Predicting psychological abuse in intimate relationships: Insights from perceptions, victimisation, and perpetration histories in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the factors contributing to the likelihood of psychological abuse in intimate relationships in South Africa. Using data from 454 adults aged 20–51, the study explores how perceptions, past victimisation and previous perpetration shape the propensity to engage in psychological abuse: verbal aggression, isolation/control, neglect/ignoring, and economic/financial abuse. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, and data collection utilised a validated scale developed for the South African context. The findings identified isolating, controlling, ignoring and neglecting behaviours as the most common forms of psychological abuse. Past victimisation and perpetration of psychological abuse strongly predict future abuse, with past abusive behaviours significantly influencing the likelihood of future tendencies. Younger participants were more likely to engage in economic abuse, highlighting an age-related pattern. Additionally, while perceptions of abuse influenced behaviours differently across relationship statuses, the link between past experiences and future abuse remained consistent. These results emphasise the need for social workers to focus on preventing abuse, implementing trauma-informed interventions to support victims and rehabilitate perpetrators, enhancing recovery efforts, and developing educational programmes and policy interventions to

break the cycle of violence. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to better understand the dynamics of abuse over time in South Africa.

Keywords: intimate relationships; intimate partner violence; perception; perpetration; psychological abuse; victimisation

INTRODUCTION

Research on intimate partner violence (IPV) – which includes physical, sexual and psychological abuse – is essential for tackling major public health challenges. IPV can lead to serious health and mental health problems for children, families and intimate partners (Al-Modallal et al., 2023; Fapohunda et al., 2021; Gass et al., 2011; Jewkes et al., 2002; Lawrence et al., 2023). Most research focuses on physical and sexual violence, examining how common it is, what causes it, and its effects on victims and perpetrators (Al-Modallal et al., 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; Gilbert et al., 2022; Jewkes et al., 2002). However, there is much less research specifically on psychological violence, especially on what makes someone likely to commit or experience this type of abuse in the future. Importantly, the experiences, motivations, and consequences for perpetrators and victims of psychological abuse are fundamentally different. The factors that cause perpetrators to commit psychological abuse may differ from those that predispose victims to experience it. Victims encounter unique trauma, safety issues, and requirements for assistance, whereas perpetrators necessitate distinct intervention methods aimed at promoting behavioural change and accountability. Recognising these distinctions is critical for developing targeted prevention strategies that address the unique risk factors, needs, and intervention approaches for each group.

This study looks at the likelihood of psychological abuse in South Africa, exploring how a person's experiences, behaviours and perceptions might influence their future actions. While many studies have focused on the mental health and substance use impacts of violence (Dokkedahl et al., 2022; Herbert et al., 2023; Okafor et al., 2021), fewer have examined the behaviour patterns behind psychological abuse (Chatterji & Heise, 2021; Herbert et al., 2022; White et al., 2024). By studying these patterns, particularly through cross-sectional research, we can better understand the causes and effects of psychological abuse. This knowledge is key to creating programmes and strategies to stop psychological abuse before it starts.

Why we need to study partner psychological abuse and its relevance to social work education and practice in South Africa

Psychological abuse in intimate relationships is a significant issue in South Africa, yet it is underemphasised. Unlike physical or sexual abuse, psychological abuse is harder to detect and is often overshadowed by more visible violence. This lack of attention hinders understanding of its prevalence, how it occurs and its impact on families and communities. Factors such as inequality,

cultural norms and weak law enforcement contribute to the persistence of this abuse, highlighting the need for solutions tailored to South Africa's unique context (Silbert & Mzozoyana, 2024). The Domestic Violence Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998) aims to protect victims, but its enforcement remains inconsistent, especially in rural areas. Additionally, traditional gender roles can sometimes normalise controlling behaviours, which is a key feature of psychological abuse , highlighting the need for interventions addressing legal shortcomings and cultural attitudes (Rasool, 2012, 2013). By understanding South Africa's socio-economic realities, social workers can develop effective, trauma-informed interventions aligned with their mission to promote fairness and equality.

Psychological abuse harms individuals during the relationship and causes lasting mental and physical health problems. Understanding its dynamics is critical for creating better support systems for victim and preventing the perpetration of other types and ongoing abuse. While progress has been made in addressing physical and sexual violence, research on psychological abuse remains limited. A lack of locally-designed tools to measure psychological abuse has led to a reliance on qualitative methods with little attention to empirical data-driven approaches. Improving education and support programmes requires further research into psychological abuse in South Africa, as Western models often fail to align with local realities.

This study uses a South African-developed tool to investigate how past experiences, behaviours and perceptions influence the likelihood of committing psychological abuse in relationships. This study is critical to bridging the gap between what is currently known from predominantly Western research and what needs to be understood about psychological abuse within the South African context. Findings will enhance social work education and training, ensuring cases of psychological abuse are not mistaken for simple arguments or conflicts, which often worsens situations (Kim & Motsei, 2002). Currently, South African social work education often overlooks the socio-cultural and economic factors shaping abuse (Jacobs & Jewkes, 2002), leaving social workers underprepared to address its complexities.

Understanding partner psychological abuse

Psychological abuse in relationships involves behaviours that control, humiliate or dominate a partner. These behaviours can include verbal aggression, neglect, isolation, control, economic or financial abuse, as well as ridicule, criticism, ignoring, jealousy, or other actions that make someone feel unsafe or fearful (Anitha, 2019; Cordova et al., 2005; Fakunmoju & Bammeke, 2024; Johnson, 2020; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Winstok & Smadar-Dror, 2021). Unlike physical violence, psychological abuse is less visible, making it harder to recognise and report, as it is often characterised as 'normal' conflict. Perception, victimisation and perpetration play critical roles in a person's propensity to perpetrate psychological abuse in intimate relationships. Perception refers to how people recognise and understand psychological abuse based on their beliefs and cultural values (Flood & Pease, 2009). Victimisation involves the psychological abuse someone has experienced in their relationship (Cinquegrana et al., 2023; Johnson, 2008; Tjaden & Thoennes,

2000). Perpetration relates to the psychological abuse someone has committed against their partner (Johnson, 2008; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Propensity to perpetrate describes a person's likelihood of engaging in psychological abuse, shaped by their attitudes, past experiences and environment (Capaldi et al., 2012).

