

The moderating role of empathic concern and perspective-taking in breaking the cycle of psychological violence to realize Sustainable Good Well-being

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Abstract. Psychological violence is a serious obstacle to achieving the SDGs because of its broad impact on the well-being of individuals and society. This research investigated how perspective-taking and empathic concern moderate the relationship between the experience of being a victim of emotional abuse and the likelihood of being a perpetrator in the future. The researchers conducted a cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach and used online questionnaires for the data collection. It involved 750 participants aged 18-25 years who were or had been in a heterosexual relationship for at least six months in the Greater Jakarta area. The instruments were the Multi-dimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse - Short Form ($\alpha = .933$), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index on perspective taking ($\alpha = .669$), and the empathic concern subscale ($\alpha = .645$). The collected data was analysed using a moderated regression model with JASP 0.18.3. The results show that perspective-taking has a significant moderating effect ($B = -.034, p < .001$), but empathic concern does not show a significant effect as a moderator ($B = .0001, p = .983$). Therefore, theoretical models that focus on the development of cognitive empathy abilities are needed to understand psychological violence in more depth.

1 Introduction

Gaslighting was selected as the word of the year 2022 by Merriam-Webster, the oldest dictionary publishing company in America [1]. It is a tactic, behaviour and mental manipulation in a relationship where the perpetrator (gaslighter) maintains control, power, and feelings of always right by destroying the sensations, thoughts, actions, affective states, and even self-perception of the victim (gaslighter) [2, 3]. The term gaslighting was first used by Patrick Hamilton in 1938 in a play in London. In the drama, which is about middle-class married life, a wife noticed that her husband has dimmed the gas lights at home. However, the husband said that it was only in her imagination. Even, the husband emphasized that their house was as bright as before [1]

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Gaslighting is a subtle and covert model of emotional and psychological abuse [4, 5]. Interpersonal relationships which, by nature, should prioritize love, respect and equality are disrupted by unhealthy behaviour, harassment and abuse [3]. The victim of gaslighting usually goes through three stages of experience: 1) distrust; in this initial stage, the victim is still realistic. He or she does not simply believe what the partner says or does, 2) survive; at this stage, the victim struggles to defend his or her point of view, and 3) depression; at this stage, the victim is overwhelmed by his or her partner's manipulation and is typically depressed [5, 6]. Fortunately, the searches for the term gaslighting throughout 2022 increased, which proves the rise of public anxiety and awareness of emotional abuse.

Previous research shows that emotional abuse occurs more frequently than physical abuse, and it typically predicts the beginning of physical abuse [7–9]. Victims of emotional abuse often feel that the fault is on them and do not realize that they experience abuse [10]. Unfortunately, they tend to be the next perpetrators in the future [11–14]. Through this vulnerability perspective, bad experiences can cause a decrease in problem-solving competence so that negative experiences recur [15, 16].

In the context of child-to-parent and sibling abuse, meta-analysis research suggested that children who have been victims of certain abuse by their parents have a 71% higher possibility of being perpetrators against their parents [17]. In the concept of social learning, children see their parents' aggressive behaviour to solve problems [18]. The cognitive process in social learning presents a series of experiences that will be used to guide individual behaviour in the future. Social learning does not suddenly stop once childhood ends. Social learning is a permanent social cognition process that shapes human development throughout life [19], including, but not limited to, the time when individuals turn into adolescents, adults, and even older people.

Based on the website of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of Indonesia (kemenpppa.go.id), cases of abuse in Indonesia reached 15,871 as of January 1, 2023, with abuse against adults reaching 6,389 cases, the majority of which were cases against 18–44-year-old people (5,763 cases). Based on the data, psychological or emotional abuse experienced by adults reached 2,495 cases. Due to the lack of data distinguishing the extent of abuse perpetrated by boyfriends and friends, this research focuses on violence committed by boyfriends considering the prevalent orientation towards dating in intimate relationships among adults.

