

19.00 €

Four-monthly Journal
ISSN 0006-6761

BPA

vol. LXIV. January-April 2016
N° 275

1/3

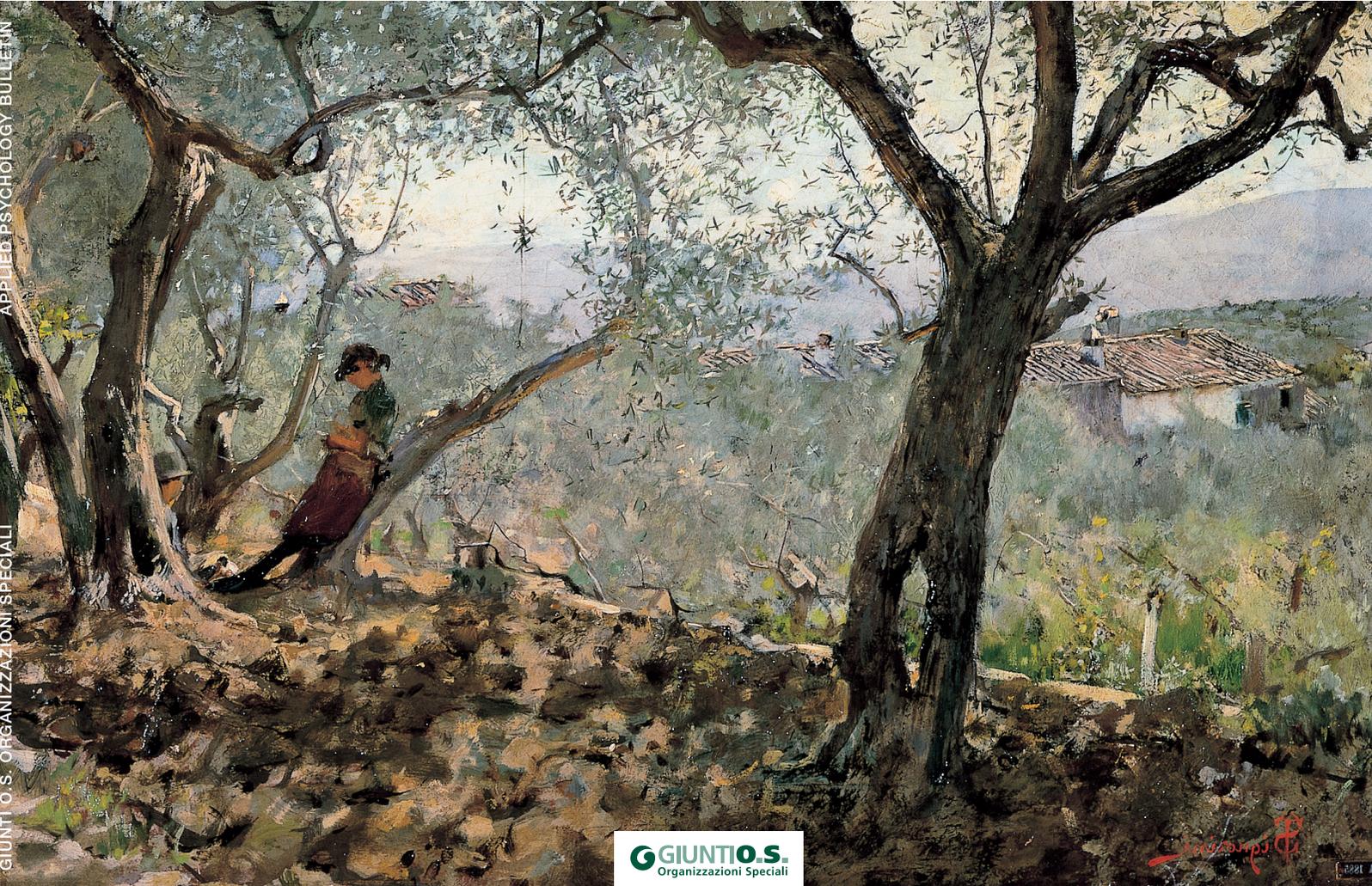
Bollettino di Psicologia Applicata
APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY BULLETIN
Indexed in PsycINFO® – Scopus Bibliographic Database



Research



Experiences & Tools



GIUNTI O.S.
Organizzazioni Speciali

Giunti

Scientific Director Alessandro Zennaro

CONTENTS

Research

- Do Communication Patterns Predict the Psychological Abuse
in Young Adults Romantic Relationships? 3
Franca Tani, Sonia Ingoglia, Martina Smorti
- Immediate outcomes after inpatient intensive CBT for severe, resistant OCD 15
*More severe inpatients with comorbid Obsessive-Compulsive
Personality Disorder get the most out of treatment. A preliminary study*
Andrea Pozza, Gian Paolo Mazzoni, Davide Coradeschi, Davide Dèttore

Experiences & Tools

- Applicant's self-efficacy in personnel selection: Perspectives and development
of a new measure 25
Rita Chiesa, Marco Giovanni Mariani
- A contribution towards the validation of the Italian version
of the Entrepreneurial Potential Assessment Inventory 37
Paola Spagnoli, Susana Correia Santos, António Caetano, Alessandro Lo Presti
- Sequential bilingualism and Specific Language Impairment:
The Italian version of ALDeQ Parental Questionnaire 50
*Paola Bonifacci, Rita Mari, Luana Gabbianelli, Elena Ferraguti, Federica Montanari,
Francesca Burani, Marina Porrelli*

Errata Corrige

Please, allow us to point out a mistake – which is of a formal rather than a textual nature – in the last number (n. 274) of Applied Psychology Bulletin – BPA

Research – A beliefs-based measure of attitudes towards urban littering, Paola Passafaro, Fridanna Maricchiolo, Annalisa Angelici, Virginia Ciaraldi, Silvia Giannetti, Sofia Ludovici, Matteo Lungo, Martina Marra, Francesca Piselli, Simona Rosana

Do Communication Patterns Predict the Psychological Abuse in Young Adults Romantic Relationships?

