Adopting a cognitive consistency framework, this study explores whether targets of physical violence reinterpret severely violent behaviors to be relatively benign. It was suggested that relationship commitment figures prominently in reinterpreting violence. Fifty-four participants who indicated on a measure of partner violence that their current relationship partner had engaged in at least one act of physical violence during a conflict also completed an almost identical measure that assessed the same acts of physical violence in a different context: when playing or joking around with a partner. Participants also completed a measure of relationship commitment. Consistent with hypotheses, only highly committed individuals who experienced substantial violence during a conflict reported severely violent behaviors as comprising mere instances of “joking around.”

**Joking Violence Among Highly Committed Individuals**

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Most individuals do not anticipate that their relationships will become violent. When a person uses physical force in a relationship, the partner must struggle with a basic contradiction: How is it that a relationship defined by loving behaviors can also be the source of hurtful behaviors? One way to make sense of violence in intimate relationships is to reinterpret violent behaviors so as to view them in more positive terms. Violent behaviors become more tolerable if one can negate that they comprise violence per se. Indeed, denial and reinterpretation are common ways of coping with severely stressful events (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989). But why would a person reinterpret violent behaviors rather than simply leave the relationship? The current research suggests that an answer to this question requires an examination of relationship commitment. In particular, this article advances the idea that compared to less committed individuals, highly committed individuals who sustain high levels of partner violence are more likely to reinterpret these violent behaviors.

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NATURE OF VIOLENCE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Over the past few decades, much has been learned about the nature of violence in intimate relationships (Arriaga & Oskamp, 1999). In the mid-1970s, a large nationally representative survey revealed an annual rate of partner violence at one in every six households, and comparable results were obtained in the mid-1980s (Straus & Gelles, 1986, 1990). Thus, behaviors no less severe than being pushed, grabbed, shoved, or slapped—what recently has been referred to as “common couple violence” (M. P. Johnson, 1995)—are disturbingly common. More severe forms of physical and psychological abuse are less common but may result in injuries or even death.

Because there are many negative consequences of violence (e.g., Goodman, Koss, & Russo, 1993) and because most people in the United States have negative beliefs about violent relationships (Carlson, 1996), there is a pervasive view that being in a violent relationship is socially undesirable. As a result, perpetrators and targets often distort such events (Riggs, Murphy, & O’Leary, 1989). Perpetrators may deny their violent behavior to avoid the label of batterer. Targets may distort reality in disclosing abuse (Dunham & Senn, 2000). One reason for such distortions is to avoid negative impressions by others (Woods, 1999). Indeed, many people adopt the naive idea that any reasonable person who becomes the target of intimate violence should want to leave that relationship immediately and that any person who does not leave a violent relationship must not be “reasonable.” As will be suggested below, there are reasons why a person may remain in a violent relationship despite pressure by others to end it. To avoid potential negative evaluations by others, violence victims who do not end their relationships may reinterpret violent behaviors to be relatively benign.

A COGNITIVE CONSISTENCY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING PARTNER VIOLENCE

Cognitive consistency theories support the notion that targets of partner violence may reinterpret violent behaviors to be relatively benign. One major cognitive consistency theory, balance theory (Heider, 1958), suggests that beliefs linking various attitude objects will have a strong tendency toward consistency. According to this theory, our sense of belonging with close others, such as friends or family members, can be said to comprise a positive “unit relation” between the self and close others. We also have positive or negative attitudes (“sentiments”) toward objects that are associated with the
self and close others. Balance theory suggests that there is a tendency toward consistency in our attitudes toward objects, our perceptions of others, and our perceptions of others’ attitudes toward the same objects. For example, if a person has a positive attitude toward a political candidate and the partner has a negative attitude, over time the person may adopt an increasingly negative attitude toward the candidate to restore belief consistency. A second cognitive consistency theory, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), similarly suggests a tendency toward consistent beliefs. It posits that when one accepts directly opposing beliefs, this results in mental discomfort that motivates changing one of the beliefs to be consistent with the other.

