvement and its relationship to post cult distress. *Cultic Studies Journal*, *14*, 290–306.

Wolfson, L. B. (2002). A study of the factors of psychological abuse and control in two relationships: Domestic violence and cultic systems. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *63*(8A), 2794.