Risk Factors for Husband-to-Wife Psychological Abuse in Korean American Communities in the United States

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This study examined the risk factors for husband-to-wife psychological abuse in a sample of 187 Korean American married men between the ages of 20 and 64, residing in Los Angeles County, California. A cross-sectional survey was conducted by using a structured self-administered questionnaire. In order to measure the respondents' use of psychological abuse, a subscale of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2), the Psychological Aggression Scale, consisting of four minor and four severe psychological abuse items, was employed. In the multiple regression models, only marital satisfaction was found to be negatively associated with minor psychological abuse, and psychological abuse in general, perpetrated by the respondents. The number of domestic violence survivors the respondents knew was significantly positively associated with severe psychological abuse, as was the frequency with which the respondents witnessed parental abuse during childhood. Implications for clinical social workers and mental health practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: Risk factors, psychological abuse, emotional abuse, wife abuse, Korean Americans

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1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against women is one of the most serious social problems in contemporary America. It has been estimated that at least 1.8 million women per year are physically abused by their intimate male partners in the United States (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998; Mahoney, Williams, and West, 2001). The term domestic violence is defined as “a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners” (Ganley, 1998: 8). As this definition points out, domestic violence can encompass more than just physical attacks. It can include physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse.

Since the beginning of the study of domestic violence, researchers have identified the psychological abuse of women by their male partners as an important form in the intimate partner relationship (Schumacher, Smith Slep, and Heyman, 2001) and have viewed it as a precursor to physical abuse or battering of battered women (Follingstad, 2007; Follingstad et al., 1990; O'Leary, 1999). Specifically, in a study of 234 women who had a history of physical abuse, 99% reported being abused psychologically by their partners (Follingstad et al., 1990). Psychological abuse not only can lead to physical abuse but also affects many other aspects of its victims’ lives. O'Leary (1999) revealed that psychological abuse had a greater adverse effect on women than physical abuse. Psychological abuse often makes a victim lose self-esteem. When abusers regularly devalue, degrade, and mistreat their respective partners, the victims may begin to believe the deprecatory messages they receive (Power, Gebhard, and Dakake, 1993). Furthermore, abusers often isolate those whom they mistreat, thereby diminishing the victims’ access to friends and relatives who could support or help them. The victims, therefore, often lose their relationships with friends and family, which severely reduces the overall quality of the victims’ lives. If an abused woman has few emotional or financial resources, she may find herself trapped and too overwhelmed to figure out how to escape.