Franca Tani¹, Sonia Ingoglia², Martina Smorti³

¹ Department of Health Sciences, Psychology Unit, University of Florence

² Department of Psychological and Educational Sciences, University of Palermo

³ Faculty of Education, Free University of Bozen

✦ **ABSTRACT.** L'obiettivo di questo studio è stato quello di indagare il legame tra i differenti pattern di comunicazione e l'abuso psicologico all'interno delle relazioni sentimentali di giovani adulti. Nello specifico, la ricerca aveva come obiettivo l'analisi della relazione diretta tra i pattern di comunicazione efficace, evitante, rifiutante e manipolativo e i comportamenti di vittimizzazione e perpetrazione di abuso psicologico all'interno delle coppie. Hanno partecipato alla ricerca 557 giovani adulti (211 maschi), di età compresa tra i 18 e i 30 anni ($M = 22.61$, $DS = 3.85$), che al momento dello studio erano coinvolti in una relazione sentimentale che durava da almeno 6 mesi. I risultati mostrano che i più importanti predittori dell'abuso psicologico agito e subito all'interno delle coppie sono i pattern di comunicazione rifiutante e manipolativa; il pattern evitante, invece, non è risultato un predittore significativo dell'abuso psicologico. Sono state identificate le implicazioni teoriche e sociali e le direttive per le future ricerche.

✦ **SUMMARY.** The aim of the study was to investigate the link between different communication patterns and psychological abuse among young adults romantic relationships. Specifically, the research was aimed at analyzing the direct relation between efficacious, avoidant, dismissive and manipulative communicative patterns and both reported victimized and perpetrated behaviors of psychological abuse within the couple. Participants were 557 young adults (211 males), aged between 18-30 years ($M = 22.61$; $SD = 3.85$), currently involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship of at least 6 months duration. Results showed that the most important predictors of perpetration and victimization reports of psychological abuse are the Dismissal and Manipulation communication patterns, whereas Avoidance is not a significant predictor of psychological abuse. Theoretical and social implications and directions for future research are identified.

Keywords: Psychological abuse; Victimization; Perpetration; Communication strategies; Romantic relationships; Young adults

INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the most important public health problems in the world (Akar, Aksakal, Demirel, Durukan & Ozhan, 2010; Awang & Hariharan, 2011; Hou, Yu, Ting, Sze & Fang, 2011; Kar & Garcia-Moreno, 2009; World Health Organization, 2013).

IPV takes on several forms, such as physical, psychological and sexual violence, and can be committed by one or both partners in marital, cohabiting, dating and other intimate relationships (Callahan, Tolman & Suanders, 2003; Dutton, Goodman & Bennett, 2001; O'Leary & Woodin, 2009). To date

research has mainly examined physical and sexual violence, whereas much less work has investigated psychological abuse within romantic relationships considering it as a separate and distinct form of aggression, which does not necessarily overlap with physical or sexual violence (DeHart, Follingstad & Fields, 2010; Follingstad, 2007; Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Theory and research suggest that psychological abuse is a common and significant form of interpersonal violence, not only in violent relationships, or clinical samples, but also in college romantic relationships and in adolescents during the transition to adulthood (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a; Jose & O'Leary, 2009; Lawrence, Yoon, Langer & Ro, 2009; Milletich, Kelley, Doane & Pearson, 2010). The prevalence rates vary widely in different studies, probably because in each of them definition of psychological abuse significantly varies, despite most of the studies suggests that approximately 70% to 90% of college couples have experienced some forms of psychological aggression in their relationships (Bonechi & Tani, 2011b; Gormley & Lopez, 2010; Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2009; Kar & Garcia-Moreno, 2009), in the same distribution by men and women (Antonio & Hokoda, 2009; Bonechi & Tani, 2011b), in contrast with physical abuse that is mainly suffered by women.

Researchers define psychological abuse as any behavior or act that is designed to provoke emotional pain to partner and establish an unequal distribution of power in the relationship. It is a complex phenomenon in which it is possible to track down a variety of behaviors, all aimed to control partner and/or destroy his/her self-esteem and sense of safety (Ro & Lawrence, 2007). In order to explain this complexity, Murphy and Hoover (1999) propose a multidimensional model, comprising four main dimensions. The first dimension, *Restrictive Engulfment*, includes coercive acts that isolate, restrict, control and monitor the partner, such as possessiveness, pathological jealousy and isolation from family and friends. The second dimension, *Denigration*, comprises actions or verbal attacks, humiliation, name-calling and criticism, which have a negative impact on the partner's self-esteem. The third dimension, *Hostile Withdrawal*, includes behaviors such as withholding emotional contact and acting distant, which are intended to punish the partner or increase his/her anxiety or insecurity. Finally, the fourth dimension, *Dominance/Intimidation*, comprises actions that are intended to create fear and submission through threats or attacks to person property.