Applied to partner violence, cognitive consistency theories suggest that individuals in loving relationships who become targets of violence should experience substantial mental discomfort. In balance theory terms, inconsistency exists among the following: (a) being in (what is believed to be) a loving relationship with a partner (i.e., a positive unit relation between self and partner), (b) holding the widely shared belief that partner violence is undesirable (i.e., a negative sentiment relation between self and partner violence), and (c) recognizing that the partner’s behaviors are violent (i.e., a positive unit relation between partner and violence). The combination of a positive link, a negative link, and another positive link among these beliefs constitutes a system characterized by inconsistency (i.e., when these signs are multiplied, they yield a negative product rather than a positive product). Such conditions create pressure to change the belief system: Either the person ends the relationship to create a negative unit relation between self and partner, or the person reinterprets the partner’s violent behaviors to be nonviolent so as to eliminate the negative link between self and partner violence.

Dissonance theory is equally applicable to understanding partner violence. In dissonance terms, individuals have ample justification for being in an intimate relationship—they are attracted to the partner. However, having to tolerate partner violence brings into question one’s justification for remaining in the relationship. Indeed, individuals in violent relationships report significantly higher levels of mixed feelings than do individuals in nonviolent relationships (Gryl, Stith, & Bird, 1991). To eliminate the resultant mental dissonance, individuals end the relationship, or if they must persist in it, they change their view of the violent behaviors. Behaviors that are reinterpreted to be nonviolent no longer undermine one’s reasons for remaining in the relationship. Thus, consistency theories suggest that when a loving relationship becomes the source of violent behaviors, the resultant cognitive inconsistency must be resolved. Targets will change the meaning of violent behaviors when the thought of ending the relationship is highly undesirable—that is, when they are highly committed to the relationship.
THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

Whereas cognitive consistency theories describe the mechanism by which partners reinterpret violence (i.e., transforming the negative meaning of a violent behavior into a neutral or positive meaning), being committed to a relationship provides the motivation for reinterpreting violent behaviors. Once a person becomes committed to a course of action, such as remaining in a relationship, that person becomes much more likely to adopt beliefs that are consistent with the chosen course of action (Cialdini, 1985). Relationship commitment involves being emotionally attached to a partner, envisioning a long-term future with the partner, and intending to remain in the relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Rusbult’s (1983) investment model suggests that relationship partners become more committed to the extent that they are satisfied with their relationship, the quality of alternatives to the relationship is poor, and they have invested many resources into the relationship. Indeed, satisfaction level, alternative quality, and investment size have been shown to be predictive of commitment in numerous studies (cf. Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). It has also been suggested that strong commitment has several positive consequences for maintaining a relationship. High levels of commitment have been shown to promote several relationship maintenance mechanisms, including foregoing one’s self-interest for the sake of the relationship (e.g., Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Van Lange et al., 1997) and adopting positively biased beliefs of the relationship (e.g., D. J. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Martz et al., 1998; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

Although commitment has numerous positive consequences for a relationship, strong commitment may also sustain violent relationships at the expense of the abused couple member. Actions taken to smooth over conflicts may indeed save the relationship. But violence victims do this at the expense of their physical and emotional well-being. For example, research has shown that highly committed individuals blame their partners less for psychologically abusive behaviors than do less committed individuals (Mills & Malley-Morrison, 1998), thus providing a context for psychological abuse to continue indefinitely.

Why might strong commitment lead targets of violence to remain in violent relationships? Women in physically violent marital relationships often remain because they are economically dependent on their husbands (Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Strube, 1988; Strube & Barbour, 1984). However, the “ties that bind” extend well beyond economic dependence (Strube, 1988). In both marital and dating relationships, targets of partner violence may remain because they feel a strong affective bond toward their partner despite the violence.
The bond may be fueled by the partner’s promises that the violence will not occur again (Rosen, 1996). Regardless of whether these feelings involve being seduced by a violent partner (Rosen, 1996), wanting the relationship to continue due to a lack of alternatives (e.g., being alone may not be financially feasible; Rusbult & Martz, 1995), or having investments in the relationship that would be lost if it were to end (Bauserman & Arias, 1992; Rusbult & Martz, 1995), many targets of partner violence remain in their relationships because of strong commitment (Rosenblatt, 1977; Strube, 1988).

