

ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

Psychopathy and Narcissistic Abuse: the Consequences of an Unknown Type of Intimate Partner Violence

Psicopatía y abuso narcisista: las consecuencias de un tipo desconocido de violencia en pareja

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of narcissistic abuse within romantic relationships in which one partner is an integrated psychopath. The study focuses on heterosexual couples in which the psychopath is the male partner. Specifically, it seeks to explain what this abuse entails and its characteristics, and then outline its consequences. Firstly, we explain what psychopathy is. Secondly, we provide a detailed description of narcissistic abuse and its phases: love bombing, devaluation, discard and hoovering. To achieve our objective, we present an analysis of interviews with twenty women who claim to have been in a relationship with an integrated psychopath, a fact corroborated by their therapists. As a methodological tool for data analysis, we employed Grounded Theory, generating theory based on the analysis of the women's discourse rather than from pre-existing hypotheses. Some conclusions relate to the establishment of a previously unknown pattern of violence and abuse linked to psychopathy and narcissism. This type of abuse results in a significant emotional impact on the partners and ex-partners of narcissistic psychopaths.

KEYWORDS: devaluation; hoovering; integrated psychopaths; love bombing; discard.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la cuestión del abuso narcisista dentro de las relaciones de pareja en la que uno de los dos integrantes es psicópata integrado. El estudio se centra en parejas heterosexuales en las que el psicópata es el hombre. Concretamente buscamos explicar en qué consiste y cuáles son las características de tal abuso, para después plasmar cuáles son las consecuencias del mismo. En primer lugar, explicamos qué es la psicopatía y, en segundo, describimos detalladamente qué es el abuso narcisista y cuáles son sus fases (bombardeo de amor, devaluación, descarte y hoovering). Para la consecución de nuestro objetivo, se expone el análisis de entrevistas a veinte mujeres que declaran haber estado en pareja con un psicópata integrado, hecho que ha sido corroborado por sus terapeutas. Como instrumento metodológico para llevar a cabo el análisis de datos hemos empleado la Teoría Fundamentada, dado que partimos del análisis del discurso de las mujeres para generar teoría y no de hipótesis previas. Algunas de las conclusiones obtenidas tienen que ver con el establecimiento de un, hasta ahora desconocido, patrón de violencia y maltrato vinculado a la psicopatía y al narcisismo. Maltrato que deriva en un alto impacto emocional que tienen este tipo de relaciones de abuso en las parejas y exparejas de psicópatas narcisistas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: bombardeo de amor; descarte; devaluación; hoovering; psicópatas integrados.

1. Introduction

Studies such as those by Shejet (2023), Iñaki Piñuel (2008) and Vicente Garrido (2000) highlight that psychopathy is prevalent in our societies in fields such as politics, media and the economy. There are social analyses of psychopathy, such as those by Lasch (1979), Sennett (1980), Lipovetsky (1983, 1990), Bauman (2007) and Grapsas (2022), that link it, along with narcissism, to the capitalist system (Miller *et al.*, 2017). According to Lipovetsky, the myth of “Narcissus” and its conceptualisation are the most precise symbols of the individuality born in this era, which he terms “hypermodernity”, focused on emotional fulfilment, a constant yearning for youth, consumption, sport as a value, the need for movement, etc. Lipovetsky argues that we are witnessing a shift in subjective interests characterised by a lack of concern for values and institutions previously considered solid, such as family and religion. In this context, authors such as Garrido (2004) and Pozueco, Romero and Casas (2011) recognise two types of psychopaths: those who commit crimes and those who do not. The protagonists of this article will be the latter, referred to as subclinical or integrated psychopaths. What differentiates one from the other is solely the issue mentioned: whether they have committed any criminal act or not. Both types of psychopaths share, as will be seen in detail later, the same profile concerning emotions and personality (Pozueco, Romero and Casas, 2011). It is precisely for this reason, because they have not committed any punitive act—or at least have not been caught—that it becomes very complex to distinguish them from the rest of the population. Nothing alerts one to the fact that they are interacting with psychopaths until, through deeper interaction, their true personality emerges, which in many cases leads to some form of abuse (Alyson, 2023). In this case, we will discuss narcissistic abuse, which, as evidence suggests, often occurs within romantic relation-

