

## Women's aggression in heterosexual conflicts

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### **Abstract:**

Using a longitudinal design, prior experience with violence as a victim and opportunity to aggress were examined as predictors of college women's verbal and physical aggression toward romantic partners. Five additional categories of predictors identified in previous research (experienced and witnessed parental aggression during childhood, attitudes accepting of aggression, aggressive/impulsive personality attributes, psychopathology, and prior use of aggression) were also examined. Blockwise hierarchical regression analyses were performed to reveal the best predictors of verbal aggression were prior use of verbal aggression in heterosexual conflicts during adolescence, witnessed parental aggression, level of adolescent sexual victimization, being a target of rational conflict strategies during adolescence and use of physical aggression in romantic adolescent relationships, as well as self-reported verbal aggression as an index of personality, weak emotional ties, number of sexual partners, and approval of sexual intimacy in many types of relationships. Significant predictors of physical aggression were prior use of physical aggression during adolescence, witnessing and experiencing parental aggression, being a victim of physical aggression in adolescent romantic relationships, weak emotional ties, low levels of alcohol/drug use, and opportunity to aggress. A developmental model of aggression in which childhood experiences with family violence contribute to the likelihood of subsequent involvement in relationship violence seems appropriate. Past experience with aggression may be particularly important for women. Cultural expectations about women's roles do not provide the social support for female aggression that is provided for male aggression. Adolescent sexual victimizations and general involvement in conflictual relationships (as target and perpetrator) predicted subsequent verbal aggression, whereas experiencing family violence and sustaining physical aggression in romantic relationships predicted subsequent physical aggression.

**Keywords:** women's aggression | courtship violence | heterosexual conflict | family violence

## Article:

### INTRODUCTION

Research on verbal and physical aggression in heterosexual relationships has produced contradictory results. Some studies report that men are more often the aggressors and women the victims [Laner and Thompson, 1982; Makepeace, 1981, 1986; Yllo and Straus, 1981]; other studies show the opposite [Plass and Gessner, 1983; Stets and Henderson, 1991]; and some find that women's self-reported levels of aggression do not differ significantly from those of men [Straus et al., 1980; White and Koss, 1991]. Makepeace [1986] argued that the contradictions are in part due to methodological factors. Addressing these factors, he found that though women consistently reported being the targets of violence, women and men reported inflicting comparable levels of violence in courtship relationships. Makepeace [1986] further noted that comparable levels of aggression do not mean comparable processes underlying these behaviors in women and men. Further research is necessary to clarify the relationship between gender and aggression. One cannot assume that past research and theory based primarily on male data are adequate for explanations of female aggression [Macaulay, 1985; White, 1993]. Female aggression must be studied directly.

In the most recent study on the incidence of courtship violence in a representative national sample of college students in the United States, White and Koss [1991] found no significant gender-related patterns in levels or type of self-reported violence inflicted or sustained. White et al. [1991] analyzed these data further and found significantly different structural models underlying courtship aggression for women and men. For women, past use of verbal aggression in heterosexual conflicts was the only significant direct path to courtship violence. Other factors in the model operated indirectly through their influence on prior use of aggression.<sup>1</sup> Prior use of verbal aggression was measured using the verbal aggression subscale of the Extended Personality Attributes Questionnaire (EPAQ) and encompassed irritability (easily annoyed, irritable) and nagging, complaining, and whining when things go wrong [Spence et al., 1979]. This measure of prior use of verbal aggression may have been the best predictor of courtship aggression in part because this form of aggressive expression is judged more socially acceptable for women than other forms of aggression. Other factors influencing verbal aggression included witnessing and experiencing parental aggression prior to the age of 14 years, attitudes accepting of interpersonal violence, and an overly dependent, emotionally impulsive personality. White et al. [1991] suggested that prior experience with violence and disinhibition of impulsive expressions of aggression enable women to overcome gender-related constraints on aggressive expression. This conclusion is worthy of further investigation.