Psychological abuse leads to deleterious consequences for psychological and physical well being (Mechanic, Weaver & Mesick, 2008) that in many cases can have a more negative impact than physical abuse (O'Leary, 2001). Depending on the different forms of psychological abuse, the outcomes may include low self-esteem (Sakett & Saunders, 1999), fearfulness, self-blame (Miller & Porter, 2010), learned helplessness (Peterson & Seligman, 2010), anxiety (Lawrence et al., 2009) and/or depressive symptoms, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bargai, Ben-Shakhar & Shalev, 2007).

However, the interest of researchers has focused not only on the negative consequences of psychological abuse (William, Frieze & Henson, 2005), but also on the risk factors that increase the likelihood of experiencing it (Schumacher, Feldbau-Kohn, Smith Slep & Heyman, 2001). Indeed, the majority of studies have paid particular attention to the role of individual and psychopathological variables, while little attention has been given to an analysis of the communicative variables related to violence (Capaldi, Kim & Short, 2007; Feldman & Ridley, 2000). Moreover, most of these studies focus primarily on marital relations, while little attention has been given to adolescent and young adult relationships. To address this limitation, the main focus of the present study is to examine the role that different types of communication strategies used by partners in their daily exchanges have in initiating and maintaining several forms of psychological abuse within young adults romantic relationships.

Communication Patterns and Couple Violence

A great deal of research has found that communication patterns are a powerful predictor of relationship quality and marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1994; Punyanunt-Carter, 2004). Specifically, negative communication styles predict relationship deterioration, divorce, and represent a distinguishing characteristic of couple violence (Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe & Cox, 1993; Fletcher, 2002). The empirical literature in this area, however, has especially examined the link between communication and physical abuse, demonstrating that physically violent couples respond to conflict with hostile communication patterns (Robertson & Murachver, 2007), exhibit high levels of avoidance and use less constructive communication styles during their daily interactions (Feldman & Ridley, 2000). In addition, victims and perpetrators of physical

abuse demonstrate fewer negotiation strategies and lower levels of encouragement during conversations with their partner as well as higher rates of demanding/withdrawal behavior, compared to non-violent couples (Robertson & Murachver, 2007). In particular, researchers have found that the *demand-withdraw pattern*, which characterizes a communicative style by which one partner will attempt a discussion by criticizing, demanding and complaining, while the other member of the couple attempts to end the discussion or remain silent and avoid the issue, is associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Berns, Jacobson & Gottman, 1999a; Caughlin, Huston & Houts, 2000), discomfort and frustration (Harper & Welsh, 2007), poor marital adjustment (Eldrige, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007) and the perpetration of physical and psychological aggression (Berns, Jacobson & Gottman, 1999b; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler & Stuart, 1998). Investigations have also identified other patterns linked with couple adjustment and aggression, namely *dismissing*, based on voluntary interruption of communication, and *manipulation*, based on communication that tries to control other's actions. The former, if used frequently, characterizes people who show hostility toward others, arrogance and aggressive relational patterns while the second form involves communication based on intimidation, impositions and threats (Cusinato & Cristante, 1999).

Cornelius, Shorey and Beebe (2010) have recently showed that individuals who reported high levels of psychological aggression within their couple relationships have less skilled communication, and use patterns in which one partner expresses criticism and the other responds with defensiveness, which increase sarcasm and withdrawal. This negative form of communication eventually erodes relationship satisfaction. Victims also use this maladaptive pattern to reduce their partners' aggression levels. According to the authors, negative communication patterns proceed, and occur in conjunction with, psychologically aggressive behaviors (Cornelius et al., 2010).

In conclusion, the relationship between communication patterns and psychological abuse has been well documented in the marital literature, while fewer studies have analyzed this relationship in samples of young adults. In addition, while previous research has demonstrated that the *demand-withdraw pattern* generally contributes to predicting psychological abuse, no study has verified the influence of other communication patterns on both victimization and perpetration of psychological abuse.

AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the link between different communication patterns and psychological abuse among young adults. More specifically, the present research was aimed at analyzing the direct relationship between efficacious, avoidant, dismissive and manipulative communication strategies and different forms of psychological abuse, evaluated as couple-level variable.

We hypothesized that *Efficacy* in communication would have a direct negative effect on psychological abuse. In other words, we expected that *Positive* and *Effective* communication would be a predictor of low levels of psychological abuse. A parallel hypothesis was that negative communication patterns, based on *Avoidance*, *Dismissal* and *Manipulation*, would have a significant direct positive effect on psychological abuse within couple relationships of young adults.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 557 young adults (211 males and 346 females) aged between 18-30 years ($M = 22.61$; $SD = 3.85$), who were currently involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship of at least six months' duration ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 2.80$; range = six months through to five years). Some participants were college students who were recruited from several university faculties (Psychology, Biology, Mathematics) and some were students from post degree courses, located in two cities in central Italy (Florence and Siena). The majority of them were born in central Italy (78%), with the remainder being born in the south (16%) or north of Italy (6%). Ninety-eight percent of participants were Caucasian. With respect to religion, 78% of them were Catholic and 20% atheist. Furthermore, all participants came from families with middle or high socioeconomic status and more than 62% of their parents had a high school diploma or university degree. With respect to relationship status, the majority of females (85%) and males (80%) were dating and not living with their partners: only 15% of females and 20% of males were cohabiting, in particular, seven participants were married and only two had children. All the participants had complete data on all study variables.

