

BOUNDED BY TRAUMA: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF TRAUMATIC BONDING AND STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

Filiz Ekim Çevik^{1,*}, Tuğba Emen²

¹*Istanbul University – Cerrahpasa, Department of Medical Sciences, Institute of Forensic Sciences and Legal Medicine,* ²*Istanbul University – Cerrahpasa, Department of Social Sciences Institute of Forensic Sciences and Legal Medicine, Istanbul, Türkiye*

Abstract: Traumatic bonding involves a strong emotional bond between an individual and their abuser or captor, often in cases of partner violence. The available literature regarding the progression of traumatic bonding is limited, and the elements that play a role in the establishment and perpetuation of traumatic bonding remain undisclosed. To comprehend the phenomenon of trauma bonding, a thorough assessment of scholarly literature was done. The search was limited to studies published in English between 2018 and 2022. The search was conducted using the terms “Trauma Bonding,” and “Stockholm Syndrome” The research found that trauma bonding, frequently referred to as “Stockholm Syndrome” in certain circumstances, is a complex psychological reaction seen in abuse or trauma sufferers. In spite of the harm the abuser does, it is defined by the close emotional bonds that form between the victim and the abuser. Multiple variables influence the development of it in this review.

Keywords: trauma, intimate partner relationship, ipv, traumatic bonding, Stockholm syndrome.

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic bonding involves a strong emotional bond between an individual and their abuser or captor, often in cases of intimate partner violence. Victims may develop loyalty, attachment, and dependency, making it hard to leave. It is important to recognize and understand this bond in order to provide appropriate support and intervention for individuals experiencing intimate partner violence (1). Intimate partner relationships, defined by their inherent closeness and emotional intensity, hold a central position in the lives of individuals. These relationships have the power to shape and influence one's emotional, psychological, and even physical well-being (2) When they flourish, they serve as a source of immeasurable comfort, unwavering support, and profound love, nurturing not only the individuals within them but also the foundation of families, communities, and society as a whole (3). However, the dichotomy of intimate partner

relationships lies in their potential to transform into breeding grounds for emotional turmoil and lasting trauma (4). Within the contours of these complex unions, a phenomenon known as “trauma bonding” quietly takes root, often eluding the immediate awareness of those ensnared in its web. Trauma bonding represents a profoundly intricate and frequently overlooked aspect of intimate partnerships, challenging our conventional understanding of love, connection, and the human psyche (5). When people hear the term trauma bonding, they tend to think of the theory called Stockholm Syndrome; however, trauma bonding differs in how it functions and operates. Stockholm Syndrome is a dynamic between captors and captives. Trauma bonding occurs in a dating or marital relationship (6). Trauma bonding consists of strong, relation-based emotional ties between an abuser and victim, which are reinforced through powerful paradoxical attachments, “where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses or intimidates the other”. This abuse

*Correspondence to: Filiz Ekim Çevik, Istanbul University – Cerrahpasa, Department of Medical Sciences, Institute of Forensic Sciences and Legal, Istanbul, Türkiye, E-mail: fecevik@gmail.com

reinforces the attachments, which “manifest themselves in positive feelings and attitudes by the subjugated party for the intermittently maltreating or abusive party” (7) this research order to thoroughly study the phenomenon of traumatic bonding in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV) and distinguish it from Stockholm syndrome, a comprehensive review of the scientific literature was conducted.

METHODS

The aim of this study is to examine the articles published in peer-reviewed journals on traumatic bonding and stockholm syndrome. For this purpose, the review method will be used, which tries to create a content by summarising and synthesising the approaches and ideas of other researchers. Reputable academic databases were searched to select peer-reviewed papers, focusing on publications from 2018 to 2022. Key search terms included “Trauma Bonding,” “Stockholm syndrome,” and their overlap with IPV. The search was carefully designed to ensure an informed selection of relevant literature. Of the 147 articles initially identified, nine key articles were identified after extensive research and screening. These were chosen for their relevance and significant contribution to the research objectives, particularly in elucidating the differences and overlaps between traumatic bonding and stockholm syndrome.

