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## Group psychological abuse: Taxonomy and severity of its components

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to delimit group psychological abuse through a psychosocial approach. An operational definition of the phenomenon and a taxonomy of group psychological abuse strategies were proposed based on a review of the scientific literature. A panel of 31 experts in the area evaluated the content of the taxonomy and judged the severity of the strategies through a Delphi study. Group psychological abuse was defined by the application of abusive strategies, their continued duration, and their ultimate aim, i.e., subjugation of the individual. The taxonomy showed adequate content validity. Experts' judgments allowed for hierarchically organizing the strategies based on their severity, being the most severe those directed to the emotional area. Operationalizing, classifying, and organizing the strategies hierarchically contributes to a better delimitation of the phenomenon, which is useful for both the academic and applied fields.

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## Abuso psicológico en grupos: taxonomía y severidad de sus componentes

### RESUMEN

Se diseñó un estudio con el propósito de delimitar el abuso psicológico en grupos desde una aproximación psicosocial. A partir de una revisión de la literatura científica, se propuso una definición del fenómeno y una taxonomía de las estrategias de abuso psicológico en grupos. Un panel de 31 expertos evaluó el contenido de la taxonomía y juzgó la severidad de las estrategias a través de un estudio Delphi. El abuso psicológico en grupos es definido por la aplicación de estrategias abusivas, su duración continuada y su objetivo último, el sometimiento del individuo. La taxonomía mostró una adecuada validez de contenido. El juicio de expertos permitió jerarquizar las estrategias en función de su severidad, siendo las más severas aquellas que inciden en el ámbito emocional. Operativizar, clasificar y jerarquizar las estrategias contribuye a una mejor delimitación del fenómeno, útil tanto en el campo académico como en el aplicado.

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#### Palabras clave:

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Group Psychological Abuse (hereafter GPA) refers to a process that can occur in group settings with an intense, continued interaction associated with recruiting and maintaining followers (Langone & Chambers, 1991). This process involves a set of behaviors or strategies that combine forms relevant to the field of aggression, ranging from undue influence to interpersonal control, coercion, and abuse (Taylor, 2004).

These behaviors have been studied on the basis of the interpersonal relations that take place in different group settings, in particular those that have been called manipulative groups (Almendros, Gámez-Guadix, Carrolles, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011). Some authors have studied these behaviors in elite sports teams (Stirling & Kerr, 2014), in youth gangs (Ulloa, Dyson, & Wynes, 2012), or in terrorist groups (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2009; Trujillo, Ramírez, & Alonso, 2009).

Psychological abuse applied in group settings has mainly been studied in manipulative groups, perhaps due to the unexpected nature of some destructive behaviors that can occur in them (Bohm & Alison, 2001). Some extreme evidence of these behaviors can be seen in the so-called collective suicides of People's Temple members in Guyana in 1978, Heaven's Gate members in San Diego (US) in 1997,

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or Ordre du Temple Solaire members in various locations (Switzerland, France, and Canada) in 1994 and 1995 (Dein & Littlewood, 2000). Multiple testimonies from former members of these types of groups report having suffered persistent forms of psychological abuse (e.g., Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Other studies have found clinically significant psychological symptoms and/or adjustment problems attributable to these abusive behaviors in this population (Aronoff, Linn, & Malinosky, 2000).

Despite the social relevance of GPA, the scientific community has not reached a strong consensus about the elements defining the phenomenon or the abusive behaviors found in group settings, even less than the degree of agreement about psychological abuse against the partner (Kelly, 2004). In addition, the severity of these behaviors, which is essential in predicting the damage suffered by their victims, has not been adequately evaluated. In order to contribute to improving the delimitation of GPA, this study aims to answer the following three questions:

- What are the basic elements of GPA?
- How can GPA behaviors be classified?
- Do these abusive behaviors differ in terms of their severity?

### Group Psychological Abuse

The study of the social influence processes in group settings has focused on mechanisms such as conformity, obedience, compliance, the power of group dynamics, or the factors explaining group influence, such as the strength, number, and immediacy of the sources of influence (Latané, 1981). However, most studies, which usually analyze legitimate and non-continuous episodes of social interaction, are not sufficient to explain some forms of influence that, exerted continuously over time in groups and due to their intensity, can include abusive components.

To designate the forms of undue influence, control, coercion, and abuse occurring on a continued basis in group settings, the term Group Psychological Abuse has been proposed (Langone & Chambers, 1991). In addition, other terms have been used in recent literature, such as emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2014) or intense indoctrination (Baron, 2000). The focus on psychological abuse involves the analysis of the abusive behaviors taking place in group settings, without prejudging the dynamics characterizing the entire group in which they occur (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). However, the first approaches to the study of the phenomenon came from investigations analyzing the practices of certain groups labeled as cults or manipulative groups.

