

## Perpetrator Personality Effects on Post-Separation Victim Reactions in Abusive Relationships

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*Previous research has examined the influence of the abusive personality (Dutton, 1994a,b) on relationship dynamics. Men with high scores of abusive personality (borderline personality organization, anger and MCM18: Negativity) generate more frequent and extreme forms of physical and emotional abuse in intimate relationships. Other lines of research have examined the role of these relationship features in influencing post-separation adjustment in women. The current study combines two data sets; one bearing on the first of these issues, the other on the second issue, in order to connect characteristics of the perpetrator's personality to post separation aspects of victim reaction. Substantial associations are found between abusive personality and relationship dynamics and between the latter and persistent attachment, trauma symptoms, and lowered self esteem in battered women.*

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**KEY WORDS:** abusive personality; battered women; domestic violence.

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### INTRODUCTION

Certain aspects of perpetrators' personalities have been identified by Dutton and his colleagues as descriptive of an "abusive personality" (Dutton 1994a,b; Dutton and Starzomski, 1993, 1994). This personality scores high on a measure of borderline personality organization (Oldham *et al.*, 1985). Borderline Personality Organization (BPO) is a clinical category characterized by intense, unstable interpersonal relationships, an unstable sense of self, intense anger, and impulsivity (Gunderson, 1984), characteristics which, *prima facie*, should increase the likelihood of violence in intimate

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relationships. BPO is a less severe form of the more rare Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD: Kernberg, 1977).

As Gunderson (1984) describes the Borderline Personality (BP), the essential characteristics are (in order of importance): a proclivity for intense, unstable interpersonal relationships characterized by intermittent undermining of the significant other, manipulation, and masked dependency; an unstable sense of self with intolerance of being alone and abandonment anxiety; and intense anger, demandingness, and impulsivity, usually tied to substance abuse or promiscuity.

In a series of studies, Dutton and his colleagues (Dutton, 1994a,b; Dutton and Starzomski, 1993, 1994; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Hart *et al.*, 1993; Starzomski and Dutton, 1994; Landolt and Dutton, 1997) have examined personality profiles of assaultive males. The overall strategy of this work has been to relate self-report scales filled out by abusive men as part of an assessment procedure for treatment to the female partners' reports of the man's abusiveness. Both self-referred and court-referred men have been compared to demographically matched controls (Dutton and Starzomski, 1994). Extensive analyses of the men's reporting tendencies have been made through the use of the Marlowe-Crowne scale (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960), the Balanced Inventory of Social Responding (Paulhus, 1984; 1986) and the Disclosure, Debasement and Desirability Scales of the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-II (MCMI-II: Millon, 1987). An extensive report on the relationship of social desirability to all self-report scales described below is available in Dutton and Hemphill (1992) and Dutton and Starzomski (1994). Self-reports of the man's anger, jealousy, experience of trauma symptoms and abusiveness, as well as reports of the man's abusiveness (both physical and psychological) made by his female partner have constituted the dependent variables in these studies. Dutton and Starzomski (1994) argued that self-referred assaulters constituted a more "pure" group of abusive personality (typically self-referring during the contrition phase of an abuse cycle) while court-referred samples were more heterogeneous. Consistent with this view was the finding that 45% of self-referred but only 27.5% of court-referred wife assaulters reached the 85th percentile on the borderline scale of the MCMI-II (Hart *et al.*, 1993). Self-reports were made on a scale measuring borderline personality organization (BPO; Oldham *et al.*, 1985). This scale has three subscales; Identity Diffusion (a poorly integrated sense of self), Primitive Defenses (projection and splitting) and Reality Testing (transient psychotic states).

