

Gender and cultural effects on perception of psychological violence in the partner

Carmen Delgado Álvarez¹, Benito Estrada Aranda² and José Alfredo López Huerto²

¹ Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca (España) and ² Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí (México)

Abstract

Background: Studies reporting similar figures of couple (man-woman) violence and works questioning the validity of the instruments employed have generated controversy about the conceptualization of this construct. One of the critical issues is the different ways of perceiving violence between men and women, as well as its nature in the cultural context. This may affect self-reported answers. **Method:** A questionnaire evaluating the degree of violence perceived in ten kinds of psychological partner abuse was applied. 1750 students from Spain and Mexico, all of them randomly selected, completed it. **Results:** Through MANOVA, greater perception of violence in the Spanish sample than in the Mexican one was obtained; in both countries, there was a greater perception in women than in men. Effects of gender-culture interaction were obtained in four dimensions: Isolation, Sexual Pressure, Emotional Manipulation, and Dominance. Multidimensional scaling showed two perceived dimensions: (1) "Proactive-Passive Tactics", stronger in the Spanish culture and (2) "Punitive-Emotional Tactics", stronger in the Mexican culture. **Conclusions:** These results confirm gender-culture effects in perception of psychological violence in the partner.

Keywords: Perceived psychological violence; partner violence; gender violence; gender effects; cultural effects.

Resumen

Efectos del género y la cultura sobre la percepción de violencia psicológica en la pareja. **Antecedentes:** estudios que reportan cifras similares de violencia de pareja en mujeres y hombres, y trabajos que cuestionan la validez de los instrumentos utilizados, han generado controversia sobre la conceptualización de este constructo. Una de las cuestiones críticas es la diferente forma de percibir la violencia que tienen hombres y mujeres, así como la naturalización de la misma en el contexto cultural. Esto podría afectar a las respuestas de autoinforme. **Método:** se aplicó un cuestionario que evalúa el grado de violencia percibida en diez formas de abuso psicológico en la pareja. 1750 estudiantes de España y México, seleccionados por muestreo incidental, respondieron al cuestionario. **Resultados:** mediante MANOVA se obtiene mayor percepción de la violencia en la muestra española que en la mexicana, y en ambos países mayor percepción en las mujeres que en los hombres. Se obtienen efectos de interacción género*cultura en cuatro dimensiones: Aislamiento, Presión Sexual, Manipulación Emocional, y Dominación. El escalamiento multidimensional muestra dos dimensiones percibidas: (1) "Tácticas Proactivas-Pasivas" con mayor peso en cultura española, y (2) "Tácticas Punitivas-Emocionales" con mayor peso en cultura mexicana. **Conclusiones:** Estos resultados confirman los efectos del género y la cultura sobre la percepción de la violencia psicológica en la pareja.

Palabras clave: violencia psicológica percibida; violencia de pareja; violencia de género; efectos del género; efectos culturales.

Psychological violence has been considered one of the most relevant dimensions of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The most widely used criteria for classifying this type of violence has been the kind of aggression: psychological, physical and sexual aggressions (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). Very popular scales for evaluating dating violence, such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS and CTS-2), adopt this typology (Strauss, 1979; Strauss, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The controversy about its usefulness to properly detect gender violence in couples generated much criticism and counter-

criticism since these scales were published (Kelly, 1987; Strauss, 1989). The results generated by research that adopted the approach of CTS reported equal rates of violence perpetrated by men and women, or higher rates in women for psychological violence and some forms of physical violence (Hird, 2000; Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, & González, 2007; Muñoz-Rivas, Andreu, Graña, & O'Leary, 2007; Strauss, 2004; Swahn, Alemdar, & Whitaker, 2010). Meta-analysis studies confirmed this trend (Archer, 2000), which was in contradiction with studies reporting increased violence perpetrated by men and suffered by women, which in turn are consistent with data reported by international agencies. Data on IPV confirm that it is mostly perpetrated by men and suffered by women (EUAFR, 2014; UNIFEM, 2008), being the cause of 38% of murders of women in the world (WHO, 2013).