Most definitions of psychological abuse in this type of groups mention the use of influence and abuse strategies. These strategies have been described as systematic and intentional (Langone, 1992), planned, coordinated, and hidden (Singer & Lalich, 1995), or manipulative and exploitative (Almendros et al., 2011). Some definitions have focused on the intended purposes of the abuse, such as controlling the group members (Singer & Lalich, 1995) or subordinating their well-being to the benefit of the leader (Almendros et al., 2011).

Other definitions of GPA highlight its adverse consequences for the people affected. Thus, it has been defined as a set of techniques that influence how people think, feel, and act, altering their identity (Hassan, 2013). Likewise, Langone (1992) stated that psychological abuse involves: (a) controlling information in order to manipulate thinking and judgment, (b) coercing choice, (c) fragmenting and altering personal identity, and (d) undermining feelings of self-worth.

The differences in the proposed definitions seem to confirm that psychological abuse, both in groups and in other settings where it has been studied, is an elusive phenomenon with dim limits (Almendros et al., 2011; Follingstad, 2007). Probably for this reason, the proposed definitions involve limitations such as being excessively broad and imprecise,

including elements that are hardly operational, or trying to delimit the abusive action by combining it with its possible consequences.

### Classifications of the Group Psychological Abuse Strategies

As long as the different abusive behaviors and strategies are one of the key elements in defining GPA, it seems appropriate to delimit them as accurately as possible, so that they can be identified, evaluated, and prevented. Most studies attempting to delimit these strategies have proposed lists of abusive behaviors that can be applied in a group (e.g., Langone, 1982; West & Singer, 1980). Other investigations have focused on specifying the conditions that should be met in the group to enhance the implementation of these behaviors (Ofshe & Singer, 1986; Singer & Lalich, 1995).

The proposed classifications of psychological abuse strategies have mainly been based on four viewpoints according to: (a) the integration stage of the subject in the group where these strategies are usually applied (Baron, 2000; Clark, Langone, Schecter, & Daly, 1981; Zerlin, 1983); (b) the specific type of strategy (Andersen, 1985); (c) the degree of coercion characterizing them (Langone, as cited in Rodríguez-Carballeira, 1992); and (d) personal or situational components to which the action of each strategy is directed (Coates, 2012; Hassan, 2013; Rodríguez-Carballeira, 1992).

Other approaches to the classification of GPA strategies come from the measurement instruments proposed for the assessment of the phenomenon. The Group Psychological Abuse Scale (GPA-S; Almendros et al., 2012; Chambers et al., 1994) is divided into four subscales: Compliance, Exploitation, Anxious Dependency, and Mind Control; while the Across Groups Psychological Abuse and Control Scale (AGPAC; Wolfson, as cited in Almendros et al., 2011) is divided into three subscales: Emotional Abuse, Isolation-Control of Activity, and Verbal Abuse. In the development of the Individual Cult Experience Index (ICE; Winocur, Whitney, Sorensen, Vaughn, & Foy, 1997), questions related to controlling group members, emotional manipulation, and experiences of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse were considered. However, these authors suggested interpreting the overall instrument score as the "extent of exposure to cult experiences".

Some of the limitations identified in previous studies designed to delimit or evaluate GPA are: (a) including strategies labeled as abusive without defining them operationally; (b) covering only some abusive strategies that can occur in groups; (c) formulating some strategies by combining different types of abusive behaviors; and (d) highlighting the adverse consequences for people's health and well-being, either by mixing them with abusive strategies or considering them as strategies themselves. Based on these limitations, there is a clear need to develop more precise, comprehensive, and operational classifications of GPA strategies.

### Severity of the Group Psychological Abuse Strategies

GPA usually produces substantial costs for the affected people, either in terms of money, time, missed opportunities, self-harm, or harm to their loved ones (Baron, 2000). Most studies evaluating former members of groups in which abusive behaviors were applied have found that a significant part of this population experienced psychological and social difficulties after leaving the group (Aronoff et al., 2000). Some of the difficulties involve establishing social relationships, cognitive deficits, feelings of loss, anger, blame and shame, depression, anxiety, dissociation, self-destructive tendencies, or post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Coates, 2010; Malinoski, Langone, & Lynn, 1999; Matthews & Salazar, 2014).

A person can experience a variety of abusive behaviors in a group that can lead to different costs or damages. Therefore, the severity, defined here as the degree of damage that can potentially be caused by each abusive behavior, is likely to differ among them (Follingstad, 2007). A priori, some behaviors characteristic of emotional abuse,

such as threats or humiliation, would be expected to have a different potential to cause damage from other behaviors aimed at the control of information, for instance. In this regard, the severity of abusive action is one of the variables that might predict the degree of seriousness of the effects on health and well-being of people experiencing abuse.