In an initial sample of 80 wife assaulters and 40 demographically matched controls, Dutton (1994a) found BPO scores to be similar to those for diagnosed borderlines. The mean BPO score for the sample of wife assaulters was 71.3 ( $SD = 17.1$ ), whereas the score for diagnosed borderlines

was 74.8 (Oldham *et al.*, 1985). By comparison, Oldham *et al.* reported a mean score of 61.3 for a nonborderline sample and our controls scored 60.0 ( $SD = 17.0$ ) on the BPO scale. Furthermore, BPO scores were significantly related to chronic anger, jealousy, use of violence, and experience of adult trauma symptoms in the wife assault group. High BPO scorers reported significantly more anger; of greater frequency, magnitude, and duration. They also reported greater jealousy and more trauma symptoms; dissociation, anxiety, sleep disturbance, depression and post-sexual abuse trauma. Finally, they reported significantly more abuse towards their wives: both verbal-symbolic and physical as measured on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979).

Dutton and Starzomski (1993) corroborated these findings by focusing on wives' reports of abusive treatment by their husbands through assessment of both physical abuse using the CTS and emotional abuse using the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI; Tolman, 1989). The latter 58-item scale yields two factors called Dominance/Isolation and Emotional Abuse. A multiple regression indicated that BPO scale scores combined with scores from a self report for anger (the MAI; Siegel, 1986) accounted for 50% of women's reports of Dominance/Isolation (Factor 1: PMWI) and 35% of Emotional Abuse scores (Factor 2).

Dutton (1994b) found that BPO, anger scores, and the measure of Negativity (Passive Aggression and Self Defeating Scales) from the MCMI (scale 8) contributed most to a discriminant function for high and low abusiveness as reported by wives. This latter finding suggests that certain features of abusive relationships such as the total amount of physical and emotional abuse can be accounted for in terms of the male perpetrator's personality.

A second series of studies (Dutton and Painter, 1981; 1993a,b) described a process known as "traumatic bonding" that occurred for victims of violence in intimate relationships. Traumatic bonding refers to powerful attachments that develop from the dynamics of abusive relationships. These include the total amount of physical and emotional abuse, the intermittency of abuse, and power differentials created through violence. Dutton and Painter (1993b) found that persistent (post separation) attachment, lowered self esteem and high levels of chronic trauma symptoms were interrelated and formed a syndrome. Some aspects of trauma symptoms, notably depression and anxiety, had been discussed as parts of the Battered Woman Syndrome (Walker, 1979), as had lowered self esteem. Paradoxical attachment was not part of the original description of the Battered Woman Syndrome, although Douglas (1987) described "idealization of the abuser" as part of a secondary complex of symptoms. Clearly, persistent attachment, low self-esteem, and trauma

symptoms would lead to more difficulties with post-separation adjustment of the battered woman.

The present study seeks to make a two step empirical connection. The first step links the abusive personality with "relationship" dynamics features such as physical abuse, domination/isolation and emotional abuse reported by battered women. In a second sample of battered women, these relationship features are linked to post relationship sequelae, such as attachment, lowered self-esteem and trauma symptoms. Hence, these relationship features which relate to the important sequelae of abusive relationships, which in turn, serve to complicate the process of a woman's emancipation from that relationship, may be related to the abusive personality described above.

## **STUDY 1: LINKING THE ABUSIVE PERSONALITY WITH RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS**

### **Method**

#### *Subjects*

In Part 1, data were supplied by 120 men in treatment for wife assault and by 43 of their female partners. In addition, 44 demographically similar men and 33 of their partners were assessed. The assaultive group consisted of both court-referred and self-referred males (treated by the Vancouver Assaultive Husbands Project or the Victoria Family Violence Institute) and their partners. Subject fees were provided. All assessments were completed during the first 4 weeks of a sixteen week treatment program for wife assault. The demographic profile of the men in this group is as follows: average age 35 years (range 17-65), average level of education grade 12, average family income \$34,285 (63% self-identified as blue collar, 37% as white collar), 56% were still living with the assault victim, and mean self-reported CTS score for physical assaultiveness against their partner in the prior year was 5.87 (*SD* 6.22). Women completed assessments privately and independently of their partners.

The control sample consisted of blue-collar workers and their partners recruited through a local union. A subject fee was paid to each participant. The average age of the men was 35 years (range 19-45), average level of education was grade 12, average family income \$55,000 (mode \$35,000), 65% were married, and the mean self-reported CTS score for physical assaultiveness against their partner in the prior year was 1.34 (*SD* 3.4). Again, men and women completed the assessment independently. These men were selected to provide a demographically matched, relatively nonvio-

lent, noncriminal sample (although, as reported above, they did self-report some violence toward their wives).

