You can degrade but you can’t hit: Differences in perceptions of psychological versus physical aggression

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ABSTRACT
This study fills two major gaps in the partner aggression literature. First, little is known about perceptions of psychological aggression. Second, it is unclear whether any physical aggression or just high physical aggression is perceived to be negative and severe. We conducted an experiment with college students (N = 212) to examine perceptions of a hypothetical marital conflict that varied the husband’s level of physical aggression (absent, low, high) and psychological aggression (low, high). The effect of manipulating the husband’s physical aggression led to robust main effects on perceptions of negativity and severity. The distinction between any versus low or high physical aggression depended on the variable. The effect of manipulating the husband’s psychological aggression was not nearly as robust.

KEY WORDS: conflict severity • perceptions of violence • physical abuse • psychological aggression

Partner aggression involves acts of physical and psychological aggression that can have many negative effects. Physical aggression can result in minor bruises to broken bones and, in the worst cases, even death (Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). Physical as well as psychological aggression – verbally...
and/or emotion ally aggressive acts, such as yelling, criticizing, derogating, ridiculing, threatening, isolating, and other nonphysically aggressive attempts to control and dominate another person (O’Leary, 1999) – have been linked to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use, and chronic disease (Coker et al., 2002; Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Given the known destructive consequences of partner aggression, it would seem that people should perceive physically and psychologically aggressive acts to be largely negative in the context of intimate relationships. It would be problematic if partner aggression was not seen as negative, as this would create a climate in which further partner aggression may be accepted. Thus, a major milestone toward ending partner aggression involves ensuring that people find partner aggression to be negative. Is this the case?

Most of the extant research on perceptions of partner aggression has focused on one form of aggression: physical aggression. The extant research suggests that, in general, physical aggression is perceived to be negative and severe (e.g., Harris & Cook, 1994). However, our knowledge of perceptions of physical aggression is limited in that it is unclear the point at which such perceptions become negative. For example, is a slap in the face seen as negative or only more severe physical acts? One aim of this research was to fill this gap.

More importantly, very little is known about perceptions of another form of partner aggression: psychological aggression. It remains unclear whether conflicts involving high levels of psychological aggression are perceived to be negative and unacceptable, that is, whether psychological aggression is tolerated. Our major aim was to examine perceptions of mild versus severe psychological aggression.

Why examine perceptions of partner aggression?

Partner aggression is a problem
A major reason for examining perceptions of physical and psychological aggression is that both types of aggression still occur, suggesting that people may use these behaviors to resolve conflicts (Simon et al., 2001; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Factor analyses of physical aggression support a distinction between mild and severe forms, such that “mild” physical aggression refers to grabbing, pushing, shoving, and slapping, while “severe” physical aggression refers to choking, beating up, and using a gun or a knife (Pan, Neidig, & O’Leary, 1994). In the United States, approximately, 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are physically assaulted by a romantic partner annually, with the majority of reported acts (about 75%) being mild forms of aggression, such as pushing or slapping (Tjaden & Thebonnes, 2000). Each year, about 5% of physically abused women (approximately 44,000) suffer serious injuries such as being beaten up, choked, or weapon wounds, and such severe acts are significantly more likely to be perpetrated by men against women (Rennison & Welchans, 2000).
Not all partner aggression involves only physical aggression; much may include psychological forms of aggression. As with physical aggression, extant research supports a distinction between mild and severe forms of psychological aggression. Mild forms of psychological aggression include yelling, swearing, and other verbal attempts to intimidate or dominate another person, while more severe forms of psychological aggression include efforts to emotionally manipulate a partner through threats, belittling, degrading, humiliating, severe criticism, isolation from others, and denying needed economic resources (Coker et al., 2002; Johnson, 1995). Severe forms of psychological aggression – namely humiliating, degrading and threats – are highly correlated with occurrences of physical aggression (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). In addition, psychologists have rated threats of physical force, restriction of physical freedom, and degradation as the most serious forms of psychological aggression, and calling a person a very derogatory name (e.g., for a woman: slut, bitch, whore) was viewed as more severe than yelling or screaming (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005).

In establishing whether psychological aggression remains a problem, it becomes necessary to examine whether the wide range of behaviors under the label “psychological aggression” have severe consequences. Despite disagreements in rates of psychological aggression because of ambiguities in defining the concept (O’Leary, 1999), there are demonstrated negative consequences (e.g., Coker et al., 2002). Psychological aggression often has an impact that may be more difficult to overcome than the impact of physical aggression (Arias & Pape, 1999). One study reported that 72% of physically abused women rated psychological aggression as having a more negative effect on them than physical aggression, and being ridiculed had a particularly negative impact (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). Moreover, psychological aggression is often a precursor of physical aggression in young married couples (Murphy & O’Leary, 1989), which makes psychological aggression a risk factor for physical injury.