Procedure

The research was conducted in accordance with the guidelines for the ethical treatment of human participants of the Italian Psychological Association. Prior permission was obtained from the University Dean and President as well as each course professor. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were recruited while they were in class during university courses. All students were told about the goals of this research project and 98% of them provided their individual consent to participate in this study. Anyway, they could withdraw from participation at any time. None of those who accepted dropped the task. Participation time was approximately 45 minutes.

Measures

Sociodemographic schedule. A brief demographic measure assessing age, gender, birthplace, race and religion, as well as status and length of current romantic relationship, was administered to participants.

Psychological abuse. Psychological abuse in the romantic relationships was measured using the *Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA)* (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). The MMEA is a self-report scale comprising 28 items for victimization and perpetration behaviors. It measures the four main dimensions of psychological abuse discussed above – *Restrictive Engulfment* (e.g., “Checked up on the other person by asking friends or relatives where they were or who they were with”), *Denigration* (e.g., “Belittled the other person in front of other people”), *Hostile Withdrawal* (e.g., “Acted cold or distant when angry”) and *Dominance/Intimidation* (e.g., “Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something in front of the other person”), that contain 7 items each. Participants were asked to report how often they and their partners have engaged in the aforementioned abusive behaviors within the preceding six months, on a 7-point frequency scale, from 0 (never) to 6 (more than 20 times). Scores for the four subscales, both for perpetration and victimization reports, are obtained by summing the response categories selected by the participants. Scores range from 0 to 42 for each subscale. Before collecting data, reliability of MMEA has been verified within the Italian context. Confirmatory factor analyses supported the original

four-factor structure for both *Victimization* ($\chi^2 = 494.24$, $df = 344$, $\chi^2/df = 1.44$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .05) and *Perpetration* ($\chi^2 = 517.42$, $df = 344$, $\chi^2/df = 1.50$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .06). Moreover, the four subscales showed satisfactory internal consistency coefficients for both *Victimization* and *Perpetration*: for the current sample, Cronbach’s alpha for perpetration and victimization reports were: .77 and .83, respectively, for *Restrictive Engulfment*, .84 and .85, respectively, for *Denigration*, .83 and .84, respectively, for *Hostile Withdrawal*, and .76 and .80, respectively, for *Dominance/Intimidation*. Finally, the four subscales for both perpetration and victimization reports tend to be moderately to highly correlated, demonstrating the relational nature of psychological abuse within romantic relationship (Bonechi & Tani, 2011c). Consistently with this evidence, and according to a procedure used in previous researches (Panuzio, Taft, Black, Koenen & Murphy, 2007; Taft, Murphy, King, Dedeyn & Musser, 2005), in this study we used, for each dimension (*Restrictive Engulfment*, *Denigration*, *Hostile Withdrawal*, *Dominance*), the total score, obtained computing the mean score of victimization and perpetration reports.

Couple communication patterns. Communication patterns were assessed using the *Couple Communication Questionnaire (CCQ)* (Cusinato & Cristante, 1999). This measure has 56 items on the way in which the respondent talks with, discusses topics and communicates with his or her partner and it reveals four communication styles. They are (a) *Efficacy*, referring to clear, effective communication, and positive dialogue based on self-disclosure between the partners (e.g., “We say our things with appropriate gestures and behaviors”); (b) *Avoidance*, which describes the propensity of both partners to avoid conversation (e.g., “There are long periods of silence between us”); (c) *Dismissal*, which involves a voluntary break in communication on important topics through the use of arrogance, hostility, charges and negative reinforcements (e.g., “My partner tends to change the subject in the face of certain topics”); and (d) *Manipulation*, which comprises communicative exchanges based on the use of intimidation, impositions, ultimatums and threats (e.g., “During discussions my partner gets me to say what he/ she wants”). Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to

5 (strongly agree). With regard to reliability, Cronbach's alpha ranged from .73 to .80 (Cusinato & Cristante, 1999). In the present study, the internal consistency coefficients were: .85 for *Efficacy*, .83 for *Avoidance*, .80 for *Dismissal* and .82 for *Manipulation*.

DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), using EQS 6.1 (Bentler, 2006), was employed to investigate the hypothesized model. The model testing used maximum likelihood estimation method. In addition, robust statistics were used to account for the multivariate non-normality of variables. The robust statistics included the Satorra-Bentler χ^2 test statistic ($SB\chi^2$) and robust Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Satorra & Bentler, 1994), both of which adjust standard errors to calculate parameter estimates in situations where multivariate normality cannot be assumed. The model fit was evaluated with the $SB\chi^2$, the Normed χ^2 , which is the $SB\chi^2$ adjusted by degrees of freedom ($SB\chi^2/df$, Jöreskog, 1969), the robust CFI (Bentler, 1990), and the Root Mean

Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudek, 1993). $SB\chi^2$ values not significant, $SB\chi^2/df$ values less than 3, CFI values greater than .90, and RMSEA values less than .05 indicate good fit.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

With regard to psychological abuse, almost all participants (98.5%) admitted to perpetrate some form of psychological abuse in their romantic relationships: 78.8% in occasional way (less than ten times in the last six months) and 19.7% frequently (from ten to more than 20 times in the last six months). Furthermore, about 98% of participants reported that they had been the victim of one or more psychological attacks: 76.8% in occasional way, and 21.2% frequently. Finally, there were a very high proportion of participants who reported to be both victims and perpetrators in their romantic relationships (97.5%). Table 1 report descriptive statistics of study variables by gender.