### *Personality Scales: BPO*

The Self-Report Instrument for Borderline Personality Organization (Oldham *et al.*, 1985) is a 30-item instrument derived from factor analysis of a 130-item questionnaire designed by the authors. The 30-item scale retains items with the strongest factor loadings for each of the three subscales of identity diffusion, primitive defenses and reality testing.

The first subscale, identity diffusion, measures a poorly integrated sense of self or of significant others. Identity diffusion is assessed by ascertaining difficulties in describing one's own personality or the personalities of others, uncertainty about career or goals, contradictory behaviors, and instability in intimate relationships.

The second subscale measures primitive defenses. Items were written to cover defenses of splitting, idealization, devaluation, omnipotence, denial, projection and projective identification.

Reality testing items were written to cover external versus internal origins of perceptions, evaluation of own behavior in terms of social criteria of reality, differentiation of self from non-self, internal reality testing, and the cognitive process of reality testing.

Oldham *et al.* (1985) report Cronbach's alpha for the BPO subscales as identity diffusion .92, primitive defenses .87, and reality testing .84. We replicated these scores with our sample of men. We also correlated BPO scores with the C scale of the MCMI-II as a validity check. These two assessments correlated at +.71. The BPO self-report instrument does not assess abusiveness or aggression. Hence, any associations with other scales reported below are not attributable to overlap in item content.

### *Anger: The Multidimensional Anger Inventory (MAI)*

MAI is a 38-item self-report scale assessing the following dimensions of anger response: frequency, duration, magnitude, mode of expression, hostile outlook and range of anger-eliciting situations. Siegel (1986) reports results of a factor analysis of this scale, the reliability of its subscales (alphas = .51 to .83), and the scale as a whole (alpha equal to .84 and .89) for two separate samples. The scale was validated by correlation with other, conceptually similar anger inventories.

In addition, a general assessment for psychopathology was made of

the subjects using the *Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory, Version 2 (MCMI-II)*. The MCMI-II (Millon, 1987) contains 175 items that form 26 scales intended to measure a variety of DSM-III-R Axis I and II disorders, as well as three response styles. Scoring of the MCMI-II is a two-step process: first, raw items are weighted to yield scale scores; second, scale scores are weighted to control for response styles; and finally, weighted scale scores are transformed into base rate scores. All MCMI-II protocols in the present study were machine scored by National Computer Systems. Of the 120 profiles scored, 9 were rejected as invalid and excluded from the remaining analyses.

*Criterion Scales: Psychological Maltreatment of  
Women Inventory (PMWI)*

The PMWI (Tolman, 1989) assesses a broad range of intrafamilial, nonphysical aggression that is not identified by the CTS. It contains 58 items (rated from 1 "never" to 5 "very frequently"), which comprise forms of Dominance/Isolation and Emotional/Verbal abuse. Dominance/Isolation includes items related to rigid observance of traditional sex roles, demands for subservience, and isolation from resources. In contrast, Emotional/Verbal abuse includes withholding emotional resources, verbal attacks, and behavior that degrades women. Factor analyses support this two factor structure. In the sample considered in this study, Cronbach's alpha for the Dominance/Isolation subscale was .82, and for the Emotional/Verbal subscale was .93.

*Physical Abuse: The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS)*

CTS (Straus, 1979) is a standardized scale designed to measure the frequency and intensity of 19 tactics used in dyads to resolve conflict. The scale includes rational tactics, withdrawal, and a variety of verbally, emotionally and physically abusive strategies. Respondents report both their own use of these tactics and their use by an interactant. This allows independent assessment of both use of, and being a recipient of, various conflict tactics on affective reactions to stimulus materials. Straus *et al.* (1980) have published population norms for usage of each tactic in a variety of intimate relationships.

