

A Cross-Cultural Assessment of Posttrauma Reactions Among Malaysian and US Women Reporting Partner Abuse

Kathryn E. Phillips · Gerald M. Rosen ·
Lori A. Zoellner · Norah C. Feeny

Published online: 30 September 2006
© Springer Science+Business Media, Inc. 2006

Abstract Information on partner abuse in women from non-Western cultures and resulting psychological morbidity are scant. The present study examined these issues among women who experienced partner violence and sought refuge at a domestic violence shelter in Malaysia. These women completed a semi-structured interview and standardized measures to assess posttrauma morbidity. Responses by Malaysian shelter residents were compared with a sample of US women who also reported partner violence. The majority of women in both samples reported severe levels of distress and met criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These findings suggest that psychological problems that women face after partner abuse may be similar in many respects, despite political, geographical, or cultural differences.

Keywords Partner abuse · Battered women · Domestic violence · Posttraumatic Stress disorder · Cross-cultural · Malaysia

Victims of violent crimes have a high incidence of psychological problems, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Acierno, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Saunders, & Best, 1999; Norris & Kaniasty, 1994). One subset of violent crimes that is widespread and has received considerable attention in the United States is that of partner abuse (Garner & Fagan, 1997). The National Crime Victimization Survey in the United States found more than 960,000 incidents of violence against a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend in each of the study years, with about 85% of the victims being women (Greenfield et al. 1998). As with other violent crimes, partner abuse may have psychological consequences for its victims, a point clearly demonstrated by studies conducted in the United States (Humphreys, Lee, Neyhlan, & Marmar, 2001; Kemp, Rawlings, & Green, 1991; Vogel & Marshall, 2001). Relatively little data exist on posttrauma reactions among battered women outside the United States, despite emergence of a cross-cultural perspective on family violence (Hoff, 1992; Levinson, 1989) and trauma (Marsella, Friedman, Gerrity, & Scurfield, 1996). The only identified report based in a non-Western country found higher levels of psychological distress, anger, and fear among abused Palestinian women as compared to non-abused women (Haj-Yahia, 1999). Haj-Yahia made no attempt to relate assessment instruments and findings to the symptom criteria of PTSD.

The present study represents a preliminary effort to assess the psychological impact of partner abuse in a sample of non-Western women with reference to the symptom criteria that define PTSD. Malaysian women who sought residence in a battered women's shelter were assessed for PTSD-related

K. E. Phillips (✉)
Center for Prevention and Health Services,
National Business Group on Health,
50 F Street NW, Suite 600, Washington,
District of Columbia, USA
e-mail: phillips@businessgrouphealth.org

G. M. Rosen
University of Washington,
Seattle, Washington, USA

L. A. Zoellner
University of Washington,
Seattle, Washington, USA

N. C. Feeny
Case Western Reserve University,
Cleveland, Ohio, USA

posttrauma reactions and the findings were compared to a group of women in the United States who experienced partner abuse.

Method

Participants

Participants were female residents ($n = 17$) at a shelter in a suburb of Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur. They reported being abused by their husbands over a period of 6 months to 37 years ($M = 7.88$ years, $SD = 8.70$ years). Ages ranged from 26 to 49 years ($M = 34.59$, $SD = 7.35$). Ten (58.8%) of the participants were Indian, five (29.4%) were Malay, and two (11.8%) were Chinese. The participants' level of education varied: five (29.4%) had not gone beyond primary school, seven (41.2%) had attended secondary school, four (23.5%) had earned the equivalent of a high school diploma, and one (5.9%) had earned a university or graduate degree.

A comparison group of women ($n = 17$) from the United States who had experienced partner abuse were randomly selected from a larger pool of 52 participants (O'Neill, Feeny, Watlington, Alvarez, Zoellner, Zager, et al., unpublished manuscript). These participants were seeking emergency restraining orders from the Philadelphia Family Court Domestic Violence Unit, Philadelphia, PA. The age of these women ranged from 20 to 47 years ($M = 31.41$, $SD = 8.04$). Education levels varied, with three (17.6%) having completed some high school, nine (52.9%) having graduated from high school or earned a GED, and five (29.4%) having attended or graduated from college. The comparison sample included 12 African-American (70.6%) and 5 Caucasian (29.4%) women. These women had been in an abusive relationship for periods that ranged from 10 months to 13.25 years ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 3.54$).