Unpleasant relational experiences, including emotional abuse by a partner, frequently result in negative emotions [20] and can shape the victim's perception that such harm is acceptable [21]. This rationalization contributes to a cycle of violence where the victims can carry out the same emotional abuse against their partner in the future. Correspondingly, other studies demonstrated that some victims are driven to become perpetrators of violence because of their experiences of being victims [22]. The experience of being a victim is the strongest antecedent in predicting violent behaviour [23]. Stopping this cycle of violence is crucial as individuals who have been both victims and perpetrators are at a greater risk of mental health issues compared to those who have only been victims or perpetrators [24]. This problem is a serious obstacle to achieving the SDGs because of its broad impact on the welfare of individuals and society. Addressing and preventing psychological violence is an important step towards achieving inclusive and equitable sustainable development.

Previous studies show that children who commit violence against their parents have lower levels of social and emotional competence [23, 25]. In addition, interventions to promote social and emotional skills have been found to reduce violent behaviour [26]. Social and emotional competence has also been identified as a factor that protects children and adolescents from violent behaviour, such as bullying in real life and in the digital world [23,27]. In this study, the researchers examined the role of social and emotional skills as

determinants of the strong relationship between victims and perpetrators of emotional abuse in dating.

Empathy is a fundamental skill in social interaction [28]. It is a prominent trait that can explain the mechanisms behind prosocial and antisocial behaviour [28–30]. Low levels of empathy are associated with a greater risk of recidivism in antisocial offenders [23,31]. On the other hand, high empathy has been proven to prevent men and women from becoming perpetrators of violence [23,32,33]. Empathy is divided into two, cognitive empathy and affective empathy [28]. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand the mental state or feelings of others, while affective empathy refers to the ability to experience the same feelings as others [34]. In other words, cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand a situation from another person's perspective.

The cognitive component of empathy is also known as perspective taking, the willingness to understand others [28,35,36]. Perspective-taking is a fundamental social skill necessary to create healthy social attachments [35]. However, not everyone is able or encouraged to take other people's perspectives, especially in their intimate relationships [35,37]. Moreover, the experience of being a victim of abuse will generate a selfish mindset in the victim, so that they justify that being the perpetrator is acceptable [20,21].

The ability to experience the same feelings as those experienced by others in this research is operationalized through the variable empathic concern, which refers to a concern for the emotional well-being of others [38,39]. Empathic concern has become a common focus and driving force that explains the motivations and mechanisms behind prosocial and antisocial behaviour [28]. Considering that emotional violence is antisocial behaviour, this research also examines the moderating role of empathic concern on the strength of the relationship between victims and perpetrators of emotional abuse in dating.

Therefore, this research investigates how psychological factors can moderate the relationship between the experience of emotional abuse as a victim and the possibility of becoming a perpetrator in the future. The variables included as moderators in this research are perspective-taking and empathic concern. Furthermore, most research shows that either men or women can experience emotional violence, both as victims and perpetrators, at equal rates [40–43]. Thus, this research also considers the role of gender in the relationship between experiences of being a victim in predicting the possibility of becoming a perpetrator of emotional abuse.

The hypotheses formulated are: (1) there is a positive relationship between the frequency of being a victim and the frequency of being a perpetrator of emotional abuse; (2) perspective-taking moderates the relationship between emotional abuse victimization and emotional abuse perpetrator, where an increase in perspective taking can reduce the tendency to become emotional abuse perpetrator; (3) empathic concern moderates the relationship between emotional abuse victimization and emotional abuse perpetrator, which means an increase of empathic concern can reduce the tendency to become an emotional abuse perpetrator; and (4) gender moderates the relationship between emotional abuse victimization and emotional abuse perpetrator, with significant differences in number between female and male group.

