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# Just Don't Take it so Seriously: Definitions of Psychological Abuse

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Just Don't Take it so Seriously:

Definitions of Psychological Abuse

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**Abstract**

Current lack of consensus for a clinical and legal definition of psychological abuse perpetuates systemic difficulties in addressing this societal problem. This study investigates through qualitative interviewing how adults who have and have not experienced psychological abuse define it, with an intent to gain insight on factors that should be considered in creating such a definition, as well as informing future research and social work practice. Ten participants were interviewed and transcripts created from their responses for content analysis. Twenty-two themes emerged from analysis of these transcripts with a strong emphasis on themes of control, dominance, and manipulation as a component of abuse. This theme was the only one that occurred in 100% of the interviews without major differences of participant interpretation. Participant responses overwhelmingly brought up themes coinciding with the results of prior research on perceptions of psychological abuse in other populations. Implications for policy and social work practice include an emphasis on the subjectivity of psychological abuse and a need for flexibility in establishing a definition for clinical and legal purposes.

Psychological abuse: informing our ability to define this term is the purpose of this paper. However it may be helpful to note that throughout the text this term is meant to include emotional abuse and mental abuse.

Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Lack of consensus on the appropriate way to define psychological, emotional and mental abuse is a source of confusion among professionals and distress among people victimized in their relationships. While extensive research has been conducted on the subject of physical abuse, there is still a great deal less research available on psychological abuse, limiting the ability of the scientific community to come to agreement on a definition that would encompass the needs of society and the needs of people in abusive relationships.

A true measure of prevalence is therefore difficult to find. Under-reporting is an accepted difficulty in collecting data on relationship abuse as a whole. The lack of an agreed upon definition for psychological abuse further complicates this problem. If we do not have solid parameters defining psychological abuse, how can we say what qualifies and what does not?

Studies seem to vary according to what severity of psychological aggression qualifies as abuse (McHugh, Rakowski & Swiderski, 2013). However we do have evidence that psychological abuse is a common problem rather than an uncommon one. Investigation into causes for divorce show emotional abuse given as a reason for 55.5 % of women and 24.7% of men (Cleek & Pearson, 1985). Research also found that more than 90% of college women reported experiencing psychological abuse in their relationships (Neufeld, McNamara, & Ertl, 1999). A more recent study that included both men and women found high numbers of both sexes (79.1 %) experienced psychological abuse at least once (Avant, Swopes, Davis & Dlhai, 2011).

It makes sense that those needs impact how individuals think about psychological abuse. Perceptions of psychological abuse might change depending on how one defines what it is; who is harmed by it, who perpetuates it, and under what circumstances it occurs. Psychological abuse might be more serious an offense to someone who has lived with it, or they might think that because they have lived through it, anyone could. This study will investigate perceptions of psychological abuse in order to expand our capacity to address this problem.

**Literature Review**

The negative impact of domestic abuse on individuals is generally established and agreed upon. Effects of relationship trauma are found to impact the brain in multiple ways. When exposed to emotional trauma at a young age, children have been found to develop hyperresponsivity in the amygdala to facial expressions in other people that lasts into adulthood (Van Harmelen, Van Tol, Demenescu, Van der Wee, Veltman, Aleman, Van Buchem, Spnhoven, Pennix, & Elzinga, 2012). Because the amygdala response bypasses prefrontal cortex when it takes over, executive function is impaired (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003, Van Der Kolk, 2003). Researchers predict increased emotional sensitivity and difficulties in interpersonal relationships for adults who have undergone childhood psychological abuse in response to the resulting hyperresponsivity (van Harmelen et. al., 2012). In adults, strong links have been found between experiences of relationship abuse and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Dutton,

Goodman, & Bennett, 1999).  Correlations have been found in college women who experienced psychological abuse between the amount of abuse and the amounts of self-objectification, body surveillance and shame (Gervais & Davidson, 2013). In meta-analysis of 33 studies of exposure to interpersonal trauma and severe mental illness, Mauritz, Goossens, Draijer and van Achterberg (2013) found consistent results linking mental illness and interpersonal trauma, and all except one described prevalence of PTSD among subjects. Using alcohol, drugs, and self-injury are reported as coping strategies for many women who have experienced physical and psychological abuse (Macdonald, 2013).

Although no form of abuse is a positive force in relationships, psychological abuse has a distinct disadvantage  when compared to physical and sexual abuse. While recent years have increased the research available concerning psychological abuse, they have not succeeded in defining it. There is even disagreement on the term to use, with verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and mental abuse sometimes replacing the label "psychological abuse" in research and in common speech (McHugh, Rakowski, & Swiderski, 2013).  However, there is wide agreement that some psychologically abusive behaviors are easily identified; "rejecting, degrading, terrorizing, isolating, missocializing (also called corrupting), exploiting, and denying emotional responsiveness" (Follingstad and Dehart, 2000, p.893). There is a lack of agreement on what to exclude. Some definitions are so expansive as to include any behavior the victim claims as abusive (McHugh et. al. 2013).

This general disagreement of terms and definitions creates confusion and numerous difficulties for researchers, legal practitioners, clinicians, and most importantly for victims of psychological abuse. Some examples of these difficulties include over-classifying, lack of agreement between partners as to whether abuse is occurring, and an inability for clinicians to determine if and when abuse is occurring (McHugh, et. al., 2013).

Confusion and disagreement on this subject leave us with questions of what actually constitutes psychological abuse. Who gets to decide? This question has led to numerous studies exploring perceptions of psychological abuse in relationships. Follingstad and Dehart (2000) performed a study investigating categories of abuse in order to construct a framework for further research. Their work gathered information from 1000 psychologists to find out what behaviors they perceived as abusive. Results found three clusters of behavior that were overwhelmingly classified by psychologists as abusive; threats to physical health, control over basic physical freedoms, and general destabilization. Items in a fourth cluster, Dominate/control items were rated as abusive by more than half of the psychologists, but were seen as abusive depending on how often they occurred and for how long. Psychologists largely saw frequency and duration as more important contextually than the man's intent or the woman's perception (Follingstad & Dehart, 2000).

Context and gender differences have been targeted for study in particular. Research by Dehart, Follingstad and Fields (2010) investigated what lay people thought about context in relation to psychological abuse. Participants were given

vignettes of interactions between romantic partners and asked to rate them on how abusive they found the behavior. Contexts in these vignettes exemplified evident harm, variation in sequence and continuing behavior, relationships that were casual versus those that were more serious, relationships that were happy versus those that contained frequent conflict, and whether the behavior was in front of others or in private. Participants were also asked information on their own past and experiences with regard to psychological abuse and biases they might have (Dehart, Follingstad, and Fields, 2010). Results found no significant associations between level of abusiveness and many of the contextual issues in given vignettes including different levels of provocation, or sudden attacks versus those that stemmed naturally from the discussion. Further, no significant results were found as well in psychologically aggressive behaviors occurring in public versus in private, as normal versus unusual in the relationship, or under the influence of peer pressure or support (Dehart, Follingstad, and Fields, 2010).

Threat of harm in response to strong versus weak provocation was significantly associated with ratings of psychological abuse for gender although not for context.  It was viewed as significantly more abusive from a man than from a woman (Dehart, Follingstad, and Fields, 2010). Significant ratings for abuse were also associated with evident distress reactions from the abused party regardless of gender, and when refusal to visit the other partner's family was met with depression (Dehart, Follingstad, and Fields, 2010). Behavior forbidding one's partner to interact with rivals was regarded as abusive originating from a man, but not from a woman.

There is disagreement about the relationship of gender to abuse. The disagreement touches everything from whether women should be seen as usually victims of domestic abuse (the gender paradigm) or normally equal to men in perpetration to how scientists adhering to these positions find their samples and which measurement tools they use (Dutton and Corvo 2007, Dutton, 2011, Gondolf 2007, 2011). With regard to intimate partner violence (IPV) as a whole, researchers can be found in three camps of opinion; women are more violent than men, less violent than men, or just as violent as men. However researchers in these camps also use different definitions of IPV, different measurements, and different populations in their studies (Tanha, Beck, Figueredo, & Raghavan, 2009). This limits the value of looking at IPV for this study, despite the fact that many definitions of IPV include psychological abuse. Studies on IPV offer a great deal of information about domestic abuse in general, but without separating psychological abuse from physical and sexual abuse, their data muddies attempts to distinguish psychological abuse from other types.