Measures

Socio demographic survey

The socio demographic survey was a semi-structured interview developed specifically for the Malaysian shelter sample. The survey included questions about age, ethnicity, religion, income level, and family composition. Several cultural markers were also included to assess the practices of patrilocality, arranged marriage, and legal versus customary marriage.

Severity of violence against women scales (SVAWS; Marshall, 1992)

The SVAWS is a 46-item self-report measure used to assess the frequency and severity of abuse experiences, including

threats of violence, acts of violence, and sexual aggression (McFarlane, Willson, Malecha, & Lemmey, 2000; Vogel & Marshall, 2001). Respondents rate frequency of particular acts using a scale ranging from *never* (0) to *almost daily* (9). Internal consistency reliability estimates for threats of violence and acts of violence are high (coefficient alpha = .92, .96; McFarlane, Willson, Malecha, & Lemmey, 2000). In the present study, three items were omitted from translation (one from each subscale), with mean substitution utilized to allow for generalization to other studies. Items were coded following (Vogel & Marshall, 2001).

PTSD symptom scale-self-report (PSS-SR; Foa, Cashman, Jaycox, & Perry, 1997; Foa, Riggs, Dancu, & Rothbaum, 1993)

The PSS-SR, a version of the PDS, consists of 17 questions that correspond to DSM-IV PTSD symptom criteria (APA, 1994); each rated on a 0–3 point scale for frequency and severity. The scale has been found to be internally consistent (alpha = .91) and stable over a period of 1 month ($r = .74$). Subscales that assess reexperiencing, avoidance, and arousal also show good internal consistency and stability.

Revised impact of events scale (RIES; Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979; Sundin & Horowitz, 2002)

The REIS is a 15-item self-report questionnaire, with good psychometric properties (Joseph, 2000) and satisfactory convergent validity with observer-diagnosed PTSD (Sundin & Horowitz, 2002). Each item on the REIS is scored 0, 1, 3, and 5 with a range for the aggregate score on 15 items of 0–75. In Neal, Busuttill, Rollins, Herepath, Strike, & Turnbull, (1994), a cut score of 35 most accurately identified individuals diagnosed with PTSD on the basis of clinical structured interviews.

Procedure

During an 11-week period, all shelter residents who were victims of partner abuse ($n = 20$) were asked to participate in a study on trauma. Following informed consent, participants completed the interview and self-report measures with reference to (1) the abuse they had endured in their *most recent* domestic relationship; and (2) the distress they had suffered from that abusive situation. Three women were not included in analyses as they did not complete the survey in its entirety. Questionnaires originally developed in the United States were translated into Bahasa Malaysia for participants who were not fluent in English. Participants who did not read English or Bahasa Malaysia were interviewed orally in their native language by a bilingual social worker (Bahasa Malaysia $n = 3$, Tamil $n = 2$, Cantonese $n = 1$).

Participants in the US comparison sample completed a similar demographic survey and the PSS-SR. All participants from the US sample were interviewed in English.

Results from Malaysian participants

Extent of abuse

In response to general questions in the demographic survey regarding type of abuse experienced, 100% of the women reported physical abuse and 88.2% reported psychological or emotional abuse. On the SVAWS, 93% of the participants reported at least one episode in which they were “beat-up,” 87.5% reported being “threatened with death,” and 66.7% reported being “threatened with a weapon.” Using the SVAWS to determine sexual abuse experience, 81.3% of the women reported at least one act of sexual assault: 66.6% reported forced vaginal intercourse, 40% of the women reported forced anal intercourse, and 33.3% reported forced oral sex. On average, the women reported leaving their abusive partner 3.35 times ($SD = 1.73$, range 1–6). Overall, women reported high scores on all subscales of the SVAWS: threat subscale ($M = 42.69$, $SD = 26.23$), violence subscale ($M = 59.61$, $SD = 34.35$), and sexual aggression subscale ($M = 13.67$, $SD = 12.88$).

Prevalence of PTSD symptoms

All items on the PSS-SR were endorsed by more than 41% of the participants, with the most commonly endorsed items being psychological reactivity to trauma reminders (94.1%), intrusive thoughts (87.5%), irritability (88.2%), and sleep disturbances (81.3%). A majority of the women met criteria for PTSD on the PSS-SR (82.4%), and met or exceeded a recommended cut score of 35 (Neal et al., 1994) on the RIES (76.5%).

