



Exploring the Triad: Marital Status, Emotional Abuse, and Learned Helplessness among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The ever-increasing appreciation for the prevalence and distinctiveness of emotional abuse as a type of social harm has been growing over the last few years, especially amongst young adults in their intimate relationships, yet it is still relatively unexplored in the research realm. Also, the majority of existing knowledge regarding the impact of emotional abuse has focused on mental/emotional health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem. Although, there has been little research conducted on the effect of marital status on these same variables as it pertains to emotional abuse experiences. In this article, we review the literature on the relationship between emotional abuse and learned helplessness, focusing specifically on the differences between married and unmarried adults. Utilizing established theoretical models, including the learned helplessness model and the coercive control model, this paper integrates findings from multiple research disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and public health. All the available evidence indicates that emotional abuse causes emotional disturbances that eventually leads to a gradual loss of perceived control in individual(s), as a result, they develop a state of learned helplessness. Individuals in marriage are typically faced with more robust social



expectations, legal obligations, and family peer pressure than individuals who are not married which leads to restricted exit options, whereas people who are not married experience emotional instability, emotional dependency on their partner, and limited support systems. However, very few studies till date have compared the two groups of emotional abuse victims to each other. This review synthesizes several key commonalities in the findings, highlighting the scarcity of current research regarding marital status impact, and provides recommendations for continued theoretical, practical, and policy implications regarding emotional abuse within social constructs. The findings derived from this study tells us the importance of conducting extensive and thorough research which studies relationship structures as well as psychological impact of emotional abuse of those individuals.

1. Introduction

Emerging adults, this transition period in life is defined by free will, a sense of who we are as people, and developing long-term relationships with other people. For many people, these romantic relationships become a major part of their emotional world and psychological health. These relationships can offer us support, security, and belonging, but they can also become a source of emotional pain if they involve conflict or abusive behaviour (Arnett, 2000). In terms of different types of harm in relationships, emotional abuse has become a major issue in recent years. Emotional abuse and physical abuse are not the same. Emotional abuse includes behaviour that devalues or diminishes an individual's self-worth, sense of autonomy and emotional safety. Emotional abuse is a non-physical form of abuse which includes behaviour such as verbal abuse, manipulation, threatening, humiliation or isolation. This often leads to it not being taken seriously by both victims and society (Follingstad, 2007). Shockingly, research points that emotional abuse can have psychological effects similar to or even greater than physical abuse. Martin Seligman's learned helplessness makes for a great lens in understanding the psychological impact of emotional abuse. Seligman first described the theory of learned helplessness in 1975, as the development of a belief that will be unsuccessful at controlling any events in their life if they are exposed to negative events that they cannot control. Over time, this will lead to a loss of interest in acting, a decrease in motivation and eventually a cease in trying to change their life situations. When people are subjected to emotional abuse through repeated criticism, rejection, or controlling behaviors,



they may develop a belief that they have little or no influence over their partner's behavior. They may then stop asserting themselves and/or trying to get help because they do not believe anything they do will make a difference in their partner's behavior (Seligman, 1975).

In addition to this dynamic, there is the issue of marital status, which creates additional complexities for the learned helplessness model. While both the partnership types are legally recognized, differences do arise when it comes to their social expectations, cultural meaning as well as structure of the relationship. In India, marriage is seen as a foundational social unit of the society. It is seen as an important source of family honor, social stability and long-term commitment (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). Therefore, marriage and the social expectations around it can shape how individuals in relationships interpret and respond to their problems. The expectations of dating or cohabiting relationships differ from those of married couples in many cultures. Although they may offer more flexibility and self-direction when compared with traditional marriages, often there are less formal and informal means of integration or acceptance into society. Consequently, these two different types of relationships have the potential to affect both the incidence of emotional abuse and how people respond to emotional abuse because of how these relationships differ in terms of their structure, culture and institutional support. Besides characterizing the differences in how marriages are related to emotional failed attempts at persuading someone to stay in a relationship, there is evidence that few studies have considered how marital status might influence emotional and painful experiences of people who have been emotionally abused. That is, most studies have focused on one or both constructs in isolation or in the context of the same relationship but do not consider how structural and cultural aspects and individual psychology co-occur or interact throughout multiple relationships even though both constructs are experienced in relationships with others.