ships involving an integrated psychopath (Littlebear, Lofties and Mikolon, 2023). This type of abuse within couples, as well as the romantic relationships where one partner has a psychopathic personality, has not been the subject of extensive study due to the significant difficulty in addressing these issues. Furthermore, psychopathy has been stereotypically attributed only to ruthless murderers, largely due to the media and cinema in general (Kumar and Sharma, 2023). Moreover, until a few years ago, the issue of abuse and mistreatment belonged primarily to the domestic or private sphere, which is why it was not extensively discussed (Graña, 2023). Additionally, the pattern of partner violence has been largely confined to Lenore Walker's framework. Walker describes this pattern as a spiral comprising several stages that occur repeatedly until the cycle is broken. Specifically, the framework divides the cycle of violence into repetitive phases: the tension-building phase, the acute battering phase and the remorseful or "honeymoon" phase (1979). In recent years, this type of abuse has been increasingly highlighted to raise awareness and educate the population, with the aim of eradicating this highly destructive form of relationship. Awareness has been significantly boosted by the media, which has brought visibility to this issue and condemned it. Similarly, social media has played its part, creating spaces for communication, expression and debate. It is precisely through social media that other patterns of partner violence have been brought to light, including the one presented in these lines. Specifically, while conducting a social media analysis, particularly on Instagram, for a research project on fundamentalism, we came across various profiles on the mentioned social network (@pulsiondevida.psi, @psico.maxi, @instintocriminal.science, @apartados8km, @self-talk, @psicopsiquis, @pinuelinaki, @giapelleterapeuta, @psicopatascotidianos, @orudiz, etc.) that addressed the general issue of romantic relationships with psychopaths. These profiles discuss topics ranging from raising awareness about narcissistic psychopathic abuse and helping to detect whether your partner is a psychopath and/or narcissist, to what actions to take when this occurs. Thus, the discovery of these realities led to a redirection of the previous sociological perspective and a study on this issue. This issue is of vital importance as it outlines a previously unknown profile of abuse, whose most complex characteristic is its subtlety. This type of violence is beginning to be studied from a psychological perspective, but not from sociology or anthropology. Therefore, this study aims to take the first steps toward addressing these realities within the social sciences. Specifically, one of the objectives is to raise awareness of the cycle of narcissistic violence that exists in relationships with psychopaths, as well as its particularities. Additionally, the study will highlight the consequences of having been in a relationship with a narcissistic psychopath on the lives of the women under study, who are some of the participants in the various aforementioned Instagram pages dedicated to this topic. It is important to clarify that psychopaths can be both men and women and are involved in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. However, the study has focused on interviewing women involved in heterosexual relationships because, quantitatively, there are far more women participating in these pages, and their narratives were much more accessible than those of men.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The psychopath

Given the complexity of the topic, we will explore all the facets involved. We will begin with the definition of psychopathy, which is not without debate, as there is no unanimous agreement on it. Some definitions focus, for example, on biological aspects (Taylor *et al.*, 2003; Guinea *et al.*, 2006), while others are more “environmentalist” (Lang *et al.*, 2002; Poythress *et al.*, 2006; Craparo *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, it is observed that there are authors proposing various types and subtypes of psychopathy. Hare (1984), for example, identified three types of psychopaths: “primary” (characterised by antisocial behaviour based on a deficient or non-existent emotional response towards others); “secondary”/“neurotic” (forms emotional relationships, can feel guilt or remorse and is characterised by high anxiety); and “dis-social” (whose antisocial behaviour is due to environmental factors). In this context, the narcissistic psychopath would be conceptualised as “primary”. There are other sociological classifications, such as Babiak’s (2000), which differentiates only between criminal and non-criminal psychopaths. In summary, these classifications are important to highlight, although they are not the main focus of our study. In any case, considering the various categories proposed by authors such as Cleckley (1941), Karpman (1961), and Hare, Millon and Davis (2001), certain fundamental characteristics define psychopathic personality. Before continuing, it is important to note that psychopathy is not classified as a mental illness, but rather as a personality disorder characterised by a deficient emotional response towards others. This deficiency underpins the antisocial behaviour exhibited by psychopaths (Cleckley, 1941). This emotional deficit arises from an inability to experience emotions, despite not necessarily displaying this trait verbally or outwardly. According to Babiak (2000), their predatory relational style presents a constant and significant risk to those around them, potentially resulting in emotional, physical and/or economic harm. Hare (1991) developed the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), comprising 20 items that delineate the specific traits of psychopathy.

Table 1

Psychopathy checklist factors (Hare, 1991)

1. Glibness/superficial charm	11. Promiscuous sexual behaviour
2. Grandiose sense of self-worth	12. Early behaviour problems
3. Need for stimulation	13. Lack of realistic goals
4. Pathological lying	14. Impulsivity
5. Conning/manipulative	15. Irresponsibility
6. Lack of remorse or guilt	16. Failure to accept responsibility
7. Shallow affect	17. Many short-term relationships
8. Callous/lack of empathy	18. Juvenile delinquency
9. Parasitic lifestyle	19. Revocation of conditional release
10. Poor behavioural controls	20. Criminal versatility

The study of the narcissistic aspect of psychopathy began in the 1970s in North America. Works such as *Generation of Narcissus* (Malcolm, 1971), *Le Narcissisme* (Grunberger, 1971), *Los narcisos: el radicalismo cultural de los jóvenes* (De Miguel, 1979) and *La cultura del yo* (Béjar, 1993) emerged during this period, deeply exploring this phenomenon from diverse perspectives. According to Lasch (1979), each era gives rise to its own particular form of pathology, and narcissism would epitomise our current era, influenced once again by the values of the economic system in which we live. Authors like Jauregui (2018) argue that psychopathy is inherent to modernity and its “values”, where it has become the paradigm of success and power. Beyond psychiatric diagnosis, this author suggests that psychopathy manifests as a growing social issue characterised by cruelty towards humanity. This cruelty stems not merely from consistent norm violations, but from ongoing ethical, moral and even legal distortions for personal gain, driven by market laws and prevailing individualism.