Table 1 – Means and standard deviations of study variables for males and females

		Males n = 211		Females n = 346	
		M	SD	M	SD
<i>Communication strategies</i>	Efficacy	53.12	8.49	52.95	8.96
	Avoidance	30.19	7.65	29.15	8.35
	Dismissal	28.21	8.30	28.23	9.35
	Manipulation	30.24	9.88	30.04	9.60
<i>Psychological abuse</i>	Restrictive Engulfment	7.62	6.93	7.95	6.16
	Denigration	4.05	6.26	4.25	5.74
	Hostile Withdrawal	11.84	8.47	13.05	7.93
	Dominance/Intimidation	5.36	5.35	5.91	5.59

To explore gender differences in the study variables, two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were performed. Results showed a not significant multivariate effect of gender for both communication strategies, Wilks' $\Lambda = .99$, $F(4, 552) = 1.21$ ns, $\eta^2 = .01$, and psychological abuse, Wilks' $\Lambda = .99$, $F(4, 552) = .92$ ns, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients are reported in Table 2. All correlation coefficients were statistically significant and occurred in the expected direction.

The relation between Communication Strategies and Psychological Abuse

To determine whether the communication patterns used by young adults with their partner foreboded psychological abuse, a latent variable structural equation model was constructed. The scale of the latent variable was determined by fixing at 1.0 the factor loading for the observed variable *Restrictive Engulfment*. The model evidenced a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 64.83$, $p < .001$, $SB\chi^2 = 48.93$, $df = 14$, $SB\chi^2/df = 3.49$, robust CFI = .97, RMSEA = .07), but the Normed

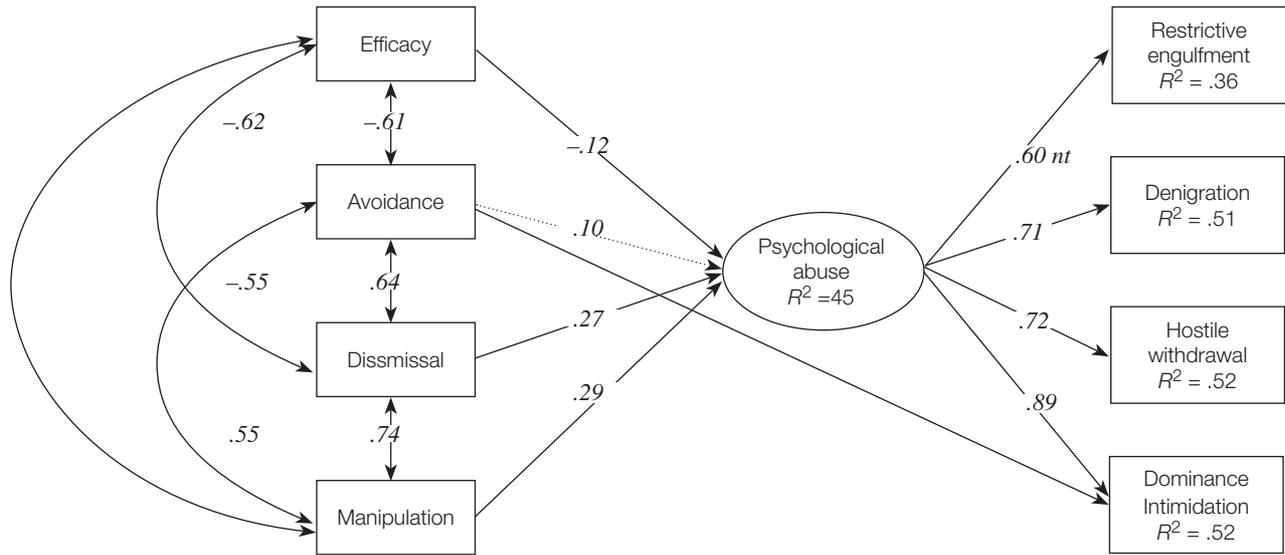
χ^2 value > 3.0 suggest a misfit. The model was modified on the basis of diagnostic procedure provided by the software, which suggested adding a path from *Avoidance* to *Dominance/Intimidation*. The modified model had a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 24.52$, $p < .05$, $SB\chi^2 = 18.52$, $df = 13$, $SB\chi^2/df = 1.42$, $\chi^2 = 30.13$, $p < .001$, $df = 1$, robust CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03). Figure 1 presents the standardized parameter estimates. The examination of paths showed that estimates were substantial, robust standard errors were small and t -values were high and significant, the only exception was represented by the paths from *Avoidance* to *Psychological abuse* which was not significant. The results showed that *Psychological abuse* was negatively associated to *Efficacy*, and positively associated to *Dismissal* and *Manipulation*; moreover, *Avoidance* was associated negatively to *Dominance/Intimidation*. The comparison between the results of bivariate and multivariate analyses revealed a suppression effect for the relation between *Avoidance* and *Dominance*; the zero-order correlation evidenced a moderate positive association, while the tested model showed a negative direct effect of *Avoidance* on *Dominance*. Once took into account the effects of the other communication strategies on *Dominance*, *Avoidance* exhibits a negative relation with this variable.

Table 2 – Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients among study variables ($n = 557$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Efficacy	–							
2 Avoidance	–.61	–						
3 Dismissal	–.62	.64	–					
4 Manipulation	–.55	.55	.64	–				
5 Restrictive Engulfment	–.29	.29	.35	.39	–			
6 Denigration	–.36	.35	.42	.41	.38	–		
7 Hostile Withdrawal	–.41	.38	.49	.46	.47	.50	–	
8 Dominance/Intimidation	–.25	.18	.38	.38	.47	.57	.51	–

Note. All coefficients are significant at $p < .001$.

