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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERPERSONAL ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the social psychological factors that contribute to and sustain interpersonal abusive relationships. It explores the dynamics of power, control, and emotional manipulation between partners, highlighting the roles of personality traits, communication patterns, and social influences. The study analyzes how abusive behaviors develop and persist within intimate relationships, considering both perpetrators and victims. It also discusses the psychological impact of abuse, including trauma, dependency, and self-esteem issues. By integrating theories from social psychology, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities underlying abusive interactions and suggests potential pathways for intervention and prevention.

Interpersonal abusive relationships represent a critical social and psychological issue that affects individuals across diverse cultures and societies. Such relationships are characterized by patterns of coercive control, emotional manipulation, and physical or psychological harm, which undermine the well-being and autonomy of victims. Understanding the social psychological characteristics of these relationships is essential for identifying the mechanisms that perpetuate abuse and for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. This article aims to explore the underlying dynamics of interpersonal abuse by examining factors such as power imbalances, communication styles, personality traits, and the influence of social and cultural contexts. By integrating insights from social psychology, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how abusive behaviors emerge, persist, and impact both perpetrators and victims within intimate relationships.

An abusive relationship is a type of interpersonal relationship where one partner exerts power and control over the other through harmful behaviors. These behaviors can be physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, or financial, and are intended to intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, or dominate the other person. Abuse can be overt, such as physical violence, or subtler, like emotional manipulation or isolation. Over time, abusive



relationships often create a cycle of fear, dependency, and trauma, severely impacting the victim's mental, emotional, and sometimes physical well-being. The hallmark of such relationships is a persistent pattern of coercion and control rather than isolated incidents of conflict [2].

An interpersonal abusive relationship refers to a close, personal relationship often between intimate partners, family members, or close friends in which one individual consistently exerts power and control over the other through abusive behaviors. These behaviors can be physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, or financial in nature. Unlike occasional conflicts or disagreements, interpersonal abuse involves a repeated pattern of harm that undermines the victim's autonomy, self-esteem, and well-being. The term emphasizes the abuse occurring within the context of a personal, ongoing relationship, highlighting how trust and emotional connection can be exploited to maintain control and dominance [5].

Social psychological characteristics of interpersonal abusive relationships refer to the patterns, behaviors, and underlying social and psychological processes that shape and sustain abusive dynamics between individuals in close relationships. These characteristics include how social influences, cognitive processes, emotional responses, and interpersonal interactions contribute to the development and maintenance of abuse. Key features often involve:

- Power and control dynamics: One partner seeks to dominate or control the other, using various tactics such as manipulation, intimidation, or coercion.
- Communication patterns: Abusive relationships frequently display dysfunctional communication, including hostility, withdrawal, blame, or gaslighting.
- Emotional manipulation: Abusers often exploit emotions to maintain control, creating dependency, fear, or guilt in the victim.
- Social influences: Norms, cultural beliefs, and social environments can either perpetuate or challenge abusive behaviors.
- Psychological effects: Patterns of abuse affect victims' self-esteem, mental health, and coping mechanisms, often resulting in trauma or learned helplessness.

Together, these social and psychological factors interact to create a complex environment where abuse can persist, making it difficult for victims to break free and for effective intervention to occur. Understanding these characteristics is crucial for developing targeted prevention and treatment strategies [3].

According to Walker [1], the cycle of abuse theory explains the recurring patterns of tension-building, incident, reconciliation, and calm, which trap victims in abusive relationships through psychological dependence and hope for change. Bandura's [2] social learning theory further posits that abusive behaviors are often learned through observation and reinforcement within social contexts, emphasizing the role of environment and modeling in perpetuating violence. Herman [3] highlights the profound psychological trauma experienced by victims, noting how abuse disrupts victims' sense of self and agency, which contributes to feelings of helplessness and entrapment. Dutton and Painter [4] emphasize the significance of power and control dynamics, arguing that perpetrators use emotional manipulation and coercion to maintain dominance.



Furthermore, Johnson [5] distinguishes between situational couple violence and intimate terrorism, underscoring the importance of understanding different abuse patterns for effective intervention. These theoretical perspectives collectively affirm that interpersonal abusive relationships are sustained by complex social and psychological mechanisms, necessitating multifaceted approaches for prevention and treatment.

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to investigate the social psychological factors involved in interpersonal abusive relationships. The quantitative component involved standardized questionnaires administered to a sample of adults who had experienced or witnessed abuse in intimate relationships, assessing variables such as power dynamics, communication patterns, personality traits, and emotional well-being. The qualitative component consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected participants to gain deeper insight into personal experiences, contextual factors, and coping mechanisms. Data were analyzed using statistical methods for the quantitative data and thematic analysis for the qualitative data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics underlying abusive relationships.

The findings reveal that interpersonal abusive relationships are strongly influenced by imbalances of power and control, with perpetrators often exhibiting controlling behaviors and emotional manipulation. Communication patterns characterized by hostility, withdrawal, and avoidance were prevalent among abusive partners. Personality traits such as low empathy and high aggression were more common in perpetrators, while victims frequently reported lowered self-esteem and feelings of dependency. The qualitative interviews highlighted the cyclical nature of abuse, with periods of tension followed by reconciliation, which complicates victims' decisions to leave. Additionally, social and cultural factors, including stigma and lack of support, were found to reinforce the persistence of abuse. Overall, the results emphasize the multifaceted nature of interpersonal abuse and underscore the importance of addressing psychological, social, and relational factors in prevention and intervention efforts.

The results of this study underscore the complex interplay of psychological and social factors that sustain interpersonal abusive relationships. Consistent with existing literature, power imbalances and controlling behaviors emerge as central components driving abuse, confirming theories of coercive control in intimate relationships. The identified communication patterns marked by hostility and withdrawal highlight how dysfunctional interaction exacerbates conflict and emotional harm. The presence of specific personality traits among perpetrators, such as low empathy and high aggression, aligns with psychological profiles commonly associated with abusive behavior, while the victims' experiences of diminished self-worth and dependency illustrate the profound psychological impact of abuse. Importantly, the cyclical nature of abuse uncovered through qualitative insights reflects the challenges victims face in breaking free, often complicated by social stigma and inadequate support systems. These findings reinforce the necessity for comprehensive intervention strategies that address not only individual psychological factors but also relational dynamics and broader social contexts. Future



research should explore targeted prevention programs that integrate social psychological principles to disrupt abusive cycles and empower victims toward recovery.

This study highlights the multifaceted social psychological characteristics that contribute to the formation and persistence of interpersonal abusive relationships. Key factors such as power imbalances, emotional manipulation, dysfunctional communication patterns, and specific personality traits play critical roles in sustaining abuse. The research also emphasizes the significant psychological impact on victims, including lowered self-esteem and dependency, which, combined with social stigma, complicate efforts to escape abusive situations. These insights underscore the importance of developing comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies that address both individual and relational factors, as well as the broader social environment. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of these dynamics is essential for fostering more effective support systems and breaking the cycle of interpersonal abuse.

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