Perceptions of Intimate Relationships: When is it Abuse?

Laura Geimer

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne
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Laura Geimer and Jody Ross, Ph.D. – Department of Psychology

Introduction

Intimate partner aggression (IPA) is common among young adults, with 50% or more experiencing IPA (Linder & Collins, 2005). However, some forms of IPA (e.g., psychological aggression, female-perpetrated IPA) may be less likely than others (e.g., male-perpetrated physical aggression) to be considered “abusive” (Russell, Chapleau, & Kraus, 2015) Still, data suggest that psychological abuse and women’s aggression have negative consequences (Hines & Douglas, 2010; Sackett & Saunders, 1999).

We were interested in the relations between (a) participants personality traits, attitudes, and experiences with violence and (b) their perceptions of different types of IPA (psychological and physical). We predicted that:

H1: Participants with lower threshold for “abuse” would report:
- Histories of violence, either in romantic relationships or family of origin
- More symptoms of antisocial and narcissistic personality
- More accepting attitudes toward dating violence

H2: Participants presented with official definitions of “abuse” would have lower thresholds and higher severity ratings for the aggressive acts.

Method

Students (253 women and 112 men) identified the point in two conflict scenarios where they believed the aggressor’s behavior “crossed the line” and became “abusive.” The scenarios were progressively severe and roughly half of the participants read that the aggressor was male; half were presented with a female aggressor. Other than aggressor gender, the scenarios were identical. Participants also rated the severity of each aggressive act in the scenarios. In addition to these ratings, participants also completed the following measures:

- The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (M-C SDS; Crowne, & Marlowe, 1960), to assess biased responding.
- The Attitudes Towards Dating Violence Scales (ATFDV; Price & Byers, 1999).
- A subset of items from the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4th Edition (PDQ-4; Hylar, 1994) corresponding to the following diagnoses: Antisocial Personality and Narcissistic Personality Disorder.
- The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), a measure of intimate partner aggression.

Results

Participants’ threshold ratings for each scenario were used as outcomes in regressions, where maladaptive personality traits, attitudes towards dating violence, personal IPA history, and IPA in one’s family of origin were predictors. Regression models predicting the following outcomes were significant (see Table 1):

- Threshold ratings of men’s physical aggression
  1. Men/Male participant data: [F = 2.64, p < .05]
  2. Women/Female participant data: [F = 2.49, p < .05]
- Threshold ratings of women’s physical aggression
  3. Women/Female participant data: [F = 3.12, p < .01]
- Threshold ratings of women’s psychological aggression
  4. Women/Female participant data: [F = 3.13, p < .01]

Table 1: Summary of Regression Results Predicting Threshold Ratings (significant predictors only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Aggression Scenario: Male Perp.</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE b</th>
<th>B²</th>
<th>R²Adj</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ATFDV</td>
<td>.5**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.27 .17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ASPD</td>
<td>-.45**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• NARC</td>
<td>.38*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ATFDV</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.14 .08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Aggression Scenario: Female Perp.</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE b</th>
<th>B²</th>
<th>R²Adj</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• IPA Injuries</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.14 .1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inter-parental IPA</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.16 .11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Participants had lower thresholds for abuse when the perpetrator was male versus female. This was true for both the physical aggression scenario (above) and the psychological aggression scenario (below).

In general, thresholds for men’s IPA were related to participants’ attitudes about dating violence and their personality traits. Thresholds for women’s IPA were more strongly related to participants’ own experiences with violence and abuse.

Although reading a definition of abuse did not impact threshold ratings, exposure to the definition did appear to influence participants’ ratings of the severity of the acts portrayed in the scenarios (see handout).