

*Group intervention in partner sex violence cases.
Effects and processes of an open psychosocial
support group**

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***Summary.** For several years we have focused, our work on the treatment of sex abuse survivors providing enhancement of authority and agency of women in patriarchal violent situations. Extensive research shows that group intervention is beneficial and effective, therefore indispensable in all levels of social intervention for eradicating gender violence. We study an open psychosocial support group of women survivors of intimate partner male violence. We measured positive results, including an increased freedom from violence and a development of heightened critique as well as socio-economic independence, emotional detachment, and improved health. We propose a multidimensional model of recovery assessment. We observed and evaluated the psychosocial support group processes: group organization, participation and groupality, growth and emotional, instrumental and evaluative supports.*

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During the past few years we have worked on understanding the process of liberation and recovery from situations of male partner violence, providing victims enhancement of their agency, authority and empowerment. It is gender violence that perpetuates a socially asymmetrical relationship between men and women (Millet, 1970) in interpersonal relationships. It is an intentional and ongoing aggression at the most personal and intimate level of micro-social relationships that aims to establish and/or maintain a situation of dominance and submission.

Intervention by means of instrumental groups as well as groups specific to the scope of the study is possible and indispensable at all levels of social interventions aiming to free our society of male violence. One task accomplished in recent years has been to promote group work from the point of view of gender, training professionals and organizing in systems pioneering experiences in municipal social services that aim to detect and prevent gender violence, both in groups and the community, and to provide services to survivors and their children (Roca-Cortés, & Masip-Serra, 2011).

Groups are natural environments in which psychosocial processes necessary for survival and self-realization take place; professionally created, they offer a high capacity to foster introspection, recognition and self-knowledge, they accelerate the learning process, explore new possibilities and alleviate the insecurity of change (Roca-Cortés, and Masip-Serra, 2011). Several research revisions (Bednar, & Kaul, 1994; Forsyth, 2001; McRoberts, Burlingame, & Hoag, 1998) show that group intervention, when properly prepared technically, is beneficial for the subjective wellbeing of the participant, for her health and her social performance (Roca-Cortés, 2011).

In this work we present research done on the processes and results of a psychosocial support group prepared to assist and facilitate in the recovery of victims of partner violence. It is a research-action with the double goal of testing a system for evaluating the process of recovery and, at the same time, to reflect on such process, its effects and the procedures to assist women in situation of violence.

Precedents

Reviews done on the effects of group work with women that have been victims of intimate partner violence (Schlee, Heyman, & O'Leary, 1998; Tutty, 1996) show that research in in this area is scarce. However most research points to the benefits for women's health and a decrease in violence that support groups provide. At the same time, we must confirm that this short-duration in group work is insufficient for achieving a full recovery of the victims, particularly in cases of chronic violence.

We studied an open and ongoing psychosocial support group, that women can join at any time and leave when they want according to their needs and possibilities (usually they are not free to move), so we gave preference to three times during the year (Paíno, 2011). The group supports and facilitates the recovery process of survivors of male partner violence.

Method

We followed 10 women for a period of one year, four of these women were attending their second year in the group, four were in their first year, and two participated for only four months, and completed the evaluations at the beginning and at the end of the period. The women sampled were between 21 and 65 years old, mostly Spanish-born, with great diversity in education and marital status. All of them received social and judicial assistance, and only seven received individual psychological therapy. In the pre-post statistical comparative analysis we applied the non-parametric tests for small paired samples.

The Psychosocial model for evaluating recovery

The evaluations used in the research show that criteria are both restrictive and partial in defining the concept of recovery. We approached recovery from a psychosocial perspective rather than a purely health one, considering it a process due to the nature of gender violence. We define freedom from and recovery of a woman living in a situation of violence as the final stage where she is free from violence in her intimate relationships, enjoys physical and mental health, has rebuilt her personal and social life with freedom, financial independence and social inclusion (Roca-Cortés, 2011).

- The psychosocial model consists of three main elements:
- past and present violence: intensity and duration;
 - the woman's psychosocial profile: presence and intensity of psychological, psychosomatic and physical symptoms as well as social insertion, including her own financial income;
 - recovery process: degree of contact, psychological relationship with the violent partner and reconstruction of her own life.

We use measuring instruments validated for each of the dimensions and sub-dimensions, with the exception of work and income aspects, degree of contact and partner relationship, for which we designed our own indicators. This model is currently being improved.

Results

The results achieved account for the impact of the group intervention on the participants, but they also include, inevitably, their initial condition and the social and psychological services received. The severity of physical violence (Hudson, & MacIntosh, 1981) experienced during cohabitation is widely diverse and the decline in violence has been substantial. These outcomes were achieved not only for women attending groups for one year, but also for some of the women that have been in the group for two years or less. The process of freedom from violence and recovery are significantly longer. The women that separated from a violent partner during the year of evaluation have been able to put physical and psychological limits to the situation, and have used legal services as well as some social resources available.

