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## **EMOTIONAL ABUSE AS HUMAN INSECURITY: A MYTH OR REALITY?**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper is focused on emotional abuse on both genders in intimate relationships as human insecurity, how it is being under-reported and perceived by many in the Nigerian society as an insignificant issue since it is not physical, and where many are advised to bear it in silence or even accused of being the cause of it most of the times. The study examines the signs, causes, and effects, which makes it a form of human insecurity. The study is anchored on Attachment Theory. Secondary data were employed in gathering information and content data analysis was used in analysing the data for the study. The paper concluded that emotional abuse is a reality that many are not accepting and that speaking out to the right people (such as talking to trusted family members, friends, associates and therapists) is the first and main strategy in which the problem can be solved.*

## **Keywords**

Emotional Abuse, Human Insecurity, Intimate Relationship, Nigerian Society

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## **1. Introduction and Statement of the Problem**

Different people go through different kinds of abuses, some as children, as adults, as women, as men, or as a group. The complexity of emotional abuse is embedded in other forms of abuse and can still be distinguished as a separate type of abuse. Initially, emotional abuse was viewed by researchers as a consequence of other kinds of abuses like physical or sexual abuse, but in contemporary times, it is seen as a separate and distinct type of abuse (Arias & Pape, 1999). A single behavioural pattern usually makes up other types of abuses like physical or sexual abuse. However, a series of behavioural patterns (including verbal, physical, sexual, and other forms of abuse) that occur consistently make up emotional abuse. It involves criticisms, threats, insults, emotional manipulation, rejection, aggressive expectations or demands, blame, neglect, ignoring, punishment, physical beatings, harassment, among others. It can happen anywhere like schools, homes, workplaces, or in relationships. It can happen to men, women, or children. It involves two sides of players called the abuser and the abused.

Emotional abuse is the bedrock of all kinds of abuses. It is the least talked about and the most common type of abuse, especially in Nigeria. Effects of emotional abuse are devastating and could last throughout a lifetime if not properly managed. Other kinds of abuses such as physical and sexual have drawn more attention probably because the effects can be seen, but the fact remains that the effects of emotional abuse could be more real and devastating, thus affecting human security.

Pulumbarit (2012) categorised emotional abuse as the most common kind of domestic violence and the greatest predictor of physical violence (Springtide, 2000). It occurs as a result of a series of consistent incidents and it is generally assumed in a society like Nigeria that only abuses that the effects are physical are the real ones. However, the resultant effects of emotional abuse could be as detrimental as or even more damaging than those of other abuses (Springtide, 2000). Emotional abuse gradually reduces the self-worth and self-esteem of its victims, irrespective of the emotional strength of such persons. It is a means of scaring, controlling, or isolating an individual. Anyone can be a victim of emotional abuse ranging from men to women, and children. It can happen anywhere like schools, homes, workplaces, or in relationships. It is a form of human insecurity.

Munro (2001) stressed that the least talked about and the most common type of abuse is emotional abuse. It is often unnoticed or underplayed even by the victims sometimes. Davenport (2013) stated that emotional abuse could be difficult to describe and subtle because in some cases the abuser and the abused might not even be conscious that it is taking place.

In Nigeria, as part of the societal and cultural heritage, emotions are not supposed to be displayed, people are expected to mask their emotions no matter what they might be going through. Generations are raised with this perception, which is why emotional abuse is not usually taken seriously until the effects become terribly obvious on the victims.

There has been an increasing awareness in recent times about domestic or physical abuse or violence, but emotional abuse is still very much underrated and underreported, many do not know whether they are in any form of abusive relationships or not, as long as it is not physical (Afro News, 2007). Fareo (2015) emphasised that this might be because some abusive behaviours have been accepted as 'normal'. Moreover, many are going through it with concealment for various reasons such as people's attitudes toward it, not wanting to be separated from family members especially when children are involved (especially for women), what people in the society will say (stigmatisation), not having the financial independence to stay alone, among others (Oyong, 2016; Duru, 2017). Many reports have it that the police usually dismiss any complaints about any form of abuse in marriages and intimate relationships as 'a family matter' that should be settled domestically outside the law (Duru, 2017).