FINDINGS

In this study, five key themes emerged, providing a comprehensive understanding of the trauma bonding phenomenon. These themes include the intricate emotional commitment between victims and abusers, the significant influence of societal constructs on these relationships, the complex psychology of victims, the effectiveness of various therapeutic interventions, and the differentiation between stockholm syndrome and traumatic bonding.

Emotional Commitment and Traumatic Bonding

Traumatic bonding represents an ambivalent psychological phenomenon that occurs particularly in abusive relationships in which a deep emotional bond is formed between the victim and the abuser. This complex emotional attachment often occurs in abusive contexts, interspersed with intermittent feelings or rewards. The revised articles highlights

how victims often confuse abuse with love, and control and manipulation with care and affection. This misunderstanding results from the cyclical nature of abuse, where the abuser alternates between aggressive behavior and remorseful, loving behavior. This pattern not only results in a strong emotional attachment, but also psychological dependence, making it difficult for the victim to escape the abusive situation. As described in the articles, traumatic bonding are complicated by the fact that victims show empathy for their abusers and often feel responsible for their abusers’ actions. This phenomenon underlines the psychological distress and the complicated nature of abusive relationships, making it challenging for victims to recognize the abusive patterns and seek help (8, 9).

Societal Constructs and Influence

The influence of social construction on the formation and maintenance of traumatic bonding in abusive relationships is a critical factor. Cultural and social norms surrounding relationships, gender roles, and victimhood have a significant impact on victims’ experiences and society’s response to their plight. As discussed in the reviewed articles, these structures often lead to victim blaming and a lack of understanding of the complexities of abusive relationships. Society’s stigma against victims of abuse may exacerbate their trauma and make it more difficult for them to seek help or leave an abusive situation. In addition to this, there are common myths and misconceptions about abuse and traumatic bonding. For example, believing that victims always have the option to leave, or misunderstanding the psychological effects of long-term abuse, can lead to a lack of empathy and support for victims. Additionally, gender norms play an important role in how victims and perpetrators are perceived and treated. In many cultures, masculinity is associated with dominance and femininity with submission, which can normalize abusive behavior and diminish the severity of the victim’s experience. This cultural context can make it difficult for victims to recognize abuse or be taken seriously when seeking help. In summary, social constructions and influences not only shape the dynamics of abusive relationships but also influence the responses and support systems available to victims. Overcoming these social barriers is critical to more sensitively and effectively working with victims of traumatic bonding in abusive relationships (10, 11).

