Critical Discourse Analysis of Trauma Bonding in Female Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse: A Phenomenological Constructivist Approach

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**ARTICLE DETAILS**

**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Intimate partner abuse is a socially prevalent issue across cultures. Despite establishing survivor institutes and anti-domestic violence NGOs, the voices of battered women have not yet reached the legal governmental policies. Recent research on IPA indicates that women remain chained to the dangerously controlled and maintained relationship despite its social and psychological repercussions. Exitance of Intimate Partner Abuse has been seen through the lens of criminal activity. Therefore, the perpetuation of IPA is linked to the psychotic and criminal intentions of the perpetrator (Gibbs et al., 2018). Empirical evidence suggests that there is a dearth of data to highlight the female voice on the domestic violence issue.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The research design focuses of critically deconstructing the labels, reinforces identities and professed believes mentioned in the article to identify the meaning and motive behind them. This study is built on the socio-cognitive approach to understand the cognitive link between the societal ideals and the way they shape the thought process of the victim in choosing their reaction towards abuse.

**Findings:** The findings suggest that the co-existence of these contributing factors create trauma bonding in victims that forces them to stay in abusive relationships.

**Implications/Originality/Value:** This study explores recently published newspaper articles on Domestic Violence portraying Intimate partner abuse to analyses discursive elements used to discuss the issue in the light of varying psychological, emotional and socioeconomical backgrounds.

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Introduction and Issues

Intimate partner Abuse (IPA) is both a psychologically and physiologically degenerative problem owing to the manner its consequences are manifested in the victim (Nevala, 2017). Trauma bonding is the distorted coping mechanism observed in victims unable to comprehend the near life and death situations and hence drift away from rationalizing any uncomfortable event of varying degree of pain, stress, and discomfort (Ali et al., 2016).

The phenomenon of traumatic bonding centers on the intermittency pattern of violence and remorse that affords the victim time and space for enmeshing sympathetically with the abuser over time. An abusive traumatic event is characterized by its ability to threaten and disrupt an individual’s sense of security, peace, and logical cognitive abilities (Godbout et al., 2017).

Literature Review

I build this study by analyzing the existing literature on Intimate Partner Abuse to draw an understanding about the already explored dimensions of IPA. There is no dearth of empirical data on IPA literature, hence, this review is established to highlight the key findings in the domains of Psychological, Emotional and Socioeconomical Status. Women are subjected to domestic violence across cultures and class (Garcia-Moreno & Stockl, 2013). Violence in many forms exists inside the premise IPA including, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse. Tragically, a significant no of victims dies under the trauma of abuse. 40%-70 % of women murder cases have been reported to be a crime of passion of the husband or boyfriend (World Health Organization, 2005).

Several reasons have attributed to the crime of Domestic violence. Predominantly, the act is filtered through legal lens of male aggression and a social lens of female oppression (Shah et al., 2016). The relational aggression of abuser also manifests in the form of psychological aggression, emotional manipulation, and economic oppression (Ali et al., 2016; Candela, 2016). This category of violence is an implicit crime that disrupts the self-esteem, identity, emotional security of the victim and plunges them into loop of uncertainty that is a literal definition of stress. Unresolved stress eventually manifests itself as a trauma (Gagnon, Lee, & DePrince, 2017). Social oppression of women is not a new issue and the advocates of women right and women protection focus on disseminating awareness of rights and alternate choices battered woman can make. However, the victims of IPA who have never reported abuse and are living with their perpetrators in a traumatic bond. This unreported data needs to be investigated to explore the contributing factors that facilitate this psychological transition (Curtis et al., 2017; Tougas et al., 2016).