Study results also disagree on the importance of gender as a factor in perceptions of psychological abuse. McHugh, Rakowski and Swiderski (2013) cited evidence that men and women perceive abuse differently and call for measurement tools that acknowledge differences in perceptions of the same actions between the sexes. "Aggression and control are gendered in that they are consistent with the traditional male role, and are less expected and recognized when demonstrated by women" (McHugh, et. al. 2013, p.178). A study by Coutin (2009) found similar results, that perceptions of psychological

abuse in intimate partner relationships were not influenced by the gender of the perpetrator or victim, nor by the sexual orientation of the couple. Contrary to expectations, neither the gender of the person answering the survey, nor the gender of the person perpetrating abuse, nor the gender of the victim of abuse were correlated with a perception of greater abuse severity.

Other researchers have had conflicting results. A study by Tanha, et al. (2009), found significant differences between men and women. Their data showed women reportedly experiencing both more frequent and more severe psychological abuse, threats of and escalated physical violence, and sexual assault, intimidation and coercion than men. This research also used restrictive models to show a causal relationship between women's coercive control and men's victimization and men's coercive control and women's victimization (Tanha et. al, 2009). Dehart, Follingstad and Fields 2010 results showed no difference between results given by men versus women in their investigation of context but did show differences in perceptions of both men and women in response to certain behaviors initiated by men versus initiation by women.

Follingstad's more recent 2013 study with Rogers cites differences between couples' perceptions of abuse and agrees with McHugh, Rakowski and Swiderski that there is a need to account for gender differences around "the meaning of aggression, impacts of abuse and even patterns of violence for women and men (p. 149)." Rogers and Follingstad's 2011 study concurs. While results indicated that women and men are more the same than different when it comes to perceptions of psychological abuse, significant differences arose from

the data in terms of the type of abuse and the impact of the abuse. Results showed women as reporting themselves as more likely to engage in behaviors that check up on their partner, manipulate them to get what they want, and act jealous of affairs or other romantic partners. They showed men to report themselves more likely to behave in ways designed to make their partner feel inferior by establishing authority over them and show romantic interest in others in order to make their partner feel insecure. Women also reported a higher negative emotional impact from psychological abuse than men and a negative emotional impact from a greater number of behaviors (Rogers and Follingstad, 2011). Men were more likely to use their physical stature to intimidate their partner and induce inferiority and women were more likely to engage in abusive behavior around issues of trust and to withhold emotional and physical affection more than men (Rogers and Follingstad, 2011).

An area related to both context and gender is whether or not psychological abuse is reciprocal. Research done by Follingstad and Edmundson (2010) indicates that psychologically abusive behavior is often reciprocated in intimate partner relationships. All items were significantly correlated except for those involving ignoring events significant to the other, threatening harm (rather than death), limiting access to friends and family, pretending greater intelligence to make a partner feel inferior, instigating conflict from neutral interaction, and making a partner's personal choices for them (Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010). These exceptions amount to six items out of forty-two tested categories.  The number of items where partners did reciprocate behaviors was much greater.

Later research by Follingstad, Rogers and Duvall (2012) expanded on this to inquire into levels of satisfaction, commitment and investment in relationships reporting psychological abuse.  Results showed that women's reported use of psychological abuse in her relationship significantly predicted her satisfaction with the relationship.

> "Specifically, the more the woman perceived that she contributed to her partner's use of these tactics, the more she engaged in higher rates of reciprocity of these behaviors, and the more she reported even initiating these aversive behaviors, the higher her level of satisfaction" (Follingstad, Rogers, & Duvall, 2012, p. 270).

Clearly this reveals a contextual condition that makes an impact on experience of psychological abuse and has some implications for how we understand women in psychologically abusive relationships. If engaging in psychologically abusive behavior is linked to greater satisfaction for women in their relationships, perhaps other factors connected to feelings of empowerment also offer women greater satisfaction in their relationships. Perhaps there are ways that women in relationships that include psychological abuse can feel satisfied and powerful without becoming perpetrators of psychological abuse themselves.

Overall these varying results shape an understanding that psychological abuse constitutes a real problem for our society with as yet no real way of prevention due its complexity and to the lack of agreement on a definition. The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge base around perceptions of psychological abuse in response to the variable of personal experience.

Individual definitions of what constitutes abuse and whether or not personal experience impacts those definitions may offer insight into useful ways to create a consensus as well as inform future research and social work practice.

## Conceptual framework

Several assumptions underlie the decision to research this topic. Labeling theory, internalization and object-relations theory, and narrative theory all provide explanations of ideas that have bearing on an investigation of how we define psychological abuse.

### Labeling Theory

The most basic assumption made by this study is that our society would be better off if legal advocates, clinicians and clients had a solid definition of psychological abuse to use in understanding human behavior. The lack of a definition for psychological abuse means that there is no way to define who is and is not a perpetrator or a victim of abuse. Concepts around the value of having solid definitions for issues are addressed in labeling theory; the theory that a social norm must be established in order to understand both norms and social deviance from those norms (Forte, 2007). Labels give individuals a framework for considering behavior, or abstinence from a behavior as separate from themselves in order to choose whether or not to self-identify with it. They also give societies the ability to react to that behavior and attach values to it (Forte, 2007). Labels offer a mixed blessing because some behaviors are embraced while others are condemned, and individuals can be embraced or

condemned along with the behavior. Shame and its negative effects can accompany self-identification with being a victim of abuse (Beck, Clapp, Olsen, Avery, & Hagewood, 2011). But the separation of behavior or symptom from the individuals offered by labels can also bring a sense of freedom through the idea that one is affected by a disorder rather than responsible for it (Forte, 2007). Debate around this issue is particularly visible around the question of using the DSM and the medical model to diagnose mental illness. On one hand, a label can get insurance to pay for treatments and help individuals find others who are experiencing similar symptoms. On the other hand, a label can be a trap, keeping individuals from feeling normal and disqualifying them from things they might want to do.

**Internalization and Object Relations Theory**

Along with the assumption of a societal need for a definition of psychological abuse, this study assumes that the ideas we internalize effect how we understand the world. We identify with attachment figures and absorb their behaviors, social roles, and personal characteristics. These absorbed behaviors and characteristics become part of our own identities and influence how we make decisions and think about ourselves (Forte, 2007). Our personalities develop out of what we internalize and shape our experiences of ourselves, the world around us, and our interactions with others. The theory of object relations provides a framework for understanding how human beings decide what to absorb and integrate into our definitions of self, and what we reject as "other." As infants and very young children we are not developmentally able to consciously choose what

we absorb, but those ideas and behaviors we have absorbed in our earliest years

establish patterns that determine what we will seek out or reject in our

relationships later in life (Hutchinson, 2008). These concepts apply to human

perceptions of psychological abuse as well. If our understanding of what qualities

are normal, desirable, or unacceptable is established through internalization of

what we absorbed as infants and young children, this will include how we

understand psychological abuse. Someone who grew up in a family where

psychological abuse was common may have a very different experience and

understanding of abuse as an adult. They may internalize a schema that reflects

distrust and unreliability. This framework is backed up by research in

neuroscience. Recent examination of individuals who experienced emotional

abuse as children show enhanced reaction in the amygdala in response to facial

expressions even more than twenty years after the occurrence of abuse (Van

Harmelen et.al., 2012). Van Harmelen, et al. (2012) study of adults reporting

childhood abuse found abnormally strong reactions in the amygdala not only in

response to facial expressions of negative emotions, but also to happy and

neutral faces. They note that this reactivity is associated with chronic stress and

release of noradrenaline in humans, and with fear conditioning in rats. The

authors suggest that their findings may be important for understanding emotional

reactivity and interpersonal difficulties in adults who have experienced emotional

abuse as children (Van Harmelen, et al. 2012). Their findings strongly support

the emphasis placed by the object-relations internalization theory on the

importance of childhood experiences impacting adult responses and

relationships. This relationship between what we internalize as children and how it affects our adult thinking has bearing on the question of how personal experience impacts our definitions of psychological abuse. If the experiences of our past define how we interpret our present, personal experience should have profound impact on our definitions of psychological abuse. The downside of internalization and object-relations is stagnation. In focusing on what we absorb as children and how that defines patterns for what we integrate into our identities or reject, it emphasizes what stays the same, rather than changing. This leads us to the last theory.

**Narrative Theory**

This study also makes use of assumptions originating in narrative theory. Narrative theory is an interesting companion to internalization and object-relations theory. While object-relations and the internalization process focus on the creation of character through what we absorb as children and the traits so internalized that influence our decisions for the rest of our lives, narrative theory focuses on change. The narrative theory proposes that the self and how we understand it have some fluidity that can be influenced to change our perspective and how we think about our roles in any given situation (Hutchinson, 2008). How we tell ourselves stories about our lives impacts how we understand our identities.