Several studies have explored the association between relationship commitment and onset of partner violence, suggesting that increases in commitment may trigger violence (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Gryl et al., 1991; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983; Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Sigelman, Berry, & Wiles, 1984). These studies revealed that levels of physical violence were lower among participants who were dating casually than among participants who were dating seriously. Unfortunately, these studies used relationship type (e.g., dating casually) or duration as a proxy for commitment, yet they did not account for a potential artifact: Serious relationships, because of their longer duration than casual ones, provide more opportunities for interactions to be characterized by physical violence (e.g., in Gryl et al., 1991, violent relationships were longer in duration than nonviolent ones). Without directly measuring commitment, it is difficult to assess its relation to partner violence.

Extant studies that have used direct indicators of commitment have yielded mixed results. One study revealed that conflict and verbal aggression were higher among individuals who reported wanting to marry their partner than among casual daters (Billingham, 1987). However, physical violence was not related to intention to marry. In another study, females in violent relationships reported higher levels of their own commitment than did females in nonviolent relationships, but there were no significant differences among males (Hanley & O’Neill, 1997).

Thus, several studies have suggested an association between commitment and partner violence. The current research contributes to the extant literature in several ways. First, this research focused only on individuals in physically violent relationships, measuring variations in commitment level within this group, rather than comparing this group to a nonabused group. This allows for a more exact test of the link between commitment and partner violence than does comparing two groups that may differ in many important ways, including partner violence and level of commitment. Second, rather than combine perpetrators and targets into one sample, this study focused only on targets, given that targets and perpetrators are likely to have different per-
spectives; the major focus was on how targets reinterpret violence given the theoretical importance of understanding how individuals remain in hurtful situations and given the practical importance of detecting instances in which individuals may be reinterpretting dangerous situations. Third, the current research examined a specific mechanism by which committed individuals may remain in violent relationships that has not been examined previously: reinterpretting violent behaviors as constituting instances of “joking.”

CURRENT RESEARCH

As stated earlier, the higher an individual’s commitment level, the more likely that person is to remain in a relationship despite violence. How do highly committed targets manage partner violence? Although low levels of violence can be dismissed by highly committed individuals—for instance, by believing that minor abuse is common in relationships—high levels of violence are not as easily rationalized. The cognitive consistency theories reviewed earlier suggest that when high levels of violence occur, notions of strong commitment to a relationship clash with notions that the relationship is violent. Thus, highly committed targets are more likely to experience dissonance, which must be resolved. As a result, they perceive a partner’s violent acts in more benign ways; less committed individuals do not feel the same need to “protect” their perceptions of the relationship. The current research suggests that not all targets of partner violence reinterpret violent acts to constitute mere joking around; instead, this reinterpretation process is unique to highly committed individuals.

Previous research has focused on ways of coping with severe partner violence that involve minimizing the abuse. For example, Dunham and Senn (2000) revealed that women who experience relatively more severe abuse are less likely to disclose violent incidents to friends or family members. There is also research that documents the ways in which committed couple members engage in wishful thinking and fantasize that their relationship will improve (Rosen, 1996). The current focus on reinterpreting violent acts as instances of joking constitutes yet another method of coping with partner violence that has not received attention in the extant literature.

Participants in the current study completed a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1990) to assess extent of partner violence during conflicts. Then they completed a second, almost identical scale to assess the same physical behaviors but in a different context: when playing or joking around with a partner. It was anticipated that couple members who are
targets of partner violence during conflicts would also experience physical force in other types of interactions, such as joking contexts. However, the individuals of most interest in this study were those who reported severely violent behaviors by the partner in a joking context (e.g., “jokingly” being kicked, beat up, or assaulted with a weapon). It was anticipated that highly committed individuals who experienced high levels of violence during conflicts would also report severely violent behaviors as mere instances of joking around. On the other hand, less committed individuals should be less inclined to reinterpret violent behaviors because they have less of an interest in sustaining the relationship and therefore need less of a justification for remaining in it. On the basis of this reasoning, I advanced the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Compared with individuals who are targets of less violence during conflicts, those who are targets of more conflict violence will also report more joking behaviors that involve physical force.

Hypothesis 2(a): Compared with individuals who are targets of less violence during conflicts, those who are targets of more conflict violence will also be more likely to report joking behaviors that constitute severe forms of violence.