Psychological abuse is often linked to other forms of violence, such as physical aggression, and has far-reaching effects on victims (Henning & Klesges, 2003). Understanding what makes someone likely to commit psychological abuse is key to preventing it and supporting victims. Nevertheless, research shows that IPV – including physical, sexual and psychological abuse – is common in many relationships. A recent Human Sciences Research Council (2022) study in South Africa indicates that approximately 25.1% of women who had ever been in a relationship reported experiencing at least one instance of emotional abuse during their lifetime, while over half (57.6%) indicated that their partners exhibited controlling behaviours. Another study indicates that 13.1% of young women reported experiencing IPV in 2017 (Mthembu et al., 2021). Several factors contribute to IPV, including gender norms (Cohen et al., 2022; Makangaa et al., 2015; Mshweshwe, 2020; Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024), lower levels of education (Álvarez et al., 2015), socioeconomic status (Fakunmoju & Rasool, 2018; Johnson et al., 2023), and past experiences, such as childhood abuse or witnessing domestic violence (Rasool, 2022; Russo & Borelli, 2023; Stith et al., 2000).

How people perceive abuse plays a big role in its occurrence; hence, it is important to consider the perspectives of the victim, perpetrator, and observer (Follingstad, 2007). For example, if someone sees their partner's abusive behaviour as normal or justified, they may be more likely to utilise the same strategies in their relationships (Bélanger et al., 2013). Follingstad and Edmundson (2010) suggest that psychological abuse often happens in both directions, where both partners are abusive toward each other., psychological violence is sometimes considered less severe than physical violence, but is often more common, and more difficult to overcome. Studies have found that psychological abuse occurs more frequently than physical or sexual abuse in some relationships, showing the need for more attention to this issue (Human Sciences Research Council, 2024; Musizvingoza et al., 2022; Wali et al., 2020).

WHY FURTHER RESEARCH IS NEEDED

Despite its severe impact, intimate partner psychological abuse is less studied than physical or sexual violence. Many people fail to recognise it as abuse, because it doesn't leave visible scars, making it harder to identify, measure and report (Dardis et al., 2017, Rasool, 2013). This lack of awareness leads to underreporting, perpetuating the misconception that psychological abuse is less common or less harmful. Social workers need to be equipped to detect and intervene in cases of psychological abuse in order to prevent it and to support those affected.

Locally conducted research is crucial to uncover how South African cultural beliefs, traditions and social norms shape perceptions and experiences of psychological abuse. It can guide culturally appropriate interventions (Musizvingoza et al., 2022; Wali et al., 2020).

Further research is needed to explore factors influencing the likelihood of perpetration, including the roles of perception, victimisation and past abuse. Understanding these dynamics can help break the cycle of abuse in intimate relationships (Dardis et al., 2017; Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010). Moreover, research on the scale and impact of psychological abuse provides evidence for advocacy, policymaking, funding for support services, and professional training for social workers and interventions by social work organisations.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY AND PARTNER PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Bandura's social learning theory (1977) provides a valuable framework for examining how individual perceptions and prior experiences shape the propensity to engage in psychologically abusive behaviour. The theory also explains how abusive behaviours can be passed down through generations. Over time, these behaviours may start to feel normal or even justified (Bandura & National Institute of Mental Health, 1986; Ehrensaft et al., 2003; McLeod, 2023). For example, someone who grows up witnessing abuse may see it as an acceptable way to handle conflict. Victims of abuse may unconsciously replicate these behaviours in future relationships, thinking they are normal parts of intimacy (Stith et al., 2000; Widom & Wilson, 2015). People may also continue abusive behaviour because they believe it helps them achieve goals such as maintaining power or control in a relationship (Bandura, 1977). Their self-perception and cognitive processes, such as justifying abusive acts, reinforce these patterns (Bandura, 1973; Eckhardt & Crane, 2014).

This theory is especially important in South Africa, where violence is often part of people's everyday experiences, making psychological abuse seem normal in some communities (Fagbadebo et al., 2024). This theory helps explain why some individuals who have experienced or witnessed abuse in the past are more likely to become perpetrators themselves, highlighting the need for interventions that disrupt this cycle.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study focuses on understanding the link between experiencing and committing psychological abuse in relationships. It looks at how people's perceptions of abuse, their past experiences as victims, and their history of abusive behaviours influence the likelihood of their engaging in different forms of psychological abuse. These include:

Verbal aggression/abuse (such as insults or threats);

Isolation/control (like limiting a partner's social interactions or activities);

Ignoring/neglect (failing to acknowledge or care for a partner's needs);

Economic/financial abuse (controlling or restricting a partner's access to money).

The study includes participants who are currently in relationships as well as those who are not, but have had past relationship experiences. By exploring these patterns, the research aims to provide insights for social workers and other mental health professionals that can guide interventions,

shape policies and support advocacy efforts to prevent and address psychological abuse in intimate relationships.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Are there any relationships between perceptions, victimisation experiences, past perpetration, and propensity to perpetrate

    a: verbal aggression/abuse?

    b: isolation and control?

    c: ignoring/neglecting behaviours? and

    d: economic and financial abuse?

2. Which factor accounted for the highest variance in the propensity to perpetrate partner psychological abuse? That is, which predictor had the strongest unique influence in explaining differences in individuals' likelihood of engaging in psychological abuse, after controlling for the effects of the other variables in the model?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

In 2023, a comprehensive study was conducted with a total of 454 adult participants. The average age of the participants was 30.17 years (SD = 5.86, range 20-51). The study included slightly more female participants (233, 51.3%) than male participants (221, 48.7%). The majority (310, 68.3%) reported having a qualification lower than a bachelor's degree, while 27.3% (124) reported having a bachelor's degree, and 4.4% (20) reported having a degree higher than a Bachelor's. Most participants were single (346, 76.2%), while others (108, 23.8%) reported various marital statuses, including married, married but separated, living together in a committed relationship, divorced, separated or widowed.

Somewhat more than two-thirds (304, 67%) reported currently being in a relationship, while 33% (150) reported not being in one, but having been in a past relationship. Slightly over half (234, 51.5%) reported not living with a partner at the time of the study. The majority reported not working (187, 41.2%), while others indicated their occupational status as working with a private organisation (105, 23.1%), being students (62, 13.7%), working with the government (41, 9%), being self-employed (41, 9%), or both studying and working (16, 4%).