Results

A composite abusive personality score was established by summing scores on the BPO, MAI and MCMI-8. Since the metrics of these scales differ, Z scores were calculated and then combined. A composite "relationship dynamics" score was calculated by combining scores on the CTS; Physical Abuse Scale and both Factors of the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory. Again, Z transformations were used to combine the data.

A general linear correlation was calculated between the two composites of +.32 (p < .001). Hence, the abusive personality appeared to be related to relationship dynamics. (see Fig. 1).

STUDY 2: LINKING RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS TO PERSISTENT ATTACHMENT

Method

Subjects

Women (n = 75) with a history of physical and/or emotional abuse were recruited through three sources: transition houses, a court-mandated treatment program for wife assaulters (who were their partners), and newspaper advertisements. To qualify for the research sample, a woman had to have left the relationship within the past 6 months. Sample source had no significant effect on any assessment measure, with the exception that

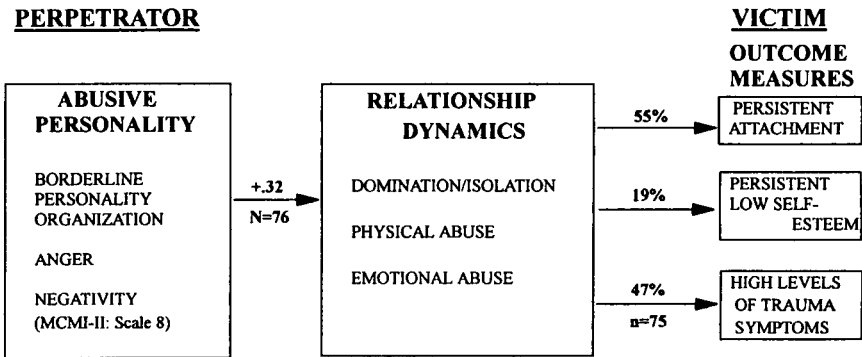


Fig. 1. Correlation of Man's Abusive Personality Measure with Subsequent Relationship Dynamics and Variance in Outcome Measures Accounted for by Relationship Dynamics.

transition house women and partners of treatment program men reported more frequent and severe physical abuse than women recruited through newspaper advertisements. Of the total sample 50 women were specifically leaving battering relationships and 25 were leaving emotionally abusive relationships.

The women were assessed for abuse experience by the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) and the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (Tolman, 1989). The total sample reported very high degrees of verbal aggression directed toward them in the relationship they had just left. For example, the mean report of verbal aggression was 55.2 on the CTS, which places this sample beyond the 99th percentile for population norms published by Straus, *et al.* (1980). Women leaving battering relationships ( $n = 50$ ) reported physical aggression scores by their male partner of 37.5 (and severe physical aggression scores of 13.4), again beyond the 99th percentile for population norms.

A total of 75 women participated in the study. Their average age was 31.4, mean time in the relationship was 11.5 years (range 6 months to 44 years), mean time separated was 20.5 weeks. On average, these women had initiated 2.1 prior separations, half had experienced some form of abuse in a previous relationship, and 22 were childless. All Women were contacted immediately after relationship termination and 6 months after termination (Time 2).

### *Relationship Dynamics*

Women reported abusiveness as with sample 1 using the Conflict Tactics Scale and the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory.

### *Outcome Measures*

*Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSC-33).* The TSC-33 (Briere & Runtz, 1989) is a 33-item instrument that has been shown to discriminate victims of childhood sexual abuse from nonvictimized respondents for both females (Briere and Runtz, 1989) and males (Briere, 1992). The TSC-33 contains five subscales: dissociation, anxiety, depression, postsexual abuse trauma-hypothesized (PSAT-hypothesized), and sleep disturbance. The PSAT-hypothesized includes those symptoms thought to be most characteristic of sexual abuse experiences, but which may also occur as a result of other types of trauma. Analysis of the five subscales' internal consistency indicates

reasonable reliability, with an average subscale alpha of .71 and a total alpha for the TSC-33 of .89 (Briere and Runtz, 1989).