According to Kohut (1968), the narcissistic aspect of psychopathy manifests as a clinical expression of the infantile need for admiration. Svračić (1987) suggests this involves a tendency to present oneself as unique and exclusive, with the ultimate existential goal of gaining attention and admiration (Bleichmar, 1983). Narcissists therefore strive to maintain or regain a grandiose self-image (Freud, 1986; Kernberg, 1970; Kohut, 1966). This behaviour aligns with the “mask” model, a concept derived from clinical observations in which narcissistic individuals project a grandiose exterior while harbouring deep-seated feelings of threat, inferiority, weakness and fragility. Lasch (1979) posits that the constant pursuit of attention by narcissistic psychopaths prevents them from succumbing to their underlying sense of emptiness. This emptiness stems from a profound loss of identity; contrary to their outward portrayal, narcissists suffer from a chronic lack of self-love (Edershill, 2021). At this juncture, Kernberg (1970) discusses the narcissistic paradox, which suggests that while the narcissistic psychopath is unable to comprehend anything external to themselves, they simultaneously rely on constant external “supply” to maintain their fragile ego. Tudor (2017), who openly identifies as a narcissistic psychopath, dubs these supplies “fuel”. Terms like “fuel”, “supply” and “narcissistic supplement” denote the emotional reactions from others that the psychopathic narcissist consumes to counter their inner emptiness. Through these reactions, they uphold their grandiose self-image; lacking them, they plunge into existential void. Regarding fuel, two types are discernible on which the narcissistic psychopath “feeds”: positive fuel (emotional reactions that induce positive sensations such as admiration, idolisation or any form of general attention) and negative fuel (anger, resentment, fury, etc.). Both types are equally valuable and significant.

2.2. The cycle of narcissistic psychopathic abuse

Having elucidated the concept of narcissistic supply, it becomes evident that the routine of the narcissistic psychopath revolves around obtaining it, as their fragile ego would otherwise collapse (Herreros, 1995). Authors such as Piñuel (2015) un-

derscore a recurring pattern of abuse present in every relationship with a narcissistic psychopath, which comprises four main phases: love bombing, devaluation, discard and hoovering. In each phase, the narcissistic psychopath secures their “dose of supply”.

During the initial phase of love bombing, detecting the psychopath can be challenging as they portray themselves as the ideal partner. Armed with information about their prospective partner, the psychopath constructs a tailored mask or persona to allure and satisfy the victim’s emotional needs, painting an ideal and exhilarating picture. The psychopath effectively masks themselves as a “soul mate”, echoing the person’s preferences and beliefs, fostering an illusion of exceptional compatibility. Relationships often escalate swiftly, forming intense emotional bonds. Furthermore, typically during this phase, the psychopath may present themselves as a victim of some purportedly traumatic life event (issues in previous relationships, various forms of abuse suffered, etc.). In this manner, by portraying themselves as victims, they elicit empathy and a sense of commitment from the victim towards the perpetrator. This also renders the victim more receptive, grateful for the trust bestowed upon them and feeling secure and confident, thus divulging more personal and intimate information (which will later be used, in one form or another, against them). During this phase, the psychopath experiences a form of euphoria as they receive attention and supply (affection, compliments, gifts, etc.). In contrast, the victim perceives a false reciprocity in the relationship, believing their partner is genuinely happy. Yet, the narcissistic psychopath’s happiness derives from admiration, being the focal point of attention and achieving the desired outcomes of their manipulation.

The second phase, known as devaluation, initiates when the victim’s attachment to the psychopath is notably strong. Gradually, the narcissist escalates their demand for attention, thereby initiating a process of distancing the victim from their social circles. Concurrently, through isolation and increased dependency on the psychopath, manipulation tactics such as intermittent reinforcement, gaslighting, silent treatment and/or triangulation come into play.

Regarding intermittent reinforcement, in 1956, Skinner discovered that while rewards and punishments impact mammalian behaviour, a particular method of reward delivery can sustain behaviour over time: intermittent reinforcement, which entails a reward schedule that is unpredictable and random. This implies that when a reward is anticipated after a specific action, individuals tend to exert less effort to attain it. However, when the timing of the reward or the certainty of obtaining it is unpredictable, there tends to be a repetition of the behaviour that “worked” or another perceived as an improvement, with greater enthusiasm, in the hope of achieving a positive outcome. This pattern occurs in relationships where the victim increasingly strives to obtain an emotional reward without knowing when or if it will arrive.