Emotional abuse might be from a man to a woman or vice versa, and also from parents to children. Incidentally, there are statistics that emotional abuse by women towards men is as much as from men towards women (Davenport, 2013). He further emphasised that many men do suffer different kinds of abuses in silence from women in intimate relationships or marriages, but the cultural structure of the Nigerian society does not permit them to report or complain about it because such men would be seen as weaklings and laughed at. There have been cases of women beating up their spouses, emotionally abusing them to have their ways and so on, but such men hardly speak out or admit to it happening to them.

Emotional abuse is a form of human insecurity. Human insecurity is an individual's level of fear; threats to personal safety, families' safety, and the ability to support families; loss of income, homes and lands; and fear about the future. It is a lack of protection of individuals, their wellbeing, and threats to their welfare. It is also threats to the safety of humans and how they are able to live a full and productive life with dignity, without fear or feeling at risk. Where there is insecurity, there is a blend of threats that are connected to conflict and people that are displaced (Giguere, 2013). To an emotionally abused person, there is a threat to sanity and

personal safety, there is the fear about the future and the abilities to support the family, and there can be loss of homes, properties, and so on.

However, this study focuses on being emotionally abused in intimate relationships and marriages in Nigeria. Oftentimes, many are abused by their spouses and are expected to keep mute about it since it is not physical and even when it is physical, the abused might not want people to know about it.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The paper examines the following:

- Signs and ways emotional abuse can be identified
- Causes and factors responsible for its insignificance and its effects,
- Strategies that can help in addressing, managing, and/or minimising the problem.

## **3. Conceptual Analysis of Emotional Abuse**

The concept of emotional abuse has been described in various ways and defined by different scholars. Engel (2002) defined it as a non-physical attitude or character that is structured to control (dictate or influence), subdue (quieten), punish (harm or hurt), isolate an individual by employing means that are humiliating and fearful. This is viewing emotional abuse as an attitude that humiliates, degrades and causes fear. It can also be described as systemic destruction of an individual's self-esteem and/or sense of safety, usually happening in relationships where there are imbalances in power and control (Follingstand & Dehart, 2000). These authors see it taking place in a situation where there are power imbalances, especially in relationships. Similar to the view of Engel (2002) above, Doherty & Berglund (2008) added that it involves intents and threats of harming, abandoning, humiliating, and disconnecting from loved ones, isolating and other emotionally abusive characters and strategies. Another definition by Ishola (2016) says it is a serious way of character that belittles a person through threatening an individual of what belongs to him/her, hurting his/her sense of self-worth by putting him/her at danger of different behavioural, cognitive, psychological and mental disorders. The consequences of emotional abuse are being emphasised here and they are seen as highly psychologically detrimental.

Emotional abuse can further be described as degrading publicly or privately, dictating what the victim should do or not do, keeping information from the victim, intentionally performing activities that can make the victim to be humiliated or reduced, separating him/her

from family members and friends, blackmailing him/her indirectly by causing harm to others especially when the victim is happy or independent, refusing him/her access to finances and other necessities and supplies and any form of degradation (Pankaj, Jitender, Anil, Kamal, & Dhatarwal, 2013). It also comprises contending activities or remarks that are structured to confound and initiate uncertainty or insecurity in the victim (Pankaj et al, 2013). The insecurity aspect of emotional abuse is added to all the features that have been mentioned above, which emphasises the human insecurity aspect as earlier mentioned.

Emotional abuse is also about power over another person who exploits the power to control, degrade and humiliate just like any other kind of abuse, it comprises verbal abuse like name calling, blaming; criticisms, threats, insults, emotional manipulation, social isolation, intimidation, rejection, aggressive expectations or demands, blame, neglect, ignoring, punishment, harassment, etc. (Pankaj et al, 2013). This description is corroborating what Follingstand & Dehart (2000) mentioned about power imbalances above, recognising the power of the abuser over the abused.