Article	Definition	Definition	Measured Outcome	Research Purpose	Method	Sample	Results
<p><i>Interpersonal Needs and Trauma Bonding in Intimate Partner Violence in Men</i></p> <p>Bhat (2021)</p>	<p>Traumatic Bonding</p> <p>phenomena of becoming attached to the abuser due to cycles of violence and its intermittent phases of punishment and rewards, leading to a psychological response to abuse</p>	<p>Stockholm Syndrome</p> <p>specific type of trauma bonding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal Needs • Trauma Bonding 	<p>provide a better understanding about the interpersonal needs and trauma bonding in men who have experienced intimate partner violence</p>	<p>The research design is a convergent parallel design that involves conducting quantitative and qualitative studies parallelly with equal importance, analyzed independently and interpreted together for results</p>	<p>1790 victim 63 men</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimate partner violence is any behaviour or act towards an intimate partner with an intent of harming the partner. • Abuse leaves a deep impact on victims and the level of needs wanted and expressed show discrepancy • Trauma bonding may develop compelling the victim to stay and compromise with their needs.
<p><i>Traumatic bonding in victims of intimate partner violence is intensified via empathy</i></p> <p>(Lijiang et al. 2022)</p>	<p>strong emotional attachment between an abused person and his or her abuser that is often formed as a result of the repeated cycle of violence. TB is developed as the result of ongoing cycles of abuse in which the intermittent reinforcement of reward and punishment creates powerful emotional bonds that are resistant to change</p>	<p>"suggestive of rationalization of the partner's angry behaviour, self blame for the partner's angry behaviour, siding with partner against others, projection of 1's victim status onto the abuser"</p>	<p>Trauma bonding</p> <p>Empathy</p>	<p>investigate the roles empathy may be playing in traumatic bonding among victims of intimate partner violence and to advance knowledge and add to the available literature on traumatic bonding. The study also aimed to help inform therapeutic approaches/ strategies as well as policies regarding intimate partner victimization in sub Saharan Africa</p>	<p>Qualitative study</p>	<p>The sample was 345 women who were purposively selected from female clients who visited the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SART) Awka, Anambra State (n = 145) and the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team. Lagos (n = 200)</p>	<p>Partner molestation was not significantly associated with traumatic bonding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affective and cognitive components of empathy were positively associated with increased traumatic bonding. • Empathy may engender tendencies that increase the likelihood for traumatic bonding.
<p><i>Intimate Partner Violence and Psychological Distress: Mediating Role of Stockholm Syndrome</i></p> <p>(Ahmad et al. 2018)</p>	<p>The text mentions multiple theories to explain terror or traumatic bonding in relation to residualism, but it does not provide a definition of trauma bonding</p>	<p>Stockholm Syndrome as a condition where the captive develops positive feelings towards the captor, which strengthens as the relationship progresses. It is considered a coping mechanism with 3 main components: positive feelings on part of the captive towards the captor, positive reciprocal feelings by the captor towards the captives, and negative feelings on part of the captives towards authority and/or authority figures</p>	<p>Psychological Distress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core Stockholm Syndrome • Psychological Damage • Love Dependence 	<p>The purpose of the study was to understand the relationship between IPV and psychological distress mediated by Stockholm Syndrome among intimate Pakistani partners</p>	<p>Qualitative study</p>	<p>The sample consisted of 212 individuals in married and dating relationships</p>	<p>The findings suggest that there is a positive and significant correlation between IPV and Anxiety and Depression</p>
<p><i>Women of Intimate Partner Abuse: Traumatic Bonding Phenomenon</i></p> <p>(Koché Redel 2018)</p>	<p>the compelling emotional attachment forming despite abuse, and because of power imbalance."</p>	-	<p>Female Attachment Bond Perceptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views Concerning Self Esteem, Self Identity, Or Self Reference • Implicit Aggression • Coercive Control • Manipulation Experiences • Survivor Experiences Categorized By Coercive, Deceptive, Emotional, Implicit, And Oppressive Traumatization 	<p>victim perspective contribution to existing data regarding traumatic bonding and IPA. Attention was directed at female survivor perspectives of attachment, identity, and the implicitly bonding experiences during intimate abuse.</p>	<p>Review Article</p>	-	-