**Accepting aggression breeds further aggression**

Do perceptions of psychological aggression matter? We assume that when people perceive partner aggression to be acceptable, this creates a societal condition that breeds further aggression. Several theoretical viewpoints support our premise. For example, feminist theorists argue that the patriarchal nature of many societies lead to social norms that permit a husband to physically or psychologically abuse his wife. When men are dominant members of their society, it is tolerable and even expected in some situations for them to use aggression in order to control and dominate their female partner (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Social learning theorists suggest that we mimic the behavior of others whom we find it rewarding to mimic; people who are exposed to an admired other (e.g., parent, peer) acting aggressively become more likely to act aggressively. Moreover, if these admired others create an environment where aggression is viewed as normal and acceptable, then this belief is also likely to be modeled by the
Perceiver (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Personality theories suggest that abusive individuals have specific personality features that lead them to act aggressively, such as borderline personality disorders (Dutton, 2002); one of the major risk factors is early exposure to physical violence during childhood and shaming by parents (Dutton, 2000; Hughes, Stuart, Gordon, & Moore, 2007).

All of these viewpoints suggest that social environments in which partner aggression becomes a fact of life may contribute to one’s own partner aggression in the future. Indeed, past research has shown that norms in the form of male peer support for wife abuse leads to higher rates of actual aggression (e.g., Schwartz & Dekeseredy, 2000). Given that acceptance of aggression may lead to further instances of aggression, it becomes increasingly important to study perceptions of various types of aggression. If people fail to recognize that it is unacceptable to physically or psychologically assault a partner, then partner aggression becomes more likely to continue as perpetrators fail to be punished and targets fail to get much needed support.

**Extant research on perceptions of partner aggression**

Given that benign perceptions of aggression may be implicated in sustaining aggression, it becomes important to establish whether people fail to see partner aggression as negative and unacceptable. Much more is known about whether people find physical aggression to be unacceptable than psychological aggression (Harris & Cook, 1994). Some studies have focused on factors surrounding the physically aggressive incident – such as the race of the victim and/or perpetrator (Locke & Richman, 1999), or whether the perpetrator was intoxicated (Lane & Knowles, 2000). Numerous studies have examined characteristics reflecting individual differences among the perceivers, and particularly beliefs toward gender and beliefs toward victims in general (Hillier & Foddy, 1993). One individual difference that has been somewhat consistent in predicting perceptions of physical aggression is the sex of the perceiver. The majority of these studies have found that women find the perpetrator’s behavior to be more blameworthy and less acceptable than men (Cauffman, Feldman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000; Pierce & Harris, 1993). Women also rate conflicts involving physical aggression to be more severe than men (Pierce & Harris, 1993).

The research on perceptions of physical aggression typically involves examining two types of perceptions: perceptions of the perpetrator’s actions and perceptions of the conflict. Different factors may be behind each type of perception. People may perceive a perpetrator less negatively as a way to make sense of a discomforting event (Lerner, 1980; Shaver, 1985). Thus, attributions of the perpetrator can be based not only on the perpetrator’s behavior, but also the behavior of the victim, as well as perceiver characteristics. For example, the perpetrator is blamed less when the victim is seen as provoking the abuse, (Pierce & Harris, 1993), and when the perceiver is a man (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Shlien-Dellinger, Huss, & Kramer, 2004).
On the other hand, research has shown that perceptions of conflict severity are based on the extent of injuries that the victim suffers; when injuries are present this dominates perceptions of the conflict (Lane & Knowles, 2000). Factor analyses support differentiating between perceptions of a perpetrator versus a conflict (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2004; Willis, Hallinan, & Melby, 1996); as such, they are typically analyzed separately (Home, 1994; Pierce & Harris, 1993; Seelau & Seelau, 2005). Thus, in our study we were interested in examining perceptions of, both, the perpetrator and conflict.

Is psychological aggression unacceptable?

A major gap in the extant literature is the absence of research on perceptions of a perpetrator or conflict when presented with different levels of psychological aggression. Instead, research has examined whether people perceive certain acts to comprise psychological aggression and how severe they perceive the acts to be (Follingstad et al., 2005; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000). We could locate only one study that examined the perception of both psychological and physical aggression (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2004). Participants in this study viewed one of two videos depicting either a psychologically aggressive conflict or a conflict that involved both psychological and physical aggression. Results indicated that physical aggression added to the perception of seriousness (i.e., the perpetrator was seen as more abusive and violent), above and beyond the effect of psychological aggression. However, this study did not vary the level of psychological aggression, making it impossible to infer what effect it had on perceptions.

As such, our major aim was to begin to fill this gap by advancing the following research question: Do conflicts involving high levels of psychological aggression lead to more unacceptable and negative perceptions of the perpetrator and ratings of the incident as more severe, when compared with a conflict involving low levels of psychological aggression (RQ1)? There are two equally plausible answers to this question and no directly relevant extant research, suggesting we advance a question rather than a specific hypothesis.

On the one hand, given the negative and long-lasting effects of psychological aggression, one might expect it to be perceived as negatively as physical aggression. This would suggest that perceivers will rate the perpetrator’s behavior in a conflict involving high psychological aggression to be more unacceptable and negative, and rate the conflict as more severe, than when only low levels of psychological aggression are present.