Hypothesis 2(b): The association between violence during conflicts and severely violent joking behaviors will be qualified by an interaction with commitment. The positive association between conflict violence and severely violent joking behaviors will be more pronounced for highly committed individuals than for less committed individuals.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited from a community college and a large university in Southern California to participate in a study on positive and negative interactions in relationships. Of the 129 participants sampled, 82 reported currently being in a romantic relationship. Of those, 54 reported that their current partner had engaged in at least one physically violent behavior during a conflict (as assessed by a measure described below); these individuals (18 males and 36 females) comprised the current sample. The median age was 21.5 years (M = 24.6 years), and the median relationship duration was 35 months (M = 60 months). Twenty individuals were in marital relationships, and 34 were in steady dating relationships (e.g., of these, 2 individuals reported dating their partner more than others; all others reported dating only each other, cohabitating, and/or being engaged).
Procedure

Data collection sessions were conducted in a classroom; approximately 20 participants took part in each session. After obtaining written consent to participate, the experimenter distributed questionnaires. Sessions lasted approximately 15 minutes. At the end of the session, the experimenter debriefed and thanked participants and scanned the room for any individuals who might show signs of distress. No participants reported or exhibited signs of being distressed.

Measures

The variables of interest were measured in a questionnaire that formed part of a broader study on intimate violence. After answering questions regarding demographic characteristics and completing measures that are beyond the scope of the present research, participants were asked whether they were currently in a romantic relationship; if so, they completed a set of measures tapping characteristics of their relationship.

To measure physical violence during conflicts, participants completed a scale that was modeled after Straus’s (1990) CTS. At the top of the page containing the scale, participants read the following:

No matter how well couple members get along, there are times when things don’t go as well as they would like. For example, couple members may have arguments because they have had a bad day, or because one has angered the other. Conflict can be an important part of relationships. Even people who have good intentions and typically find reasonable ways of settling differences can act out of character on occasion. Sometimes well-intentioned people do hurtful things to their partners that they may later regret.

Using a Likert-type response scale (0 = never, 4 = four or more times), participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which their partner enacted each of 16 behaviors at any time in their current relationship. Participants were instructed to count only times when the partner acted first and not in self-defense. The 16 behaviors ranged in severity: nudged me, lightly pushed me, pushed me, strongly pushed me, grabbed me, grabbed me and shook me, slapped me, punched me, kicked me, bit me, threw something at me, threw me down the stairs, beat me up, burned me, struck me with something that is not a weapon, and struck me with a weapon (e.g., knife or gun). Participants who indicated being the target of at least one physically violent act during a conflict comprised the current sample (N = 54). To obtain an overall mea-
sure of conflict violence, I summed the frequencies of the 16 behaviors (alpha = .89).

Participants completed a second, almost identical measure that assessed the same behaviors in a joking context. The instructions were as follows:

You have just completed a measure that asked you to reflect on past conflicts. Couples also joke with one another and do playful things. Sometimes they even laugh and tease each other while they are having a disagreement. For example, one couple member might pretend to be “getting rough” and lightly shake a partner. Other times, couples are just playing with one another or interact in ways that involve playful physical contact. For example, one partner may lightly slap the other on the shoulder and say with a laugh, “No way??! You’re pulling my leg!” Their mannerisms and expressions simply involve physical contact.

The remaining part of the scale was identical to that measuring violence during a conflict situation: Participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which their partner enacted the same 16 acts as those assessing conflict violence (ignoring behaviors that their partners did in self-defense). To obtain an overall measure of joking behaviors, I summed the frequencies of the 16 behaviors (alpha = .87).

The individuals of most interest in this study were those who reported severely violent behaviors by the partner in a joking context. Arguably, in a joking context, most behaviors do not necessarily involve violence per se; many of the 16 behaviors are ambiguous and could involve actions that, although physically forceful, are genuinely meant in jest. However, some of the behaviors are sufficiently injurious to constitute violence, even if they are masked as instances of joking around. Based on results of a factor analysis differentiating severe behaviors from less severe behaviors, two joking behavior groups were created: ambiguous joking behaviors and “joking” violence. Specifically, individuals who reported “jokingly” being kicked, beat up, or struck with a weapon were deemed to be reinterpreting unambiguously violent behaviors as being less serious or nonviolent; they comprised the violent joking group. On the other hand, participants who reported the other joking behaviors—all of which, arguably, could be enacted in a joking manner—were categorized into the ambiguous joking group. Thus, a two-level grouping variable (presence/absence) was created to tap joking violence (as distinct from joking behaviors).