"Since the stories that persons have about their lives determine both the ascription of meaning to experience and the selection of those aspects of experience that are to be given expression, these stories are constitutive

or shaping of persons' lives. The lives and relationships of persons evolve

as they live through or perform these stories (White & Epston, 1990,

p.40)."

For example, instead of someone thinking of themselves as a victim who keeps

being impeded by failure, they can reframe their story to view themselves as the

plucky underdog who perseveres through hardship and disappointment.

Reframing the story changes the meaning of the experience for the individual

involved. Narrative theory proposes that stories have the meaning and

coherence that we give them (Hutchinson, 2008). This theory empowers

individuals through emphasis of that choice. One of the benefits of narrative

theory is that, like labeling theory, it allows individuals to separate problems or

aspects of their personalities from themselves. The story can then shift to

emphasize persisting in spite of that challenge instead of identifying with it and

being overcome by part of oneself. An addict becomes a person with an

addiction, or a diabetic becomes a person with diabetes. As the struggle is

separated from the individual, the story changes meaning and the individual is

empowered for change (Hutchinson, 2008). This ability to separate the challenge

from the individual to change perspective and meaning has huge implications for

people overcoming traumatic experiences. A life that is defined by trauma can

create a framework where people see themselves as perpetual victims. A life

where individuals apply a meaning of their choice to experiences of trauma

opens possibilities and alternatives. Psychological abuse is widely accepted as

traumatic and has been linked extensively with PTSD symptoms (Avant, Swopes, Davis & Elhai, 2011).

The premises of narrative theory raise questions for research into psychological abuse. Results from research by Follingstad and Edmondson (2010) indicate that reciprocation of psychological abuse in relationships is common. Follingstad's further research with Rogers and Duvall (2012) further shows that reciprocation of psychological abuse between partners predicts greater satisfaction from women in those relationships and speculates that this may be due to a feeling of contribution or equal responsibility for the problems in the relationship. Whether this speculation is correct, or whether it is something else entirely, it seems likely that women who find satisfaction in psychologically abusive relationships are narrating a story for themselves about their relationships that allows room for them to feel satisfaction despite the abuse they are suffering. Similarly, women with negative coping strategies who stay in psychologically abusive relationships may be telling themselves stories supporting an idea that they do not deserve better treatment (Follingstad, Rogers & Duvall, 2012). The stories we have about ourselves impact the stories we tell ourselves when facing new challenges and troubles. Narrative theory would suggest that previous experience may impact the stories we tell ourselves about our lives, and therefore impact our beliefs and definitions of psychological abuse. However, narrative theory also suggests that we can change our stories about ourselves. This suggests that people with personal experience will not

necessarily define psychological abuse the same way, even if their story does

make an impact on their definition.

**Combining Theories**

Each of these theories has a limitation. The limit of narrative theory's

usefulness is that while it can free people from over-identification with a problem,

it can also absolve them from feeling responsible to change the problem. The

limit of object relations and internalization is stagnation. The limit of labeling

theory is trapping people and reducing them to a word. But these ideas together

balance one another. Narrative theory keeps the others moving, object relations

and internalization help us look at how we decide to be what we are and labeling

theory keeps us accountable for what we have become.

## Methods

In an effort to make the most use of participant language around

definitions of psychological abuse, the nature of this study is designed to be

qualitative. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it attempts

to access the subjective dimensions of how individuals define psychological

abuse both broadly and for themselves in relation to their personal experience

(Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). This study investigates whether personal

experience has an impact on definitions of psychological abuse and provides

data that will be useful in informing further research and social work practice with

clients who have experienced psychological abuse. IRB approval was requested

and received before any steps were taken toward obtaining participants. I

predicted that personal experience will have an impact on individual definitions of psychological abuse, and that it would be possible to show evidence of this through language used to recount incidence of psychological abuse of self or others and definitions offered by participants.

**Population**

The population for this study is adults over the age of 18. In order to recruit a sample, fliers asking for volunteers were posted around University of St. Thomas, and Saint Catherine University (see appendix A). When participants did not immediately volunteer, more fliers were posted. After a few days more with no contacts, investigation revealed a typo on the e-mail address listed on the fliers. It is possible that attempts to participate were shunted off to a non-existing e-mail. At this point fliers were re-posted and handed out in the Anderson Student Center at University of Saint Thomas, which resulted in more people signing up. An IRB amendment was also requested and approved to allow me to post an online flier (see appendix A) on the Facebook page of an event I planned to attend (with permission obtained from the page's owners). A sufficient number of participants volunteered to allow the research to move forward. The final sample included 10 individuals, some of whom self-reported personal experience with psychological abuse, and some of whom did not.

**Sample**

Of the participants in this research, five were students at University of Saint Thomas or Saint Catherine University, and five were found through advertising for the Glitter and Gloom event on the Facebook page and

interviewed in Baltimore, Maryland. Four participants were male and six were female. All participants were over 18, as required. Actual ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-four. Of the participants six had direct experience with psychological abuse, one was unsure if he had or not, and nine had indirect experience with psychological abuse.

**Consent and Confidentiality**

Informed consent was obtained through a form explaining the research, confidentiality and dissemination of data (see appendix B). Participants were given or e-mailed a copy of this consent form at least one day ahead of time. A separate copy of this form was signed and kept by the researcher so that the first copy stayed with each participant. Participants were reminded that they could request that their data not be used. Data from unwilling participants would not have been included in the data for this research, but none of the participants were unwilling. One of them requested that two particular parts of his interview not be quoted directly, and that request was observed. Each participant interview was given a number for purposes of differentiating between interviews. No identifying information was included in the final analysis or presentation. All recordings and transcripts were kept on a USB file in a locked drawer and will be destroyed by June 1, 2014 in order to protect any connection with participants.

**Risks and Benefits of Participants**

With confidentiality kept strictly, the main risk to participants in this study is emotional.  Defining psychological abuse and discussion of personal experience

can bring up emotions that are painful and might leave participants feeling depressed.

To minimize this risk, participants were reminded that they could stop the interview at any time. They were given information on resources for experience of abuse as well as hotline information for people to talk to in case of abuse or suicidal ideation. Participants were also given a $5 gift card at a coffee shop as thanks for participation.

Benefits of participation include the aforementioned gift card. Additionally, it may be of some normative benefit to them to have a non-judgmental, listening ear regarding their experiences.

**Data Collection**

Data was gathered through a recorded semi-structured interview. Interviews lasted from just over seven minutes to twenty-two minutes, not including the two debriefing questions which were not recorded. Participants were informed that they have the right not to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable. A 9-question unstandardized interview survey was used, with open-ended questions designed to draw out information about participant definitions of psychological abuse and how those definitions relate or do not relate to personal experience. Questions investigated definitions of psychological abuse, and whether or not individuals had direct or indirect personal experience with psychological abuse (see appendix D). The questions were designed to draw out information around characteristics of psychological abuse, consequences of psychological abuse and causes of psychological abuse.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by a graduate student. Transcripts were created from the recordings by that same graduate student.

**Setting**

The settings for the interviews were mutually agreed upon by the interviewer and participant ahead of time. Locations provided privacy and few distractions. Participating students were interviewed in a reserved library study room. Participants at the event in Baltimore were interviewed in private rooms provided by the Admiral Fell's Inn.

**Analysis**

Each transcript was conventionally coded according to the types of answers given. Both inductive and deductive content analysis was performed, and types of answers grouped together according to similar themes. Content analysis refers to a systematic way of categorizing behaviors or written materials to find thematic similarities and differences (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Themes were found in the interrelating areas of characteristics of psychological abuse, consequences of psychological abuse and causes of psychological abuse.

A peer researcher was asked to check the completed coding to improve reliability. Any peer researcher involved signed a confidentiality agreement before reviewing the transcripts (Appendix C). She was able to find two errors in the coding which were corrected.

**Findings**

**Age, gender and experience**

Of the individuals who participated in this research, six identified themselves as female and four as male. Ages ranged from 19 to 34 with slightly less than half of the participants being 19 (40%). No other participants shared an age.

Findings revealed that five of the 10 participants said they had direct experience with psychological abuse, three had not, and one was not sure. The remaining participant initially said no and then changed his answer. Ninety percent of the participants had indirect experience of a friend or family who had been psychologically abused and four participants had both direct and indirect experience. One participant had neither direct nor indirect experience.

Of the nineteen-year-old participants reported varying degrees of inexperience with psychological abuse. Two said they had not experienced it, one was not sure, and one said no and then gave another conflicting answer. Of participants identifying as female, four said they had direct experience with psychological abuse, one said she had not, and one was not sure. Of participants identifying as male, one said he had direct experience with psychological abuse, two said they had not, and one first said no and then gave a conflicting answer, including himself by saying "Everyone has been psychologically abused at one point whether they feel like they have or not "(Participant 5).