In the concept of emotional abuse and the way it has been described by various scholars, it is clear that emotional abuse has features that controls, humiliates, degrades, and reduces the victim's self-esteem and self-worth no matter how emotionally strong such a person might be. It usually reflects and occurs alongside other forms of abuse such as physical, sexual, economic, verbal, and so on. Hence, it is symbiotic with human insecurity.

### **3.1. Theoretical Perspective on Emotional Abuse**

Attachment theory was propounded by John Bowlby in the 1950s, it states that attachment patterns are established and congealed in early infancy and continue through peoples' lifetime. The two patterns of the attachment theory are secured and insecure. If an individual as a child grows up with reliability, constituency and safety, he/she will probably have a secure pattern of attachment which reflect in his/her lifestyle especially in intimate relationships whereby he/she is not afraid to take risks in relationships. On the other hand, individuals who grow up with inconsistency, unreliability and insecurity are the ones with the insecure pattern of attachment (this can be grouped into avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised). They usually do not have meaningful relationships with others.

The three forms of insecure attachment are explained below:

- **Avoidant:** This is characterised by avoiding intimacy, flippant attitude, and having problems in reaching out for help in times of need.

- **Ambivalent:** The people with this pattern are usually clingy, aggressive, and require constant reassurance and validation from others.
- **Disorganised:** This is a pattern with individuals that had traumatic experiences or terrible inconsistency while growing up. Usually, these individuals do not have coping strategies in dealing with the world. It has features such as anxiety, depression, erratic behaviour, poor self-image, among others.

Individuals with insecure pattern of attachment generally have difficulties connecting with others emotionally, they are usually unpredictable and aggressive especially toward their loved ones, thus it can be linked to an abuser's insecure pattern which he/she had suffered as a resultant effect of traumas experienced from childhood, However, it has been argued that it is the same insecure pattern of attachment that the victim has, that has led him/her into an emotionally abusive relationship. The two paths contribute to the abuse since a series of traumas had caused the abuser and the victim to be vulnerable. There might have been one form of insecure pattern or more, which is as a result of the abuser and the victim's childhood experiences such as lack of love and warmth or not experiencing bonding from the ones who took care of them (Feurman, 2020).

#### **4. Methodology**

This section is all about the gathering and analysing the data which illuminated the research issues for this study. It involves the description of existing information gathered and the processes for analysing the information gathered from secondary sources. This research is for the purpose of scholarship. The study area of the research is Nigeria and the population of the study is both genders in intimate relationships. The data for the study were gathered through desk research such as books, journals, newspapers and internet sources, and analysed using the content analysis approach.

#### **5. Results and Discussions**

The way in which emotional abuse is underrated in the Nigerian society calls for it signs, causes and effects to be found and discussed. This part of the study contains the description about the findings of the research and the interpretation of the results which provides the significance of the findings.

##### **5.1. Signs of Emotional Abuse**

Some patterns of behaviour reveal the features of emotional abuse which were discovered from the findings and some of them are:

- Monitoring virtually everything a person (the abused) does
- Threatening to hurt an individual or the people that the abused care about. On the other hand, the abuser might also be threatening to harm himself/herself
- Extreme display of jealousy and possessiveness, for instance; accusing someone of unfaithfulness; forcing him/her to prove his/her love by coercing him/her into sexual activities
- The abused adjusting his/her characters and responses to the abuser's needs and demands
- Harasses, intimidates, threatens, or punishes a person for noncompliance to the abuser's demands
- Blackmailing an individual into staying in the abusive relationship
- Abusers take all decisions including personal ones for the victim
- Controls how an individual spends his/her money
- Constantly criticising someone about his/her looks, actions and capabilities
- Humiliates someone in the presence of others
- Gets angry in ways that frighten someone from going to work or school
- Prevents a person from seeing friends or family and isolates him/her from doing things he/she loves doing

(Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015; Legg, 2018; Feuerman, 2020)