Some contradictions found in the research literature on IPV were analyzed in a few studies (Frieze, 2005), arguing that there is

more than one type of partner violence, and that motives and other correlates of violence should be further examined in research. Some studies also indicate the need to include the severity of aggression in the discussion about IPV (Winstok, 2012).

A large number of researchers have criticized the Dating Violence Scales for different reasons. Some of the major methodological issues concern definitional problems, operationalization of concepts, recall bias, underreporting, question order, external validity, and the sex and ethnicity of interviewers (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Delgado, 2014; Kimmel, 2002; Schwartz, 2000). The consequence of its use is that it contributes to massive confusion when comparing reports of women and men because these scales ignore the contexts, meanings, and motives of abuse (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1993). Men sentenced for violence against women in intimate relationships frequently blame their victims to justify their own violent behavior (Lila, Gracia & Murguía, 2013). Men tend to underestimate their own aggression and overestimate women's feeling guilty about it (Jackson, 1999), making it difficult to compare the results obtained with these scales, as the response process should be equivalent to compare scores of tests (AERA, NCME, & APA, 1999).

The reasons for the attack are not covered by the Conflict Tactics Scales, and this is one of the most critical aspects with respect to the results obtained with these scales. Men usually assaulting their partners primarily do so to dominate and exert control over them. Male sexual jealousy or male sexual proprietariness is one of the most frequently cited causes of IPV, both physical and sexual (Buss, 2000; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Goetz & Shackelford, 2009). The violence of women, however, is often perpetrated on grounds reactive in nature, such as an emotional relief in times of intense anger or inadequate response to action by their partners (Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007).

Strauss (1989) responded to criticism about the context problem and the reasons for violence, not covered by their scales, indicating that they should be evaluated with other instruments; but the fact is that the results of these studies offer no correction scale scores depending on the context or motives. Some researchers point out this limitation in their studies; but the data reported are not corrected for it (González & Santana, 2001). This helps to reinforce the myth that men and women equally perform IPV, minimizing the seriousness of the problem of gender violence in couples (Bosch & Ferrer, 2012). The social consequences of test use affect its validity (Messick, 1980), so much that the Standards for Educational Psychological Testing consider this as a source of validity that must examine both the technical and the social aspects of testing (AERA, NCME, & APA, 1999).

Gender theories explain, from different perspectives, how differing men and women empowerment affects their partner relationships (Harding, 2004; Hegelson, 2002; Lamas, 2003; Murillo, 2000). The empowerment concept is fundamental to an understanding of gender relations also in the couple, and in the effects of violence. Empowerment demonstrated greater relative importance over resource acquisition in women; specifically, empowerment was found to attenuate the impact of IPV severity (Pérez, Johnson, & Wright, 2012), showing its importance in understanding the dynamics of IPV. From this perspective, the analysis of the differences in violence perpetrated by women and men requires including more complex analytical frameworks of IPV and examining gender differences in the use of violence. Women use violence and aggression within the context of their

agency, their victimization, and the choices available (Banwell, 2010). Some researchers found four distinct types of IPV: (1) characterological violence, (2) violent resistance, (3) situational violence, and (4) separation-instigated violence (Friend, Cleary, Thatcher, & Gottman, 2011; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Conceptual differences between these types make a review of measurement of IPV necessary to make scores comparable (DeKeseredy, 2011), so the differences can be valid (Messick, 1989; 1998).

In the case of IPV, the inferences drawn from measurements with the CTS refer to the prevalence of violence perpetrated by women and men, and therefore, the validity of these instruments should be revised to support these inferences (Evers, et al., 2013). Threats to validity include potential bias of self-reports, motivations when reporting on a partner and the influence of response styles, so that "*gender needs to be considered when establishing construct validity due to differences in the meaning of aggression, impacts of abuse, and even patterns of violence for women and men*" (Follingstad & Rogers, 2013, p. 149).

