

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE EXPERIENCED IN GROUPS SCALE: PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES OF THE SPANISH VERSION

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Abstract

The Psychological Abuse Experienced in Groups Scale (PAEGS) is a self-reported questionnaire measuring psychologically abusive behaviors experienced within a group. The purpose of this study was to analyze the psychometric properties of the PAEGS for its use in the Spanish-speaking population. An online questionnaire was administered to 269 former members of abusive groups and to 268 former members of non-abusive groups. The main results showed a one-dimensional factor structure explaining 55.47% of the total variance with an internal consistency of .97, and a high discriminatory power to distinguish between abusive and non-abusive group experiences. In addition, significant correlations were found between the PAEGS and group abusiveness and psychological distress measures, providing further evidence of validity. The Spanish version of the PAEGS is proposed to overcome limitations of previous instruments, and it can be useful in research and applied contexts to assess the extent of psychological abuse experienced within a certain group.

KEY WORDS: *interpersonal control, psychological violence, scale adaptation, scale validation, social groups.*

Resumen

La "Escala de abuso psicológico experimentado en grupos" (PAEGS, por sus siglas en inglés) es un cuestionario autoadministrado que mide comportamientos de abuso psicológico experimentados en el seno de un grupo. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar las propiedades psicométricas del PAEGS para su uso en población hispanoparlante. Se administró la PAEGS en línea a 269 exmiembros de grupos abusivos y a 268 exmiembros de grupos no abusivos. Los principales resultados mostraron una estructura factorial unidimensional que explicó el 55,47% de la varianza total con una consistencia interna de 0,97, así como un alto poder discriminatorio para distinguir entre experiencias grupales abusivas y no abusivas. Además, se encontraron correlaciones significativas entre la PAEGS y medidas del grado de abuso que caracteriza al grupo y de malestar psicológico,

This work was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, Spain (PSI2016-75915-P, AEI/FEDER, EU).

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aportándose mayores indicios de validez. Se propone la versión española de la PAEGS para superar las limitaciones de instrumentos previos, pudiendo resultar de utilidad tanto en el ámbito de la investigación como en contextos aplicados para evaluar el grado de abuso psicológico experimentado dentro de un determinado grupo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *adaptación de escala, control interpersonal, grupos sociales, validación de escala, violencia psicológica.*

Introduction

Over the years, the abusive practices exerted within certain groups to recruit and retain followers have aroused the interest of researchers, clinicians, legal practitioners, and policy makers. Organized groups employing these negative practices, which can have a religious, political, pseudo-therapeutic, commercial or other nature, have been sometimes labeled high-demand groups, new religious movements, destructive cults, or abusive groups (Langone, 2002). Abusive groups are characterized by their practices rather than by their beliefs, and they have been defined as any group or movement that exhibits excessive devotion or dedication to a person, idea, or thing, and employs control and abusive practices designed to foster submission and advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the current or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community (West & Langone, 1986).

Much of the public concern about the phenomenon stemmed primarily from infrequent actions with dramatic consequences, such as sexual abuse, murder, collective suicide, or even terrorist attacks, carried out by followers of diverse abusive groups (e.g., Bohm & Alison, 2001). The human and clinical relevance of the phenomenon also comes from the numerous psychological and social difficulties that can be experienced by former members of these groups, even several years after leaving the group (e.g., Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinoski, 2000; Baron, 2000; Gasde & Block, 1998; Matthews & Salazar, 2014; Saldaña, Antelo, Rodríguez-Carballeira, & Almendros, 2018; Zhou, Luo, Chen, & Liang, 2016).