**Identifying psychological abuse**

When it came to opinions on whether or not participants felt they could identify psychological abuse, 60% felt they would be able to identify it directed at themselves, 40% felt they could identify it if they saw it directed at others. Twenty percent felt they could identify psychological abuse directed at themselves or others, and 20% felt they would not be able to identify psychological abuse directed at themselves or others.

Answers to these questions did not all fall within a simple pattern of "yes" or "no." Instead some participants gave conditional answers.

"I mean…I can recognize it if it's somebody else…but I mean…people have told me…well I mean…I guess I feel moderately equipped. I think there are sometimes when people will be very subtle towards me…like say things that could maybe possibly be considered psychologically abusive, but I just don't get it. So I mean, for the most part though…I think I'm pretty well equipped" (Participant 4).

Some were not sure what the question asked. Some asked for clarification as to whether questions referred to psychological abuse directed at themselves or at others or both. One participant was not sure if the question was about abuse directly occurring while the participant watched, or the signs abuse later. "Like what do you mean? Do you think I might be able to identify it if I see it amongst my friends or something like that" (Participant 2)? Some participants interpreted a question and gave an answer that did not differentiate at whom the

psychological abuse was directed or gave an answer about recognizing psychological abuse directed only at themselves or only at others.

> "I think it's…I mean I would say it's still pretty hard. You'd have to know the people. You'd probably have to know them pretty well to know that…In my circle throwing insults and things like that…it's kind of a normal thing. We're pretty catty among friends. But you know to recognize it with you know….and between two intimate partners it might not be as recognizable. Because we are kind of catty. I don't…I think that I might be able to identify it. Like if we had to go to a scale I'd probably still be at a five though…from one to 10" (Participant 9).

When asked about the abilities of others to identify psychological abuse, 60% said they thought most people were ill-equipped. "I don't think most people would see it, because the signals aren't bright red and bright yellow there, 'I'm getting psychologically abused!'"(Participant 1).

Ten percent said they thought most people were well equipped.

> "I think everybody's equipped for it. I think there's an instinct where you can identify it, but I think a lot of people choose not to. Or they can…they might identify it, but they choose not to do anything farther than that, than identifying it." (Participant 5).

Twenty percent of the participants weren't sure if people were equipped to recognize psychological abuse or not. "I don't know. I mean some people are well-equipped and some aren't. It's just…how to…I really don't know how to answer that question" (Participant 4). Ten percent said that individual ability to

identify psychological abuse depended on cultural upbringing. "I think that it depends on kind of their cultural up-bringing. Like I feel like there's certain cultures that think that certain things are acceptable- like perhaps the culture I was brought up in – that are completely not" (Participant 7).

**Themes**

Participant definitions of psychological abuse were considered in this research by viewing their statements in light of three interrelated elements of those definitions: characteristics of psychological abuse, consequences of psychological abuse, and causes of psychological abuse (Table 1.).

**themes of psychological abuse characteristics.** Participants revealed the largest number of themes in their responses regarding characteristics of psychological abuse (see Table 2). One of the most common characteristics themes was behavior designed to control the person being abused. Direct mention of control, dominance, manipulation and/or descriptions of behavior that fit those categories occurred 43 times in the interview transcripts and occurred at least once in 100% of the transcripts.

"Psychological abuse I think could be um, words or actions that are meant to um…threaten or intimidate someone into doing or saying something that they might not otherwise want to do. So you know, threatening to hit somebody if they don't do dishes or whatever" (Participant 8).[1]

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[1]    In response to the question "How do you define psychological abuse?"

**Table 1. Themes in Participant Definitions of Psychological Abuse**

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Characteristics of Psychological Abuse Themes:
- Psychological abuse controls those who experience it.
- There is disagreement about whether psychological abuse is separate from other types of abuse.
- Psychological abuse takes time to happen and/or recover from
- Psychological abuse is subjective
- People experience denial/make excuses to ignore psychological abuse around them
- Taboos and social consequences for talking about psychological abuse can prevent people from acknowledging it.
- Psychological abuse co-occurs with chemical use/abuse
- Those who psychological abuse others may not know they are being abusive

Consequences of Psychological Abuse Themes:
- People experiencing psychological abuse show signs/symptoms
- Psychological abuse has lasting effects on those who experience it
- Exposure to psychological abuse creates more abusers.
- Experiencing psychological abuse strengthens resolve to stand up to abuse
- Experience of psychological abuse makes people more aware
- People become more resilient in the face of psychological abuse.
- Psychological abuse harms friends and/or family of those being abused

Causes of Psychological Abuse Themes:
- Psychological abuse is caused by malice or intent to harm
- People psychologically abuse others because of their moral standpoint/cultural conditioning
- People psychologically abuse others because it was modeled for them growing up
- People psychologically abuse others because of a need for control/dominance
- People psychologically abuse others because they are insecure/lack confidence
- People psychologically abuse others because they were themselves abused
- Chemical use/abuse causes people to psychologically abuse others

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Of those occurrences, five were mentioned by people who said they had no

direct experience with psychological abuse, eight were mentioned by people who

were not sure or who had changed their answer about whether they had direct experience with psychological abuse, and 30 were mentioned by people who said they had direct experience with psychological abuse.

Another very common theme in the responses was the relationship between psychological abuse and physical abuse. All 10 of the participants made reference to physical actions in relationship to psychological abuse despite the fact that no questions specifically asked about it. A total of 17 references to physical abuse were made. However there was not consensus as to what that relationship is. Six of the 10 participants heavily linked psychological abuse with physical abuse and expressed opinions that physical abuse was psychologically abusive. "I think if there's a relationship where they're just misbehavior ultimately it's psychological because even if someone is physically abusive it also turns into psychological abuse because the person getting abused starts thinking, 'I can't trust this person'"(Participant 1). The remaining four participants disagreed and indicated in their responses that physical abuse is separate from psychological abuse. "Non-physical. Anything that attacks another individual's emotions" (Participant 10).[2]

Participants who expressed belief in a difference between psychological abuse and physical abuse did not clarify whether they believed psychological abuse and physical abuse could co-occur at the same time, but did indicate relationship by describing escalation or by referencing a similarity between the two kinds of abuse.

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[2] In response to the question, "How do you define psychological abuse?"

**Table 2. Characteristics of Psychological Abuse Themes**

| Direct experience of psychological abuse | Percentage of Interviews Mentioning Theme | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Yes | No | Not sure/changed answer | Total |
| Controls those experiencing it. | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Relationship to Physical abuse? | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Positive | 60% | 66% | 50% | 60% |
| Negative | 40% | 33% | 50% | 40% |
| Long-term problem | 80% | 100% | 50% | 80% |
| Subjective | 100% | 66% | 50% | 80% |
| Denial/Excuses not to notice | 80% | 33% | 50% | 60% |
| Social Consequence/Taboo | 40% | 33% | 100% | 50% |
| Co-occurs with chemical use/abuse | 40% | 33% | 50% | 40% |
| Those who abuse may not know they are doing it | 60% | 0% | 50% | 40% |

*Note.* N=10

"Unlike with physical abuse there's no necessarily outward sign. It's not like you have a black eye or whatever…unless it escalates. And then escalation can quickly turn from just psychological to physical. And obviously gets dangerous…not that emotional and psychological isn't damaging – it certainly is, but it's more insidious" (Participant 6).

Several themes arose as characteristics of psychological abuse in less than 100% of the interviews and occurred a fewer number of times; alcohol and drug use, the idea that abuse is subjective, the idea relationship between

psychological abuse and time, the idea that people make excuses for psychological abuse and avoid interpreting it as abuse, and the idea that there is a taboo and social consequences for talking about it.

The theme that psychological abuse either takes time to inflict or takes time to recover from was mentioned by 80% of the participants. "Anything that affects you lastingly…either…even if it's verbal or physical, but it just has a lasting effect on your person. I guess like in your head" (Participant 7).[3] Themes of time occurred 18 times in the interviews. Eighty percent of the participants also mentioned the theme of psychological abuse as subjective. Themes of subjectivity came up 13 times in the interviews.

"I think psychological abuse is kind of subjective to the person. So like some like bad relationship actions might affect someone in a certain way and then to another person it might have a totally different affect. So to one person they might be experiencing psychological abuse from bad relationship behavior, I guess" (Participant 3).

The theme of individuals making excuses not to acknowledge psychological abuse, or being in denial that psychological abuse was happening to others occurred in 70% of the interviews and were mentioned a total of 12 times.