To date, no study has directly addressed the severity of abusive behaviors in group settings. In addition, when examining the seriousness of the possible consequences of GPA, very few studies have differentiated among the various abusive behaviors experienced (e.g., Winocur et al., 1997).

### Study Objectives

Based on this review of the background and the limitations identified, this study proposes three key objectives: (a) to delimit the basic defining elements characterizing GPA; (b) to develop and validate a taxonomy of psychological abuse strategies utilized in group settings; and (c) to hierarchically organize the components of the taxonomy based on the degree of severity according to experts' opinions.

## Method

### Participants

In order to validate the taxonomy and hierarchically organize its components, we had the collaboration of an intentional sample of professionals and academicians of recognized expertise in the field of abuse in group settings. Expert panels have been used extensively to validate definitions and typologies (e.g., Daly & Jogerst, 2005). First, 46 experts were contacted based on two criteria: (a) at least 5 years of professional experience in the field of prevention, counseling or treatment of people involved in groups where abusive behaviors took place; or (b) at least 5 years of experience as a researcher, and participation in three or more relevant studies dealing with this subject.

The final sample included 31 experts, 16 women and 15 men, who expressed their interest in and availability to take part in the study anonymously and voluntarily; 74.2% of the participants were professionals with expertise in the care of people experiencing group abusive practices, 16.1% were academicians, and the other 9.7% combined both activities in their professional career. Most of the experts (58.1%) were from the field of Psychology. The rest were distributed among the following areas: Sociology (6.5%), Medicine (3.2%), Theology (6.5%), Law (3.2%), Anthropology (3.2%), Journalism (6.5%), Social Education (3.2%), and Security Forces (6.5%).

### Procedure

In order to approach the first two study objectives (definition and development of the taxonomy), a review of the existing scientific literature on GPA was conducted. Searches were carried out in the main databases (i.e., PsycInfo, Scopus, and Medline), using combinations of the following terms as search terms: intense indoctrination, coercive persuasion, extreme influence, unethical influence, undue influence, coercive influence, thought-reform, mind control, cult, sect, group, new religious movements, manipulative, closed, abusive, sectarian, coercive, dogmatic, charismatic, destructive, and high-demand. Gray literature, such as unpublished doctoral dissertations, was also collected by contacting the authors. From the searches performed, studies aimed at delimiting and/or measuring GPA were selected.

Then, four members of the research group with previous experience in the study of the different forms of psychological abuse extracted the definitions, classifications, components, and abusive

strategies contained in the selected studies. The definitions were analyzed systematically, agreeing those elements that defined GPA to propose a new operational definition. A consensual taxonomy that included and contained the previously extracted GPA strategies was developed. An operational definition was drafted for each of the categories in the taxonomy in order to accurately explain the abusive strategies or behaviors involved.

The first task requested from the expert panel participating in this study was to review the developed taxonomy, including: (a) the relevance of each category as a component of GPA; (b) other relevant components of GPA that had not been considered in the taxonomy; and (c) possible changes in both the name and definition of the categories, in case they were found to be inappropriate. To do so, each expert received a document by e-mail that included instructions to be followed, as well as the names and operational definitions of the categories forming the taxonomy. The experts' annotations were analyzed and integrated in the final version of the taxonomy.

In order to approach the third study objective (hierarchically organizing the GPA strategies), a Delphi method was used, which consists of an anonymous, systematic, iterative process of group interaction aimed at obtaining individual judgments from an expert panel and group answers that could be interpreted statistically (Diamond et al., 2014). This method has been shown to be useful in situations where individual opinions can be combined to investigate a phenomenon that is difficult to delimit or an area that is not fully understood, as in the fields of partner violence (Murray, Smith, & Avent, 2010; Rodríguez-Carballeira, Porrúa-García, Escartín, Martín-Peña, & Almendros, 2014), workplace bullying (Rodríguez-Carballeira, Escartín, Visauta, Porrúa, & Martín-Peña, 2010), abuse of the elderly (Daly & Jogerst, 2005) or school bullying (Cross, Pintabona, Hall, Hamilton, & Erceg, 2004).

The Delphi method performed included two consecutive rounds using e-mail for interaction between the investigators and each expert participant. Contact with the participants was always individualized, and so they had no access to the identity of the rest of the participants.

In the first round, the panelists were provided with a document containing the instructions to be followed and a first questionnaire, including the reviewed taxonomy. The panelists were asked to distribute 100 points among each group of components of the taxonomy based on their opinions about the relative severity or burden of each abusive component in the respective group. They distributed 100 points among the main six categories and another 100 points among the components of each set of subcategories. This procedure, followed by Rodríguez-Carballeira et al. (2010) and Rodríguez-Carballeira et al. (2014), among others, was chosen to facilitate the experts' decision making and to ensure the variability of the scores.