The concept group psychological abuse has been used to refer to the coercive and control strategies that may be exerted within abusive groups (Langone, 2002). These strategies go beyond group processes such as conformity, obedience, social identification, or moral disengagement (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015), increasing their potential influence to explain membership in minority groups such as destructive cults (Baron, 2000), gangs (Wood, 2014), or terrorist groups (De la Corte, Kruglanski, De Miguel, Sabucedo, & Díaz, 2007). Group psychological abuse has been defined as a process of systematic and continuous application of strategies based on isolation, control of information, control of personal life, emotional abuse, indoctrination, and imposition of authority, in order to achieve the submission of the group members (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). Examples of these strategies include isolation from the social support network, control of affective relationships, intimidation, and denigration of critical thinking. The general lack of understanding of group psychological abuse and the diffuse

boundaries between some abusive and non-abusive practices makes it difficult to assess the extent of abuse rigorously in research and applied contexts.

The development of measures of group psychological abuse has been the aim of several studies (e.g., Bohm & Alison, 2001; Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Saldaña, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Almendros, & Escartín, 2017; Winocur, Whitney, Sorensen, Vaughn, & Foy, 1997). However, the need for standardized instruments validated across different cultures still exists (Almendros, Gámez-Guadix, Carrobes, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011). To date, only two instruments measuring group psychological abuse have repeatedly obtained evidence of reliability and validity in different populations.

The Group Psychological Abuse Scale (GPA; Chambers et al., 1994) was the first measure empirically developed, and it has shown adequate psychometric properties with samples of former members of abusive groups from the United States (e.g., Malinoski, Langone, & Lynn, 1999) and Spain (e.g., Almendros, Carrobes, Rodríguez-Carballeira, & Jansá, 2004). Despite its strengths, the scores on this scale involve judgements about the group as a whole by asking about group characteristics and perceived group practices, whether experienced personally or not. Thus, the GPA has limited use in both research and applied contexts where the interest lies in individual experiences of abuse.

The Psychological Abuse Experienced in Groups Scale (PAEGS; Saldaña et al., 2017) is a recently developed self-reported tool composed of 31 items intended to assess the degree of psychologically abusive behaviors experienced by the respondent within a group. Its content represents the whole range of group psychological abuse strategies, which were compiled and defined in a taxonomy validated by a panel of experts (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). Previous studies have analyzed the psychometric properties of the scale with samples of former members of abusive groups composed of 138 English-speaking people mainly from the United States (Saldaña et al., 2017), and 130 Japanese-speaking people from Japan (Saldaña, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Almendros, & Nishida, 2018). Results of these studies found a one-dimensional factor structure, adequate internal consistency, and high correlations with the GPA. Evidence of the discriminatory power of the Japanese version of the PAEGS was also provided, using a sample of 123 students. The authors reported that a value above 13 in a theoretical range from 0 to 124 was useful to distinguish between abusive and non-abusive group experiences in the Japanese population.

The PAEGS appears to be a promising tool that overcomes the limitations of previous instruments designed to assess individual's experiences of group psychological abuse. The purpose of this study was to adapt the PAEGS and to analyze its psychometric properties for its use with Spanish-speaking population. The four specific aims established were to analyze: (a) its internal structure, (b) its internal consistency, (c) its discriminating power, and (d) its relationship with perceived group abusiveness and psychological distress. This project will provide a useful tool for research and applied contexts where the degree of group psychological abuse that may have experienced Spanish-speaking people need to be rigorously evaluated.

Method

Participants

Participants were 537 people from Spain (298 women; age: $M= 41.1$, $SD= 14.63$) who were former members of different groups, mainly of a religious, personal development, commercial or philosophical nature. They were distributed into two different samples according to their stated involvement or not in an abusive and overly controlling group. Self-identification as victim or non-victim is a common criterion used to split samples in violence studies (e.g., Almendros, Carrobes, Rodríguez-Carballeira, & Gámez-Guadix, 2009; Escartín, Monzani, Leong, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2017; Longares, Escartín, Barrientos, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2018). A first sample of victims was composed of 269 people self-identified as former members of abusive groups. A second sample of Non-victims was composed of 268 people who self-identified as former members of non-abusive groups. Table 1 shows the main descriptive data regarding the demographic and group-related information.