"People don't necessarily think of it as psychological abuse. Because they might not necessarily see or understand the impacts that happen because of what people are saying or doing. Um…so um…I think people are just

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[3] In response to the question, "How do you define psychological abuse?"

like well, 'oh that guy or that girl is a bitch or a jerk,' or, 'he's a total

douchebag and I don't understand why she stays with him.' That kind of

thing. Or, 'I don't understand why he stays with her. But the thoughts just

kind of end there and they just think of it as, 'that person has a bad

personality' and they don't go to the next step to thinking that they are

doing psychological abuse to the other person" (Participant 8).

The idea of taboo or not speaking about psychological abuse for fear of

social consequences occurred in 50% of the interviews. Themes around reasons

not to talk about psychological abuse occurred 12 times.

"I guess it just makes me want to be more aware of what my friends are

going through. I guess I can't just ask them like you know…get into their

lives and tell them…and like find out every single detail about them"

(Participant 1).

Alcohol and substance abuse by either the person perpetrating or the

person experiencing psychological abuse were mentioned by 50% of the

participants. "I mean people who have been beaten time and time again by their

drunken, staggering, smelly-breathed fathers, and called an idiot and a whole

bunch of other nasty things…I mean that's psychological abuse" (Participant 4).

Themes of chemical influence on abuse occurred 12 times in the interviews.

The theme of individuals abusing others either knowing or not knowing

that what they did was abuse came up in 40% of the interviews. "There were two

[abusive ex-boyfriends]. Like two back-to-back. Like one was more serious and

the other not so much, but they were just really awful people. Like I don't even

think they realized, like the effect they had on her" (Participant 7). This theme

was brought up three times by someone who was not sure if they had direct

experience with psychological abuse and 4 times by individuals who said they

had direct experience with psychological abuse.

**themes of psychological abuse consequences.** Content Analysis of

the 10 interviews also revealed themes pertaining to consequences of

psychological abuse (see Table 3). Themes pointing to consequences of

psychological abuse include the idea that people show signs and symptoms

when they are experiencing psychological abuse, individuals increase in

awareness and vigilance when exposed to psychological abuse, individuals are

inspired to stand up to psychological abusers for themselves or others, show

resilience in the face of psychological abuse, individuals have long-term negative

effects as a result of experiencing psychological abuse, individuals see their

identity shaped by psychological abuse, and family and friends share the

hardship of a loved one experiencing psychological abuse.

The theme of individuals experiencing psychological abuse showing signs

and symptoms was mentioned in 60% of the participant interviews and occurred

a total of 20 times, more than any other theme in this category.

"If somebody has a normal, stable like…viewpoint of themselves, off-

setting that can start making other things go. You know, telling someone

that they're chubby and going to an extreme of, you know – fat. Somebody

could…that person may start actually believing it even though it may not

be true and take more extreme precautions to be less heavy. Which

unfortunately, if it's a persistent stimulus, 'You're too heavy,' 'Your hair is

too short,' or something like that. The caring that you have for that person

makes you, you know, want to change and start to become less of

yourself" (Participant 9).

**Table 3. Consequences of Psychological Abuse Themes**

| Direct experience of psychological abuse | Percentage of Interviews Mentioning Theme | | | |
| | Yes | No | Not sure/changed answer | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Show signs/symptoms | 60% | 33% | 100% | 60% |
| Have lasting damage | 80% | 66% | 50% | 70% |
| Become abusers | 80% | 66% | 0% | 60% |
| Stand up for those abused | 80% | 33% | 50% | 60% |
| Become more aware | 40% | 33% | 50% | 40% |
| Show resilience | 40% | 0% | 50% | 30% |
| Hurt friends/family | 20% | 0% | 50% | 20% |

*Note.* N=10

This theme of showing signs and symptoms arose 11 times in transcripts of

people who had directly experienced psychological abuse, three times in

transcripts of people who had not experienced psychological abuse, and six

times in transcripts of people who were not sure or had given differing answers

about whether they had experienced psychological abuse.

The theme of exposure to psychological abuse creating lasting effects was

another more common theme in this category.  "I think the difference is that you

can kind of get over somebody not being nice to you. But it's a lot harder…like

psychological abuse leaves an impact…it leaves some kind of emotional scar" (Participant 8). Themes of lasting effects from psychological abuse occurred in 70% of the interviews and were mentioned 13 times. These effects were mentioned twice by people with no direct experience of psychological abuse, twice by people who were unsure or who gave differing answers about having experienced psychological abuse, and nine times by people who had directly experienced psychological abuse.

Individuals abusing others in response to abuse in their childhood occurred 7 times in 60% of the interviews. Participants who had directly experienced psychological abuse mentioned this theme five times and participants who had not directly experienced psychological abuse mentioned it twice.

"We don't know the person's past per se, because maybe the person who's being the abuser? Maybe they were abused as probably as a child like…psychologically from a parent or a sibling and they're trying to sort of gain the sense of dominance that the person and when they were the victim. But they're trying to become the more dominant person so to feel like they don't want to be inferior again or try to be taken advantage of if they get into a relationship. So…I guess it's trying to sort of a survival technique at times like when you were the victim and maybe now you're just trying not to be the victim and you want to be the more dominant one to guarantee that you'll be safe" (Participant 2).

Some participants were moved by impulses to stand up for themselves or others in response to experiencing psychological abuse or imagining it. This theme emerged in 60% of the interviews and occurred 10 times total. "If I were ever to see like, warning signs I feel like I would have an obligation to step in if I thought a friend was being abused, or a family member" (Participant 3). Standing up to abuse of self or others came up six times with participants with direct experience of psychological abuse, once with participants who had no direct experience, and three times with participants who were either not sure or had changed their answer about having direct experience with psychological abuse.

Other participants felt that they had become more aware or wanted to become more aware of psychological abuse and it's symptoms as an issue after being exposed to it. References to awareness as a consequence occurred in 40% of the interviews. "I think it just makes you more aware that things happen even though you think it's not going to happen" (Participant 1). Themes of awareness were mentioned a total of six times; three times from participants who had direct experience with psychological abuse, once from participants with no direct experience of psychological abuse, and twice from participants who were either not sure or gave differing answers about having direct experience with psychological abuse.

Interviews also revealed themes around the resilience of those who experienced psychological abuse.  Thirty percent of the interviews included mention of those who experienced psychological abuse coming through it and recovering. "I'm very proud of my mom. Because she…she came from a very

horrible relationship, and has grown into being able to have healthy, stable

relationships" (Participant 9). Themes of resilience in the face of psychological

abuse occurred seven times; five times by people who had experienced it directly

and two times by someone who had changed his answer about whether or not he

had direct experience with psychological abuse.

Two participants (20%) brought up the theme of difficulties for friends and

families connected with individuals who experienced psychological abuse.

"I guess what really hurts is my mom got from that situation….my uncle,

he ended up going to jail. And my uncle wasn't my mom's brother. He was

my sister's sister. So my sister's sister wound up turning a cold shoulder to

everybody. And my mom only has a sister and a brother and so now she

doesn't even have a sister because she doesn't talk to her anymore"

(Participant 1).[4]

Themes of difficulties for friends and family members of those experiencing

psychological abuse occurred six times in the transcripts; once by someone who

had experienced psychological abuse first hand, and five times by someone who

was not sure.

**themes of psychological abuse causes.** Themes around causes of

psychological abuse included chemical use and abuse, parental modeling, those

who abuse being themselves abused, malice or intent to harm, cultural or

conditioning influences, the abuser trying to gain confidence, the abuser trying to

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[4]      The relationships here were clarified in the interview. The participant said she meant that her uncle was her mother's sister's husband, and that her mother's sister turned a cold shoulder to everyone.

gain control, and the idea that psychological abuse is the fault of the victim (see

Table 4).

Themes of intent to harm or descriptions of abuse as behavior that

indicated intent to harm (such as threats) were one of the most common themes

of psychological abuse causes. This theme was included in 90% of the interviews

and was mentioned 14 times. "I think the difference is psychological abuse is

going to be more um…I don't know the word for it…more intended" (Participant

5). Participants with direct experience of psychological abuse brought up this

theme nine times. Participants with no direct experience of psychological abuse

and participants who either were not sure or changed their answer about

experiencing psychological abuse each brought up this theme twice.

**Table 4. Causes of Psychological Abuse Themes**

| Direct experience of psychological abuse | Percentage of Interviews Mentioning Theme | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | No | Not sure/changed answer | Total |
| Malice/intent to harm | 80% | 66% | 100% | 80% |
| Culture/conditioning | 80% | 66% | 0% | 60% |
| Modeling | 80% | 0% | 0% | 40% |
| Need control | 60% | 33% | 50% | 50% |
| Lack confidence | 0% | 66% | 100% | 40% |
| Were abused | 80% | 33% | 0% | 60% |
| Influenced by alcohol/chemicals | 40% | 33% | 0% | 30% |
| The person experiencing abuse did something | 0% | 0% | 50% | 10% |

*Note.* N=10

Another theme for causation of psychological abuse common in this sample is the theme of individuals abusing others in response to their own culture and conditioning. This theme came up in 60% of the interviews.