In the second round of the study, a new questionnaire was sent to the participants that included feedback from the group answers given in the previous round. The following data were added for each component of the taxonomy: the expert's score in the first round, plus the mean, standard deviation, maximum score, and minimum score of the set of answers received. Each expert was then asked to again score each category in the taxonomy based on severity, considering the feedback provided. The participants' answers in the second round, after checking that stability had been reached in the scores issued, were analyzed to obtain the hierarchical organization of the GPA strategies.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the SPSS.18.0 software. In both rounds, the main descriptive statistics for the scores given to each category of the taxonomy were calculated. For the purpose of evaluating the stability of the expert panel's judgment, for each category: (a) Kol-

mogorov-Smirnov tests were conducted to evaluate the normality of the distributions of the scores issued in both rounds; (b) Spearman correlations between the two scores were calculated; and (c) non-parametric Wilcoxon Z tests for related samples were conducted to evaluate the possible difference in ranks between the two scores.

## Results

### Definition of Group Psychological Abuse

From the analysis of the definitions of GPA taken from the reviewed literature, three basic elements emerged that made it possible to characterize the phenomenon: (a) the abusive nature of the strategies; (b) the continued duration of their application; and (c) the ultimate goal of these strategies, namely, the submission of group members. Combining these three elements, GPA can be defined as a process of systematic and continuous application of pressure, control, manipulation, and coercion strategies for the purpose of dominating other people in order to achieve their submission to the group. This definition focuses on the abusive action itself, without mentioning its possible consequences for people affected.

### Taxonomy of the Group Psychological Abuse Strategies

The result corresponding to the second study objective was the creation and validation of a new taxonomy comprising 6 categories and 26 subcategories of psychological abuse strategies that

can be used in groups (Table 1). From a psychosocial viewpoint, the six categories can be classified based on the four dimensions to which the strategies can be directed: emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and contextual or situational. The first three dimensions relate to strategies directly affecting the person, either his/her emotions (emotional abuse), cognitions (indoctrination in an absolute and Manichean belief system), or behavior (imposing a single and extraordinary authority). The last dimension relates to indirect strategies related to how to operate in the person's immediate environment (isolation, control, and manipulation of information, and control over personal life).

The taxonomy covers a wide range of abusive behaviors, ranging from the most obvious to the most subtle strategies. These strategies interact with each other and can be used in variable numbers, intensities, and sequences. Each abusive strategy is associated with an operational definition to facilitate a better differential analysis of the strategies and a better delimitation of psychological abuse overall. The terms used to name the strategies and the proposed definitions focus on the abusive action itself, trying to avoid mentioning the consequences for people.

Most of the experts considered that all the categories and subcategories included in the taxonomy were relevant. An expert stated that the subcategory granting of forgiveness could not discriminate between self-interested forgiveness and prosocial forgiveness, which was taken into account by modifying its operational definition. The experts did not suggest additional abusive strategies not previously included in the taxonomy or relevant changes in the names of the strategies considered or in the wording of the respec-

**Table 1**  
Taxonomy of the GPA Strategies

<p><b>1. ISOLATION</b> Separate or distance the group member from his/her setting of significant relationships and spaces, promoting immersion in the vital space of the group.</p> <p>1.1 Isolation from the family: Separate or distance the group member from his/her family environment.</p> <p>1.2. Isolation from friends and social support network: Separate or distance the group member from his/her friends and the network of people in his/her social environment.</p> <p>1.3. Isolation from work, studies and interests: Separate or distance the group member from the practice of his/her interests and external educational and professional activities.</p> <p>1.4. Isolation in another place of residence: Separate or distance the subject from his/her home and geographic setting, promoting a high degree of immersion or confinement in the vital space of the group.</p>
<p><b>2. CONTROL AND MANIPULATION OF INFORMATION</b> Selection and management of the information, including lies and manipulation of language, always in the interest of those controlling the group and intending to monopolize the information that reaches the subject.</p> <p>2.1. Manipulation of information: Deceive, manage interestedly or hide the information provided to the group member, also indicating to him/her what type of information should be transmitted externally and what should not be.</p> <p>2.2. Manipulation of language: Use of common terms and creation of neologisms, giving them a new meaning that acquires an intense emotional and ideological overload for the group, thus enhancing the use of doctrinal clichés and Manichean formulations, to exert greater influence over the subject.</p>
<p><b>3. CONTROL OVER PERSONAL LIFE</b> Explore to know in depth the personal life of the subject, in order to guide it and intervene in it in order to use it for the benefit of those controlling the group.</p> <p>3.1. Control over/abuse of finances: Investigate the financial status of the subject and condition his/her decisions in order to obtain the maximum contribution for the benefit of those controlling the group.</p> <p>3.2. Control over activities and use of time: Try to ensure that the activities performed by the subject and his/her time are devoted to the group or under its supervision, minimizing the opportunities to enjoy other sources of information and contact.</p> <p>3.3. Control-inspection of behavior: Establish mechanisms to monitor the subject's behavior, generally through colleagues, making privacy very difficult.</p> <p>3.4. Control of affective relationships and sexual life: Have the last say about the affective relationships the subject can or cannot have and the sexual practices that can or cannot be performed and with whom.</p> <p>3.5. Control-weakening of physical and mental health: Impose some behavioral pattern that weakens the physical and mental health of the group member (sleep limitation, poor diet, physical abuse, exhaustion, changes in consciousness states) or prevent him/her from managing health problems through professionals and standardized treatments.</p> <p>3.6. Control of self-existence: Convince the subject to leave to the group the decisions about his/her existence.</p>