The conceptualization of prior experience with violence should be expanded to include victimization experiences. It is not unusual to find that victims of childhood abuse become

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<sup>1</sup> They also found a significant direct path for women from pathology (i.e., anxiety and depression) to courtship violence. However, because of the retrospective nature of the White et al. [1991] data it is likely that the pathology was at least in part a consequence of engagement in courtship violence. This is a reasonable interpretation because of the correlation between inflicting and sustaining courtship aggression. The present study's longitudinal design allowed us to disentangle these confounding factors.

perpetrators of violence [Seghom et al., 1987; Straus et al., 1980]. Also, the frequently observed reciprocal relationship between inflicting and sustaining aggression [White and Koss, 1991] suggests the hypothesis that previously victimized women would be more likely to use aggression in response to interpersonal conflict than non-victimized women. Additionally, opportunities to commit acts of aggression should be considered. A highly constrained environment which presents few occasions and/or targets would reduce overt aggressive behavior even in persons with aggressive tendencies.

Historically, women have been limited in acceptable forms of aggressive expression. However, recent social changes may now offer more occasions for aggression. George et al. [1992] have suggested that these opportunities have increased women's risk for victimization; it is not unreasonable to assume that the risk for perpetration has also increased. Based on Malamuth's [1986] work with men, it was hypothesized that the greater the number of different intimate partners one has, the greater the likelihood that interpersonal violence will occur.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine the role of prior experience with violence as a victim and the opportunity to aggress within the context of the intrapersonal, attitudinal, experiential, and behavioral predictors of relationship aggression previously identified by White et al. [1991]. The present study used a longitudinal design to examine predictors of college women's verbal and physical aggression toward romantic partners. Five categories of predictors previously used by White et al. (parental aggression during childhood, attitudes accepting of aggression, aggressive/impulsive personality attributes, psychopathology, and prior use of aggression) and two new categories of predictors (prior victimization and opportunity) were included.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Participants**

Eight hundred twenty-nine women 17 and 18 years old, entering the university for the first time, completed a confidential survey. This represented 84% of the entering class of women. These same young women were invited to complete a comparable survey at the end of their first year of college. Complete data were obtained from 702 (85% of the original sample).

### **Survey**

Seven categories of variables were assessed on the first survey. For all measures the reliability and validity were established by the scale developers. Included were the following:

1. Witnessing and experiencing parental aggression, assessed by asking two questions regarding family violence [taken from Koss et al., 1987]. Using 5-point scales (ranging from never, 1-5 times, 6-10 times, 11-20 times, over 20 times) respondents indicated how often in a typical month between the ages of 8 and 14 years they experienced physical blows from their parents/stepparents and how often they observed parents/stepparents deliver physical blows to each other.

2. Prior victimization, both sexual and non-sexual. Sexual victimization was assessed using the Koss and Oros Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) [Koss et al., 1987], which identifies four levels of sexual victimization (unwanted contact; verbal coercion; attempted rape; rape). Research participants were categorized according to the most severe form of sexual assault experienced since the age of 14 years. Non-sexual victimization was based on measures of various forms of courtship violence sustained during adolescence (i.e., being the target of rational, verbally aggressive, and physically aggressive strategies), measured by Straus' [1979] Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). Straus' [1979] scoring method was used to arrive at a continuous score for rational strategies and verbal aggression and a dichotomous score (never, ever) for physical aggression.

3. Prior use of aggression, using the Straus [1979] CTS to measure the inflicting of various forms of aggression in a romantic relationship. Three scores, continuous for rational and verbal aggression and dichotomous for physical aggression, were obtained.

4. Attitudes accepting of traditional gender roles and male violence toward women were measured using two subscales from Ashmore and DelBoca [1987]: Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles (10 items) and Acceptance of Male Violence Toward Women (5 items). The sum of the item ratings, using a 5-point agree-disagree scale, provided the subscale scores. Religiosity was also assessed using two questions based on Tittle and Welch [1983]. The cross-products of responses to the two questions, concerning frequency of attendance at religious functions and the importance of religious values in one's day-to-day life, yielded the religiosity index.

5. Impulsiveness/emotionality was measured via the six subscales of the Spence et al. [1979] EPAQ; these included positive instrumentality, negative instrumentality, positive expressiveness, verbal aggression, communal, and masculine-feminine. The sum of the items, rated on a 5-point like me-not like me scale, was used to obtain each subscale score.