This paper will examine the literature related to emotional abuse and learned helplessness among young adults, identifying trends, areas needing further investigation and expanding the understanding of how marital status impacts both constructs to guide future research.

2. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Background

2.1 Emotional Abuse

A system of behavior that involves controlling, demeaning, or damaging a person's mind is classified as emotional abuse. It can be manifested in many ways, including repeating criticism, threatening, humiliating, manipulating, and limiting the opportunities a person has to socialize (Stark, 2007). Emotional abuse is distinctly different from a one-time conflict or violent incident in that it is



repetitive and systematic in nature. Follingstad (2007) noted that many researchers have found that emotional abuse is not merely a milder form of violence but a completely independent type of emotional abuse and has a different mechanism and consequence from that of physical abuse. Abuse usually affects a person's sense of identity and their self-esteem; consequently, emotional abuse usually results in long-term psychiatric injury. Constantly criticizing someone may cause them to begin to apply to themselves the negative beliefs that have been directed at them; similarly, being isolated from their community and being unable to seek support from their family will have a similar effect because of being subjected to emotional abuse. The assessment tools used in studies to measure emotional abuse are like one another in that they use several different measures of the frequency and severity of behaviors associated with emotional abuse, which may include verbal aggression, controlling behaviors and emotional manipulation. Despite these differences, researchers consistently report that emotional abuse occurs across a broad range of relationships (Follingsdat 2007).

2.2 Long Term Effects of Emotional Abuse

Learned Helplessness is another condition developed because of the individual's continued exposure to uncontrollable negative situations. According to Seligman (1975), repeated exposure to uncontrollable negative situations will develop generalized expectancies about the lack of control over events, which develop many times into an attitude of passivity where individuals no longer attempt to reach a solution to their problems. Then, Abramson et al. (1978) expanded the theory by adding a cognitive aspect. They claimed how a person's perception of an event impacts whether that individual will indeed develop feelings of helplessness. The likelihood of helplessness increasing develops when negative experiences are linked with stable, global and internal causes. Whereas in interpersonal settings, such as avoiding asserting oneself, not being able to make decisions and remaining in dysfunctional conditions, these responses are not signs of weakness, but rather adaptive responses to their perception of a lack of control.

2.3 Marital Status

Marital status is a socially created category containing definite definitions and expectations regarding its meaning. The institution of marriage indicates permanence, a commitment to a shared future and inclusion in society. Legally, marriage is intertwined with how the law regulates issues surrounding property rights, inheritance rights and the relationship defined by family. Unmarried individuals (those in romantic relationship but not formally married), while generally emotionally committed to one another, and may share deep emotional connections with one another, do not possess the social or legal society



attains from marriage. All these distinctions should produce different reactions and responses between married and unmarried individuals experiencing emotional abuse. Specifically, married individuals are subjected to greater weights to maintain their marriage than unmarried couples, especially in cultures that stigmatize divorce or separation. Likewise, married individuals may encounter additional challenges, such as being financially dependent on their spouse or being too concerned about how their spouse and/or children will cope without them. (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). In comparison to married people, single individuals are more flexible with their time and activities but might not have a formal support system. Society also sometimes views unmarried relationships as not legitimate. This can also affect how they are treated if they report being victims of abuse.

2.4 Integrating the Constructs

The way in which emotional abuse and learned helplessness relates to one another can be conceptualized with the dynamic of both forms of abuse denying an individual his/her self-efficacy, which creates passive coping mechanisms. These types of coping mechanisms ultimately reinforce emotional abuse and therefore create a cycle that often cannot be broken. An individual's marital status will likely affect this process via the context in which emotional abuse occurs. For example, marital status will play a large role in the availability of resources (i.e., personal support systems) to a young adult, the perception of alternative relationships, and the social consequences of leaving an abusive relationship.