Table 1
Descriptive data of the samples of victims and non-victims

Variables	Victims ($n= 269$)	Non-victims ($n= 268$)	Contrast
Sex			
Men	51.5%	37.1%	$\chi^2= 11.262, p< .001$
Women	48.5%	62.9%	
Age			
Mean (SD)	45.81 (12.93)	36.54 (14.91)	$t= 7.037, p< .001$
Educational level			
No studies	0.7%	0.7%	$\chi^2= 7.186, p= .066$
Primary education	4.1%	2.2%	
Secondary education	14.2%	22.5%	
University studies	81%	74.5%	
Age of involvement			
Mean (SD)	18.71 (11.26)	21.68 (11.19)	$t= -3.048, p= .002$
Years inside the group			
Mean (SD)	13.9 (11.25)	6.95 (6.41)	$t= 8.076, p< .001$
Years outside the group			
Mean (SD)	12.84 (12.29)	7.9 (10.13)	$t= 4.558, p< .001$
Method of departure			
Personal reflection	63.7%	80.6%	$\chi^2= 31.942, p< .001$
Counseled	18.4%	1.8%	
Expelled/Dissolution	17.9%	17.6%	
Support received			
Medical care	24.9%	8%	$\chi^2= 22.772, p< .001$
Psychological care	38.5%	1.3%	$\chi^2= 96.219, p< .001$
Psychiatric care	16%	0%	$\chi^2= 38.772, p< .001$

Measures

- a) *Biographical Questionnaire ad-hoc*. Participants provided information about sociodemographic data and other aspects related to their experiences after leaving the group. Questions were included about participants' sex, age, level of education, the date they joined the group, the date they left the group, the method of departure from the group, and the medical, psychological and psychiatric support received related to the group experiences. The following dichotomous yes-no question was used as a criterion to divide participants into the samples of victims and Non-victims: "Have you ever belonged to a group that you now think was overly controlling or abusive to some of its members, either psychologically, physically, or in any other way?"
- b) *The Spanish version of the Psychological Abuse Experienced in Groups Scale* (PAEGS; Saldaña et al., 2017). The PAEGS was adapted and used to assess group psychological abuse (see Appendix). This scale was designed to measure the degree to which a person experienced psychologically abusive behaviors while in a group. The PAEGS is a self-reported instrument composed of 31 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (0= *not at all*, 1= *slightly*, 2= *quite a lot*, 3= *a lot*, 4= *continually*). Previous studies reported a one-dimensional factor structure explaining 45.7% and 50.1% of the total variance, and adequate internal consistency coefficients of .94 and .97 with English and Japanese samples, respectively (Saldaña et al., 2017; Saldaña, Rodríguez-Carballeira, et al., 2018). For the Spanish adaptation of the PAEGS, we followed the standardized guidelines recommended for the intercultural adaptation of psychological questionnaires (International Test Commission, 2016; Muñoz, Elosua, & Hambleton, 2013). The first step involved gathering evidence to ensure the conceptual equivalence of the construct of group psychological abuse in the English and Spanish cultural groups. For this purpose, a board of experts composed of two researchers, two health professionals, and one methodologist with recognized expertise in the subject matter evaluated whether the construct measured could be found in a similar form in both cultural groups of interest. The second step involved selecting two qualified translators, one of them Spanish and the other North American, both with experience in translations between American English and Spanish and extensive knowledge about the process for adapting psychological questionnaires. After the translation and back-translation of the PAEGS was completed, the board of experts evaluated the equivalence of the Spanish version by comparing the original and back-translated English versions. Based on this comparison, the Spanish version was reviewed, and slight modifications were made, taking into account possible cultural and linguistic differences between the two cultural groups. Finally, we conducted a pilot study to ensure that the instructions and the items were adequate and easy to understand, by administering the adapted instrument to a voluntary sample of 12 Spanish former members of diverse abusive groups.
- c) *The Group Psychological Abuse Scale* (GPA; Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994). We used the Spanish version of the GPA (GPA-S; Almendros et al.,