Figure 1 – Statistical model of the relations between communication strategies and psychological abuse. Standardized solution. Measurement errors and disturbance are not reported



Note. All parameters are significant at $p < .05$, except those represented by dashed lines; *nt*: not tested for significance.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the current study show also within our sample a high prevalence of psychological abuse for both victimization and perpetration. Specifically, our findings reveal that almost all participants, without any difference by gender, admit to having perpetrated or experienced some form of psychological abuse over the last six months. Furthermore, the rates of bidirectionality were also very high, with about 98% of participants reporting both experiencing and perpetrating partner abuse. Overall, the results are consistent with previous research showing, both in males and females, high levels of psychological abuse and very high levels of bidirectional aggression, suggesting a circular relationship of conflict behaviors involving both partners (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Bonechi & Tani, 2011b; Cornelius et al., 2010; Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010; Menesini et al, 2011).

The main aim of the present study was to verify how different communication strategies might influence psychological abuse

behaviors within young adults' romantic relationships. We expected that a positive and effective communication would be a predictor of low levels of psychological abuse; as well we expected that negative communication strategies, based on avoidance, dismissal and manipulation, would have a significant positive effect on psychological abuse.

Our findings only partially support these predictions. Actually, regarding the first hypothesis, a communication style based on clear communication, positive dialogue, honest disclosure and the empathy of both partners was negatively related to victimization, but not to perpetration reports. Consistently with previous research (Cornelius et al., 2010; Robertson & Murachver, 2007), this result suggests that victims often develop a communication style that is characterized by minimal interaction and ineffectiveness, and this communicative style encourages the partner to use several psychological abuse tactics within their relationship.

In general, the absence of a good communication is associated with a higher probability of sustained violence and aggression (Punyanunt-Carter, 2004). However, in contrast with our hypothesis, findings showed that avoidance is not a significant predictor of psychological abuse when other communication patterns are considered. Actually, our results evidenced that once we took into account the effects of the other communication patterns on each dimension of psychological abuse, avoidance is not significantly associated to any of them with the only exception of *Dominance/Intimidation*, with which avoidance exhibits a negative relation. This result, inconsistent with literature (Berns et al., 1999a, 1999b; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998), may be due to the different constructs of avoidance that were used in our investigation. Indeed, the previous studies have analyzed the demand-withdraw pattern, such as a communication pattern in which one partner avoids discussion while the other nags or complains (Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell & Callan, 1994). So it is not surprising that in these cases the avoiding communication represents the most important behavior pattern as it characterizes couples who are at high risk of dissolution and relational dissatisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). In contrast, we considered avoidance as a communication style in which both partners avoid the conversation. Defined in this way, avoidance is not probably linked to psychological abuse behaviors, since both partners avoid daily discussions and therefore the violence cycle is not triggered.

Indeed, our results have demonstrated that the most important predictors of perpetration and victimization reports of psychological abuse within the couple relationship are the dismissal and manipulation communication patterns. However, our definition of dismissal – intended as a negative communication style in which one partner interrupts communication about an important topic through complaints, negative reinforcement, censorship and reproaches – is very similar to that of demand-withdraw pattern analyzed in previous studies. Therefore, verifying that this communication pattern characterizes the couple relationships in which the psychological abuse is high, our data are consistent with those of previous studies that argued that demand-withdraw pattern characterizes couples with high levels of relational dissatisfaction and which are at high risk of dissolution (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Gottman & Levenson, 1992).

Manipulation, instead, involves communicative exchanges based on the use of intimidation, impositions, ultimatums and threats that tend to control the partner (Cusinato & Cristante, 1999). These destructive communication styles not only escalate into psychologically aggressive interaction (i.e., perpetration of abuse), but are also used by the victims of psychological abuse upon receipt of aggression, and elicit the violence. These results suggest that psychological aggression tends to be associated to highly maladaptive interactional patterns that are established between partners during their daily interaction.

Our results should be viewed in the light of several methodological limitations. First, the assessment of psychological abuse was based on self-report measures. This approach has several methodological problems such as a unique and sometimes biased perspective on the phenomenon. Second, the study is based on reports from one partner at one point in time, rather than both partners. It would have been interesting to also collect romantic partner reports of aggression and victimization. Future research should also use alternative methodologies, such as individual interviews or observational procedures, to explore the implications and experiences of psychological aggression in young adults' relationships in greater depth. Third, the cross-sectional design of this study cannot provide an assessment of the longitudinal relationship between psychological abuse and communication behaviors. Moreover, this research sample was entirely made up of Caucasian college students of Catholic religion. Although this is an important population sample, the results may not be generally applicable to romantic relationships and further studies on a range of intimate relationships would assist to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon of psychological abuse across diverse types of intimate relationships and different samples for ethnic and religious characteristics. In order to have a more complete understanding of psychological abuse, future studies should continue investigation of these aspects. Finally this study did not consider the influence of gender differences. Future research should deep this aspect.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the present study significantly adds to our knowledge about the relational risk factors in psychological abuse among young adults. Our findings can be used to guide the development of interventions that address the importance of creating positive communication in romantic relationships.