The concept of gaslighting originates from the British play *Gas Light* (1933), later adapted into a film by George Cukor (1944). Since the 1970s, it has colloquially described efforts to manipulate a person’s sense of reality, causing them to

question their own sanity (Sweet, 2019). Alongside these, there is the silent treatment, which involves a complete communication blockade without apparent cause (Morán *et al.*, 2019). They may not communicate for hours, days or even weeks. Alternatively, they may disappear entirely. Later, they return or resume communication as if nothing happened, causing confusion, guilt, unease, uncertainty and more in the victim.

Lastly, there is triangulation (Sánchez, 2020), another manipulation tactic where the narcissistic psychopath introduces a third person abruptly into the relationship. This person may exist, be someone from the past or even be invented. In any case, the psychopath shows excessive interest in this person and extols all their supposed qualities, especially those the victim believes they lack or perceives themselves lacking. This leads to constant comparison, self-devaluation and competition for attention, which is what the psychopath truly desires. During this phase, the psychopath continues to receive fuel from the confused victim, who sometimes strives harder to obtain rewards and at other times offers fuel in the form of anger, jealousy, sadness, constant demands and so forth.

The third phase is discard: when the psychopath knows their victim is trapped in their web and psychologically sunk, they abruptly end the relationship simply because “they no longer serve them” and “cannot extract fuel”. In other words, they cannot obtain the attention they need or the emotional reactions they feed on from the victim. Thus, they leave behind a confused, disoriented, dependent person who, in many cases, is financially ruined because the victim will have given everything, one way or another, believing in the relationship. Typically, and simultaneously, at this stage, the psychopath will have already initiated a new relationship (or several), entering the “love bombing” phase. During this time, a traumatic bond exists between the psychopath and the victim, intensifying the devastation of being discarded. According to some psychiatrists and psychologists like Piñuel (2015), three conditions must be met by victims for a traumatic bond to form: an unwavering loyalty that defies logic and common sense, an inability to detach or a dependency on the perpetrator and a denial of a self-destructive reality. In most instances, while victims suffer profound devastation, the psychopath seamlessly continues their life with a new partner, effectively forgetting the one left behind. In the most severe cases, they persist with triangulation, seeking to inflict maximum harm.

There is a final phase known as hoovering. This concept originates from the American vacuum cleaner brand “Hoover” and metaphorically describes the intention to “suck” the victim back into the cycle of abuse within the relationship. Hoovering typically begins anew with “love bombing”, especially when the victim is starting to recover. Should the victim be “sucked” back in, they re-enter the spiral of the narcissistic psychopath (He, 2023).

3. Methodology

The data collection instrument utilised in this study was a semi-structured, in-depth interview. It comprised a script containing ninety questions (mostly open-ended, except for sociodemographic questions) organised into thematic sections. The final section specifically explored the impact of relationships with psychopathic partners and experiences of narcissistic abuse on the participants' lives. Twenty interviews were conducted with women who met the following criteria: (1) actively participate on Instagram in some of the previously mentioned profiles, (2) report having been in a relationship with narcissistic psychopaths and (3) indicate that they are undergoing psychological or psychiatric treatment as a result of these relationships. The interviewed women assert the validity of the second criterion—having been in a romantic relationship with a psychopath—based on confirmation from mental health professionals during their therapeutic process. The confirmation by mental health professionals was pivotal and a prerequisite for sample selection, mitigating potential subjectivity regarding whether their partner or ex-partner is a narcissistic psychopath, as the evaluation was conducted by an expert. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that there is a simultaneous and paradoxical awareness regarding one possible aspect in this context: the construction of the diagnosis of the narcissistic psychopath based on the subjective experiences narrated by the women. Ideally, interviewing the psychopaths themselves would have been desirable, but this endeavour, although considered as an objective, proved completely infeasible for reasons beyond the scope of this work.