Procedures

The study was approved by the ethics boards of the University of Johannesburg (REC-02-365-2023), South Africa and Westfield State University (22/23-073), Massachusetts, USA. To collect data, the research team worked with four South African social media influencers, each with up to 450,000 followers, who shared the survey link on their X (formerly Twitter) accounts. The link

was also shared on other platforms, such as Facebook, and participants were encouraged to pass it on to their own networks. To thank participants, they were offered data or airtime reimbursement worth $1.62 (R30). The social media influencers were paid $16.21 (R300) each for helping to post the survey link on their X accounts. Before starting the survey, participants were required to read and agree to a consent form included in the online survey.

We chose to collect data through social media for several reasons. First, the study explores a sensitive topic and many individuals might be reluctant to share their experiences as victims or perpetrators of psychological abuse in person. Collecting data in person is also costly and time-consuming, which exceeded the resources available for this study. Using census data was not a feasible option, as it is primarily designed for in-person data collection. Similarly, focusing on a single location or city would not provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue across different areas and demographic groups in South Africa.

Although using a survey panel firm was considered, such firms often focus on consumer and marketing research, which may not align with the needs of this study or effectively reach a broader, untapped population. Other methods, such as using databases of individuals affiliated with organisations, tend to include older demographics, making it difficult to connect with the younger population identified through empirical research as vulnerable to abuse (Rasool, 1999).

Social media, on the other hand, allowed us to reach a broader audience, including individuals more likely to experience or perpetrate psychological abuse, such as young adults and those in higher households. This platform also facilitated access to respondents from diverse regions of South Africa, enabling a deeper understanding of relationship dynamics across the country. Ultimately, using social media provided a more efficient and inclusive way to explore the topic without the challenges associated with traditional data-collection methods, which usually only include individuals (e.g., those with low income) who report IPV (except in National Household Surveys).

Being an online survey, several steps were taken to ensure participation by those residing only in South Africa. First, we worked with four South African social media influencers to share the link to the survey on their platform. Second, we set up the survey on SurveyMonkey with rules to include only respondents residing in South Africa. If someone from another country tried to pretend to be residing in South Africa, the system would enable us to detect this. We also made sure that the survey could only be completed once from the same device to prevent duplicate responses. For participants who provided their phone numbers to receive data reimbursement, the numbers and country code provided matched the phone providers in South Africa. Moreover, the mode of data reimbursement is only possible for South African phone numbers. Lastly, the SurveyMonkey platform had tools that allowed us to verify the region where participants were located, ensuring they were residing in South Africa.

Why quantitative research?

We used a quantitative method, because it is effective for identifying patterns and relationships between factors such as victimisation, past abusive behaviours and perceptions of abuse. This approach helps us understand what drives abusive tendencies in relationships. Most studies on psychological abuse in intimate relationships have relied on qualitative methods, or are largely conceptual and theoretical papers, hence unable to identify trends and patterns. A challenge has been the lack of research scales capable of examining prevalence and associations in South Africa. Although interviews or personal stories provide deeper insights, we chose this method to gather broad, foundational data for future studies

Measurement

Participants answered questions designed to assess key aspects of the study: how they view psychological abuse in relationships, whether they have experienced or committed such abuse, and to ascertain their likelihood of engaging in these behaviours.

Perception of partner psychological abuse (PPPA): This tool, created specifically for the South African context based on existing qualitative studies, evaluates what participants consider to be psychologically abusive behaviours in intimate relationships. The scale includes four categories and 17 questions (Fakunmoju, 2025; Fakunmoju & Bammeke, 2024). The four factors include: verbal aggression/abuse, ignoring/neglect, isolation/control, and economic/financial abuse. Introductory questions focused on the extent the 17 behaviours may be perceived as psychologically abusive within intimate relationships: "In your opinion, to what degree can the following behaviours be classified as psychological or emotional abuse when a partner repeatedly engages in them?" The response options for these items were as follows: "1 = Definitely not psychological abuse, 2 = Most likely not psychological abuse, 3 = Not sure if it's psychological abuse or not, 4 = Most likely psychological abuse, and 5 = Definitely psychological abuse". Examples of items included: "insulting a partner and using hurtful words; gaining access to a partner's phone, email, or social media accounts without permission; excluding a partner from important events, occasions, or activities; refusing to contribute financially to household expenses or refusing to earn an income." Every respondent completed these questions. The overall Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was $\alpha = 0.887$.

In addition to completing the 17 questions on their views about psychological abuse, participants also answered adjusted versions of these questions (e.g. by replacing "a partner" with "you") to explore their experiences of being a victim of psychological abuse, committing psychological abuse, and their likelihood of engaging in such behaviours.

Victimisation of partner psychological abuse: The 17 questions to determine whether participants had been victims of psychological abuse were intended only for those in a relationship at the time of the survey (option 1 below). To identify eligible participants, they were first asked, *"Which of the following applies to you?"* and given several response options:

1. **I am currently in a relationship:** People who chose this option answered questions about experiencing psychological abuse in their current relationship;
2. **I am not in a relationship now, but I have been in the past:** People who selected this option answered questions about abusive behaviours they may have used in past relationships;
3. **I have never been in a relationship:** People who picked this option answered questions about the likelihood of them using abusive behaviours in future relationships.

The 17 questions were introduced with a main question: "If you reflect on your current relationship, how frequently does your partner engage in the following behaviours with you?" Examples of items included: "insulting you and using hurtful words; gaining access to your phone, email, or social media accounts without permission; excluding you from important events, occasions, or activities; and refusing to contribute financially to household expenses or refusing to earn an income." The response options for these items were as follows: "1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Most of the time, and 5 = Always." Only those who selected option 1 above completed the questions. The overall Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was α = .92.

Perpetration of partner psychological abuse: The 17 questions to determine if respondents had ever engaged in psychologically abusive behaviours were preceded by a main question, which was: "If you reflect on your past relationship, how frequently did you engage in the following behaviours with your partner?" Examples of items included: "insulting your partner and using hurtful words; gaining access to your partner's phone, email, or social media accounts without permission; excluding your partner from important events, occasions, or activities; and refusing to contribute financially to household expenses or refusing to earn an income." The response options for these items were as follows: "1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Most of the time, and 5 = Always." These questions were completed by only those who selected option 2 above. The overall Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was α = .804.