References

- AKAR, T., AKSAKAL, N., DEMIREL, B., DURUKAN, E. & OZHAN, S. (2010). The prevalence of domestic violence against women among a group woman: Ankara, Turkey. *Journal of Family Violence*, 25, 449-460.
- ANTONIO, T. & HOKODA, A. (2009). Gender variations in dating violence and positive conflict resolution among Mexican adolescents. *Violence and Victims*, 24 (4), 533-545.
- AWANG, H. & HARIHARAN, S. (2011). Determinants of domestic violence: Evidence from Malaysia. *Journal of Family Violence*, 26, 459-464.
- BARGAI, N., BEN-SHAKHAR, G. & SHALEV, A. (2007). Posttraumatic stress disorder and depression in battered women: The mediating role of learned helplessness. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22 (5), 267-275.
- BELL, K.M. & NAUGLE, A.E. (2008). Intimate partner violence theoretical considerations: Moving towards a contextual framework. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28, 1096-1107.
- BENTLER, P.M. (1990). Comparative fit indices in structural model. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107, 238-246.
- BENTLER, P.M. (2006). *EQS 6 Structural equations program manual*. Encino: CA. Multivariate Software, Inc.
- BERNS, S.B., JACOBSON, N.S. & GOTTMAN, J.M. (1999a). Demand/ withdraw interaction patterns between different types of batterers and their spouses. *Journal of Marital & Family Therapy*, 25, 337-348.
- BERNS, S.B., JACOBSON, N.S. & GOTTMAN, J.M. (1999b). Demand/withdraw interaction in couples with a violent husband. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 67, 666-674.
- BONECHI, A. & TANI, F. (2011a). Le ferite invisibili: L'abuso psicologico nelle relazioni di coppia [The invisible injuries: The psychological abuse within couple relationships]. *Psicologia Clinica dello Sviluppo*, 15 (2), 333-366.
- BONECHI, A. & TANI, F. (2011b). Psychological abuse within romantic relationships: Prevalence, age and gender differences. *Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 100, 84-93.
- BONECHI, A. & TANI, F. (2011c). Italian adaptation of the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA). *TPM-Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 18 (2), 65-86.
- BROWNE, M.W. & CUDECK, R. (1993). Alternative ways of assessing model fit. In K.A. Bollen & J.S. Long (Eds.), *Testing structural equation model*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- CALLAHAN, M.R., TOLMAN, R.M. & SUANDERS, D.G. (2003). Adolescent dating violence victimization and psychological well-being. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 18, 664-681.
- CAPALDI, D.M., KIM, H.K. & SHORT, J.W. (2007). Observed initiation and reciprocity of physical aggression in young, at-risk couples. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22, 101-111.
- CAUGHLIN, J.P., HUSTON, T.L. & HOUTS, R.M. (2000). How does personality matter in marriage? An examination of trait anxiety, interpersonal negativity, and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 326-336.
- CHRISTENSEN, A. & HEAVEY, C.L. (1993). Gender differences in marital conflict: The demand/withdraw interaction pattern. In S. Oskamp & M. Costanzo (Eds.), *Gender issues in contemporary society*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- CORDOVA, J.V., JACOBSON, N.S., GOTTMAN, J.M., RUSHE, R. & COX, G. (1993). Negative reciprocity and communication in couples with a violent husband. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 102, 559-564.
- CORNELIUS, T.L., SHOREY, R.C. & BEEBE, S.M. (2010). Self-reported communication variables and dating violence: Using Gottman's Marital Communication conceptualization. *Journal of Family Violence*, 25, 439-448.
- CUSINATO, M. & CRISTANTE, F. (1999). Proposta di operazionalizzazione degli stili comunicativi [Proposed operationalization of communication styles]. In M. Cusinato, F. Cristante & F. Morino Abbele (Eds.), *Dentro la complessità della famiglia. Crisi, risorse e cambiamenti*. Firenze: Giunti.
- DEHART, D.D., FOLLINGSTAD, D.R. & FIELDS, A.M. (2010). Does context matter in determining psychological abuse? Effect of pattern, harm, relationship, and norms. *Journal of Family Violence*, 25, 461-474.
- DUTTON, M.A., GOODMAN, L. & BENNETT, L. (2001). Court-involved battered women's responses to violence: The role of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. In K.D. O'Leary & R.W.D. Maiuro (Eds.), *Psychological Abuse in Violent Domestic Relations*. New York: Springer.
- ELDRIDGE, K.A., SEVIER, M., JONES, J., ATKINS, D.C. & CHRISTENSEN, A. (2007). Demand-withdraw communication in severely distressed, moderately distressed, and non-distressed couples: Rigidity and polarity during

relationship and personal problem discussions. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21, 218-226.

FELDMAN, C.M. & RIDLEY, C.A. (2000). The role of conflict-based communication responses and outcomes in male domestic violence toward female partners. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17, 552-573.

FINCHAM, F.D. & BEACH, S.R.H. (2002). Forgiveness in marriage: Implications for psychological aggression and constructive communication. *Personal Relationships*, 9 (3), 239-251.

FLETCHER, G.J.O. (2002). *The new science of intimate relationships*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

FOLLINGSTAD, D.R. (2007). Rethinking current approaches to psychological abuse: Conceptual and methodological issues. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 12 (4), 439-458.

FOLLINGSTAD, D.R. & EDMUNDSON, M. (2010). Is psychological abuse reciprocal in intimate relationships? Data from a national sample of American adults. *Journal of Family Violence*, 25, 495-508.

GORMLEY, B. & LOPEZ, F.G. (2010). Psychological abuse in college dating relationships: Contributions of gender, stress, and adult attachment orientations. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25 (2), 204-218.

GOTTMAN, J.M. (1994). *What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.

GOTTMAN, J.M. & LEVENSON, R.W. (1992). Marital process predictive of later dissolution: Behavior, physiology, and health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 221-233.