In sum, I derived three variables on the basis of two measures tapping physical force. Conflict violence consisted of the sum of physically forceful behaviors experienced during a conflict. Joking behaviors consisted of the
sum of physically forceful behaviors experienced during a joking interaction. Joking violence (a grouping variable) differentiated individuals who experienced severe physically forceful behaviors during a joking interaction from those who experienced less severe joking behaviors. Thus, conflict violence and joking behaviors were variables based on the same behaviors in different contexts; joking violence was based on a specific set of behaviors. One concern was that the incidents reported on the two versions of the CTS might be the same incidents. To assess this possibility, I examined whether there were any participants whose reports on the two scales were identical (i.e., who had the same frequencies for each of the 16 behaviors). There were no such cases, suggesting that participants were thinking of different instances when they completed the two scales.

To measure commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and investments, participants completed a version of Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) investment model scale. All items employed a 9-point Likert-type response scale (0 = do not agree at all, 8 = agree completely). Seven items measured level of commitment (alpha = .93; e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”). Five items measured satisfaction level (alpha = .91; e.g., “I feel satisfied with our relationship”). Five items measured perceived quality of alternatives (alpha = .81; e.g., “If I weren’t dating my partner, I would do fine—I would find another appealing person to date”). Five items measured investment size (alpha = .71; e.g., “I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if our relationship were to end”). I averaged items to obtain a mean score for each measure, ranging from 0 to 8.

RESULTS

Descriptive Information

Analyses to assess overall levels of key variables revealed that on average, participants were highly committed (M = 7.11, SD = 1.43), and they had been the target of at least five acts of physical violence during a conflict (Md = 5, M = 9.15, SD = 9.91) and at least 15 acts of physically forceful joking behaviors (Md = 15, M = 17.32, SD = 12.58). Of the sample, 32% (n = 17) reported at least one violent joking act; they comprised the violent joking group, whereas the other 68% (n = 37) comprised the ambiguous joking group.

The mean number of conflict violence acts was higher for individuals who reported joking violence (M = 14.29, SD = 13.76) than for individuals who did not report joking violence (M = 6.78, SD = 6.49). However, the mean
commitment levels of those who reported joking violence ($M = 7.00, SD = 1.41$) and those who did not report joking violence ($M = 7.16, SD = 1.45$) were essentially equal.

**Group Differences: Gender and Relationship Type**

To determine whether there were gender differences on any of the variables, I performed ANOVA analyses on commitment level, conflict violence, joking behaviors, and joking violence. There were no significant gender differences.

To assess whether gender moderated any of the hypothesized associations, I performed a logistic regression analysis given the categorical nature of joking violence (present or absent). I regressed joking violence onto commitment level, conflict violence, gender, and all higher order interactions among these variables. There was a significant three-way interaction, $\chi^2(53) = 4.87, p < .05$. Follow-up analyses revealed that the hypothesized associations were slightly stronger for males than for females. Because gender did not change the sign of the association between any of the hypothesized associations and only slightly changed the strength and because the three-way interaction was not hypothesized a priori, I did not include this interaction in later analyses.\(^6\)

Relationship type—marital or dating—was also analyzed to determine whether married individuals differed from dating individuals in meaningful ways. ANOVAs assessing the effect of relationship type on commitment level, conflict violence, joking behaviors, and joking violence revealed, as might be expected, that married individuals ($n = 20$) exhibited higher levels of commitment ($M = 7.73, SD = 0.73$) than did dating individuals ($n = 33, M = 6.73, SD = 1.62$), $F(1, 51) = 6.69, p < .05$. Moreover, compared to the dating group, married individuals exhibited significantly fewer physical joking behaviors (married: $M = 11.00, SD = 8.59$; dating: $M = 21.15, SD = 13.16$), $F(1, 51) = 9.51, p < .01$, and a nonsignificant trend toward fewer conflict violent behaviors (married: $M = 6.30, SD = 5.27$; dating: $M = 10.83, SD = 11.57$), $F(1, 52) = 2.70, p < .11$. However, relationship type was not significantly associated with the percentage of individuals in each joking violence group (married: 25%; dating: 35%); $F(1, 52) = 0.60, p < .45$. I performed logistic regression analyses parallel to those involving gender to determine whether relationship type moderated any of the hypothesized associations. There was a significant three-way interaction, $\chi^2(53) = 4.60, p < .05$. Follow-up analyses revealed that the hypothesized associations were slightly stronger for dating individuals. Because relationship type did not change the sign of the associa-
Hypothesis Tests

Hypothesis 1 suggested that individuals who are targets of conflict violence should be more likely to be targets of any physically forceful behaviors during playful or joking interactions. As shown in Table 1, the simple correlation between conflict violence and joking behaviors was significantly positive, \( r(53) = .55, p < .01 \). This finding suggests that some participants may be targets of physical force in various types of interactions, not just during conflicts.

