

Psychology of Abusive Human Behavior

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the psychology of abusive human behavior with special attention to gaslighting, defamation of character, mockery, bullying, and mobbing, based on the so-far published scientific literature, and my own experience and observations. Abusive human behavior can have various forms, but the motivation is almost always the same: power and control over the victim. Psychological abuse, especially if longer lasting, can cause serious psychological and even physical damage to the victim. Society should be more aware of the detrimental effects of abusive human behavior in its variety of forms and be ready to offer adequate medical, psychological and legal help for the victim.

Keywords

Gaslighting, Slander, Mockery, Bullying, Mobbing

1. Introduction

Abusive human behavior can have various forms. The most common motivation for abusive behavior is power and control over the victim. Abusers are possessive, although they usually deny their actions of blaming and controlling the victim, and on the other hand, are insecure and suffer from untreated mental health problems, including depression and suicidal ideation [1]. The most common abusive tactics are humiliation, negation, destructive criticism, mockery, controlling, shaming, accusing, blaming, denial, emotional neglect, and isolation [2]. Sheikh A. M. found in a study that psychological abuse (relative risk [RR] = 1.66, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.45 - 1.89) and substance abuse distress in childhood (RR = 1.38, 95% CI: 1.18 - 1.62) were associated with an increased risk of dissatisfaction with friendships in adulthood. Dissatisfaction with friendships in adulthood was associated with an increased risk of incident psychiatric problems (IPPs) in adulthood (RR = 1.71, 95% CI: 1.33 - 2.20). Dissatisfaction with

friendships in adulthood mediated 9.31% (95% CI: 4.25 - 14.57) of the association between psychological abuse in childhood and IPPs in adulthood, and 9.17% (95% CI: 4.35 - 16.33) of the association between substance abuse distress in childhood and IPPs in adulthood [3].

Emotional trauma may induce a cascade of neurobiological events that have long-lasting consequences even altered gene expression. Early abuse and neglect can deregulate the child's developing neurobiological system by reducing its resistance to stressful events, leading to later problems of emotional regulation. Children who have been subjected to physical or emotional abuse tend to pay more attention to signs that contain anger and are hypersensitive to threats. Unfavorable early social experiences, such as emotional abuse or institutionalization can affect the structure and function of the prefrontal cortex. Exposure to repeated emotional stressors, even in the absence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnoses, has been shown to produce increased synapse formation and dendritic growth in the basolateral amygdala, dendritic retraction in the hippocampus, and anxiety-like behavior against specific triggers, such as the phobia of open spaces. During the narration of an emotionally traumatic event, there is an activation of the limbic system, the right amygdala, the orbitofrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate gyrus. There is also an activation of the anterior insula, which records the physical impact of negative emotions, and the anterior and medial temporal cortex, which are involved in negative emotions. Neuroimaging studies in PTSD patients have found hypoactivity in the frontal lobe, anterior cingulate, and thalamic areas, indicating the effects of PTSD on executive function, attention and cognitive, memorial, and affective and somatosensory integration. One of the most replicated findings in studies involving PTSD patients is the decreased activation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Studies have also found a negative correlation between the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and amygdala activation. Neuroimaging studies of successful eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) treatment have consistently shown that patients exhibited increased frontal lobe activation [4].

2. Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation that seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or members of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception and sanity. Using persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, it attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's belief [5] [6]. Sociopaths and narcissists use gaslighting tactics. Sociopaths consistently transgress social mores, break laws and exploit others, but are typically also convincing liars, sometimes charming ones, who consistently deny wrongdoing. Thus, some who have been victimized by sociopaths may doubt their own perception [7]. The abuser wants full control of the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the victim. The abuser discreetly emotionally abuses the victim in hostile, abusive or coercive ways [8]. Signs of gaslighting are

withholding information from the victim, countering information to fit the abuser's perspective, discounting information, verbal abuse (usually in the form of offensive jokes), blocking and diverting the victim's attention from outside sources, trivializing the victim's worth and undermining victim by gradually weakening them and their thought process [9]. The three most common methods of gaslighting are hiding, changing, and control. The abuser wants to hide things and information from the victim, change something about the victim so that the victim molds into the abuser's fantasy, and fully control the victim [10].

