

Emotional Abuse in Intimate Relationships: A Qualitative Study among married people

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Abstract

Context: Intimacy being a crucial part of marriage is often misunderstood that only couple with less intimacy experience emotional abuse. But whether highly intimate married couple also experience emotional abuse is not clearly understood. So the present study emphasized on exploring the emotional abuse among highly intimate married couples.

Aim: To explore emotional abuse in intimate relationships among married people.

Method: The data was collected from 10 participants using in-depth interviews, living in India, who are in an intimate (married) relationship. The data was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis.

Results: After analysing the qualitative content of the interviews, the following five themes were emerged: Verbal abuse, emotional insecurities, degradation, lack of affiliation, and negative view on life.

Conclusions: Even highly intimate married couples experience emotional abuse. The findings have important applications in developing healthy relationship among married couples.

Keywords: Intimate relationships, married couples, emotional abuse

Introduction:

The present scenario is witnessing a rapid deterioration of adjustment among intimate married relationships. The satisfaction in married life depends upon how well the couples cope up with the problems and are satisfied with their family life. Marital adjustment can be an issue in India as it involves individuals from two different traditions, cultures, and family backgrounds coming up together. Though there was a widespread exploration of topics related to marital satisfaction by the 1990s researchers, an integrated understanding of marital relationships was not formulated (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach 2000; Karney and Bradbury, 1995).

According to World Health Organization (2010), Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) “is any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual and emotional harm to mostly women in the relationship”. WHO has advanced the list by adding controlling behaviour as a form of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), which is prevalent in all forms of settings regardless of socio economic, religious, cultural, and development index classes. It is considered as a human rights violation as well as a public health issue across the globe (Campbell, 2002).

Emotional Abuse (EA) is “any nonphysical behaviour or attitude that is designed to control, subdue, punish, or isolate another person through the use of humiliation or fear and cause psychological trauma” (Engel, 2002). It includes behaviours such as insulting, belittling, name calling, blaming, stalking, isolating, humiliating, intimidating (e.g: breaking things), threatening to harm, and threatening to take away children. It is also called as psychological abuse or chronic verbal aggression. Some of the physical behaviours, though they fall under the category of physical violence, can be considered as Emotional Abuse (EA) (Marshall, 1996). Such behaviours are throwing objects, hitting/kicking a wall, shaking a finger, hand or fist at the victim, driving recklessly when the victim is in the car, threatening to destroy the

things that the victim values, or inflicting harm on victim's pets that causes suffering for both victim and animals (Faver & Strand, 2007).

Gondolf, Heckert, & Kimmel (2002) found a correlation between physical and emotional abuse. Similarly, Schumacher and Leonard (2005) reported that an early verbal abuse in a relationship is predictive of subsequent physical abuse. Furthermore new findings from National Intimate Partner & Sexual violence Survey (NISVS) by Black et al. (2011) found that approximately half of Americans reported experiencing life time emotional abuse by Partner. Consequently, emotional abuse appears to be the most common form of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Though these studies report a correlation between physical and emotional abuse, there is another view point which emphasizes that emotional abuse is entirely different from physical abuse and is worth of having its own theories and strategies to prevent (O' Leary & Maiuro, 2001).

Intimacy is one of the crucial aspects of marriage and it is an important aspect for maintaining healthy relationships. It is often thought that mostly couples with less intimacy experience emotional abuse; also studies have indicated the noticeable prevalence of intimate partner violence among the couples, which is usually under recognized (Patra , Prakash, 2018). Emotional abuse, an aspect of intimate partner violence, is a leading risk factor for mental health problems. Its prevalence is increasing not only among females but among males too (Carney & Barner, 2012). Studies reported that, even intimate partners experience emotional abuse and they have a tendency to report risk symptoms of depression, PTSD and mental health problems (Golding,1999 & Chandra, Satyanarayana, et.al, 2009). Further, the studies have focused on the IPV among couples, but this study specifically tried to explore the emotional abuse among the highly intimate partners and the kind of problems they are facing, as there is a poor understanding about the role of intimacy and emotional abuse among the highly intimate couples.

Method

Design and recruitment

The present study was qualitative in nature and has used the purposive sampling technique. Wherein, the researcher initially has approached the participants for the participation with the consent form; later the researcher purposefully has taken the participants who have scored high on intimacy part of Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1997) and interviewed by providing the privacy at participant's house. Two participants declined the invitation to take part in the interview.

Participants

10 married individuals (7 females and 3 males) between the aged between 26 to 33 years belonging to Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Maharashtra states of India, participated in this study. All participants, except one female, were employed. After marriage, the participants left their natal family and were leading a nuclear family life during the time of interview. 8 participants were interviewed once and the other 2 were interviewed twice.