Significance of Study

The diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) does not have a diagnostic criterion mentioned for trauma bonding, terror bonding or Stockholm syndrome (Nevala, 2017). Researchers have not yet established consensus on the definition of traumatic bonding due to the difficulty in the exploration of the event which ideally requires in-depth interviews to establish patterns and themes. Quantitative research does not approach the problem subjectively and later develop the common and more general conclusion for progressive studies. This results in dearth of empirical data on traumatic bonding in abused women despite the exhaustive focus of research on the topic for decades. There is a need for qualitative exploration oriented towards understanding the phenomenon of traumatic bonding and the potential reinforcing factors (Gagnon et al., 2017).

Study Objectives

The explore recently published newspaper articles on Domestic Violence portraying Intimate partner abuse to analyses discursive elements used to discuss the issue in the light of varying psychological, emotional and socioeconomical backgrounds.

Using Critical Discourse analysis, the research aims at identifying the role of Socioeconomic Dependency, Attachment Style of the victim based on the Attachment Theory established by John
Bowl and the cognitive dissonance on the development of traumatic bonding in the abused women (Gagnon et al., 2017).

**Attachment Style**

According to the attachment theory a person is likely to exhibit one of the three attachment styles elicited by the theory: (a) Avoidant attachment style, (b) Anxious attachment style, (C) Secure attachment style. An individual would develop anxious attachment style due to intermittent love and security provided by the caregiver during childhood. This relationship style could transcend into the individual’s relationship with their spouse. They will be vulnerable in the relationship with perpetual uncertainty and eventually develop chronic stress. Such an individual is likely to demand more closeness with their partner if the partner is withdrawn, distant or shows inconsistent behavior as was dictated by the caregiver in her childhood (Godbout et al., 2017; Tougas et al., 2016).

**Socioeconomic Dependency**

In the case of general domestic abuse, If the victim belongs to a low socioeconomic status, then she is likely to consider the cost of divorce and the threat of stigma attached to divorce. She will be worried about her standing in the society, lack of support from the family and inability to fend for herself or provide for her children. She may opt out of divorce and bear the terror of abuse (Tougas et al., 2016).

**Cognitive Dissonance**

When two or more risk factors exist in the case of a victim then she is prone to developing cognitive dissonance. It occurs when a person is holding on to conflicting ideologies or the new information creates a conflict with the existing belief. If a woman is financially dependent on her intimate partner also has an anxious relationship style and experiences abuse knowing she cannot break off from it then she may manifest dissonance in her thinking and ascribe a distorted meaning to the abuse (Nicholson & Lutz, 2017).

She might think her husband is trying to protect her
She may deny any abuse altogether claiming it is a normal couple’s disagreement
If she has an anxious attachment style, always needing reassurance and attention then might rationalize her partners behavior accepting that it is her fault that he is abusive.

Cognitive Dissonance may take turn for the worst and the women may fall in the pits of Traumatic bonding.

**Problem Statement**

Intimate partner abuse is a socially prevalent issue across cultures. Despite establishing survivor institutes and anti-domestic violence NGOs, the voices of battered women have not yet reached the legal governmental policies (Curtis et al., 2017). Recent research on IPA indicates that women remain chained to the dangerously controlled and maintained relationship despite its social and psychological repercussions (Megias et al., 2018).

Exitance of Intimate Partner Abuse has been seen through the lens of criminal activity. Therefore, the perpetuation of IPA is linked to the psychotic and criminal intentions of the perpetrator (Gibbs et al., 2018). Empirical evidence suggests that there is a dearth of data to highlight the female voice on the domestic violence issue (Ali et al., 2016). This creates a void in the understanding of the existence and perpetuation of IPA. A phenomenological constructivist study to evaluate the lived experiences of domestic violence victims would serve to understand the contributing factors that bonds the IPA victims to their perpetrator (Tougas et al., 2017). Such revelation would identify the role of maladaptive attachment, cognitive dissonance, and socio-economic dependency on the perpetrator in creating trauma bonding in the victims of Intimate Partner Abuse (Godbout et al., 2017).