- 2004) to assess perceived group abusiveness in order to provide evidence of convergent validity. It is composed of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all characteristic*) to 5 (*very characteristic*). Items 5, 21, 22, 25 and 26 are reverse-worded. As in previous studies, the internal consistency was adequate for the overall score ($\alpha = .86$) and for the three dimensions in which its items are distributed: Compliance (.82), Mind Control (.70), and Exploitation (.60).
- d) *The Brief Symptom Inventory* (BSI; Derogatis, 1993). The Spanish version of Ruirpérez, Ibáñez, Lorente, Moro, and Ortet (2001) was administered to assess the possible existence of current psychopathological symptoms in order to provide further evidence of validity. The BSI is a well-validated and reliable instrument composed of 53 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which each identified problem has caused them discomfort in the past week. The BSI measures nine symptom dimensions and three global indices. In the present study, the nine dimensions and the global severity index were considered. Their Cronbach's alphas ranged from .79 (Paranoid ideation) to .87 (Depression).

Procedure

The current study was approved by the University of Barcelona's Bioethics Commission. Data collection took place between August and November 2015 through an online questionnaire, using convenience and snowball sampling methods. The study was announced on two distribution lists, allowing us to contact both former members of abusive groups and former members of non-abusive groups. To contact potential victims of group psychological abuse, we announced the study through organizations providing information, education, and counseling about abusive groups, health professionals, specialized forums and social networks, and through other participants who had already collaborated in the study. To contact potential former members of non-abusive groups, we announced the study through mainstream society organizations and social networks. In all cases, a link was provided to potential participants to allow them to collaborate in the study. All the participants were asked to select a group they had belonged to and report their experiences in that group. If they thought they had belonged to an abusive and overly controlling group, they were explicitly asked to respond with that group in mind. All the participants were informed about the study goals on the first page of the online questionnaire. They gave their informed consent and collaborated anonymously and voluntarily without receiving any compensation.

Data analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to examine the factor structure of the PAEGS using FACTOR 9.3 (Lorenzo-Seva & Ferrando, 2006). The Unweighted Least Squares (ULS) extraction method was used with the polychoric

correlation matrix, due to its robustness with small samples and Likert-type items (Baglin, 2014; Izquierdo, Olea, & Abad, 2014). In selecting the number of factors, the information provided by the Parallel Analysis was taken into account. The goodness-of-fit of the data to the model was established through the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) and the Root Mean Square of Residuals (RMSR).

Descriptive analysis and correlation coefficients were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0 (IBM, 2011). The internal consistency of the PAEGS scores in the present study was examined by computing the ordinal alpha coefficients. The latter are calculated using the polychoric correlation matrix, and they are an alternative to Cronbach's alpha that is more accurate with ordinal item response data, especially when the data show skewness (Elosua & Zumbo, 2008; Gadermann, Guhn, & Zumbo, 2012). The discriminating power and optimal cut-off of the PAEGS were examined by means of the Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve procedure using MedCalc 14 (MedCalc Software, 2015). Finally, Cliff's delta (d) coefficient was used to examine the effect size of the differences between samples on the PAEGS, due to its robustness with non-normal and ordinal data (Macbeth, Razumiejczyk, & Ledesma, 2011).

Results

Factor structure analysis

The internal structure of the Spanish version of the PAEGS was examined using the data from the sample of former members of abusive groups. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index (.95) and the value of the Bartlett Sphericity test ($\chi^2= 6151.0$, $p < .001$) confirmed the adequacy of the current matrix for factor analysis. Parallel Analysis recommended the extraction of one common factor with a total explained variance of 55.47%. Values of both GFI (.98) and RMSR (.074) showed a good fit of the data. Factor weights of the items ranged from .49 to .83 (Table 2).