The four IPV types (Friend, Cleary, Thatcher, & Gottman, 2011) raise threats to the validity of scales of dating violence by reducing all manifestations to situational violence (inadequate definition of construct) and ignoring the influence of gender and culture in violence symbolization (a lack of equivalence in the answering process). This last aspect, unlike social desirability referred to social expectations, refers to violence symbolization, the purpose of this work is limited to situational violence. The main threat to the validity of scales of dating violence, however, comes from the definition of the construct; therefore, new studies are necessary. IPV type (2), mostly practiced by women (Kimmel, 2002), received the same treatment as proactive violence in scales while ignoring the context and this may explain the contradictory data with sociological studies.

In Spain, according to prevalence studies, 72.6% of women do not report violence perpetrated by their partner (Government Office for Gender Violence, 2012), and this hinders its quantification (Ferrer, Bosch, & Riera, 2006). Fifty-five percent of women go to emergency (ER) services and deny being battered by their partner (González-Morga, García-Guillamón, & Brando, 2014). Moreover, the General Judicial Council warned that between 2007 and 2013, 1007 boys under 18 had been prosecuted for crimes or offenses of violence, the figure of instructed cases being considerably higher, according to the Annual Report of the Office 2012, with a growth of 30% in the last year. In Mexico, the Relationship Dynamics at Home National Survey (INEGI, 2011) shows that 47% of Mexican women aged 15 years old or more suffered some violent incident by their partners (husband or partner, ex-husband or ex-partner, or boyfriend) during their last relationship. In 1997, the Mexican Congress approved the first law on prevention of domestic violence. In 2006, Congress passed the General Law for Equality between Women and Men. However, recent research claims greater efforts should be made to empower women so they can effectively execute their right to live a life free of violence (Mojarro-Iñiguez, Vadez, Santiago, Pérez-Núñez, & Salinas-Rodríguez, 2014).

This pocket of hidden violence leads some researchers to propose a suggestive question inviting reflection on the meanings women attribute to suffering violence (Hlavka, 2014). How do girls and boys perceive behaviors that researchers would label as psychological violence? Young people are socialized in a culture that often encourages and normalizes male power and aggression, particularly within the context of heterosexual relationships (Tolman, Spencer,

Rosen-Reynosa, & Porche, 2003). The relationship between traditional masculinity, violence and culture has been documented in numerous studies (Hatty, 2000). However, little research has been done on how women and men account for and name their experiences with violence (Hlavka, 2010; Hlavka, 2013). The interest of this work focuses on exploring how young people perceive psychological violence, and how culture and gender influence it.

Method

Participants

An incidental sample of 1753 secondary and university students participated voluntarily. In Spain, the sample was taken at attention centers in Castilla & León, Andalucía, Extremadura, the Basque Country & Asturias. The Mexican sample comes from students from the City of Monterrey. Table 1 shows its characteristics:

Instruments

The long version of Perceived Gender Violence Scale (VGP) of 47 items (Delgado, 2010) was applied in both samples. This instrument includes 25 items of VEC scales for men and women (Cantera, Estébanez & Vázquez, 2009) to which 22 new items were added in one scale alone. The VGP scale assesses ten dimensions of psychological violence: Control, Harassment, Isolation, Jealousy, Downgrading, Emotional Indifference, Sexual Pressure, Emotional Manipulation, Threats, and Domination. The rating ranges from 0 (nothing violent) to 6 (absolutely violent). Reliability estimated by the method of internal consistency was satisfactory for all dimensions in both samples, as shown in the table 2.

Procedure

The scale was collectively administered to students in the classroom; all of them willingly participated in the study on partner violence. Application took between 10 and 20 minutes.