**Table 1**  
Taxonomy of the GPA Strategies (cont.)

<p><b>4. EMOTIONAL ABUSE</b> Actions aimed at influencing the subjects' feelings and emotions in order to manipulate them toward greater submission to the group.</p> <p>4.1. Self-interested activation of positive emotions: Planned strategies to activate or intensify positive emotions in the subject for the purpose of impacting and provoking pleasant life experiences leading to strengthening the link with the group (e.g., love bombing).</p> <p>4.2. Demands for affective and enthusiastic commitment: Demand that the subject commit him/herself affectively to the group and to the group experience with excitement and enthusiasm for its project of happiness and personal fulfillment in the group.</p> <p>4.3. Intimidation or threats: Scare the subject by warning him/her of the physical or psychological (including spiritual) damage, or others, that would happen to him/her or his/her environment if he/she doubted or deviated from the postulates of the group.</p> <p>4.4. Contempt, humiliation, or rejection: Insult, embarrass or show contempt and rejection toward the subject for any attitude or behavior that is interpreted as being against the group interests.</p> <p>4.5. Manipulation of blame: Infuse in the subject the blame for any attitude, behavior or omission that the authority attributes and interprets unilaterally as contrary to the group postulates.</p> <p>4.6. Induction to confessing "deviant" behaviors, thoughts, and feelings: Impose on the subject, as a pattern of behavior, the duty to confess before the group or its leaders any behavior, thought or feeling they might interpret as deviant.</p> <p>4.7. Granting of forgiveness: Strategically give the subject some lenient treatment or release him/her from blame, forgiving or ending the punishment and reintegrating him/her fully into the group.</p>
<p><b>5. INDOCTRINATION IN AN ABSOLUTE AND MANICHEAN BELIEF SYSTEM</b> Discredit the subject's previous ideas, instilling in him/her a closed belief system and the sense of having been chosen to be a member of a group owning the Truth and superior to the rest of the world.</p> <p>5.1. Negative reconstruction of the past and the previous identity: Make the subject, based on the group's new belief system, reject his/her past life and previous identity, considering it to be an erroneous stage in his/her life.</p> <p>5.2. Denigration of critical thinking: Discredit and reject any reasoning by the subject that is not consistent with or disagrees with the group postulates.</p> <p>5.3. Demand for full identification with the doctrine and its application: Convince the subject to convert to the group doctrine or ideology, to its application and to full compliance with its rules, symbols and forms of behavior.</p> <p>5.4. Imposition of the doctrine above people and the law: Force the subject to give an absolute value to the group doctrine or ideology, placing it above people and social laws and ultimately justifying illicit means to achieve its goals.</p> <p>5.5. Glorification of the ingroup and rejection of the outgroup: Try to produce in the subject a dichotomous Manichean view of reality that enhances the goodness of anything related to the group and considers life outside as erratic, worth rejection or malignant.</p>
<p><b>6. IMPOSITION OF A SINGLE AND EXTRAORDINARY AUTHORITY</b> Make the subject obey and grant the maximum power and recognition of special qualities to a single source of authority governing or inspiring the group government.</p> <p>6.1. Imposition of an absolute authority: Impose an authority that holds all power and that (or its representatives) the subject must obey unquestioningly.</p> <p>6.2. Implantation of the belief in the special qualities of the leader: Persuade the subject to recognize and admire the qualities or special, superhuman or divine powers of the leader.</p>

tive operational definitions. Therefore, the taxonomy appeared to be considered adequate and complete by the experts participating in the study.

**Severity of the Group Psychological Abuse Strategies**

The result for the third study objective was the hierarchical organization of the strategies included in the taxonomy based on their severity according to the judgments of the expert group. The correlations between the scores in the two rounds of the Delphi study were positive, significant, and high for all categories included in the taxonomy (rank *r*s = .60 - .95), and none of the Wilcoxon *Z* tests performed on each pair of scores yielded a significant difference in ranks (Table 2). Therefore, the scores the participants gave to each strategy in the second round of the study did not change markedly from the scores issued in the first round. Given this stability, there was no need to perform a third round, and the means for the second scores were taken as relative severity indices of the GPA strategies included in the taxonomy (Table 2).