3. Methodology

The present study utilizes an exploratory narrative review methodology. This paper does not set out to provide an exhaustive review and synthesis of all research articles published to date, but identifies patterns, connections, and gaps in the literature regarding emotional abuse, learned helplessness, and marital status among young adults. A narrative review is useful in a situation where a concept is so complex, and the literature of interest spans multiple disciplines.

Databases & Search Strategy: For the literature search, the major scholarly databases were PsycINFO and PubMed in addition to Scopus. The search terms used to locate a broad spectrum of appropriate studies involved combining search terms through various means. Among the search terms used were “emotional abuse,” “psychological abuse,” “intimate partner abuse,” “learned helplessness,” “perceived control,” “marital status,” “young adults,” and “relationship dynamics.” Boolean operators were also used to increase accuracy of the identified articles.



Selection Criteria: The inclusion criteria were established to provide clarity and relevance to the data collected. Articles were included if (a) participants aged between 18-35 years, (b) the study examined either emotional or psychological abuse in an intimate relationship, and/or (c) the study examined learned helplessness or concepts closely associated with learned helplessness such as, perceived control, passivity, and attributional style. Both theoretical and empirical studies were included provided they made a meaningful contribution to understanding the related topic. Exclusion criteria were as follows: (a) article focusing on physical or sexual violence that did not address emotional abuse or related psychological processes, (b) articles that presented purely opinion-based claims without empirical or theoretical backing. The selection process iterative and the articles identified via database searches were supplemented with screening of reference lists of selected studies.

Framework & Analysis: The framework utilized in the current study was thematic analysis, which aims to analyze studies through a broader lens rather than summarizing each study. The results have been categorized into themes of emotional abuse prevalence/manifestations, psychological sequelae of emotional abuse, mechanisms of learned helplessness, and effect of marital status on these themes, providing a clearer illustration of the interrelationships between the different areas of research.

4. Thematic Synthesis and Integrated Findings

4.1 Prevalence and Manifestations of Emotional Abuse in Young Adult Relationships

There are many reports of emotional abuse in both dating and marital relationships of young adults. Straus (2004) researched and found that even in early-stage romantic relationships psychological aggression occurs at substantial rates, confirming that abuse is not limited to long term or highly committed relationships. Emotional abuse often overlaps with behaviour associated with everyday conflict. Actions like criticism or emotional withdrawal may seem minor but can turn abusive when they become frequent, intentional and targeted. Youngsters have limited relational experience which may make it difficult to identify emotional abuse clearly and lack clear points of reference for healthy interactions. Behaviors like jealousy, possessiveness or control can be misinterpreted as care, which delays identification of abuse and eventually prolonging exposure. Research shows that emotional abuse has mounting effects. Follingstad (2007) argues that self-esteem gradually erodes with repeated exposure to demeaning or controlling behaviors. The psychological impact of such behaviors often stays and influences future relationships. Gender differences are seen but are not straightforward. Women are more likely to report emotional abuse. Men also experience emotional abuse, but it is underreported due social norms that discourage expressions of vulnerability (Follingstad, 2007). Another crucial feature is the



normalization of emotional abuse in certain contexts. Endurance, sacrifice or dominance when emphasized in cultural narratives make abusive behaviors appear acceptable. This reduces the likelihood of interventions and in turn reinforces harmful patterns.