3.1. Analysis technique

As previously mentioned, the current subject of study was not initially the primary focus. These realities, which we analyse somewhat serendipitously, were discovered—literally speaking—by accident, hence there were no predefined research hypotheses. Therefore, Grounded Theory was deemed the best methodological approach for conducting data analysis, as it derives from the analysis of discourse rather than from preconceived ideas or hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This technique involves a series of procedures that help organise information and develop analytical categories that reveal the most pertinent patterns in the data (Cutcliffe, 2000). Thus, Atlas.Ti6 software served as the primary tool for coding and creating various codes, upon which the constant comparative method was applied. This method entails systematically exploring similarities and differences through the analysis of incidents found within the data (Trinidad, Carrero and Soriano, 2006). The process began by developing substantive codes from the data obtained during the initial interviews (open coding), aimed at deriving core categories grounded in the data. These categories, referred to in Grounded Theory as *in vivo* codes, are based on participants' expressions and literal language, which play a crucial role in facilitating the emergence of theory. Simultaneously, the aforementioned coding process

was conducted alongside the constant comparative method, enabling the development of diverse narratives. Continuous comparison of incidents within the data prompted the emergence of new avenues for exploration in subsequent interviews. Thus, each interviewee's narrative contributed information that enabled comparison of similarities, differences and the robustness of the identified categories. Thus, the categories began to solidify with the emergence of new properties until they were ultimately verified and saturated. Through this process, and due to the theoretical emergence and saturation of multiple categories found in the initial in-depth interviews, there was a pursuit for more novel information.

After transcribing and analysing the initial interviews, substantive codes such as "dependence", "I can't live without him", "I can't leave him", "neither with you nor without you", were identified, illustrating how women demonstrated an inability to detach themselves from the narcissistic psychopath. These codes facilitated the development of a category termed "attachment", which encapsulated the aforementioned substantive codes. Similarly, other codes indicated that the second core category could be labelled "ruin", grouping substantive codes such as "I'm bankrupt", "sunk", "destroyed", "he's taken everything", "broken" and "empty and with nothing". Lastly, the central category "madness" emerged from substantive codes like "lost", "half-crazy", "crazy", "incongruous", "hypervigilant" and "paranoid".

With these substantive codes, three significant categories were established to elucidate and address the research questions: "attachment", "ruin" and "madness". The term "attachment" was selected for the first category because it is rooted in the women's descriptions of unconditional attachment and addiction, akin to that experienced by a drug addict. The second category, "ruin", reflects the emotional, economic and social turmoil these women endure upon ending the relationship. Lastly, "madness" was chosen for the third category to capture the recurrent expressions of feeling like they "are going crazy" or "were going crazy" in the women's narratives.

3.2. Participants

The participants consisted of twenty women aged between 24 and 59 years who have reported being in relationships with narcissistic psychopaths and are currently undergoing psychological or psychiatric treatment for this experience. The sample was incidental, with women selected based on the specified criteria. Participants were primarily accessed through Instagram profiles as detailed in the introduction. Additionally, the snowball technique was employed, where some interviewees encouraged others to participate. All interviews took place via Skype during September, October and December 2023, in view of the diverse geographic locations of the women's residences. Table 2 below presents the profiles of the interviewees.

Table 2
Interviewee profiles

Name	Age	Duration of relationship	Time since leaving relationship	Instances of resuming relationship	Who ended the relationship (last time)
Cinthya	29	9 months	1 month	2 times	Ex-partner
Sole	52	10 years	6 months	At least 10 times	Sole
Marga	42	6 years	1 month	At least 8 times	Ex-partner
Luisa	48	2 years	8 months	2 times	Ex-partner
Encarni	59	20 years	More than a year	1 time	Encarni
Yolanda	56	9 months	3 weeks	2	Yolanda
Érica	33	1 year and 6 months	2 months	At least 5 times	Érica
Susana	37	9 months	6 months	At least 8 times	Ex-partner
María	34	4 years	2 months	1 time	María
Izaskun	29	1 year	3 months	4 times	Izaskun
Estefanía	24	4 months	4 months	1 time	Estefanía
Sonia	38	5 years	6 months	2 times	Ex-partner
Sofía	39	4 years	1 week	1 time	Ex-partner
Carla	32	2 years	3 months	3 times	Carla
Marta	27				
Carmen	53	34 years	9 months	3 times	Ex-partner
Patricia	49	5 years	1 month	At least 12 times	Ex-partner
María del Mar	45	25 years	1 year	A lot of times: doesn't remember	Ex-partner
Laura	43	12 years	3 years	A lot of times: doesn't remember	Ex-partner
Nereida	30	10 years	2 weeks	A lot of times: doesn't remember	Ex-partner

Source: Own research (the names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity).

4. Analysis

As mentioned in the introduction and following the delineation of the cycle of narcissistic abuse, this analysis examines the repercussions for women who have been involved with an integrated psychopath. All interviewees recount experiencing the cycle of abuse delineated in earlier sections and its various stages. While some describe it implicitly, others do so explicitly. Moreover, their narratives highlight several common elements that closely mirror traits identified by Hare in his classification of psychopathic personalities, which are notably significant. Foremost among these is the issue of pathological lying, a characteristic mentioned by all the women.

All the women interviewed describe the psychopath as a pathological liar. They note that psychopaths begin lying from the outset of the relationship, fabricating details about themselves, their preferences and sometimes even their profession and educational background. The women discuss “the psychopath’s mask” and their “se-

cret/hidden agenda”. For example, regarding this alleged hidden agenda, twelve out of the twenty interviewed women reveal that over time, they discovered their partners were chatting and having sexual encounters with other women besides them, starting from the beginning of the relationship (during the love bombing phase). Moreover, five of these women learned that their ex-partners had another phone, from which, as one interviewee described, they lived “a different life”.