Counseling Intimate Partner Abuse Survivors: Effective and Ineffective Interventions (Leedom et al., 2019)	The text provides a theory of traumatic bonding in abusive victims, but does not provide a definition	-	The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of intimate partner abuse survivors in psychotherapy and to identify effective and ineffective interventions used by clinicians	The methodology used in the study is based on the critical realist paradigm	101 IPV survivors	Survivors of intimate partner abuse have endured trauma, the loss of their dreams of life with a loving partner, and interpersonal subjugation. In addition, the physical, emotional, psychological, social, and financial harm done to them by their partners may be difficult to overcome.
Painful bonds: Identification with the aggressor and distress among IPV survivors. Lahav (2021)	according to the trauma literature, IPV victims may develop strong bonds with their perpetrators - a phenomenon known as identification with the aggressor (IWA) - in order to survive the abuse.	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification With The Aggressor (IWA) • Trauma Related Distress • Depressive Symptoms 	this study investigated IWA in light of current versus past IPV, as well as the relations between IWA, trauma-related distress, and depressive symptoms	267 women	identification with the aggressor was related to trauma-related distress and depressive symptoms.
Traumatic bonding in intimate partner violence: A Relational Family Therapy approach. Simonis, B., & Osowska, E. (2019)	traumatic bonding as an emotional dependence between 2 people in a relationship that is characterized by the feelings of intense connectedness, cognitive distortion and behavioural strategies of both individuals that paradoxically strengthen and maintain the bond, which is reflected in a vicious cycle of violence	The Stockholm syndrome, based on cognitive and perceived distortions and attachment, is in this context a defence mechanism for dealing with these factors	Better understanding relational approach for IPV and trauma bonding	Case Study	1 women	that Relational Family Therapy can be an effective approach to transforming traumatic bonding in intimate partner violence.
Critical Discourse Analysis of Trauma Bonding in Female Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse: A Phenomenological Constructivist Approach. Qazi, W. I., Shahzad, S., & Waheed, T. (2022)	traumatic bonding is a phenomenon that occurs when a victim of abuse becomes enmeshed sympathetically with their abuser over time due to the interminable pattern of violence and remorse. Traumatic bonding is characterized by the ability of an abusive traumatic event to threaten and disrupt an individual's sense of security, peace, and logical cognitive abilities.	Stockholm syndrome, is a psychological response that occurs when hostages or abuse victims develop positive feelings towards their captors or abusers. This response is believed to occur as a survival mechanism in which the victim forms a bond with the abuser as a means of self-preservation. While there may be some overlap between traumatic bonding and Stockholm syndrome, they are distinct phenomena with different underlying causes and characteristics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimate partner abuse is a socially prevalent issue across cultures, yet the voices of battered women have not yet reached the legal governmental policies. • Recent research on IPA indicates that women remain chained to the dangerously controlled and maintained relationship despite its social and psychological repercussions. • The co-existence of contributing factors create trauma bonding in victims that forces them to stay in abusive relationships. 	phenomenological constructivist approach and critical discourse analysis	-	Traumatic bonding affects victims of intimate partner violence in several ways. Firstly, it can create a sense of loyalty and attachment to the abuser, making it difficult for the victim to leave the relationship. The victim may feel a strong emotional connection to the abuser, despite the harm they are experiencing. This can lead to a cycle of abuse, as the victim may believe that the abuser is the only source of love and support in their life.

Victims' Psychology

The psychological conditions of victims who experience traumatic bonding are extremely complex and diverse. The literature reviewed consistently shows how victims struggle with fear, dependence, and misplaced loyalties to their abusers, resulting in cognitive dissonance. This dissonance stems from the struggle between the temporary kindness of the abuser and the pervasive abuse, resulting in a challenging psychological state. The psychological impact goes beyond the direct effects of abuse and affects the overall mental health and well-being of the victim. Victims often display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, reflecting the profound impact of their experiences. These mental health issues are not just immediate reactions, but can have long-term effects that impact people's ability to form healthy relationships, their self-confidence, safety and trust in others. The trauma experienced by these victims is diverse and includes physical and emotional abuse as well as psychological manipulation and control by the perpetrator. The literature highlights the importance of understanding these psychological impacts from a broad perspective and recognizing that each victim's experience is unique and requires a tailored approach to treatment and support. It is critical to recognize the depth of psychological trauma and provide resources and interventions to meet the specific needs of each victim (12-15).

Stockholm Syndrome and Traumatic Bond Difference

Distinguishing between Stockholm syndrome and traumatic bonding is critical to understanding victim psychology in abusive relationships. In Stockholm Syndrome, hostages often develop positive feelings toward their captors, which is often a survival strategy in life-threatening situations. In contrast, according to the literature review, traumatic attachment refers to a complex emotional bond that develops in an abusive relationship and is characterized by cycles of abuse interspersed with kindness or affection. While both phenomena involve ambivalent attachment to an abuser, traumatic attachment is more common in close or close relationships. It involves prolonged interactions, emotional manipulation, and often deeper psychological entanglements. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for effective intervention, treatment, and support for victims. It allows for a more nuanced approach in addressing the specific challenges and mental health issues arising from these different types of bonds (8, 13).

Therapeutic Interventions

Therapeutic interventions for victims of traumatic bonding are a critical area of focus in the literature. These interventions are designed to address the complex psychological needs stemming from the trauma of abusive relationships. A key aspect of therapy is to rebuild the victim's self-esteem and autonomy, which are often severely undermined in abusive dynamics. Therapists aim to help victims understand the nature of traumatic bonding and the cycle of abuse, facilitating their emotional detachment from the abuser. A range of therapeutic approaches is discussed, including individual psychotherapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and trauma-informed care. These methods focus on processing traumatic experiences, developing coping strategies, and fostering resilience. Group therapy is also highlighted as an effective tool, providing victims with a supportive community of individuals who have faced similar experiences. The literature highlights the importance of a holistic treatment approach that recognizes the multidimensional nature of victim trauma. This includes treating underlying issues such as PTSD, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. The goal of these therapeutic interventions is not only to help victims recover from immediate trauma, but also to provide them with the skills and understanding they need to avoid re-victimization and build healthier relationships in the future (9, 14).

