INTRODUCTION

Given the high emotional impact of trauma, it is expected that traumatic narratives contain more affective process words than narratives about other stressful, but not traumatic, memories.

Negative emotions words, as well as words about death and dying (as an indicator of perceived threat to the personal integrity, either to oneself or to others), have been associated to a worse adjustment after trauma (e.g., Alvarez-Conrad et al., 2001).

However, the different kind of negative emotions have been rarely explored. Also, in violence victims, the use of words related to abuses must be considered as an indicator of threat perception.

OBJECTIVES

Analyzing the use of negative emotions and threat perception words in trauma narratives from battered women by comparing with stressful narratives from non-traumatized women.

Exploring the relationship between the use of words and the development of psychological symptoms.

METHODS

✓ Participants: The sample was composed by 100 Spanish women in two groups matched by age:

- Trauma Group: 50 victims of intimate partner violence
- Control Group: 50 non-traumatized women

✓ Procedure: Participants were asked to recall with all details that they could remember a negative autobiographical memory:

- The worst violence episode
- The most stressful event

Oral narratives were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and linguistic variables were analyzed. Participants also filled out psychological symptoms measures.

✓ Measures:

- Variables

  - Linguistic variables
    - Negative emotion words
    - Threat perception
    - Death words
    - Abuse words*
  - Psychological symptoms
    - PTSD symptoms
    - Anxiety
    - Depression

- Measures

  - Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)
  - Global Assessment of PTSD (GESEP)
  - Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)
  - Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II)

* The category “Abuse words” was developed for this study. 5 clinicians expert in victimology and domestic violence judged the eligibility of the words included (e.g., hit, humiliate)

DATA ANALYSIS

- The differences in linguistic variables between groups were explored using U-Mann-Whitney test. Shapiro-Wilk test was calculated.
- The relationships between linguistic variables and psychological symptoms were examined using Pearson correlations.

RESULTS

Fig. 1. Percentage of negative emotions for Trauma Group and Control Group

Narratives from trauma group contained significantly more words related to anxiety (Z=-2.103, p=.035) and anger (Z=-3.151, p=.002) than controls. There were no significant differences in the use of sadness words (Z=-2.142, p=.158), although controls tended to report more sadness feelings.

Fig. 2. Percentage of threat perception words for Trauma Group and Control Group

Trauma group used a greater number of abuse words (Z=-3.575, p<.001), whereas among controls predominated words regarding death and dying (Z=-3.618, p=.001).

Table 1. Correlations between linguistic variables and psychological symptoms for Trauma Group and Control Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Trauma Group (n=50)</th>
<th>Control Group (n=50)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Depress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.177</td>
<td>-.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td>.251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>-.031</td>
<td>.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unexpectedly, for the trauma group the use of negative emotions and words related to threat perception was not associated with any measure of psychological symptoms. However, for the control group, an increase in the use of anger words was significantly associated to depression symptoms; and death words were related to the severity of PTSD, specifically to negative cognitions and mood (r=.442, p=.001), and arousal (r=.441, p=.001).

CONCLUSIONS

Anger was the most common emotion, specially among battered women. Depending on the nature of the stressful experience, the threat perception was evidenced in narratives through the use of different language domains.

Contrary to hypotheses, for battered women none of linguistic variables was associated to the psychological adjustment, while for non-traumatized women anger and death references were linked to the development of symptoms. All in all, this study highlights the need to adapt the eligibility of words explored across different samples, taking into account the context in which language is constructed and its implications for the victims’ wellbeing.

References


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