Data collection and handling

The data was collected through in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted from October 2018 to December 2018. Each of the interviews started with explaining the purpose of the research, followed by informal conversation about their family, friends, work, life, and the participants were then encouraged to talk about their personal life including the development of their relationship with their partner. As the interview proceeded, participants were asked to tell more about their life situations and mental health status. These conversations offered more specific and contextualised insights into the participants' feelings. Each of the interviews lasted between 95 to 125 minutes.

Data analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The interviews were transcribed and translated into verbatim and were rechecked several times to understand it as a whole. All the information taken from the interview was considered as the unit of analysis. The meaning unit consists of sentences and words related to the meaning and content. The meaning unit is then condensed to form condensed unit. After doing the process of abstraction and conceptualization by considering the meaning, codes are developed. Categories or subthemes were formed by comparing and abstracting the similarities and differences of codes. By comparing the categories, themes were extracted. The data analyses ultimately led to the development of 5 themes related to emotional abuse in intimate relationships.

Results:

Table 1: Socio demographic details of the participants:

S.no	Name	Age	Gender	Educational qualification
1	AF	28	F	Engineering
2	MK	26	F	PG
3	SA	27	F	UG
4	GT	30	F	PG
5	MA	28	F	UG
6	SH	30	M	B.Tech
7	SK	33	F	MBA
8	RB	29	M	10 th Standard
9	DL	29	F	B tech
10	MN	31	M	B tech

Table 2: Themes and subthemes extracted.

Main themes	Subthemes
Verbal abuse	Negative feedback(Relieving frustration) Inflicting guilt Inflicting negative emotions Verbal sadism
Emotional insecurities	Lack of trust Possessive about quality time Need for reassurance High possessiveness
Degradation	Self-restriction Self-sacrifice Affliction Social restriction Inflicting appearance anxiety
Lack of affiliation	Social desirability
Negative views on life	Anxious Pessimistic view on future Work pressure

The results revealed that the highly intimate married couples experience emotional abuse and the themes generated from the analysis were verbal abuse, emotional insecurities, degradation, need for affiliation, and negative view about life.

Verbal abuse: Participants reported that when the partners are emotionally unstable or under high stress or physical discomfort, they would constantly criticize, insult and denounce them. For example,

Participant SA shared that: “Yes, he knows that his words can hurt me. But during our fights he uses those words intentionally to make me emotionally down”.

Participant MK shared that, “If I commit any mistake he would always blame me by pointing at my personality and often tries to hurt me verbally with intentional attacking points on my personality”.

Emotional insecurities: Some of the participants responded that their partners felt insecure about their relationship, showed possessiveness and needed reassurance. For example,

Participant MN said that, “Yes, he was jealous of one of my male friends and I had to avoid talking with him in order to avoid my partner’s jealousy”.

Participant MK shared that, “Sometimes when I talk with my friends for long hours he gets irritated”.

Lack of trust in partner may lead to a state of insecurity where the individual will always be cautious about the partner’s moves. The participants while talking about several situations shared their inconsistent opinions which they share with their partner. They were not sure as how their partner would react to a particular situation which shows that they haven’t understood nor tried to understand their partner, talked to them freely and openly etc. When participant AF was asked whether the partner tell their personal matters to others, she responded:

“No, since he doesn’t have best friends I don’t think he shares our personal matters with a third person”

This answer is very diplomatic as it implies that she’s not very sure about her husband and if he had a friend, he might share their personal matters with him/her which is an evident case of lack of trust. This insecurity evokes possessiveness and other emotional disturbances.

Degradation: Most of the participants reported the presence of degradation in their life, in terms of restrictions or comparisons. Some have shared that their partner restricts their social media usage whereas others reported that their partners have set strict hygiene rules. Other kind of restriction reported was with respect to meeting up with friends. The examples include:

MA said that, “He wants me to wake up early in the morning and doesn’t allow me to hang out with my friends even for a day”

DL shared that, “He told me to limit the usage of certain apps to prevent problems in our personal lives”.

SK responded that, “Yes, sometimes he would look at some girls and tell me that I am fatter than them.”

Need for affiliation: The participants expressed their need for belongingness to the social world. They were ready to sacrifice their own needs and their fantasies in order to get confirmed with the standards kept by the society. This becomes an issue of abuse for the partner, when the other partner confirms with the social values and standards kept by the society only in the presence of others and acts contradictorily while being in their own private time. When asked about public display of affection, participant AF responded as:

“No, because I stick to my social values and beliefs. I think these things are to be done in private”.