Figure 1 shows the six main categories of the taxonomy organized hierarchically on the basis of their mean scores. The most severe strategies

in the first category (emotional abuse) were manipulation of blame (*M* = 18.32, *SD* = 4.59) and interested activation of positive feelings (*M* = 16.81, *SD* = 6.26). In the second category (isolation), the most severe strategies were isolation from the family (*M* = 30.71, *SD* = 6.42) and isolation from friends and social support network (*M* = 27.65, *SD* = 5.63). In the third category (control and manipulation of the information), the most severe strategy was manipulation of information (*M* = 55.65, *SD* = 10.78). In the fourth category (control over personal life), the most severe strategies were control of activities and use of time (*M* = 20.29, *SD* = 8.29) and control of self-existence (*M* = 18.13, *SD* = 8.10). In the fifth category (indoctrination in an absolute and Manichean belief system), the most severe strategies were negative reconstruction of the past and the previous identity (*M* = 21.81, *SD* = 5.53) and glorification of the ingroup and rejection of the outgroup (*M* = 21.16, *SD* = 5.5). Finally, in the sixth category (imposition of a single and extraordinary authority), the most severe strategy was implantation of the belief in the special qualities of the leader (*M* = 52.1, *SD* = 15.32).

Returning to the psychosocial perspective of the dimensions mainly affected by GPA strategies, the experts' judgments showed a greater burden of the strategies directed toward emotions, followed by those aimed at the elements of the person's immediate context or

**Table 2**  
Descriptive Statistics of the Scores of the Second Round and Stability Markers

Component	Second round				Wilcoxon Z	Spearman r
	M	SD	Rank	KS		
1. ISOLATION	19.16	4.99	10 - 30	.24***	-1.48	.80***
1.1. Isolation from the family	30.71	6.42	20 - 50	.25***	-0.82	.74***
1.2. Isolation from friends and social support network	27.65	5.63	20 - 40	.20***	-1.60	.91***
1.3. Isolation from work, studies, and interests	18.42	4.09	10 - 25	.26***	-0.17	.64***
1.4. Isolation in another place of residence	23.42	10.29	10 - 50	.15	-0.93	.95***
2. CONTROL AND MANIPULATION OF INFORMATION	17.71	4.53	10 - 30	.21***	-0.57	.84***
2.1. Manipulation of information	55.65	10.78	30 - 80	.17*	-0.84	.89***
2.2. Manipulation of language	44.35	10.78	20 - 70	.17*	-0.84	.89***
3. CONTROL OVER PERSONAL LIFE	15.23	4.60	10 - 30	.26***	-1.05	.60***
3.1. Control over-abuse of finances	10.55	3.52	5 - 20	.27***	-1.67	.93***
3.2. Control over activities and use of time	20.29	8.29	5 - 40	.16*	-0.84	.84***
3.3. Control-inspection of behavior	16.71	4.88	10 - 25	.17*	-1.32	.85***
3.4. Control of affective relationships and sexual life	16.68	4.89	0 - 40	.25***	-0.06	.78***
3.5. Control-weakening of physical and mental health	17.65	6.07	10 - 30	.17*	-0.84	.88***
3.6. Control of self-existence	18.13	8.10	0 - 30	.11	-0.43	.92***
4. EMOTIONAL ABUSE	21.71	4.60	15 - 30	.26***	-0.44	.90***
4.1. Self-interested activation of positive emotions	16.81	6.26	8 - 30	.18**	-0.61	.81***
4.2. Demands for affective and enthusiastic commitment	13.48	8.50	5 - 50	.24***	-0.27	.85***
4.3. Intimidation or threats	14.52	6.55	0 - 30	.15	-0.06	.92***
4.4. Contempt, humiliation, or rejection	13.61	4.92	5 - 25	.25***	-0.82	.92***
4.5. Manipulation of blame	18.32	4.59	10 - 30	.23***	-0.41	.84***
4.6. Induction to confessing "deviant" behaviors, thoughts, and feelings	12.81	4.62	5 - 20	.20**	-1.00	.83***
4.7. Granting of forgiveness	10.45	4.68	3 - 25	.28***	-0.26	.88***
5. INDOCTRINATION IN AN ABSOLUTE AND MANICHEAN BELIEF...	14.13	5.85	0 - 30	.18**	-0.06	.92***
5.1. Negative reconstruction of the past and the previous identity	21.81	5.53	10 - 35	.21**	-0.99	.86***
5.2. Denigration of critical thinking	19.97	6.46	0 - 30	.24***	-0.79	.74***
5.3. Demand for full identification with the doctrine and its application	17.97	5.57	10 - 30	.22**	-0.18	.77***
5.4. Imposition of the doctrine above people and the law	19.10	7.48	10 - 50	.26***	-0.07	.90***
5.5. Glorification of the ingroup and rejection of the outgroup	21.16	5.50	10 - 30	.26***	-0.09	.91***
6. IMPOSITION OF A SINGLE AND EXTRAORDINARY AUTHORITY	12.39	5.72	5 - 30	.23***	-1.44	.91***
6.1. Imposition of an absolute authority	47.90	15.32	0 - 80	.17*	-0.99	.93***
6.2. Implantation of the belief in the special qualities of the leader	52.10	15.32	20 - 100	.17*	-0.82	.93***