	Spain (N = 1170)	Mexico (N = 580)
Age	Range 15-30 years Mean = 20,39 SD = 2,95	Range 15-30 years Mean = 19,63 SD = 2,39
Gender	Male = 38,3% Female = 61,7%	Male = 43,4% Female = 56,6%
Politics	Right = 18,8% Center = 41,6% Left = 39,6%	Right = 29,1% Center = 44,0% Left = 26,9%
Religious beliefs	Practitioner = 10,2% No Practitioner = 42,4% Unbeliever = 47,4%	Practitioner = 40,7% No Practitioner = 49,3% Unbeliever = 10,0%

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Spain	0,87	0,84	0,90	0,92	0,92	0,87	0,93	0,89	0,94	0,92	0,99
México	0,91	0,90	0,92	0,94	0,96	0,91	0,97	0,95	0,96	0,96	0,99

Data analysis

Comparison of Spanish and Mexican samples was performed by MANOVA, taking as independent variables country and gender, and as dependent variables the ten dimensions of the scale. Pillai's Trace was considered as a statistic of contrast, proving homogeneity of variance among groups through Box's test and Levene's tests. In order to identify the underlying structure of IPV as it is perceived psychologically, a Proxcal Multidimensional Scaling was performed with two matrix sources (Spain and Mexico).

Results

Significant effects were obtained both for country ($p = .000$; $\eta^2_p = .234$) and gender ($p = .000$; $\eta^2_p = .026$), with a Country \times Gender interaction effect ($p = .000$; $\eta^2_p = .036$). The ability to detect psychological violence in the relationship was higher in the Spanish population than in the Mexican one, and higher in women than in men.

Comparison between men and women, separately for each country, showed different results. In the Spanish sample, women perceived more violence than men in *control* ($p = .042$; $\eta^2_p = .04$), *downgrading* ($p = .006$; $\eta^2_p = .06$), and *threats* ($p = .009$; $\eta^2_p = .06$). In the Mexican sample, women have greater perception of violence in *harassment* ($p = .038$; $\eta^2_p = .07$), *isolation* ($p = .004$; $\eta^2_p = .14$), *jealousy* ($p = .009$; $\eta^2_p = .12$), *downgrading* ($p = .016$; $\eta^2_p = .10$), *affective indifference* ($p = .000$; $\eta^2_p = .24$), *sexual pressure* ($p = .000$; $\eta^2_p = .28$), *emotional manipulation* ($p = .006$; $\eta^2_p = .13$), and *domination* ($p = .001$; $\eta^2_p = .20$).

The Country \times Gender interaction was significant in four dimensions: *affective indifference* ($p = .000$; $\eta^2_p = .09$), *sexual pressure* ($p = .001$; $\eta^2_p = .06$), *emotional manipulation* ($p = .050$; $\eta^2_p = .02$), and *domination* ($p = .013$; $\eta^2_p = .04$). The direction of the interaction, as shown in Figure 2, is the same in all four dimensions: the difference between women and men is low in the Spanish sample.

A common two-dimensional space, with excellent fit index (S-Stress = .018) was obtained:

- Dimension 1: Punitive-Possessive Tactics. This dimension uses more punitive forms of psychological violence (*threats*, *sexual pressing*, *domination*), and more possessive forms (*control*, *harassment*).
- Dimension 2: Proactive-Passive Tactics. This dimension uses more proactive forms of psychological violence (*threats*), and more passive forms (*affective indifference*).

These dimensions have different weights in the Spanish and Mexican samples as shown in Figure 4:

In the Spanish sample, dimension 2 "Proactive-Passive Tactics" (.582) outweighs dimension 1 "Punitive-Possessive