Negative view about life: The participants shared about their work pressure and its reasons such as lack of positive relationship with colleagues, partner’s possessiveness about other’s work environments, difficulty in meeting the deadlines, and lack of sleep, all of these were leading to create a negative view of life. They were finding it difficult to balance their personal and professional lives. They further expressed that the work pressure was affecting them negatively as they are not getting enough time to spend with themselves, partners, or other family members. Later, most of them opened up about their pessimistic view about the future. They were anxious how well they could lead their life in the future. Some of the responses about this aspect are:

RB responded that, “I have many goals to accomplish and I am trying hard for it. But life does not seem to move forward”

GT shared that, “Though I am happy, I do feel sad sometimes and these days are really hectic for me with a schedule”.

Discussion

The present study provided insights into the emotional abuse in highly intimate relationships through the lived experiences of Indian couples. It revealed that the presence of emotional abuse in highly intimate relationships. Couples experienced abuse in the form of verbal abuse, emotional insecurities, degradation, need for affiliation, and negative view about life.

Couples experienced verbal abuse as their partners intentionally used words to hurt them and let them down emotionally. In accordance with the findings of Elgin and Haden (2018) such an emotional outburst mostly occurred when their partners were highly stressed out or experiencing physical discomfort. Verbal abuse is a destructive form of communication caused by underlying anger and hostility, which may end up destructing the self-concept of the other person leading to negative emotions. Mostly in a romantic relationship, the verbal abuser seem to possess low self-esteem he/she would view the partner’s independent thought, views etc., as a threat against them. And as a result of which, they try to place their partner in a similar situation.

Emotional insecurities experienced by the couples in highly intimate relationship included lack of trust, possessiveness about the time spent together and need for reassurance. Lack of trust in the partner may lead to a state of insecurity where the individual will always be cautious about the partner’s moves. This insecurity may further leads to possessiveness and other emotional disturbances. Insecurity is found to ruin relationships and cause more fights (Wilde, 2016). Unlike a person who is emotionally secured, an insecure person does not have control over his emotional state. They tend to be neurotic and are generally selfish and egocentric (Blitz, 2016). However, couples ignored such behaviours of their partners because of their intimate relationship and continued to move forward.

Another form of emotional abuse seen among couples in highly intimate relationships was degradation. It included imposing various restrictions on the partner and comparing their appearance with others. Restricting a partner from hanging out with his/her friends or from being an active member in a social media forum which eventually leads to social isolation. Isolation is a pivotal tactic which a controlling partner use in order to weaken their victims, prevent them from hearing others perspective, and forcing them to comply with his/her own beliefs and requirements. According to Murphy (2009), possessiveness and jealousy play a part in some men’s motivation to isolate women from social contact with friends and family.

According to a study conducted by Karakurt, Kristin & Silver (2015), it was found that young women experience high rate of isolation and property damage as compared to men. Such controlling behaviours may lead to marital dissatisfaction. Those who engage in

comparing their partner with others in aspects of physical appearance are causing degradation to the partner by evoking appearance anxiety in them.

Need for affiliation can be defined as an individual's sense of belongingness and involvement with the social world (McClelland, D., 1960). Though this looks like a positive term, when a partner of an intimate relationship is oriented too much to the societal acceptance, he/she might lose his/her own essence, which would indirectly affect the other partner. Following the social codes is appreciable to a certain extent, but when a partner acts differently in their personal world and becomes another person when in outside world would result in emotional insecurity because of the partner's unpredictable behaviour. Long term run of this character would become a form of emotional abuse for the other partner.

Couples attributed their negative views about life to work pressures. According to them, it was a result of lack of positive relationship with colleagues, partner's possessiveness about other's work environments, difficulty in meeting the deadlines, and lack of sleep. They were finding it difficult to balance their personal and professional lives. They further expressed that the work pressure was affecting them negatively as they are not getting enough time to spend with themselves, partners, or other family members. A lack of quality time spent with partners over a period of months or years can lead to frustration, resentment and withdrawal. It can also cause feelings of neglect, which creates further emotional and physical distance (Beer, 2016).

Story and Repetti (2006) found a significant relationship between job stressors and marital interaction. According to them, spouses who belong to high conflict families are more vulnerable to effects of work pressure on marital interaction (Story & Repetti, 2006).

Limitations and Recommendations

The socio economic status, gender, religion and locality type of the participants were not adequately represented in the sample. Hence the future studies can utilize a representative sample considering these factors.

Conclusion

From the findings, the researcher concluded that intimate married couple also experience emotional abuse. But surprisingly, the participants were not aware that they were being emotionally abused the whole time. They expressed it in terms of verbal abuse, emotional insecurities, degradation, need for affiliation, and negative view about life.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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