Propensity to perpetrate partner psychological abuse: The 17 questions that assess the likelihood of engaging in psychologically abusive behaviours in a relationship were preceded by the question, "How likely are you to engage in the following behaviours in a relationship?" Examples of items included: "insulting your partner and using hurtful words; dictating whom your partner can or cannot be friends with; excluding your partner from important events, occasions, or activities; spending money on unnecessary things for self or the household." The response options for these items were as follows: "1 = Never likely, 2 = Rarely likely, 3 = It depends on the situation, 4 = Most likely, and 5 = Definitely likely." Every respondent completed these questions. The overall Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was α = .893.

Demographics: Respondents also provided their demographic information, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational and occupational backgrounds, relationship status and cohabitation status.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to ascertain the background information of the respondents, such as their age, gender and relationship status, as well as how often they experienced or caused psychological abuse. To calculate how common partner psychological abuse is, the responses were divided into two groups: those who answered "never" to experiencing psychological abuse and those who chose any other response. To understand the relationship between these factors and the likelihood of someone engaging in abusive behaviours (research question 1-2), we used multiple regression analysis, utilising hierarchical entry, which is a way to explore how different factors may influence or contribute incrementally to the outcome (Stevens, 2009). With the rule of 10/15 respondents per variable, the 454 sample size meets and exceeds the sample size requirements for multiple regression analysis (Stevens, 2009). In this analysis, we first included demographic information (such as age, gender, etc.), then added the respondents' perceptions of abuse, and finally looked at their past experiences of being victims or perpetrators of abuse. Separate analyses were done for two groups: one group consisted of participants who are currently in a relationship and answered questions about their perceptions and experiences of abuse, while the other group consisted of people who are not in a relationship but have had one in the past. For example, Table 2 shows two separate analyses that look at the factors influencing verbal aggression or abuse in both groups, while Tables 3, 4, and 5 examine similar patterns for ignoring/neglect, isolation/control, and economic/financial control, respectively.

The analysis looked at the extent to which perception, past victimisation and past abusive behaviour influenced the likelihood of someone engaging in psychological abuse in a relationship. A total of 571 respondents completed the survey up to the questions on the propensity to perpetrate partner psychological abuse. After cleaning the data, respondents who had never been in a committed relationship (14), those with missing demographics (20), and those who did not pass the survey engagement and fidelity tests (83) were excluded, leaving 454 cases for analysis. These cases included individuals currently in committed relationships and those previously in committed relationships. Missing responses (fewer than 20 cases with no more than one missing response per item) were examined and addressed using ipsative mean imputation (Schafer & Graham, 2002), which was applied to cases or variables with less than 25% missing data. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 28™ (IBM Corporation, 2021).

RESULTS

Prevalence of partner psychological abuse

The findings showed that two types of partner psychological abuse – ignoring/neglect and isolation/control – were the most common. For ignoring and neglecting behaviours, many respondents reported experiencing repeated incidents, such as:

1. Not being appreciated or acknowledged for their positive actions (n = 234, 77%);
2. Having their valid advice ignored (n = 191, 62.8%);

3. Being deprived of quality time or necessary attention from their partner (n = 170, 56.3%).

For isolation and controlling behaviours, common experiences included:

1. Being closely monitored or having every action tracked (n = 147, 48.4%);
2. Having their actions and movements controlled (n = 146, 48.2%).

Similarly, respondents admitted to repeatedly perpetrating ignoring and neglecting behaviours, with the most frequent actions being:

1. Failing to appreciate or acknowledge their partner's positive actions (n = 99, 66%);
2. Excluding their partner from important events or activities (n = 61, 40.7%);
3. Depriving their partner of quality time or attention (n = 60, 40%).

Connection between perception, victimisation, perpetration and propensity for partner psychological abuse

The results show a moderate connection between experiencing abuse, committing abuse and the likelihood of engaging in psychological abuse in a relationship. Specifically, people who have experienced psychological abuse from a partner tend to have a moderate likelihood of showing abusive tendencies themselves, with correlations ranging from .222 to .518 (p < .001) (Table 1). Similarly, people who have previously committed psychological abuse in a relationship also show a moderate likelihood of continuing such behaviour, with correlations ranging from .172 to .630 (p < .05 to p < .001). On the other hand, the way that people perceive certain abusive behaviours does not seem strongly linked to their likelihood of engaging in abuse. The only exception is when it comes to control and isolation and economic/financial abuse – people who don't see these behaviours as abusive are somewhat more likely to engage in them (r = -.227, p < .001) and (r = -.104, p < .05), respectively.

Table 1: **Cronbach's alpha and correlations between the variables**

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Correlation Propensity to perpetrate partner psychological abuse			
		Verbal aggression/ abuse	Isolation/ control	Ignoring/ neglect	Economic/ financial abuse
Perception of partner psychological abuse					
Perception[a]					
Verbal aggression/abuse	.84	-.01	-.01	-.08	-.01
Isolation/control	.84	-.01	-.23**	-.00	-.01
Ignoring/neglect	.69	.02	.02	-.04	-.00
Economic/financial	.77	.02	-.02	-.02	-.10*
Victimisation in the current relationship					
Victimisation[b]					
Verbal aggression/abuse	.84	.52**	.27**	.46**	.37**
Isolation/control	.86	.42**	.39**	.40**	.22**
Ignoring/neglect	.76	.29**	.23**	.50**	.32**
Economic/financial	.80	.42**	.32**	.51**	.48**
Perpetration in the past relationship					
Perpetration[c]					
Verbal aggression/abuse	.74	.60**	.34**	.29**	.32**
Isolation/control	.76	.30**	.63**	.35**	.04
Ignoring/neglect	.54	.29**	.29**	.62**	.19*
Economic/financial	.40	.24**	.17*	.39**	.57**
Propensity to perpetrate partner psychological abuse					
Verbal aggression/abuse	.81				
Isolation/control	.80				
Ignoring/neglect	.72				
Economic/financial	.74				

Note: The relationships among the variables were moderately statistically significant, including several associations that cannot be reported here due to space limitations.

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Number of items: Verbal aggression/abuse = 4, Isolation/control = 5, Ignoring/neglect = 4, Economic/financial = 4.

[a]n=454   [b]n=304   [c]n=150

Model predicting the tendency to perpetrate verbal aggression/abuse

Victimisation in the current relationship: For individuals currently in a relationship, a significant link was found between the likelihood of verbal aggression/abuse and factors such as demographic characteristics, perceptions and experiences of psychological abuse [F (11, 288) = 11.467, p < .001]. The model explained 31.3% (adjusted R-square = .286) of the variation in the tendency to use verbal aggression. One of the key findings was that individuals who had previously experienced verbal aggression/abuse or economic/financial abuse were more likely to exhibit the tendency to use verbally aggressive behaviour in their relationships (Table 2, research question 1a).