HARPER, M.S. & WELSH, D.P. (2007). Keeping quiet: Self-silencing and its association with relational and individual functioning among adolescent romantic couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24, 99-116.

HAUSMANN, R., TYSON, L.D. & ZAHIDI, S. (Eds.) (2009). *The Global Gender Gap Report*. World Economic Forum, Colony/Geneva.

HOLTZWORTH-MUNROE, A., SMUTZLER, N. & STUART, G.L. (1998). Demand and withdraw communication among couples experiencing husband violence. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66, 731-743.

HOU, J., YU, TING S.R., SZE, Y.S. & FANG, X. (2011). The status and characteristics of couple violence in China. *Journal of Family Violence*, 26, 81-92.

JÖRESKOG, K.G. (1969). A general approach to confirmatory maximum likelihood factor analysis. *Psychometrika*, 34 (2), 183-202.

JOSE, A. & O'LEARY, K.D. (2009). Prevalence of partner aggression in representative and clinic samples. In K.D. O'Leary & E.M. Woodin (Eds.), *Psychological and physical aggression in couples: Causes and interventions*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

KAR, H.L. & GARCIA-MORENO, C. (2009). Partner aggression across cultures. In K.D. O'Leary & E.M. Woodin (Eds.), *Psychological and physical aggression in couples: Causes and interventions*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

LAWRENCE, E., YOON, J., LANGER, A. & RO, E. (2009). Is psychological aggression as detrimental as physical aggression? The independent effects of psychological aggression on depression and anxiety symptoms. *Violence and Victims*, 24 (1), 20-35.

MECHANIC, M.B., WEAVER, T.L. & RESICK, P.A. (2008). Mental health consequences of intimate partner abuse: A multidimensional assessment of four forms of abuse. *Violence Against Women*, 14 (6), 634-654.

MILLER, D.T. & PORTER, C.A. (2010). Self-blame in victims of violence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39 (2), 139-152.

MILLETICH, R.J., KELLEY, M.L., DOANE, A.N. & PEARSON, M.R. (2010). Exposure to interparental violence and childhood physical and emotional abuse as related to physical aggression in undergraduate dating relationships. *Journal of Family Violence*, 25, 627-637.

MURPHY, C.M. & HOOVER, S.A. (1999). Measuring emotional abuse in dating relationships as a multifactorial construct. *Violence and Victims*, 14, 39-53.

MURPHY, C.M., HOOVER, S.A. & TAFT, C.T. (1999, November). *The multidimensional measure of emotional abuse: Factor structure and subscale validity*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy, Toronto, Canada.

NOLLER, P., FEENEY, J.A., BONNELL, D. & CALLAN, V. (1994). A longitudinal study of conflict in early marriage. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 11, 233-252.

O'LEARY, K.D. (2001). Psychological abuse: A variable deserving critical attention in domestic violence. In K.D. O'Leary & R.D. Maiuro (Eds.), *Psychological abuse in violent domestic relations*. New York: Springer.

O'LEARY, K.D. & WOODIN, E.M. (2009). *Psychological and physical aggression in couples: Causes and interventions*.

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

PANUZIO, J., TAFT, C.T., BLACK, D.A., KOENEN, K.C. & MURPHY, C.M. (2007). Relationship abuse and victims' posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms: Associations with child behavior problems. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22 (4), 177-185.

PETERSON, C. & SELINGMAN, M.E. (2010). Learned helplessness and victimization. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39 (2), 103-116.

PUNYANUNT-CARTER, N.M. (2004). Reported affectionate communication and satisfaction in marital and dating relationships. *Psychological Reports*, 95, 1154-1160.

RO, E. & LAWRENCE, E. (2007). Comparing three measures of psychological aggression: Psychometric properties and differentiation from negative communication. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22 (7) , 575-586.

ROBERTSON, K. & MURACHVER, T. (2007). Predictors of partner violence for incarcerated women and men. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22, 639-655.

SACKETT, L.A. & SAUNDERS, D.G. (1999). The impact of different forms of psychological abuse on battered women. *Violence and Victims*, 14 (1), 105-117.

SATORRA, A. & BENTLER, P.M. (1994). Corrections to test statistics and standard errors in covariance structure analysis. In A. von Eye & C.C. Clogg (Eds.), *Latent variables analysis: Applications for developmental research*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.

SCHUMACHER, J.A., FELDBAU-KOHN, S., SMITH SLEP, A.M. & HEYMAN, R.E. (2001). Risk factors for male-to-female partner physical abuse. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 6 (2), 281-352.

STRAUS, M.A., HAMBY, S.L., BONEY-MCCOY, S. & SUGARMAN, D.B. (1996). The revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2): Development and preliminary psychometric data. *Journal of Family Issues*, 17, 283-316.

TAFT, C.T., MURPHY, C.M., KING, L.A., DEDEYN, J.M. & MUSSER, P.H. (2005). Posttraumatic stress disorder symptomatology among partners of men in treatment for relationship abuse. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 114 (2), 259.

WILLIAM, S.L., FRIEZE, I.H. & HENSON, I. (2005). Patterns of violent relationships, psychological distress, and marital satisfaction in a national sample of men and women. *Sex Roles*, 52, 771-784.

Acknowledgements

Preparation of this article was primarily supported by Italian “Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica” – ex MIUR 60% 2012-2014. We extend our thanks to Dr. Alice Bonechi who collaborated in data collection, and most of all to participants