Comparison with US sample

We were interested in how posttrauma reactions present across cultural groups. Therefore, Malaysian women were compared to a sample of US women who experienced partner abuse. Both samples were composed mainly of ethnic minorities (Malaysian 70.6%, US 81.3%). Differences in ages of Malaysian and US women were nonsignificant (Malaysian: $M = 34.59$, $SD = 7.35$; US: $M = 31.41$; $SD = 8.04$) as were the number of children (Malaysian: $M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.59$, US: $M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.56$). Only 29.4% of the Malaysian women completed high school equivalency, a figure significantly less than the 82.3% reported for the US sample, $\chi^2(N = 34) = 9.66$, $p < .05$. Further, Malaysian women reported staying in their abu-

sive relationships longer than women in the US sample (Malaysian: $M = 11.29$; $SD = 8.79$; US: $M = 5.58$; $SD = 3.54$; $t(32) = 2.49$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = .88$).

Reports of posttrauma reactions on the PSS-SR were comparable across Malaysian and US samples (Malaysian: $M = 22.19$, $SD = 8.99$; US: $M = 27.47$, $SD = 11.81$) as were the rates of PTSD (Malaysian 82.4%; US 88.2%). Differences were not significant.

Discussion

The present study found that a majority of Malaysian women who experience partner abuse and seek help from a shelter, endorse posttrauma symptoms and meet self-report based criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder. The high rate of PTSD found in this sample (82.4% on the PSS-SR and 76.5% on the RIES) is consistent with rates found in other populations, including women from a Philadelphia sample. These findings demonstrate the need for further study of residents in Malaysian shelters and the appropriateness of therapeutic services to address posttrauma issues.

This study is limited by the small number of women surveyed in one shelter over a brief period of time. Further, the present study did not address issues of comorbidity, an important consideration when assessing the psychological status of trauma survivors (Boudreaux, Kilpatrick, Resnick, Best, & Saunders, 1998; Stein & Kennedy, 2001). Current findings also are preliminary, in that measurement instruments used to assess posttrauma reactions were developed and validated in the United States. Although the construct of PTSD has been found to surmount some barriers of culture and language (Sack, Seeley, & Clarke, 1997), several of the words and phrases on the PSS-SR, REIS, and SVAWS (e.g. intrusive thoughts, flashbacks) were difficult to translate and may have failed to reflect the experiences of trauma victims in non-Western cultures (Peltzer, 1998). Moreover, instruments translated by staff social workers were not reviewed by a third party for accuracy, nor were they back translated. Perhaps of greatest concern, the Western construct of PTSD, has been faulted for “medicalizing human suffering” (Summerfield, 2004). Imposing PTSD symptomatic criteria on differing sociocultural definitions of illness and distress (Bracken, 2002; Bracken & Petty, 1998; Marsella, Friedman, Gerrity, & Scurfield, 1996) may have obscured the cultural experience of trauma among Malaysian women. Despite these limitations, the present study demonstrates that emotional distress after partner abuse is likely to find expression the world around.

Acknowledgements We thank the staff and administration at Women's Aid Organization, Malaysia, who sponsored this study; social workers Shoba, Zahura, Nohrma, Nazlina and Jesse who helped translate questionnaires and interview participants; Jennifer Alvarez

Conrad, Bart Brigidi, Marie Manzo, Melanie O'Neal, Christina Watlington, Ruth Zager, and the staff of the Philadelphia Family Court Domestic Violence Unit for their help in recruiting and interviewing participants. This project was supported by a grant from the Freeman Foundation and the University of Oregon.