Gaslighting can occur in private relationships, in school as a form of bullying, on the work as a form of mobbing, or can be institutional and systematic.

Gaslighting in the workplace can occur when individuals perform actions that cause colleagues to question themselves and their actions in a way that is detrimental to their careers [11]. The victim may be deliberately excluded, made the subject of gossip, or persistently discredited or questioned in an attempt to destroy the victim's confidence. The perpetrator may reroute conversations to perceived faults or wrongs [12]. Gaslighting can be committed by any colleague and can be especially detrimental when the perpetrator is someone in a position of power [13].

Systematic and institutional gaslighting occurs in totalitarian and corrupted regimes (communism, Nazism, fascism, organized crime, soft and inverted totalitarianism) when the group of abusers that serve the totalitarian regime and organized crime abuse a targeted group of honest individuals that oppose to totalitarianism and crime.

Gaslighting, especially when it is long lasting, can cause anxiety, depression, and even psychosis. Psychological abuse causes the formation of mind knots with cognitive and emotional damage. This type of abuser (the gaslighter) likes to break the victim's introspective mirror so that the victim starts to doubt in oneself. A very powerful weapon of the gaslighters is gossip. Abusers often slander their victims and are often very persistent in lying. Gaslighters like to question the victim's sanity so that the victim loses credibility. Gaslighters often have double standards so that the targeted individual feels isolated and marginalized. A very popular tactic is the warm-cold behavior. The perpetrator is sometimes throwing the victim in the positive reinforcement to confuse the victim [14] and the rest of the time is being very abusive and cold. Gaslighters also like to project their flaws on the victim and steal creative ideas and merits from the victim. For example, an incompetent abusive boss will try to present the victim as incompetent and steal the victim's merits.

Gaslighters use toxic emotions (pathological negative emotions) such as hatred and envy to damage the victim's emotional and cognitive health. The victim should never internalize the abuser's negative emotions and thoughts about oneself. It is very important to use only healthy negative emotions (for example, healthy anger) when defending the abuser, and to avoid developing pathological negative emotions (hatred, rage, depression, pathological shame, pathological

anxiety). It is very important not to feel hatred towards the abuser because hatred is always toxic for emotional health. The victim should always look for positive stimuli so that the balance between positive and negative emotions and thoughts is maintained. After the conflict with the abuser is finished, it is very important to restore the homeostasis of the mind and feel positive emotions (love, joy, gratitude), and think positive about oneself.

3. Defamation of Character

Defamation of character is a false statement someone makes about a person, which is published as a statement of fact, and which harms personal and/or professional reputation or causes other damages, including financial loss and emotional distress. Libel is written defamation, and slander is spoken defamation [15]. Slander can be defined as the oral communication of false statements that are harmful to a person's reputation. Slander is an act of communication that causes someone to be shamed, ridiculed, held in contempt, lowered in the estimation of the community, lose employment status or earnings, or otherwise suffer a damaged reputation [16].

It is said that defamation killed more people than the sword. Defamation of character is a powerful weapon against a person, especially if the slanderer is a skilled manipulator. Slanderer creates a false image of the victim in society and creates a hostile environment. Defamation is especially dangerous if the slanderer is envious of the victim. People who listen or read lies about the victim develop an illusory perception, mental constructions about the victim. Slanderer creates a bias in society so that the victim is always perceived as negative regardless of the true facts. The goal of slander (and libel) is to disable the victim in private and professional life. Defamation of character can cause severe psychological damage. The consequences might be depression, anxiety, self-destruction, the broken mirror syndrome (deformed picture about oneself, internalization of abuser's negative emotions and thoughts, mind knots, destructive self-criticism, low self-esteem, strong inferiority complex, strong somatization of emotional pain, increased suggestibility), suicidal ideation and suicide.