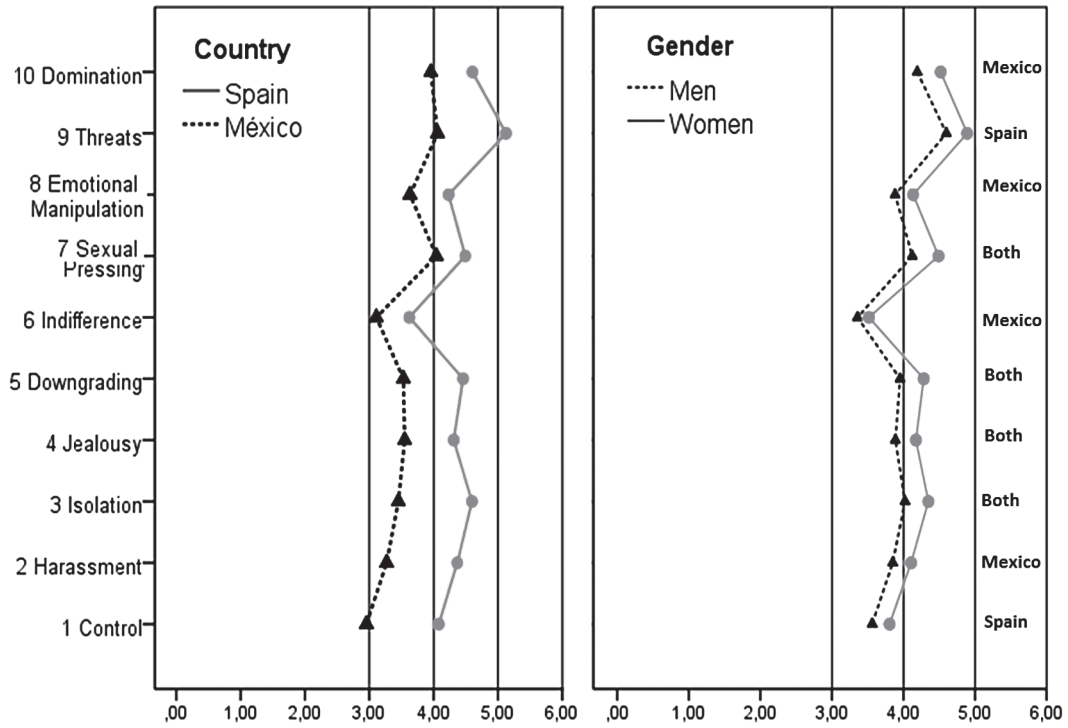


Figure 1. Differences by country and gender
 Spain: Differences in Spain; Mexico: Differences in Mexico; Both: Differences in Spain and Mexico