Descriptive statistics and reliability

No significant differences were found in the PAEGS scores based on sex in the sample of victims (Men: $M= 82.06$, $SD= 28.8$; Women: $M= 82.15$, $SD= 29.44$; $t(266)= .25$; $p= .98$) or the sample of Non-victims (Men: $M= 3.66$, $SD= 5.20$; Women: $M= 4.01$, $SD= 6.76$; $t(265)= .44$; $p= .66$). No differences were found either in the PAEGS scores based on the educational level (Victims: $\chi^2= 1.678$, $p= .642$; Non-victims: $\chi^2= .405$, $p= .256$) or the method of departure from the group (Victims: $\chi^2= 2.812$, $p= .245$; Non-victims: $\chi^2= 3.186$, $p= .203$). Moreover, also taking into account both samples separately, we found no significant correlations between the PAEGS scores and age of involvement in the group (Victims: $r= -.09$, $p= .130$; Non-victims: $r= -.10$, $p= .093$) or years outside the group (Victims: $r= .11$, $p= .119$; Non-victims: $r= .03$, $p= .709$). Thus, these sociodemographic and biographical variables were not considered for further analyses. Table 2 shows the descriptive properties of the 31 items on the PAEGS,

calculated based on the scores of former members of abusive groups. The corrected item-total correlation values were higher than the .30 criterion in all cases. The ordinal alpha coefficient was .97, showing an appropriate internal consistency of the PAEGS scores of the sample of victims.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of the PAEGS item scores for the sample of victims ($n= 269$)

Item	M [95% CI]	SD	r_{ix}^c	λ_{i1}
1	1.81 [1.63, 1.99]	1.48	.45	.49
2	2.95 [2.79, 3.11]	1.36	.67	.74
3	2.80 [2.62, 2.97]	1.43	.75	.81
4	3.10 [2.95, 3.26]	1.32	.71	.80
5	2.97 [2.82, 3.12]	1.23	.78	.83
6	3.17 [3.04, 3.31]	1.16	.75	.82
7	3.15 [3.02, 3.28]	1.10	.68	.73
8	1.86 [1.65, 2.08]	1.78	.57	.64
9	2.17 [1.99, 2.36]	1.56	.70	.75
10	2.93 [2.78, 3.07]	1.23	.67	.73
11	2.64 [2.48, 2.81]	1.39	.74	.80
12	2.48 [2.29, 2.66]	1.51	.67	.74
13	2.54 [2.36, 2.72]	1.47	.68	.74
14	3.48 [3.35, 3.60]	1.04	.66	.78
15	2.76 [2.60, 2.92]	1.36	.75	.81
16	1.94 [1.75, 2.12]	1.52	.60	.65
17	2.61 [2.46, 2.77]	1.30	.73	.78
18	1.45 [1.26, 1.63]	1.57	.58	.65
19	3.44 [3.31, 3.57]	1.09	.67	.79
20	3.11 [2.96, 3.25]	1.22	.70	.79
21	2.55 [2.38, 2.73]	1.46	.63	.68
22	3.45 [3.31, 3.58]	1.11	.65	.78
23	2.25 [2.06, 2.44]	1.57	.65	.71
24	2.28 [2.10, 2.47]	1.52	.56	.60
25	2.80 [2.66, 2.95]	1.21	.63	.67
26	2.24 [2.06, 2.41]	1.47	.74	.78
27	2.98 [2.83, 3.12]	1.21	.70	.76
28	2.89 [2.74, 3.04]	1.27	.72	.78
29	2.31 [2.12, 2.49]	1.55	.61	.67
30	3.14 [3.00, 3.28]	1.19	.66	.71
31	1.91 [1.73, 2.08]	1.45	.60	.65

Note: r_{ix}^c = corrected item-total correlation score; λ_{i1} = item's factor loadings.