4. Mockery

Mockery (derision) and insults are powerful weapons in bullying and mobbing. Derision is used to destabilize and humiliate the victim and it can have detrimental effects on the victim's mental health. Mockery is often associated with envy and a lack of constructive self-criticism. It is especially dangerous when there is a group of peers, colleagues, or other people, that mock and humiliate together. An insulted individual might lose self-confidence and status in a certain social environment. Mockery can also be used as a method of manipulation with a goal to discredit a rival. Sometimes mockery can be very discrete, for example, a discrete sneer combined with assertive behavior and passive aggression, can cause subconscious knots of negative feelings in the victim's mind. These

subconscious knots are very difficult to disentangle and can destroy the victim's self-esteem. Healthy humor is the opposite of mockery. If we consider mockery as hostile behavior, healthy humor can be considered as a friendly behavior. A good sense of humor is always desirable, in relationships, at work, everywhere. It is very important to distinguish individuals with a good sense of humor from those who mock and humiliate. Sometimes those who mock will try to misinterpret their mockery as humor. Healthy humor never humiliates. It is also very important to distinguish self-mockery from self-referential humor. Self-mockery is toxic for the individual that makes fun of oneself. Self-mockery is characteristic for individuals with low self-esteem and inferiority complex. On the other hand, self-referential humor is associated with constructive self-criticism and humility. Individuals with a good sense of self-referential humor never lose their dignity.

5. Bullying

Bullying is the systematic abuse of power and is defined as aggressive behavior or intentional harm-doing by peers that is carried out repeatedly and involve an imbalance of power. Bullying is a major risk factor for poor physical and mental health and reduced adaptation to adult roles including forming lasting relationships, integrating into work and being economically independent [17].

Cyberbullying or cyber-harassment is a form of bullying or harassment using electronic means. Cyberbullying is also known as online bullying. It has become increasingly common, especially among teenagers [18]. Victims of cyberbullying may have lower self-esteem, increased suicidal ideation, and a variety of emotional responses, including being scared, frustrated, angry, and depressed [19]. Internet trolling is a common form of cyberbullying in order to elicit a reaction, disruption, or for someone's own personal amusement [20]. Cyberstalking is another form of bullying or harassment that uses electronic communications to stalk a victim, which may pose a credible threat to the victim [21].

The Internet can be very useful for education, briefing, leisure activities and communication with peers, colleagues, friends and family. Working and socializing on the Internet is associated with emotional and intellectual engagement. Being offended and harassed on the Internet can cause emotional pain and psychological damage. Victims of cyberbullying might experience the formation of knots of negative emotions and thoughts leading to anxiety and depression. These viral mind knots caused by cyber-harassment are real as well as emotional pain.

Beauty bullying is a type of bullying that is based on beauty stereotypes and beauty ideals for both women and men, but it is more common in women. Those who do not fit in the beauty stereotypes and do not want to follow beauty trends are insulted or mocked by those who promote such trends. Because of beauty bullying, many women feel like they are obliged to use make-up, wear expensive designer clothes, to be thin, and to have a perfect haircut. Men are also

under the pressure to have a perfect muscular body, wear expensive clothes and accessories. Both men and women feel they are obliged to undergo unnecessary cosmetic surgery. Beauty bullying can cause a lot of emotional suffering and a myriad of psychological problems, such as low self-esteem, inferiority complex, ugliness complex, social anxiety, depression, anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Melvin G. Kettner [22] described the ugly duckling complex, which is a type of inferiority complex, as follows: *No one loves me. Therefore, I am ugly. Therefore, no one loves me.* My advice for protecting oneself from beauty bullying and ugly duckling complex is:

- 1) Accept your natural physical appearance.
- 2) Stand every day in front of the mirror without make-up, wear clothes you like to wear and can afford, and say: *I accept myself. I accept my natural physical appearance. I love myself. I am beautiful.*
- 3) Natural gemstones are more beautiful than laboratory-made gems because natural gems have little impurities which make every natural gemstone unique. ***Your natural beauty is unique.***
- 4) Know that the beauty ideal in the mass media is manipulated by technology and that ***photoshopped beauty*** does not exist.
- 5) Eat a healthy balanced diet and be physically active, instead of being anorexic or bulimic.
- 6) Personality is more important than physical appearance.
- 7) Introspect yourself every day and think about yourself holistically, not just as a biophysical being, but also as an intellectual, emotional and spiritual one.