Regarding their true identity, the most significant falsehood was recounted by a participant whose ex-partner claimed to work in gardening in Australia and had come to Spain to reconnect with his Spanish roots, supposedly having Spanish nationality. This narrative was based on the story that his parents migrated to Australia years ago when he was young, seeking work. The woman discovered from an archived news article online that her ex-partner had served twelve years in prison for murder. He was deported to Spain after completing his sentence.

Regarding the theme of the psychopath’s mask and hidden agenda, more than half of the twenty interviewees indicate that their healing process has involved or currently involves “killing” the image they had constructed of the psychopath during the love bombing phase. This phase was when the psychopath crafted their persona and essence based on the idealised concept of love that the woman they were seducing held. One interviewee succinctly captures this sentiment:

My grieving process has revolved around that, permanently burying that character in some way. Coming to terms with the fact that it was a falsehood that never truly existed and will never return (María del Mar).

In this context, the women being studied undergo a state of cognitive dissonance, as articulated by Cinthya and Luisa in their accounts. This dissonance is influenced by cultural and structural factors ingrained in the concept of romantic love, perpetuated through literature and media over the years. This notion often includes the belief that if you wait long enough, “he will change”, or specifically in this case, “he will return to his initial self”:

What happens to us is something like this: you’ve had really good experiences with that person, and suddenly you can’t reconcile that they’re being, yes, bad to you. And then you search for reasons; oh, it’s because they had a bad day, or it’s because their father used to hit them, or it’s because their ex was a bad person, and you make excuses and it continues, and each time they mess you up even more deeply (Cinthya).

Cinthya describes the contradiction that all interviewed women acknowledge experiencing. They initially fell in love with someone they admired for certain qualities, and now they must confront the reality that this person they wanted/loved, and in some cases still want/love, is not who they believed them to be.

The following excerpt also illustrates the contradictions experienced by the women, which in various ways paralyse them in a state of indecision, prolonging their hesitation in abusive situations.

Imagine, you think he’s nostalgic, that he came to meet his relatives, that he wants to reconnect with his roots, it’s wonderful, even romantic, and suddenly

you discover that he has killed someone! I looked into his eyes and thought: it's impossible for him to have killed someone. He doesn't have the eyes of a killer. He's very affectionate. It's impossible. But it's not impossible, no. It's a difficult truth to digest (Luisa).

Luisa reveals that she persisted in the relationship with him even after uncovering this fact. It wasn't until she observed his increasing lies that she became able to question the relationship. She recognised his deceit and manipulation but questioned her own perception of reality. Eventually, she began to doubt her sanity. She confesses her inability to end the relationship; she was “completely hooked”, and it was he who “discarded” her, leaving her “destroyed”.

It is notable that all the women whose relationships were terminated by the psychopath assert that just as he ends the relationship, they experience a challenging existential moment. On one hand, they express exhaustion from the relationship, while on the other, they highlight an incident where they futilely expected the psychopath to treat them well (reciprocity). Many of these women describe how the psychopath leaves them in the worst possible circumstances, feeling “empty” and believing they have nothing more to offer (no supply). Furthermore, most of them disclose that when their partner ends the relationship, he had already begun another:

I was devastated. He had returned to my life after being with someone else, and all he did was compare me. But the worst part was when my father's cancer worsened, and he was dying. What do you think he did? He disappeared. [...] He hadn't finished with me, but he already had someone else. Emotionally, I felt like a corpse (Laura).

In the penultimate column of the table, you can observe instances of relationship cessation between the interviewees and their partners. In most cases, the relationship has ended more than once, and as illustrated by Nereida, sometimes multiple times: “So many that I don't even remember,” she says. This fact is reflected in the data as one of the consequences of a relationship with a narcissistic psychopath, which some psychiatrists/psychologists refer to as “traumatic bonding”. This term describes the “attachment” sensation that the women report feeling, which we have categorised accordingly.

It's like a drug; over time, but only over time—lest people think we are foolish—you know it's killing you, that he pretends, deceives, mistreats and humiliates you, but you need that, you need him, you need his attention. You just don't want to believe it! It's very hard to digest! His good side, his other side. The one from the beginning. You have hope. I've already told you that I ended up in a psychiatric ward; I didn't even know where my right foot was. I doubted everything: myself, reality, and yet I wanted him to come back, to return and deceive me, to suck me back in and let me rest. To put on the mask and play the character from the beginning, the one I don't know why I long for so much and have become obsessed with (Yolanda).