4.2 Learned Helplessness in Interpersonal Relationships: Mechanism and Outcomes

Learned helplessness provides a framework for understanding how individuals respond to emotional abuse. Martin Seligman in 1975, stated that repeated exposure to uncontrollable aversive events will lead individuals to believe that their actions will not bring any change in the situation. This belief reduces motivation and encourages inaction. This process takes time in interpersonal relationships. In the beginning, individuals may make efforts to acknowledge conflicts or might resist controlling behaviors. But they start to question the effectiveness of their actions after the failed attempts. This may lead them to stop trying eventually. In their revised model of a cognitive dimension of helplessness, Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) added another cognitive aspect (the cognitive aspect) to previous work done on helplessness. This also builds on several previous studies of helplessness conducted by other researchers. The revised version of the theory states that people who view the cause of negative experiences in their life as internal (i.e., they are to blame for these experiences); stable (i.e., they believe the experience will happen again); and global (i.e., they believe all aspects of their life will be negative) are much more likely to develop helplessness than individuals who do not have these beliefs. People who believe they are the cause of the problem, rather than viewing the situation as a problem, are much more likely to develop feelings of helplessness than individuals. There have been empirical research studies supporting the link between beliefs about control and helplessness. Walker (1979) studied individuals who had been in an abusive relationship and found that after repeated cycles of violence and making up, the victim develops a level of resignation, which is not a conscious decision made by the victim but rather a learned response to their perception of not having control over their own life. The broader ramifications of learned helplessness include numerous psychological consequences. Peterson and Seligman (1983) conducted a study that indicated individuals experiencing learned helplessness also experienced depression when confronted with a situation in which they no longer felt any control over. The behaviour of a partner who discounts or disqualifies their partner's efforts to change their circumstances will reinforce that individual's feelings of having no control over their life. It should be noted that learned helplessness is reversible, for example, when an individual has re-connected with their sense of control or when they receive support from social networks, that individual can completely recover from or resist learned helplessness.



4.3 Marital Status as a Structural and Cultural Context

People who suffer from emotional trauma have different experiences based upon their societal, structural, and marital statuses. Most legal and cultural systems - including both religious and secular - that govern married relationships give priority to stability and continuity. While these systems have the potential to offer support for those in a marriage, they can also act as barriers to separating from an abusive relationship. As highlighted by Allendorf & Panadian (2016), through their research, marriage is often related to societal expectations of families and social status. Consequently, in many instances, leaving a marriage is more about what is best for the family's reputation and social status than for the person deciding to leave. This belief results in many people remaining in unhealthy relationships despite the harmful effects. Additionally, practical matters such as shared finances or living arrangements, joint child rearing responsibilities create additional barriers to separating from an abusive partner (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). Because of these same shared finances or jointly owned possessions, one partner may be very economically dependent upon the other partner, further complicating an abusive relationship. For unmarried individuals in an unhealthy relationship, the process of leaving an unhealthy relationship is usually much more straightforward since there are very few formal commitments or legal obligations. However, it does not mean that an unmarried person cannot be emotionally dependent upon their partner. There are several reasons for a person remaining in an abusive relationship, like being afraid to be alone, worried about what people will think if they leave or being emotionally connected to their abuser (Barnett, 2000; Lammers et al., 2005). An individual's decision to seek help may be influenced by social views of different kinds of abuse (Liang et al., 2005). For example, most collectivist societies have a belief that when you marry, it is forever, so there is more pressure to stay together than there would be in other cultures; as a result, it may be less likely that a person will report being abused (Gill, 2004; Triandis, 1995). Changes in other cultures in how they view non-marital relationships are leading to increasingly complex and evolving definitions of what constitutes abuse between people who are not married (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011).

4.4 Intersections of Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness and Marital Status

Analyzing the literature reveals several patterns. There is a substantial connection between emotional abuse and negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem that is not dependent on the type of relationship. Emotional abuse contributes to learned helplessness in how a person's behavior is impacted; if a person continually experiences uncontrollably negative interactions, they may react by withdrawing and accepting the situation. Finally, the marital status of the victim plays a factor in how the victim processes emotional abuse. While marital status does not dictate if



emotional abuse occurs, it does play a role in how victims ultimately process emotional abuse, resulting in married individuals experiencing greater forms of external constraint, while unmarried individuals frequently experience varying forms of uncertainty. There is also a significant lack of comparative studies within current literature between married and unmarried individuals that makes it difficult to reach any definitive conclusions regarding the differences within each group. This indicates a need for better integrated research designs.