Hypothesis 2a suggested that individuals who report conflict violence should be more likely to be the targets of severely violent behaviors in a joking context; that is, they would be more likely to be in the violent joking group than in the ambiguous joking group. As shown in Table 1, the correlation between conflict violence and joking violence was significantly positive, \( r(54) = .36, p < .01 \). Thus, individuals who reported more conflict violence were more likely to report severely violent behaviors as having occurred in a joking context.

Hypothesis 2b suggested that the association between conflict violence and joking violence should be moderated by level of commitment; that is, commitment and conflict violence should interact in predicting joking violence. In a logistic analysis regressing joking violence onto conflict violence, commitment, and the interaction between these two predictors, the interaction was significant, \( \chi^2(53) = 5.38, p < .05 \), odds ratio = 1.10. To decompose this interaction, I divided the sample into two groups based on commitment scores: highly committed individuals and less committed individuals. As predicted, the correlation between conflict violence and joking violence was

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** \( p < .01 \).
positive and significant only for highly committed individuals, $r(32) = .59, p < .01$. On the other hand, for relatively less committed individuals, the correlation between conflict violence and joking violence was not significant, $r(22) = -.06, p < .79$. Thus, among targets of relatively high levels of conflict violence, highly committed individuals were more likely than less committed individuals to report being the targets of severe violence in a joking context.

**Auxiliary Analyses**

The results strongly support the notion that individuals who report severely violent joking behaviors are different from those who report more ambiguous forms of physical force in a joking context. Additional analyses were performed to further characterize these two groups. First, given extensive support for the investment model in predicting commitment (cf. Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), this model was examined in each of the two violent joking groups—ambiguous joking and violent joking. In the overall sample, higher commitment was predicted by higher satisfaction (beta = .32, $p < .01$), relatively poor alternatives (beta = -.25, $p < .05$), higher investments (beta = .33, $p < .01$), and being in a marital relationship (beta = -.25, $p < .05$); relationship duration was not significantly predictive of commitment. When I repeated this analysis for each joking group separately, the investment model remained strong: As shown in Table 2, investment model variables accounted for greater than half the variance in commitment in both groups. However, there were important differences. In the ambiguous joking group, alternatives were not significantly associated with commitment. These individuals were more committed to the extent that they were highly satisfied and had made large investments in the relationship; the effect of being in a marital relationship was marginal. On the other hand, in the violent joking group, only alternatives exhibited a significant association with commitment, whereas the other variables did not exhibit significant associations. Individuals who reported joking violence were more committed to the extent they lacked alternatives to their current situation. These results are highly speculative and should be interpreted with caution, given that the sample size for each joking group was small. Thus, these should be interpreted as suggestive rather than reliable findings.

Additional analyses also explored the association between commitment level and conflict violence for individuals who reported joking violence versus those who did not. First, I performed simple correlations. Commitment and conflict violence were not significantly associated among individuals in the ambiguous joking group, $r(36) = -.22, p < .20$, but they were significantly
associated for individuals in the violent joking group, $r(17) = .50, p < .05$. Moreover, in an analysis in which conflict violence was regressed onto commitment, joking violence, and the interaction between these two variables, the interaction was significant, $t(49) = 3.19, p < .01$. Further analyses revealed that among less committed individuals, those in the ambiguous and violent joking groups did not differ in conflict violence. On the other hand, highly committed individuals in the violent joking group reported more conflict violence than did highly committed individuals in the ambiguous joking group.