Note.  $p < .1$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . A panel of 31 experts distributed 100 points among the main categories, as well as among each subset of subcategories.

situation. Third in importance were the strategies directed toward cognition and, finally, the strategies directed toward behaviors.

## Discussion

The elements included in the definition of psychological abuse in group settings proposed in this study (duration, application of abu-

sive strategies, and achieving the individual's submission) make it possible to distinguish this process from other forms of influence and aggression. The recurrence and duration in time, key elements of psychological abuse (Follingstad, 2007; Langone, 1992), distinguish it from psychological aggression, which is defined as an occasional action that harms the affected person (Richardson & Hammock, 2011). Duration is necessary for the influence processes to be inten-

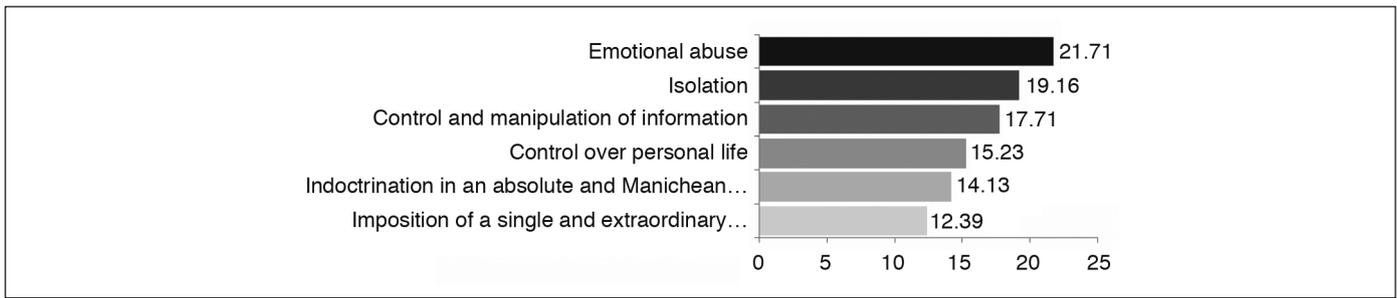


Figure 1. Hierarchical Organization of the Main Categories of the Taxonomy based on their Severity.

sified, gradually adding the abusive components (Hassan, 2013). Thus, it seems necessary to add it to the three factors explaining group influence (number, immediacy, and strength of the sources of influence) proposed in the Social Impact Theory (Latané, 1981) to explain groups' capacity to influence their members through intense and continued interaction.

The abusive nature of the strategies implemented, an element considered in most previous definitions (e.g., Hassan, 2013; Langone, 1992; Singer & Lalich, 1995), makes GPA qualitatively different from other forms of social influence (Baron, 2000). Hence, the combined strategies of pressure, control, manipulation, and coercion collected and defined in the taxonomy presented here become much more intense than the techniques usually used to obtain compliance, conformity, or obedience in other settings (e.g., Sundie, Cialdini, Griskevicius, & Kenrick, 2012). The use of GPA strategies is compatible with the implementation of social influence strategies; in fact, they are usually concurrent and their influence can even be enhanced by the psychological abuse process itself (Baron, 2000).

The submission of the person as a primary goal of GPA also distinguishes it from simple psychological aggression and other forms of influence. Its ultimate goal is not to cause damage or simply obtain conformity with the group rules, acceptance of direct requests, or obedience to specific orders; instead it is used as an instrument to obtain broad dominance over the lives of the group members (Singer & Lalich, 1995). Furthermore, this objective of submission makes GPA similar to the abuse inflicted in intimate partner violence, and distinguishes it from the abuse applied in other settings, such as bullying at school or in the workplace, where the main purpose is the exclusion of the person (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2013).

The defining elements proposed for GPA do not include its possible adverse consequences for the affected people, which are set out in previous definitions (e.g., Hassan, 2013; Langone, 1992). Thus, the proposal emphasizes that the essential characteristic of psychological abuse is the abusive action performed by the perpetrator, understanding that the effects on the victim are a consequence of this action. The negative effects can be of a different nature or seriousness or, in the opinion of some authors, even non-existent (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001).