On the other hand, over the last decade members of the media and policy makers have emphasized that physical aggression is not acceptable, but they have not provided a comparable message about psychological aggression (O’Leary, 1999). In the United States, a large amount of attention has been given to physical forms of aggression, but only recently has attention focused on nonphysical forms of aggression (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002).
Research has shown that physical aggression plays a more significant role in battered women’s use of the legal system, even though these women report that the psychological aggression they suffer has had a more negative impact on their mental health (Dutton, Goodman, & Bennett, 1999). Consequently, the general public may believe that physical aggression is deplorable, but may not hold comparably negative beliefs about psychological aggression. People may still believe the old saying, “sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

**Does the severity of physical aggression influence perceptions?**

A second limitation in the extant literature is the absence of information on the severity of physical aggression as a factor that influences perceptions of the perpetrator and conflict severity. Although there are meaningful differences in the consequences of mild physical aggression (e.g., slapping) versus severe physical aggression (e.g., beating up, causing injuries; Pan et al., 1994), little is known about whether people use these variations in severity to guide their perceptions. Does any aggression or only severe aggression cause a shift in perceptions? Studies that have manipulated physical aggression have only examined the presence versus absence of aggression (e.g., Home, 1994) rather than assessing perceptions of no physical aggression versus mild physical aggression versus severe physical aggression, which would shed light on the point at which people shift their views of physically aggressive acts as benign versus negative.

We located only one study that varied the level of physical aggression, in which participants read a vignette describing either moderate aggression (the victim was slapped twice across the face causing a couple of bruises) or severe aggression (the victim was hit several times across the face causing a broken and bloody nose and she lost consciousness; Lane & Knowles, 2000). The perpetrator was held responsible for the aggression in both conditions, suggesting that severity did not influence perceptions of culpability. However, the severe aggression condition was rated as more violent than the moderate aggression condition, and harsher punishments were recommended in the severe aggression condition. There was no condition in which physical aggression was absent, nor did this study examine psychological aggression.

As such, a second aim was to fill this gap by advancing a second research question: Does the presence of any physical aggression lead to more negative perceptions of the perpetrator and of incident severity, or will perceivers also differentiate between conflicts involving low versus high physical aggression (RQ2)? As with RQ1, there are two equally plausible answers to this question and only limited directly relevant extant research, suggesting we advance a question rather than a specific hypothesis.

On the one hand, when examining actual instances of aggression, severity matters. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that men who perpetrate less
severe physical aggression are not the same as those who perpetrate more severe aggression, and the consequences of severe physical aggression are worse (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2003). If perceivers are aware of this distinction in actual cases of aggression, then perceivers should provide different ratings of the perpetrator for conflicts in which physical aggression is absent versus mild versus severe.

On the other hand, given strong social norms that have developed against any physical aggression, it may be that once any physical aggression is present the perpetrator’s behavior is negative and the conflict severe. That is, the presence of any physical aggression may cause perceivers to provide extreme ratings (i.e., a ceiling or floor effect for ratings), causing them to make distinctions between no versus any physical aggression, but not between mild versus severe where distinctions may be minimized or overlooked.

In addition to the two research questions, we also examined one hypothesis in regards to perceiver sex differences. We anticipated that high psychologically and physically aggressive behaviors should lead to more negative perceptions for women than men, but no differences in perceptions should be observed when partner aggression is very low (e.g., low levels of psychological aggression). That is, we expected perceiver sex to moderate the effect of the psychological aggression and physical aggression manipulations (Hypothesis 1). In short, we attempted to replicate past research suggesting that women find physical aggression to be more severe than men, and that women find the perpetrator’s behavior more negative (e.g., Cauffman et al., 2000; Pierce & Harris, 1993; these studies did not include conditions where aggression was absent, but there are no theoretical reasons to expect sex differences in such a condition). We expected to find this for perceptions of physical aggression given that this is what was examined in past research. Although we were less sure that the hypothesis would be supported for perceptions of psychological aggression, we advanced this hypothesis given that physical and psychological aggression often occur together and are related forms of partner aggression (Johnson & Leone, 2005).

**Current research**

This study was a $2 \times 3$ (factorial) between-subjects experiment, in which participants were randomly assigned to read one of six hypothetical scenarios depicting a married couple’s conflict, following which they provided various ratings of the scenario and couple members. Two levels of psychological aggression (low versus high) were crossed with three levels of physical aggression (absent, low, and high). We also included participant sex as a measured independent variable.

We manipulated levels of partner aggression in a context where a husband is aggressive toward his wife. Importantly, we kept this gender pattern constant across all conditions so as to isolate the effect of varying levels of aggression, rather than expand the analysis to also examine the effect of varying who is aggressive (a man versus a woman). We do not intend to
suggest that women are never aggressive toward men, nor that this distinction is not important; more simply, varying perceptions based on the perpetrator’s gender was beyond the scope of an initial analysis of perceptions of the different levels of aggression. As such, we selected a scenario that may be plausible to lay persons, one where a husband is potentially physically aggressive toward his wife. Research has shown that social norms regarding male-to-female violence are more widely understood than any other types of violence (Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). Using previous research examining perceptions of aggression as a guide (e.g., Pierce & Harris, 1993), we developed items to examine general perceptions of the perpetrator (e.g., how negative was the perpetrator’s actions) and perceptions of conflict severity (e.g., how violent was the conflict). In addition, given that the primary purpose of this research was to begin to examine perceptions of psychological aggression per se, we also included items that assessed perceptions of the perpetrator when he engaged in specific acts of psychological aggression.