**DISCUSSION**

The results provided strong support for the hypotheses. Relative to individuals who were targets of low levels of conflict violence, those who experienced higher levels were also more likely to report physically forceful behaviors in a joking context (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, individuals who experienced high conflict violence were more likely to report severe acts of partner violence in a joking context (Hypothesis 2a). Importantly, the latter finding was true of highly committed individuals but not of less committed individuals (Hypothesis 2b).
Who exhibited the highest levels of partner violence? The highest levels during a conflict occurred among individuals who were highly committed and who reported severely violent behaviors in a joking context. These results, in combination with the results of auxiliary analyses, revealed that among highly committed individuals, sustaining high levels of conflict violence and reporting high levels of joking violence go hand in hand; less committed individuals did not exhibit a link between amount of conflict and joking violence.

It is important to note that participants were not merely referring to the same events when answering questions on the conflict and joking scales (as noted in the Method section). Nor were highly committed individuals in violent relationships (as indicated by the measure of conflict violence) merely reporting more physical joking behaviors. They reported “jokingly” being beat up, assaulted with a weapon, and kicked—behaviors that objectively do not occur in a joking context. Importantly, there were systematic and theoretically meaningful differences in who reported severely violent joking behaviors that cannot be explained if the violent joking behaviors merely constituted benign instances of joking around. There would be no reason to expect that severely violent joking behaviors would correlate with conflict violence and, more important, that this correlation would occur only among highly committed individuals. As was predicted, only highly committed individuals who experienced a lot of conflict violence also reported high levels of joking violence. Presumably, it is only these individuals who struggle to find a way to report particularly difficult incidents. Thus, the current method provided an indirect way to get people who do not want to undermine their relationships (i.e., highly committed people) to report violence. As is suggested by cognitive dissonance theory, reinterpretation of violence may help victims privately manage the confusion that arises from choosing to remain in a violent relationship. Dunham and Senn (2000) revealed more public strategies, whereby victims minimized their experiences in disclosures of violence to close others. Thus, minimization and reinterpretation both constitute ways of coping with a severe situation. As Dunham and Senn noted, such coping strategies may have benefits and costs. In the short term, committed individuals can find a “mental space” within which to sustain their relationships, which they are motivated to do. However, in the long term, as is the case with minimizing violent experiences, reinterpreting a partner’s violent behavior may preclude a person from recognizing the abuse and seeking help.

Auxiliary analyses exploring the investment model among each joking group suggest why some individuals in violent relationships are highly committed. Among individuals who reported severely violent behaviors in a joking context, the basis of commitment was an absence of alternatives to the
relationship and not elevated levels of satisfaction or large investments in the relationship. The investment model results for this group—namely, the prominent role (i.e., an absence) of alternatives—is similar to the investment model results of battered women who seek shelter (cf. Rusbult & Martz, 1995). This suggests that highly committed individuals who experienced high conflict and joking violence share a key relationship characteristic with battered women: As bad as the current relationship situation may be, there is no better situation. It is possible that reinterpretation is more common among victims of intimate terrorism than among victims of common couple violence (cf. M. P. Johnson, 1995). However, these results should be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First, the ambiguous versus violent joking groups did not comprise large enough samples to reliably estimate the effects of investment model variables within each group. Second, the overall sample exhibited an unusually high level of commitment. The mean commitment level (7.11) was almost at the highest possible level (8.00). Although this was a college sample, the current sample was comprised of older students, many of whom were married. Thus, these results cannot easily be generalized to less committed samples.

Given the current study design, the exact causal sequence between sustaining conflict violence and perceiving violent acts as joking cannot be determined: Did highly committed individuals who sustained high levels of violence develop over time the tendency to reinterpret violent acts? Or did highly committed individuals who were able to reinterpret violent acts become more likely to sustain high levels of violence over time? It is also plausible that among highly committed individuals, high levels of violence led to reinterpretting violent behaviors that in turn led to sustaining even greater levels of partner violence; that is, there may be bidirectional causality. It is likely that conflict violence preceded the process of perceiving severely violent acts as joking behaviors given that violent behaviors must occur before they can be reinterpreted. Future research using a longitudinal design stands to provide evidence of the temporal sequence among these variables.