2 Method

2.1 Participant

This study involved 750 respondents who were or had been in a heterosexual relationship for at least six months around the Greater Jakarta area. They consisted of men (N=182, 24.3%) and women (N=568, 75.7%) aged 18 – 25 years (M= 20.67, SD=1.919). The adopted

sampling technique was non-random with convenience sampling, which is selecting samples based on ease of access [44].

2.2 Instrument of measurement

2.2.1 Multidimensional measure of emotional abuse - short form (MMEA-SF)

MMEA-SF is a multidimensional instrument that assesses acts of coercion or hostility aimed at causing emotional harm or threat to a certain person [8]. It measures four subtypes of psychological abuse, for both victims and perpetrators. On the victimization subscale, respondents were asked to convey self-reports of coercive or hostile actions by their partners (for example: 'trying to make you feel guilty for not spending enough time together'). Meanwhile, on the perpetrator subscale, they were asked to show self-reports of coercive or hostile actions committed by themselves towards their partner (for example: 'trying to make their partner feel guilty for not spending enough time together'). The instrument was translated into Indonesian via forward and back translation by three experts.

The MMEA-SF instrument consisted of 16 items with four subtypes, restrictive engulfment, denigration, hostile withdrawal, and domination/intimidation. Respondents were asked to report how often they and their partners (or former partners) engaged in coercive or hostile behaviour during the past six months on a 7-point Likert frequency scale (0 = never; 1 = once; 2 = twice; 3 = 3-5 times; 4 = 6-10 times; 5 = 11-20 times; 6 = more than 20 times). The scores of the four subscales were obtained by summing up the response categories selected by participants. The scores ranged from 0 to 42 for each subscale. The researcher used all parts of the original instrument, so that the psychometric properties of the instrument were in accordance with the original version. The final translated MMEA-SF instrument has been tested and obtained a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of .933 and could be said to have very good reliability.

2.2.2 Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

IRI measures a multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy [45]. Empathy is the ability to understand other people which includes cognitive and affective processes. Therefore, this instrument is designed to be more comprehensive with a cognitive and affective empathy subscale. Cognitive empathy was measured using the perspective-taking subscale to indicate one's ability to see from another person's point of view. Affective empathy was measured with the empathic concern subscale which indicated one's ability to involve feelings of concern and feel the emotions of others (e.g. 'I am often moved by the events I see'). Each subscale –perspective taking and empathic concern subscales – consisted of 7 items using a Likert scale with 5 answer options which are given to respondents to be filled in online. The answer range for this instrument was 0 to 4, with a detailed scale of 0 (does not describe me well) to 4 (describes myself very well). Next, the researchers used the total score to measure the respondents' perspective-taking and empathic concern. The researcher used all parts of the original instrument, so that the psychometric properties of the instrument were in accordance with the original version. The final translated instrument has been tested and obtained Cronbach Alpha coefficients of .669 for perspective taking and .645 for empathic concern, so they can be said to be reliable.

2.3 Design and procedure

This research is a cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach. Data was collected through an online questionnaire filled in by respondents who met the criteria. The researchers obtained permission to conduct research after passing an ethical test from the Nusantara Scientific Psychology Consortium before the data collection via an online questionnaire. Participants were informed that their decision to participate in the study was voluntary and all provided data would be kept confidential. The researchers also proactively provided information regarding the availability of counselling services to minimize the possibility of uncomfortable conditions for respondents after data collection.

2.4 Data analysis

The data was analysed using a moderation regression model to examine the effect of moderating variables on the relationship between emotional abuse victimization and emotional abuse perpetrators. This analysis was carried out with JASP 0.18.3 statistical software to ensure accurate and reliable results. Tolerance and VIF statistics were utilized to test multicollinearity, and the findings showed that it was suitable in every situation.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, and correlation.