This study seeks to address the following questions to bridge the research gap

**Nature of Study**
Qualitative research is the ideal choice to strategically extrapolate meaning, perception and understanding of a phenomenon. It subjectively establishes a viewpoint to derive meaningful descriptive data. The focus of qualitative research is to view the world through a subjective lens of perspective. It carves out a research direction for specific inquiry questions designed exclusively for the selected sample. Which enables collection of data enrich with information about how individual give meaning to their experience. Ontological understanding of IPA is rooted in the reality that it is a complex and dangerously maintained relationship construct. Varying socioeconomic, biological, and psychological factors contribute to the development of distorted cognitive believes that elicit behavioral denial and abuse acceptance in IPA victims (Nicholson & Lutz, 2017).

Epistemologically IPA cannot be relegated to generally concluded empirical data acquisition because the dynamics of the problem requires interpretation of the individual cases through the lens of subjects’ personal understanding of their experience. So, epistemologically approaching the problem through semi-structured interviews, open ended questions, and gaining knowledge on the subject matter through Discourse analysis of research articles as the means for extracting meaningful information from research participants.

**Research Question**
How does the women respond to the study?
How does a female view her relationship attachment style with her partner?
What external factors or believes influence her towards accepting her partners relational abuse?
How does the victim view herself, her identity, her choices in the predicament of abuse?

**Theoretical Framework**
The dynamic lane of research on Intimate partner abuse has been developed by feminist obstructionism approach and social constructivism theories to apply intersectional perspective on the socially constructed and maintained knowledge. Because construction of knowledge generates its power from submission of masses to its validity which sways towards the side of the powerful. The data drawn from the theories have a consensus on the description of the state of a victim of IPA.

Primarily, this study is built on the socio-cognitive approach to understand the cognitive link between the societal ideals and the way they shape the thought process of the victim in choosing their reaction towards abuse.

**Methodology**
The study was conducted according to the principle of Social Constructivism approach to gain insight into an existing phenomenon. It explores the social understanding of intimate partner Violence phenomenon by employing Critical Discourse Analysis. It distinguishes the dominant influencing factors involved in mapping the victim’s perception of intimate partner violence.

The research framework is inductive, bottom-up approach and the theoretical principle of study will refer to idiographic understanding of the contributing factors in determining a behavioral pattern. CDA would enable the acquisition of rich, unique data about experiences of each subject about the reasons that lead them to choose the coping mechanism. And the chosen method help gain deep insight into how individuals make sense of their situation and give meaning to their behavioral response. Using Constructivism approach for the study is an ideal choice because it does not rely on pre-defined coherent hypothesis because the aim is to identify key patterns of behavior that are different to every experience and the subjects ‘personal narrative that elaborates their social stand-point.

**Philosophical Foundation**
Our study follows a Social Constructivism approach towards understanding a social issue is the ideal framework that could explore a social issue from several different dimensions and draw a conclusion. Constructivism was the birth of the assumption that reality is socially constructed by the acceptance
or rejection of ideals. The inductive research on identifying specific factors that reinforced the development of traumatic bonding in the victim will lay the groundwork for establishing patterns and themes that could be generalized to a specific cultural or ethnic group and used as the basis for new research extrapolating another contributing factor in the occurrence of the event (Nicholson & Lutz, 2017).

The tradition of methodology followed for this study is Phenomenological constructivist approach. It is the scientific study of the appearance of a phenomenon to the consciousness of the individual experiencing it. Phenomenological method of our research are focused on exploring the description of the phenomenon as it was experienced and not as the explanation of the event. Phenomenology is rooted in the understanding of the meaning placed on the phenomenon and then deriving valuable conclusion using your own intuition and reflection that leads to the development of ideas that give direction to the research towards discovering of themes that will sustain the interpretive inquiry and the entire methodology (Gagnon et al., 2017).

Method
Critical discourse analysis examines the use of power and authority in influencing the participants that are often left unaware of the entire truth or motives of the manipulator. Some researchers have liked the roots of discourse analysis to Marxist’s theory of social powerplay. According to this theory power is constructed socially by manipulating the weaker group of the society and then it is economically maintained. Discourse analysis relies on language as a medium the explore the social issues, their structure and how they are constructed.