Perpetration in past relationships: The study found a strong connection between the likelihood of using verbal aggression or abuse, personal characteristics, perceptions and the tendency to engage in psychological abuse within intimate relationships [F (11, 145) = 10.13, p < .001]. This model explained 45.4% (adjusted R-square = .409) of the factors leading to verbal aggression or abuse. Notably, a history of using verbal aggression in past relationships was strongly linked to the tendency to use similar behaviours in future relationships (Table 2, research question 2).

Model predicting the tendency to isolate or control a partner

Victimisation in the current relationship: The model that examined the relationship between the likelihood of isolating or controlling a partner, personal characteristics, perceptions and experiences of psychological abuse in the current relationship was also significant [F (11, 286) = 8.11, p < .001]. This model explained 24.5% (adjusted R-square = .215) of the factors leading to isolation or control. Specifically, a higher history of experiencing isolation/control and financial abuse in past relationships was linked to the likelihood of using these behaviours in current relationships (Table 3, research question 1b).

Perpetration in past relationships: The study also found that past experiences of using isolation or control in a relationship were strongly linked to the tendency to continue these behaviours in future relationships [F (11, 141) = 10.801, p < .001]. This model explained 47.8% (adjusted R-square = .433) of the factors leading to the use of isolation or control. A history of using isolation/control in a past relationship was a key predictor of continuing these behaviours in future relationships (Table 3, research question 2).

Model predicting the tendency to ignore or neglect a partner

Victimisation in the current relationship: The model that explored the link between the tendency to ignore or neglect a partner, personal characteristics, perceptions and experiences of abuse in the current relationship was significant [F (11, 288) = 13.979, p < .001]. This model explained 35.7% (adjusted R-square = .331) of the factors leading to ignoring or neglecting a partner. A higher history of being ignored or neglected, as well as experiencing financial abuse, was associated with the likelihood of engaging in these behaviours (Table 4, research question 1c).

Table 2: **Regressions of associations between perception, victimisation, past perpetration and propensity to perpetrate verbal aggression/abuse among those who are currently in a relationship and those who are not but were previously.**

Variable	Victimisation in the current relationship[#a]				95.0% Confidence Interval		Perpetration in the past relationship[#b]				95.0% Confidence Interval	
	B	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LB**	**UB**	**B**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LB**	**UB**
Age	-.01	.01	-1.19	.234	-.015	.004	-.01	.00	-1.22	.225	-.014	.003
Gender[a]	.02	.06	.27	.787	-.093	.123	.00	.05	.07	.948	-.099	.105
Marital status[b]	-.01	.06	-.13	.896	-.127	.111	.01	.12	.06	.953	-.230	.244
Perception												
Verbal aggression/abuse	-.01	.05	-.19	.844	-.112	.091	-.02	.05	-.32	.751	-.119	.086
Isolation/control	.01	.05	.29	.773	-.076	.102	.01	.04	.23	.815	-.062	.079
Ignoring/neglect	-.00	.04	-.09	.930	-.075	.069	-.01	.03	-.43	.672	-.080	.052
Economic/financial	-.01	.04	-.36	.718	-.083	.057	.01	.03	.21	.833	-.057	.071
Victimisation												
Verbal aggression/abuse	.29	.06	4.99	<.001	.175	.403						
Isolation/control	.07	.05	1.49	.137	-.022	.156						
Ignoring/neglect	-.08	.05	-1.81	.071	-.174	.007						
Economic/financial	.15	.05	3.06	.002	.053	.244						
Perpetration												
Verbal aggression/abuse							.55	.07	7.53	<.001	.405	.693
Isolation/control							.03	.05	.47	.641	-.081	.131
Ignoring/neglect							.03	.05	.55	.585	-.072	.127
Economic/financial							.06	.07	.86	.394	-.076	.191

Note. The final model (Step 3) described above. The victimisation in the current relationship column pertains to those who are in a relationship, while the perpetration in the past relationship column pertains to those who are not currently in a relationship but reported a history of one.

LB = Lower bound; UB = Upper bound.

[a]Gender = Female (1), Male (0).

[b]Marital status = Single (1), Married and others (married but separated, divorced, and widowed (0).

[#a]Step 1: R^2 = .007; Step 2: R^2 = .011, R^2 change = .003; Step 3: R^2 = .313, R^2 change = .302.

[#b]Step 1: R^2 = .016; Step 2: R^2 = .025, R^2 change = .008; Step 3: R^2 = .454, R^2 change = .430.

Table 3: **Regressions of associations between perception, victimisation, past perpetration, and propensity to perpetrate isolation/control among those who are currently in a relationship and those who are not but were previously.**

Variable	Victimisation in the current relationship[#a]				95.0% Confidence Interval		Perpetration in the past relationship[#b]				95.0% Confidence Interval	
	B	SE	t	p	LB	UB	B	SE	t	p	LB	UB
Age	-.01	.01	-1.84	.068	-.024	.001	-.01	.01	-1.45	.149	-.025	.004
Gender[a]	-.02	.07	-.23	.817	-.153	.121	.01	.09	.16	.872	-.158	.186
Marital status[b]	.05	.08	.63	.533	-.103	.199	-.31	.21	-1.47	.145	-.736	.110
Perception												
Verbal aggression/abuse	.04	.07	.68	.500	-.084	.173	.02	.09	.25	.802	-.149	.193
Isolation/control	-.22	.06	-3.85	<.001	-.334	-.108	-.12	.06	-1.96	.052	-.238	.001
Ignoring/neglect	.02	.05	.51	.608	-.068	.116	.01	.06	.18	.861	-.102	.122
Economic/financial	.04	.05	.89	.372	-.049	.131	.02	.05	.32	.753	-.090	.124
Victimisation												
Verbal aggression/abuse	-.03	.07	-.46	.645	-.178	.111						
Isolation/control	.24	.06	4.17	<.001	.128	.356						
Ignoring/neglect	-.01	.06	-.21	.832	-.128	.103						
Economic/financial	.14	.06	2.32	.021	.021	.264						
Perpetration												
Verbal aggression/abuse							.05	.12	.45	.655	-.186	.295
Isolation/control							.62	.09	6.89	<.001	.442	.798
Ignoring/neglect							.08	.08	.97	.336	-.085	.249
Economic/financial							.03	.11	.30	.763	-.189	.257

Note. The final model (Step 3) described above. The victimisation in the current relationship column pertains to those who are in a relationship, while the perpetration in the past relationship column pertains to those who are not currently in a relationship but reported a history of one.

