

FILIPINO BATTERED GIRLFRIENDS: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THEIR COUNTERFACTUALS.*

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Counterfactual thinking is imagining how a situation might have turned out differently from what actually happened. It is a lodestone of information about what a person thinks about a particular experience. For example, about a specific battering incident. A description and analysis could reveal personal perceptions about its cause, changeability and controllability, and its negativity and atypicality.

The study is an attempt to make a descriptive analysis of the content of counterfactual statements as reflective of counterfactual thought that Filipino battered girlfriends generate when mentally undoing battering episodes they experienced.

Objectives of the Study:

The study aims to:

- 1) document the narratives and verbalizations of Filipino battered girlfriends when they talk about their battering experiences,

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- 2) describe their experiences of abuse and the circumstances surrounding it in the way they describe it,
- 3) describe the content of the counterfactual statements of Filipino battered girlfriends,
- 4) add to the existing local literature on battered women by describing a specific cognitive mechanism, counterfactual thinking, in response to battering experiences, and
- 5) give some recommendations on intervention or treatment points that could help battered girlfriends learn or re-learn cognitive skills in planning out future actions on their own.

Methodology

The study looked into the stories of eight women who have been physically battered by their boyfriends. They were interviewed in-depth about their family, their relationships, the development of the abusive relationship, how they usually fight, specific battering incidents, help sources, their contemplations about the future, and sometimes their boyfriends. Documenting their experiences started by having verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. Counterfactual-related verbalization were then culled from the whole mass of statements of each woman's narratives and verbalizations. The third step was to backtranslate all the counterfactual-related verbalizations that were expressed in Filipino. Language plays an important factor in building and testing the concept of counterfactuals because it is a foreign concept, and is therefore dependent on the language that defines and articulates it. Backtranslating makes counterfactual patterns comparable within and across the cases. It takes into account the cultural norms that surround such verbalizations and the manner

in which Filipino women think about specific incidents. Analyzing the counterfactuals involved a panel of judges versed in cognitive psychology, clinical psychology, who have worked with battered women, and/or have done research in this area. Patterns of counterfactual and counterfactual-related thinking for each woman and for the group as a whole were described.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited in the number of participants it had. The small number makes it difficult to generalize the findings for this group. However, having a small group rigorously puts a theory to test. The depth of data that is gathered can determine whether a concept and the theories that build it are powerful enough to be observed in a specific group. Another limitation is that the study does not systematically measure the assumptions of theory. Instead, it describes components of these assumptions as they emerge.

Findings of the Study

The study found that something about one's family influence the development of an abusive relationship or how one behaves in it. The development of the abusive relationships was generally not distinct from that of the nonviolent. Strictures of parents did not usually work. For one, most of them met in school or in church activities. Parents' strictness in not allowing their daughters to attend parties does not protect them from meeting abusive men in school or in church. First impressions did not belie a tendency towards violence. Abusers are not monsters. They do have good sides to them and they do not behave violently all the time. This makes it difficult for battered girlfriends to leave abusive relationships. The ordinariness of some abusive relationships supports the idea that violence is a continuum that supposedly normal men do in

supposedly normal relationships. However, the longer into the acquaintance or friendship, the abusers showed signs of violent behaviors. Violence mostly starts at the emotional level. We read of excessively jealous and possessive boyfriends who control and restrict their girlfriends. Reasons for fights almost always revolve around the boyfriend's insecurity and controlling behavior. Emotional abuse easily ushered in physical assault. Battering incidents mostly erupt in the context of fights. Abuse, when it starts to happen, always gets worse. Many of the women did not retaliate at the first instance. Likewise, some retaliations did not result in the cessation of violence. Either, the retaliation was empty or was too weak. Still, there were some instances where retaliation did not result in subsequent physical assault.

Fear, low self-worth, and depressive moods were experienced by the women in response to the battering. Many kept to themselves at several points of the abusive relationship for reasons ranging from habit, distrust, shame, and fear. Ending the violent relationship was mostly for the reason that they could not anymore tolerate and accept the way their boyfriends treat them shabbily. Only one woman's relationship with her abusive boyfriend ended specifically for the physical violence that was happening.

The study found these contexts and elements that surround the abuse influence how one thinks counterfactually about battering incidents. Larger than the counterfactual connection that these contexts provide, insights about herself, her experience, and her thoughts about violence against women in general were brought out. Contrary to popular perceptions, battered girlfriends do not like being hit. They are not masochists as many people think they are. Although some may have found some lessons that were served in the abusive relationship, not one positivized the battering. Reactions to the violence remained negative even if it has been going on for years.

The influence of cultural elements envelopes the concepts related to counterfactual thinking. Perceptions of a situation's unexpectedness and changeability are influenced by cultural elements. Unexpectedness must be ascertained whether this is borne by the belief that violence is wrong wherever it is found and whoever its victims, or whether it is borne by the belief that it should not happen to her or that it should not happen in that specific situation. Unexpectedness must be clarified in a socio-cultural context where violence is still predominantly accepted and used to maintain and exert control in close relationships. On the perception of changeability, many of the women consistently communicated the idea that their boyfriends' violence was something immutable. If violence is a given in the lives of many Filipino women, thinking how things could have happened differently would always put attention on the woman's behavior.

Counterfactual thinking was not always as simple as saying that a battering incident could or could not have happened differently. Alternative realities for them was not an all-or-nothing concept but rather a continuum where such realities can be weak or strong possibilities to actual scenarios. In a scenario where a man's violence is immutable, counterfactual thinking would never be as simple as saying that something could be totally undone. One will have qualified counterfactuals, those that modify but do not undo a battering situation.

The women most often pointed to their own behaviors as the causes for specific battering incidents although changeability and controllability figure largely in these. Focusing on their own behaviors was mostly a reflection of the immutability of their boyfriends' violence rather than a reflection of the belief that they are at fault for the violence. In other words, in a scenario where violence is accepted and is immutably rooted in culture, the woman would change her own behavior when mentally configuring and undoing such scenarios.

All the women in the group were able to imagine better alternative realities for themselves, suggesting that they have the capacity to visualize a situation where they are not assaulted by their partners or where they are severed from the abusive relationship. The fact that they were still able to envision better outcomes signifies that they have not been reduced to believing that better realities are beyond their reach. Imagining how things could have turned out better gave them clues as to how they can achieve these outcomes in the future. Counterfactual thinking can help women with difficulty in thinking and planning for the future because it makes them focus on a specific and real incident. It organizes their thoughts about it and involves a systematic way of looking at the relationship between events and outcomes. Moreover, it involves personal perceptions of reality, viable alternatives, and viable courses of action. In all, counterfactuals, because they reflect certain beliefs and ideas that a woman has of her own experience, are a good starting point to mobilize her towards achieving better outcomes for herself.

Recommendations

1. More sophisticated data gathering tools would capture richer information and detail that are crucial for understanding Filipino battered girlfriends.
2. Employing systematic measures that will further test the assumptions of theory can build or rephrase existing ideas about abuse and counterfactual thinking in the context of abuse.
3. Intervention should be mindful of the kind of cognitions and counterfactuals that an abused woman generates. Conceptualizing instrumental action plans is perhaps the most important aspect of counterfactual thinking. Recommendations for advocacy is likewise forwarded.

4. Advocacy should help put forward into awareness that gender violence exists in contexts other than domestic settings. Dating violence also buttresses the urgency that violence against women is a widespread social problem. The fact that some of its victims are not adults, creates an urgency to lobby for their interests and welfare and to call for more effective intervention programs and support for battered girlfriends.