In line with the main objective, this study aims to explore manipulative ideas that create an influence on people without them knowing the extent of it effect. Specifically, the present study focuses on the understanding the structure of Psychological, emotional and socioeconomical status of IPA victims and how they are manipulated using their vulnerability. With data analysis we gained insight into the ways individual subjects develop trauma bonding with the abuse perpetrator.

Selection of Participants
Five recent articles were collected from national news apers in Pakistan. The article is interpreted using the Critical discourse analysis. This analysis provides important details on the discursive use of words, images and figures used in the media to portray the victims stand-point in the society. Their relations, connections emotional state will be investigated through deconstruction of socially constructed concepts, believes regarding Intimate Partner Abuse.

Data Analysis
This study is built on the socio-cognitive approach to understand the cognitive link between the societal ideals and the way they shape the thought process of the victim in choosing their reaction towards abuse.

Research Design
This research design focuses of critically deconstructing the labels, reinforces identities and professed believes mentioned in the article to identify the meaning and motive behind them. I used the CDA to expose manipulative influences of believes and ideals imposed on the victims by their family members and how their thoughts are influenced. We identified the trends used in the article also called as the discursive practices and link them to the traumatic bonds that IPA victims develop with their perpetrator.

Critical Discourse Analysis
Discourse 1
The first incursive Practice analyzed here is the threat and fear of low socio-economic status of victims that subconsciously sensitizes them to the abuse. The following phrases from the articles are analyzed
for their manipulative power.

“Extreme poverty and lack of education are plunging poor women into vicious cycle of domestic violence. There is an urgent need for spreading the level of awareness about women’s rights,” (Dawn news, 2016).

Many women also do not have the financial means to flee abuse along with their children (Farooq, 2021.).

“Those who report about husband or in-laws’ ill-treatment is not accepted back in the family. So, they keep silence” (Rizwan, 2021).

The provincial government, he said, had established women university and medical college to enable them to continue their education unhindered (Rizwan, 2021).

Young woman seen painting a slogan against domestic violence in Karachi. PHOTO: AYESHA MIR/EXPRESS (Farooq, 2021)

The aforementioned references from recent newspaper articles have used a particular discursive practice that demonstrate that the socio-economic standpoint of the victims is a liability for them. The use of words “spreading awareness” hints towards the peril of the victims’ lack of exposure and resources. They are dominated by their family; their decisions are influenced by others’ opinions which reflects their absence of choices and social support system to fall back on. If they decide to flee from the abusive relationship their financial dependency and their literacy level would force them to retract their decision.

Despite the legal support offered by the law against violence, they can not report abuse to the police for fear of losing the roof over their head. These existing predicaments construct a schema of thought patterns in the victims that begin to rationalize their abuse as a way of coping mechanism under the circumstances of no escape possible.

The Image shown in the article by Farooq (2021), a woman is seen protesting against domestic violence. Her attire is a marker, an exercise of her choice. women who can fend for themselves are not vulnerable to be influences by the societal construct of compromise in order to survive.

**Discourse 2**

The second Discursive practice analysed here is the reflection of Attachment Style or the connection between the Victim and their family members, primarily the parents. The way they a victim feels about fleeing from abuse and the actions they would take rely on the implicit influence from them.

Or perhaps it is the parents who think their reputation in the family and community is far more important than the mental health of their child (Enam, 2021).

But, as a child, I did not know why my mother was so cold and strict; why she never showed me any love or warmth. I did not know about her childhood or the feelings of loss and rejection she carried with her and passed on to me. I did not know any of this because feelings were not something we shared or discussed in my family. In fact, the only emotions my mother seemed capable of expressing were anger and sadness (Khan, 2021).