In part of the interview, Sonia summarises various aspects of narcissistic psychopathic abuse very well. Among other issues, she highlights the reinforcement of the submission she experienced, linked to intermittent reinforcement. Towards the end of her account, she questions whether she would re-enter the cycle of narcissistic psychopathic abuse, illustrating the difficulty of breaking the bond.

It sounds super pathological, but he is... well, I want to think he was, because he left me, I believe, fortunately for me, my favourite form of self-destruction. I make a joke of it, but it's not funny at all. I got myself into a place from which I couldn't escape, and the worst part is that nothing tied me down—it was my mind. It's like they kidnap your mind, and you live solely for him. You try everything to please him, to bring back that person you knew, so that he won't leave you. I tried everything: his favourite food, clever surprises, massages, hoping I would hit the mark and bring back that magical person from the good times... until I understood that he wasn't a person, but a fabricated character (Sonia).

When asked, "In one word, describe your current state after having experienced this relationship," the most repeated words were "ruin", "broken", "dead" and "crazy". Cultural expectations and traditional gender roles still play a fundamental role in this context. Some interviewees wondered how they could break up when, to their families and surroundings, their partner was or had been wonderful: "hard-working, a good father, a good conversationalist, etc.," thus placing significant weight on family and societal expectations at the expense of their psychological and social well-being.

The following statement highlights the exercise of economic violence, perpetuated partly by the still-prevalent idea of the sexual division of labour, where men work outside and provide while women work at home without economic or social recognition. In this case, it is imposed to maintain women's dependency on men:

Ruined. He left me in ruins. I married him—you know how it was years ago, it's not like now. He would disappear for days, spend money and give gifts to other girlfriends he had. I was dying of heartbreak; on top of that, he compared me to them. I endured everything. It's hard to understand, but it was like knowing two different people: the perfect one and the monster. He wouldn't let me work, so I was useless, dependent (Encarni).

All the interviewed women reported psychological problems after the end of the relationship: depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. Of the twenty women interviewed, only three had psychological issues before starting the relationship with their partner. When asked to describe their psychological state while in the relationship, most referred to madness: "I was crazy", "it was sheer madness", "one day you'd be on cloud nine with a crumb, with a kind word, and two days later you'd be in the muck because he'd disappear or make you feel worthless", "a living hell, madness", "I thought I had lost it, felt like I was going completely nuts", "crackpot", etc.

Do you know what it is to literally pull your hair out? You have to live through it to understand it. Everything's going fantastically, you're super in love, theoretically, he is too, and suddenly everything changes, and you say: what happened? Is it me? And you look for him and can't find him. From being the most affectionate person in the world, he becomes the most distant, cold and calculating person in the blink of an eye. He goes days without talking to you, literally. From being the person who cared for you the most, he becomes... nothing... no one. You become nothing, like air, and you start grovelling, and he gives you crumbs, and you light up again, and then he rejects you, insults you, humiliates you in a thousand possible ways, and you dim again. He starts bringing in others, and you endure it and start competing... you compete. Broken, dead, and him, he's happy, indifferent. Do you understand? As if nothing had happened (Laura).