Discriminatory power analysis

The theoretical range of the PAEGS is between 0 and 124. In the present study, the sample of former members of abusive groups obtained an average score of 82.16 (95% CI [78.68, 85.65]; $SD= 29.02$), and the comparison sample obtained an average score of 3.87 (95% CI [3.12, 4.61]; $SD= 6.23$). The results of

the Mann Whitney U test confirmed significant rank differences in the scale scores between the two samples ($U= 356.50$, $p < .001$). These differences had a high magnitude (Cliff's $d= .99$). Results of the ROC curve analysis supported the high discriminating capacity of the PAEGS because the area under the curve was .995 (95% CI [.985, .999]; $p < .001$). The Youden index indicated that a score above 27 was the optimal cut-off point on the PAEGS to distinguish between victims and Non-victims of group psychological abuse in Spanish-speaking people. This threshold showed a sensitivity of 94.42% (95% CI [91.0%, 96.8%]) and a specificity of 99.25% (95% CI [97.3%, 99.9%]).

Other evidence of validity

The PAEGS scores obtained by the sample of victims correlated significantly and with high magnitudes with the GPA-S ($r_s= .75$, $n= 218$, $p < .001$), and with its three dimensions: Compliance ($r_s= .72$, $p < .001$), Exploitation ($r_s= .60$, $p < .001$), and Mind Control ($r_s= .57$, $p < .001$). The correlations between the PAEGS and the BSI were computed taking into account the responses of the samples of victims and Non-victims to increase the variability of the measures. Given that the pattern of correlations was similar for men and women, the correlation coefficients for the complete sample are reported. Significant correlations, but with low magnitudes, were found between the PAEGS and the Global Severity Index ($r_s= .23$, $p < .001$), and with the symptomatic dimensions of Paranoid Ideation ($r_s= .29$, $p < .001$), Psychoticism ($r_s= .28$, $p < .001$), Depression ($r_s= .25$, $p < .001$), and Interpersonal Sensitivity ($r_s= .20$, $p < .001$). Other symptomatic dimensions also correlated with the PAEGS scores, but with even lower magnitudes: Phobic Anxiety ($r_s= .19$, $p < .001$), Obsessive-Compulsive ($r_s= .15$, $p = .002$), and Anxiety ($r_s= .11$, $p = .036$). The only dimensions showing no significant correlations with the PAEGS were Hostility ($r_s= .09$, $p = .052$) and Somatization ($r_s= .09$, $p = .072$).

Discussion

Practices of psychological abuse endured within social groups are a relevant but elusive phenomenon which usually has not been examined through standardized instruments (Almendros et al., 2011). The adaptation and validation into different cultures of measures as the PAEGS is essential for research and clinical purposes, especially due to the relevance of conducting rigorous assessments of individual experiences of abuse in a controversial field of research in which empirically driven measures are still needed. The present investigation is the first to examine the psychometric properties of the PAEGS for its use with Spanish-speaking people, and it overcomes previous studies by examining together different sources of validity with a relatively large sample of victims and a more appropriate comparison sample.

In line with previous studies that examined the factor structure of the PAEGS with English and Japanese former members of abusive groups (Saldaña et al., 2017; Saldaña, Rodríguez-Carballeira, et al., 2018), results of the current factor analysis yielded a one-factor structure as the most adequate. Thus, evidence

consistently suggested that the whole range of psychologically abusive practices represented in the items on the PAEGS could be components of a single phenomenon. In terms of internal consistency, an adequate ordinal alpha coefficient with a value of .97 was found, which was also similar to values obtained in samples from previous studies. Along with the items' discrimination coefficients, these results suggested that all items had an appropriate functioning, contributing significantly to the total score.

Regarding the discriminatory power of the Spanish version of the PAEGS, a score above 27 in a theoretical range from 0 to 124 maximized the sensitivity and specificity of the scale, and so it could be used as a threshold for detecting group psychological abuse experiences in both research and applied contexts with a Spanish-speaking population. The optimal cut-off point found in this study was considerably higher than the one found in the study where the PAEGS was adapted to the Japanese population (Saldaña, Rodríguez-Carballeira, et al., 2018). A possible explanation for the difference in the cut-off points obtained might be related to the age range of the comparison samples. The Japanese version of the PAEGS was developed using a non-victim sample composed mainly of university students. Presumably, they could have belonged to a smaller number of groups, and the practices they experienced could have been less intense than those normally experienced by Japanese and Spanish people. Nevertheless, this explanation is still speculative, and further research is needed to examine intercultural differences in the psychometric properties of the PAEGS.