6. Indicators of psychopathology included anxiety, depression, loss of control emotional ties [Veit and Ware, 1983], and use of drugs and alcohol [Humphrey et al., 1983]. Anxiety, depression, loss of control, and emotional ties subscale scores were obtained by summing the item ratings based on a 5-point like me-not like me scale. The alcohol/drug use measure was a composite score based on responses to four questions regarding drinking frequency, quantity consumed, frequency of drunkenness, and marijuana use.

7. Opportunity was based on the number of sexual partners the respondents indicated they had had during adolescence and the conditions under which sexual intimacy was acceptable, using a 5-point scale that reflected conservative to liberal judgments.

The second survey contained similar items, but focused only on experiences during the first year of college. Responses to the Straus [1979] CTS were used as outcome measures and assessed the frequency of verbal and physical aggression directed toward a romantic partner during the past school year.

## Procedure

Women were tested both times in small mixed sex groups as part of a larger survey project. All surveys were administered by trained female and male graduate and undergraduate students. Confidentiality of the data was assured.

Data collected at time one ( at the beginning of the first year of college) were used to predict verbal and physical aggression assessed at time two (approximately 9 months later, at the end of the first year of college).

## RESULTS

Preliminary data analyses verified the reliability of all the scales used. The intercorrelations among all the variables revealed no problems of collinearity. Results showed that 27.2% of the women had experienced some form of parental aggression and 8.5% witnessed parental aggression. Furthermore, 49.6% experienced some form of sexual assault as an adolescent, usually committed by an acquaintance in a dating context; 12.4% experienced unwanted sexual contact; 16.3% were verbally coerced into sexual intercourse; 8.1 % were victims of an attempted rape; and 12.8% experienced behaviors that meet the legal definition of rape. Whereas 88.3% reported using verbal aggression at least once during adolescence in a romantic relationship, 51.5% used physical aggression at least once; 94.6% reported using rational strategies. With regard to experiencing violence in a romantic relationship during adolescence, 92.4% had had rational strategies directed toward them; 85.8% had been the target of verbal aggression and 47.6% had been the target of physical aggression.

Hierarchical blockwise regression analyses were conducted, with the seven categories of variables assessed at time one as predictors of verbal and physical aggression directed toward one's romantic partner(s) at time two. At time two, 76.1 % of the women reported verbal aggression, and 30.2% reported physical aggression. Categories were entered in the following order: parental aggression, prior victimization, prior use of aggression, attitudes, personality, psychopathology, and opportunity. The order of variables within each category was free to vary.

For verbal aggression  $R = 0.576$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , with each block except the attitudes accepting of aggression contributing significantly to the final  $R$ . The single strongest predictor of verbal aggression was prior use of verbal aggression in heterosexual conflicts (see Table I). Other significant variables in the final model included witnessed parental aggression, level of adolescent sexual victimization and being target of rational conflict strategies, perpetrator of physical aggression in romantic adolescent relationships, as well as self-reported verbal aggression as an index of personality, weak emotional ties, number of sexual partners, and approval of sexual intimacy in many types of relationships.

Past use of physical aggression was the best predictor of physical aggression, with the blocks representing family violence (witnessing and experiencing parental aggression), past victimization (being a victim of physical aggression in adolescent romantic relationships), pathology (weak emotional ties and low levels of alcohol/drug use), and opportunity contributing to the final  $R$  ( $R = 0.575$ ) (see Table I).

**Table I.** Summary of Blockwise Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Criterion variable	Step	R	R2	Significant predictors	B	P
Verbal aggression	1	0.121	0.015*	Witnessed parental aggression	0.074	0.040
	2	0.453	0.205*	Target of rational strategies	0.104	0.076
				Victim of sexual aggression	0.068	0.088
	3	0.541	0.292*	Inflicted physical aggression	0.172	0.0006
				Inflicted verbal aggression	0.323	<0.0001
	4	0.541	0.293			
	5	0.547	0.230	Personality: verbal aggression	0.080	0.072
6	0.568	0.323*	Emotional ties	0.154	0.0001	
7	0.576	0.332*	Approving of premarital intimacy	0.106	0.008	
Physical aggression	1	0.187	0.035*	Witnessed parental aggression	0.111	0.0024
				Experienced parental aggression	0.061	0.099
	2	0.351	0.124*	Target of physical aggression	-0.087	0.088
	3	0.545	0.297*	Inflicted physical aggression	0.494	<0.0001
	4	0.547	0.299			
	5	0.553	0.306			
	6	0.569	0.324*	Emotional ties	0.082	0.038
7	0.575	0.331*	Use of intoxicants	-0.130	0.0007	
			Number of sexual partners	0.079	0.075	