### *Attachment*

To assess attachment in this study we used a scale of attachment developed by Kitson (1982), supplemented with some items from a scale by NiCarthy (1982). The *Kitson scale*, which was devised to assess attachment during divorce, measures the bereavement aspect of separation and contains items such as "I frequently find myself wondering what he is doing" and "I spend a lot of time still thinking about him." Kitson (1982) reports the psychometric qualities of the scale, including an alpha of .80. To supplement the assessment of attachment, 10 items from an "idealization" measure developed by NiCarthy (1982) were included. These include items such as "no one could ever understand him the way I do," "without him I have nothing to live for" and "I love him so much, I can't think of being with anyone else." The NiCarthy scale added an element of continuing obsession with the partner that was not included in the Kitson scale. Since the composite scale was new, we performed an item-whole correlation for each item and retained only items that had correlations over .55 ("I feel I will never get over the breakup"). Cronbach's alpha for the entire 20 item scale was .92.

### *Self-esteem*

Since self-esteem is frequently mentioned in the literature on effects of battering, we included it here. We used the Rosenberg (1965) Self-esteem Inventory. His 58-item self-report scale has a reported alpha of .83 (Robinson *et al.*, 1991). Respondents indicate whether each item is "like me" or not.

## **Results**

Respondents in this study reported CTS annual physical aggression scores by their former partner as follows: Battered group  $M = 37.8$  (17.6), Emotionally Abused (EA) group  $M = 1.2$  (2.0) indicating frequent physical abuse for the Battered group. On the Tolman Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI), the Battered group's scores were as follows: domination/isolation = 79.1 (25.9) and emotional abuse = 95.5 (15.9),

indicating that frequent emotional abuse accompanied physical abuse for these women. Corresponding scores for the Emotionally Abused group were: domination/isolation 43.1 ( $SD = 27.5$ ), emotional abuse 69.4 ( $SD = 20.1$ ). Social desirability measures (the Marlowe-Crowne Scale) did not correlate significantly with reports of partners' physical or emotional abuse, leading to the conclusion that these reports were uncontaminated by impression management concerns.

To estimate the overall effect of relationship variables on post-relationship measures, a composite measure of relationship variables was constructed and entered into a multiple regression on the various dependent measures of the study. Current relationship variables included total physical abuse, dominance, emotional abuse and length of relationship. In this analysis current relationship variables accounted a substantial amount of the post-relationship variables' variance.

Relationship variables did best at accounting for attachment six months after termination of the relationship (55% of variance). Trauma symptoms at Time 2 had 47% of their variance accounted for by relationship variables, suggesting a delayed effect of relationship trauma on symptom onset. Self-esteem scores at Time 1 were 29% accounted for by relationship variables but at Time 2 only 19% of the variance of self esteem was accounted for by relationship variables (see Fig. 1).

Finally, a discriminant function analysis was run on composite distress by assigning women to high and low distress groups on the basis of self-esteem, experienced trauma symptoms and continuing attachment at Time 2. Using all available predictor variables, a composite explained 71% of the variance in composite distress and correctly classified 81.3% of the women according to distress group assignment. The main contributors to this composite variable (with beta weights) were dominance/isolation ( $B = .81$ ), total physical abuse by partner ( $B = .59$ ) and emotional abuse ( $B = .49$ ).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study represents a first step toward linking the abusive personality with postrelationship distress experienced by battered women. In our original study of postrelationship distress (Dutton and Painter, 1993b), two other relationship variables were related to the sequelae of abuse. These were the intermittent nature of abuse (good followed by bad treatment) and the loss of power experienced by battered women after the onset of violence. Unfortunately, we have not yet assessed the impact of the abusive personality on these aspects of relationship dynamics, although in clinical

descriptions borderline personality undergoes cyclical anger outbursts followed by contrition (Dutton, 1994a; Dutton and Starzomski, 1994), suggesting a form of alternating good-bad treatment of the victim.

The abusive personality correlates significantly with other aspects of relationship dynamics that also influence post separation adjustment. These include amount of physical abuse, domination/isolation and emotional abuse. Hence, a tentative conclusion at this juncture would be that men with high scores on abusive personality (negativity, anger and borderline personality) generate the very relationship dynamics that make post separation adjustment problematic for the abuse victim.

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