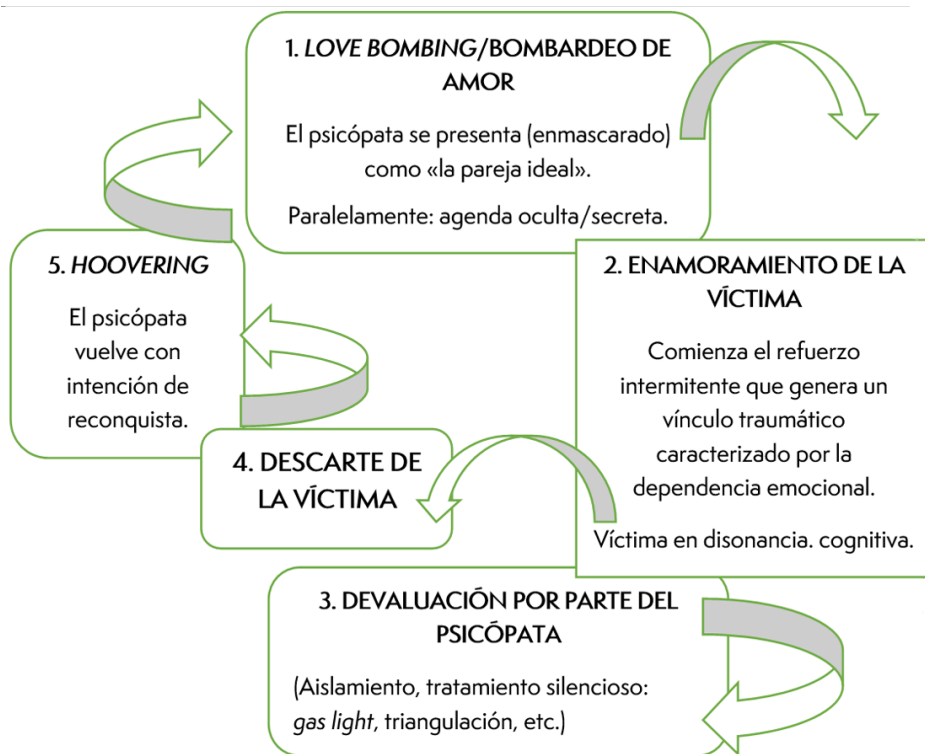
5. Discussion and conclusions

Exploring the scientific literature on this topic reveals that current research is emerging from realities like those described by the interviewed women. These realities are brought to light thanks to social media and various documentaries and programmes addressing this issue, such as *The Tinder Swindler* and *Bad Surgeon: Love Under the Knife*. Such documentaries provide some insights, in a more relaxed and less scientific manner, into the personality of these types of individuals and the consequences of being in a relationship with them. The term “unknown” is used in the title of this article to refer to the type of violence discussed. This term is used intentionally, as this type of violence has likely existed for a long time but has either been invisible or analysed through different behavioural patterns that obscured the particularities of these realities. It is important to highlight that, according to various authors, especially the sociologists cited throughout this work, psychopathy and particularly its narcissistic component are significantly related to the characteristics of our time, where individualism, impermanence, volatility, anomie and market dictates prevail. Consequently, some psychopaths, given their characteristics, become figures of success and reference in fields connected to the public sphere.

This article has systematised and organised existing information, providing theory based on the analysis of the conducted interviews and generating a starting point, a new horizon for the study of violence and abuse within romantic relationships. This new horizon indicates the existence of other patterns of abuse and mistreatment within romantic relationships, beyond those detected and described by Walker. Walker theorised, as previously mentioned, about the cyclical dynamics of violence within couples, specifically the violence exerted by men towards women. In contrast, this study and the emerging theory suggest that psychopathic narcissistic violence and abuse are not necessarily related to sex-gender constructions—although such abuse can be reinforced by cultural patterns based on these constructions—but that this type of violence can occur within any romantic relationship, whether from a man towards a woman, a woman towards a man or within homosexual couples. The type of abuse discussed in this article, which requires further extensive study, also follows a cyclical pattern and comprises different stages. Specifically, the repetitive pattern observed in various cases, based on literature and especially the analysis of different social media groups and the interviews, corresponds to the outline presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Phases of psychopathic narcissistic abuse in relationships



Source: own research.

This pattern, therefore, necessitates further study to refine additional details that could enhance efforts in the prevention and detection of this type of violence, as well as the development of specialised therapies tailored to address such abuse effectively and provide adequate support to victims. As highlighted throughout this text, psychopathic narcissistic abuse reveals its complexity through constant, subtle manipulation. Its insidious nature instils doubt in the victim's judgement and mental stability, fostering a belief in a distorted reality.

The psychological impact of this abuse is profound and devastating, which is borne out by the fact that all twenty women interviewed are currently undergoing psychiatric or psychological treatment. Prior to their relationships with psychopaths, only three had sought psychological or psychiatric consultation. This underscores the critical need for comprehensive dissemination of knowledge regarding the intricacies of psychopathic narcissistic abuse. The dissemination of this type of abuse, alongside the experiences of the interviewed women, can offer robust support to others who have undergone or are currently facing similar situ-

ations. It enables them to depersonalise their experiences and recognise that they have been victims of psychopathic narcissistic abuse, reassuring them that “there is nothing wrong with them”. In essence, their mental health challenges do not stem from intrinsic flaws, but rather from the abusive relationships they urgently need to break free from, starting with what psychiatrists and psychologists term “no contact”. As noted by various experts, including Scott Peck, evil exists alongside evildoers and warrants thorough study. Therefore, there is an urgent call for comprehensive studies to elucidate these phenomena, the nature of evil and their repercussions. Moreover, these studies must adopt a holistic approach, encompassing not only psychological and psychiatric perspectives but also social dimensions. For future research, the aim is to interview psychopathic and narcissistic individuals, acknowledging the complexity of this issue. Firstly, because these individuals are “integrated” psychopaths, meaning they blend in with the general population. Secondly, because obtaining a professional diagnosis and finding participants willing to disclose their condition and undergo interviews pose significant challenges. As recommendations and future research directions, it would be crucial and valuable to investigate profiles “closely” associated with individuals exhibiting these personality characteristics. While this study focused on women partnered with them, exploring insights from professionals who work with such individuals could provide deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

Moreover, the narratives of these women have underscored that psychopathy is not confined to cinema; rather, psychopathy and psychopaths are firmly integrated into our societies. These societies, influenced by emerging values like individualism and competitiveness, sometimes elevate these individuals as role models and examples, often unaware of the potential danger they pose to everyone.

6. References

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