6. Mobbing

Mobbing (bullying at work) refers to a form of psychological harassment that occurs in the workplace, in which the victim must be systematically and continuously persecuted for a long period of time. Findings of a study, in which a total of 35 court sentences were analyzed, showed that the duration of the mobbing campaign was on average 1.5 years and that the frequency of harassment was every day in most cases. In the majority of cases (17, 48.6%) the mobbing occurred in a private company. The gender of the victims who reported the mobbing experience was predominantly female (19, 54.3%), and on average, the victims were 44.54 years of age. The victims were classified as captives (12, 34.3%), scapegoats (8, 22.9%), ambitious (8, 22.9%), passives (5, 14.3%) and hypochondriacs (2, 5.7%). The mobbers were predominantly men (25, 71.4%) and on average 53.20 years of age. They were classified as casual (12, 34.3%), sadists (11, 31.4%), instigators (8, 22.9%) and choleric (4, 11.4%). The witnesses were described in the majority of cases as active, while the asymmetry of power was vertical. On average, the victims suffered 4.9 types of harassment, and the most cited consequences were anxiety disorder and physical symptoms. The motives for beginning the mobbing campaign were principally related to difficulties in relationships [23].

Mobbing can be vertical (the mobber is in the position of power), horizontal (mobber is in the same position of power as the victim) or combined (the victim is experiencing mobbing from both directions). The most common techniques of mobbing are too much work (burnout syndrome), no work at all (empty desk mobbing), wrong assignments (the victim is assigned the tasks that are not in the job description), slander, verbal assault, sexual harassment, physical assault, social isolation, violation of basic human and worker's rights, mockery and gaslighting.

The cyclist syndrome is a pattern of behavior when the subject ("the cyclist") is being abused by the superior subject and is abusing the subordinate subject. This pathological pattern of behavior is usually seen in unhealthy professional environments. In corrupted and totalitarian systems, there is a chain of cyclists from the top leader (the boss) to the weakest link. Only the top leader and the weakest link are not the cyclists. The top leader is an absolute abuser and the weakest link is the absolute victim. All others between the top leader and the weakest link are cyclists, which means that they are all being abused by their superiors and are abusing the subordinate subjects. Every cyclist in this chain of abuse has at least one abuser and at least one victim. In the chain of cyclists, everyone, except for the top leader, has many mind knots caused by systematic abuse, especially the weakest link. As the weakest link is never in the position of power, he or she suffers the most. The top leader is usually a sociopath or psychopath that enjoys in other people's suffering. To prevent the cyclist syndrome, it is very important that equally the employers and employees, superiors and subordinates, leaders and followers have the balance between their rights and obligations. In undemocratic and unjust systems employers (bosses, leaders) have greater rights than obligations. At the same time employees (subordinate subjects, followers) have greater obligations than rights, and often do not have rights at all, only obligations.

Social Puppeteering is a psychologically damaging form of mental harassment in which a victim's perception of reality is deliberately distorted by a puppeteer. Social puppeteer creates a situation that is deliberately vague and then allows the Puppet to fill in the blanks, but the framework is always strictly set by the puppeteer. Therefore, the puppet is unconsciously fulfilling the goals of a puppeteer [24] [25]. Social puppeteering at work is a type of mobbing, in which the victim is unconsciously fulfilling the goals of a mobber, and this is to his/her own detriment.