LB = Lower bound; UB = Upper bound.

[a]Gender = Female (1), Male (0).

[b]Marital status = Single (1), Married and others (married but separated, divorced, and widowed (0).

[#a]Step 1: R^2 = .022; Step 2: R^2 = .095, R^2 change = .073; Step 3: R^2 = .245, R^2 change = .150.

[#b]Step 1: R^2 = .067; Step 2: R^2 = .131, R^2 change = .063; Step 3: R^2 = .478, R^2 change = .347.

Table 4: **Regressions of associations between perception, victimisation, past perpetration, and the propensity to perpetrate ignoring/neglect among those who are currently in a relationship and those who are not but were previously.**

Variable	Victimisation in the current relationship[#a]				95.0% Confidence Interval		Perpetration in the past relationship[#b]				95.0% Confidence Interval	
	B	SE	t	p	LB	UB	B	SE	t	p	LB	UB
Age	-.01	.01	-.83	.405	-.017	.007	-.00	.01	-.17	.863	-.014	.012
Gender[a]	-.09	.07	-1.46	.145	-.232	.034	-.02	.08	-.30	.763	-.176	.129
Marital status[b]	.02	.07	.32	.750	-.123	.170	.14	.18	.81	.421	-.210	.498
Perception												
Verbal aggression/abuse	-.05	.06	-.73	.468	-.171	.079	-.23	.08	-2.92	.004	-.379	-.073
Isolation/control	.04	.06	.77	.445	-.067	.153	.15	.05	2.78	.006	.043	.254
Ignoring/neglect	-.03	.05	-.59	.559	-.116	.063	-.02	.05	-.30	.762	-.113	.083
Economic/financial	.01	.04	.17	.862	-.079	.094	.01	.05	.27	.785	-.082	.109
Victimisation												
Verbal aggression/abuse	.11	.07	1.55	.122	-.030	.252						
Isolation/control	.06	.06	1.09	.276	-.049	.171						
Ignoring/neglect	.22	.06	3.84	<.001	.106	.331						
Economic/financial	.21	.06	3.43	<.001	.087	.323						
Perpetration												
Verbal aggression/abuse							-.06	.11	-.52	.604	-.272	.159
Isolation/control							.22	.08	2.77	.006	.063	.380
Ignoring/neglect							.53	.08	7.05	<.001	.383	.682
Economic/financial							.27	.10	2.70	.008	.073	.472

Note. The final model (Step 3) described above. The victimisation in the current relationship column pertains to those who are in a relationship, while the perpetration in the past relationship column pertains to those who are not currently in a relationship but reported a history of one.

LB = Lower bound; UB = Upper bound.

[a]Gender = Female (1), Male (0).

[b]Marital status = Single (1), Married and others (married but separated, divorced, and widowed (0).

[#a]Step 1: R^2 = .006; Step 2: R^2 = .012, R^2 change = .006; Step 3: R^2 = .357, R^2 change = .345.

[#b]Step 1: R^2 = .008; Step 2: R^2 = .040, R^2 change = .032; Step 3: R^2 = .518, R^2 change = .478.

Perpetration in past relationship: The study found a strong connection between past behaviours and the likelihood of ignoring or neglecting a partner in future relationships. Specifically, the analysis showed that a combination of factors – such as perceptions, demographics and past abusive actions – significantly predicted this behaviour [F (11, 145) = 13.10, p < .001]. Together, these factors explained 41.8% of the likelihood of ignoring/neglecting a partner, with past perpetration of partner psychological abuse accounting for nearly half (47.8%) of this influence.

Among individuals not currently in a relationship but with a history of past relationships, certain traits increased the likelihood of ignoring/neglect:

1. A lower perception of verbal aggression as problematic;
2. A higher perception of isolation and control as acceptable;
3. A past pattern of ignoring/neglecting, controlling, or economically/financially abusing their partner (Table 4, research question 2).

Model predicting economic/financial abuse

Victimisation in the current relationships: For those in relationships, the analysis showed a significant connection between various factors – such as demographics, perceptions and prior experiences of victimisation – and the likelihood of committing economic/financial abuse [F (11, 286) = 9.51, p < .001]. This model explained 27.6% of the tendency to engage in this behaviour, with past victimisation of psychological abuse contributing 25.4% to the prediction. Key factors linked to a higher likelihood of economic/financial abuse in current relationships included:

1. Being younger;
2. A history of being verbally abused;
3. A history of being economically/financially abused (Table 5, research question 1d).

Perpetration in past relationships: For those with past relationships but not currently in one, similar patterns emerged. The model significantly explained 48.6% of the likelihood to perpetrate economic/financial abuse, with past abusive actions accounting for 44% of the variance [F (11, 141) = 11.17, p < .001]. The analysis identified these factors as increasing the likelihood of economic/financial abuse:

1. Being younger;
2. A history of perpetrating verbal aggression, isolation/control, or economic/financial abuse in previous relationships (Table 5, research question 2).

Table 5: **Regressions of associations between perception, victimisation, past perpetration, and propensity to perpetrate economic/financial abuse among those who are currently in a relationship and those who are not but were previously.**

Variable	Victimisation in the current relationship[#a]						Perpetration in the past relationship[#b]					
					95.0% Confidence Interval						95.0% Confidence Interval	
	B	SE	t	p	LB	UB	B	SE	t	p	LB	UB
Age	-.01	.01	-2.08	.038	-.024	-.001	-.01	.01	-2.74	.007	-.024	-.004
Gender[a]	-.02	.07	-.22	.824	-.143	.114	.02	.06	.29	.768	-.100	.135
Marital status[b]	.06	.07	.82	.413	-.082	.199	-.09	.15	-.64	.524	-.383	.196
Perception												
Verbal aggression/abuse	-.04	.06	-.57	.568	-.155	.085	.08	.06	1.31	.193	-.040	.194
Isolation/control	.04	.05	.73	.468	-.067	.145	-.00	.04	-.06	.952	-.084	.079
Ignoring/neglect	.03	.04	.61	.540	-.059	.113	-.01	.04	-.31	.756	-.089	.065
Economic/financial	-.07	.04	-1.70	.090	-.157	.011	-.02	.04	-.44	.661	-.090	.057
Victimisation												
Verbal aggression/abuse	.18	.07	2.58	.010	.042	.312						
Isolation/control	-.09	.05	-1.64	.103	-.195	.018						
Ignoring/neglect	.01	.06	.09	.923	-.102	.113						
Economic/financial	.32	.06	5.55	<.001	.206	.432						
Perpetration												
Verbal aggression/abuse							.32	.08	3.82	<.001	.153	.482
Isolation/control							-.18	.06	-2.92	.004	-.302	-.058
Ignoring/neglect							-.03	.06	-.46	.650	-.141	.088
Economic/financial							.61	.08	7.94	<.001	.460	.765