Regarding other evidence of validity, the high-magnitude correlations between the PAEGS and the GPA-S imply that people who experienced intense group psychological abuse also tended to describe the group they belonged to as abusive. As in previous studies, Compliance was the GPA-S subscale showing the highest correlation with the PAEGS, which focuses on the relationship of submission to the leader and the group (Almendros et al., 2004). On the other hand, the correlations between the PAEGS and the BSI dimensions also provided evidence of criterion-related validity. Results imply that people exposed to psychologically abusive behaviors within a group may suffer post-involvement clinical symptoms to some extent, especially those related to paranoid ideation, psychoticism, depression, and interpersonal sensitivity. These findings are consistent with previous studies in which former members of abusive groups reported psychological problems (e.g., Aronoff et al., 2000; Malinoski et al., 1999; Matthews & Salazar, 2014; Zhou et al., 2016), and with the few studies that examined the relationship between group psychological abuse and psychopathological symptoms through standardized measures (e.g., Winocur et al., 1997). Our results especially resemble those from a prior study with a non-clinical Spanish sample of 101 former members of abusive groups (Carrobes, Almendros, Rodríguez-Carballeira, & Gámez-Guadix, 2010), in that paranoid ideation and interpersonal sensitivity SCL-90-R subscales showed some predominance. The authors highlighted a tendency toward defensiveness, suspicion and distrust of others in participants who endured an abusive situation and coped by using their own resources in most cases, but this was not accompanied by a hostility component. Moreover, prior studies with North American samples of former

members of abusive groups have shown relatively less weight of hostility and trait anger (e.g., Malinoski et al., 1999).

This study has relevant strengths, but also some limitations. First, the difficulties in accessing former members of abusive groups for research purposes implied the use of a non-probabilistic sampling method and the impossibility of verifying the representativeness of the sample. Non-representative samples are a common issue in a field of study where former members of abusive groups are considered a hidden and hard-to-reach population (Shaghghi, Bhopal, & Sheikh, 2011). Nevertheless, the sample size of 269 former members of abusive groups in the current study represents a clear advantage compared to the samples gathered in previous studies, which are usually composed of about 100 participants (e.g., Almendros et al., 2009; Almendros et al., 2004; Nishida & Kuroda, 2004; Winocur et al., 1997). A second limitation is related to the self-report nature of the PAEGS and the retrospective evaluation of abusive experiences, another common issue also pointed out in other areas where psychological abuse is assessed, such as intimate partner violence (e.g., Momeña, Jáuregui, & Estévez, 2017; Porrúa-García et al., 2016). A third limitation is related to differences in demographic variables between the samples of victims and Non-victims of group psychological abuse. Although the comparison sample obtained in the present study is not limited to mainly university students (e.g., Saldaña, Rodríguez-Carballeira, et al., 2018) or former members of religious groups (e.g., Gasde & Block, 1998; Malinoski et al., 1999), future studies need to gather comparison samples with more similar characteristics in terms of biographical and socio-demographic variables in order to carry out proper comparisons.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, this is the first study to provide evidence of reliability in terms of the internal consistency of the PAEGS scores in a Spanish-speaking sample. This study also provides initial evidence of the validity of the PAEGS scores for assessing the degree of group psychological abuse experienced by Spanish-speaking people, thus contributing to discriminating between people who experienced abusive practices and non-abusive practices in a group setting. Previous studies have usually drawn conclusions about the experiences of former members of abusive groups without a rigorous evaluation of the phenomenon (e.g., Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, & Christians, 2007; Coates, 2016; Rodríguez, 2013). In this direction, the PAEGS provides new opportunities for future research, allowing the evaluation of the relationship between individual experiences of group psychological abuse and post-involvement difficulties or other relevant variables through standardized measures. Moreover, the PAEGS can be used in clinical contexts as a tool to provide useful information for diagnostic processes, especially for less experienced practitioners whose clients claim to have suffered group practices of a dubious nature. Future studies need to continue to examine the psychometric properties of the PAEGS and its usefulness in applied contexts.