"I think it depends on kind of their cultural up-bringing. Like I feel like there's certain cultures that think that certain things are acceptable - like perhaps the culture I was brought up in – that are completely not. Like absolutely not ok. But because there's such a difference in different cultures like they….it's …I don't know how to explain it. Um…so like something I would think is not acceptable, like someone else may think that I'm being inappropriate for even saying that it's wrong. Because that's acceptable to them even though I don't feel that way" (Participant 7).

Participants who said they had direct experience with psychological abuse mentioned this theme six times. Participants who claimed no direct experience with psychological abuse mentioned this theme three times.

The theme of modeled abusive behavior emerged as a cause of psychological abuse in 40% of the interviews. For the purposes of this study, this theme differs from the theme of abusing others due to cultural or conditioned behaviors in the theme of modeling indicates examples of psychological abuse performed directly in front of a child who later exhibits abusive behavior toward others, as opposed to stories normalizing this behavior or learning this behavior through philosophical values passed on by that culture. This theme was mentioned exclusively by participants who said they had direct experience with psychological abuse.

"It is at least in my opinion a learned behavior. As children we don't really learn how to do things until something has come up. We don't learn to lie until we figure out 'oh, if I lie, I won't get into trouble.' We are a product of our…of our growing up and our experiences. You know for a young boy to see, you know, his mother being you know, insulted by his father….that can become, you know, a normal thing for him…like horrible normal obviously. But you know that stuff carries into adulthood" (Participant 9).

Another theme proposed about causes of psychological abuse is the idea that psychological abuse happens when the individuals perpetrating abuse need to feel in control. This theme came up in 50% of the interviews with a total of 11 occurrences.

"I think it's people's lack or the sense that they either don't have control over themselves, or that they're trying like really hard to have the control. So there's something there where like, either they feel like they're expected to be the person in control and they're overcompensating in a way, or that they on the inside feel out of control and they're trying really hard to control the situation. And sometimes they can do that in an appropriate way, and sometimes it comes out in a completely inappropriate way. With either emotional domineering or just like being really cruel like verbally, or like physically: like just being angry that they feel like they're out of control in a situation where they should be in control and they're so frustrated that they act out inappropriately. At least that's how I've experienced it" (Participant 7).

Individuals abusing others due to lack of confidence in themselves also emerged as a cause of psychological abuse in the interviews. The theme of this cause was mentioned by 40% of the participants. "It's like maybe people are not confident about themselves and so they try to degrade somebody to make them feel like they're powerful over them. (Participant 1)." Themes of confidence as a cause of psychological abuse were mentioned twice by people who had not experienced psychological abuse and three times by people who were not sure or gave differing answers about whether they had direct experience of psychological abuse.

The theme that psychological abuse is caused by abusers being abused themselves as children arose in 60% of the interviews and occurred 7 times as stated in the previous section.

Thirty percent of participant interviews included a reference to use of chemicals as a cause of psychological abuse. This theme was mentioned five times by individuals who had direct experience with psychological abuse and twice by participants who had no direct experience with psychological abuse. "Drugs and alcohol can cause drastic personality shifts in people so that could be a cause" (Participant 8).

One of the 10 participants (10%) also spoke to a belief that people being abused have a role in their abuse. "She kind of put it on herself because she's making a decision to be overweight because she's making a decision to eat what she wants and not to exercise to help with that" (Participant 5). This theme came up twice in that interview.

**Discussion**

All of the participants interviewed shared an understanding that themes of control, dominance and manipulation were central to a definition of psychological abuse. Application of labeling theory, narrative theory and internalization through object relations emphasizes the importance of participant themes around the subjectivity of experiencing psychological abuse. While not an exact repetition of any of the research from the literature review, the findings of this research include many of the ideas supported by that prior research. This study was significantly limited by the number of participants; regardless it provides a great deal of helpful direction for further research as well as some useful ideas for social work practice and policy.

The first object of this research was to find out how participants defined psychological abuse. The sheer number of themes that emerged in these interviews indicates that participant understanding of this issue is complex. Looking at the most common themes provides some insight into the most commonly accepted ideas about psychological abuse within the group.

Themes of control came up in 100% of the interviews and occurred with more frequency within interviews than any other theme.  While physical abuse and actions were also mentioned in 100% of the interviews, participant opinions divided on whether physical and psychological abuse went together (60%) or were distinct things that should be considered separately(40%). The difference in these positions points to the relationship suggested by Participant 1, "I think if there's a relationship where they're just misbehavior ultimately it's psychological

because even if someone is physically abusive it also turns into psychological abuse because the person getting abused starts thinking, 'I can't trust this person.'" This answer indicates an opinion that physical abuse automatically creates psychological abuse, but it does not rule out that psychological abuse can happen independent of physical abuse. Participant 10 had a strong view that psychological abuse was strictly non-physical. Both of these attitudes fit with prior research that looks at physical and psychological abuse as things that happen together and at psychological abuse as something that also happens separately (Beck et al, 2011, Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010,).

Themes mentioned by 100% of the group but still having broad support from participants also support prior research. These themes include the idea of psychological abuse as something that takes time to affect individuals and from which to recover, the idea that psychological abuse is subjective and what one person considers abuse is not necessarily considered abuse by others, and a belief that malice or harmful intent is part of causing psychological abuse. Each of these themes occurred in 80% of the interviews. Prior research links psychological abuse and post-traumatic symptoms (Dutton, Goodman, & Bennett, 1999, Mauritz, Goossens, Draijer & van Achterberg 2013). The theme of long-term effects as a result of psychological abuse fits very well with these prior results. The theme of psychological abuse as subjective also conforms to prior research. A number of studies have been conducted around issues related to context and its impact on perceptions of psychological abuse (Dehart, Follingstad, & Fields, 2010). Even trained psychologists were not immune to

having their perceptions of psychological abuse swayed by context (Follingstad &

Dehart, 2000). Evidence has also been found in prior research for malice and

intent to harm as a component of psychological abuse (Follingstad, &

Edmundson, 2010). Participants in this study might emphasize or deemphasize

these themes differently than prior research, but there is evidence to support

each of them as a component of psychological abuse.

Other themes from this research seem to be related to each other by

similarity. Individuals abusing others because of cultural conditioning or because

of modeling seem to be close in meaning, as both relate to being taught that a

behavior is normal. The themes of individuals abusing others because of a need

for control or because of a need for confidence seem very close in meaning, as

both relate to a need of individuals abusing others to feel better about

themselves. If we accept these relationships and calculate the total percentage of

participants mentioning at least one of these, we get themes of being taught to

abuse at 100%, and themes of individuals who psychologically abuse trying to

make themselves feel better at 90%. These differ from the broadly accepted

theme of harmful intent, but our findings do not rule out different reasons for the

same behavior.

Control and power have been verified by prior research as one of many

motivations for individuals perpetrating physical and emotional abuse against

their partners (Leisring, 2013). Research by Dutton (2012), and Dutton and White

(1999),has also provided evidence of individuals perpetrating IPV connected with

being abused and/or traumatized as a child. All in all, the primary responses from

participant interviews defined psychological abuse using themes already incorporated by prior research, although not necessarily in the same proportion.

Of the themes mentioned by half or more participants, but not by an overwhelming majority, the theme of individuals being in denial and making excuses to avoid recognizing psychological abuse happening around them, the theme of those who are exposed to abuse abusing others, the theme of showing signs and symptoms and the theme of exposure to abuse motivating individuals to stand up to abuse remain.

These themes also support existing research. Denial and making excuses not to recognize psychological abuse has been documented in prior research (Varia, Abidin, & Dass, 1996). The theme of those who are exposed to abuse also supports prior research (Dutton, 1999, Dutton, & White, 2012). Study results are divided on whether experience of psychological abuse causing signs and symptoms is heavily documented (Avant, Swopes, Davis, & Elhai, 2011, Van Harmelen, et. al., 2012, Dutton, Goodman, & Bennett, 1999 ). Participant perceptions support the work of Dutton, Goodman, & Bennet that abuse and post-traumatic symptoms are linked.

While resilience is a theme that has been extensively researched, the specific theme of finding motivation to stand up to abuse in response to psychological abuse seems to be unique. Other research focuses on getting help or overcoming emotional trauma (Parker & Lee, 2007, MacDonald, 2012).  One interpretation is that psychological abuse has not been considered a problem when individuals stand up to it, accounting for this omission. But abuse and

childhood abuse in particular have been associated with increasing the difficulty of standing up for oneself (Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2005). The fact that a large percentage of participants see this as a consequence of psychological abuse merits further investigation. With the exception of this area, the larger themes brought to light by the interviews in this study support prior research on psychological abuse.