## **5.2. Causes of Emotional Abuse**

In looking at causes of emotional abuse, it should be realised that abuse is usually a result of an insecure pattern of attachment theory as discussed above. It can be due to bad parenting, parental neglect, or observing abuse as a child. Abused children or wards are likely to grow up being abusive or vulnerable to abusive personalities. There are many adduced causes of emotional abuse in Nigerian society as discovered from findings and they can be viewed from three perspectives: causes from the victims (abused), causes from the abuser, and causes from the family structures/societal. They are further explained below:

- **Desperation**

This cause is from the victim's side. Lots of people who are in relationships and are desperate in the relationships do play into the abuser's hands and when the abuser perceives the desperation, he/she tends to do whatever he/she likes with the victim even in a situation when the relationship ends up in marriage, the trend continues and the abuser becomes perpetually abusive even in the marriage.

- **Drugs and Alcoholic Influence**

This is a cause from the abuser. Someone becomes abusive as a result of drug and alcohol influence caused by some other reasons. This has been corroborated by Awolowo (2013) that anyone under the influence of drugs and alcohol has become dangerous to people around him/her.

- **Financial Matters**

This cause can be from the abused or the abuser. This could be in form of job loss, or one of the partners earning more than the other, which might result in either of them having low self-esteem and start suspecting the other (extreme display of jealousy and possessiveness), thus consciously or unconsciously abusing the partner emotionally. Oftentimes, it leads to other forms of abuse such as physical, sexual, and others. On the other hand, if one of the partners is completely financially dependent on the other, it can make him/her abusive with the mentality that he/she is the other person's all, that he/she does not have any choice or anywhere to go, thus, cannot do anything or strive without him/her.

- **Upbringing and Value System**

This cause falls under family structures/societal and is the major cause of emotional abuse (relating it to the insecure pattern of attachment). The kind of upbringing and value system a person has determines how he/she will treat people around him/her particularly the family members. For instance, a man who grew up in a home where his father had no regard for his mother or the father use to device psychological or emotional blackmail or threats to correct or force his mother to submit to his will and demands, will likely do the same thing to his spouse and vice versa for a woman too. Moreover, many parents do all these in the presence of their children or wards, thus the children grow up to be like them or even worse, except in some rare cases. Furthermore, it might be abusive experiences and/or observations from the people around the abuser in his/her environment as a child.

- **Religious Belief**

This is another cause that can be viewed from family structures/societal. According to Ishola (2016), some religions see women as slaves or next to nothing. Women are not allowed to be part of discussions when men are talking no matter what their views might be in some religions, they must not be heard especially during religious activities. Another angle to this is the religious belief that marriage is a do or die affair, whether things are working or not. No matter the complaints from the spouses, especially when there is no physical violence involved, they will not be taken seriously, religious leaders will likely continue to advocate for patience

and prayers in the marriage. Spouses might even be blamed for the emotional abuse being meted on them, or seen as an insignificant issue, that they are just picking issues out of no issue in such marriages (especially women).

- **Cultural Belief**

This is close to religious belief and it is within the framework of family structures/societal. In a culture like the Nigerian culture, fathers/men are seen as ‘semi gods’, who are not to be questioned no matter what. Olateru-Olagbegi & Afolabi (2015) wrote that the main ethnic groups in Nigeria have intense patriarchal social conformation that supports men to have a sense of entitlement, power, and authority over their spouses. It is typical reasoning in the African culture that women should mind women affairs, and let the men be in charge of serious matters. This culture, like religious belief, has the same structure that will rather have a woman stay in an abusive relationship than opt-out of the relationship, with statements like “it is our culture”, “you are a woman, you should be patience”, “a wise woman builds her home” and so on.

Looking at this cause from another angle is the belief that since men are seen as ‘semi gods’, it is almost impossible and improper for them to be abused by their wives, it is shameful for any man to come out to say he is been abused by his wife. Thus, he is emotionally abused (and probably other abuses too), but cannot say it or seek help due to cultural belief.