The comparison of means between physical violence experienced during cohabitation and that experienced in the post evaluation phase is significant ($T=4.53$ at one per thousand). In regards to non-physical violence (psychological, sexual, financial and social), that affected the entire sample, it is still present in the final evaluation in almost half of the cases but at medium or low intensity. This is because in some cases they are still cohabiting with the violent partner, or they are in the process of separation and in some cases they are already separated but they experience violence at the hands of their sons. However, one can see in the comparison a greater decrease ($T=7.9$ at more than one per thousand) in physical violence. Post-separation violence levels, measured only at the end of the study, are medium and medium/low (between 3 and 4.5 over 5 as non-violence). This

last instrument seems useful, since the same women reported no actual violent incidents in the ISA

After a year or less we measured positive changes in the psychosocial profile of the women since there has been a decrease in the negative impact of violence on the person and their lives. Symptoms of suffering, although still present, have decreased. Post-traumatic stress symptoms have not decreased much, but still significantly ($T= 2.8$; $signification= 0.023$); levels of anxiety and depression, however, have remained (pre= 2.57; post= 2.9) the same due to the onset of chronic illnesses in one woman as due to the fact that two women experienced increased levels of violence (new violence from a son and an attempted murder and separation, while in the initial evaluation, although in cohabitation with the violent partner violence was less and she was hopeful for change). These results show, the small size of the sample notwithstanding, a decrease in suffering but also an increase in some symptoms at certain times.

Regarding positive psychological aspects, there was an increase in self-esteem, social skills and in the perception of internal self-control in the life of all women, with the exception of the three cases above mentioned. The pre-post comparison is not significant although it falls between 0.06 and 0.07. Physical and psychosomatic health has improved in general, with the same three exceptions. Social integration and positive relationships have continued and increased. Financial, work and housing independence, however, remains the same as in the initial evaluation: precarious and medium/low.

The women made significant progress in the recovery as a process (inventory of stages). Contact with the abusive partner by initiative of the victim is much less. With great variety in progress, two thirds of the women moved during the year from a recovery stage to the next one, with an increased critical attitude towards violence, increased financial independence, and increased emotional distance from the violent partner. The other third has remained stable, although overcoming the risks particular to the stage in which they are, or consolidating the last stage of reconstruction of their lives.

Discussion

With the limitations that a small sample poses, we consider the results to be positive, taking into account the peculiarities of the women. This points

towards aspects to be considered in the appraisal of the results: the long duration of the recovery (Anderson, Saunders, Yoshihama, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Woods, 2000) the appearance of variables that influence the symptoms of suffering in the recovery stage or along other variables to be considered in this complex and multidimensional phenomenon. If we compare these outcomes with all the research above mentioned we observe similar results. And the women that have been victims of chronic violence in the sample that remained in the group past the year of evaluation also made important progress, even separating from the partner and freeing themselves from violence. These comparisons are tentative given the diversity of comparative criteria.

Observation and evaluation of group processes

What takes place inside the groups? We investigate the group processes that promotes such beneficial effects. Based on the theory of the collective (Fuentes-Ávila, 1993; Petrovsky, 1986) and on studies about social support, we created a template to observe the process of group social support (Roca-Cortés, 2011a) with 25 categories. We divided this into two large chapters: a) groupality (positive and negative interaction, functional organization, community sense and group consciousness) and b) group social support (cognitive as well as emotional, informative and instrumental, and evaluative of orientation and confrontation). With this we analyzed 18 group sessions, previously recorded by handwriting by a non-participating observer. The goal of this second study is to understand and conceptualize the group dynamics per se, to determine the moments in which they appear in the group and who is the agent and, with this information, to answer questions about intervention strategies of social support professionals. The dimensions and categories are illustrated with recordings of the sessions (Roca-Cortés, 2011a).

Likewise, we asked ourselves whether the group dynamics created met the necessary cohesion requirements for an effective group intervention (Bednar, & Kaul, 1994; Burlingame, McClendon, & Alonso, 2011; Marziali, Munroe-Blum, & McCleary, 1997). To this effect we applied the validated NDG questionnaire (Roca-Cortés, 2001; Roca, 2011) based on the theory of the collective that measures group developmental levels. The results indicate a significantly high level, 4.28 (between 1 and 5). Even though this was an open group, this group intervention has the prerequisites

of group cohesion common in experiential and therapeutically closed groups. Results indicate that this is a cohesive group with the will of unity and self-care. There are good interpersonal relationships, aimed to the success and proper functioning of the group; there is confidence in the group and in the value and meaning of the work it performs. Participants value very highly the interest there is in the group to mutually give and receive help, and they testify to the significant influence of the group on the lives of its members.

Conclusions

We conclude that additional comparative research is needed on the effects of group intervention on breaking free from partner violence and recovery, as well as a more adjusted evaluation of the great diversity of circumstances that this phenomenon presents. This research should also include an evaluation of different techniques and procedures used in the groups. In light of the limits and possibilities shown, the recovery evaluation model has been discussed and it is evolving towards refining the theoretical construct and its systematization and the validation and improvement of a battery of scales and indexes that allows to adjust their application and fine-tune the perspective of gender with the creation of several new instruments, amongst them one to measure social and psychological separation. We expect to contribute towards providing more precision and comparability in the research.

We conclude that the conceptualization of group processes of psychosocial support, as tools for understanding group dynamics, can contribute to the research as well as the practice of group interventions by providing greater precision in defining processes and their effect.

We hope with this work, through its exchange, and partnerships with professional services, public policy and women's organizations, to eradicate gender violence that violates the liberty and fundamental rights of women.

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