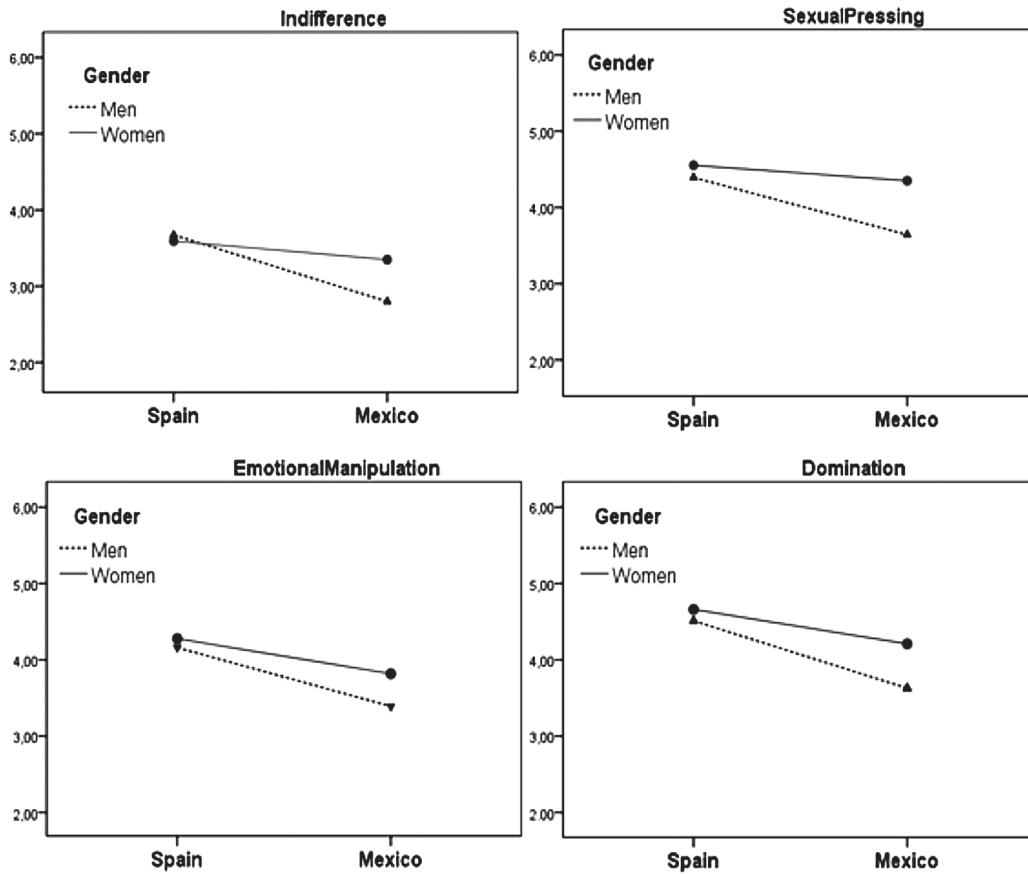


Figure 2. Interaction gender*country

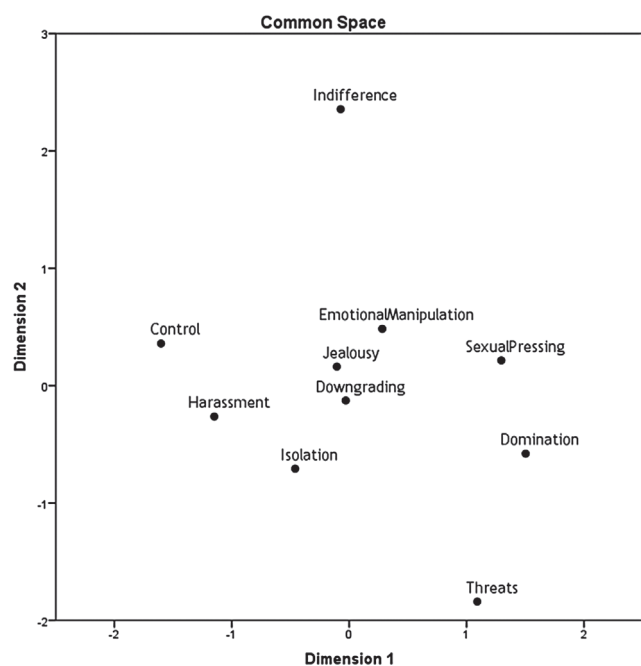


Figure 3. Structure of perceived violence

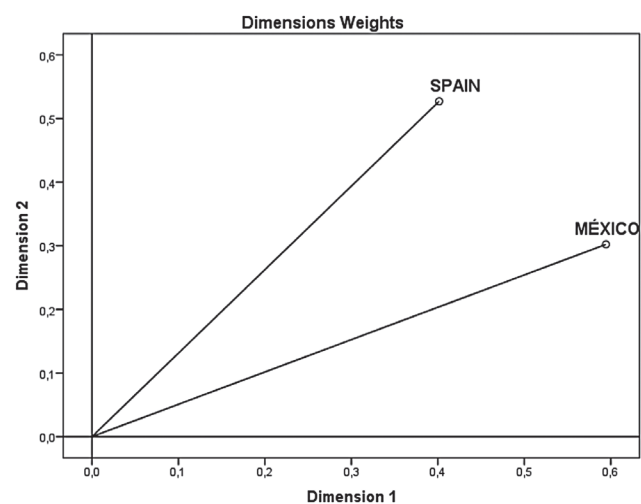


Figure 4. Dimensions Weights by country

Tactics” (.325). In the Mexican sample, however, the weight is greater for Dimension 1 “Punitive-Possessive Tactics” (.618) than for dimension 2 “Proactive-Passive Tactics” (.253).