Although the current results have been interpreted in terms of a cognitive consistency theoretical framework, other interpretations are plausible. Following self-perception theory (Bem, 1965), it is possible that targets of high levels of partner violence inferred that they are highly committed (e.g., “If I have remained in the relationship despite my partner’s repeated violent acts, then I must be committed”). Targets of lower levels of violence may also follow a self-perception process (e.g., “Minor forms of abuse are common in most relationships and so they say nothing about my level of commitment”). As stated earlier, a limitation of the current study concerns the correlational
design, making it impossible to establish causal relationships among these variables. However, it is possible to rule out potential causal explanations. To support a self-perception explanation, there would have to be a significant linear association between conflict violence and level of commitment: Increasing levels of conflict violence should make inferences of strong commitment more likely. However, as is shown in Table 1, commitment level was not linearly associated with conflict violence, making a cognitive consistency framework more plausible.

A strength of the current research is that it advances an understanding of the association between commitment and partner violence, an association that has received only inconsistent support. These inconsistencies may have stemmed from the measurement of commitment, such as using relationship type (e.g., dating vs. marital) or duration as an indicator of commitment. However, inconsistencies in past research may have a different explanation. Whereas previous studies focused exclusively on a main effects model to explain the link between commitment and violence, the current research revealed that an interaction model may be more appropriate: Commitment exhibited a significant association with conflict violence only under certain conditions, namely, when severely physically violent behaviors were reported in a joking context.

The current analysis suggests that just as interpersonal communication may have a “dark side” (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994), so might the strong motivation to maintain a relationship. Although strong commitment is typically a positive force in maintaining relationships, it may also sustain violent relationships at the cost of an abused partner’s personal well-being. Moreover, auxiliary analyses (although tentative) suggested that highly committed individuals who had experienced high levels of conflict violence and reinterpreted violent behaviors in fact were committed because they perceived a lack of alternatives to the current relationship. Indeed, there are many alternatives to being in a violent relationship, including spending time alone, spending more time with friends and family, or other situations that in the long-run may be preferable to the current situation. An important direction for future research is to determine whether making such alternatives available (or broadening the perceptions of alternatives) would reduce the tendency to reinterpret violent behaviors. A key step in partner violence interventions concerns assessing the victim’s level of commitment. The current research suggests that a major challenge with highly committed individuals is to break the strong link between sustaining high levels of partner violence and dismissing severely violent acts as merely joking around.
NOTES

1. In this article, *partner violence* refers to instances in a romantic relationship in which one partner is physically abusive toward the other partner.

2. These two schools were comparable in demographic characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity).

3. In a pilot study (*n* = 28), the order of completing the conflict versus joking measure was manipulated. There were no order effects on levels of conflict violence, *F*(1, 27) = 0.03, *p* < .87, or joking behaviors, *F*(1, 27) = 1.88, *p* < .18.

4. Detailed results of this factor analysis are available from the author upon request.

5. No participants reported being thrown down the stairs or burned in a joking context.

6. Importantly, the same pattern of results emerged regardless of whether this interaction was included or excluded in hypothesis tests.

7. Additional analyses were done to determine whether relationship duration or nature of relationship should be included as covariates. Neither of these variables was significantly correlated with joking violence: duration of relationship, *r*(54) = −.10, *p* < .46; nature of relationship, *r*(54) = .11, *p* < .45. Moreover, there were no higher order interactions involving these variables in predicting joking violence. Thus, they were not included as covariates.

8. The range of commitment scores was from 1.83 to 8.00. Because more than half of the sample indicated the highest possible level of commitment (i.e., averaging 8.0 on all commitment items), a median split on this variable resulting in two equally sized commitment groups was not possible. Instead, the sample was split into individuals who indicated the highest possible level of commitment (*n* = 32) and those who reported relatively lower levels (*n* = 22). The mean level of commitment for highly committed individuals was 8.00, and the mean for less committed individuals was 5.74. The average number of conflict violent behaviors for highly committed individuals (*M* = 9.59, *SD* = 11.21) did not differ significantly from the average number for less committed individuals (*M* = 8.50, *SD* = 7.84); *F*(1, 52) = 0.16, *p* < .70. Similarly, the average number of joking behaviors did not significantly differ: highly committed, *M* = 15.69, *SD* = 12.67; less committed individuals, *M* = 19.81, *SD* = 12.31; *F*(1, 51) = 1.37, *p* = .25. The rate of individuals reporting joking violence also did not differ significantly: highly committed, 28%; less committed, 36%; *F*(1, 52) = 0.40, *p* < .54.

REFERENCES


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