- **Childlessness**

This is a family structure/societal cause and is quite similar to cultural beliefs. From observation, it is usually one-sided against women. It is perceived that women are always the problem when it comes to the issue of childlessness. The inability of a woman to have children in marriage might be a reason for being emotionally abused. The African society places so much value on children especially after marriage, the expectation of the family members and the society is to see the woman producing babies, and once this does not happen, abuse is likely to be the next thing. However, the abuse will not only be from the man but also his family members majorly because she is blamed for the totality of the problem.

- **Male-Child Issue**

Another family structure/societal cause which is closely related to childlessness as observed, many African men have an obsession with having male children and once the spouse cannot give birth to a male child, emotional abuse is likely to set in, it might even be an unconscious thing on the part of the man. There have been many reported cases of men

abandoning their wives in the hospital because of delivering another female child or sternly warning the woman not to return home once she delivers another female child.

### **5.3. Effects of Emotional Abuse**

Many scholars have stressed that emotional abuse is as detrimental as, if not more damaging than physical abuse, the wounds are real and deep. There are reports that emotional abuse is the cause of prolonged health issues, depression, and mental disorders (that is, anxiety, suicide, personality changes like withdrawal), low self-esteem and low self-worth. Packota (2000) noted that emotional abuse reduces an individual's capacity to take care, pay proper attention and provide for the children. He further stated that it prevents victims from participating effectively in the workforce. Emotional abuse involves definite and autonomous repercussions and is possibly the most permeating and harmful kind of abuse, it is a subtle and cunning killer of the spirit and even worse (Hornor, 2012; Gilad, 2016). Below are some of the identified effects of emotional abuse by various scholars.

- **Depression and Mental Disorders**

This usually happens after some time that the abuse has started. It makes a once vibrant person panicky, withdrawn, and reserved and can result in long-term anxiety. Some people can even take to alcohol, drug abuse and/or hard drug to resolve the hurt and pain they feel. However, in some extreme cases, it results in mental issues that require psychiatry attention and it might take a long time before the victim gets healed.

- **Denial and Self-criticism**

The victim usually denies the abuse at the initial stage, projecting the abuser positively to himself/herself and others. However, with time, he/she starts to blame himself/herself for the abuse and self-criticism sets in and this, in turn, makes the victim lose his/her unique self to the situation and gets destroyed psychologically in a gradual process.

- **Anger and Hostility**

These are symptoms that might occur as a result of emotional abuse. The victim might start behaving differently from the way he/she normally behave, such as getting angry unnecessarily, being hostile towards people, extreme withdrawal, flinching, being passive, restlessness, nervousness and generally displaying negative attitudes.

- **Low Self-Esteem and Self-Worth**

This is the main target of emotional abuse, whether it is intentional or unintentional, all the characters and dispositions of the abuser are to devalue the victim in every sense of it.

- **Sleeping disorders and sleepwalking**

This might be in form of oversleeping, not getting enough sleep (insomnia) or sleepwalking which is walking or performing other actions while still sleeping (somnambulate).

- **Suicide**

Many people who are emotionally abused get to the extent of attempting or committing suicide after some time, especially when depression has set in and they are not speaking about it or they are not listened to.

- **Fear for self and/or for loved ones**

A victim of emotional abuse is likely to live in perpetual fear of the abuser, thus, not wanting to take any action (especially talking to people about what he/she is going through) because of the fear that the abuser might hurt him/her or loved ones.

There are so many other effects like obsessions (being obsessed with a particular trait such as eating, cleanliness and so on), extreme dependence, being defiant, weight loss/gain, tiredness, being generally sickly, among others. Moreover, according to Hornor (2012), the long-term implications of emotional abuse are not yet completely explored.

## **6. Conclusion**

Considering the views of various authors, emotional abuse is an issue that needs to be taken seriously in Nigeria mainly because it is an aspect of insecurity. Also, because of the terrible effects, it has been having on victims over the years, the generational effects on children who grow up in this kind of setting and the very high tendency of graduating into physical violence which cannot be overemphasised. Endurance is usually preached to the victims and they are encouraged to move on as if nothing is happening and any report about it, is seen as 'a family matter' that should be treated with secrecy.