Variable	M	SD	Perpetrator	Victim	PT	EC
Perpetrator	18.44	14.169	—			
Victim	20.221	17.877	.710**	—		
PT	14.727	3.102	-.076*	.010	—	
EC	17.344	4.053	.011	-.042	.041**	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

From Table 1 above we can see that the correlation between victims and perpetrators of emotional violence is strong ($r = .710, p < .001$). This supports the statement that victims are driven to become perpetrators of violence because of their experiences of being victims. It can also be seen that there is a weak correlation between perspective-taking ability and empathic concern ($r = .041, p < .001$) which shows that increasing ability in perspective-taking tends to be accompanied by an increase in empathic concern and vice versa. In addition, the correlation between actor and perspective-taking was weak and in a negative direction ($r = -.076, p < .05$). This means that the higher the frequency of someone committing psychological violence, the lower their ability to take perspective and vice versa.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Model information

This study used moderation regression to examine the effect of moderating variables on the relationship between victims and perpetrators of emotional abuse. This model successfully explained 56% of the variability in the frequency of being a perpetrator of emotional abuse ($R\text{-squared} = 0.560$), it strongly predicts the dependent variables.

Table 2. Parameter estimates.

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
Victim → Perpetrator	0.899	0.131	6.884	<.001
PT → Perpetrator	0.077	0.194	.394	.693
Victim: PT → Perpetrator	-0.034	0.007	-4.736	<.001
EC → Perpetrator	0.071	0.148	.482	.629
Victim: EC → Perpetrator	0.0001	0.005	.021	.983
Sex → Perpetrator	-2.646	1.321	-2.002	.045
Victim: Sex → Perpetrator	-0.055	0.049	-1.127	.260

* PT: perspective taking; EC: emphatic concern

3.2 H1: The relationship between victim and perpetrator

The result demonstrated that there is a strong and significant positive relationship between the frequency of being a victim and that of being a perpetrator of emotional abuse with an estimated value of 0.899 and a significance level of 0.001 ($p < 0.005$). It means that individuals who frequently experience emotional abuse have a higher likelihood of being perpetrators in the future.

3.3 H2: The moderating effect of perspective-taking

Moderation by perspective-taking suggests that one’s ability to understand others’ perspectives can reduce the negative impact of emotional abuse victimization. The result showed that perspective-taking has a significant moderating effect with an estimated value of -0.034 and a significance level of 0.001 ($p < 0.005$). It means that individuals with higher levels of perspective-taking have a lower risk of being emotional abusers in the future even though they have even been the victims.

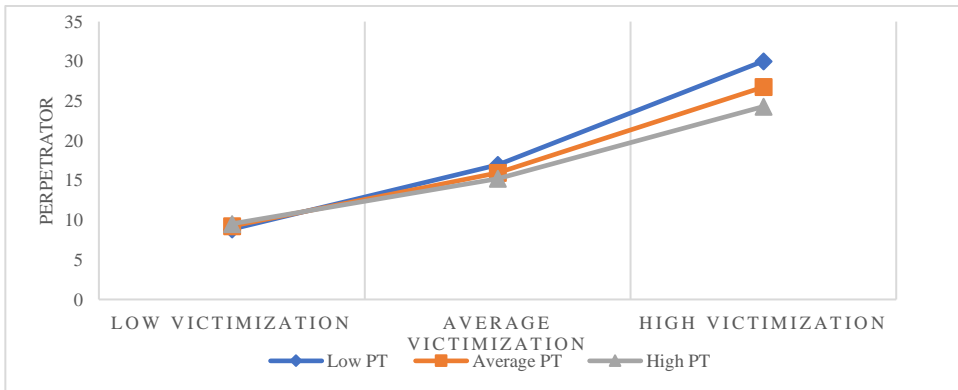


Fig. 1. The interaction plot of perspective taking effect on the relationship between emotional abuse victimization and emotional abuse perpetrator.

The interaction plot test shows a decreasing effect. As the perspective-taking of an emotional abuse victim increases, the frequency of being a perpetrator decreases. On the other hand, when the perspective-taking of the victim decreases, the frequency of being a perpetrator increases.