**Method**

**Participants**
A total of 212 college students were recruited from a large university in Midwestern United States to participate in a study on conflict in relationships in return for credit toward an introductory psychology course requirement. The sample consisted of 117 females and 95 males. The mean age was 19.1 years (SD = 1.37), and most participants were White (81%; 10% Asian American; 5% African American; and 4% Hispanic).

**Procedure**
Data collection sessions were conducted in a classroom; approximately 10 participants took part in each session. After obtaining written consent to participate, participants completed a questionnaire packet that contained all study materials. Participants first read a scenario depicting a marital conflict. After reading the scenario, participants completed a scale assessing specific perceptions of each spouse’s behavior and the severity of the conflict. Finally, participants provided demographic information and answered questions about the content of the scenario that were used as manipulation checks. Sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes. At the end of the session, the experimenter debriefed and thanked participants.

**Manipulation**
We deliberately used extended descriptions (approximately 1.5 single-spaced pages) of the couple interaction as a way of engaging participants and facilitating their imagining a specific, meaningful situation (rather than providing a situation that is not sufficiently described or too abstract). The hypothetical scenario in all conditions was the same, varying only in specific ways described later.
In all conditions, the scenario described a conflict situation involving a married couple, John and Sue. The couple held fairly traditional family roles; Sue was responsible for cooking and cleaning, and John was responsible for paying bills. Sue had recently started a new job that took more of her time and required John to help out with some of Sue’s household chores (e.g., washing dishes), which was a source of marital tension. The conflict began when John failed to wash the dishes. Sue became frustrated, and the conflict escalated and culminated into a face-to-face confrontation. In all conditions, both John and Sue engage in yelling, criticism, and other “low” levels of psychological aggression that are plausible during particularly heated marital conflicts. This increased the believability of the scenarios and made the different versions comparable in that they all constituted a particularly heated marital conflict (as contrasted with a calm discussion over a disagreement).

Sue’s conflict behavior did not vary across conditions. In all conditions, Sue yelled at John (e.g., “Her tone of voice rising, she sternly said, ‘John, John! Come on!! Lately you leave everything around here for me to do, and honestly I’m getting tired of this routine!’”), she threw something at John (“Sue grabbed a dishtowel and hurled it at him”), and she was critical of John (“I just knew you’d be this way. What is your problem? You’re being so incredibly unreasonable. How difficult is it for you to help out a little??!! Honestly, John, most women would not put up with this!!!”).

Whereas Sue’s conflict behavior was consistent, John’s conflict behavior varied across conditions. The 2 × 3 design entailed creating six different scenarios that crossed a (1) low psychological versus high psychological aggression manipulation of his behavior, with a (2) no versus low versus high physical aggression manipulation of his behavior.

The psychological aggression manipulation was guided by extant research that distinguished between mild and severe forms of psychological aggression, which we discussed in the introduction. More specifically, we relied on Murphy and Hoover’s (1999) findings that degradation and threats were highly correlated with physical aggression, which suggests that these behaviors are severe. We used these types of behaviors in the high psychological aggression condition. Our development of the two conditions also relied on Follingstad and DeHart’s (2000) findings that psychologists rated certain behaviors as comprising psychological aggression (e.g., threats, calling her derogatory names, and denying her access to money), while other behaviors such as yelling and screaming and mild criticism were rated less likely to be psychological aggression.

In all low psychological aggression conditions (regardless of the physical aggression condition), John’s psychologically aggressive acts were comparable to Sue’s: John yelled at Sue; John was critical of Sue (“You brought this on yourself. Things were fine until you decided to take on this fashion show thing. If you can’t handle it, maybe you should just stop, instead of making us miserable!”); John broke dishes (“John slammed down the dishes he was holding and yelled, ‘You just don’t know when to stop, do you?!!’”), and John “stormed out of the room.” As such, this low condition...
did not involve highly controlling, highly detrimental forms of psychological aggression.

In contrast, in the highly psychologically aggressive condition, John was controlling; he asked Sue where she was going as well as having her ask him for money and demanding she bring him the change. John engaged in increased verbal aggression, yelling more and cursing, as well as belittling Sue (e.g., “John slammed down the dishes he was holding and yelled, ‘You just don’t know when to stop, do you?!!! You go ahead and get upset, d*** it! Even better, you just try leaving me!! You are such a demanding b**** no one else is ever gonna put up with you! Honestly, I don’t even know why I put up with this bull s****! If you can’t handle your side of the marriage bargain then have a f****ing happy life alone!!’”); and his threatening behavior was substantially intensified (e.g., “John rushed toward Sue, leaning over her in a menacing way, as if he were about to attack her”, “John yelled, ‘You are such a f****ing cry baby!!! You keep this up and I’ll really give you something to cry about!!!””).