5. Discussion

Learned helplessness is a gradual transition in how one perceives their situation and consequently responds to difficulties in achieving a goal. Emotional abuse takes away a person's control over their life because of repeated failures when trying to exert control, their view of the possibility of change becomes generalized over time. A person's marital status impacts this process by influencing the perception of alternative choices to an abusive relationship. Marital status creates a variety of structural and cultural supports for entrapment; therefore, through an abusive marriage, a person may recognize fewer viable ways to escape, which sets up the conditions necessary to create learned helplessness. The same can be said about unmarried relationships; although there may not be the same number of structured barriers, a person remains to be tethered emotionally to their partner and has social influences on the perception of available options. It is not reasonable to assume that a lack of marital commitment will prevent the abuse's psychological effects. These results highlight the importance of taking both individual and contextual factors into account. For instance, the psychological theories of learned helplessness help explain how an individual's psychological processes are influenced by external factors. Failure to account for either contextual or individual factors will result in an incomplete understanding. The role of normalization is also essential. The victim will not view abuse as negative if emotional abuse is seen as acceptable and a normal component of the relationship. This will also affect help seeking behaviour. This review demonstrates that the concept of learned helplessness is applicable to real-life relationships as well as lab experiments. It aids in the explanation of how individuals act in intricate social contexts, particularly when variables like marital status are considered. Results suggest mental health practitioners consider not only a person's thought patterns but also what life situations they are currently in. In addition to providing individuals with more knowledge about the exact nature of the problems they may be having, therapy should also assist the individual in regaining a sense of control over their lives. Programs designed to raise awareness can also help individuals become aware of how emotionally abusive situations impact them and how to respond and act appropriately to bring an emotionally abusive situation to a resolution. Early detection and intervention of abuse will reduce the occurrence of feelings



of helplessness. Additionally, the scope and accessibility of current research are one of the limitations of this review. Strong conclusions regarding the differences between married and single people are limited by the lack of direct comparative studies. Another limitation includes the reliance on studies conducted in specific cultural contexts.

6. Future Directions

Further studies should emphasize comparative studies that examine married and unmarried populations within the same study. Insight into how emotional abuse and learned helplessness develop over time should also be worked on by using longitudinal design. A more diverse cultural setting should also be researched in the future. Understanding how cultural norms influence these processes can improve the relevance of interventions.

7. Conclusion

Emotional abuse is consistently reported across studies as a limiting factor for perceived agency. Emotional abuse not only causes distress but also causes individuals to change their belief systems; individuals will begin to believe their actions will not result in an outcome that is of any significance. This belief system is created through a series of events where an individual has gone through successive failed attempts to establish boundaries and/or obtain fairness. This belief system and the associated behaviors (withdrawal, hesitation) that come from it change the way an individual perceives their ability to do anything. The reformulated theory of learned helplessness provides an additional clarification by explaining how internal attributions (i.e. self-blame) magnify the effect (Abramson et al.). Psychologically, the mechanism underlying the loss of control is the same, yet the environment in which it develops differs with marital status. Those married are usually functioning within environments with greater emphasis on constancy and continuation in essence, legal bonds, shared tasks and expectations, and societal pronouncements have made investment in a relationship costly to exit. It is not so much the increased cost of leaving the relationship per se that induces helplessness; it is the increased likelihood that one's options have been eliminated. When the realization that one has few choices meets the repetition of emotionally injurious interactions, one begins to experience helplessness (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). One might expect more agency within them due to the lack of legal and contractual obligations, yet dependence on another's affections, fear of the negative consequences of rejection or the loss of a relationship, and concern for one's reputation in a judgmental world can serve the same function as formal obligations. In some respects, being within an unmarried relationship offers even less formal



support than within a married one. It is possible, therefore, for the very same cycle of increasing helplessness to unfold.

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