Discussion

The perception of IPV is a subjective judgment that depends not only of the presence of abusive behavior in the relationship but in the way that these conducts are represented in the mind of the people who refer to them. The way in which societies elaborate their representation of the couple’s relationship constitutes a comparison parameter that will determine the valuation of the abusive conducts as violent or normalized (Loseke, 1992; Mehrotra, 1999). Analyses about the social changes in IPV conceptualization

in Spain refer to the way in which normalized conducts are seen as violent, as a consequence of sensitization policies that introduce cultural changes (Ferrer & Bosch, 2014). The results of this research confirm the effect of the cultural context due to a greater perception obtained in Spain than in Mexico, in the expected direction after active sensitization policies implemented in Spain in the last decade.

On the other hand, the disparity in results between research that reports similar figures of violence practiced by women and men, and International Agencies Analyses that confirms the preponderant practice of violence of men towards women, reveal the need to provide new elements to clarify the complexity of the IPV construct (Friend, Cleary, Thatcher, & Gottman, 2011). One of these elements is the different way in which men and women conceptualize and give meaning to violence (DeKeseredy, 2011; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Kimmel, 2002). In this analysis, this difference is confirmed: men perceive it less in both the studied countries. The difference between men and women is quantitatively higher and in more aspects in Mexico than in Spain, confirming the influence of culture and gender.

The trend of men to minimize the violence they practice, and of women to minimize the violence they suffer as a consequence of the relationship between masculinity and violence may contribute to explain why men and women report as equal the use of violence, in contradiction with the sociological analysis. Some relevant data from the result of our research is that *affective indifference* and *control* are the most normalized by men and women in both cultural contexts. These data are consistent with the gender analysis which identifies emotional hardness and control, as normalized guides for traditional masculinity (Hatty, 2000), suggesting the utility of gender as an analysis category for a better understanding of violence acceptance and the way it naturalizes in the couple’s relationships. The most perceived forms of abuse are *threats* and *sexual pressing*, more visible forms due to their punitiveness. The punitiveness-possessiveness is one of the dimensions that emerge in the Multidimensional Scaling. The larger weight of this dimension in the Mexican sample would support greater visibility, in opposition to more subtle ways of violence. These more subtle ways of violence have been the target of sensitization policies in Spain. In this sense, the greater weight of the proactive-passive dimension tactics in the Spanish sample would support the sensitization effect on the visible forms of violence not traditionally conceptualized as such in couple’s relationships.

The results from this research confirm the gender effect, showing that men perceive psychological violence less than women in the abusive behavior in couple’s relationships. Although this datum does not make reference to the degree of violence practiced or received, it is of interest because the results support the hypothesis that men and women differ in the degree of violence perceived in psychological abusive behaviors, and that this gender difference is maintained in different cultural contexts.

As a consequence, the perception of violence would not depend so much on the degree in which it is present in the relationship, but on the capacity of identifying it as such. The Culture × Gender interaction shows different patterns of assessment in four forms of psychological abuse: *Affective Indifference*, *Sexual Pressing*, *Emotional Manipulation*, and *Domination*. The differences in perceived violence between men and women are minimized in Spain and maximized in Mexico. Gender, a changing construct

determined by cultural values (Rodríguez-Franco, Antuña, López-Cepero, Rodríguez-Díaz, & Bringas, 2012), which normalizes behaviors and assigns roles as a function of sex, acquires different concretions as a function of the context, as anthropological analyses show (McKinnon, 2005). The results of this study, therefore reveal the effect of the cultural context and gender socialization on how violence is symbolized, as well as, the role of culture in the modification of this symbolization.

Finally, important limitations of this work should be noted. First, it does not address the critical issue of construct definition in scales of partner violence, differentiating the four IPV types (Friend, Cleary, Thatcher, & Gottman, 2011; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Secondly, although the influence of culture and gender on violence perception has been demonstrated, it is necessary to investigate the way that this different symbolization affects self-reports of violence issued and suffered. Finally, results have been obtained with samples of students, so we cannot generalize results to any other type of population.

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