The physical aggression manipulation was also guided by extant research that differentiates mild and severe forms. We specifically assigned acts to the low versus high physical aggression conditions based on factor analyses that support such a distinction (Pan et al., 1994). In the no physical aggression condition (regardless of the psychological aggression condition), John did not engage in physically aggressive behaviors. In the low physical aggression condition, prior to leaving the room, John “slapped her hard across the face.” In the high physical aggression condition, “John launched himself toward Sue, sending her down to the floor. Sue, on her stomach, was struggling to push herself back up when John pushed her back down, sat on her back, and grabbed her hair from behind. Then he knocked her head hard onto the floor.”

**Perception measures**

We developed 7 items to capture perceptions of the perpetrator. Five items assessed global perceptions of the perpetrator’s actions (e.g., “How negative were John’s actions?”), whereas the other 2 items assessed perceptions of specific perpetrator behaviors in the scenario that varied in level of psychological aggression (described later). We also developed 3 items to capture perceptions of conflict severity (e.g., “How violent was the incident?”). All items used a 5-point response scale (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely). The 10 items were then subjected to a factor analysis using principal component analysis and varimax rotation. In light of past research, we expected that perceptions of the perpetrator’s psychological and physical aggression would be distinct from perceptions of the conflict. We also expected that the items referring to acts of psychological aggression only would comprise a separate (third) factor.

The factor analysis yielded three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. One item – “How responsible was John for their fight?” – did not load on any of the factors, and was eliminated from all analyses. As shown in Table 1, the first factor contained 4 items that reflected global negative versus
positive perceptions of John’s actions. The 4 items were averaged to assess the general perceptions of negativity of the perpetrator’s behavior (α = .79). The second factor contained 2 items that asked about specific perceptions of acts that varied in level of psychological aggression. These two items were used to refer to a specific section in the scenario that corresponded to the psychological aggression manipulation (see the Appendix). The 2 items were averaged to assess the unacceptability of psychological aggression (α = .76). The third factor contained 3 items that reflected perceptions of the abusiveness and seriousness of the conflict. The three items were averaged to assess perceptions of conflict severity (α = .77). Higher numbers reflected more negative, more unacceptable and more severe ratings. In summary, we examined two variables assessing perceptions of the perpetrator and one variable assessing perceptions of the conflict.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perp negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How negative were John’s actions?</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How positive were John’s actions?*</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much do you sympathize with John?*</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How understandable do you find John’s behavior?*</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How justified was John’s reaction in paragraph –?*</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How acceptable was John’s reaction in paragraph –?*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was John being “abusive”?</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How serious was the incident?</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How violent was the incident?</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of variance</td>
<td>39.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Factor loadings in **bold** show which items loaded on each factor.
* items were reverse coded, such that higher values represent more negative perceptions.

**Manipulation checks**

Three questions assessed whether participants perceived the acts that comprised the psychological and physical aggression manipulations. Participants answered the following questions: Did John slap Sue? Did John push Sue to the ground? and Did John belittle Sue? Participants rated these questions either yes or no.

To test whether the manipulations worked, a chi-square test was run on each of the three manipulation checks. Participants were more likely to say that John slapped Sue in the low physical aggression condition than in the no or high physical aggression conditions, $\chi^2 = 151.16, p < .001$, and participants were more likely to say that John pushed Sue to the ground in the high physical aggression condition than in the low or no physical aggression conditions.
conditions, χ² = 199.35, p < .001. Thus, the physical aggression manipulation (all three conditions) worked. Moreover, participants were more likely to say that John belittled Sue in the high psychological aggression condition than in the low aggression condition, χ² = 19.15, p < .001. Thus, the psychological aggression condition worked. In short, participants differentiated between various conditions of physical and psychological aggression.

Results

Perceptions of the perpetrator

Descriptive statistics. We examined two measures that assessed perceptions of the perpetrator’s behavior: (i) Perpetrator’s psychological and/or physical aggression was negative, and (ii) perpetrator’s psychological aggression in specific instances was unacceptable. Across all conditions, the perpetrator’s actions were seen as largely negative (M = 4.10, on a scale from 1 to 5; higher numbers reflect more negativity), and unacceptable (M = 4.56, on a scale from 1 to 5 higher numbers reflect more unacceptability).

Research questions 1 and 2. We first explored whether variations in the physical and psychological aggression manipulation affected perceptions of the perpetrator. Given that the negativity and unacceptability factors both assessed perceptions of the perpetrator, we adopted the conservative approach of analyzing these two variables in a MANOVA context. In the MANOVA there were two dependent variables (negativity and unacceptability of psychological aggression), and three independent variables (the psychological aggression manipulation, the physical aggression manipulation, and participant sex) along with all interactions between these three variables. At the multivariate level, none of the higher order interactions were significant.