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RECEIVED: July 10, 2017

ACCEPTED: March 18, 2018

Appendix

SPANISH VERSION OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE EXPERIENCED IN GROUPS SCALE
(PAEGS)

Saldaña, Rodríguez-Carballeira, and Almendros (2018)

Instrucciones: A continuación encontrará una serie de afirmaciones acerca de algunas prácticas que pudo haber experimentado dentro del grupo. Por favor, indique el grado en el que usted experimentó lo que se describe en cada frase, independientemente de si los miembros del grupo lo hicieron o no de forma intencionada. Seleccione la opción que mejor se ajuste a su experiencia a partir de la siguiente escala: 0= Nada; 1= Un poco; 2= Bastante; 3= Mucho; 4= Continuamente.

1. Hicieron que sintiera rechazo hacia mi vida anterior a formar parte del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
2. Me hicieron creer que correría un peligro considerable si abandonaba el grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
3. Para establecer relaciones afectivas debía contar con la aprobación del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
4. Esperaban que confesara cualquier acto o sentimiento que pudiera apartarse de la ideología del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
5. Me hicieron creer que debía rechazar cualquier cosa ajena al grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
6. Comportarme de acuerdo con la ideología del grupo debía ser más importante para mí que yo mismo/a.	0	1	2	3	4
7. Me desacreditaban si cuestionaba algún aspecto de la ideología del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
8. Me insistieron para que fuera a vivir con miembros del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
9. Trataron de que me distanciara de mi familia.	0	1	2	3	4
10. Me hicieron sentir culpable por cosas pequeñas y sin importancia.	0	1	2	3	4
11. Me presionaron para que abandonara mis actividades de ocio ajenas al grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
12. Me hicieron utilizar una jerga propia del grupo que alteraba el significado habitual de las palabras.	0	1	2	3	4
13. Me hacían participar en tantas actividades diarias que ocasionaban mi agotamiento.	0	1	2	3	4
14. Me hicieron creer que el/la líder del grupo tenía una autoridad incuestionable.	0	1	2	3	4
15. Controlaban en qué ocupaba mi tiempo.	0	1	2	3	4
16. Me indicaron que engañara a los demás sobre aspectos concretos del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
17. Hicieron que cambiara aspectos de mi identidad y forma de ser para adaptarlos a la ideología del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
18. Me animaron a que abandonara mis estudios o mi trabajo.	0	1	2	3	4
19. Me hicieron ver al líder como una autoridad indiscutible que tenía que ser obedecida.	0	1	2	3	4
20. Querían que estuviera preparado/a para hacer grandes sacrificios.	0	1	2	3	4
21. Me ocultaron información relevante acerca de quiénes eran y lo que se hacía realmente en el grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
22. Me hicieron ver al líder como alguien con características muy especiales y claramente superiores.	0	1	2	3	4

23. La autoridad que me imponía un castigo me podía conceder el perdón cuando ella quería.	0	1	2	3	4
24. Me mintieron acerca de la finalidad del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
25. Me mostraban rechazo cuando consideraban que desobedecía alguna indicación del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
26. Me presionaron para que me distanciara de mis anteriores amistades.	0	1	2	3	4
27. Procuraron que pasara el máximo tiempo posible con miembros del grupo.	0	1	2	3	4
28. Vigilaban mi forma de comportarme.	0	1	2	3	4
29. Intentaron conocer con detalle mi situación económica.	0	1	2	3	4
30. Me hicieron creer que todo lo del grupo era bueno y todo lo de fuera era malo.	0	1	2	3	4
31. Me humillaban si no hacía lo que se esperaba de mí.	0	1	2	3	4