7. Discussion

Gaslighting is a very dangerous form of psychological manipulation and abuse that can occur in private relationships, in school (bullying), at the workplace (mobbing) and systematically (totalitarianism). The consequences of gaslighting can be devastating. It is very important to raise awareness in society about gaslighting and to provide high quality legislative measures that will protect the vic-

tims from psychological abuse. Knot psychotherapy, which is based on the disentanglement of the mind knots, might be helpful for the victims of gaslighting. It is very important to use only healthy negative emotions (for example, healthy anger) when defending the abuser, and to avoid developing pathological negative emotions (hatred, rage, depression, pathological shame, pathological anxiety). It is very important not to feel hatred towards the abuser because hatred is always toxic for emotional health. The victim should always look for positive stimuli so that the balance between positive and negative emotions and thoughts is maintained. After the conflict with the abuser is finished, it is very important to restore the homeostasis of the mind and to feel positive emotions (love, joy, gratitude) and think positive about oneself. Defamation of character is very dangerous because it can cause severe psychological damage to the victim. It is very important for the victim to detect a source of lies about oneself, and to legally protect oneself if possible. It is very important to preserve the realistic picture about oneself with constructive self-criticism (healthy introspective mirror). The best antidotes for toxic lies against oneself are positive thoughts and emotions about oneself. It is very important for the victim to surround oneself with people who think positive and realistic, who do not listen and believe in lies, who are just and honest. It is also very important to be self-confident and to preserve self-respect.

Mockery (derision) and insults are powerful weapons in bullying and mobbing. Victims of derision might lose their self-confidence and self-respect. It is very important to stop every communication with those who mock and humiliate. Healthy humor is the opposite from mockery, and it represents a type of friendly and desirable behavior. Individuals with healthy humor never humiliate anybody.

Bullying, defined as the systematic abuse of power manifested as aggressive behavior or intentional harm-doing by peers that is carried out repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power, represents a major risk factor for poor physical and mental health and reduced adaptation to adult roles. Cyberbullying or cyber-harassment, defined as a form of bullying or harassment using electronic means, may cause low self-esteem, increased suicidal ideation, anxiety and depression. In the prevention of cyberbullying and the treatment of its consequences legal measures and education are very important. When it comes to children and young adolescents, good communication with parents is crucial. It is very important that parents discuss with their children about Internet and social media. Education about safe use of the Internet and social media should be provided in schools, universities and even work places, because adults can be victims of cyber-harassment as well.

Beauty bullying is a type of bullying that is based on beauty stereotypes and beauty ideals for both women and men, but it is more common in women. Those who do not fit in the beauty stereotypes and do not want to follow beauty trends are insulted or mocked by those who promote such trends. Beauty bullying can cause a lot of emotional suffer and a myriad of psychological problems,

such as low self-esteem, inferiority complex, the ugliness complex, social anxiety, depression, anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Mobbing (bullying at work) refers to a form of psychological harassment that occurs in the workplace, in which the victim must be systematically and continuously persecuted for a long period of time that eventually causes severe psychological and physical damage. Mobbing can be vertical, horizontal or combined. The balance between rights and obligations on every level of power from the top leader to the lowest level in the command chain is mandatory for the prevention of mobbing and the cyclist syndrome, which can be defined as a pattern of behavior when the subject (“the cyclist”) is being abused by the superior subject and is abusing the subordinate subject, and for the development of healthy and democratic professional environment.

In summary, various forms of abusive human behavior remain a challenge in modern society. Psychological abuse sometimes goes unnoticed both by the victim, who might suppress the consequences of the abuse deep into the subconsciousness (subconscious mind knots), and the surrounding society. Recognizing and stopping the psychological abuse in its early phase, before severe or even permanent psychological and physical damage to the victim is done, is crucial. Society should work on the means to prevent and stop abusive behavior, and these could include education (from the early childhood throughout the life) about good manners, friendly behavior, human rights, as well as the ways of recognizing and defending the abuser; high quality legislative measures in order to protect the victim; providing medical and psychological support to the victim.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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