There was a multivariate main effect for physical aggression, F(4, 412) = 7.21, p < .001. We anticipated a significant univariate effect for perceptions of negativity but not for perceptions of unacceptability, given that the latter assessed only specific perceptions of psychological aggression, not physical aggression. As expected, the univariate results revealed a significant effect for negativity, F(2, 207) = 13.89, p < .001, but not for unacceptability of psychological aggression, F(2, 207) = 2.40, p = .094. As can be seen in Table 2, follow-up Tukey comparisons revealed that the perpetrator’s behavior was perceived to be significantly more negative when any physical aggression was present (low or high), but perceptions of low versus high physical aggression did not differ.

There was a multivariate main effect for psychological aggression, F(2, 206) = 8.17, p < .001. The univariate analysis was significant for unacceptability of psychological aggression, F(1, 207) = 15.84, p < .001, but not for negativity, F(1, 207) = 2.12, p = .151. As can be seen in Table 2, the perpetrator’s
TABLE 2
Mean levels of the dependent variables for each physical aggression condition and each psychological aggression condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>Physical aggression</th>
<th>Psychological aggression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absent (n = 72)</td>
<td>Low (n = 70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator’s behavior as negative</td>
<td>3.80 (0.66)a</td>
<td>4.18 (0.62)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator’s behavior as unacceptable*</td>
<td>4.44 (0.73)a</td>
<td>4.65 (0.58)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict severity</td>
<td>3.02 (0.78)a</td>
<td>3.84 (0.68)b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>Low (n = 107)</th>
<th>High (n = 105)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator’s behavior as negative</td>
<td>4.04 (0.69)a</td>
<td>4.16 (0.63)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator’s behavior as unacceptable</td>
<td>4.39 (0.74)a</td>
<td>4.74 (0.51)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict severity</td>
<td>3.65 (0.98)a</td>
<td>3.87 (0.83)b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Table values are mean perceptions for each level of physical aggression or psychological aggression. Standard deviations are reported in italics. Within rows, mean values with different superscripts are significantly different (p < .05), as indicated by results of Tukey multiple-range tests.

* No differences were expected for this variable because it only assessed variations in the psychological aggression manipulation, and thus should not have an effect on perceptions as a function of the physical aggression manipulation.

behavior was perceived to be significantly more unacceptable in the high psychological aggression condition than in the low aggression condition.

For participant sex, we expected that the effects of the manipulations would be stronger for women than men (i.e., an interaction between sex and the manipulations). There was only a multivariate main effect for participant sex, $F(2, 206) = 4.19, p = .016$, and no interaction. The univariate analysis was significant for negativity, $F(1, 207) = 7.57, p = .006$, but not for unacceptability of psychological aggression, $F(1, 207) = 1.95, p = .164$. Female participants perceived the perpetrator’s behavior to be significantly more negative ($M = 4.21$) than male participants ($M = 3.96$). Thus, although we found sex differences in perceptions of situations clearly involving partner aggression, as has been shown in past research (e.g., Pierce & Harris, 1993), the effect of participant sex also generalized to situations with little or no partner aggression (i.e., low psychological aggression and absent physical aggression conditions).

In summary, the effect of increasing the perpetrator’s physical aggression led to more negative perceptions. The effect of increasing the perpetrator’s psychological aggression led to seeing the perpetrator’s behavior as unacceptable when asked specifically about certain aspects of the psychological aggression manipulation, but no differences emerged in general perceptions of negativity.
Perceptions of the conflict

Descriptive statistics. We also examined perceptions of conflict severity (as compared with perceptions of the perpetrator’s actions). Across all conditions, the conflict was seen as moderately severe (M = 3.75, on a scale from 1 to 5; higher numbers reflect more severe).

Research Questions 1 and 2. An ANOVA was run on the dependent variable (conflict severity) to determine if there was an effect of the physical aggression manipulation, the psychological aggression manipulation, participant sex, and all higher order interactions between these three variables. No interaction or main effects were found for participant sex.

The main effect for physical aggression was significant, F(2, 205) = 71.02, p < .001, such that all three conditions differed from each other (i.e., absent versus low versus high physical aggression; see Table 2). There was also a main effect of psychological aggression, F(1, 205) = 5.79, p = .017 (see Table 2). However, these two manipulation main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between the two manipulations, F(2, 205) = 3.21, p = .042. As can be seen in the top portion of Table 3, follow-up Tukey comparisons revealed that physical aggression had a significant effect on perceptions of conflict severity within each level of psychological aggression, such that the conflict was labeled as most severe in the high physical aggression condition and least severe when no physical aggression was present, regardless of level of psychological aggression. In short, the effect of the physical aggression manipulation was robust. As can be seen in the bottom portion of Table 3, follow-up Tukey comparisons revealed that the effect of high psychological aggression on perceptions of conflict severity was present only when physical aggression was absent, F(1, 70) = 9.09, p = .004. That is, the main effect for psychological aggression was conditional on there being no physical aggression, and as such was not as robust as the physical aggression manipulation.