3.4 H3: The moderating effect of empathic concern

Empathic concern does not show a significant effect as a moderator in this relationship with an estimated value of 0.0001 and a significance level of 0.983 ($p > 0.005$). It suggested that an individual's level of empathic concern does not strongly change the relationship between emotional abuse victimization and the possibility of being perpetrators in the future.

3.5 H4: The moderating effect of gender

Gender has a significant effect on the likelihood of being a perpetrator of emotional abuse. Men show a lower tendency to be perpetrators of emotional violence compared to women with an estimated value of -2.646 and a significance level of 0.045 ($p < 0.005$). However, gender does not have a significant effect as a moderator in the relationship between victims and perpetrators of emotional abuse with an estimated value of 0.0001 and a significance level of -0.055 ($p > 0.005$).

The result of this study indicated that the experience of being a victim of emotional abuse significantly increases the possibility of being the next perpetrator in the future. This finding is consistent with the cycle of violence theory, where a victimization experience is the strongest antecedent in predicting violent behaviour [22, 23]. This vicious cycle leads to unending emotional aggression, which will influence people's well-being both individually and as a society. We must dissolve the vicious cycle of emotional violence for achieve inclusive and equitable sustainable development that is in line with the SDGs.

We found that perspective-taking and empathic concern were important indicators of emotional abuse [46, 47]. A significant correlation exists between low cognitive empathy and offending [46, 47]. The concept of empathy highlights that various types of violence are linked to distinct perpetrator profiles, and perspective-taking is related to all forms of violence [48]. High perspective-taking abilities have been proven to be a protective factor that can reduce the possibility of emotional abuse victims becoming the next perpetrators. On the other hand, moderation by empathic concern does not show a significant effect. The feeling of concern and empathy towards others does not strongly alter the cycle of violence. When analysing the results for victimization, empathic concern was found to have a positive correlation with sexual coercion [49], so each form of violence has its own nature that cannot be generalized. The theoretical implication of these findings is that each type of violence requires more in-depth exploration.

The results of studies on empathic concern indicate that individuals with high levels of empathic concern are more likely to interpret their partner's violent behaviour because of frustration and, as a result, are more accepting of the violence committed by their partner [49]. Individuals with this type of empathetic concern tend to experience high relationship satisfaction [50], because they believe they are the only ones who truly understand their partner. These misconceptions about relationships can lead individuals to remain trapped in emotionally abusive situations. This dynamic demonstrates that empathic concern has a dual nature; while it can serve as a protective factor, it can also act as a defence mechanism that rationalizes violent behaviour to preserve positive aspects of the relationship. These findings can provide insight for us to find out in what situations empathic concern will be a protective factor and in what context it will be a risk factor.

The length of intimate relationships was found to have a positive correlation with perceived psychological abuse. A significant amount of research indicates that violence is more likely to happen in more serious dating relationships and those that last longer [51]. Considering the age of respondents in emerging adulthood provides insight into the quality of relationships at the start of young adulthood, where commitment is often still developing. This study did not take information about the duration of the relationship the respondents

had, so this could have influenced the research results. This is also a limitation of the study that can be addressed in future research. Furthermore, researchers recommend there is a need to understand other factors that can moderate the relationship between being a victim and perpetrator of violence, including environmental and social factors that may play an important role in breaking the cycle of violence.

4 Conclusion

This study emphasizes the extreme need for interventions that focus not only on the emotional abuse perpetrators but also on the victims so that the cycle of violence can be interrupted. Therefore, interventions that focus on developing the ability to understand others' perspectives are required to prevent future violence. Besides, gender also plays a prominent role in explaining the psychological dynamics between the victims and perpetrators. It suggested that men demonstrated a lower risk of being emotional abuse perpetrators. Therefore, an intervention for abuse prevention is supposed to consider gender differences for effectiveness.

Acknowledgments.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat (LPPM) Universitas Negeri Jakarta for providing the necessary resources, facilities, and for their financial support without which this research would not have been possible.

Disclosure of Interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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