In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis of articles on traumatic bonding and Stockholm syndrome in the context of abusive relationships ultimately leads to a nuanced understanding of these complex phenomena. Overall, the literature highlights the complex interplay between emotional attachment, social influence, and psychological influence. A recurring theme is the emotional bonding a victim feels toward her abuser, which is strongly influenced by factors such as fear, love, dependence, and social norms. These factors create a challenging environment for victims and hinder their ability to escape abusive situations. Furthermore, the distinction between Stockholm syndrome and trauma bond illuminates their differential occurrence in different contexts and enriches our understanding of emotional attachment in abuse dynamics. Stockholm syndrome usually occurs when there is no prior relationship between the victim and abductor, whereas traumatic attachment occurs within a pre-existing relationship and is characterized by cycles of abuse and intermittent positive reinforcement. This review highlights the need for context-specific support and

intervention strategies and advocates for a sensitive and tailored approach to address the particular challenges faced by victims in these circumstances.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

1. Dutton DG, Painter S. Emotional attachments in abusive relationships: A test of traumatic bonding theory. *Violence and victims*. 1993; 8.2: 105.
2. Buss DM, Duntley JD. The evolution of intimate partner violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 16.5. 2011: 411-419.
3. Frech A, Williams K. Depression and the psychological benefits of entering marriage. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 2007; 48.2: 149-163.
4. Pico-Alfonso MA. Psychological intimate partner violence: The major predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder in abused women. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*. 2005; 29.1: 181-193.
5. Reid JA, Haskell R, Dillahun-Aspillaga C, Thor JA. Contemporary review of empirical and clinical studies of trauma bonding in violent or exploitative relationships. *International Journal of Psychology Research*. 2013; 8.1: 37.
6. Painter SL, Dutton D. Patterns of emotional bonding in battered women: Traumatic bonding. *International Journal of Women's Studies*. 1985.
7. Dutton DG, Painter S. Emotional attachments in abusive relationships: A test of traumatic bonding theory. *Violence and victims*. 1983; 8.2- 105.
8. Koch M. Women of Intimate Partner Abuse: Traumatic Bonding Phenomenon. Diss. Walden University. 2018.
9. Simonič B, Osewska E. Traumatic bonding in intimate partner violence: A Relational Family Therapy approach. *Family Forum*. Vol. 9.
9. Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego. 2019.
10. Qazi WI, Shahzad S, Waheed T. Critical Discourse Analysis of Trauma Bonding in Female Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse: A Phenomenological Constructivist Approach. *Sustainable Business and Society in Emerging Economies*. 2022; 4.4: 727-734.
11. Sani AI, Pereira D. Mothers as victims of intimate partner violence: The decision to leave or stay and resilience-oriented intervention. *Social Sciences*. 2020; 9.10- 174.
12. AJ, Bhat MS. Interpersonal Needs and Trauma Bonding in Intimate Partner Violence in Men. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*. 2021; 9(4).
13. Ahmad A, Aziz M, Anjum G, Mir FV. Intimate partner violence and psychological distress: Mediating role of Stockholm syndrome. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*. 2018; 33(2): 541-557.
14. Lahav Y. Painful bonds: Identification with the aggressor and distress among IPV survivors. *Journal of psychiatric research*. 2021; 144, 26-31.
15. Leedom LJ, Andersen D, Glynn MA, Barone ML. Counseling intimate partner abuse survivors: Effective and ineffective interventions. *Journal of Counseling & Development*. 2019; 97(4): 364-375.
16. Effiong JE, Ibeagha PN, Iorfa SK. Traumatic bonding in victims of intimate partner violence is intensified via empathy. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 2022; 39(12): 3619-3637.