Note. The final model (Step 3) described above. The victimisation in the current relationship column pertains to those who are in a relationship, while the perpetration in the past relationship column pertains to those who are not currently in a relationship but reported a history of one.

LB = Lower bound; UB = Upper bound.

[a]Gender = Female (1), Male (0).

[b]Marital status = Single (1), Married and others (married but separated, divorced, and widowed (0).

[#a]Step 1: R^2 = .011; Step 2: R^2 = .022, R^2 change = .011; Step 3: R^2 = .276, R^2 change = .254.

[#b]Step 1: R^2 = .021; Step 2: R^2 = .051, R^2 change = .030; Step 3: R^2 = .486, R^2 change = .435.

DISCUSSION

This study builds on what we know about the risk factors for IPV, focusing specifically on the likelihood of – or propensity to – engage in psychological abuse within relationships. The prevalence of psychological abuse in this study is comparable to the prevalence of emotional abuse in South Africa reported by Jewkes et al. (2001) (43.7% - 51.4%) and, Spencer et al. (2016) (54.9%).

Age and economic abuse

The study highlights that younger age is closely associated with economic and financial abuse in relationships. This finding aligns with previous research, which indicates that younger individuals are more likely to engage in various forms of IPV, including psychological, physical and sexual abuse (Johnson et al., 2015; Stylianou et al., 2013). Contributing factors may include limited financial management experience, dependence on a partner, power imbalances, cultural and social expectations about relationships, and stressors such as financial pressures and poor budgeting skills. Impulsive behaviours, jealousy and frequent arguments – common among younger couples – also play a role in this pattern (Kerig et al., 2012; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Addressing these factors is crucial for reducing economic abuse among young adults.

Perceptions and psychological abuse

The way people perceive abusive behaviours plays a crucial role in determining whether they might engage in them. This study shows that a lower perception of certain abusive behaviours, such as isolation and control, increases the likelihood of perpetrating those behaviours. Conversely, higher awareness of specific behaviours – like verbal aggression – may lead to a tendency to engage in different types of abuse, such as ignoring/neglect. This and similar findings suggest that elements of 'abuse displacement', 'abuse substitution' or 'compensatory abusive behaviour' might be at play. Abuse displacement refers to shifting abusive tendencies from one form of abuse to another to avoid detection or being perceived as harsh. Abuse substitution involves replacing one overtly harmful behaviour with another, subtler form of abuse, often to maintain control or exert power without triggering obvious backlash. Compensatory abusive behaviour occurs when individuals avoid certain abusive actions while engaging in less overt but still harmful behaviours to compensate.

Cultural norms and societal attitudes significantly shape these perceptions, as do personal experiences of abuse. For example, individuals who have experienced victimisation may downplay its severity or normalise abusive behaviours (Dardis et al., 2017; Fulu et al., 2013, Rasool, 2012). Misperceptions about social norms, rules for acceptable behaviour, and assumptions about others' actions can also lead to abusive behaviours (Mulla et al., 2019; Neighbors et al., 2010). Importantly, perceiving behaviours as abusive does not always deter individuals from committing those actions. Some may act out of a desire for control or revenge, while others may abstain from abuse because of their personal values, religious beliefs or adherence to principles of nonviolence.

Victimisation and the likelihood of psychological abuse

Experiencing psychological abuse in the past can influence whether someone might use similar abusive behaviours in future relationships. This study found that past experiences of various types of psychological abuse – such as verbal aggression, isolation, neglect, or financial control – are linked to a higher chance of engaging in these behaviours later. For example, those who experienced financial abuse were more likely to perpetrate all forms of psychological abuse examined in the study. This supports earlier research showing that being a victim of abuse, especially during childhood, increases the risk of becoming an abuser later (Al-Modallal et al., 2023; Cohen et al., 2022; Kahya, 2021; Richards et al., 2017; Stith et al., 2000; Widom et al., 2014).

Interestingly, while some studies find a strong link between being a victim of physical abuse and committing future violence (Stith et al., 2004), our research shows this also applies to psychological abuse. Sometimes victims, or those around them, do not construe these behaviours as abusive and may even normalize them, resulting in victims repeating these behaviours in their own relationships (Waltermaurer, 2012; Rasool, 2012). However, not everyone who experiences abuse goes on to become abusive. Recent studies, such as those by Cénat et al. (2022) and Russo and Borelli (2023), found that victimisation does not always lead to perpetration.

Abuse often follows a cycle – tensions rise, abuse occurs, and then things calm down temporarily (Bandura, 1977; Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Widom, 1989; Whitfield et al., 2003). Victims who endure repeated abuse might normalize the behaviours to which they have been exposed and are more likely to replicate them later. This could result from frustration, anger, or a desire to regain control. Factors like long-term exposure to abuse, internalised behaviours and attempts to balance power dynamics in relationships can further increase this risk.

Perpetration and the likelihood of future abuse

Past abusive behaviour strongly predicts future abuse. This study confirms that individuals who were previously abusive are more likely to continue such behaviour in future relationships, even if not currently involved in a relationship. This persistence often occurs because some perpetrators fail to recognise the harm in their actions, don't understand the psychological impact, or they use abuse to maintain power and control (Widom et al., 2014). Known as inter-relationship transmission, this pattern demonstrates how abusive behaviours can carry over from one relationship to the next. Factors such as learned behaviours, alignment with patriarchal beliefs, exposure to domestic violence, unresolved trauma, and poor communication may contribute to this cycle. Research also helps to identify contributing factors such as economic stress, gender inequality and childhood trauma, thus guiding social work prevention efforts tailored to meet local needs (Fakunmoju & Bammeke, 2024; Jacobs & Jewkes, 2002). Without intervention to rehabilitate perpetrators, help them recognize their behaviours as abusive, or provide training/coaching that promotes self-awareness, these behaviours can become entrenched and habitual.