In summary, the effect of increasing the perpetrator’s physical aggression led to rating the conflict as more severe, regardless of level of psychological aggression. The effect of increasing the perpetrator’s psychological

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict severity</th>
<th>Absent (n = 72)</th>
<th>Low (n = 70)</th>
<th>High (n = 70)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within low psychological aggression</td>
<td>2.76 (0.73)a</td>
<td>3.72 (0.73)b</td>
<td>4.45 (0.61)c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within high psychological aggression</td>
<td>3.29 (0.75)a</td>
<td>3.95 (0.62)b</td>
<td>4.39 (0.73)c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued opposite
aggression had an effect only when no physical aggression was present; once there was physical aggression, the conflict was uniformly perceived as more severe.

**Discussion**

We revisit the two main questions guiding this research that were described in the introduction, and we advance answers based on the current findings and their implications.

**Is psychological aggression unacceptable?**

This study is among the first to examine perceptions of psychological aggression. Given mounting evidence that psychological aggression can have devastating consequences (Arias & Pape, 1999), it becomes important to understand how people perceive these actions.

Our first research question addressed whether conflicts involving high levels of psychological aggression lead to perceiving the perpetrator’s actions as more (i) negative and (ii) unacceptable, and (iii) whether the conflict is perceived to be more severe when compared with a conflict involving low levels of psychological aggression. The answer is that, despite evidence of an effective psychological aggression manipulation (as indicated by the manipulation check), the effect of high (versus low) psychological aggression is subtle and not robust. Of the three dependent variables we examined, there was a main effect for high psychological aggression on perceiving perpetrator acts as unacceptable; the effect for perceiving the acts as negative was not significant, and the effect on perceiving the conflict as severe was limited only to instances in which there was no physical aggression.

It is unclear why the acts in the high psychological aggression condition (in contrast with low psychological aggression) were perceived to be more unacceptable, but the perpetrator was not rated any more negatively. As noted in the introduction, perceptions of a perpetrator are not only affected

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**TABLE 3**

**Continued**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict severity</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within absent physical aggression</td>
<td>2.76 (0.73)(^a)</td>
<td>3.29 (0.75)(^b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within low physical aggression</td>
<td>3.72 (0.73)(^a)</td>
<td>3.95 (0.62)(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within high physical aggression</td>
<td>4.45 (0.61)(^a)</td>
<td>4.39 (0.73)(^a)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Table values are mean perceptions for each level of one manipulation (physical or psychological) with each level of the other manipulation. Standard deviations are reported in italics. Within rows, mean values with different superscripts are significantly different (*p* < .05), as indicated by results of Tukey multiple-range tests.
by his actions, but also the victim’s actions and the conflict situation (Pierce & Harris, 1993). So, even though a high psychologically aggressive act is rated as unacceptable, more general attributions against the perpetrator were not impacted, suggesting that participants may have attributed some of the responsibility to the victim for the perpetrator’s psychological aggression. This interpretation is tentative and warrants further investigation.

More generally, it is unclear why the psychological aggression manipulation did not have a strong effect across different dependent variables. This is concerning given that the condition involving high psychological aggression was extreme; the perpetrator unambiguously belittled the victim, criticized her in extreme ways, called her names, was controlling, restricted her access to money, and did precisely the types of severely psychologically aggressive acts that have been linked to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Yet, despite the fact that participants did find the perpetrator’s behavior to be more unacceptable when he engaged in these acts, the effects on their perceptions were limited. This was not the case for perceptions of physical aggression; once any physical aggression was present the perpetrator’s behavior was rated as more negative and the conflict as more severe.

Even though the physical and psychological aggression manipulations were similar (there were only specific wording changes to vary levels of psychological or physical aggression), the effect sizes for physical aggression were larger than those for psychological aggression. For example, we reported the effects for the physical aggression manipulation ($F = 71.02$) and the psychological aggression manipulation ($F = 5.79$) on severity ratings. At a descriptive level, a comparison of the effect sizes reveals that the physical aggression manipulation had a much larger impact ($\eta^2 = .40$) than did the psychological aggression manipulation ($\eta^2 = .02$). A conflict involving physical aggression is perceived to be much more severe than a conflict involving psychological aggression. Even though severe psychological acts are likely to cause just as much, if not more, harm than physical aggression, participants failed to make this distinction.

Why does psychological aggression seem less damaging than physical aggression? One reason may be that physical aggression often leads to injuries that are more salient and visible than injuries sustained by psychological aggression. Thus, psychological aggression may not be perceived to be as damaging because it lacks visible signs of harm.

Another possible explanation is that one instance involving high psychological aggression is recognized as being unacceptable, but a pervasive and repeated pattern of psychological aggression – that is, many such events – may be needed to warrant a shift in overall perceptions of the perpetrator and conflict. The high psychological aggression condition included several severe acts, but all in one occurrence. It may be that one act of physical aggression is enough to lead to variations in perceptions, but one act of high psychological aggression is not enough.

Whatever the reasons for finding psychological aggression to be less severe and negative than physical aggression, our data suggest a situation
whereby people may be tolerating instances of severe psychological aggression not realizing how damaging it can be. The more research shows that high psychologically aggressive acts are seen no differently than acts of low psychological aggression (Capezza & Arriaga, in press), the more efforts there should be to inform the public about the negative consequences of such acts.