\*  $P < 0.05$ , significant change in R from previous step.

## DISCUSSION

The present results are consistent with White et al. 's [1991] earlier findings that past use of aggression was the best direct predictor of subsequent verbal and physical courtship aggression. Young women, in the present study, who reported inflicting various forms of verbal and physical aggression on romantic partners as adolescents were likely to report a continuation of these behaviors in their first year of college.

A developmental model of aggression in which childhood experiences with family violence contribute to the likelihood of subsequent involvement in relationship violence seems appropriate. Past experience with aggression may be particularly important for women. Cultural expectations about women's roles do not provide the social support for female aggression that is provided for male aggression. Men receive messages from numerous sources about the appropriateness of displays of power, dominance, and aggression. Men are also more likely to learn to identify situations in which aggression is appropriate [Malone et al., 1989]. Women do not. Thus, any message endorsing and/or encouraging violence in women must be strong enough to counteract contrary messages from other sources.

According to social learning theory, experiences with aggression—those modeled in the home and enacted in adolescent romantic relationships—provide the necessary social context for subsequent aggression. We agree with Malone and colleagues [1989] that the cycle-of-violence hypothesis [Straus et al., 1980] may better describe women's than men's violence. Malone et al. [1989] argued that patterns of aggression for women are more likely to be generalized than for men. They stated, "Women have fewer opportunities to understand and channel their aggressive experiences and behaviors. Rather than interpreting violence as a role-specific experience, they may, through the lack of social structure, develop aggressive tendencies that become pervasive." The only personality measure that emerged as a significant predictor of self-reported verbal

aggression in college reflected a verbally aggressive disposition during adolescence. This argument would be strengthened by determining whether women's aggression is limited to few targets or is generalized to many relationships. Unfortunately, the present study did not determine if the victims of verbal and physical aggression were the same men during adolescence and college. However, given reports of several dating partners in high school and college, it seems likely that different targets were involved across time.

The present study extends previous research on courtship violence by demonstrating that prior victimization predicts subsequent use of aggression in heterosexual relationships. Young women who engaged in verbal and/or physical courtship aggression in college were those who reported higher levels of sexual and/or non-sexual victimization during adolescence. Adolescent sexual victimizations and general involvement in conflictual relationships (as target and perpetrator) predicted subsequent *verbal* aggression, whereas experiencing family violence and sustaining physical aggression in romantic relationships predicted subsequent *physical* aggression.

Finally, the young women who engaged in verbal and/or physical aggression scored lower on the emotional ties subscale of a mental health index. The results indicated significant correlations between weak emotional ties and all measures of victimization (family violence,  $R = 0.167$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ; verbal aggression,  $R = 0.124$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ; physical aggression,  $R = 0.133$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ; sexual victimization,  $R = 0.083$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Perhaps the earlier experiences with parental aggression and adolescent victimization contributed to greater feelings of distrust and alienation from others. Makepeace [1986] has reported that for men the goal of their courtship violence is intimidation, whereas women perceive theirs to be self-defensive. Feelings of isolation resulting from prior victimization may contribute to a greater awareness of threat associated with the intimidating behaviors of their male partners, resulting in the perceived need for self-defensive efforts. Though the present study did not assess whether women's aggression was more likely to be offensive or defensive, other research suggests that it is likely to be defensive [Matthews, 1984; Makepeace, 1986]. The present study also did not assess the time between aggressive episodes. For example, it is not clear if violence perpetrated earlier in adolescence is a better predictor of college perpetration than perpetration later in adolescence.

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