Our findings align with recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses, showing that individuals who have experienced IPV are more likely to face abuse again (Dokkedahl et al., 2022). Psychological abuse, including controlling behaviour, emotional/verbal abuse and isolation, is strongly associated with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and PTSD (Dokkedahl et al., 2022). Research on young people in the UK further indicates that different types and patterns of partner abuse result in varying levels of negative impact and increase the likelihood of reoffending (Herbert et al., 2023). Together, these studies underscore how past experiences, personal circumstances, and beliefs shape the dynamics of psychological abuse (Dokkedahl et al., 2022), in line with social learning theory.

Psychological abuse in relationships: Perceptions, experiences and social learning

Social learning theory also shows how perceptions and personal experiences influence abusive behaviour in relationships. Observing or experiencing abusive behaviour can lead people to see it as acceptable, normal or even necessary (Bandura, 1977). For example:

1. Victims of economic or financial abuse may later replicate these behaviours, using control tactics they learned during their own victimisation;
2. Past perpetrators often repeat abusive behaviours in future relationships, especially if these actions helped them maintain control or power (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Stith et al., 2000).

The strongest predictor of perpetration of future abuse is past abuse. When people witness or experience psychological abuse, they may internalise it and repeat it later, especially if they faced no consequences for such behaviour (Widom & Wilson, 2015). Interestingly, while perceptions of abuse have a weaker effect on future behaviour, they still matter. For instance:

1. People exposed to abuse may develop distorted ideas of what is 'normal' in a relationship;
2. Even if they know abusive behaviour is wrong, their thinking may be shaped by these past experiences, making it harder to break the cycle (Eckhardt & Crane, 2014; Fincham et al., 2008).

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

One strength of this study is that it examines the likelihood of future abuse rather than focusing only on past behaviours. This forward-looking approach allows for the development of prevention strategies and interventions before abuse occurs. By identifying risk factors such as past victimization or distorted perceptions, resources can be directed toward stopping abuse before it begins, ensuring that victims receive needed support and that perpetrators receive rehabilitation to prevent further abuse. Additionally, focusing on future behaviours avoids the memory biases common in studies that rely on people recalling past events.

However, the study also has limitations. While collecting data online allowed for a wide geographical reach, it may not fully represent people without internet access or who are not active on social media, such as those in rural areas. These groups might have different experiences with

psychological abuse, which could affect the results. The use of convenience sampling also limits the generalisability of findings to the larger population of South Africa.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings on how past victimisation and perpetration influence future psychological abuse underscore the importance of trauma-informed approaches and the need for prevention efforts by social workers that address the normalisation and perpetuation of the intergenerational cycle of abuse. Supporting both victims and perpetrators is essential to breaking the cycle of abuse, as focusing solely on victims is insufficient. Without treatment, perpetrators often move on to new victims. Early interventions, such as counselling, rehabilitation and legal consequences, are critical for preventing abuse, fostering healthy relationships and disrupting generational cycles of abuse (Cannon et al., 2016; Eckhardt et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2022).

Helping victims understand how their past experiences contribute to their vulnerability aids recovery, while assisting perpetrators in linking past and present behaviours reduces reoffending. Social workers should receive training to recognize and intervene in psychological abuse cases and use cognitive therapy to address harmful thought patterns that sustain abuse. Incorporating education on healthy relationships and conflict resolution into awareness and educational programmes is essential (Murphy et al., 2022; Trabold et al., 2020). These programmes should also challenge underlying socio-cultural attitudes, such as normalisation and patriarchy, that perpetuate abuse.

Given the significant impact of financial abuse, especially among younger individuals, social workers should prioritise financial literacy, economic independence and connecting clients to resources to prevent abuse and improve wellbeing (Chowbey & Sharp-Jeffs, 2023; Murphy et al., 2022; Postmus et al., 2020; Trabold et al., 2020). Training programmes must include content on the nature of psychological abuse and its indicators, as well as ways to enhance community support for victims. Behaviour-change strategies, such as skill-building and role-playing healthy interactions, should take precedence, since awareness of perceptions has less influence on abusive tendencies.

Recognising controlling, isolating, neglecting and ignoring behaviours as forms of psychological abuse is crucial for effective assessment and intervention. Social workers can educate clients on identifying abuse, promote healthy relationship practices and address stressors such as financial strain. Incorporating lessons on psychological abuse into social work training equips professionals to manage such cases effectively. Therapeutic approaches, including cognitive-behavioural therapy, trauma-informed therapy, couples therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction can address both victimisation and perpetration, thus reducing abuse (Murphy & Maiuro, 2009; Murphy et al., 2022). Shifting harmful discourses and cultural practices that perpetuate abuse is critical for its prevention (Rasool, 2012). Enhanced training for social workers is also necessary to help them understand the dynamics of psychological abuse and develop culturally sensitive

strategies for supporting victims, especially in communities where abuse is rooted in socio-cultural norms (Jacobs & Jewkes, 2002).

Future research should integrate cultural and contextual factors when studying psychological abuse. Mixed-methods, long-term studies could provide deeper insights into how attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of abuse evolve, contributing to a robust evidence base for policy advocacy to protect victims and prevent abuse.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies that people who have experienced or perpetrated psychological abuse are more likely to engage in such abuse in future relationships, a phenomenon referred to as inter-relationship transmission. While victimization or exposure to abusive behaviours is a known risk factor for intra-relationship transmission, or the cycle of abuse, its potential for inter-relationship transmission is strongly emphasized in the present study. This occurs because abusive behaviours become normalized over time, reinforced by the normalisation of abuse in families and communities, thus confirming social learning theory: people unconsciously learn and repeat these patterns. Emotional scars and destructive coping mechanisms also play a role, making it harder to break free from these harmful behaviours in different relationships without intervention and without addressing the socio-cultural and patriarchal norms that entrench certain behaviours. This research demonstrates how victimisation, perpetration, and perception interact and highlights the need for early detection of psychological abuse by social workers to prevent inter-relationship transmission. It also underscores the need for social work interventions at various levels of the ecological system to better address inter-relationship transmission through the identification of risk factors.

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