**On the Taxonomy and Severity of the Group Psychological Abuse Strategies**

The content of the GPA strategies taxonomy has been validated using a broad sample of experts and employing a novel procedure in this field of study. This taxonomy is characterized by comprehensively gathering both explicit and subtle strategies, including most of the abusive behaviors considered in previous classifications (e.g., Andersen, 1985; Hassan, 2013; Singer & Lalich, 1995). It is also characterized by operationally defining each mutually-exclusive strategy.

Both the names and definitions of the strategies are focused on the abusive action itself, excluding its possible effects, which were

often included in previous classifications by other authors (e.g., "reduction of self" according to West & Singer, 1980). Abusive behaviors and their consequences for people's health and well-being must be evaluated at the same time, in order to subsequently relate them through accurate studies (Aronoff et al., 2000). An initial contribution in this line is the hierarchical organization of the psychological abuse strategies by severity, based on expert opinions. Future research should analyze the correlations between the severity of the abuse and the seriousness of its consequences, as has been studied in other similar fields.

The taxonomy is structured using a psychosocial approach in four dimensions, based on the personal or situational area to which the abusive action is directed. These dimensions are classified in the following order according to their severity: emotional, immediate context or situation, cognitive, and behavioral. The dimension of emotional abuse includes, among others, strategies previously labeled as coercion (Andersen, 1985) or emotional control techniques (Hassan, 2013; Rodríguez-Carballeira, 1992). This dimension was considered to have the greatest severity in the opinion of the experts. The same result was obtained when evaluating the severity of abusive strategies used in partner violence (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2014) and in bullying in the workplace (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2010).

The dimension of the context or situation includes indirect strategies aimed at intervening in the person's immediate setting, including isolation, control and manipulation of information, and control over personal life. This dimension was considered the most severe after emotional abuse. Its importance has been related to extensively studied strategies, such as isolation from external sources of social support (Andersen, 1985), deception (e.g., Andersen, 1985; Langone, 1982), or the continuous supervision of behavior (Hassan, 2013).

The cognitive dimension, indoctrination in an absolute and Manichean belief system, received a lower severity score from the experts, even though it was defended as a central component of GPA. In this regard, some authors use intense indoctrination to refer to the whole process of undue influence, control, coercion, and abuse in group settings (e.g., Baron, 2000).

The behavioral dimension, imposition of a single and extraordinary authority, received the lowest severity score, probably because it is a somewhat transversal action that is usually associated with, reinforced by, or achieved through other forms of abuse. This would explain why it has hardly been mentioned in previous classifications, although some authors did include it as "assuring the existence of a single true authority" (Andersen, 1985) or "requiring unconditional surrender to the leader" (West, 1990).

**Implications**

GPA is a phenomenon with great human, social, and scientific relevance. Therefore, the delimitation of abusive behaviors provides a critical integrating framework for research and a guide for interventions in the applied field. This framework helps to distinguish abu-

sive behaviors from legitimate group dynamics, as they have sometimes been confused (e.g., Dawson 2007).

In the clinical setting, the taxonomy can be taken as a useful tool to evaluate the presence or absence of psychological abuse in the clinical assessment stage and guide the different steps in the subsequent intervention where the abuse experiences are re-examined (Coates, 2010; Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Furthermore, within the scope of prevention, it might be useful for designing interventions that, through knowledge about abusive strategies, can increase resistance to their influence and reduce personal susceptibility (Andersen & Zimbardo, 1984).

In the legal setting, precise concepts are usually lacking that deal with the limits between legitimate influence and psychological abuse processes (Ordeñana, 2001). The taxonomy provided can contribute to delimiting the group practices that can be considered psychological abuse, in order to take them into account in legal claims or in advancing the criminal law regulating this phenomenon. In this regard, the taxonomy could be used by forensic experts to assess the perpetrated abuses and the experienced injury, trying to establish their casual relationship through forensic-clinical interviews (Vilaño, Arce, & Fariña, 2013).

### Limitations

The study limitations include the non-probabilistic sampling method used to select the expert panel that validated the taxonomy and hierarchically organized its components. Therefore, a perfect representation of all the professional and academician experts on this subject is not expected. In any case, all professionals with experience in the area from whom enough information was available were contacted. Even with this limitation, this investigation makes a novel contribution, both due to the accuracy in the method used and to the number of participating experts, which are important when trying to validate the psychological abuse components in an area where very few empirical studies are available (Almendros et al., 2011).

### Future Research

Future investigations must continue to study the phenomenon of psychological abuse occurring in group settings in order to make improvements in its definition, assessment, and general understanding. For a measurement instrument to have sufficient psychometric guarantees, a complete, accurate definition of the evaluated construct must be used (Carretero-Dios & Pérez, 2007). In this respect, the taxonomy provided will allow researchers to develop instruments that can comprehensively evaluate GPA. With these instruments, it will be easier to study the relationship between the abuse strategies experienced and their possible consequences for people, thus obtaining more precise information about the relative severity of the different components of GPA.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

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