**Direct Experience and Perceptions of Psychological Abuse.**

The second object of this research was to evaluate whether or not experience of psychological abuse had an impact on how people think about it. When participants were asked if they believed that experience of psychological abuse made a difference in how they think about it, 60% of them said yes, and 40% said no[5]. This is a majority, but not a great one. In viewing the responses from participants however, we can also find some substantial differences between responses from people with direct experience of psychological abuse and responses from people with no direct experience of psychological abuse. A greater majority of individuals with direct experience of psychological abuse (80% or more) brought up several of the themes in contrast with fewer occurrences in the other groups.

Individuals who had direct experience of psychological abuse had greater numbers than the other categories mentioning the following themes; the idea that psychological abuse is subjective, the idea that people use excuses and denial to avoid recognizing psychological abuse happening around them, the idea that

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[5] Where N=10

damage for psychological abuse is lasting, the idea that exposure to psychological abuse creates more individuals who abuse others, and the idea that people who experience abuse become motivated to stand against abuse. It is possible that due to lack of sample size, the differences in percentage here are coincidental, but this group had the greatest percentage of people bringing up the same themes in eight different categories (as opposed to five categories for people who weren't sure if they had direct experience with psychological abuse or changed their answer, and one category for people who said they had no experience with psychological abuse). The data shows a difference between participants who said they had direct experience with psychological abuse and those who said that they had no direct experience, those who said they weren't sure, and those who changed their answer. While we cannot apply this answer to the greater population, the data does support the possibility that participants who had direct experience with psychological abuse had different perceptions about psychological abuse because they had experienced it.

**Themes of Psychological Abuse and Labeling Theory**

Each of the theories explored in the earlier conceptual framework section expands understanding of the themes found in this research. Labeling theory, narrative theory, and internalization process in object-relations theory are lenses through which these themes can be understood for a richer interpretation of the data.

Several of the themes occurring in participant interviews are related to recognizing psychological abuse and consciousness around it. The themes of

individuals who abuse having malicious intent to harm, individuals who have been abused becoming more aware, psychological abuse as subjective, people making excuses or denying psychological abuse happening around them, and social consequences and taboos preventing discussion of psychological abuse all fall into this category, as does the idea that those who abuse others may do it without knowing that they are doing it. Labeling theory provides a useful lens for interpreting them. Labels define a situation in our minds. Having a word for an idea anchors thoughts so that we can communicate more effectively and this is especially helpful when so many variables confuse the ideas. Labeling theory assists when we apply names that are appropriate to both the limits and scope of what makes up the abuse, what makes it psychological, and what helps an individual accept and understand what is happening around them or to them.

The theme of people who abuse others as malicious and intending harm is at odds with the theme of people who abuse not knowing what they are doing. Individuals abusing others with intent was mentioned by substantially more people in this study (80% compared to 40% where N=10), but responses leave room for an interpretation that some people know they are doing it and some do not. It is also possible that individuals psychologically abusing others know that they are doing something harmful without thinking it is abuse, or while thinking that it is necessary and that the necessity is more important than the damage they might be doing. Do the circumstances and intent make a difference? If we say that yelling at people is abusive, do we include yelling to stop someone from injury? Labeling theory tells us to explore definitions based on the themes

revealed by research. It informs our discussion by categorizing one type of action as abuse and another as not, but our data points to a need for a definition flexible enough to include both people who abuse others while knowing what they do, and those who abuse others without knowing what they do. This flexibility may play a role in the confusion expressed by the other themes in this category.

The idea that psychological abuse is subjective adds to this confusion. Participant 7 spoke extensively about this issue, and 100% of the individuals who said they had direct experience of psychological abuse agreed with her. What is abuse to one person might only be bad behavior to another. What is culturally accepted in one place may be completely unacceptable in another or to someone from another culture. So a definition of psychological abuse built from the themes of this research needs to be flexible enough to incorporate perpetration by people who fail to recognize that they are doing it as well as those who do, *and* be flexible enough to include acts or not depending on the culture of the one being abused.

Further complications are added by participant themes pointing to difficulties identifying psychological abuse. First there is the issue of social consequences and taboos preventing people from speaking out about psychological abuse when they experience it. This creates a problem because those who are suffering continue to suffer and those who abuse, continue to abuse. But it is also a problem for defining psychological abuse when the details of this abuse are hidden.

In addition to this difficulty, according to themes from this research, people make excuses and deny that psychological abuse is going on in front of them. They refuse to see what is there. They think it cannot happen to them like Participant 1, or they minimize what they see as Participant 5 suggested in his interview.  This creates more room for confusion. The psychological abuse going on is hidden, and individuals who refuse to see the psychological abuse that remains unhidden may convince others not to see what is there.

All of this creates a very difficult task for anyone wishing to define psychological abuse. But a theme emerged from the research that everyone agreed on: control, dominance, and manipulation. Participants in this research said unanimously that psychological abuse controls the ones being abused. Adding this statement to the themes that are supported by 80% of the participants generates suggestions for what a definition of psychological abuse might look like. Participants said it sometimes happens with physical abuse, and sometimes happens with chemical use and it can take a long time to recover from. A definition derived from this research therefore must say that psychological abuse is flexible enough for ignorance and subjectivity, it carries stigma and consequences that individuals don't want to see or accept, it controls those who are abused, can co-occur with chemical use or physical abuse, and can take a long time to recover from.

**Psychological Abuse, Narrative Theory, and Object-Relations Theory**

While psychological abuse can also be seen through story and narrative, participants brought up many themes where the ideas of narrative theory and

internalization through object-relations theory overlap. Several the themes cited by participants point to childhood as the beginning for psychological abuse. Themes of modeling, culture and conditioning, and people exposed to abuse as children growing up to abuse others all engage humans where our stories and identities begin.

Object-relations and the internalization process tells us that early childhood establishes the patterns that govern our interactions with others throughout our lives. The social influences with whom we identify and attach, determine the values and characteristics absorb as part of ourselves and what we reject as "other." If those values and characteristics include aggression and a tendency to abuse others, the internalization process tells us that children who experience abuse are more likely to become abusers themselves. This theory also predicts that having abuse modeled or growing up in a culture that embraces abuse as normal would have a similar impact. Humans absorb the identity of those around them into themselves including characteristics, values and perspectives. Object relations theory indicates that identities established in this way are not immutable, and can be improved later in life, rather than claiming that humans stop changing after a certain age (Hutchinson, 2008). And narrative theory strongly supports the process of change.

Narrative theory focuses on reframing human story in ways that empower that change. Through reframing, someone who grows up in an abusive household can separate themselves from a problem and see themselves instead as someone who overcame the abuse, or survived it. The theory that story

influences how we understand ourselves in relationship to our contexts provides an explanation for how some individuals who grow up in abusive families and do not abuse others themselves. Instead we have people who use their experience of abuse to reject the behaviors they do not want in their relationships. Participant 7 and Participant 8 are both examples of this. A story of how a family was torn apart by abuse can be reframed as a story of a family reforming into something new and stronger after a tragedy (for example, Participant 9). This reframing does not negate the consequences of a tragedy. Lasting effects as a consequence of psychological abuse was a theme brought up by 80% of the participants of this research. But narrative theory provides direction for understanding those effects as finite rather than permanent, or as something survived rather than as an earned punishment.

These two theories also serve as a lens for participant perception of individuals who psychologically abuse others. Within the transcripts collected, participants describe those who abuse as malicious, controlling, lacking confidence, victims of abuse fulfilling a cycle, chemically dependent, products of their culture, and acting out of provocation. Narrative theory impacts not only the story individuals tell about themselves, but also the stories they tell about others. A person who abuses another may be framed as a monster intending wrongful damage, a thoughtless person who is unaware of the harmful impact they have on others, or an insecure person struggling to feel control and confidence. Internalization process through object relations theory suggests that individuals exposed to psychological abuse have interpretations of the world that are at least

partially formed by their own modeling and cultural conditioning, which may include their perceptions of people who abuse others. This understanding supports the participant interview theme that psychological abuse is subjective. The variety of descriptions for the role of individuals who abuse others emphasizes the need for flexibility in any established clinical or legal definition of psychological abuse.