“I didn’t want to marry this man, but my mother and brothers arranged it. I told them many times, ‘I don’t want to get married’ but they had made their decision,” she says (Khan, 2021).

When she was 13 years old, her father arranged her marriage to a much older man (Farooq, 2021).

She told her family about the affair and the abuse, and that she wanted a divorce. “They didn’t believe me. He is my uncle’s son, he is family. So, a divorce was not an option,” she tells me (Khan 2021).

The evidence of attachment styles, relationship bonding between victims and their family members is of striking importance. This element is found to be present amongst all the victims chosen for the study. The article by Khan (2021), narrates stories of battered women from domestic violence shelter home Dastak. Critically analysing the discourse revealed their crippling anxiety regarding their parents’
reaction to their chose of divorce. the use of language to explain their nightmare suggests their lack of trust and a debilitating fear of further violence upon returning to their parents. The phrase “They didn’t believe me” and “my mother was so cold and strict” clearly shows they didn’t have a comfortable bond with their parents, they couldn’t reveal their pain to them. Their relationship constructed a thought pattern in victims that they are alone, no one would believe them, and one would stand by them. Such persistent thoughts force them to stay in the abusive relationship.

Discourse 3
The third reference of discursive practices analysed here reflects “cognitive Dissonance”. According to Psychological belief theory, certain belief gradually gets imprinted in the victims’ minds that convinces them that they are the ones at fault. They become complacent in their attempt to fight and eventually are desensitised to abuse.

Her body stiffens as she remembers the dream she had. “I dreamt that my parents locked me up in a closet in their house. I screamed, ‘No, I can’t live in a closet, I’m dying here, please let me out!’ I faint because I can’t breathe, and then I wake up” (Khan 2021).

From what I have seen, many women, who have had enough and speak to their families and acquaintances, are only driven back into their corner using the fear of being “dragged around” in courts for years, losing the custody of their children and the fear of their reputation being torn to shreds in the court, amongst others (Khan, 2021).

Sara Kazmi, a student, then sang a song, ‘Auratain uthi nahi tau zulm barhta jaye ga’ (If women don’t rise now, atrocities against them will only get stronger (Rizwan, 2021).

However, another legal myth often touted by family members of women especially, is telling them that they will definitely have to file a custody case or else lose their children, and this fear once instilled, successfully serves as a common deterrent for women who may be considering leaving an abusive partner (Khan, 2021).

There is a dire need to stop hindering women from seeking their rights. Going to court does not damage a woman’s reputation, and even if it does, it will only cease to do so after more women receive the support they need (Khan 2021).

The article by Rizwan (2021) states a phrase, “Auratain uthi nahi tau zulm barhta jaye ga” which clearly shows the peril of victims’ submission to abuse. In line with this are other phrases like “dragged around”, “fear instilled”, “Damaged reputation” suggests the guilt and fear instilled in the victims regarding Divorce that they refuse to fight so they could live with their children. They reference of legal complications regarding child custody is spread across the country and mothers are forces to stay quiet and make attempts to cope with abuse.

Discussion and Conclusion
The entire Discourse about Domestic Violence, exclusively Intimate partner abuse evident from the chose articles demonstrate the use of discursive practices that suggest the existence of a pattern in the victims’ psychology, emotions, and their societal standing. By closely analysing the five articles a co-existence of a triad of factors was found which answers the study question effectively. The un reports cases of IPA are a result of traumatic bonding created between the victim and the perpetrator. The contributing factors are the inability to escape caused by the lack of social and financial independency. Cognitive dissonance caused by socially constructed false believes about a women’s reputation after divorce and the legal complications of custody and lack of trust and support from family members is a recipe toward a toxic coping mechanism powered by a delusion that the victim is at fault if they are being abused.
This serves as a step further for future studies regarding mental health of Domestic Violence victims.
Discovering more underlying contributing factors could prove beneficial in creating resilient treatment plans for women in the shelter homes to help them get back toward life and fight for their survival.

References