References

- Acierno, R., Resnick, H., Kilpatrick, D. G., Saunders, B., & Best, C. L. (1999). Risk factors for rape, physical assault, and posttraumatic stress disorder in women: Examination of differential multivariate relationships. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 13*, 541–563.
- Boudreaux, E., Kilpatrick, D. G., Resnick, H. S., Best, C. L., & Saunders, B. E. (1998). Criminal victimization, posttraumatic stress disorder and comorbid psychopathology among a community sample of women. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 11*, 665–678.
- Bracken, P. J. (2002). *Trauma: Culture, meaning and philosophy*. London: Whurr Publishers.
- Bracken, P. J. & Petty, C. (1998). *Rethinking the trauma of war*. London: Free Association Books.
- Foa, E. B., Cashman, L., Jaycox, L., & Perry, K. (1997). The validation of a self-report measure of posttraumatic stress disorder: The Posttraumatic Diagnostic Scale. *Psychological Assessment, 9*, 445–451.
- Foa, E. B., Riggs, D. S., Dancu, C. V., & Rothbaum, B. O. (1993). Reliability and validity of a brief instrument for assessing posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 6*, 459–473.
- Garner, J., & Fagan, J. (1997). Victims of partner abuse. In R. C. Davis, A. J. Lurigio, & W. G. Skogan (Eds), *Victims of crime* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Greenfield, L. A., Rand, M. R., Craven, D., Flaus, P. A., Perkins, C. A., Ringel, C., et al. (1998). *Violence by intimates: Analysis of data on crimes by current or former spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends* (NCJ-167237). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Haj-Yahia, M. M. (1999). Wife abuse and its psychological consequences as revealed by the first Palestinian National Survey on Violence Against Women. *Journal of Family Psychology, 13*, 642–662.
- Hoff, L. A. (1992). An anthropological perspective on wife beating. In C. M. Sampselle (Ed.), *Violence against women: Nursing research, education, and practice issues*. Washington, DC: Hemisphere Publishing Corp.
- Horowitz, M., Wilner, N., & Alvarez, W. (1979). Impact of event scale: A measure of subjective stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 41*, 209–218.
- Humphreys, J., Lee, K., Neyhlan, T., & Marmar, C. (2001). Psychological and physical distress of sheltered women who have experienced partner abuse. *Health Care for Women International, 22*, 401–414.
- Joseph, S. (2000). Psychometric evaluation of Horowitz's impact of event scale: A review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 13*, 101–113.
- Kemp, A. Q., Rawlings, E. I., & Green, B. L. (1991). Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in women who have experienced partner abuse: A shelter sample. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 4*, 137–148.
- Levinson, D. (1989). *Family violence in cross-cultural perspective*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Marsella, A. J., Friedman, M. J., Gerrity, E. T., & Scurfield, R. M. (1996). *Ethnocultural aspects of posttraumatic stress disorder: Issues, research, and clinical applications*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Marshall, L. L. (1992). Development of the severity of violence against women scales. *Journal of Family Violence, 7*, 103–121.
- McFarlane, J., Willson, P., Malecha, A., & Lemmey, D. (2000). Intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 15*, 158–169.
- Neal, L. A., Busuttill, W., Rollins, J., Herepath, R., Strike, P., & Turnbull, G. (1994). Convergent validity of measures of posttraumatic stress disorder in a mixed military and civilian population. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 7*, 447–455.
- Norris, F. H., & Kaniasty, K. (1994). Psychological distress following criminal victimization in the general population: Cross-sectional, longitudinal, and prospective analyses. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 62*, 111–123.
- O'Neill, M. L., Feeny, N. C., Watlington, C., Alvarez, J. A., Zoellner, L. A., Zager, R., & Foa, E. B. (unpublished manuscript). The impact of emotional and physical abuse on the psychological adjustment of female victims of partner violence.
- Peltzer, K. (1998). Ethnocultural construction of posttraumatic stress symptoms in African contexts. *Journal of Psychology in Africa, 1*, 17–30.
- Sack, W. H., Seeley, J. R., & Clarke, G. N. (1997). Does PTSD transcend cultural barriers? A study from the Kmer Adolescent refugee project. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 36*, 49–54.
- Stein, M. B., & Kennedy, C. (2001). Major depressive and posttraumatic stress disorder co-morbidity in female victims of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 66*, 133–138.
- Summerfield, D. (2004). The medicalization of human suffering. In G. M. Rosen (Ed.), *Posttraumatic stress disorder: Issues and controversies* (pp. 233–245). Chichester, England: Wiley.
- Sundin, E. C., & Horowitz, M. J. (2002). Impact of Event Scale: Psychometric properties. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 180*, 205–209.
- Vogel, L. C. M., & Marshall, L. L. (2001). PTSD symptoms and partner abuse: Low income women at risk. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 14*, 569–584.