**Limits of Research**

This research is exploratory in nature and only a small number of individuals were interviewed. A total of ten participants were interviewed for their definitions of psychological abuse. This means that the ability to generalize from this research is limited. The representative value of this research was further limited by the unexpected participants who were not sure if they had been directly psychologically abused or not or who gave conflicting answers about whether they had direct experience of psychological abuse. While the sample did include both individuals who have and have not directly experienced psychological abuse, 90% of the sample had indirect experience. Very little information from individuals with no experience of psychological abuse was gathered. As a result of these sample limitations, comparison between those with direct experience and those without was uneven, and comparison between those with indirect experience and those without extremely non-representative and inconclusive. A larger sample could rectify this problem in future research.

There was also a problem in the sample recruitment. Part way into the recruitment process, I noticed that while the phone number on the fliers was

correct, there was a typo in the e-mail address on the fliers. This means that anyone trying to volunteer via e-mail rather than by phone could not get ahold of me to set up an appointment. This problem was rectified and new fliers put up. An amendment was also put through the IRB in order to recruit enough participants so that the research would not be harmed, but given the number of contacts made after the interview period was complete, it is likely that this research would have had a larger sample if not for that error.

Another limitation of this research was the general nature of the interview questions. Several of them turned out to have interpretations unanticipated by the researcher. This led to answers from participants that did not always match up to the same categories. Sometimes participants answered a question generally and sometimes specifically. Sometimes participants answered questions specifically referencing one group but not another. Breaking these questions down more specifically, for example asking participants if they feel equipped to identify psychological abuse directed at themselves and others as separate questions rather than generally, could improve this research. Making use of location perspective to create questions that collect more information on where participants are coming from would also improve the quality of the interview questionnaire.

Strengths of this research include a sample that included both participants who had direct experience of psychological abuse and participants who had not. Participants varied in age and gender, and were not all recruited from the same

part of the country. This variety of participants provided statements originating from diverse backgrounds and offering improved scientific validity.

Additionally, participants for this study were not recruited only from a population of mental health professionals. This allows the study to collect data that applies more closely to the population that will be impacted by definitions of psychological abuse created by clinicians. A broader study of this same grouping with more participants would be helpful for creating a definition likely to meet the needs of this population.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

This research offers several possible insights for practice of social work. The emphasis participants placed on themes of control, dominance and manipulation and the number of themes tying into psychological abuse as a subjective problem are especially relevant. Social workers assisting individuals with direct experience of psychological abuse should be careful not to define psychological abuse so narrowly as to undermine client experience. Beyond this, clients in this population may be especially sensitive or vulnerable to controlling behavior. Social workers may benefit from being especially mindful of this. In engaging with public policy, any established definition for clinical or legal purposes should be flexible enough to include both the individuals who know they abuse others and those who do not, as well as make room for psychological abuse that may be culturally subjective.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

All in all, this study was helpful as exploratory research of how individuals define psychological abuse and whether or not direct experience makes a difference in their thinking. While prior research investigated how mental health professionals defined psychological abuse, there was no prior research on how individuals not selected for being professionals perceived this issue. Data gathered from the general population has a better chance of identifying the needs of the general public when it comes to defining psychological abuse. However, it would be much more helpful if the sample size were increased, questions clarified to rectify the problem of multiple interpretations for the same question, and a more mixed methods design formulated to access more versatile analysis methods. A study in order to standardize questions could help with this clarification. An increased sample size of at least 40 individuals would provide information that could be applied more generally to an understanding of the population (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong 2011).

Further research into a similar set of questions could help clarify the import of the data retrieved by this study's non-representative sample. The theme of psychological abuse having the potential to strengthen resolve to stand up to abuse merits further investigation. Research into the validity of this idea has the potential to shed light on resilience and the process of recovery from psychological abuse.  It might also prove fruitful to ask questions regarding how individuals would like to see psychological abuse managed and if personal experience with psychological abuse creates a different set of preferences than

does lack of personal experience. Current lack of definition means that there can be no legal recourse for those abused by others and responsibility for managing psychological abuse remains on the individuals directly involved with the abuse. It is up to individuals who experience abuse and individuals who abuse to get the help they need. Finding out what kind of interventions individuals who have experienced abuse would find helpful could open more possibilities for social work practice.

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**Appendix A Recruiting Fliers**

**Participants needed for Graduate Research on Psychological Abuse!**

I am looking for men and women over the age of 18 to interview about how you define psychological abuse. You do not need to be a survivor to participate. Your opinion matters! Your thoughts and ideas can contribute to research that will benefit social work practice and future research in this area. We will meet at a mutually agreed upon location and speak for about a half hour. Your identifying information will be kept confidential.

Research will be conducted by a Graduate Student in Social Work at Saint Catherine University and University of St. Thomas. Heather can be reached at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or by e-mail at handerson@stthomas.edu Please consider calling and participating in this study or passing it on to others who may be interested.

**Participants needed for Graduate Research on Definitions of Psychological Abuse!**

I am looking for approximately 15 men and women to interview about how you define psychological abuse. These interviews would be scheduled around the time of Glitter and Gloom.

Participants should be:
- Over 18
- Not currently in an abusive relationship
- Not a personal friend of the researcher

We will meet at a mutually agreed upon location (perhaps a private library room) and speak for about an hour. Your identifying information will be kept confidential. Participation in this study is not meant to provide or substitute for therapy. While psychological abuse is a sensitive topic, this study focuses on how it is defined. *If you are experiencing a psychological crisis around abuse or for any other reason please call 911 or your local Crisis Hot Line for help.* A $5 coffee shop card is offered as an incentive for participation.

If you are willing to do this, please contact me so that I can send you information ahead of time. I will be in town and available March 17 – 23. Research will be conducted by a Graduate Student in Social Work (me) at Saint Catherine University and University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Pa Der Vang. You can send me a private message to set up an appointment at https://www.facebook.com/heather.hall.96155 or by e-mail at

[ande0031@stthomas.edu.](mailto:ande0031@stthomas.edu)  Or you may contact Dr. Vang at 651-690-8647. You

may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-

962-5341 with any questions or concerns. Please consider calling and

participating in this study or passing it on to others who may be interested.

**Appendix B Consent Form**

**CONSENT FORM**
**UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**
**GRSW682 RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Qualitative Study of Definitions of Psychological Abuse**

I am conducting a study about psychological abuse and how people define it. I invite you to participate in this research. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Heather Hall, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Pa Der Vang.

**Background Information:**
The purpose of this study is: To get a clearer understanding of how individuals with and without personal experience define psychological abuse.

**Procedures:**
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: read and sign this consent form, meet with me for a 30-45 minute interview in a mutually agreed upon location, answer questions focused on your definitions of psychological abuse for purposes of audio-recording, anonymous review with my student-peer for reliability checking, and presentation of data at the end of the year. I may ask additional questions to gain clarification or greater depth.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**
The only risk this study offers is the potential emotional distress due to talking about sensitive subjects. Participants will be reminded that they can stop the interview at any time. Resource information will be provided at the end of the interview in case you decide you need it.
The benefits of this study are an opportunity to contribute to the efficacy of social work practice and influence future research that may be done in this area, as well as a $5 gift card to a coffee shop.

**Confidentiality:**
The records of this study will be kept anonymous for this study. As a graduate research paper, I will be publishing my work in its final form. However no names or identifying information will be included. The student reviewing my work will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Research records and transcripts will be kept on a USB drive in a locked file in my desk. A research peer will see the transcript of the interview, but will not know who you are. I will delete any identifying information from the transcript. Findings will be presented in the

context of data collected from 9-15 other anonymous individuals. The audio recording and transcript will be destroyed by June 1, 2014.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used.

**Contacts and Questions**
My name is Heather Hall. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 651-231-5933. Or you may contact Dr. Vang at 651-690-8647. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**
I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped.


_____          _____
**Signature of Study Participant**                              **Date**


_____
**Print Name of Study Participant**


_____          _____
**Signature of Researcher**                              **Date**

**Appendix C Confidentiality Agreement**

As a reader for Heather Hall's MSW research project on perceptions of psychological abuse, I _____ agree to keep complete confidentiality of the documents I review, and to return all materials to Heather Hall for safe-keeping and disposal.

_____

_____

Signature                                                                 Date

**Appendix D Semi-structured Interview Questionnaire**

1. What is your age and gender?

2. How do you define psychological abuse?

3. Is there a difference between psychological abuse and bad relationship behavior? If so, what is it?

4. How well equipped do you feel to recognize psychological abuse when you see it?

5. Please describe any personal experience you have had with psychological

   abuse.

6. Please describe your experience with friends and family victimized by

   psychological abuse.

7. Have your direct and indirect experiences with psychological abuse made a

   difference in how you think about it? If so, how?

8. How well do you think the average person is to recognize psychological abuse

   when they see it?

9. What do you think makes someone likely to psychologically abuse another

   person?