**Does severity of physical aggression influence perceptions?**

Our second research question addressed whether the presence of *any* physical aggression causes perceivers to rate a conflict as more negative and severe, or instead whether such perceptions are reserved for only *high* physical aggression. There was a robust main effect of perpetrator physical aggression on perceptions of the perpetrator as negative and perceptions of the conflict as severe, but the point of distinction – between any versus no physical aggression, or between low versus high – depended on the specific variable. For conflict severity, participants made distinctions among all the conditions, that is, when the perpetrator’s level of physical aggression was absent versus low versus high. For perceptions of the perpetrator’s behavior as negative, participants made distinctions between no versus low physical aggression, but not between low versus high.

Although these findings are preliminary, they suggest that people process information about the conflict differently than information about the perpetrator. Perceptions of severity were relatively “fine tuned” to the specific conditions present, such that an act of high physical aggression is likely to lead to more severe injuries to the victim and is thus perceived to be more severe than an act of low physical aggression. In short, perceivers match their ratings of conflict severity to the actual amount of physical aggression in the conflict. In contrast, with respect to perceiving the perpetrator’s behavior as negative, perceivers were inclined to see his behavior as universally negative once any physical aggression was present. This may, in part, be due to a ceiling effect for ratings of negativity (see Table 2), suggesting that any aggressive acts are seen as negative, even if they are not necessarily “severe”.

Contrary to our hypothesis, participant sex did not moderate any of the main effects for physical or psychological aggression. Only a main effect for participant sex was found, such that females perceived the perpetrator’s actions to be more negative than males, even when there was no or minimal partner aggression (i.e., absent physical aggression and low psychological aggression conditions). Our findings suggest that sex differences may be more prevalent when assessing general attributions about the perpetrator, and support past research showing that women tend to rate perpetrators more negatively than men (e.g., Pierce & Harris, 1993). No difference, however, emerged for perceptions of conflict severity or perceptions of the unacceptability of psychological aggression.
Limitations

Although this study provides important contributions to the study of partner aggression, it has limitations. One limitation is that we examined only some aspects of psychological aggression, but not other aspects (e.g., extreme isolation). More research is needed to determine whether there are any acts of psychological aggression that might be deemed severe and negative. Another limitation concerns the manner in which psychological and physical aggression were presented to participants. It is possible that if participants were to observe a live interaction or watch a video involving psychological aggression they may find these acts to be more severe and negative. However, participants did find physical aggression to be severe and negative using the written scenarios, so it is unlikely that the method accounted for the lack of findings regarding psychological aggression.

There are also limitations with the sample of participants we obtained. We had a convenience sample of college students, most of whom were White, and thus we cannot draw more general inferences about all young adults in the U.S. or to the population in general. However, rates of psychological aggression are exceedingly high even in college samples, suggesting that the issues raised in this study pertain to college students as well as others (Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003). In addition to assessing the generalizability of our findings, future research should attempt to identify samples of people who do find psychological aggression to be severe and negative, so as to determine what it is about their experiences that drives their negative perceptions. For example, individuals who have been victims of longstanding psychological aggression may be familiar with the negative effects and consequently see it in a more negative way.

Conclusion

This study has important implications for understanding perceptions of partner aggression. First, this is one of the first studies to examine perceptions of varying levels of physical aggression to assess at what point the perpetrator and conflict are viewed negatively. This study suggests that people hold different thresholds for perceiving a perpetrator’s behavior as negative and a conflict as severe. Second, there is very limited knowledge of how psychological aggression is perceived, despite its negative consequences; this study makes a novel contribution toward improving this knowledge. The current sample did not perceive psychological aggression to be nearly as negative or severe as physical aggression, despite the fact that participants did recognize that the behaviors in the high psychological aggression condition were unacceptable. Much more needs to be done toward educating people about the harmful consequences of psychological aggression.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Sections of text corresponding to items assessing specific perceptions of the perpetrator

The scenario included a specific section that participants were asked to rate in regards to how justified and acceptable John’s actions were. The two versions (low vs. high psychological aggression) of this section are presented below. More generally, the psychological aggression manipulation involved this section as well as other text that captured variations in belittling, threats, and monitoring behaviors (see p. 233–234 for complete details about the psychological aggression manipulation).

- Low psychological aggression: This set off John. Before she finished her statement, John slammed down the dishes he was holding and yelled, “You just don’t know when to stop, do you?!”
- High psychological aggression: This set off John. Before she finished her statement, John slammed down the dishes he was holding and yelled, “You just don’t know when to stop, do you?! You go ahead and get upset, d*** it! Even better, you just try leaving me!! You are such a demanding b**** – no one else is ever gonna put up with you! Honestly, I don’t even know why I put up with this bull s***! If you can’t handle your side of the marriage bargain then have a f***ing happy life alone!! I oughta just put you in your place!!”

Capezza & Arriaga: You can degrade but you can’t hit

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