This kind of abuse is not usually seen or heard because it is not physical. However, no matter how much it is denied or masked in Nigerian society, it does not erase its reality and devastating effects.

### **6.1. Scope of Future Research**

This study has many areas that can still be further researched. Such as considering emotional abuse as a cause of the high rate of divorces, murders and suicides.

### **6.2. Research Limitations**

This study experienced limitations in the aspect of trying to get primary data, due to the 'silence' culture of many about emotional abuse (it was viewed by some people as exposing family secrets), a lot of people do not even admit the fact that they are being abused emotionally, especially since it is not physical. Thus, the study had to eventually rely on secondary data and observation.

### **6.3. Recommendation**

If a victim stays in an emotionally abusive relationship, there is a remarkably high tendency that such an individual has been a victim of abuse in the past. Even though the person may not know or recognise it, however, healing begins the moment the victim starts to understand how he/she has been abused, forgive himself/herself and take steps in rebuilding his/her confidence and self-worth (Lancer, 2017). Lots of people devise different ways to cope, manage or end emotional abuse, directly or indirectly. The victims of abuse generally find it difficult to admit their condition and strive to get assistance from those that can help, especially in Nigeria. The following are some of the steps that can be taken in managing emotional abuse.

- The first step to take in the management of emotional abuse is recognising the abuse because, in some situations, the victim might not even know that he/she is being abused.
- The next step is for the victim to realise that he/she cannot change the abuser or force him/her to see reason, he/she will only get frustrated trying overtime. The abuser has to come to terms with his/her destructive character and want to change all by himself/herself.
- The next thing to realise by the victim, is that he/she is not at fault, because part of the effects of the abuse over time is self-blame, feeling like something is wrong with him/her. However, if the abused should acknowledge that it is not his/her fault, this will help in rebuilding his/her self-esteem.
- Then, the abused should put his/her needs first. He/she should not bother about pleasing or protecting the abuser, even in the face of his/her threats and manipulations.
- Boundaries should be set by the abused to let the abuser realise that he/she will no longer stand, stay, or tolerate it any longer, he/she will rather walk away.
- The abused should not engage the abuser in any argument, especially when the abuser is trying to pick a fight, he/she should neither try to over-explain himself/herself, nor over-apologise to please the abuser, rather he/she should keep quiet and walk away.
- The abused should speak out, silence should be avoided at all costs because once the abused is quiet, the abuser gains more power to continue. The abused can also talk to

people who can help, like a therapist who can make available information on safe strategies that can make the abused regain his/her self-worth and self-esteem. Therapy can be in different forms like:

- Talking to trusted family members, friends, or associates, who can identify with and help the abused in rebuilding his/her confidence because there might not be easy and cheap access to professional therapists in a society like Nigeria.
- The abused might join a group therapy, which is a group of victims of emotional abuse who are coming out of it through sharing of experiences. This might also be in form of friends and associates, which can help the abused to regain his/her self-worth and self-esteem knowing fully well that he/she is not alone and that some people have passed through it and they bounced back. It might even be a group on social media.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy, which concentrates on physical perceptions instead of memories and thoughts, is also efficient in helping the abused.
- If the abuser recognises his/her situation and is ready to change, then couples' therapy will be effective here. The two of them i.e. the abuser and the abused will agree and visit a therapist together for help.
- The victim should also try and engage in activities that he/she likes and enjoys.
- The abused should reconnect with loved ones that the abuser has disconnected him/her from, those who will support in every way.
- The abused should maintain a healthy lifestyle such as eating well, sleeping well, regular exercises, might even join a gym and generally keep fit.

*Sources: Davenport (2013) & GoodTherapy.org (2015)*

In all that has been highlighted above regarding the management of emotional abuse, the abused can put an outright end to it by making plans to leave the relationship, especially if the situation persists, rather than continue to suffer in silence or do something that will be regrettable or tragic in the long run, like committing murder or suicide.

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